

CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVE AND POTENTIAL OF RURAL TOURISM IN TUNGKU, SABAH, MALAYSIA

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Abstract – The tourism sector has become one of the key drivers of economy in developed countries. Rural tourism has been widely recognized as an important factor in the development of rural areas since it creates new jobs and preserves the heritage and culture of the communities in an area. Rural tourism is diverse and is an alternative to mass tourism. Alternative tourism is described as a special tourism that usually emphasizes the relationship between people and nature and the understanding of the way people live with nature. In many countries, the diversity of cultures in the rural areas provides the opportunity to build and provide attractive and competitive tourism products. In Malaysia, the development of rural areas fully utilizes the existing resources including in producing tourism products. Malaysia has introduced policies such as the National Ecotourism Plan and the Rural Tourism Master Plan (RTMP) as part of its sustainable rural tourism development strategies. In an effort to understand rural tourism conceptually, this article will examine the dimensions, definitions, types, and related theoretical approaches of rural tourism. In the context of rural tourism's potential, Tungku district has a diverse range of attractive terrain that holds the largest potential to be a tourism hub on the East Coast of Sabah. Thus, this study aims to identify the diversity of potential tourism products in terms of physical, cultural, and other attractions as well as to present some of the challenges faced in developing rural tourism in Tungku, Sabah. Highlights on the concept, theory, and potential of rural tourism are expected to form the basis and useful reference for further assessments on numerous other rural tourism issues that occur in various countries.

Keywords - Rural Tourism, Product, Potential, Conceptual, Tungku.

I. INTRODUCTION

The tourism sector has become one of the key drivers of economy in developed countries. In tourism typology, there has been a considerable growth in the rural tourism sector over the last few decades [1]. Developed countries and even developing countries have shown contagious rural tourism growth which is a catalyst for socioeconomic progress [2]. According to [3], rural tourism has been widely recognized as an important factor in the development of rural areas. This fact is also supported by [4] who considers rural tourism as a means of preservation by creating new jobs and preserving the heritage and culture of the community in an area. According to [5], rural tourism comprises several important elements that are found in the rural areas with a small-scale settlement and linked with nature, heritage, community traditions, and traditional customs. In terms of diversity of activities, rural tourism is a complementary alternative to traditional economic activities such as agriculture, farming, and other major industries in some areas. In addition, the diversity of rural cultures in various countries provides an opportunity for attractive and competitive tourism products. Furthermore, rural tourism has the potential to create a more sustainable and competitive community compared to that of the urban areas.

II. CONCEPT AND THEORY IN RURAL TOURISM

In the history of tourism, there are numerous

differences and criteria in describing the definition and concept of rural tourism. The difference is due to the number of different focus given by the scholars such as statistical, administrative, regional development, regional functions, agriculture, and density of population. The concept of rural tourism is diverse and is an alternative to mass tourism characterized by a majority of people looking for a vacation experience in a popular resort area [5]. Alternative tourism is described as a special tourism that usually emphasizes the relationship between the people and the natural environment and the understanding of the way people live with such environment.

There are five dimensions of rural tourism: location features, purpose of visit, activities carried out, scale of operation and sustainability [6]. Location features refer to rural areas which are located far away from urban areas. The purpose of the visit is to have individual experiences such as enjoying the beauty of nature, cultures, and heritage of the region. Meanwhile, activities indicates the various aspects of activities carried out in rural tourism, while the scale of operations refers to the rural areas with low population density.

According to [5], there are three main types of rural tourism. Firstly, the diversity of the area's attractions based on cultural heritage tourism, nature-based tourism and agrotourism by having a beautiful and attractive area. Secondly, nature-based or ecotourism activities that refer to the process of visiting natural areas. The purpose is to enjoy the scenery in the area including flora and fauna. The third major types of rural tourism are agrotourism which refers to the

activities of visiting farms, horticulture or agricultural businesses for the sake of education or excitement. It consist of participating in various agricultural-based activities such as agrobazaar and agricultural festivals.

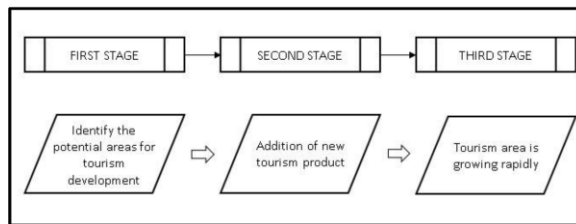


Figure no. 1theEvolution of Rural Tourism Development Approach

Source: Modified from Turner (1999).

In rural tourism, it is important to understand and apply the approach of tourism evolution theory to enable a sustainable development planning [7]. Based on these theories, the development of rural tourism can be seen as a process of change that occurs naturally. This theory provides an understanding of dynamism towards rural tourism development so that the key factors for changes in the sector can be identified and the proper selection of execution can be implemented. [8] has identified three stages in the development of rural tourism, namely the identification of potential tourism area, the addition of new tourism products, and the rapid development of the area. When a potential area is identified and promoted, there is an increase in the number of visitors. In addition, local communities began to engage in the tourism industry as well as make efforts to improve the construction of infrastructure and facilities.

III. RURAL TOURISM PLAN IN MALAYSIA

In Malaysia, the government implements two plans as part of the policy of rural tourism development: the National Ecotourism Plan (1996) and the Rural Tourism Master Plan (2000) [9]. The National Ecotourism Plan aims to provide a framework to assist the federal and state governments in developing Malaysia's potential ecotourism [10]. The Ministry of Tourism has been empowered to implement the plan in which it serves as a sustainable and efficient development instrument for the conservation of the country's culture and environment. In addition, collective efforts at various stages of government, private sector, and local communities have been planned and implemented to ensure the success of ecotourism plans in maximizing the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental sectors that can be derived from the tourism industry [11]. The National Ecotourism Plan stipulates gradual implementation of the program such as plan approval, disseminating it at the federal and state level as well as establishing a partnership between the government, the private sector, and the local community.

Rural Tourism Master Plan (RTMP) was prepared in 2001 to drive rural tourism development in Malaysia [9]. Efforts made to promote the development of rural tourism in the country were exhibiting attractive tropical scenery, providing a variety of activities and facilities for visitors, and providing a new network with additional accommodation facilities [12].

Furthermore, RTMP proposed to develop rural tourism in Malaysia by improving the quality of rural infrastructure and developing human resources. The plan was not only to improve the infrastructure, but also to upgrade the standard of the accommodation facilities. However, the government acknowledged that the initiative to develop a new rural tourism product is a big challenge as it requires an integrated approach. Most of the companies run by individuals are small scale and they lack experience in the tourism industry, especially in addressing the needs of tourists [9].

Therefore, one of the strategies in RTMP is to identify certain potential areas and entrepreneurs to achieve the established standards. This effort is undertaken through the establishment of 'priority district' in Sabah to ensure that the utilization of existing resources can be optimized holistically in certain areas [12].

IV. RURAL TOURISM PLAN AND STRATEGY IN SABAH

Sabah Tourism Board (STB) has set up a 10 Year Strategy Plan (2016 - 2026) implemented from the Homestay Experience Malaysia Upscaling Program (2017-2026) as a policy on the development of rural tourism in Sabah [13]. According to the Sabah Tourism Board, this strategy is divided into four stages. The first stage (2016) involves the preparation of the local community towards the development of rural tourism.

It includes a system to prepare the community with education and empower the community towards continuing development. The second stage (2017 - 2019) is an effort to develop sustainable tourism based on local communities. The focus was on developing, planning, and managing organizations within the local community as well as identifying and creating potential local leaders or champions in the community. Moreover, designing of quality products will be carried out in this stage. Subsequently, the third stage (2020 - 2022) involves efforts to preserve sustainable tourism based on local communities such as developing partnerships between stakeholders, identifying demand markets, and developing strategic marketing. Finally, the fourth stage (2023 - 2026) is to achieve a maturity level in the development of tourism sustainability based on community. Meanwhile, efforts to empower the community will continue to be implemented consistently

V. POTENTIAL OF RURAL TOURISM PRODUCT IN TUNGKU

In developing rural tourism, nature-based environmental and cultural assets are the prerequisites for the achievement of an excellence sector as well as an important factor in attracting tourists to travel to the destination [14]. Tungku is a district in Sabah which has such attractions with its diversity of natural resources that has the potential to attract both local and foreign tourists [15].

Tungku located on the East Coast of Sabah has a wealth of biodiversity and enchanting nature which is a source of tourist attraction. The beauty of its nature such as forests, beaches, and rivers are important natural attraction product of rural tourism. There are several coastal areas that have a big potential to attract visitors such as Parapat Beach, Kahapan Beach, Bangingod Beach, FeldaSahabat Beach, TanjungLabian Beach, and Buta Island Beach. The spacious beachfront overlooking the Celebes Sea and the rivers, such as Membatu River and Merabung River, are also among the potential attractions found in Tungku. Some other attractions in Tungku include TanjungAtiam, Buta Island Mangrove Forest, and Bakapit Mangrove Forest. TanjungAtiam which is located in MukimTambisan is well-known as the 'Easternmost Reference Point in Malaysia' and has the potential to serve as the tourism hub for Tungku [15]. This reference point is used as a station to determine the position of the new moon and the Malaysian Hijri calendar.

Nature (Environment)	Culture	Other Attraction
(a) Beach -Parapat Beach -Kahapan Beach -Bangingod Beach - Felda Sahabat Beach -Tanjung Labian Beach -Pulau Buta Beach	(a)Local wisdom of ethnic -Ethnic of <i>Ubian</i> -Ethnic of <i>Balangingi</i> -Ethnic of <i>Begak</i> - Food -Musical instrument - Dance - Costume - Handicraft - Traditional game - Economy activity - Daily routine	(a) Shrimp aquaculture (b) Aquaculture / fish cage (c) Machete-Making industry (d) Pillow-making industry (e) Traditional <i>kuih</i> -making industry (f) Palm-based industry (g) Farming industries- mango, goat, <i>kelulut</i> , swiflet, etc.
(b) Adventure Site - Membatu River - Marabung River		
(c) Others - TanjungAtiam - Pulau ButaMangrove Forest - Bakapit Mangrove Forest	(b) <i>Homestay</i>	

Table no. 1 The Variety Attraction of Rural Tourism Product In Tungku

In addition, rural tourism in Tungku has a variety of cultural and historical heritage assets as part of its

tourist attraction. The rural tourism activity is one of the efforts that use various forms of cultural and historical heritage resources. The local wisdom of the ethnic people and the homestays are some of the cultural and historical tourism products found in Tungku. The district of Tungku consists of three main ethnic groups: BajauUbian, BajauBalangingi, and Begak. Each ethnic group is different from the other in terms of belief, way of life, and historical and social background [2]. The cultural value offered by each ethnic group is with regards to the uniqueness of foods, musical instruments, dances, costumes, handicrafts, traditional games, economic activities, and daily routine that form part of the potential cultural attractions of rural tourism in Tungku. Currently, the cultural tourism market is growing rapidly, as tourists are increasingly interested to know deeper the way of life of the people. Thus, there is a concept of commercially developed homestay tourism in Tungku which has the highest potential to be holistically developed. Through the development of homestay in Tungku, tourists have the opportunity to live with the local residents to gain experience on the lifestyle and cultural heritage of the local people. Homestays in different areas offer different forms of activities depending on the location, culture, food diversity, and economic activities [16]. There are some other high potential attractions to be developed as a rural tourism product in Tungku. These attractions include shrimp aquaculture, marine fish cage, machete-making industry, pillow-making industry, traditional *kuih*-making industry, palm-based industry, and farming industries such as mango, goat, *kelulut*, and swiflet. Indirectly, these tourism products help to generate the economic income of the local communities, offer various job opportunities, and provide more convenience to the communities.

VI. CONCLUSION

Tungku has the largest potential as a rural tourism destination on the East Coast of Sabah due to its characteristic environment and uniqueness of culture. Nevertheless, there are some challenges that must be faced in the development of rural tourism in Tungku. For instance, the lack of infrastructure and tourism facilities, the lack of tourism promotion and marketing, and the impact of the Sulu militant incident in LahadDatu cause a less secure feeling among the tourists.

At present, multiple efforts are undertaken by the Sabah Tourism Ministry to strengthen the development of rural tourism in Tungku such as by diversifying tourism destinations and promoting cultural areas to attract tourists from within and outside the country [13]. Hence, various parties need to implement the activities collectively and holistically in order to make Tungku district a prominent rural tourism destination, especially in the East Coast of Sabah and internationally.

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