

SPEECH BY Y.B.TAN SRI DATUK CHONG KAH KIAT, DEPUTY CHIEF MINISTER/MINISTER OF TOURISM, CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT AT THE OFFICIAL LAUNCHING OF BORNEO ECOTOURISM CONFERENCE ON 12TH APRIL, 2005 AT PACIFIC SUTERA HOTEL

Salutations.....

Sabah is indeed, very honoured to host its third International Ecotourism Conference. And it is a great pleasure to see many familiar as well as new faces at this important ecotourism gathering. Many of you have come from afar, not only from other parts of Sabah and Malaysia but also from as far as Canada and Australia to share your knowledge and experience and to help us chart the direction in which we want the tourism industry to develop and grow in the region especially on the island of Borneo. I also wish to acknowledge the presence of delegates from our neighbours, Sarawak and Brunei. I am especially pleased to be informed that nine State Directors of Tourism Malaysia are participating in this conference, and I have also been told that there is a big contingent from Johore State national park corporation. I would like to extend a very warm welcome to all of you to this conference and to Sabah. To our visiting speakers, I wish you a pleasant and memorable stay in Sabah. If this your first visit to Sabah, may it be the start of many to come.

Tourism is now accepted as a key growth industry in Malaysia. Over the past decade, Malaysia has been proactive in developing various forms of tourism, many of which take their character and substance from the nation's varied natural assets. Sabah as well as Sarawak, the Bornean states of Malaysia in particular, continue to rank among the leaders in the country by their substantial contributions towards the national image of Malaysia as a nature as well as an ecotourism destination through their richness of their biodiversity on land and sea.

Over the past few years the Sabah State Government has embarked on various concerted measures to improve air access and has invested in vigorous promotions to raise the profile of the state and to increase tourist arrivals. We are proud to say that we have succeeded beyond our expectations in this mission. In 2004 we achieved a tremendous growth in international and domestic tourist to Sabah with a total of 1.77 million arrivals. This figure was an increase of 41.7% over the previous year. From visitor trends in the first two months of this year we expect a similar growth in arrivals both from overseas and domestic markets in 2005. The State Government has set a target of 2.7 million visitor arrivals to be achieved by year 2007. With the immediate expansion of the Kota Kinabalu International Airport which is being carried out over the next few years at a cost of RM1 billion we are confident of reaching the target.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are also very much aware of the needs and challenges for sustainable growth of tourism, in particular, ecotourism, especially in a state like Sabah, where its touristic resources are largely nature based. The State Government also realises that our fundamental touristic assets encompass nature and culture resources. To generate long term benefits to meet various economic and social needs, these resources need to be properly managed and appropriately developed and where necessary given due protection.

The growth in numbers of tourists and the influx expected in the next few years will invariably pose several challenges to the industry. Among them will be the need for increased physical development of appropriate tourism products especially in rural areas where many of the nature attractions are located to cater for the increase, Another is in development of services and skills of high quality and standards required to deliver these products to meet especially discerning visitor needs and expectations. These issues demand awareness and understanding of the needs of the industry by the players comprising providers or producers, and the visitor and the general public who are the users. For instance, it is not enough to develop appropriate and tasteful infrastructure, visitor amenities and recreational facilities. The development plan should include care and protection of the environment, provision regular maintenance of infrastructure and enable delivery of appropriate services that not only meet safety requirements and other standards but also to beautify the environs.

The maintenance culture has to be firmly inculcated so that we do not unduly degrade important superlative nature resources and visitor attractions on land and in the sea by carelessness and apathy in littering the environment and causing undue destruction through simple neglect and ignorance of the negative impact of our actions such as on coral reefs, wildlife habitats and ecosystems by visitor and provider alike. At the same time there is a continued need to respect and appreciate the cultures of the people we visit, many of whom are the focal attraction or are part of it. Sufficient thought should be given to avoid or prevent short-sighted and expedient development that can result in costly operations such as through the constant need for repairs of the infrastructure, and which can lead to business failures. These are some of the issues which I hope the conference will be able to address that will not only help Sabah but also other parts of Borneo.

Sabah, Sarawak together with our neighbours, Brunei, and the provinces of Kalimantan, Indonesia, are integral components of the island of Borneo and

share a wonderful heritage of the rich biodiversity, the spectacular and diverse natural landscapes and seascapes. As you are all aware, many of these extraordinary nature and natural environmental resources provide the foundation of a wide variety of marine and terrestrial tourism products and attractions, which also offer economic opportunities for the development of other forms of nature-based tourism.

To name but a few, our rainforest is home to a much loved nature icon, the Orang Utan, better known as the man of the forest. It is a primate species endemic to the island of Borneo and Sumatra. Another species endemic to Borneo is the Sumatran rhinoceros, the smallest of four species of rhinoceros in the world. Another endemic primate species is the proboscis monkey, which is distinctive for its disproportionate pendulous nose. The pygmy elephants in Sabah has been discovered to be a distinct subspecies of the Asian elephant and is endemic to Borneo.

The rainforest of Borneo, from Gunong Gading of Sarawak to Crocker Range and Maliau Basin of Sabah, is home to four species of the world largest flower, the Rafflesia. And the world heritage sites of the summit of Mt. Kinabalu to Mulu Caves contain more than a thousand species of orchids, and many unique plants and flowers and with many more still waiting to be discovered and researched.

These spectacular attractions found in the parks and protected areas in Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei have attracted the likes of world renowned naturalists and scientists who include Sir David Attenborough and Professor David Bellamy. They continue to attract the new generation of ecotourists, who are recognized as the largest growth segment in the tourism industry today.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The population of Borneo constitute some 50 ethnic groups with their respective colourful customs and traditions. Without doubt both indigenous and non-indigenous people will continue to play a central role in making Borneo distinct, offering enormous potential for developing appropriate ecotourism. Many of them are indigenous communities who live near or inhabit areas of important natural ecosystems. In Sabah they are gradually being integrated in various programmes as custodians of these areas, and are encouraged to contribute towards the development of sustainable tourism.

They include the Bajau, Suluks of Semporna, the Orang Sungai in the Kinabatangan River, the Kadazandusun in Kinabalu and Crocker Range Park and

the Lundayeh in Long Pasia. In Sarawak I understand similar initiatives are being done for the Ibans in Lanjak Entimau National Park.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This Conference brings together various tourism players from operators, industry representatives, policy makers, academics and researchers to guide the future of ecotourism in Borneo. It offers a forum for discussion, sharing of knowledge and experiences by industry experts, business leaders, progressive communities and government officers on ecotourism and how sustainable tourism can contribute towards improving the livelihoods of local communities, sustain and protect the environment, and enhance local and state economies.

I would like all of you to take advantage of this window of opportunity offered for all of you to take a look at the vast potential in this part of the natural world and to share and discuss it with your peers. In Sabah the private sector, some in partnership with Government, has been proactive in spearheading various forms of ecotourism development which offer models of development for others to emulate. While you can learn from their experiences, there is much we can learn from yours. Sustainability is the operative direction of the industry. Indeed, I am certain the issues discussed during the conference will help determine the direction of development of ecotourism in the region for the ensuing years.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the State Government and the people of Sabah, I welcome you all again to this Conference and congratulate you for your participation. Your participation and the sharing of experiences, knowledge and information will no doubt help place you in a better position to tap this potential more effectively and help make the industry more sustainable.

I wish you all a fruitful conference and I look forward to receiving your findings from the workshops after this conference.

It is with great pleasure that I now officiate the Borneo Ecotourism Conference 2005.

Thank You.