

Rural Tourism Destination Performance in East Malaysia: Influencing Factors from the Communities' Perspective

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Abstract

Rural tourism is a rapidly growing tourism segment and has been given increasing importance, in view of its potential to contribute economic growth to the rural areas. However, any rural tourism destination development should be implemented in a way that maximises destination performance. In our study, we examine the relationship between support and participation of the local government, community leadership in tourism, community attitudes towards tourism, and community support towards tourism with destination performance (from the economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects), from the local community perspective. We obtained, as voluntary respondents, 176 residents of a local community at a rural tourism destination in Sabah, Malaysia. *SmartPLS 2.0 (M3)* was applied to assess the developed model. Thereafter, to generate the standard error of the estimate and t-values, bootstrapping with 200 re-samples was applied. The findings suggested that community attitudes and community leadership in tourism have a significant positive impact on destination performance, whereas local government participation and support, and community support for tourism, had little impact on the same. Implications of these findings were further discussed.

Keywords: rural tourism, destination performance, community attitudes, community support, government support, community leadership

1. Introduction

Past Malaysia Plans, the New Economic Model and the Economic Transformation Programme have identified tourism as a key economic sector able to generate a high income level, providing significant potential for growth and development. Because Malaysia has an abundance of biodiversity, the government has identified ecotourism (and hence rural tourism) as an area to be further developed, with the condition that it is well managed according to the principles of long-term sustainability, in order to improve and maintain tourist yield (Economic Transformation Programme: A Roadmap for Malaysia, 2010).

It is only in the past decade or so that rural tourism has been identified as a niche market (Mintel, 2007), and it is already a main priority in many European countries (Swarbrooke, 1996). Rural tourism has been noted for many perceived benefits: revitalisation of declining rural areas and local economies (Kulcsar, 2009; Sharpley, 2002), maintenance of local infrastructure, employment/income opportunities (Liu, 2006; Sharpley, 2002; Kulcsar, 2009), growing awareness of the local cultural heritage (Sharpley, 2002) and broadened cultural provision (Kulcsar, 2009); but it is not without its problems (Sharpley, 2002; Su, 2011; Liu, 2006). Therefore, it is essential that the development of any rural tourism destination should be performed in a way that maximises destination performance from the economic, socio-cultural and environmental perspectives.

In this study, destination performance from the perspective of the local community is examined. The local community is an important stakeholder group living in or in close proximity with the destination. As such, their viewpoints on rural destination performance, from the economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects, should be seriously considered, due to two factors. The local community may act as a tourism supplier (of goods and services) within the rural destination and has a vested interest in the said site as a tourism destination. Therefore, they would be well aware of the success factors/elements (or lack thereof) at the destination in question and would be in a good position to offer accurate insight. Local community representatives with no direct vested interests are also in the position to give feedback as they are residents and are privy to destination-specific insider knowledge.