

Rural Communities Perceptions and Attitudes towards Environment Tourism Development

May-Chiun Lo¹, T. Ramayah² & Helen Lee Hui Hui¹

¹ Faculty of Economics and Business, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Sarawak, Malaysia

² School of Management, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

Correspondence: May-Chiun Lo, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 94300 Sarawak, Malaysia. Tel: 60-82-58-1154. E-mail: mclo@feb.unimas.my

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Abstract

Past literature has posited that tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors and has been signified as an attractive investment proposition. Rural tourism sector has been actively promoted by the Malaysian government and currently, it is considered as one of the cornerstone of Malaysia's economic diversification strategy. On the other hand, it is important to note that stakeholder like local communities do play a crucial role in sustaining tourism development. Hence, the purpose of this study is to assess the impact of rural tourism development on the environment from the local communities' perspectives. The environmental constructs which consists of surrounding of the rural tourism destination, environment management practice, conservation of culture heritage, local satisfaction and influence of resources have been examined against local communities' attitude towards rural tourism development. 199 respondents comprising of residents of rural tourism in Sarawak, Malaysia took part voluntarily in this study. To assess the developed model, *SmartPLS 2.0 (M3)* was applied based on path modelling and then bootstrapping with 200 re-samples was applied to generate the standard error of the estimate and t-values. Interestingly, the findings suggested that local communities were most concerned with the conservation of culture heritage and influence of resources when it comes to rural tourism development. Implications of these findings showed that it is crucial to understand the various concerns of the local communities for ensuring better sustainability performance especially in rural tourism setting.

1. Introduction

Tourism is considered as one of the corner stone industry and is ranked as the second largest industry in Malaysia. It plays a significant role in reducing the rate of poverty among the rural communities especially those in rural tourism destinations. Most significantly, rural tourism is seen as an opportunity for local people living in tourism destinations to gain positive benefits from tourism development and the state's conservation of forests and protected areas. Past studies have elucidated that the standard of living and employment opportunities of the rural communities depend very much on tourism industry (Bredhenhann & Wickens, 2003; Ruiz Molina, Gil-Saura, & Moliner-Velazquez, 2010). Nonetheless, tourism may bring negative impact to the local residents if it is not managed in a responsible way. In order to achieve a sustainable tourism development, local community leaders and stakeholders in tourism industry should work together to manage rural tourism industry as a 'community industry' (Murphy, 1985). Hence, for the tourism-related economy to sustain it and the residents to be satisfied, residents must be willing to take part in the process. Considering the frequency of interaction between residents and tourists, their willingness to serve as kind hosts is critical to the success of tourism. Therefore, residents are encouraged to be actively involved in the planning process and their attitudes toward tourism and perceptions of its impact on community life must be continually assessed to increase their satisfaction (Allen, Long, Perdue & Kieselbach, 1988).

Tourism was promoted by the Malaysian government back in the 1970s, where the government started by focusing on providing basic infrastructures like highways, airports and the upgrading of attractions with potential tourism destination. In the 1980's, tourism was promoted as a means to meet the country's development objectives, and now, the Malaysian government has launched the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) as they foresee that there is a need to enhance connectivity to key priority tourism markets. Although government efforts play a