

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT FROM TOURISM STAKEHOLDERS' PERSPECTIVE: A CASE AT SUNGAI SEDIM AMENITY FOREST, KEDAH, MALAYSIA

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Abstract: *Tree Top Walk (TTW) at Sungai Sedim Amenity Forest (SSAF) could best be promoted not only through its natural scenery but also as the world's longest TTW that could only be experienced at SSAF. However, TTW have not been able to promote and attract an adequate number of tourists to SSAF and its performance is still lagging despite being considered the most valuable product in Malaysia. Although, extensive strategies have been carried out to promote the tourism industry in Kedah, little attention has been paid to strategize and develop SSAF. Hence, the development of rural tourism at SSAF has been dislocated as an unfulfilled promise in spilling over the income to tourism stakeholders besides providing indigenous people with employment. Thus, this study aims to explore the strengths and contributions of rural tourism development from tourism stakeholders' perspective (local communities, local authorities, visitors, and operators). The key strengths and contributions indicated the need to focus on maintaining the tourism stakeholders' perception derived from various tourism dimensions. One of the most significant issue that emerge from this study is that rural tourism has become an important developmental agenda for SSAF due to its potential for business activities, which may provide benefits to the communities.*

Keywords: rural tourism, rural development, tourism stakeholders, tourism and community development

Introduction

Tourism in rural areas plays an important role that positively influences regional development or vice-versa. It has been considered to be an economically significant sector of the country's economy and holds great potential in terms of sustainable rural development. It allows rural peoples to share in promoting more balanced benefits of tourism development as well as for sustainable forms of development (Ciolac et al., 2011). In fact, it may offer differentiated products to tourists, blend them together with nature, and enable appreciation of the culture of the particular destination. This is the main focus of rural tourism because rural areas are rich in natural, cultural, and traditional elements (Bhujbal & Joshi, 2012). The aim of rural tourism everywhere across the world is not just to increase the net benefits to rural people from the tourism industry but to enhance the participation of local people in managing the tourism product (Zhu, 2009).

The tourism industry in Malaysia has achieved such a leading position that it counts as one of the most important sources of income and foreign exchange. This growth will continue in the future and will contribute to make tourism the most significant industry in the world (Kayat, 2011). Besides, the industry is, like no other industry, in a position to create prosperity and economic development opportunities. Since 2000, Malaysia has launched the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) with the intention to tap the growth potential of tourism, as well as to realise Malaysia's aspiration of becoming a high-income country by 2020 (Ministry of Tourism Malaysia, 2013). As a result, the tourism industry recently was acknowledged as a major contributor to Malaysia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), with an average growth rate of 12 per cent per annum since 2004 (PEMANDU, 2013).

With those matters, the study found that rural tourism, generally has been acknowledged as a tool to promote the preservation of various products that are nature-based and enriched by the community and local environment. However, none of the studies make a distinction between tourism in rural areas of developing countries and those of developed countries, when discussing about the concept and contributions of rural tourism (Knowd, 2001). This will be further discussed to highlight the inadequacies of previous literature in explaining of rural tourism contributions. This is because rural tourism is unique as it plays a role in integrating the rural experience based on the interaction of rural activities, man-made facilities as well as rural accommodation (Pierret, 2012). It is essential to have a better understanding regarding of these contributions and the important elements that are included in this area.

Literature review

Definition and concepts of rural tourism

What does rural tourism mean? For many in the industry, the word rural is a common 'house-ware', particularly for those who are involved in the development of society. However, in the tourism industry, rural tourism considerably varies from country to country. The term occurs in advanced industrial societies. It was born in the mid-1950s when the European economic reconstruction process was finished after the Second World War (Lane, 1994). The term of rural tourism has been a subject of discussion either in a policy context or in industry and academic literature. A number of empirical studies have been conducted in which researchers discuss the essential aspects of rural tourism. The nature of rural tourism products often involves small-scale operations and culturally-based or farm-based products, which are conducive to wide participation amongst tourists (Pakurar & Olah, 2008).

In particular, Irshad (2010)'s review of Page and Getz (1997) shows that rural tourism is not just a farm or agro-based tourism, because it also comprises special interest in nature holidays and eco-tourism, educational travel, walking, climbing and riding holidays, sport and health tourism, adventure and heritage tourism where production is based on establishing new places for tourism. This is supported by previous research, which states that rural tourism should involve any activities that causes the rural community to directly engage in tourism either by them having in full control or having their culture serve as the attraction (Holland, Burian, Dixey, & Goodwin, 2003). Nevertheless, such definitions do little to convey the true meaning of tourism in rural areas because of the difficulty of establishing what is 'rural'. In broader definition, Bramwell & Lane (2012) and Lane (1994) discussed and established the purest form of rural tourism, which includes a few elements (see Figure 1).

Prior to discussion of definitions of rural tourism, there are key issues that need to be considered in defining the term of rural tourism. In much of the recent literature on the tourism industry, efforts have been made to define the term of rural tourism itself. The literatures related to rural tourism areas are heterogeneous and the definition of a rural areas is thus problematic and the different terminologies are used according to aims or types of activities in rural areas such as adventure, eco-tourism and green tourism (Holland, Burian, Dixey & Goodwin, 2003). In general, rural tourism is a more complex form of tourism, comprising both the actual tourist activities as well as the economy itself (WTO, 2002) and any definition of rural tourism requires recognizing the essential qualities of what is 'rural' itself.

Studies on the rural tourism concept in previous studies were more concentrated on natural areas or wilderness areas. This is because rural tourism is unique as it plays a role in integrating the rural experience based on the interaction of rural activities, man-made facilities as well as rural accommodation (Pierret, 2012). Numerous studies have attempted to explain a broader perspective of rural tourism, such as the established concept by WTO (2001) in the Rural Tourism Master Plan for Malaysia, which identified various components of Malaysian "ruralness" in tourism objectives. It is included agro-tourism, heritage tourism, ecotourism, as well as culture-based and home-stay products. Conversely, Bhujbal & Joshi (2012), stated that a few elements are considered in the different forms of rural tourism, such as eco-tourism, nature tourism, agro-tourism and adventure tourism (see Figure 2). It is essential to have a better understanding regarding of these concepts and the important elements that are included in this area. What is important is the diversity of approaches used by many researchers that emphasize the concept of an urban-rural continuum as a means of establishing differing degrees of "rurality" and the essential characteristics of "ruralness" (UNWTO, 2011).

The Strengths and Contributions of Rural Tourism Development

Over the past decade, rural tourism has become an indispensable part in some countries like Malaysia. In fact, governments also see tourism as offering new employment opportunities in a growing sector that is focused on service industries and may assist in developing and modernizing the economy (Egbali, Nosrat & Ali, 2011). This industry also is important for many reasons such as enhancing the rural collective economy, beautifying the rural landscape, reducing the urban-rural gap, building a harmonious society, and exploring a new method of rural tourism development (Zhang, 2012). In addition, Bramwell & Lane (2012) claimed that rural tourism is associated with quality of life issues as it offers people the opportunity to take a break away from the complexities and stresses of everyday life and work.

In the new global industry, the only way to encourage rural area development is to encourage rural tourism because the development of rural tourism has significantly contributed to the preservation of local cultural heritage and to the nature of the environment (Affairs, By & Buck, 2010; Razzaq et al., 2013). The main reason visitors choose rural destinations is due to a desire to enjoy the quality of rural life beyond the human landscape. Therefore, maintaining environmental quality is an essential condition for an area to be considered attractive (Tureac, Turtureanu & Bordean, 2008; Turtureanu, 2006). Appropriate locations for tourism activities are best when the recreational attributes are primarily expressed by their very atmosphere, as villages are characterized by preserved nature and large green areas (Mensah & Benedict, 2010; Sharpley & Roberts, 2004). Changes to rural areas have been inextricably linked to the development of both global and local economies. It is believed that study on the potential of developing rural tourism, particularly in a rural setting, may contribute to the sustainability of the environment as well creation of alternative income for rural dwellers because many countries engage the rural tourism industry as a “richly paradoxical” industry and experience rapid changes, particularly in socio-economic transformations (Knowd, 2001).

Rural tourism in particular, may cover the customers’ needs concerning hospitality, food and beverage, lodging, leisure activities, and events besides the preservation of the environment. Promoting rural tourism in undeveloped areas where the natural environment predominates, aims at sustainable local development, ensuring social and economic benefits to the local community in order to maintain rural assets (Devisme & Bargeau, 2009). Despite these, promoting rural tourism is grounded on a look for authentic experience, which may allow the interaction between the territory and its inhabitants (Tang & Jones, 2012).

One of the most significant current discussions in rural studies is the goal of promoting rural tourism to increase net benefits to rural people by increasing their participation in managing tourism products. If more tourism can be developed in rural areas, particularly in ways that involve high local participation in decisions and enterprises, then poverty impacts are likely to be enhanced (Zhang, 2012). The implementation of tourism development and rural tourism may vary between different states in terms of its focus and speed of the implementation. There have been suggestions to use an integrated approach in tourism planning and development to preserve existing natural and cultural assets (Siti-Nabiha, Wahid, Amran, Haat & Abustan, 2009). Initially, rural tourism can utilise tourism resources to optimize rural industrial structures, develop rural tourism services, promote employment and create a better economic base for the new rural construction (Zhang, Cai & Harrill, 2009). When a rural community considers tourism a development tool, attention should be given to planning, developing, investigating, and promoting opportunities for sustainable tourism development (Kim, Uysal & Sirgy, 2013).

Research Setting: *Sungai Sedim Amenity Forest, Kulim, Kedah*

In the early 1990s, the Kedah State Government gave serious attention to the tourism industry due its ability to generate economic growth, creating more job opportunities and changing the rural development landscape (Kulim District Council, 2004). Tourism development in Kedah has changed its physical landscape, especially in rural and remote areas. Since 1990, the Kedah state focused on industrial development, tourism and commercial agriculture sectors (UPEN, 2009). With comparatively advantageous effects on income and employment generation in Kedah, the tourism industry is an option for enhancing rural lifestyles and for inducing positive changes in the distribution of income in underprivileged areas (Liu, 2006). Sungai Sedim Amenity Forest (SSAF), located in the north of Peninsular Malaysia, within Sedim’s area and near Karangan,

30km from Kulim's town was chosen as the research setting due to its characteristics and future contributions to host residents. The World's Longest Canopy Walk, the 925m long and 50m high Tree Top Walk (TTW), is among the best attractions at SSAF and offers great aerial views of the natural forest (Kulim District Council, 2013), acknowledged as one of the most popular activities in Kedah.

There are developmental reasons to promote tourism at SSAF as a growth pole, such as diversifying a state's tourism image and travel packages or alleviating bottlenecks in popular sites. One key opportunity of involving more of the people in tourism activities at SSAF is to develop tourism enterprises where they live. Another key features that make rural tourism relevant to SSAF development are their poverty and lack of economic opportunities, combined with the natural resources, scenery and culture of the area that provide tourism assets. As a result, the Kedah State Government received numerous enquiries from these operators for diversification of their packages that will include more eco-tourism sites and heritage attractions (Bernama, 2011).

The Kedah government, under the State Economic Planning Unit (UPEN), built the TTW at SSAF in 2004 at a cost of more than RM10 million, which includes costs for the main road (The National Audit Department, 2012). TTW at SSAF could best be promoted not only through its natural scenery but also as the world's longest TTW that could only be experienced at SSAF (Tourism Malaysia, 2010; UPEN, 2009). Additionally, the Kedah Tourism State allocated more than RM1 million in 2009 through UPEN to build 20 chalets, parking areas as well as a Tourist Information Centre (TIC) that consists of an information centre, public toilets and a cafeteria (The National Audit Department, 2012). Nevertheless, both projects have not been able to promote and attract an adequate number of tourists to SSAF and its performance is still lagging despite being considered the most valuable product in Malaysia (Kulim District Council, 2004). Despite this, according to the top management of TTW, there are no current and specific statistics or published data available that shows the number of tourists visiting SSAF nor the gross revenue or income of the project.

With those matters, SSAF was chosen as the research setting specifically based on several criteria, including: significant employment declines in natural resources sectors and their locations in areas characterized by the presence of mountains, river, and other natural amenities. There are also reasons why it is important to develop SSAF as a rural tourism destination in Kedah, (i) to create economic growth and outline environmental objectives, and (ii) to improve the social conditions of the local communities and tourism operators. In order to address these challenges, therefore, appropriate actions need to be taken and ways to deal with these challenges are needed. There is the need to strategize. A planned action for implementation ensures tourism development especially SSAF area remains strong and sustainable.

Methods, Procedures and Data Analysis

This study attempts to evaluate the strengths and contributions of rural tourism development at SSAF. A qualitative approach of investigation was adapted as a major approach in this study. Kayat (2002) recommended the use of this approach in order to reveal elements that stakeholders feel they might be exchanging in return for the benefits of tourism development. Indeed, qualitative approach was recommended if the study attempted to understand the contexts or settings in which participants in a study address a problem or issue (Creswell, 2007). Thus, Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) and semi-structured interviews were embedded for data

collection to describe the strengths and contributions of SSAF that can be promoted as well as to enhance the development of SSAF. It is believed that, an in-depth probe would be more valuable than surface understanding. In fact, there is an expressed need to have contact with the stakeholders themselves in order to understand how tourism influences them (Kayat, 2002).

Participants

The sampling strategy that was adopted in this study was a purposeful one to enable researchers to determine statistical inferences to a population and intentionally sample a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination (Creswell, 2007, pg. 118). Indeed, researchers can select individuals/ respondents for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study. There are 59 participants that involved in this study, which included those who lived in the tourism zone of Sedim area and those who are directly involved with, or affected by, tourism activities. This ensures the target population will express their feelings and attitudes towards the development of the tourism industry within their areas. The respondents for focus group discussions and interviews were chosen from local communities, local authorities, tourism operators, and visitors.

Data Analysis

For the purpose of data analysis, the process can be enhanced in various ways either manually or by using computer software. Programs designed for qualitative data can speed up the analysis process, make it easier for researchers to experiment with different codes, test different hypotheses about the relationships as well as facilitate diagrams of emerging theories and preparation of research reports (Morrison, 2000). The steps involved in computer-assisted qualitative data analysis parallel those used traditionally to analyse text, such as notes, documents, or interview transcripts: preparation, coding, analysis, and reporting. For this purpose, the ATLAS.ti qualitative computer database programme was applied to prepare and analyse the FGDs and interviews in the analytical program. It involves; (i) making sense out of text and image data, (ii) preparing the data for analysis, (iii) conducting different analysis, (iv) moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, (v) representing the data and (vi) making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data.

Codes, however, were used as indexing devices at different levels of abstraction in order to create sets of related information units for the purpose of comparison and analysis. Three coding activities were implied in the process of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. However, only the “*open and axial coding*” approaches were employed in this study for the FGD’s and interviews data. Findings are presented for each question asked and grouped under each aim of the study. It is also important to look for common threads and anomalies as well as focus and the meaning of the data. Coding the data under the key themes may require recoding under new, emerging themes based on the conversations around the original themes.

Finding and Interpretation of data

The study involved four stakeholder groups with each group being represented by different number of participants; Local Communities (LC, n=16) and Youth Group (YG, n=19), Tourism Operators (TO, n=7), Local Authorities (LA, n=5) and Visitors (VS, n=12). The total number of participants in this study were N= 59 with different profiles and interests (see Figure 3).

Findings of demographic variables were used to determine whether some criteria, which were established for participants' selection, had been achieved. Based on this finding, it is found that gender in the sample was not balanced with 83% male and 17% female participants. Youth groups were represented by a full number of male participants compared to that the local communities group because most of the young generation involved in tourism activities at SSNF is dominated by male generations. Table 1 indicates the findings from demographic profile of participants that involved in this study.

The sample consisted of individuals with age groups ranging from below 20 years old 5%, followed by 20-30 years old 39%, 31-40 years old, 41-50 years old and more than 50 years old group at 17%, 28.8% and 10.2% respectively. The educational backgrounds ranged from low-level education (primary school) to master degree holders. The most participants had low-levels of education being more than 50%, degree holders only 22%, whereas only 6.8% had higher-level education (Master degree) but from diverse working experiences.

The finding from the qualitative data

Focus group discussions and the interviews sessions clearly indicated few important elements in determine the strengths and contributions of SSAF. The results from both collections revealed two key themes the most strengths for the SSAF to be developed and promoted internationally; which are nature attractions, and Tree Top Walks. While the other themes such as eco-tourism activities, agro-tourism products, as well as cultural/history elements are the supplement themes that emerged from this study. The summary of the result can be seen in Table 2 and followed by the detail explanation of each themes.

KEY THEMES:

1) Environment and Nature characteristics

Generally, SSAF is home to natural items of special importance for dendrology, located at compartment 15 within *Gunung Inas* Rainforest in the Kulim District. The 36, 979 hectare forest was gazetted as a Permanent Forest Reserve on 5th Nov 1937 and it has a rich combination of tourism endowments, such as a forest recreational park, waterfalls, mountains, and protection for conservation and preservation that contains two natural areas; *Gunung Inas* and *Gunung Bintang*. People in search of recreational and entertainment opportunities offered by SSAF area prove an inadequate attitude and jeopardise the local flora, fauna and habitat that caused the area to be declared under protection. SSAF is also regarded as one of the important forest areas of the Kedah state and it will be declared as a Natural State Reserve (*Hutan Lipur Negeri*) by Kedah Forestry Department in few years.

Another interesting story about SSAF is they also have the oldest tree, more than hundred years old tree called *Tualang*, which can be found with only 5-minute walk into the forest. With this tree, it has been used as one of the main nature products for tourists' attraction at SSAF. In addition to this, youth groups also recognised the special element of SSAF in terms of nature; "*only specific group likes us that know and appreciate the existing of this forest (SSAF), others may be see it as normal forest as others*". Thus, they desired more relevant development to help them to learn life skills and put them in situations where they will get to help make the decisions and then live with the consequences.

2) *The World Longest Tree Top Walk*

SSAF have great potential to be developed as the best eco-tourism site in region, which may offer visitors the opportunity to get closer to the nature and flora fauna. As was mentioned before, the World's Longest Tree Top Walk (TTW) is 925m long and 50m high, is among the best attractions at SSAF and offers great aerial views of the natural forest. Although SSAF has a great asset like TTW, it is somewhat surprising that most of local communities did not support the TTW as the main strength of SSAF. They were proud to have TTW in their area, which was acknowledged as international attractions. However, they claimed that TTW is not the main attraction as most of tourists come to SSAF because of the nature and activities offered.

It seems possible that these groups of participants were more focused on business-oriented issues, thus TTW were identified as the main attraction at SSAF. Indeed, the idea of a galvanised steel walkaway is one of its kind, suspended in the air it provides safety and thrills to visitors while enjoying the nature walk through the canopy jungle and allowed those whose though it is impossible due to fear of heights, to experience the upper reaches of the rainforest. With the entrance fee of RM10 for adults and RM6 for children, it is worth enduring the nerve wrecking height among the tress where the structure used for the TTW is built onto the ground. Unlike the canopy at *Taman Negara* that is built between natural trees, this TTW give visitors more confidence in terms of stability as it is built using huge metals with railings and bolts.

OTHER THEMES:

1) *Cultural and Historical Resources*

One of the more significant findings of the study is that Sedim area actually is rich with many historical assets and products that can be promoted and developed. This theme reflects participants' thoughts about present and potential future links between tourism and culture in Sedim area. This was supported by most of the local communities and youth groups from both sessions about the strength of culture and historical assets at Sedim. They believed that although outsiders and local authorities are not aware on these matters, they would maintain and preserve the historical monuments and culture for future generations. The stories of this area can be seen from the existence of "*Rumah Lindungan Raja*" at the main gate of the *Kampung Lindungan Raja*, which it was built and protected by the villages itself. Most of the activities conducted by local communities and youth groups will include this element in their program as one of the strategies to promote their history and culture.

It is somewhat surprising from the findings when only these groups of people that tried to acknowledge this strength whereas others (such as local authorities and tourism operators) are not aware of the value of this asset. This inconsistency may be due to the different functions and experiences involved of each stakeholders related to SSAF's activities. Visitors, however, only can know about this product if somebody introduces it to them or brings them to that place. From the information gathered in this study, it was found that the cultural heritage, as well as the historical assets of SSAF and Sedim's area, were developed and recognised from long time ago. Despite this, local communities felt proud to talk about their valuable assets, such as traditional dances, *marhaban* and *silat* performance. Other than that, LC and YG's group stated that the existence of *Rumah Lindungan Raja* would be further developed and promoted as one of the most valuable assets for this area.

2) *Eco-tourism activities*

The value of SSAF as one of the best eco-tourism destinations in Malaysia can be seen from the pure resources base that they have, such as adventurous waterfall, which was recognised by the International Canoe Federation as being among the best white water rafting challenges internationally. It is also recognised as amongst the fastest flowing waters and rapids, excellent for challenging activities and intends to transform the rapids into one of the outstanding water sports destinations in the region (Kulim District Council, 2013; Tourism Development Council, 2012). Combining the purest of natural resources and challenging waterfall at SSAF, it then boasts varieties of eco-tourism products that were offered to tourists, such as kayaking and water rafting. With more than four tourism operators that offered tourism activities at SSAF, innovative and collaborative activities were promoted and offered to adventurous and mass tourist.

3) *Agro-tourism products*

Another important finding on the strengths of SSAF is called Agro-Tourism products, which is actually a well-established form of tourism. Its emphasizes nature and capitalises on rural culture as a tourism attraction; its primary appeal is not the natural landscape but a cultural landscape (Bhujbal & Joshi, 2012). It is somewhat surprising in this finding where agro-tourism becomes one of the strengths of SSAF because it is does not currently promote any agro-tourism products. It was observed that agro-tourism products would bring income to the local people at SSAF, as well as it can be considered as one of tourism attractions besides the business of fruit selling. One unanticipated finding from this study that the existing products are fresh water fish, which was managed by one of local people at Sedim. It is a small area that houses catfish, which are kept in many big fishponds. The nature of the business is for breeding and trading these freshwater catfish and is considered a Small Medium Entrepreneur's project (SMEs). The person that manages this business is also one of operators at SSAF, which offered accommodation and eco-tourism activities. This is the only project that used the waterfall resources to produce the catfish, which can accommodate up to 10,000 catfish at one time.

Discussion and Implications

One possible important implication for developing tourism at SSAF is because it may minimise the ecological impact of tourism, which focuses on wilderness adventures as well as flora and fauna as the primary attractions. The importance of tourism products at SSAF can be shown from the interest of tourists in outdoor activities and specialised groups that support the protection of natural areas and generates economic benefits for host communities. Although different groups of participants delivered their ideas in different perceptions, however initial observation from this study shows that they have same visions and missions to SSAF, which is to protect the natural environment while maximising the opportunities that are available at SSAF. It is interesting to highlight those three themes that emerged from this finding, which is similar to all stakeholders' opinions: nature characteristics, TTW's development as well as eco-tourism resources.

A variety of perspectives was expressed by the participants to share their best stories about SSAF, which were further classified as the strengths and contributions of SSAF. Some groups of participants felt that SSAF have significantly contributed to the nature and environment, whereas others felt that the development of SSAF only contributes to the specific elements such as TTW. However, often-conflicting discourse emerged when discussing about TTW where external stakeholders (Local Authorities) only recognised TTW as the main attraction whereas internal

stakeholders (Local communities, Tourism Operators and Visitors) were more concentrated on nature and eco-tourism activities as major attractions at SSAF. This was supported by Byrd et al. (2009) who claimed entrepreneurs and government officials did not differ significantly in their perceptions of tourism development. A comparison of these results revealed that SSAF is rich with varieties of resources and products that can be promoted and developed for future tourism potentials.

The study also found that in order to establish a tourism enterprise, individual, groups, or businesses must learn about tourism and understand certain basic principles. Tourists have many expectations before, during, and even after a tourism experiences. Tourism operators are doomed to failure if they enter the industry without understanding the principles of tourism and the reasons for the existence of the industry (Dogra & Gupta, 2012). Thus, the study believed that, a practical approach towards rural tourism development at SSAF requires a certain amount of study before implementation and understanding about the contributions of tourism products is very crucial. It is important for those who are interested in providing rural tourism services to make a careful evaluation before implementing any businesses or projects.

In response to this issue, a number of factors combine to make SSAF ideal for tourist visitation and continue to experience tourism. First is that their landscape is better conserved. Road and building construction are not a common occurrence at SSAF; closely linked to this is the perception that the countryside offers a freshness of air and natural environment. This becomes an advantage to the SSAF's setting when it comes to tourism areas. For tourists who love nature and idyllic scenes, SSAF is the place to escape to from tourism purposes. Rural development at SSAF, which are currently very few, lack the necessary means but can be achieved by making a number of investments, such as an adequate parking systems as well as public facilities and services. By such investments, SSAF commune could be significantly increase its touristic function. There should be strategies to promote and enhance the development of tourism activities at SSAF either for long-term or short-term strategies.

Another possible finding is that local communities at SSAF have unused lands as well as underutilised space to be developed or managed. These "dead" assets actually can easily be turned into business or profit-making products, such as home-stay, farm-stay, and Extreme Park. What is important here is the innovation and creative thinking by local communities in managing and developing their assets (Pratt & Rivera, 2011). These benefits also may include diversification of the local industry base, such as craft and increased employment to have a better life style. Economically, this strategy may create better job opportunities, a potential for small business, as well as to have a higher earning income (Mensah, 2012). From environmentally aspects, the study found that the more sensitive tourism stakeholders were towards environment conservation, the more sustainability could be created at SSAF.

Conclusion

The study believed that although SSAF has great potential to be developed as one of the best tourism destinations in Malaysia, however not all areas or aspects of SSAF are suitable for that development. Indeed, not all local people or tourism stakeholders at SSAF are happy with the development or not willing to have any kind of development at their area. Results from the study indicated that the tourism industry could be relied upon to drive SSAFs' economic growth and development hence; local authorities should pay greater attention towards promoting tourism activities. This would contribute significantly to the structural diversification of the SSAF

stakeholders' livelihood and its resilience. SSAF has been neglected by many parties, especially in tourism development, and is characterized by a low level of infrastructural development as well as a lack of access to essential services. Thus, greater effort should be taken to provide a wider variety of quality tourism products and improve an image of SSAF to stimulate continuous tourism demand nationally and internationally.

There are also some reasons why it is important to develop Sungai Sedim Amenity Forest as rural tourism destination in Kedah. The study attempts to explore the contributions of rural tourism development at SSAF in order to create economic growth and outline environmental objectives. It helps to improve the social conditions of the local communities and tourism operators at SSAF by recommending implementation of substantial involvement of the local residents in order to sustain vital rural tourism interrelationship between tourism development, biodiversity conservation, as well as livelihood improvement. Besides, it may create a better understanding of the potential of rural tourism in Malaysia. This was supported by the finding from the study, which it is found that there are two key themes that contributed to the development of rural tourism at SSAF, which is nature characteristics and Tree Top Walk. While the other themes that support these factors are cultural and historical, eco-tourism activities, and agro-tourism products. These key strengths of SSAF indicated the significance and contributions of rural tourism development at SSAF and Kedah in general.

The study has gone some way towards enhancing our understanding of rural tourism as well as the significance of tourism development in rural area. As the WTO's reports that Malaysian tourism, have two main strengths: the unique environment and nature of the country, and the local people themselves. The industry has also become an important foreign-exchange earner, contributing to economic growth, providing employment, and attracting investments. Indeed, Malaysia has outstanding possibilities to empower the development of rural tourism as it is blessed with beautiful tropical rainforest, clean, unpolluted rivers with well-preserved unique culture and heritage site. Malaysia's tourism interests in peripheral areas are diverse and yet commonly supported with the belief that tourism is an effective development vehicle. Thus, one of the most significant issue that emerge from this study is that rural tourism has become an important developmental agenda for any country due to its potential for business activities, which may provide benefits to the communities. Developing rural tourism does not mean letting go of local culture and traditions, in fact it may assist in maintaining the local cultural, social and environment.

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