

## ANTECEDENTS OF DESTINATION IMAGE IN NATURAL PROTECTED AREA: THE MODERATING ROLE OF PERCEIVED VALUE

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**Abstract:** Ecotourism is a nature-oriented tourism idea that is flourishing and with promising outlook. The present study attempts to explore the importance of local communities' attitude, carrying capacity and destination attractiveness & resources towards destination image by adopting perceived value as a moderator on examining the antecedents on destination image. Data were collected from 146 tourists who have visited Bako National Park, Sarawak. The research employs WarpPLS 6.0 and the results revealed that local communities' attitude, carrying capacity and destination attractiveness & resources have impact on destination image. Perceived value has moderating effect between destination attractiveness & resources and destination image.

**Key words:** local communities' attitude, carrying capacity, destination attractiveness and resources, perceived value, destination image

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### INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become a noteworthy part of economic development. As revealed by Andrades and Dimanche (2017), the future economic benefits of tourism to regions or countries have been a recurring topic in the literature on tourism research. Ecotourism is a nature-oriented tourism that is thriving with promising future as it is able to satisfy the needs of tourists. It serves tourists with enriching "experience" that enables them to fulfil their tourism experiences (Lin, 2019). Therefore, the development of ecotourism has become the development direction of various governments to meet tourists' expectations and satisfaction. According to the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC), Malaysia has encountered a rise in terms of visitor arrivals with an inclination rate of 14.66% among international tourists in 2018 (MOTAC, 2020). Besides, The National Ecotourism Plan 2016-2025 forms part of Visit Malaysia 2020 and was planned to optimize the capacity of ecotourism and ensure the sustainability of tourism (The Star Online) which would further improve the contribution of the tourism industry to the economy given the lackluster results in the first quarter of 2020 with figures adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The challenge of sustainable development of ecotourism has emerged as an important and popular theoretical objective to consider the costs, risks and impacts of global environmental hazards on tourism and travel (Jamal and Budke, 2020). Two immense drivers of change are climate change and global health emergencies namely the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) that is currently impacting tourism sector. In addition, national parks are known as ecotourism or recreational tourism destination due to pristine environments with a unique natural formation. Establishing national parks without efficient tourism management could also have a negative impact in protecting and conserving natural areas where it can damage the environment, causing overcrowding and pollution (Buckley, 2011; Tepavčević et al., 2019).

The present study was conducted at Bako National Park situated in Sarawak, Malaysia. According to the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Sarawak (MTAC), Bako National Park is the oldest national park in Sarawak and is easily accessible from Kuching. It has proven a hit with foreign and domestic tourists where it has recorded the highest number of tourist arrivals on its diverse biodiversity, unique landscape, and favorable tourism infrastructure. In the light of the above discussion, this study attempts to examine the antecedents of local communities' attitude, carrying capacity and natural resources on destination image in Bako National Park, Sarawak. In addition, perceived value is adopted as a moderator variable to examine the relationship among the constructs. There are no studies investigating on perceived value as a moderator on linking between antecedents and destination image. Therefore, this paper tries to fill the gap by conceptualizing perceived value as a moderator in the relationship between local communities' attitude, carrying capacity and natural resources on destination image. The outcome of the study will provide useful and effective insights for future research.

### Literature Review and Development of Hypotheses

#### Destination Image

An increasingly strong competitiveness of a destination is focused primarily on the perceived image of its destination (Michaelidou et al.,

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