

Headline	`Have safety rangers in campsites		
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'Have safety rangers in campsites'

After the deadly Batang Kali landslide, there are suggestions that campsites come with their own rangers to monitor surroundings for safety. Meanwhile, tourism players are hoping to learn from the tragedy, and keep growing the camping business in Malaysia.

Stories by YUEN MEIKENG
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WITH the heartbreaking find of the last victim's body - an 11-year-old boy, the tragic landslide in Batang Kali has left behind a dark scar in Malaysia.

In the wee hours of Dec 16, a landslide occurred along the Batang Kali-Genting Highlands stretch of area, hitting the Father's Organic Farm, where adults and children were out camping.

The incident, which took away 31 lives, has led to tourism players, campsite operators and camping enthusiasts to call for more action to stop another similar disaster from happening.

Some are suggesting that campsites have their own rangers, or safety personnel to monitor the surroundings for possible dangers.

Other proposals are temporarily closing campsites at risky areas during the annual monsoon season, boosting safety awareness among campers and introducing licenses to operators to monitor safety standards.

Currently, the Selangor government is in the process of formulating guidelines for campsites, as there are none so far.

After it completes a survey on all campsites in the state, a work-

shop will be held with relevant stakeholders to draft the guidelines.

Malaysia Tourism Council president Uzaidi Udanis, as one of the parties to be involved in the workshop, tells *Sunday Star* the discussion is expected to take place within the first two weeks of January next year.

"We want to do it fast to protect campers but it must be reasonable to campsite operators too.

"Above all, the guideline must protect everyone's safety.

"One of my suggestions is for campsites to have their own rangers or security personnel.

"Such rangers can monitor the site and its surroundings for possible threats like land movement, wild animals and even deter burglaries," he proposes.

He adds that the guidelines should also look into a campsite's location by getting experts to determine technical safety criteria like land stability and distance from developments.

The idea to have campsite rangers is also echoed by some camping enthusiasts.

An avid camper, who wishes to be known only as Alham, 31, says the government should grant permits to campsites based on the main criteria of safety.



Luxurious camping: Glamping or glamorous camping is a popular activity of sleeping outdoors with all amenities and sometimes, even a full hotel service. - Others

"There should also be someone on watch every night like a forest ranger. In some campsites, the management team sleeps inside a house or a shelter at night.

"Nobody is on duty after dark to ensure the safety of campers. This isn't very responsible because many campsites charge customers similar prices to hotel stays," he says.

However, Alham does know several campsites that have staff on standby and are on alert when it rains continuously.

'Let camping grow'

While ensuring safety, the proposed guidelines for campsites should not hamper the development of the industry.

This includes overly burdening operators in terms of cost, says Uzaidi, who is also Malaysia Inbound Tourism Association president.

The business of camping and glamping (upscale camping or "glamorous camping") has been blossoming in Malaysia since the Covid-19 pandemic, he points out.

"Since the pandemic, more people began to appreciate the outdoors and nature.

"Campsites were fully booked at places like the Forest Research Institute Malaysia in Selangor and locations under the Perlis forestry department," he shares.

Uzaidi says even recreational vehicles like caravans are becoming popular in Malaysia, as they allow tourists to travel from place to place and sleep inside the truck.

"Such are strong tourism trends which cannot be ignored.

"It's very sad and unfortunate for the Batang Kali incident to have happened, especially during the school holidays.

"But we should not let it affect this growing tourism attraction.

"We hope to learn lessons from it and move on from there," Uzaidi says, adding that tourism players must work together to see how tourists can be better protected.

Concurring, Malaysian Tourist Guides Council president Jimmy Leong says camping and glamping activities have great potential in the local tourism sector.

"We need to develop this industry in a safe and proper manner.

"Let's not reject this tourism category when there are ways to grow it in a strict and mature way," he adds.

Stressing the need for clearer standard operating procedures, Leong says the authorities should first categorise areas according to their risk levels and then decide which sites are too dangerous.

He says camping and glamping, which may come with the luxury and amenities of a hotel, is sometimes near hills, rivers, the sea and low lying areas.

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“Everybody needs to be made aware of the dangers and threats. “Currently, there are no guidelines to be followed,” he says.

Yes to being licensed

Meanwhile, campsite operators are willing to be issued licenses to run their business so that a bar can be set on safety.

This is following reports that there was a lack of such policies to regulate operators.

It also encourages campers to feel safer with licensed campsites, says an operator of a campsite in Pahang, who wishes to be known only as Sam.

“The authorities should immediately inspect all campsites and provide proper guidelines for us.

“Those who comply should be issued licenses so that campers can trust us,” he says.

He also hopes the government would order campsites near rivers or hilly areas to close temporarily during the monsoon season.

“If the campsite is at a safe loca-

Rising popularity: Since the pandemic, more and more domestic and international travellers are beginning to appreciate Malaysia’s rich natural beauty and outdoor recreational activities. Tourism players must work together to see how travellers can be better protected. – Others

tion like a flatland, they should be able to operate.

“The government should also set up a department to regulate camping activities.

“We have checked with our local authority but they told us there are no guidelines on this yet,” says Sam, highlighting the need for more clarity in the business.

In the meantime, he shares that the campsite has taken steps such as installing lightning arresters, monitoring road and drain conditions every day and repairing them immediately if need be.

“We have also set up a rain gauge to measure rainfall level, while our camping grounds are at least 50 feet higher than the river.

“Clear signages by the river are also placed to warn campers not to play in the water during the rain,” Sam explains, adding that there is also 24-hour surveillance of the area.

“Malaysia is blessed with natural landscapes and we all should preserve its beauty.

“The government should be thorough before issuing logging licenses especially for hilly areas. It is the main cause of land erosion and landslides,” he adds.

Similarly, Bernam Nature Hut campsite operator Juhari Mohd Shariff, 55, is open to introducing licenses for businesses like his.

“But the authorities should also help us to monitor and provide assistance to campsites in preventing landslides, especially at riverbanks.

“Campsite operators shouldn’t be solely blamed for tragedies like Batang Kali.

“For those at risky areas, the authorities should provide aid to them if they have to shut down temporarily during the monsoon season,” he says, adding that it would be burdensome for the operator to bear the cost alone.

Juhari, who has been running the campsite in Tanjung Malim, Perak since 2019, says it would be unfair to temporarily close all campsites during the rainy season.

“But I would understand if it is imposed for risky areas.

“This includes campsites located upstream of a river, whereby there’s a risk of being swept away by a sudden water surge (kepada air in Malay) when it rains,” he says.

Juhari believes that there is much potential for campsites to flourish in Malaysia.

“As operators, we are trying our best to provide a relaxing place for city dwellers to visit and admire our country’s natural surroundings.

“It’s difficult to find such natural beauty these days,” he says.