

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY APPROACH AND TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS

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Abstract: *The study attempts to examine the way in which rural tourism is developed using the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach as a research tool. AI is an increasingly important area as it was able to offer a positive and strength-based approach to the rural community development. It can be seen as an alternative tourism research tool for community development as far as rural tourism is concerned. The qualitative approach was applied by conducting focus group discussions with the local communities and youth groups at Sungai Sedim Amenity Forest (SSAF) in Kedah, Malaysia. SSAF was chosen as the research setting due to its characteristics and future contributions to a host of residents. Nature resources, eco-tourism products, Tree Top Walk and historical assets have been identified as the major strengths at SSAF. One of the most interesting dreams that came-out from this study is the development of a biodiversity rich national park or a so-called “Mini Zoo” as well as the “Extreme Theme Park”. The participants believe that with the development of these products, it will enhance the image and branding of the SSAF as the best eco-tourism destination in Malaysia.*

Keywords: *Rural Tourism, Appreciative Inquiry, Rural Development, Qualitative, Tourism Development*

Introduction

In developing countries like Malaysia, elements such as homestay, eco-tourism, and agro-tourism, cultural and heritage-based tourism have been highlighted as major rural tourism products. The diversity of these products indicate the potential for rural tourism to play a major role in enhancing the tourism yield and boosting the tourism's contribution especially in economic, social and environment aspects (Nair, Munikrishnan, Rajaratnam and King, 2014). Rural tourism also has increasingly been accepted as a strategy towards poverty reduction in most of the developing countries (Ibrahim and Razzaq, 2009), in addition to taking more and more importance in the tourism sector at the national and international level as it represents an alternative to mass tourism (Sharpley and Jepson, 2011). Currently, people coming from the

cities want to escape from their stressful daily lives and during their holidays, they look forward to enjoying a peaceful and good quality environment. Therefore, the rural countryside tries to capture these customers as it can contribute to diversifying the local economy and improving the dynamism of the territory (Bramwell and Lane, 2008).

In the global tourism market, rural tourism is considered as a strong growing sector. The protection and improvement of natural, built environment, infrastructure and the economic growth as well as the socio-cultural development are the most significant contributions to this sector (Lo, Mohamad, Songan and Yeo, 2012). Ideally, in remote areas tourism is developed using the inherent characters and resources of the locality which typically include “their attractive natural environment, original local culture and traditional systems of land use and farming” (Bramwell and Lane, 2012). Developing tourism activities in rural areas has become an important means for economic growth in Malaysia. Thus, coordination of tourism and environment is essential through maintaining a high quality environment in enabling rapid tourism development in a sustainable manner (Tang, 2015).

Tourism can be an important economic development option for rural communities with significant natural, historic and cultural attractions. In this sense, resident support and commitments to such an economic strategy should be a central part of an assessment of a community’s tourism potential (Ghanian, Ghoochani and Crofts, 2014). Tourism planners as well as the government should pay more attention on the income impacts while designing the tourism policy (Tang, 2015). Moreover, they should also take a long-term perspective on sustainable rural development as there is a need to introduce market-friendly policies for rural areas (Hwang and Lee, 2015). It is believed that rural tourism can be a good way to revitalize rural society, contribute to diversifying rural income resources, alleviating poverty as well as promoting endogenous rural vitalization.

Literature Review

Background of Appreciative Inquiry Approach

The Appreciative Inquiry approach is a way of being and seeing which offers a positive and strength-based approach to the rural community development (Nyaupane and Poudel, 2012). It can also be used as an alternative tourism research tool for community development as far as rural tourism is concerned. It is both a worldview and a process for facilitating positive change in human systems, e.g., organizations, groups, and communities. The assumption is simple; every human system has something that works right—things that give it life when it is vital, effective, and successful (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2010). AI begins by identifying this positive core and connecting to it in ways that heighten energy, sharpen vision, and inspire action for change (Judy and Hammond, 2006).

Originally AI was developed as a collaborative, strength-based approach to both personal and organizational development that proved to be highly effective in thousands of organizations and communities in hundreds of countries around the world (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005). It is a way of bringing about change that shares leadership and learning - fully engaging everyone in the organization. By focusing on the organizations’ strengths, we can evolve into a true “centre of excellence”. Rather than focusing on problems, AI elicits solutions (Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, 2008; Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005), besides providing an alternative approach that locates, highlights, and illuminates the life-giving forces within an individual, group, organization, or community (Lewis, Passmore and Cantore, 2008). Previous studies also define

AI as an alternative approach to problem solving, positioned within a social constructionist framework that builds on positive affirmation of organizational strengths to address workplace issues (Koster and Lemelin, 2009). When individuals change their inner and explicit dialogues to focus primarily on affirmation and support, they change their stories and their organizations for the better life (Judy and Hammond, 2006).

Additionally, AI can be used to develop plans and commitment in which organizational members collectively define the best of 'what is' and has been to create provocative possibilities and plans for the future. The process builds positive affirmation and alignment for commitment (Cooperrider et al., 2008). By seeking out the best of 'what is' to help ignite the collective imagination of 'what might be,' AI aims to generate new knowledge that expands the 'realm of possibility,' and help individuals, groups and organizations envision a collective desired future in ways that successfully translate images of possibility into reality and belief into practice (Cooperrider, 2014). It is believed that there is significant potential for the adoption of the AI approach within the tourism discipline as it is rarely used in the field of tourism (Nyaupane and Poudel, 2011). AI addresses organizational issues in a significantly different way compared to other approaches; instead of focusing on the problems, and what is not working and why, AI asks its organization members to discover what is working well and what would comply as “the best” within the organization (Cooperrider et al., 2008; Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005).

Understanding the poorest of the poor, minority, indigenous people and women is even harder, thus, compelling a need for non-traditional methods of data gathering and verification (Koster and Lemelin, 2009; Michael, 2005; Nyaupane and Poudel, 2012). The AI approach has been identified as an appropriate method to gain an in-depth understanding of the local communities' knowledge (Nyaupane and Poudel, 2012, Raymond and Hall, 2008a). They demonstrated that AI may offer researchers another methodology for framing and conducting tourism research. Nevertheless, it does not mean that AI will replace all research approaches or can overcome all the challenges of conducting research. Here, AI can be considered as a new method, approach or strategy for tourism research, which initiates positive changes especially in rural communities at SSAF.

No matter the purpose, the Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle is the foundation for change. The essence of all these models is based on a set of principles which generally follow the framework of the 4-D Cycle, (see Figure 1). Each AI process is home-grown and designated to meet the unique challenges of the organization and industry involved (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005). The “four D’s” of AI take many forms.

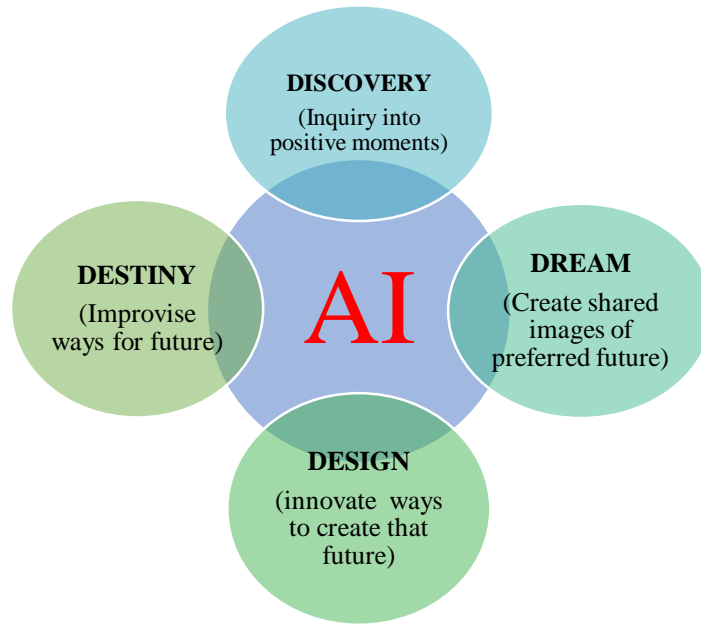


Figure 1: The Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle (Cooperrider et al., 2008)

Stage 1 - Discovery

The focus of this stage is to uncover, learn about and appreciate the best of “what is” by focusing on one’s highpoint experiences and success. Participant will share their stories of exceptional accomplishments and explore the “life-giving” factors of the organization. The primary goal of this stage is to stimulate participants’ excitement and delight as they share their values, experience and history with people and their wished for the future (pg. 104).

Stage 2 - Dream

This stage asks participants are encouraged to talk about (and dream about) not what is, but what might be a better organization and a better world. The primary goal of this stage is to facilitate a dialogue among stakeholders in which they begin to share positive stories in a way that creates energy and enthusiasm. The dream dialogue is often integrated into appreciative interviews with questions about wishes, hopes and dreams for a better organization and world (pg. 130).

Stage 3 - Design

This stage ask the individuals, team and/or organizational members to articulates the strategic focus, such as a vision of a better world, a powerful purpose and a compelling statement of a strategic intent. In this stage, attention turns to creating the ideal organization so that it might achieve its dream. This stage is very crucial in sustaining positive change and responding to the organization’s positive past (pg. 162).

Stage 4 – Destiny

This is the final stage in the 4-D Cycle of AI process. The goal of this stage is to ensure that the dream can be realized because it represents the conclusion of the Discovery, Dream and Design phrases (pg. 200).

Study Site: Sungai Sedim Amenity Forest, Kulim, Kedah

Tourism development in Kedah has changed its physical landscape especially in rural and remote areas and since 1990, the state of Kedah has been focusing on industrial, tourism and commercial agriculture sectors (UPEN, 2009). As such, Kedah started to receive the benefits of the tourism industry development with the increasing number of tourists' arrival each year (Ibrahim and Ahmad, 2008). The tourism industry in Kedah has diverse attractions, a variety of natural resources, historical heritage, and even the World's Longest Tree Top Walk (TTW) at Sungai Sedim Amenity Forest (Tourism Development Council, 2012). As a result, Kedah has successfully transformed its economic structure from an agricultural towards an industrial base economy (Majlis Perbandaran Kulim, 2004).

Sungai Sedim Amenity Forest or Hutan Lipur Sungai Sedim, one of the most popular destinations in Kulim has been chosen as the research setting due to its characteristics and future contributions to host residents around it. It also has great potential for tourism development, especially in the cultural and natural touristic segments. The forest is located in the north of Peninsular Malaysia, approximately 30 km from Kulim's town, near Karangan, Kulim. According to the Kedah Tourism Board, the SSAF as well as the Merbok River Cruise are expected to attract more tourists to the mainland of Kedah and this will help the tourism industry to create a more balanced inflow of tourists to the state (UPEN, 2006). Key features that make rural tourism relevant to SSAF's development is its poverty and lack of economic opportunities, combined with the natural resources, scenic environment as well as the culture of the area, which in turn serve as tourism assets. However, just because it is located in a rural area does not mean that the people living around the area will necessarily own an enterprise or even provide required labour.

To date, little attention has been paid to develop SSAF, hence, the development of rural tourism at SSAF has been displaced as an unfulfilled promise in spilling over the income to tourism stakeholders, besides providing indigenous people with employment (Jabatan Audit Negara, 2012). However, the nature of tourism products at SSAF such as a waterfall adventure and a natural virgin forest, often involves small-scale operations and culturally-based or farm-based products which can encourage to a wider participation. Besides that, tourism development at SSAF can bring a range of other benefits to the surrounding areas at Kulim, such as infrastructural development and spin-off opportunities for various enterprises. 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 to get more people involved in tourism activities at SSAF is to develop tourism enterprises where they live.

There are other 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. Recommending an implementation of substantial involvement of the local residents is important in order to sustain vital rural tourism interrelationship between tourism developments, biodiversity conservation, as well as livelihood improvement (Nyaupane and Poudel, 2011). Tourism has become the priority tool of rural planning at SSAF, in which tourism helps to energize the rural economy and in particular plays an important role in creating a value-added commercial channel for local produce.



Figure 2: Map of Sungai Sedim Amenity Forest (Majlis Perbandaran Kulim, 2004)

Research Methodology

Two Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were used in order to obtain comprehensive in-depth information describing local communities' attitudes and perceptions of the strengths and contributions of rural tourism development at SSAF. Participants were asked to discuss their experiences in detail in stimulating rural tourism development. Great care was taken in selecting the communities and participants for the focus groups through the questions written, and training given to moderators and assistant moderators for the focus groups. The focus groups were conducted in a community which consisted of (1) local community (with and without engagement with tourism activities), (2) local community leaders, who were knowledgeable about what went on in the community and (3) youth group who were involved with tourism activities.

The total number of focus group participants was 35 and the length of each discussion time was approximately two hours. In this study, the AI process was employed with the aim to uncover not only how tourism activities helped in the potential development of SSAF as well as for livelihood improvement of the local communities at Sedim. The task of tourism development, and livelihood improvement is only possible through the joint effort of a range of stakeholders, including governments, tourism entrepreneurs, non-profit organizations, and local people (Nyaupane and Poudel, 2012). Thus, to ensure that an integrated approach towards rural tourism development occurs, there must be active involvement and cooperation among the various stakeholders of rural tourism (Nair et al., 2014).

Appreciative inquiry was chosen as a research approach against traditional research approaches because studies (e.g. Koster and Lemelin, 2009; Raymond and Hall, 2008) in the past have reported that AI is the best approach in a situation where many stakeholders with diverse interests work together. While conducting an AI process, the 4-D cycle acts as a basic guiding framework, but it is not necessary that all AI practices go through all steps in the same manner (Nyaupane and Poudel, 2012). It is the objective and the context that most influence the form of engagement and the inquiry strategy. Taking into account the inquiry agenda and the study context, we, the researchers employed a new form of the five-step AI process as we realized that prior to the four steps (see Figure 3) process, we had to build a rapport with the local community to learn about and earn trust from them first. As such, we employed a grounding phase prior to the discovery phase.

Therefore, our AI process was adapted from a model by Nyaupane and Poudel (2012) which had five phases: (1) grounding; (2) discovery; (3) dream; (4); design and (5) destiny (see Figure 3).

However, only three out of the five phrases were employed in this study, namely (1) grounding; (2) discovery and (3) dream, as AI is a very time-consuming process particularly during the grounding phase. As indicated earlier, the grounding phase requires a significant amount of time, even though we felt that the time allocated was insufficient. However, we overcame the time limitation with the help of local field assistants of which their roles were to gather information about the communities and to contact stakeholders prior to our visit.

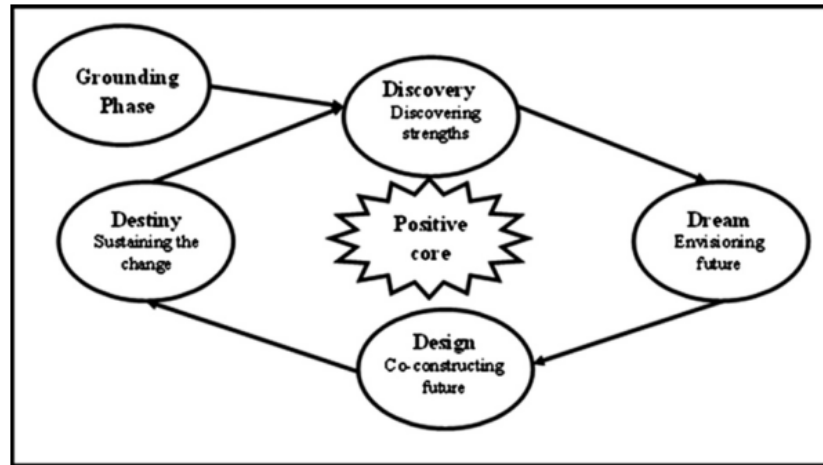


Figure 3: Application of Appreciative Inquiry process (Nyaupane and Poudel, 2012)

Results and Discussion

Outcome from the Discovery Phase

The application of the AI approach through FGD's sessions encouraged participants to speak more honestly about any issues, strengths and contributions they may have experienced. The results clearly indicate the significant contributions of rural tourism development at Sungai Sedim Amenity Forest. The focus group results highlight the following four factors/conditions that are most significant in strengths and contributions of rural tourism development at SSAF, namely (1) Natural Resources, (2) Historical assets, (3) Tree Top Walk, (4) Eco-tourism Products

1. Natural Resources

SSAF is 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. It has a rich combination of tourism endowments such as forest recreational park, waterfalls, mountains and protection for conservation and preservation which contains two natural areas; Gunung Inas and Gunung Bintang. It was declared a natural protected area which consists of hundreds of herbs and protected trees such as Meranti Seraya, Meranti Tembaga, Meranti Melantai, Keledang and Tongkat Ali. SSAF is regarded as one of the most important forest areas of the country and will be declared as a natural reserve (Hutan Lipur Negeri) in few years by Kedah Forestry Department. Visitors to the area get the opportunity to enjoy the spectacular sight of nature with a wide range of some 160 species of birds and more than 50 types of animals. However, people in search of recreational and entertainment opportunities offered by the SSAF area prove to possess an inadequate attitude, thus, jeopardizing the local flora, fauna and habitat that caused the area to be declared under protection.

2. Historical assets

One of the most significant findings of the study is that the Sedim area is actually rich with many historical assets and products that can be promoted and developed. The history of the Rumah Lindungan Raja at Kampung Sedim existed since 1934. However, in 1963 Kampung Sedim was renamed to Kampung Lindungan Raja by Y.T.M Tunku Abdul Rahman in conjunction with the control and protection afforded by the Sedim's villagers to D.Y.M, the late Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah. There is a long tale about this village and it is believed that the history will attract a greater number of visitors who are interested in cultural and heritage tourism. With the development of tourism activities at SSAF, it may be able to support the local culture by encouraging the restoration of local historic sites of Sedim and as tourism is generally considered to be a relatively clean industry, it may also foster local conservation efforts. The preservation and restoration of historical sites, buildings and artefacts will be continued as part of the effort to conserve the heritage as well as to increase the number of tourist attractions in Sedim.

3. Tree Top Walk (TTW)

SSAF has a great potential to be developed as the best eco-tourism spot in the region as it may offer visitors the opportunity to get closer to nature, specifically the flora and fauna. It has the World Longest Tree Top Walk with 925m long and 50m high, and is among the best attractions at SSAF as it offers a great aerial view of the natural forest (Majlis Perbandaran Kulim, 2013). The idea of a galvanized steel walkaway, one of its kind, where suspended in air, provides safety and thrills to visitors, while enjoying the nature walk through the canopy jungle, besides allowing those whose thought it impossible due to fear of height, to experience the upper reaches of the rainforest. The entrance fee for the experience is RM10 for adults and RM6 for children. As such, it is worth experiencing 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 gives visitors more confidence in terms of stability as it is built using huge metals with railings and bolts.

4. Eco-tourism products

The potential for SSAF to be the best eco-tourism destinations in Malaysia can be seen purely from the landscape as it has a waterfall that beckons for daring and adventurous water sport activities. This waterfall has been recognized by the International Canoe Federation as being among the best white water rafting challenges internationally (Majlis Perbandaran Kulim, 2013; Tourism Development Council, 2012). It is also recognized as amongst the fastest flowing waters and rapids which are excellent for challenging activities, which is the reason that there is an intention to transform the rapids into an outstanding water sports destinations in the region (Sekaran, 2010). Adventurous visitors can test their endurance by taking on the rapids with rafting, kayaking or canoeing while the less daring can opt for tamer activities.

The development of eco-tourism activities has many potential benefits for SSAF which can be an important source of employment for the local communities, especially for those who are economically underdeveloped. Since the jobs in the tourism industry often do not require advance training, local community members with few skills can readily work as tour guides or hospitality workers. In this case, greater emphasis has been given to eco-tourism activities at SSAF through the preservation of natural and waterfall attractions.

Outcomes from the Dream Phrase

Tourism activities, particularly in the Kulim area, play an important role in the eco-tourism sector, which is in line with the level of development and increased standard of living. The Kedah Forestry Department under the Forest Nature Unit has been able to plan, build and

maintain a sustainable recreational forest by providing recreational facilities there in order to meet the needs of the local people and the state community in general. As such, many dreams and missions have been highlighted in this discussion in order to promote and enhance the development of SSAF as one of the best eco-tourism destination in the world.

One of the most interesting dreams that came-out from this study is the development of a biodiversity rich national park or a so-called “Mini Zoo” as well as the “Extreme Theme Park”. The participants believe that with the development of these products, it will enhance the image and branding of the SSAF as the best eco-tourism destination in Malaysia. Additionally, it may also offer a variety of activities and attractions at SSAF not just for certain group of people but for all people. The partnership between the government and the local communities in forest management also plays an important part for SSAF, especially for the purpose of preserving and conserving the forest and nature. Thus, the involvement of a conservation-friendly infrastructure and tourism development may help to build socially, politically and economically healthy communities that thrive around a well-protected natural forest through a partnership among all stakeholders.

The participants also suggested that the recreational facilities at the SSAF such as the prayer room, toilets and shower rooms be developed further in order to attract local and foreign visitors in future. Although SSAF has been recognized as a world class location for water sport activities, sufficient infrastructure and public facilities are needed to ensure that it remains its recognition worldwide.

Discussion and Conclusion

The trend towards rural tourism can be partly explained by the fact that its image represents what tourists need and want. Thus, the importance of rural tourism can also be explained by the fact that it has been seen as a way to help SSAF to develop. There are also various tourist attractions on the mainland of Kedah that could be promoted such as heritage and cultural products, home-stay, as well as eco-tourism destinations including SSAF. The development of tourism in a rural area like SSAF is to increase the quality of life for local residents through the achievement of social and economic goals. The strengths of tourism development as a tool for development are that it is based on the natural and human environments of SSAF which is based on local resources. Besides that, the development of SSAF as a tourist attraction not only leads to the improvement of the structures for the tourists. Hence, it was chosen as the research site due to its untapped potentials for natural and cultural tourism development in Malaysia.

The findings of this study showed the significant contributions of rural development at SSAF, which highlights four factors as the main strengths of SSAF. This includes nature resources, TTW, eco-tourism products as well as historical assets. These four elements will be able to attract a number of visitors to SSAF, thus, enabling the creation of a better understanding of the potential of rural tourism in Malaysia. It also offers an opportunity for visitors to come into direct contact with the rural world and its traditions, besides providing an opportunity to experience nature and appreciate the quality of local products and the services available. The findings also found that the development of tourism products at SSAF may assist in alleviating poverty among the local communities as it offers ways to overcome new economic, social and environmental challenges.

This study was applied the Appreciative Inquiry approach as a main research tool. When we compare with other approaches, the AI approach addresses organizational issues in a significantly different way; where instead of focusing on the problems, and what is not working

and why, AI asks its organization members to discover what is working well and what would comply as “the best” within the organization. In essence, the effective use of AI as a research tool heavily relies upon the facilitators’ understanding of each individual community during both the data collection and data analysis phases. In other words, this approach seeks to discover the root of success rather than failure and it may offer researchers an alternative methodology in framing and conducting research related to tourism.

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