

Positioning Rural Tourism: Perspectives from the Local Communities

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Abstract—Malaysian rural tourism is composed of a large number of rural communities, each with distinct and varied assets. Within Malaysia, it is noticeably that tourism demand drivers play an important part in generating trips to rural tourism areas. Rural tourism enables tourists to reunite with nature and the culture of the destinations, and that it contributes to the economic and social recovery of the rural areas, as well as to the conservation of the environment and the spreading of local cultures. There are significant strengths and potential opportunities available to rural tourism marketing efforts. Ecotourism has been actively promoted by governments as well as the industry, without an overall effective strategy, successfully protected area management plans and without consultation or inclusion of local communities. Hence, the purpose of this research is to conduct an analysis based on the existing tourism industry in Bario by examining the impact of economics, environmental, social and cultural factors of the tourism industry on the local communities in Bario. The findings suggested that the tourism industry has created a significant impact on the cultural aspect of local communities. Implications of these findings are discussed further.

Index Terms—Economics, environment, social, cultural, rural tourism, positioning.

I. INTRODUCTION

In an area of rural setting, the economic well-being and employment opportunities for the local residents may very much depend on tourism industry [1], [2]. In tourism market, rural tourism is a growing sector whereby, the economic growth, socio-cultural development, protection and improvement of both natural and built environment and infrastructure are the significant contributions of rural tourism. Rural tourism allows tourists to blend with nature and appreciate the culture of the particular destination. In managing a rural tourism destination, one of the major tests is to understand customers' perceptions and expectations as customers can compare products offered by various destinations. With that in mind, it is imperative for industry

players to understand and fulfill the needs of their customers. A systematically managed and marketed rural tourism has a vast potential of providing opportunities to fulfill visitors' needs especially those who are searching for new destinations and experiences.

Rural tourism offers differentiated product offerings than their urban counterpart as rural areas are rich in natural and cultural traditional elements. Hence, it is imperative that these product offerings are preserved as well as practiced, as their existence provide attractions in promoting these rural destinations. In promoting rural destinations, it is therefore important to recognize the destination's tourism products and how these products are able to meet the needs of the customers.

Tourism plays a significant role in the economy of Malaysia as it is one of the National Key Economic Areas (NKEA) under the Tenth Malaysia Plan, a comprehensive blueprint by the Government of Malaysia to allocate the national budget from the year 2011 to 2015 to all economic sectors, and it is Malaysia's third largest revenue generating industry, after oil and gas, and manufacturing sectors. Statistics have shown that in 2010, Malaysia welcomed an estimated 690,000 foreign visitors and 54% of these opted for rural tourism. Hence, it is important to ensure environmental sustainability of tourism activities in rural tourists' destination.

This study endeavors to evaluate the impact of economics, environmental, social and cultural factors of the tourism industry on the local communities in Bario, a rural tourism destination in Sarawak, Malaysia. Bario is located on the island of Borneo, close to the Malaysia-Indonesia border between Sarawak (Malaysia), and Kalimantan (Indonesia). As Bario is remotely located, it takes about 14 hours drive through unpaved and muddy logging road; or a two-day boat ride or a 12-day-long trek across forested mountains. The only practical way to get there is a one-hour flight on a 19-seater Twin Otter aircraft. Bario is rapidly becoming a popular rural tourism destination and tourists' arrival has increased from year to year. While the significant economic outcome can be readily understood, it is less apparent what the dramatic increase in tourism has on the Bario communities. Hence, understanding local communities' concerns in the development of a rural tourism destination is vital. It is believed that through this study, researchers would be able to uncover perceptions and attitudes that counterbalance the economic benefits of tourism as potential negative social and cultural outcomes of tourism would be examined. As stated by past researchers [3], [4], there is a growing need to assess communities' attitudes in places that are starting in tourism development process such as in Latin

Manuscript received January 9, 2012; revised February 17, 2012. This work was supported in part by the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia.

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