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Sustainable rural tourism: An indigenous community perspective on positioning rural tourism

Abstract

It is commonly assumed that formulation of tourism policies and the marketing of destination areas are dictated by the needs and interests of visitors. Often ignored however, are the views of the local communities, the roles they play in these processes as well as the impacts on the indigenous communities and their socio-cultural spaces. Thus this paper presents a study conducted with the indigenous community of Long Lamai in Malaysia, who has recently ventured into rural tourism. The Long Lamai community has slowly transformed from being solely dependent on hunting gathering to leveraging on their rich natural sources for a cash income as well as opening up to the outside world. The local community perceives tourism as the best option to sustain and align their lifestyle to their new needs. However as a remote community, they are also aware of the vulnerabilities due to the rapid development plans which may bring about adverse effects to their present healthy existence. The purpose of this study was twofold: (1) to assess the local community's support for tourism development: and (2) to explore the perceived positioning of rural tourism by local people. Results showed that the majority of community members have strong support for tourism development and they are also ready to face possible challenges that come with this development. Major concerns expressed by community members include environmental conservation and local cultural protocols.

Key words: indigenous community; positioning; rural tourism; perspective; Long Lamai; Malaysia

Introduction

Rural tourism is the fastest growing business, which increase foreign investments and earnings (Daneshpour & Pajouh, 2014). It is regarded as one of the few activities that can benefit local communities without much expenditure and increase earnings by sustainably utilising local resources in making local products (Othman, Sazali & Mohamed, 2013). It boosts the rural economy and, in particular, provides opportunities for rural communities to directly benefit from tourism by creating a value-added commercial channel for local produce (Sgroi, Trapani, Testa & Tudisca, 2014). For indigenous peoples, the threat to their environment and culture is huge and currently there is limited effort to protect the communities, their land and environment from negative impacts of development changes. Tourism provides an opportunity for indigenous peoples to promote their sustainable lifestyle and also to earn cash income (McCool & Moisey, 2001). Nonetheless, as Scheyvens (1999) argues: 'Ecotourism ventures should only be considered successful if local communities have some measure of control over them and if they share equitably in the benefits emerging from ecotourism activities'. According to the World Tourism Organisation: 'The development of sustainable tourism requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, as well as strong political leadership to ensure wide participation and consensus building' (UNWTO, 2005).

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