Kinabalu Park

2020 Conservation Outlook Assessment

SITE INFORMATION

Country: Malaysia
Inscribed in: 2000
Criteria: (ix) (x)

Kinabalu Park, in the State of Sabah on the northern end of the island of Borneo, is dominated by Mount Kinabalu (4,095 m), the highest mountain between the Himalayas and New Guinea. It has a very wide range of habitats, from rich tropical lowland and hill rainforest to tropical mountain forest, sub-alpine forest and scrub on the higher elevations. It has been designated as a Centre of Plant Diversity for Southeast Asia and is exceptionally rich in species with examples of flora from the Himalayas, China, Australia, Malaysia, as well as pan-tropical flora. © UNESCO

SUMMARY

2020 Conservation Outlook

GOOD WITH SOME CONCERNS

Finalised on 02 Dec 2020

Kinabalu National Park is a magnificent and highly biodiverse natural asset. It is unsurprising that such a spectacular natural feature should become a major tourist attraction. Despite some degradation associated with encroachment, weed infestation and expanding tourist infrastructure, the current state of the World Heritage site remains good. The management authority has been successful at raising funds from tourism licensing; local people are enjoying the economic benefits of tourism fostered by the site; and research projects abound. However, the maintenance of this positive state of affairs cannot be relied upon. The susceptibility of the World Heritage site to edge effects combined with the cumulative impacts of climate change, encroachment, an increase in forest fires in the region, and increased demand for tourist access will greatly intensify pressure on the site in coming years. The absence of an up-to-date management plan and the lack of formal monitoring, assessments and reporting reduce the ability of the management authority to identify and address emerging threats.
FULL ASSESSMENT

Description of values

Values

World Heritage values

► An exceptional array of naturally functioning ecosystems

Kinabalu Park has an exceptional array of naturally functioning ecosystems. A number of processes actively provide ideal conditions for the diverse biota, high endemism and rapid evolutionary rates. Several factors combine to influence these processes; (1) the great altitudinal and climatic gradient from tropical forest to alpine conditions; (2) steeply dissected topography causing effective geographical isolation over short distances; (3) the diverse geology with many localised edaphic conditions, particularly the ultramafic substrates; (4) the frequent climate oscillations influenced by El Niño events; and (5) geological history of the Malay archipelago and proximity to the much older Crocker Range (World Heritage Committee, 2013).

► High floral diversity

Research on the biota of Mount Kinabalu has been extensive and has established that it is floristically species-rich and a globally important Centre of Plant Endemism. It contains an estimated 5,000-6,000 vascular plant species including representatives from more than half the families of all flowering plants. The presence of 1,000 orchid species, 78 species of Ficus, and more than 600 species of ferns are indicative of the property's botanical richness. The variety of habitats includes 6 vegetation zones from lowland rainforest through to alpine scrub at 4,095m (World Heritage Committee, 2013).

► Threatened species and endemism

Numerous bird species that are globally vulnerable or near threatened are found in the property, as well as 1 endangered and 1 critically endangered species (Kinabalu Serpent Eagle Spilornis kinabaluensis). The property is a globally important Centre of Plant Endemism (World Heritage Committee, 2013) with 5 of the 24 species of Rhododendrons which occur within the property being endemic; as are 4 of the 9 insectivorous Nepenthes, including the largest, Nepenthes rajah, and 14 of the 78 species of Ficus.

► High faunal diversity

Faunal diversity is also high and the majority of Borneo's mammals, birds, amphibians and invertebrates (many threatened and vulnerable) are present, including 90 species of lowland mammal, 22 mammal species in the montane zone and 326 bird species (World Heritage Committee, 2013).

Assessment information

Threats

Current Threats

The occupation of parts of the World Heritage site by local people practising traditional cropping methods is a serious concern. The introduction of ‘Community Use Zones’ is not a long-term solution to the conflict and sets a bad precedent by retrospectively sanctioning and potentially encouraging illegitimate and unsustainable use of part of the site. Dandelion infestation is widespread, despite efforts to contain the weed. The establishment of ‘via ferrata’ infrastructure in 2016, apparently without adequate assessment of potential impacts, indicates that the spread of tourism facilities is not properly managed.
The increase in visitation is probably manageable provided basic procedures such as planning, monitoring and reporting are greatly improved.

**Crops**

_Agricultural encroachment_

The previously noted encroachment by traditional cropping practices and unresolved land claims have been addressed by the introduction of ‘Community Use Zones’. While this is said to be a useful short term strategy to resolve the conflict between management and the local community, a long-term resolution which prevents further encroachment is required. The increase in population within the World Heritage site and its impact on forest clearance requires a rigorous monitoring and reporting protocol. A high incidence of forest fires in Sabah has been reported by local media (New Straits Times, 2019; Straits Times, 2016) and while these have yet to affect the World Heritage site, a prudent approach is to reduce potential sources of ignition within the national park.

**Invasive Non-Native/ Alien Species**

_Invasive plant species_

Dandelions are a persistent alien plant first reported as being present within the World Heritage site in 1998/99. Despite ongoing efforts to contain this invasive species (Sabah Parks 2010), the infestation has spread throughout the area displacing local plant species and impacting on biodiversity values (Latip and Rais, 2016; Latip et al., 2016). However, the level of impact on the site is unclear.

**Tourism/ visitors/ recreation**

_Impacts of tourism use_

Prior to the June 2015 earthquake which caused significant damage to the track leading to summit of Mount Kinabalu there were concerns expressed about the increasing use of and impacts on that track. As a consequence of the earthquake the track has been re-routed; nevertheless, concerns remain about the lack of monitoring to assess visitor impacts, and the lack of a scientifically determined daily visitor carrying capacity (Goh and Mariney, 2010; Latip and Rais, 2016). According to numerous media reports, the new track was opened in November/December 2015. Impacts that include spreading of dandelion and littering have been reported (Latip et al., 2016). Meanwhile, a ‘via ferrata’ (high altitude rock-climbing route protected by permanent metal infrastructure) has reportedly been established (numerous online sources, including The Star Online, 2016) on the previously pristine high precipices of Mt Kinabalu. In the absence of a publicly available EIA, it is not known whether potential impacts on the OUV was assessed or appropriate mitigation measures were implemented. Due to the sensitivity of the location however, it is possible that certain fauna (such as raptors) and flora were impacted. A recent study on the impacts of traffic noise on bird populations found significant impacts in the vicinity of the property's main access routes (Ambrose et al., 2017).

**Crops**

_Land clearing / agricultural encroachment around the property_

At the time of inscription of the site on the World Heritage List it was noted that it was at risk of becoming an ‘island in a sea of agricultural land use’. In 2011, the Sabah Environment Protection Association was highly critical of the illegal land clearing near the World Heritage site (Kaung, 2011) and a recent study (Allan, 2017) indicates that loss of forest cover in the surrounding area is ongoing. An establishment of a formal buffer zone with clearly specified land-use restrictions would help provide additional protection for the site.

**Potential Threats**

The most recognizable potential threat comes from climate change (periodically exacerbated by the El Niño phenomenon). General media reports indicate that the incidence of forest fires in the region is on the increase. The convoluted boundaries of the World Heritage site, combined with edge effects from encroachment and expanding tourism infrastructure, make parts of the site susceptible to degradation from fire or increasing dryness. Reducing the risk of fire will require constant supervision and adaptive
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management as adjacent land-use activities and the effects of climate change intensify.

**Habitat Shifting/ Alteration, Droughts, Temperature extremes**

*(Droughts creating risk of fire)*

Naturally occurring El Nino droughts greatly increase risk of serious fire impacts on biodiversity values of the World Heritage site. As many neighbours use fire for agricultural management, there is a high risk of fire escape into the site during drought times (State Party of Malaysia, 2002). The mainstream local media have reported a high incidence of fires in Sabah, including forest fires (New Straits Times, 2019; Straits Times, 2016). Combined with climate change, this creates a high potential threat that should be addressed by management and in future state-of-conservation reports.

**Overall assessment of threats**

The magnificent and highly biodiverse massif of Kinabalu has become a global tourism attraction. However, there are significant issues associated with increasing visitation, associated tourist infrastructure, a spreading infestation of an alien plant species, encroachment, climate change and associated forest fires. The lack of basic planning, monitoring and reporting constitutes a handicap to the necessary responses to minimise cumulative impacts on the values of the World Heritage site.

**Protection and management**

**Assessing Protection and Management**

**Management system**

Management is dependent on an outdated strategic document that lacks clear objectives and prescription at the park management level, especially in regard to natural heritage values. There is a clear need for a World Heritage site-specific management plan. A 1971 dated set of Regulations specific to the site is referred to, which in 2002 were proposed to be amended, but the nature of any update is unknown (State Party of Malaysia, 2002; Development Master Plan, 1992). In late 2019, no update regarding establishment of an updated management plan could be found. Increasing numbers of visitors on the mountain, new tracks and the advent of climate change make it increasingly urgent that a new management plan be prepared.

**Effectiveness of management system**

While management effectiveness appears to be reasonable, the lack of a comprehensive management plan (State Party of Malaysia, 2002) coupled with the absence of systematic monitoring (Goh and Mariney, 2010) limit the assessment of management effectiveness. The absence of these critical management tools is an increasingly serious concern against a backdrop of climate change, increases in visitor numbers and cropping activities within the boundaries of the World Heritage site.

**Boundaries**

Although boundaries have been surveyed and marked in often difficult terrain, the boundaries on the western and northern side of the park are subject to varying degrees of on-going threat from agricultural encroachment (State Party of Malaysia, 2002). The boundaries themselves contain several convoluted or straight-line sections that are not relevant to natural features of the landscape (UNESCO, 2019).

**Integration into regional and national planning systems**

While no documentation was cited revealing links to any national planning system, the World Heritage
The site is an integral part of the 2007 'Heart of Borneo' agreement between Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Its aim is to protect a 220,000-square-kilometre forested region which also includes the Lanjak Entimau Wildlife Sanctuary, the Batang Ai, Gunung Mulu (another World Heritage property) and Crocker Range National Parks in Malaysia, the Kayan Mentarang, Bukit Baka Bukit Raya and Danau Sentarum National Parks in Indonesia, and the Ulu Temburong National Park in Brunei (Heart of Borneo, 2017). Apart from this, management of the site appears to be primarily reliant on the Park Enactment Act and Master Plan (State Party of Malaysia, 2002) as administered by the Government of Sabah (Sabah Parks, 2019).

**Relationships with local people**

Mostly Effective

Relations between management and local people appear to be quite good although the persistent encroachment of traditional agriculture into the park margins (Goh and Mariney, 2010), poaching of orchids by locals, and poaching of game (Latip and Rais, 2016) suggest that there is much to be done to improve cooperation between the site's management and the local community, some of whom have made formal claims of customary rights within the park (UNEP-WCMC, 2011). A recent study found that a significant proportion of local people participated in the park's tourism enterprises, gaining employment and income; the report suggested means by which these benefits to the local community could be enhanced, particularly for women (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2018).

**Legal framework**

Some Concern

The Parks Enactment Act 1984 and Parks (Amendment) Act 1996, together with a set of Regulations (State Party of Malaysia, 2002) comprise appropriate legislation at the State level, while the use of the outdated (1992) Kinabalu Park Development Master Plan to guide management of the property is inadequate. The IUCN Technical Evaluation (2000) notes the existence of an outdated (1993) management plan and several reports since have raised the need to update the master plan and to prepare a comprehensive plan for management of the World Heritage site. Despite this there is no evidence to suggest that any steps are being taken to address the issue.

**Law enforcement**

Some Concern

Enforcement of regulations to protect the World Heritage site is a function of the Sabah Parks Management & Operation Division - Protection & Enforcement Section. It looks fine on paper (Sabah, 2019) but there is insufficient data available to make an assessment of its effectiveness.

**Implementation of Committee decisions and recommendations**

Data Deficient

There have been no Committee decisions or recommendations since the inscription of the site in 2000.

**Sustainable use**

Some Concern

Concerns have been expressed about the impact of new track construction and high visitation in areas traversed by the track to the summit of Mt Kinabalu (Latip and Rais, 2016; Latipa et al., 2016). A new major piece of infrastructure within the World Heritage site - a high-altitude 'via ferrata' opened in 2016 (The Star online, 2016). Encroachment within the park (originally illegal and now sanctioned) is not a sustainable activity in terms of maintaining OUV throughout the site, however there is no assessment of impacts available.

**Sustainable finance**

Mostly Effective

Tourism services and facilities were privatised in 1998 in order to improve the quality of the visitors experience and free the management authority to concentrate on conservation management. However, in 2005 47% of the annual budget allocation was still spent on tourism development to the detriment of expenditure on research, education, staff training and monitoring of environmental impacts from tourism. It is reported (Goh and Mariney, 2010; Latip and Rais, 2016) that there is still a serious shortfall in staff training, education, community conservation awareness and protection of the environment; there is therefore cause for some concern regarding finance although it may not so much be a matter of quantum as a matter of how available funds are allocated. The 2010 Annual Report of Parks Sabah (the
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latest one available online in December 2019) indicates that the agency has been successful in raising funds from various sources, including approximately USD 800,000 in 2010 from climbing fees (Sabah Parks, 2010).

► **Staff capacity, training, and development**  

Serious Concern

Goh and Mariney (2010) were critical of low priority given to training and development of park staff and criticized the fact that a large proportion of training budget was allocated to headquarters staff rather than site-based staff. In the 2016 study by Latip and Rais, various staff expressed concern about their low level of understanding about the attributes, values and significance of the site. There is no indication currently that measures have been undertaken or considered to address this.

► **Education and interpretation programs**  

Some Concern

Education at the park entrance station appears to be quite effective. Absence of documentation does not allow any quantitative assessment of whether education in the local community has been effective although the perception among some of those occupying the Community Use Zone that removal of trees has no impact on conservation of the forest (Mojiol, 2016) suggests that more work is required in this area. Interpretation to visitors has been identified as being deficient (Goh and Mariney, 2010; Goh and Rosilawati, 2014; Latip and Rais, 2016). Considering the importance of visitor satisfaction to the ongoing success of tourism in the site a higher level of site interpretation is required.

► **Tourism and visitation management**  

Some Concern

Despite a study (Goh and Mariney, 2010) predicting a threat to management of the site from a community dissociated from it by the high cost of entering/climbing, those costs have been increased and increased again. To curb the demand for access, the government has announced it will increase fees for all parks in Sabah again in 2018 (New Straits Times, 25 July, 2017) with no evidence of such prediction coming to fruition. There was also an increasing expectation among the visitors for better educational experience which would require attention by the park authority (Goh, 2015). Demand continues to exceed supply and while the daily total of climbing permits had been reduced following the 2015 earthquake this was purely due to very legitimate safety concerns. Latip and Rais (2016) report that litter accumulation along walking trails is an ongoing/increasing problem and staff training in visitor management and site interpretation is deficient.

► **Monitoring**  

Serious Concern

The absence of a systematic monitoring program for the World Heritage site does not allow for an assessment of ecological change in the park, in particular the impacts of increasing visitation, pest plant invasion and ongoing community encroachment activities (Goh and Mariney, 2010; Latip and Rais, 2016). The most recent annual report of the management authority that was available on its website in January 2020 is from 2010, making it difficult to assess the effectiveness of more recent management activities (Sabah Parks, 2010).

► **Research**  

Mostly Effective

The World Heritage site has long been the subject of biological survey and associated research but systematic monitoring of ecology and human impact has not been published on formal websites pertaining to the property. A recent survey of the impact of traffic noise on nearby bird populations within the site found significant impacts (Ambrose et al., 2017); another recent survey found that secondary forests within the park were important habitat for birds (Pegan et al., 2018). The Sabah Parks website lists various research projects and collaborations with institutions including Malaysian universities and the Kyoto University (Sabah Parks, 2019).

**Overall assessment of protection and management**  

Some Concern

The rugged terrain of Kinabalu automatically provides a high level of natural protection so the need for on-site intervention applies mainly to the edges of the World Heritage site and to infrastructure.
such as tracks, accommodation complexes and roads. The management authority has been successful at raising funds from licences for commercial tourism operators within the site; local people have been benefiting economically from tourism fostered by the park; numerous important research programs have been occurring. However, the increasing demand for visitor access is placing pressure on the site's natural values. The establishment of major infrastructure is a serious concern. The long, convoluted boundary is subject to edge effects in the form of encroachment and potential forest fires. There appear to be no formal moves to produce an up-to-date management plan for the site but such a plan is urgently needed. Against a backdrop of climate change, increasing forest fires and increasing visitor numbers, the absence of critical instruments such as planning, monitoring and reporting mean that an adequate overall assessment of protection and management cannot be made.

Assessment of the effectiveness of protection and management in addressing threats outside the site

Based on limited documentation, management of the World Heritage site appears to have had limited success in dealing with matters of agricultural encroachment. Although a Community Use Zone has been established (potentially a dangerous precedent in retrospective encroachment), a long-term solution has yet to be implemented. The reported high incidence of fires burning vegetation in the region is a concern because of the site's convoluted edge (exacerbated by encroachment) makes it susceptible to damage from fires that originate from outside the site.

State and trend of values

Assessing the current state and trend of values

World Heritage values

- An exceptional array of naturally functioning ecosystems
  
  Agricultural incursions into the park and fire escape from neighbouring land are potential threats to the ongoing ecological and biological processes of the World Heritage site. The increasing tourism activities also have the potential to threaten ongoing natural processes and species that occupy particular high-altitude niches. There has been insufficient formal reporting to be reassured that impacts are being assessed and minimised.

- High floral diversity
  
  Kinabalu is a globally outstanding centre of biodiversity, especially of plants. Ongoing surveys continue to expand knowledge of the impressive species richness of the site. There is no definitive data about any reduction in species richness, although comments about the spread of invasive plant species and reports of ongoing theft of orchids are of some concern. The impacts of encroachment and the threat of fire around the lowland edges of the World Heritage site are a matter of increasing concern.

- Threatened species and endemism
  
  While the absence of a formal monitoring program makes a definitive assessment of the conservation status and trends for threatened species difficult, the evidence suggests that at most relatively few species of plants or animals are critically threatened. However, the susceptibility of the site to edge effects, the increasing prevalence of forest fires in the region, and the recent record of serious forest fires throughout South East Asia give cause for concern, particularly at a time of intensifying climate change.
High faunal diversity

Impacts of encroachment, increasing tourism access and high-altitude infrastructure may be having significant impacts. Ambrose et al. (2017) report a reduction in bird biodiversity adjacent to the park's transport routes. While such effects may be limited in extent, they point to the need for improved monitoring along the park's roads, walking tracks and high-altitude infrastructure.

Summary of the Values

Assessment of the current state and trend of World Heritage values

The values of Kinabalu National Park have been impacted by the spread of alien species and the effects of encroachment and expanding tourist visitation and infrastructure. However, the overall state of the World Heritage site remains very good. More formal planning, reporting and scrutiny are required before there can be confidence about maintaining the Outstanding Universal Value of Kinabalu in the longer term.

Additional information

Benefits

Understanding Benefits

Outdoor recreation and tourism

Servicing nature-based tourism within the site is a major source of employment and economic benefit flowing to the local and state economies. Kinabalu is a globally recognized destination for tourists, catering to a wide spectrum, from those fit enough to reach the summit to those content to enjoy views and short nature trails down below.

Factors negatively affecting provision of this benefit:
- Climate change: Impact level - Low, Trend - Increasing
- Overexploitation: Impact level - Low, Trend - Increasing
- Invasive species: Impact level - Low, Trend - Continuing

Direct employment,
Tourism-related income,
Provision of jobs

Kinabalu generates significant employment, directly through staff and tourism and indirectly through associated service industries. A recent study surveyed local people and found that a majority had participated in the tourism industry (Rasoolimanesh 2018) and suggested ways in which participation and resulting economic benefits could be enhanced, particularly for women.

Factors negatively affecting provision of this benefit:
- Climate change: Impact level - Low, Trend - Increasing
- Overexploitation: Impact level - Low, Trend - Increasing

Importance for research

Kinabalu has for many years attracted biological surveys and research, much of which has generated published papers and books, contributing greatly to global knowledge. There have been numerous collaborations between research institutions such as Japan's Kyoto University and the management authority (Sabah Parks, 2010). Fields of research include soils, birds (Pegan et al., 2018, Ambrose et al.,...
2017), community involvement (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2018) and biodiversity generally. Negative factors affect the subjects and findings of the research but do not necessarily affect whether the research occurs.

► Contribution to education, Collection of genetic material

The World Heritage site contributes to education through a combination of scientific and sociological research, tour guiding, visitor centres, published material and websites.

Factors negatively affecting provision of this benefit :
- Overexploitation : Impact level - Low, Trend - Continuing

► Access to drinking water

Several major catchments beneficial to local communities have their headwaters within the site.

Factors negatively affecting provision of this benefit :
- Climate change : Impact level - Low, Trend - Increasing
- Overexploitation : Impact level - Low, Trend - Increasing
- Invasive species : Impact level - Low, Trend - Increasing
- Habitat change : Impact level - Low, Trend - Decreasing

Summary of benefits

Kinabalu is an outstanding contributor to biodiversity conservation and research while making a significant contribution to the local and state community in terms of direct employment through management and tourism and indirect economic contributions through associated service industries.

Projects

Compilation of active conservation projects

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<th>Organization</th>
<th>Brief description of Active Projects</th>
<th>Website</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Sabah Parks</td>
<td>No particular project but Sabah Parks maintains a staff and program of research which from time to time includes field research in Kinabalu.</td>
<td>Sabah Parks <a href="http://www.sabahparks.org.my/english/public/default.asp">link</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sabah Parks</td>
<td>Kinabalu Ecolink Project: The Kinabalu Ecolinc Project is a connectivity conservation effort initiated by Sabah Parks to improve ecological connectivity between Kinabalu Park (KP) and Crocker Range Park (CRP). Although Kinabalu Park and Crocker Range Park reside on the same range, the parks are physically separated from each other, their boundaries separated by a distance of about 10 km at the closest points. Forest fragmentation that occurs within these two protected areas due to uncontrolled deforestation and expansion of agricultural and human activities has been the major issue.</td>
<td>Sabah Parks <a href="http://www.sabahparks.org.my/index.php/discover-us-3/kinabalu-ecolinc-project">link</a></td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Sabah Parks and Kyoto University (Japan)</td>
<td>A collaboration between The Board of Trustees of The Sabah Parks (Sabah Parks) and Kyoto University, Japan, in numerous aspects that can empower the direction and management of parks in Sabah.</td>
<td>Sabah Parks <a href="http://www.sabahparks.org.my/index.php/resourc-centres/archives/2015?view=archive&amp;month=3">link</a></td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Sabah Parks</td>
<td>Climate-change collaboration, research: This research is been conducted under Research and Education Division, Botany Unit, to manage vegetation monitoring which was one of the initiatives by Sabah Parks in order to understand the climate change phenomenon. Other initiatives can be seen through collaboration between other units or visiting scientists for ecological study within the parks areas. Research activities also held in Kinabalu Park and Poring Conservation Center.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.sabahparks.org.my/index.php/discover-us/climate-change">http://www.sabahparks.org.my/index.php/discover-us/climate-change</a></td>
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