Scoping the Potentials and Pitfalls of Rural Tourism Policies: Constructivism as a Theoretical Lens

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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of policies has always been debated worldwide. In a broad perspective, there are two main types of policies; the preventive and the punitive. While some policies take a certain type, there is no conclusive evidence to support their effectiveness. The potentials and pitfalls of policies largely lie in the level of policy-making, where the analysis studied in how policy makers define problems and embed them in public policies. These include the gap in the knowledge of the nature and the extent of the problem between what is assumed to be correct by policy makers and the real nature of the situation, the level of awareness of the policies between its stakeholders, the level of acceptance and belongingness towards these policies and the level of implementation and execution of the policies. All these aspects can be summarised by the lack of interaction between policy makers and the stakeholders, which happen in most cases due to the top-down adoption in policy-making strategies. In Malaysia, the policies to retain the original setting of its rural tourist destinations are widely available. The state and federal lawmakers have enacted a range of laws and policies intended to mitigate the societal and environmental risks presented by tourists. However, a similar observation of the problems in public policy is seen in the Malaysian rural tourism context, where the lack of interaction between policy makers and its stakeholders, and the flaw in the system have led to the lack of these policies being intertwined with each other. Therefore, a multi-layered adoption should be used to encourage actors' participation and interaction. The purpose of this paper is to scope the potentials and pitfalls of rural tourism policies from a constructivist perspective. The model employed to assist

this study is the actor-network theory approach, where the problem is addressed using constructivism as a theoretical lens. This approach uses a qualitative design to enable the exploration of the current policy structure and the perception of the stakeholders.

Keywords: Policies, punitive, preventive, actor-network theory, rural tourism, constructivist

INTRODUCTION

In the past half century, the tourism industry has emerged as one of the world's most powerful, yet controversial, socio-economic forces (Telfer & Sharpley, 2008). Tourism is a fast growing industry, and more importantly, it is a valuable sector that contributes significantly to the nation's overall economy. The International Tourism Organization states that international tourist receipts are estimated to have reached USD919 billion worldwide as compared to USD851 billion in 2009. Moreover, tourism generates a significant amount of foreign exchange earnings that contribute to the economic growth of countries (Tadasse & Nsiah, 2008). This industry (worldwide) is known to effect the economies and lives of communities and has been deemed to improve the lives in many different destinations, apart from being proven to be a beneficial for many destinations. In the recent years, there is emphasis on the understanding of tourism and places with relations to nature and the role of tourists' performance. This has led to the areas of policy and practice developments in the

tourism industry to grow in prominence (Jóhannesson, 2005).

When a policy is introduced, no one will know who gets "What, When and How" or what line of action will eventually take. During the course of creating and implementing policies in a multi-actor situation, various stakeholders often view problems and solutions differently, resulting in various stakeholders trying to aim the direction of the policy to suite their needs (Hanberger, 2001).

The effectiveness of policies is often debated worldwide; there are generally two types of policies. These include policies that are preventive (rewarding) and those that are punitive (punishing). These two types of policies are widely used in many areas of interest, and they act as the basis for policies to achieve their intended objectives. While some policies take a certain nature, there is no conclusive evidence to support their effectiveness. The potentials and pitfalls of policies largely lie in the interaction gap between policy makers and other stakeholders.

The state and federal lawmakers have enacted a set of laws and policies intended to mitigate the societal and environmental risks presented by tourists. Malaysia is considered a rural tourism paradise as it has at least 19 national parks, jungle, hill resorts, and Southeast Asia's highest mountain, Mount Kinabalu. In addition, its culture, arts and traditions of multi-racial-multi-ethnic communities are a tourist attraction and an economic gold mine. This industry is deemed very important and serious attention

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is needed to sustain tourism in Malaysia (Siow, Abidin, Nair, & Ramachandran, 2011).

Rural Tourism Policy Issues

Rural tourism is seen as a form of sustainable development that promotes productivity in areas of the rural zones. The objectives of this form of tourism are to bring out employment, create better income distribution, preservation of village environment and local culture and at the same time raising host community's participation and presenting methods to confirm beliefs and traditional values within new circumstances (Mahmoudi *et al.,* 2011).

Tourism in Malaysia has been part of the political plan since 1987. This is especially seen when the Federal Government took the agenda of developing tourism as a part of the major economic sectors. The main objective of the agenda was to gain economic growth and employment in the rural areas through this industry (Hjulmand *et al.,* 2003). The Malaysian economy was traditionally dominated by the primary commodities but it soon evolved into the manufacturing sector in the 1970's (Hanim, Salleh, Othman, & Ramachandran, 2007). Rural tourism, however, was first introduced to Malaysia through the New Development Policy (NEP) between 1971 till 1990. Its main concern was to address the regional economic inequalities and poverty faced by the Malays in Peninsular Malaysia. Like other sectors, this policy intensified the rural tourism sector through intense development

of the rural areas in Malaysia (Awang & Aziz, 2011).

Today, the policies in Malaysia to retain its original setting in the context of rural tourism are widely available. The state and federal lawmakers have enacted a set of laws and policies intended to mitigate the societal and environmental risks presented by tourists. Under the federal governance, several bodies oversee the welfare of rural tourism through its policies. These include the Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and Ministry of Rural and Regional Development. Other agencies/departments falling under these ministries that also have some levels of policies governing rural tourism include Department of Environment, Department of Marine Park Malaysia, Department of Wildlife and National Parks, Forest Research Institute Malaysia, Forestry Department Peninsular Malaysia, Community Development Department, Department of Orang Asli Affairs and Institute for Rural Advancement ("The Malaysia Government's Official Portal," 2011). However, other governmental agencies could also be indirectly involved in public administration.

Malaysia's government practices a decentralised political system, where it is often difficult to reconcile the interests of federal, state and local governments. For example, Malaysia's island marine parks are under the control of the federal government in terms of its administration and management. However, these islands come under the jurisdiction of their

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respective state governments (Jordan *et al*., 2002). This can further be a challenge as 4 out of the 13 states in Malaysia are run by the opposition ("Malaysia's Penang state Getting back its mojo," 2011). Other complications include certain states not being in favour of some tourism promotion acts sanctioned by the federal government as the promotions were against the local norms (Awang & Aziz, 2011).

Amongst all the available policies, the National Ecotourism Plan that was drafted by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism and World Wide Fun for Nature (WWF) in 1996 acts as a backbone for the rural tourism policies in Malaysia. The aim of this plan is to assist the Government, both at the Federal and State levels in the development of Malaysia's ecotourism potentials, with the effective tools for conserving of the natural and cultural heritage of the country, while providing socio-economic benefits to the local communities (Chin, 2010).

Synthesizing the policies across the federal and state levels shows that there is evidence indicating two distinct approaches with the rural tourism. These include the movement towards ecotourism and 'home stay program'. The general context for the rural tourism policies in Malaysia is largely preventive in nature. This is seen through its objectives of non-coercive methods, which are mostly to encourage and educate the importance of compliance of these policies. Observations of these policies also suggest that there is a lack of interactions between policy makers and its actors, and the lack of these policies being intertwined with

each other. According to Awang and Aziz (2011), the potentials of tourism policies in Malaysia have not reached its optimum because of poor policy implementation and the lack of alignment between the federal and state governments.

The objective of this paper was to study the actor-network theory approach (ANT) through the constructivist's theoretical lens. This is a conceptual paper, from a qualitative approach where the researchers are able to explore the current policy structure along with the stakeholder perception towards these policies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The design of the study used was purely qualitative, whereby secondary findings using literature reviews were utilized as a method to coin the emerging themes stipulated below.

Preventive Policies

Policies that are preventive, rewarding, or having pull measure perceived to be non-coercive in nature and are more attractive (Steg, 2006). Over the past 20 years, professionals, consultants and academics alike have placed emphasis on the importance of a reward system in policies. This form of reward system has been gaining popularity because it increases the competitive strategy of organisations. However, it is imperative to understand that the design of the reward policy structure (Bodenstein & Furness, 2009) and its communication to actors will make a difference in the success and failure of it (Shields *et al.,* 2009). An interesting

finding has mentioned that the reward systems help improve policy systems and that the honesty of the actors cannot be taken for granted (Falkinger & Walther, 1991).

Punitive Policies

Policies that are punitive, punishing or having the push factor is perceived as coercive, have the tendency of making environmentally unsound behaviour more expensive and less attractive (Steg, 2006). Studies have shown that old policies can be irrelevant to the current day and age. This means that the "get tough" philosophy that was adopted by previous policymakers should be replaced by a lenient approach (Benekos & Merlo, 2008; Merlo & Benekos, 2010). They added that if one were to look at the perspective of policymakers, going soft on policies would be synonym to the 'kiss of death of their political careers' as they would appear to be soft on crime. However, others suggest that the support for punitive policies is significantly related to perceiving knowledge of a certain ideology, where in the research (Surette, Chadee, Heath, & Young, 2011) is seen as a set of realistic and accurate form of reactions.

Situational Analysis - Attributes to the Potentials and Pitfalls of Policies

Scholars have suggested that there are 4 main factors influencing the effectiveness of policies. These include public acceptability of policy measures, individual factors such as awareness (Prior, 2009; Shields *et al*., 2009; Steg, 2006), the gap in the knowledge of the nature and the extent of the problem between what is assumed suited by policy makers and the real nature of the situation (Dwyer, 2011; Prior, 2009), and proper execution of policies (Filtenborg *et al.,* 2002).

One of the most important obstacles of a policy and policy development is public opinion. In every kind of policy, public acceptability (which includes effectiveness and fairness) is seen as the key-dynamics in policy development (Allen, 2002). The appropriateness of public policies is often driven by the perception of individuals and society. These beliefs and perceptions are influenced by judgments, prior experience, knowledge and the education and information efforts by policy makers (Kneeshaw *et al.,* 2004). Policy makers must take into consideration that certain policies may work in some communities within a geographic context, but not all (Cowart, Sutherland, & Harris, 1995; Kneeshaw *et al*., 2004). Therefore, it is important that policy must follow the development of local programme leadership and control, where top-down policies can set standards and provide training, while serving as a catalyst for bottom-up implementation. Such efforts can bring high levels of local acceptability and support towards the policies (Cowart *et al*., 1995).

Policy awareness is essential for stakeholders' benefits (Narayana, 2006). In particular, the political awareness, knowledge and engagement in policies to its agents remain one of the key issues associated with policy effectiveness. Policy studies have shown that most individuals

in the masses are not very knowledgeable in policies. While some of them are well informed, it is easy to generalize that the typical citizen appears to be poorly informed (Claassen & Highton, 2008). Studies have also shown that awareness of the policy does not deter offenders from offending these policies. However, it does impact the community by enhancing consciousness and heightening awareness of offenses among lay people (Shin & Lee, 2005). On the other hand, Duncan (2007) postulates in his findings that actors are aware and understand the available policies, but have little effect on social outcomes. This largely rests on the policy maker's assumption of rational choice, and in turn, creating a 'rationality' mistake.

In most areas of social policy, government programmes are often implemented with little regard to evidence, which has caused billions of dollars and it still needs to address the critical needs of a society (Heinrich, 2007). The need to understand the scale and nature of the problem addressed provides a necessary underpinning for policies. The challenge comes when policy makers make meaning of certain keywords that represent a different meaning to other agents. These problems arise when policymakers make assumptions of keywords, where the words and descriptions have an ontological reality, and therefore, can be measured in order to get the 'true picture of these words in one aspect of the social world, namely, the world of stakeholders. This picture will provide a basis for interventions by policymakers who wish to alter or create policies. There is also

evidence that policymakers are unwilling to explore beyond the empirical level of what they observe, and hence, fail to investigate what really happens within the stakeholders in order to seek out explanations on why certain phenomena happen (Prior, 2009). On the other hand, scholars have suggested that policymakers would sometimes have to listen to their 'political master' in placating this pressure and would rather develop policies rationally, weighing up the evidence of their findings appropriately (Duncan, 2007).

Thus, policy makers must find ways to ensure successful implementation of the policies, as this will involve a large influx of federal money. The importance of identifying the actual working of the proposed policies produces information regarding the challenges to policy reform and to correctly interpret evaluation results is highly recognized as a challenge (Cooley, 2010). Studies have shown that there are several major attributes that contribute towards the implementation levels of policies. Firstly, the support of the organized interest and civic capacity, where stakeholders play a crucial role in showing interest in the policy objectives. Secondly, the influence of oppositional interest, where non-governmental organisations or opposition parties play a pivotal role in pressuring policy makers towards implementing the policies, and thirdly, the fiscal capacity or stress that can be supported throughout the policy implementation (Sharp, Daley, & Lynch, 2010). Some studies have shown that it is based on

principal-agent breakdown, whereby principals have the inability to formulate clear policy outcomes or to adequately supervise the implementation of their goals (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002).

INSTRUMENT

Understanding Different Agencies through Actor-Network Theory

Actor-network Theory or ANT is a patterned network of heterogeneous relations, or an effect produced by such a network. This relational and process-oriented sociology assumes agents, organizations and devices as 'interactive effects'. Therefore, ANT is an effect of the interaction between materials and strategies of organization (Law, 1992). The fundamental importance of ANT is that it is not materialist oriented. Therefore, it does not intent to divide humans and non-humans but with the intension to understand that there is a simultaneous presence of different 'agencies'. These agencies can be humans, machines or even symbols that are treated in heterogeneous actor-network (Plesner, 2009).

Actor-Network Theory in Tourism through the Constructivist Lens

The Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is worth considering as a framework for the study of tourism. This theory will guide scholars in tourism on how and what to study in tourism (Vanderduim, 2007). This is because ANT establishes important insights for tourism research (in this case, research in rural tourism policies) as it provides a possibility to bypass dualism and also to take into consideration the significance of materials in the concepts and practices of tourism. ANT, therefore, provides the ability to deal with relational materiality of the social world, where it provides an avenue for research to identify how tourism happens through hybrid network practices of different actors while providing the opportunity to grasp multiple relational orderings (Jóhannesson, 2005). In short, tourism is held together by active sets of relations in which the human and the non-human continuously exchange properties, bringing some form of structural order to the whole picture at large (Vanderduim, 2007).

What actor-network theorists now seek to investigate are the means by which associations come into existence and how the roles and functions of subjects and objects, actors and intermediaries, humans and non-humans are attributed and stabilized (Murdoch, 1997).

In the context of rural tourism in Malaysia, the characteristics of its actors can be conglomerated to tourist operators, local officials, federal and state officials, tourist and civil society. Therefore, rural tourism is a complex system of actions with specific operating logics, composed of a multitude of actors. In involves multiple objects and non-human elements into the composition, alongside with actors (Murdoch, 1997). In order for policies to work, the relationship between these elements must be bridged, creating a heterogeneous environment crucial for the effectiveness of policies.

In order to achieve this, the researcher will need to adopt an inductive,

comprehensive approach, which accumulates the experiences of actors and the sense that they give to their actions and how they view the reality of the system they operate (Jolivet & Heiskanen, 2010). This procedure will be guided through the constructivists' worldview.

Constructivism has increasingly been of more importance in the social science perspective and has even become more predominant in other areas. The constructivist sees that reality is a social construct (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Chua *et al.,* 2010). Those on this spectrum base their viewpoint on "relativism", where realities are capable to be in the state of it being from multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experiential constructions. The constructivist is guided by the fact that the belief system relies on the basis relativism and not so much on realism (Perera & Sutrisna, 2010).

The constructivist's epistemological approach looks as the transactional and subjectivist viewpoint, whereby the assumption of the investigator and the investigated object are interactively inclined (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Perera & Sutrisna, 2010). In other words, the values of the investigator are inevitably influencing the inquiry, and that the findings are literally created by the investigation proceeds (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). However, Perera and Sutrisna (2010) mentioned that with such standpoint, the conservatism will be challenged for having such distinction as compared to the more traditional ontological and epistemological of the other paradigms.

Accordingly, the constructivist, unlike other paradigms, sees the object and the subject as a single entity and not as a dichotomy. Hence, ANT creates a suitable incubator by bridging the gap between policy makers, stakeholders, and the environment.

The methodology that surrounds a constructivist would be the nature of the social construction that the individual can be elicited and refined through interaction between investigator and respondent. Using the hermeneutical techniques, the final aim is to distil a consensus construction that is more in-depth and sophisticated than any techniques of contractions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

In the study of the quality of tourist experience, Jennings *et al*. (2009) redefined that the levels of interpretation of quality (for example) would be seen differently from one individual to another. Hence, Jennings *et al*. (2009) stated that a constructivist's adoption would be able to identify the quality of the tourist's experience in more detail and in-depth. Therefore, finding out the underlying meanings of quality, tourism and experiences from the different angles of stakeholders can only be experienced through the lens of a constructivist.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 below postulates the four elements of policy effectiveness, showing the plausible reasons that can contribute to the potentials and pitfalls of tourism policies. The effectiveness of policies is seen from the perspective of general tourism in Malaysia and also rural tourism in Malaysia.

Public acceptability of policy measures

Policies for the general tourism in Malaysia involve its local residents to participate in the entrepreneurship of its local products. It is possible to correlate that once these local residents engage in these entrepreneurial activities, they will have some level of acceptance towards the policies. From the rural tourism context, the involvement of the private sector is still limited. This can well be a sign that the private sector sees the policies as unfair or ineffective. Moreover, visitors see locals as 'objects' and 'products' of rural tourism and they hardly participate in businesses related to tourists. Situations as such can cause the locals to perceive that the policy is unfair, contributing to the ineffectiveness of the policy.

Individual factors such as awareness

Policies from the general tourism aspect can be seen as effective. This is a good attempt as it creates awareness amongst the public. Nonetheless, in order to understand the full extent of its effectiveness, there is still a need to measure the success levels of these campaigns. From a rural tourism sense, there is a discrepancy in awareness in both the individual level and the agency level. This could mean that policies from the rural tourism sense are still lacking to create awareness in its stakeholders.

Gap between assumed and actual knowledge

While examining Fig.1 and Fig.2, it is apparent that the creation of policies used a top-down approach. This is because all the agencies involved are made up of governmental and non-governmental organizations, where the stakeholders such as the local and corporate communities are largely excluded. This phenomenon can create gaps of knowledge between what is assumed to be correct by the policy makers and what the actual situation at hand is.

Proper execution of policies

On the general tourism aspect, Awang and Aziz (2011) postulate that execution of policies is unequally distributed throughout the country. This is seen through the discrepancies in its promotional activities that are more rampant in certain states. This sort of policy execution can dampen its full capabilities of it being fully effective.

It is evident that the general tourism context has certain flaws in its policies. Hence, it is not surprising that the rural tourism context will have similar findings. These preliminary findings prove that the policies governing both tourism and rural tourism in Malaysia have some strength and weaknesses. With this basis, it is imperative to acknowledge these strengths and weaknesses in order to build policies that will serve to the full potential.

At this juncture, it is possible to connote that a multi-layered approach be adopted in order to encourage actors' participation and interaction. This step will ensure that the policies available are there to protect and conserve and at the same time bring economic value to the industry. The purpose of this paper is to further scope the potentials and pitfalls of the rural tourism policies

TABLE 1
The Effectiveness of Tourism Policy

No.	Factors of Effective Policies	Tourism in Malaysia	Rural Tourism in Malaysia
	Public acceptability of policy measures	• Policies focus more on domestic tourism through local residents involvement in entrepreneurship in product development and services (Mohamed, 2002)	• The involvement of the private sector is still limited (Mohamed, 2002). • Locals continue to be mere 'objects' or 'products' to be gazed by the visitors and natives never run businesses related to tourists (Mohamed, 2002)
	Individual factors such as awareness	• Malaysian Government and other NGO's conduct campaigns to raise the level of awareness on conservation. This is done through campaigns to raise the level of awareness on conservation issues throughout the country (Daud, 1999) • Government departments, private businesses and the public at large are made aware of the deteriorating world environment and the need to conserve and preserve nature through sustainable development (Daud, 1999)	• The initiative to introduce tourism as a core subject in local universities, as well as schools (Mohamed, 2002) • Lack of environmental consciousness is evident in the rural tourism setting as some Malaysians are seen washing their vehicles in the river (Mohamed, 2002). • 10 out of 15 agencies do not really understand the principles and concepts of ecotourism and 30% have little relation with the government; another 30.8% admitted have no relation with the government (Mohamed, 2002)
	Gap of knowledge of the nature and extent of the problem between what is assumed suited by policy makers and the real nature of the situation	• Figure 1.0 shows the chart on how Tourism Malaysia engages with ministries and departments in the planning, maintaining and controlling of tourism activities. However, no local representatives were present in the making.	• Figure 1.1 shows the chart on how the Malaysian Ecotourism Plan was formulated. Stakeholders were made up of different governmental bodies. However, no local representatives were present in the making.
	Proper execution of policies	• Unequally distributed amongst the region as suggested by the plan. This was caused by lack of promotion through poor policy execution (Awang & Aziz, 2011).	• Despite availability of policies, international tourist have voiced out their concerns with regards to the ambivalent policies implementation in Taman Negara National Park (Ramachandran, 2009)

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from a constructivist's perspective. The model that is aimed to assist this study is the actor-network theory approach, where the problem will be addressed using constructivism as a theoretical lens. This approach will use a qualitative design as it enables the exploration of the four elements so as to identify the effectiveness of the current policy structure, and also the exploration of stakeholders' perception.

CONCLUSION

In order to learn more about the effectiveness of a policy, scholars would need to investigate the potentials and pitfalls of rural tourism policies. The four elements of policy effectiveness, whether preventive or punitive, have been identified in this study, namely: (1) public acceptability of policy measures; (2) individual factors such as

awareness; (3) the gap of knowledge of the nature, and (4) the extent of the problem between what is assumed suited by policy makers and the real nature of the situation and proper execution of policies. Rural tourism is seen as a form of sustainable development that promotes productivity in area of the rural zones. In Malaysia, it is seen as one of the economic engines of tourism. Policies pertaining to the protection of rural tourism are available in Malaysia. The preliminary findings have shown the strengths and weaknesses that are evident in the policies of rural tourism. However, due to the lack of interaction between policy makers and its actors, and the lack of these policies being intertwined with each other has caused these policies to be less effective as they should be. The Actor-Network Theory (ANT) will assist
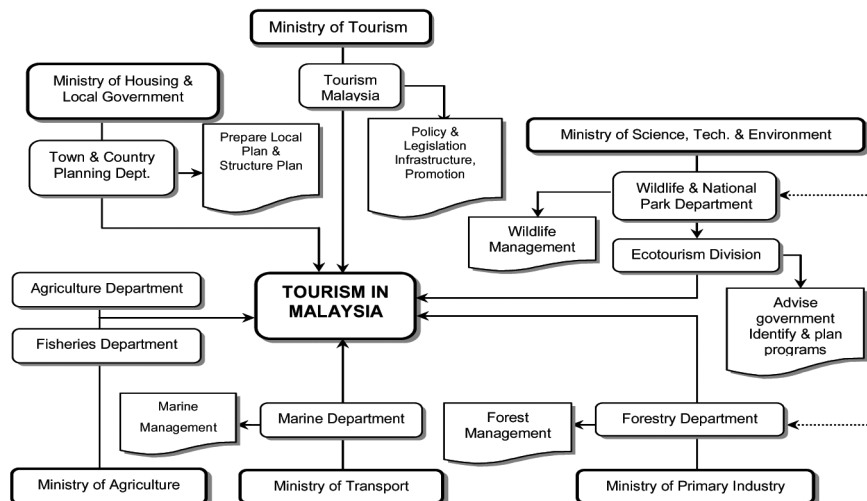

FIGURE 2: GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS INVOLVE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN MALAYSIA
Source: Modified from Mohamed (2002).

Fig.1: The engagement of the ministries and departments in the planning, maintaining and controlling of tourism activities (Marzuki, 2005)
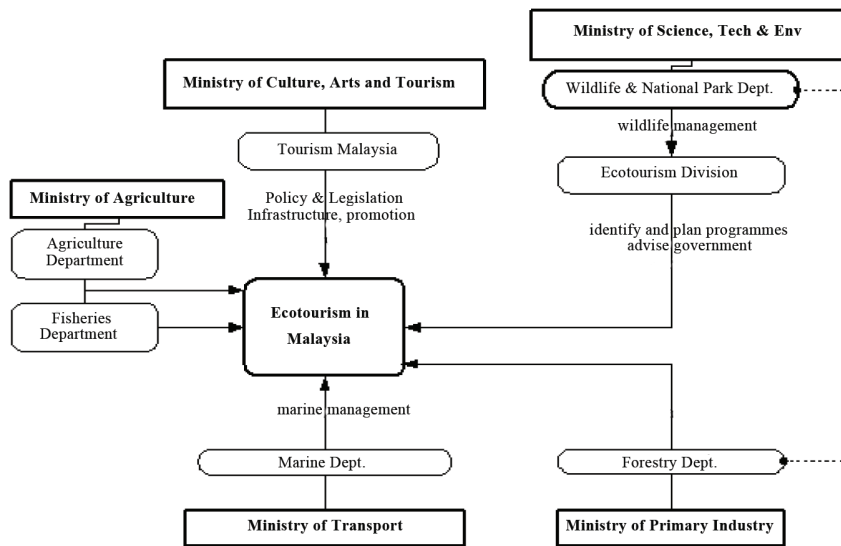
Fig.2: The engagement of the ministries and departments in the formulation of the Malaysian Ecotourism Plan (Mohamed, 2002)

in this investigation using constructivism as a theoretical lens. This bridges the gap between policy makers, stakeholders, and the environment, making it heterogeneous, and hence serving as a tool in identifying the four elements of effective policy creations.

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