Tourism Development and Change in Small Islands: Lessons from Perhentian Kecil, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Perhentian Kecil, located off the east coast of peninsula Malaysia, is predominately a backpacker destination comprising small-scale, locally-owned wooden chalets and simple infrastructure with only one larger, more upmarket resort so far. This Working Paper examines an island destination that appears poised to change substantially with the arrival of the first multi-storey resort hotel. We discuss whether Kecil is now at the key moment when a destination changes from small-scale backpacker tourism to a different tourism form and, given the fragile island environment, it faces severe challenges if larger scale tourism develops. Two key factors are examined - the changing planning environment and local entrepreneurs’ characteristics - that may account for why the island has reached a moment of qualitative change after years of ‘organic’ bottom-up incremental growth. Using insights from Resilience Theory the paper argues that this island destination is an example of non-linear change rather than conventional resort evolution.

Key words: island tourism; resorts; planning; backpackers; economic development; Malaysia

1.0 INTRODUCTION

For many small islands tourism is economically significant as a source of income and employment. In some insular areas such as the Caribbean, tourism accounts for over 75 per cent of some countries’ GNP (Weaver, 2001). Islands, especially small islands, continue to fascinate and attract tourists, and for tropical Less Developed Countries (LDCs) such as Malaysia with many offshore islands, developers and government planners see the potential to develop resorts.