

Assessing Mukah Community's Readiness Participation in the Ecotourism Industry

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ABSTRACT

Ecotourism is a distinct category within the broader tourism sector. Ecotourism is an excellent option for enhancing local socioeconomic circumstances and generating economic activity that positively impacts the national economy. The involvement of local communities, specifically rural youth communities, in ecotourism activities can offer employment prospects such as serving as nature guides, engaging in business ventures within the ecotourism industry, benefiting from the activities and products of ecotourism, and fostering social connections and local income growth. However, an essential determinant of the effectiveness of tourist development programs is the level of readiness within the community to engage in these ecotourism activities. The objective of this essay is to evaluate the preparedness of the local community in Mukah for the implementation of ecotourism activities. The study was carried out as part of the community program. A total of 62 respondents originated from the surrounding communities of Mukah, Sarawak. The findings indicated that most participants had neither attended nor received any kind of training in nature guiding. Although most respondents initially did not engage in ecotourism activities, a significant number of them showed a newfound interest in becoming nature guides and stated a readiness to pursue relevant courses in the future after enrolling in the program. It indicates that a significant proportion of young people participating in this program had the necessary readiness to engage in local ecotourism initiatives.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by offering a wider spectrum of community participation in the ecotourism industry. The study is one of the very few studies that have investigated the rural area acceptance of involvement in the ecotourism industry among native communities in Sarawak.

1. Introduction

Tourism is an important industry in Malaysia's economic development. Tourism development involves many components such as community, heritage, culture, and the environment. Based on the data provided by the [World Tourism Organisation \(UNWTO, 2019\)](#), the number of foreign tourist arrivals increased by 5% in 2018, reaching a total of 1.4 billion people mentioned by Zurab Pololikashvili the Secretary-General of UNWTO which exceeded the organization forecast. This trend of drastic incremental due to ease of global human mobility. Authenticity, beauty, distinctiveness, and diversity in one's nation are important factors in the growth of the ecotourism business. Various tourist spots and eco-tourism, such as beaches and islands, seabed, rivers and lakes, waterfalls, rainforests, mangroves, and the richness and originality of Malaysian culture, have piqued the interest of travelers from across the world. The creation of new places or tourist sites with the participation of several stakeholders is critical to the success of an ecotourism project. Government agencies and communities play critical roles in the development of ecotourism ([Abd Halim, & Choy, 2016](#)). The local community must be knowledgeable about ecotourism to participate in the activity effectively. Community participation, particularly among youngsters, provides several career options, such as nature tour guides (nature guides). Because of their physical and mental power, this group is particularly active in creating economic activities ([Choy et al., 2012](#)).

Ecotourism, as defined by [The International Ecotourism Society \(TIES\) \(2015\)](#) in 2015, refers to responsible travel to natural places that aims to save the environment, enhance the well-being of local communities, and include activities such as interpretation and education. They distinguish two sorts of ecotourism products: i) islands and beaches and ii) nature and extreme activities ([Set, 2013](#)). Although the specific terminologies were missing in the literature, rural resource and tourism capital is a thoroughly explored topic. Eco-tourism demands drivers such as state and national parks, outdoor recreation, festivals and events, agriculture tourism, natural wonders, landscape, and small-town vibe apparent examples. All these factors can surely be found in the environmental, social, and physical environment of the eco-tourism capital. Rural resources will remain rural if their potential is not transformed into an eco-tourism capital ([Ramachandran et al., 2016](#)).

Mukah is renowned for its sago manufacturing and seafood offerings. For decades, the local population has been practicing sago farming as an economic activity, relying on peat soil. Mukah possesses a lengthy coastline, a peaceful river system, a forest with peat soil, and the unique presence of the Melanau ethnic group. These features offer potential for producing money and promoting socioeconomic activities in the field of ecotourism. Ecotourism is commonly employed to facilitate the advancement of areas abundant in natural resources. Mangrove forests, known for their unique biological roles and characteristics, serve as a prime illustration in places like Mukah ([Teka et al., 2019](#)).

The Mukah ecosystem provides crucial biological and environmental functions, and if effectively and responsibly maintained, it may offer eco-tourism advantages to the surrounding communities. The nature of Mukah plays a crucial role at the local level as it generates community income via the establishment of ecotourism companies that use natural resources such as fishing, wildlife observation, and outdoor expeditions in natural forest environments. The river systems in Mukah are used for domestic water consumption, but they also provide opportunities for the development of recreational activities connected to water, similar to those seen at the Mekong River in Vietnam.

Mukah harbours a diverse array of fauna, avifauna, herpetofauna, and riparian flora. [Table 1](#) is a modified version of a study conducted by [Garrod, Wornell and Youell \(2006\)](#) in 2006. It is specifically relevant to the aspects of the rural or ecotourism capital in Mukah Sarawak. The reference is from [Ramachandran et al. \(2016\)](#). This document offers a comprehensive depiction of the factors that categorise the many aspects of rural tourism capital. These factors may be utilised by the rural tourist sector at different points along the rural tourism value chain.

Table 1: Mukah's elements of countryside/ecotourism capital

Elements	Mukah, Sarawak
Landscape and seascape	Riparian forests line the riverbanks, freshwater swamps, peat swamps, mangroves, and brackish water lagoon with vegetated sand islands, seagrass beds, and beaches.
Wildlife (Flora and Fauna)	Sharks, wild boar, deer, mouse deer, birds, wetlands,
Biodiversity	mangroves
Geology and Soils	Peat soils
Rural Settlements (isolated from markets/ towns)	Fisherman villages, local wet market
Woods, Forests and Plantations (Local Customs, Languages, Costumes, Foods, Crafts & Festivals)	Sago farms, Melanau cultures, educational hub, tabaloi, local fruits
Agricultural Buildings	Local dwelling

Source: Adaptation from [Ramachandran et al. \(2016\)](#) and [Garrod et al. \(2006\)](#)

The communities themselves provide possible eco-tourism products, such as 'Pesta Kaul' and 'Teluwih Jinih', which showcase their magnificent traditional cultural systems and lives. In order to ensure the growth and maintenance of the diverse nature and culture within the Melanau group, it is necessary to conduct a comprehensive research that takes into account their ethnic distinctiveness. Therefore, the presence of an educational and learning aspect ([Wardle et al., 2018](#)), the incorporation of cultural characteristics ([Azis et al., 2018](#)), and the impact of this form of tourism on the comprehension of local traditions and products ([He et al., 2018](#)) are a few notable features that set apart the type of tourism we previously discussed.

The research seeks to evaluate the preparedness of the Mukah community to actively engage in the ecotourism sector, involving the recruitment of local residents as tourist guides, and generating supplementary revenue to improve the local socioeconomic status.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Ecotourism

Ecotourism was originally defined as the practice of journeying to pristine natural areas that are unspoiled or unaffected by pollution, with the explicit intention of studying, appreciating, and deriving enjoyment from the landscape, wildlife, and any cultural aspects (both historical and contemporary) found in these areas ([Ceballos-Lascrain, 1987](#)). Ecotourism is the act of engaging in responsible travel to natural regions to

gather information, acquire knowledge about local culture, and showing appreciation for the natural environment (Lee & Jan, 2018).

2.2. Participation of the Community in the Ecotourism Sector

Ecotourism industry's expansion serves as a means for the community to surmount economic and social obstacles, while also functioning as a potent tool for environmental protection. The active participation and inclusion of the local population in many aspects of ecotourism planning and management is crucial for the achievement of success in an ecotourism project (Garrod et al., 2006). The community's main objectives in initiating tourism development are twofold: firstly, to stimulate economic growth, and secondly, to raise awareness about environmental protection (Leksakundilok, 2004). Studies conducted in Cambodia have shown that ecotourism efforts are more likely to succeed when indigenous populations are actively engaged. This is supported by the findings of Reimer and Walters (2013). However, despite extensive literature on the economic and environmental effects of ecotourism, there has been limited focus on the viewpoints of local communities engaged in these activities and the approaches they employ to navigate the ecotourism industry (Stronza et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, in order to effectively allure guests, community activities are vital. To achieve a sustainable and effective balance, it is necessary to align and integrate the connections between protecting biodiversity, managing natural resources, preserving the environment, promoting traditional culture, supporting local livelihoods, and fostering economic progress in society (Assaf, 2012).

Economic development entails augmenting the local community's revenue through tourism endeavors, such as accommodating substantial numbers of tourists within a condensed timeframe, and expanding employment prospects in roles such as tour guides, drivers, sampan and boat operators, cooks, restaurant staff, and lodging personnel. Furthermore, the expansion of ecotourism offers communities and tourists opportunities to engage in activities aimed at protecting and preserving the environment, therefore ensuring the sustainable continuation of these ecotourism endeavors.

2.3. Rural Communities' Readiness in the Ecotourism Sector

Communities' preparedness indicates that individuals possess two capacities. Physical potential refers to the tangible reality of humanity, while human potential is a non-physical aspect that is not visibly apparent (Sawitri, 2004). The human potential consists of cognitive abilities that foster the creation of novel ideas via the processes of education, training, and experience, as well as interactions with the environment.

The growth of rural tourism is closely tied to the growth of micro and small enterprises in different industries, which helps boost the local economy and brings about positive impacts on the local community in terms of economic development, cultural preservation, social well-being, service provision, and overall quality of life (Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012). The community preparedness theory is based on the notion that communities can develop and execute successful programmes to promote the ecotourism sector using a methodical approach (Khatun et al., 2016).

Ecotourism has the potential to foster community development, especially among women and adolescents (Scheyvens, 1999; 2000; 2007). Rural communities are provided with employment prospects and enjoy advantages from participating in ecotourism activities and utilising ecotourism products. They have the opportunity to enhance their social connections, establish new businesses or ventures, and actively participate in decision-making processes, especially those related to the establishment and administration of the ecotourism industry (Scheyvens, 2007).

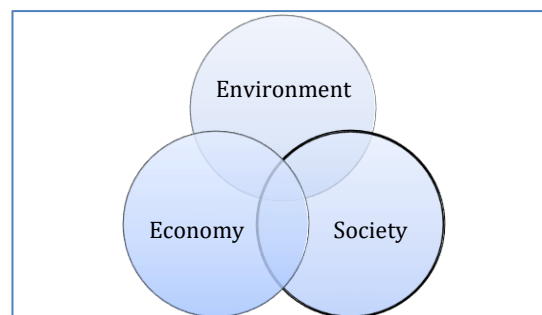
The tourist sector may contribute to the growth and prosperity of a region and its society, especially in the outskirts and suburban regions, by creating employment opportunities and stimulating economic activity (Abd Halim & Choy, 2016). The involvement of the community, especially the youth, in ecotourism activities offers several economic opportunities, such as working as tour guides and pursuing careers as local artists, in response to the increasing demand for ecotourism (Choy et al., 2012). The amount of preparedness plays a crucial role in determining the efficiency of tourism development activities.

3. Methods

The study is based on a qualitative approach which is descriptively supported by early literature on similar fields. The adoption of Giddings, Hopwood, and O'Brien's (2002) in Figure 1, Three-Ring Sector View of the Sustainable Development Model highlights the importance of incorporating environmental and societal impacts into economic development. This approach emphasizes the need for the three domains to overlap to achieve sustainability in the development process. To fully leverage the potential of rural resources for eco-tourism, stakeholders must acknowledge the necessity of adopting a comprehensive approach to their management.

Hence, it is imperative to develop and endorse legislation and training programmes that incorporate the most efficient techniques. Neglecting to resolve the problem would surely diminish the overall calibre of the visitors' experience in the future. The construction of eco-tourism sites in Mukah is highly dependent on its distinctive interconnected ecosystems, including the environment, economy, and society. This factor is of utmost importance. Therefore, by utilising the existing resources, the eco-tourism industry can effectively leverage destination imaging elements to establish a distinct and robust destination image. Additionally, active community involvement in the tourism sector can contribute to the promotion of local sustainable development (Iqbal et al., 2022; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017; Tosun, 2006; Wondirad & Ewnetu, 2019).

Figure 1: Three-ring sector view of sustainable development



Source: Giddings et al. (2002)

The study took place during the execution of the *Program Pembangunan Komuniti Eko-Pelancongan & Keusahawanan Tellian, Mukah*, which occurred from 21 to 22 January 2022 in the *Dewan Serbaguna Tellian, Mukah*. The programme aimed to generate enthusiasm among participants in pursuing a career as an ecotourism tour guide, since this profession offers promising economic prospects for both the local community and the state government. Statistics indicate a growing demand for ecotourism, however, the level of participation from the local people in the profession of licensed ecotourism tour guides remains inadequate. This campaign is the initial phase of a series of eight consecutive initiatives aimed at instructing and preparing the local populations to participate as operators of feeders for the ecotourism sector in Mukah. Ultimately, the communities can achieve self-sustainability in the future with minimal involvement or support from local authorities, therefore fostering an improved socioeconomic environment for Mukah.

The primary goal of the *Pembangunan Komuniti Eko-Pelancongan & Keusahawanan Tellian, Mukah* program is to achieve the following objectives: i) Enhance the development of ecotourism and entrepreneurship programs, ii) Expand the revenue streams of rural entrepreneurs by enhancing their understanding of fundamental business principles, iii) Familiarize entrepreneurs with the digital business landscape, and iv) Cultivate rural entrepreneurs specializing in the ecotourism industry.

A total of 100 participants were selected by the Dun N57 Tellian Service Centre, which is located among the villagers of Tellian, Mukah, with an emphasis on Kampung Hulu, Tengah, and Hilir, Tellian. Using a convenience sampling method, 100 sets of questionnaires were distributed among the participants and 61 sets were successfully gathered and only sets of 51 were completed and able to proceed to the next stages. Two sets of questionnaires, consisting of identical questions, have been sent to the participants. These questionnaires are designed to evaluate the community's willingness and engagement in ecotourism, as well as the consistency of their feedback which justified only 51 sets were consistently answered. One set of questionnaires is administered before the programme, while the other set is administered after the programme. To accomplish the goals, we used sets of questionnaires that were modified from the research conducted by [Ab Manaf et al. \(2021\)](#) on comparable contexts. Data collected was then analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) to obtain results. On the bases of descriptive research, frequencies and descriptive analysis will then be used to identify the main purpose as well as objective of the study achieved or not.

4. Findings

Further analysis of the survey responses reveals that out of the 51 participants, 76.5 percent identified as female, while the remaining 23.5 percent identified as male. The majority of respondents (86 percent) were aged 31 and above, while the remaining 14 percent were between the ages of 21 and 30. This emphasized the importance of including both adults and youth in additional training programmes to enhance their engagement in ecotourism. [Table 2](#) presents the income distribution among the respondents, and as anticipated, the majority of the respondents, as indicated in the table below, fall into the B40 category according to the Income Classification in Malaysia. Researchers have already elucidated the significance of ecotourism in enhancing local revenue generation. The aforementioned sources are [Leksakundilok \(2004\)](#), [Choy et al. \(2012\)](#), [Nunkoo and Gursoy \(2012\)](#), and [Abd Halim and Choy \(2016\)](#).

Table 2: Income Level of Participants

Range (Income 'RM)	Percentage (%)
Less 500	3.9%
501 – 1500	88.3%
1501 - 3000	5.8%
More 3001	1.9%

Without receiving formal tour guide training, 79.2 percent of the participants engaged in tourism-related activities in the vicinity of Mukah. Table 3 reveals that a significant portion of the respondents, more than half, have shown a voluntary and keen desire in engaging as tour guides in the Mukah Tourism Industry. The resilience of the communities should also be considered, since the respondents express their enthusiasm and readiness to become tour guides, despite it not being their first choice. Just over 40 percent of them are hesitant or uninterested.

Table 3: Local Interest and Willingness to Participate in the Mukah Tourism Industry

Item	Yes	No
Are you involved in tourism activities (directly/indirectly)	79.2%	20.8%
Are you interested in becoming a tour guide in your area	54.5%	45.5%
Willingness to attend tour guide courses in the future	55.3%	44.7%

Table 4 provides information on the extent to which local communities face difficulties in participating or engaging in the tourism or ecotourism sector, such as working as guides, service providers, or in other related roles. According to the survey, 86.27 percent of respondents reported no issues whatsoever in directly or indirectly involving themselves with the industry. The local authority has been actively supportive in ensuring that community engagement is neither hindered nor limited in its growth.

Table 4: Involvement restriction in the ecotourism industry

Item	Yes	No
Are there any problems in the effort involvement in the ecotourism industry	13.72%	86.27%

The analysis of Table 4 reveals the primary factors contributing to the limited participation of Mukah communities in ecotourism. This leads us to Table 5, which presents the main reasons provided by the majority of respondents for their non-involvement or resistance to engaging in tourist activities in Mukah. The data in Table 5 presents a multiple-answer question. Upon closer examination, the results of the respondents are arranged in descending order, indicating that the primary reason for the locals' lack of participation or involvement in tourism activities is a lack of knowledge, with 49 percent of the respondents agreeing. This is followed by a lack of experience, with 37.3 percent, and financial problems related to business capital and start-up, with 33.3 percent. The respondent expresses concerns about issues such as pollution, collaboration in local governance, and awareness of ecotourism. These concerns are alarming because local communities may resist efforts to promote ecotourism if they are not properly educated about its benefits. Some communities may perceive ecotourism as having a negative impact on the environment.

Table 5: Resistance to Involvement in Mukah Tourism Activities

Item ¹	Poll Results
Lack of knowledge	49.0 %
Lack of experience	37.3 %
Financial (Insufficient Capital)	33.3 %
Pollution	17.6 %
No cooperation	15.6 %
Lack of awareness	13.7 %

5. Conclusion

Mukah is an eco-tourism location abundant in natural variety, history, legacy, and cultural variations due to the presence of historical sites from ancient kingdoms. Historical sites and ecotourism activities of this nature have the potential to captivate both domestic and international tourists, enticing them to investigate and immerse themselves in the experience. The implemented programme is a joint effort between Pusat Khidmat Mukah N.57 and UiTM Sarawak Branch Mukah Campus. Its purpose is to foster the interest and awareness of the local community, motivating them to become nature guides. Subsequently, they can enrol in the Tour Guide Course to become certified professional tour guides. This initiative is part of the local authority's endeavor to promote greater participation among the locals, thereby generating job opportunities and career prospects for the youth. By organizing this programme, participants are anticipated to be capable of generating supplementary revenue while simultaneously enhancing their socioeconomic standing. This programme has not only increased awareness but also provided information and understanding regarding income creation prospects for local populations to participate in the nature tourism business in their villages. Hence, it is imperative to include a greater sample size in future research endeavors to obtain more accurate and comprehensive findings on the topic at hand. Overall, the majority of participants who participated in this programme expressed a keen interest in pursuing a career as tour guides and showed their willingness to enroll in the Tour Guide Course at a later date. The limitation arises from the constraint faced by participants supported by the Tellian Service Centre to join the expensive programme, as well as the limitation for the Tellian Service Centre to cover the expense.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical approval for this work was obtained from the Research Ethics Committees of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). All procedures involving human subjects complied with institutional and national ethical standards, and informed permission was acquired in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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