

A review on rural tourism development in Malaysia

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Rural tourism is considered to be one of the most viable development strategies for the rural areas and was included in the five-year development plans in Malaysia. However, the effort to introduce tourism as a development tool and soliciting local involvement in a backward region of a country can be daunting. This paper reviewed the approach taken by the Malaysian government in planning and developing rural tourism development. The discussion centers around the local capacity and problems encountered in the programs; which can be partly attributed to the level of participation by the residents and their readiness to be involved in the tourism programs. It is concluded that although indigenous people involvement is expected whereby the rural communities are registered, trained and licensed for some tourism activities, the skills necessary for running, managing, and promoting a tourist product, these are yet to be developed.

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According to Blaine, Mohamed & Var (1993: 770), rural tourism has increasingly being capitalised for 'a sustainable economic growth and development' to enhance the rural economy of Western countries, especially since farm agriculture is unable to generate sufficient income for rural communities (Swinerton, 1982; Ying & Zhou, 2007). The progress of rural tourism development has been successful in generating secondary incomes in agricultural households and also diversified the rural economy in the process. It has also reduced out migration by providing employment opportunities and a new living experience to rural communities (Dernoi, 1991).

Nevertheless, various types of tourism activities run in rural areas had puzzled people in the industry about the right definition of rural tourism. Although, the Organization of Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) defines rural tourism as 'a tourism taking place in the countryside' (OECD, 1994 in Raichel, Lowengart & Milman 2000: 451), this general definition failed to specifically

explain the real nature of rural tourism. As Oppermann (1996) argues, the lack of studies in the field has caused a myriad of definitions to really represent the real meaning of rural tourism. Sometimes, rural tourism is related with outdoor recreation and tourism in the wilderness areas and national parks (Ladki, 1993; Owens, 1984) while others correlate with second homes in rural areas (Pearce, 1990), and some even excluded all of these elements (Dernoi, 1991).

Defining rural tourism

Oppermann (1996) suggests that the definition of rural tourism should be in line with Dernoi's suggestion which stated rural tourism as 'a tourism in non-urban territory where human (land related economic) activity is going on, primarily agriculture; a permanent human presence seems a qualifying requirement' (Dernoi, 1991: 45). Following this definition, Oppermann (1996) developed a conceptual model of non-urban tourism to distinguish the differences between wilderness tourism and rural tourism (Table 1).

Table 1: Model of Non-Urban Tourism

Non-Urban Tourism	
Wilderness Tourism Outdoor recreation in wilderness areas, National Parks, National forests, and generally uninhibited areas	Rural Tourism Farm tourism Non-farm tourism in rural areas, and communities
<i>Accommodation Range</i>	
Camping Isolated Resorts Self-Catering B&Bs Rural Hotels Second Homes	

Source: Oppermann (1996)

According to the Oppermann's model (1996), rural tourism comprises three main components; farm tourism, non-farm tourism and communities. Wilderness tourism however, focuses more on nature activities in isolated areas such as national parks and forests, and uninhibited areas, and popularly known as eco-tourism (Campbell, 1999). Nevertheless, both rural and wilderness tourism

share similarity in types of accommodation, ranging from camping sites, isolated resorts, B&Bs, self-catering, second homes and rural hotels. In fact, the bed and breakfast (B&Bs) and self-catering units are considered as major elements in rural tourism (Fleischer and Pizam, 1997) and normally operated as family businesses (Robinson, 1990; Gilbert & Tung, 1990).

Malaysian approach to rural tourism

In Malaysia, the development of rural areas has taken many forms since the inception of Malaya Development Plans in 1950 which then became the five-year Malaysia Plans. Compared to the 1950s, where the focus was on providing infrastructure and improving accessibilities, the government strategies has evolved to not only increase agricultural productivity but also to improve social services, providing settlements and employment for rural communities. From 1970s to 1980s, land development efforts have been intensified, together with crop diversification and increased support services. However, none of the Malaysia five-year plans produced during that period were directly deals with rural tourism development.

Concurrently, a boost in the tourism industry during the late 90s has seen a more vigorous effort by the Malaysian government to tap all available resources, including rural tourism products. Rural tourism as well as the service sector in general, has been molded to be one of the most viable development strategies for the rural areas and included in the five-year development plans. The policy of the tourism sector is targeted to achieve sustainable tourism growth and to tap the full potential of employment and income-generation capabilities at the national, state and local levels. As such, tourism development was focused on optimal impact of the resources allocated. To ensure the development of sustainable rural tourism, there must be a balance between the needs of the visitors, the environment, and the local community (Murphy, 1991). Although rural tourism tends to exploit rural resources, for the most part it has low ecological impact as it attracts a relatively small number of visitors who are particularly interested in local cultures and traditions. In addition, areas of rural tourism are often sparsely populated with limited mass tourist accommodation and activities (Fatimah et al., 2006).

As an economic activity, rural tourism has been known to stimulate declining rural economy through job creation, farm support, nature conservation, rural supplies and

services, landscape and nature conservation, rural arts and crafts, and enrichment of heritage (Ratz & Puczko, 1998). Two of the most rigorous tourism development strategies pursued in the Eighth Malaysia Plan (2001-2005) include: emphasizing sustainable tourism development; and focusing on a holistic and integrated approach to tourism development. Embedded in these strategies are rural tourism, recreational tourism, and agro-tourism which have the potential to regenerate the rural economy, and redistribute the benefits of tourism industry especially in cases where local involvement is widespread.

In line with above strategies, the National Rural Tourism Master Plan completed in 2001 stressed on agro-tourism and homestay programs to provide more opportunities for local community involvement to generate a new possible source of income. Previously, during the Seventh Malaysia Plan period (1996-2000), a total of 19 agro-tourism locations were identified, with products ranging from day visits, farmstay and agro-tourism packages to be participated by farmers and fishermen in the country. Correspondingly, by the end of the plan period, 612 homestay operators in 31 villages were registered and offered accommodation with a taste of local culture and hospitality, a beautiful landscape, as well as authentic historical and architectural sites.

In the Ninth Malaysia Plan which covers the period of 2006-2010, the government allocation for the tourism industry has doubled from RM 783.6 million to RM 1847.9 million. This provision will focus on maintaining and upgrading infrastructure and providing adequate tourism-related amenities and facilities. The Plan also maintains sustainable tourism as the top priority whereby the protection and preservation of the natural habitats and environmental concern become increasingly important. As a result, in 2006, the number of registered, licensed and trained homestay operators amounts to 1089 in 79 villages. More tourism products such as farmstay, visits to agricultural parks and research stations, participation in pottery-making have been introduced under the homestay and agro-tourism programs.

The Malaysian rural tourism master plan

The Rural Tourism Master Plan was prepared in 2001 to plan and guide rural tourism development in the country. It is also aiming on improving the standard of accommodations, upgrading visitor facilities and amenities, and ensuring continuous maintenance of products and facilities. The Malaysian Government has allocated a total of RM100 million funds to take care of rural tourism development in the country over a period of five years by increasing the quality of tourism product and services offered in the rural areas.

The government also admitted that developing a new rural tourism product can be challenging as it requires an integrated approach of how the destination is presented, managed, and promoted. Since most of individual enterprises are small and inexperienced in catering for visitor needs, one of the strategies outlined in the Rural Tourism Master Plan was to start with a selective number of destinations and operators where the standards being promoted can be delivered. This is done through the creation of Priority Districts in every state to ensure that the available resources could be concentrated into a few areas and spread across the country.

To demonstrate how the government strategy works within the Rural Tourism Master Plan framework, the Priority District of Baling in the State of Kedah was chosen as a case study for further analysis. The case of the Priority District of Baling was based on the study presented in

the Rural Tourism Master Plan. The discussion centers around the problems encountered in the programs; which can be partly attributed to the level of participation by the residents and their readiness to be involved in the tourism programs.

The district of Baling is located on the western area of the state of Kedah (Figure 1), with Thailand bordering on the east and the state of Perak to the south. It covers an area of 1350 km² with a population of 124,947 in 2000 with a Malay majority (80%). It is a two hours drive from Penang Island and Alor Star, the state capital. Although it is mainly an agricultural area with paddy, rubber, palm oil, coconut and fruits, the area is also covered with forests, water falls, hills and thick lushes green.

There are three main attractions in Baling: 1) Hot Springs at Ulu Legong, 2) Bukit Hijau Recreational Forest Park, and 3) Asam Jawa Waterfall at Lata Bayu which offered several eco-tourism activities such as jungle trekking and camping.

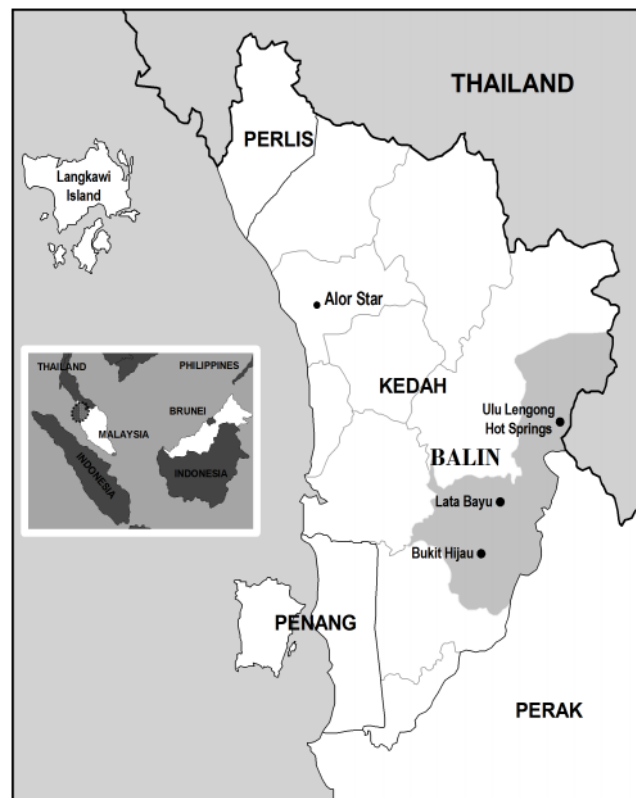


Figure 1: District of Baling

However, the main constraint to Baling is its shortage of good accommodation that will hold visitors long enough for other activities. The Rural Tourism Master Plan has outlined a few suggestions to develop Baling into an active tourism destination.

First, it was proposed that some infrastructural improvement be made in Baling, namely setting up a 3-star lodge, upgrading the recreation complex, adding other health related activities such as massages, reflexology, and acupuncture services, as well as souvenir shops and stalls. Likewise, ongoing maintenance and quality management of the attraction area are a must to upgrade the facility to an international standard.

Secondly, the existing facilities such as picnic areas, pools, food stall and toilet must be physically upgraded and improved. There is also room for improvement in the service sector for clear signage, dissemination of information, and manning of visitor centers.

Thirdly, it was also proposed that a visit to a rubber plantation be included as one of the attractions. In addition to rubber tapping, it was also suggested that the whole process from tree planting to final production be shown on audio-visual presentations, and a real visit to a manufacturing plant nearby be made. Of course, other facilities such as ample parking spaces, toilets, and accessibility need to be taken care of.

Finally, since Baling holds an historic event, it is suggested that a center be set up to commemorate the amnesty talk that took place in 1955 between the government and the communist party. A reenactment of the meeting, a presentation on audio-visual as well as discussions on the subject can all be held in an improved facility.

Discussion : local involvement in rural tourism development

Although the Rural Tourism Master Plan suggestions were reasonable and possible to be achieved, these recommendations required full commitment from three parties involved: the host area and its peoples, the visitors, and the tourism industry. It must also be noted that a balance must be obtained between pursuing economic growth of rural tourism and the

conservation needs of the environment. As a development target, it is imperative that the rural communities participate in and benefit from these activities.

The sustainable approach to rural tourism will not only sustain the culture and character of local communities, but also invite the locals to participate in tourism activities. By doing this, it is hoped that the benefit will trickle to the local communities and consequently improve their economic standing.

But the question then comes: are the rural communities ready to take on the challenges posed by tourism activities, and are they prepared to change some of their ways of doing things. In other words, to what extent are they capable and ready to get involved? As with many top-down development strategies and programs, local communities are expected to carry out the implementer's role while their capability and readiness are still not fully realized.

This fact is pointed out as one of the major deficiencies in Malaysia's approach to tourism development whereby effective mechanisms for encouraging local participation is lacking (Din, 1997). However, this issue is being addressed in the Rural Tourism Mater Plan, whereby indigenous involvement is not only expected but the rural communities are also registered, trained and licensed for some tourism activities. Yet, the gap of expectations between the local community and the tourists themselves seems to be widening. As Liu (2006) pointed out, the quest for high sophistication to achieve international standards is conspicuously incompatible with the local situation, given the inherent backwardness and economic sluggishness of the rural setting (2006: 6-7).

Rural tourism stands a better chance of being successful when it complements the existing local economy rather than competes for its limited resources (Butler and Clark, 1992). In the Baling homestay program, for instance, the operators are local elites rather than small entrepreneurs who are inexperienced and have little exposure to non-rural activities. Tourism in this case might have aggravated the income and employment inequalities even further. Liu (2006) also argues that the forms of tourism development prevailing in Malaysia's rural areas seldom

complement traditional economic activities, and "bear little linkages to rural conditions (that they) might actually demoralize the nurturing of local entrepreneurs".

Conclusion

Policy No. 8 of the 2005 Malaysian National Physical Plan states that each tourism development zone should concentrate on different packages of tourist products to maximize resources and location advantages. This means that rural areas should establish linkages with special feature towns, nature tourist attraction areas, or agricultural areas. In addition to high value added agricultural activities, the rural people should be exposed to and integrated with tourism activities.

Based on the case of Baling, this paper however, found that the Rural Tourism Master Plan suggested that involvement of local community in the tourism activities is merely limited to cultural performances, exhibition of crafts making, and the manning of facilities. This is worsened by the fact that some tourism ventures actually called for corporate are sometimes controlled by metropolitan based organizations for the planning, marketing, and management of local tourism facility. The core concerns of rural tourism - mobilization of local resources and diversification of the economic base - are yet to be achieved.

Other main issues in Baling tourism development include low service standards and poorly maintained tourism facilities, as well as a lack of knowledge and skills in hospitality as a business endeavor. As such, some undertakings are short-lived, while others are not up to international standards even for some basic necessities like cleanliness, although some facilities are in fact, popular with domestic tourists especially from around the state. Because of the remote location of the area and lack of exposure in the tourism industry, local communities are not well equipped with skills necessary for running, managing, and promoting a tourist product.

There is a possible danger of over commercialization of rural tourism products, or the heavy involvement of foreign operators or corporations that could strip the rural communities of their local pride, in which case, not only the local communities are demoralized and their enthusiasm short-lived, but the

concept of mobilization of local resources is also lost. Alternatively, small-scaled craft or indigenous-based industry as well as rural living lifestyle should be introduced as the main attractions. As such, rural tourism will no longer depend solely on the scenery and natural environment but also diversify to include the cultural attributes as well.

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