

HOMESTAY PROGRAMME – A TOOL FOR RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: CASE OF KAMPUNG RAGA HOMESTAY, YAN KEDAH

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Abstract: *The efforts to introduce tourism as a development tool for rural areas in Malaysia is reflected in the National Rural Tourism Master Plan 2001 (NRTMP). The main objective of NRTMP is to plan and guide the rural tourism development in the country. It emphasized on, among others, a homestay programme as the tool in giving more opportunities for the communities in rural areas to create new or additional income and employment. Homestay programmes offer visitors a unique experience that combines basic needs of food and accommodation with the host's culture. Ideally, homestay programmes should practice a wise use of the cultural and natural heritage resources of the rural area. The paper discusses the concept and evolution of the Malaysian Homestay Programme. It then relates the discussion in reference to the Kampung Raga Homestay in Yan Kedah. Kampong Raga Homestay is one of the oldest homestays in the state. Findings revealed that the evolution of homestay programmes in Malaysia is much reflected by what has happened and is happening in Kampung Raga homestay. Several issues are identified.*

Keywords: *Homestay Programme, Rural Tourism, Rural Community*

Introduction

Rural tourism is recognized as an important instrument of growth for rural economy. Rural tourism is also coined and introduced to the market in attempt to diversify tourism products and fulfil market requirement. Examples can be seen from people longing to escape from modernity, seeking tradition and authenticity, travelling for natural and cultural attractions, and looking for one's heritage. One of the products closely related to rural tourism is a homestay programme.

Like many other countries, Malaysia is also promoting homestay programmes as an attempt to achieve the rural community's development. As such, this paper tends to discuss the concept and evolution of the Malaysian Homestay Programme, and to relate the discussion in reference to the Kampung Raga Homestay in Yan Kedah.

Literature Review

An overview of rural tourism

Rural tourism is essentially a tourism activity that takes place in the countryside (Lane, 1994). Sharpley and Vass (2006) further defines the term as a range of activities, services or amenities provided by rural communities in order to attract visitors to visit their area, and to generate additional income. Rural tourism encompasses a broad range of activities, and it is multi-faceted (Aslam & Awang, 2015; Irshad, 2011). The diversity of attractions included within the rural tourism spectrum includes farm-tourism, agro-tourism, cultural tourism, nature tourism and ecotourism. In short, rural tourism can be defined as an experience which encompasses a wide range of attractions and activities that take place in non-urban areas. Its essential characteristics include (Irshad, 2011:5):

- Tourism activities that are located in rural areas, traditional in character
- Built upon the rural area's special features of small scale enterprise
- Low levels of tourism development
- Opportunities for visitors to directly experience social and/or natural environments, and traditional practices

From the perspective of the authority/government, rural tourism is seen and used by the authority as a development strategy to improve the social and economic wellbeing of rural areas. It is considered as a means to diversify rural economy.

Challenges of rural tourism

As with most of other forms of tourism, rural tourism development has its own drawbacks and challenges. It has been found that rural tourism contributes relatively little extra income to the communities (Sharpley, 2007). The communities, furthermore, may find it difficult to adapt to a service role, a necessary requirement in tourism industry (Stone & Stone, 2011). Thus, they need to be introduced and trained about leisure and hospitality related commercial activities. With that in mind, Irshad (2011) stressed on the importance of the government's involvement in developing and organizing rural tourism. He further argued on the importance of the authority to be concerned about the provision of support facility whenever tourism is to develop in a rural area. The inadequacy of basic facilities, such as accessibility, may hinder the development of tourism in that area. Thus, disappointing the visitors who are motivated to travel into the outlying attraction.

Rural tourism in Malaysia

In Malaysia, the scheme of rural tourism is considered as one of the most viable development strategies for rural areas (Marzuki, Ali & Othman, 2011). It is included in the five-year Malaysian development plans (MP), a short term national economic strategic plan. The rural tourism agenda is further elaborated to become the National Rural Tourism Master Plan (NRTMP), prepared by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture in 2001. By the 8th MP (2001 – 2005), rural tourism was highlighted as one of the mechanisms for rural community development, in terms of benefiting local communities economically and socially. According to the Masterplan, rural tourism is defined as:

...Tourism that provides opportunities for visitors to visit rural areas and rural attractions, and to experience the culture and heritage of Malaysia, thereby providing social-economic benefits for local communities (NRTMP, 2001:22).

The main objectives of NRTMP include:

- Plan and guide rural tourism development in the country.
- Provide more opportunities for local community involvement
- Generate new possible sources of income
- Stressed on agro-tourism and homestay programme

Homestay programme

A homestay programme is a period during which a visitor lives with a local family. The idea is to accommodate the visitors in a village with a local family, enabling visitors to learn about local lifestyle, culture and nature (Kontogeorgopoulos, Churyen, & Duangsaeng, 2015; Wani & Shafi, 2014). The homeowner is the one who provides lodging and meals to the visitors (at a fee) (Kalsom, 2010). It is a unique concept as it promotes interaction between host families and visitors. At the same time, homestay programmes act as a development tool in creating awareness of and respects for the host's culture (Ismail, Hanafiah, Aminuddin & Mustafa, (2016).

Homestay programme in Malaysia

In December 1995, the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism (MOCAT) (currently known as the Ministry of Tourism and Culture – MOTAC) had formed a unit to oversee growth of the program. It even introduced a guideline and accreditation criteria, as well as training package for the homestay development in Malaysia. MOCAT's official definition of a homestay programme says that:

...a homestay is where tourists can stay with the host's family and experience the everyday way of life of the family in both a direct and indirect manner.

According to the guideline, a village homestay program should be operated by a group of certified homestay operators in the communal areas, with a minimum of 10 houses. The ministry would then issue a license, providing the house owners able to abide to a certain criteria which include:

- Village have easy access from the main-road
- Participating houses should have adequate facilities for guests (separate bedroom / proper toilet)
- Home owners have no history of criminal record
- Home owners should be able to demonstrate a high standard of hygiene
- Homestay operators should be able to provide and include in the programme related rural communities' activities, depending on the economic activities of the village. For example, rubber tapping, paddy planting, cocoa/coconut plucking, and fishing
- Able to show-case and involve visitors in past-time games – congkak, traditional/folk dances, and other related activities commonly practiced by the rural communities
- Possess 'act and think tourism' attitude

Upon getting a license, home owners would be required to attend a basic training course conducted by the Institute for the Rural Advancement (INFRA) (*Institut Kemajuan Desa*) under the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development.

Recent development in homestay programme in Malaysia

Recent development in rural tourism related product by MOTAC sees the introduction of a new but related programme emphasizing on visit to My Kampung (village) instead of to My Home called Kampungstay (refer figure 1).



Kampungstay is a continuation from the Homestay programme, but the latter is a form of experience of which visitors are provided with accommodation facilities independently from the host's house (MOTAC, 2015). In other words, visitors do not stay with the host. Visitors would be given separate accommodation, equipped with basic facilities for the comfort of visitors and features the life of the village community. At the same time, visitors would be able to maintain the opportunity to interact and follow daily activities in the village.

Participation of the Kampungstay programme, however, are only open to the existing homestay operators registered with the MOTAC. Among the main objectives of Kampungstay implementation are to:

- Promote the participation of rural communities in the tourism industry in order to increase the income and living standards of the villagers
- Encourage rural communities to engage in business and become rural entrepreneurs;
- Provide additional accommodation arrangement for village life
- provide visitors with the option of selecting accommodation types that suit their needs

In addition, the guideline for Kampungstay also states that operators are encouraged to take visitors for a visit to historic sites / heritage, and tourist spots (MOTAC, 2015:3). Such statement clearly indicates that activities held in Kampungstay programme should not be confined within the *kampung* alone.

Kampung Raga Homestay Yan Kedah

Kampung Raga homestay is located about 1.5 km from Yan Besar, in the district of Yan and 42 km from Alor Setar, Kedah. Registered in 1996, it is among the earliest homestay programmes in the state. Kampung Raga homestay is also recognized by the State of Kedah as one of its major tourism products.

Interviews with homestay operators in Kampung Raga

Information gathered for the analysis of Kampung Raga Homestay was based on a qualitative interview with homestay operators conducted in August and September 2017. Six operators were interviewed. In general, most of the operators have other permanent jobs, with the homestay programme contributing as their additional income. Two of them work in rubber plantation, while one works in public sectors in town. The rest of the operators are self-employed. In terms of the activities offered in the homestay programme, operators explained that almost all the products are based on the environment surrounding the village area. As such, activities include:

- Rubber tapping demonstration
- Community activity such as gotong royong, planting of trees
- Cooking demonstration - traditional sweets and cookies in particular
- Handicrafts making and demonstration
- Visits and jungle trekking to nearby recreational areas like Titi Hayun, Puteri Mandi, Seri Perigi and Batu Hampar waterfalls
- Fruit eating during fruits season (June - August)

Operators interviewed could recall when they were sent for training/workshops. In fact, training/workshops were quite regular during the early stage of the programme. This signifies that whatever stated in the guideline about trainings is implemented in Kampung Raga homestay programme. When asked why they participate in the homestay programme, many of the operators said because of their interest in the programme, and that their participation is a voluntary one. To be specific, they considered the homestay programme as an avenue to support family or for additional income as majority of them work in the village. To the female operators, participating in the homestay programme is considered as a platform to practice and develop their entrepreneurial skills. According to respondent #4, one of the female operators:

.... I have attended several courses related to the homestay programme organized by the ministry, and because of the programme, I can earn my living and support my children. Besides, I am happy when visitors come and spend some time in my kampung.

Comment made by the first female operator was echoed by respondent #5, the second female operator:

...I like becoming a homestay operator as I can contribute financially to my family income. Besides, I do not have to go to town to work. I just make my house hospitable to the guests.

Many also believed the reason they participate in the programme is because they consider the homestay programme as a platform to foster a sense of ownership, togetherness and pride in the community. According to respondent #1:

...we are lucky in the sense that while promoting our village to the visitors, we are also preserving our cultural identity. We at the same time can increase awareness of local culture among ourselves, especially our children.

Other reasons mentioned by the operators include their delight and interest to share local heritage with others, and their interest to get to know people from other places/countries.

Current situation at Kampung Raga Homestay

After twenty years of operating the homestay in Kampung Raga, operators have identified certain changes that are happening in the programme. In fact, they perceive those changes as challenges in running and sustaining the programme. One aspect that has become a concern by the operators is related to the visitors. Operators began to realize that in many instances, particularly with foreign visitors, activities prepared for them are found to be inadequate. Instead of participating in activities initially prepared for them (for instance traditional games and pastimes), the visitors would request for a visit to places of interest that are outside of Yan district. For example a visit to the city of Alor Setar, another district in Kedah which is about 42km from Yan, and to the national archaeological site of Lembah Bujang which is situated in another district in Kedah. According to respondent #6:

...in the past, visitors would enjoy participating with whatever traditional games or other related activities that we have prepared for them. But now those activities are not favoured by them. They prefer to do something else, more challenging activities like hiking and exploring nature. In fact, on some occasions, they have already identified certain places to visit, but the place is not located within our district.

On one hand, request for a visit made by the visitors could become as an additional income for the operators, as services like transportation and guide are required. On the other hand, it may cause some difficulties to the operators when there is a shortage of people to fulfil the request. The shortage, furthermore, is due to the fact that there has been a significant reduction in the number of homestay operators in Kampung Raga for the past twenty years.

In the beginning of the programme in 1996, there were twenty registered operators. However, at present the number has significantly dropped to eight operators. All eight of them are the pioneers of Kampung Raga homestay programme. They have been participating in the programme for more than twenty years. Age factor is said to be the main reason for the reduction in the number of operators. In fact, at the time that this interview took place, only six out of eight operators were available at the village. Table 1 highlights the age of the six operators interviewed.

Table 1: Age of Respondents

| | Age |
|--------------|-----|
| Respondent 1 | 70 |
| Respondent 2 | 65 |
| Respondent 3 | 62 |
| Respondent 4 | 53 |
| Respondent 5 | 53 |
| Respondent 6 | 55 |

From the table, it can be seen that most of the respondents are more than fifty years of age, while the eldest of them being seventy-years old. Clearly, the age factor has become a challenge for the operators to continue with their operation. The matter escalates when there is also a lack of involvement from the younger generation to participate in the homestay programme. Many claimed that their children are not interested to pursue or be involved with the programme. The younger generation prefer to stay and work in the cities. The situation has left the existing operators with no other option but to continuously run the programme on their own. Almost all

of the respondents have shown their concern with the situation. As such, the sustainability of the programme in Kampung Raga is at stake.

At present, based on the several visits made by the researchers, efforts to develop the Kampungstay programme has not been taken up by the Kampung Raga homestay operators. Although the objective of Kampungstay is admirable (to increase the income and living standards of the villagers), perhaps the issues discussed above may hinder them from developing a Kampungstay programme. Another challenge that was raised by all of the operators is the misuse of the 'homestay' term by other parties. Commercial guest houses, of which owners refer to as 'homestay' are easily available in the surrounding areas of Yan which has created a confusion among the visitors. The existence of the so-called homestay/guest house has somehow, according to the respondents, has 'diluted' the real meaning of a homestay programme. Consequently, the development has become a threat to the genuine homestay programme like the one in Kampung Raga.

Conclusion

As noted in the early section of the paper, the objectives of developing a homestay programme by MOTAC is noble. It aspires to stimulate economic and social growth in the rural communities. While pursuing the objectives, the limitations and challenges faced by such communities should not be neglected by MOTAC. The sustainability of a homestay programme should also become a priority in the homestay guideline. A priority particularly to a long established homestay like the one in Kampung Raga. Perhaps MOTAC has taken up a proactive strategy in foreseeing the sustainability of the programme by introducing the Kampungstay programme. A programme that provides a chance for the homestay operators to further expand their economic opportunity. Alas, Kampung Raga Homestay may not be able to seize the chance as the life-cycle of Kampung Raga as a homestay programme is clearly declining.

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