

# Tanjung Datu National Park, Sarawak: Communities' Perceptions towards Its Rural Competitive Advantage

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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 maximizes destination competitive advantage. This study examines the relationship between stakeholder involvement, community knowledge about tourism, and the economic, socio-cultural and environmental impacts on tourism with rural competitive advantage, as perceived by the local community. This study obtained, as voluntary respondents, 87 residents of a rural tourism destination in Sarawak, Malaysia. 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. The findings suggested that stakeholder involvement in tourism, community knowledge about tourism and the environmental impact of tourism have had a significant positive impact on rural competitive advantage, whereas economic and socio-cultural impacts of tourism, as well as community support for tourism, had little impact on the same. Lastly, such study would benefit the tourism implementers and decision-makers in tourism industry, in the sense that tourism activity can be proactively detected and curbed once critical mass is reached.

**Keywords:** community knowledge about tourism, destination competitive advantage, rural tourism, stakeholder involvement

## 1. Introduction

Tanjung Datu National Park is one of the rural tourism attractions situated at the South-Western tip of Sarawak and near to the border with the Indonesian state of West Kalimantan (Sarawak Tourism, 2003). The park consists of various natural attractions such as white sandy beach, clear ocean, turtles' nesting spot, and as one of the most attractive rainforest for jungle trekking or wildlife observation. Both Telok Melano and Telok Serabang are the nearest villages to the national park which offered *homestay* services. The villages are accessible through either by trekking from Tanjung Datu National Park to Telok Melano village (approximately 4 hours) or by boat (20 minutes). Based on the potential of Tanjung Datu in the rural tourism industry, it is important to examine the local community perceptions towards the competitive advantages of the destination.

Rural tourism has been noted to have generated advantages and perceived benefits to the local communities such as the maintenance of infrastructure, employment/income opportunities, revitalization of local economies, growing awareness of the local cultural heritage (Liu, 2006; Sharpley, 2002). However, problems associated with it include lack of support/training, lack of local facilities/amenities, high development costs with low returns, low demand, lack of essential skills, lack of human capital supply, ineffective marketing, the dominance of mass tourism operators, lack of integration of tourism into rural development strategies, failure to address the strengths and constraints in the rurality, lack of involvement of the local population and a too-aggressive development pace without considering local capacity and cultural adaptability (Liu, 2006; Sharpley, 2002; Su, 2011).

In view of the above mentioned problems, it is imperative that the development of any rural tourism destination should be implemented in line with a multi-dimensional and tested model/framework which maximizes the competitive advantage of the said destination. A stakeholder group is the local community who live within or around the destination; and their perspective pertaining to rural competitive advantage is important due to two reasons. Firstly, the local community could be directly involved with the rural destination as a tourism supplier, with a vested interest in it, and would be aware of what works and what does not for the said destination. Secondly, a local community representative with no direct vested interest would still have insider knowledge