

Local Community’s Participation and Empowerment Level Towards Sustainable Heritage Tourism in Taiping, Malaysia

Mustafa Abd Aziz, Shazali Johari, Puvaneswaran Kunasekaran

Abstract: *The aim of this study is to holistically understand the role of community participation and resources in influencing the sustainable heritage tourism practice of the Taiping local community in Malaysia. Descriptive statistics used as the indicator of community participation and empowerment towards sustainable tourism practice. Overall, participation and empowerment levels were at a higher level. Although there is good level of participation, the empowerment level is not very high. This is most likely because of majority of the respondents were not involved in tourism and they were not empowered in tourism planning. The infrastructure development in Perak is still in infancy stage. Since Taiping is the second largest city in Perak, it is suggested that a public transport hub should be developed in Taiping so that it is easily accessed by tourists. Therefore, tourism stakeholders should work closely to promote Taiping as a tourist destination.*

Keywords: *Heritage tourism, community resources, Malaysia*

I. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is located at the Southeast Asia region amongst its 3 border neighbouring countries Thailand, Brunei, and Indonesia. It has 13 states and 3 federal territories across its peninsular and east regions. The population of the country hits 31.62 million as of 2017 with the community ranging of people from various background, religious beliefs, languages and culture. Malaysia is mainly known for its various tourism attraction such as its diverse culture, recreation, beautiful nature, food and more. According to Hall and Page (2016), the second main source of foreign exchange followed by the prime contributor to the Malaysian economy with an expected forecast of RM103.6 billion to be contributed to the Gross National Income (GNI) by 2020 is the tourism sector. The tourism industry has been growing with no boundaries since the 1960s and in Malaysia, it has been growing significantly since the government begun to be actively involved to expand the tourism industry in 1972 (Wells, 1982). A total of 26.8 million tourists visited Malaysia in the year 2016 compared to 25.7 million in the year 2015 showing that the industry is recovering from the slowdown in 2015 due to the economic condition worldwide, introduction of GST, and the unstable political situation (Suganya, 2015). This deduces that there is a 4.0% increase in tourists’ arrivals in 2016 compared to 2015 (Tourism Malaysia, 2017).

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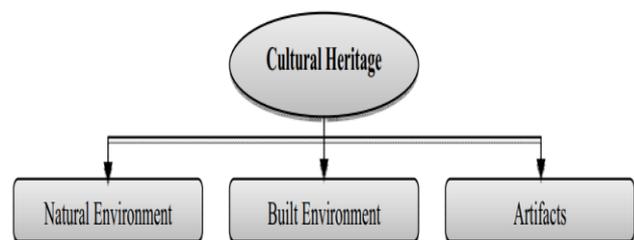
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Nevertheless, the tourism industry and the number of tourists coming to Malaysia has been developing resiliently despite the various challenges faced by the industry such as government policies and economy slowdown. The word heritage as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary means “property that is or may be inherited; an inheritance”, “valued things such as historic buildings that have been passed down from previous generations”, and “relating to things of historic or cultural value that are worthy of preservation” (Harrison,2009). Based on a study by Nuryanti (1996), historical values such as a property, a building, or an object that is carried down from a previous generation to another and is a part of the social custom of a society is known as heritage.

The association between heritage and tourism reflects the custom and modernism within a civilisation’s values. According to (Garrod and Fyall,2000), heritage tourism is “tourism centred on what we have inherited, which can mean anything from historic buildings, to art works, to beautiful scenery”. This is further supported by Rosenfel (2017) which adds on that heritage tourism is an instrument which draws in tourists whom are motivated for their interest in the historical, creative, logical lifestyle and the heritage offerings of a community, which then develops the economy and achieves economic growth. Chhabra, and Healy (2003) also emphasized economic development and interprets heritage tourism as “an economic activity that makes use of socio-cultural assets to attract visitors”. There are three (3) types of cultural and heritage tourism (Ismail, Masron and Ahmad,2014) as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1



One of the issues faced in the heritage tourism sector is authenticity. Authenticity is vital as tourists seek for genuine places and experiences.

This is important to sustain as tourists’ uses their intellectual and imagination supremacy to decode and comprehend the information and messages from the past and experience it in the present by developing their personal path to self-discovery.



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Heritage tourism is one of the important types of tourism as it attracts over a hundred of millions of tourists who are interested in attraction sites and resources annually, making the industry take the lead in the tourism sector in many countries globally. However, only the developed countries in Europe have made the most use in understanding and developing this sector (Nuryanti, 1996). This poses the developing countries with a wide range of opportunities to build on their potential to be discovered and expanded with their historical, cultural, religious, and traditional values as heritage tourism is gaining attention from tourists and is affecting the global economies progressively (Timothy and Boyd, 2006).

II. METHOD & MATERIALS

Quantitative approach was used to collect data. The sampling design that was selected for this research was a simple random sampling method. A number of 399 respondents were interviewed at Taiping. This number was derived after calculation of 95% Confidence Level and Margin of Error of 5%. This study used a self-administrated questionnaire, where the respondents were invited to participate in the survey. The data was collected from the local residents in Taiping through a Convenience Sampling method. Respondents were approached at major tourism sites near Taiping Lake Garden, Taiping town, Taiping Zoo, etc. To conduct the research in an ethical manner, there are were some ethical considerations before, during and after the research period. First, the researcher was obliged to treat all information collected from respondents as strictly private and confidential. Prior to survey, the researcher had obliged to obtain consent from respondents and respondents should give full cooperation to complete the research once they

have agreed to participate. Meanwhile, all information and analysis presented would be precise and presented as it was without any alterations and bias.

Malaysian government's initiatives to accelerate heritage tourism development in the country have earned positive reviews. Taiping is one of the sites that is in the tourism development list. Taiping is located in the north of Perak and was one of the very first cities in Malaysia (Lonely Planet, 2018). Currently, it is the second largest city after Ipoh, which is the capital city of the State of Perak. It is one of the heritage towns in the country, rich in historical buildings (Isa et al., 2015). The history of Taiping or Klian Pauh dated back to the 1840s, where it was a small mining town and became the capital of Perak during that era (Taiping Municipal Council, 2018). The name 'Taiping' originates from Chinese word which means 'Everlasting Peace' and is one of the oldest towns in Malaysia and the second largest town in Perak. It was also the State of Perak from 1875-1937 (Federal Department of Town and Country Planning, 2005).

III. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The influence of community participation in tourism is well-documented. Many past studies have highlighted the benefits of community participation. In Turkey, Tosun (2000) examined the nature of community participation in tourism development. However, there were also some arguments on the tourism development process (Timothy and Tosun, 2003). Table 1 illustrates the means and standard deviation of the items for the dimension of community participation.

Table 1 Means and standard deviation of community participation items

	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.The Taiping community is recognized and valued as an equal partner before any tourism development	3.73	0.77
2.Community leaders always consult with the community before taking any decision	3.52	0.83
3.Tourist infrastructure in this area developed after consulting with the residents	3.51	0.80
4. Tourism program and project procedures are clear and accessible	3.38	0.93
5.All members of the community have the opportunity to participate in tourism	3.43	1.04
6. The uniqueness of the local community is appreciated in implementation stages	3.48	0.88
7. Unpaid workers / volunteer activists are appreciated.	3.36	0.90
8.The Taiping community is well resourced to participate	3.66	0.80
9. Understanding, knowledge and skills developed to encourage participation	3.91	0.71

Note: Measurement scale, 1= Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree

Compared to the earlier findings on resources, the findings on community participation in tourism in Taiping was relatively low, with an average mean score of 3.36 – 3.91. The results showed that the respondents generally agreed that the community development in Taiping was good. From the results of the analysis, it was clear that respondents were more likely to agree with the statements that: "Understanding, knowledge and skills are developed to encourage participation for which the result is M = 3.91, SD = .71 and that "The Taiping community is recognized and valued as an equal partner before any tourism development" for which the result is M = 3.73, SD = .77. The lowest mean score was for the statement that; "Unpaid

workers' / volunteer activists are appreciated" for which the result is M = 3.36, SD = .90. This was consistent with the findings of (Kunasekaran et al., 2015; Kunasekaran et al., 2016) studies in the Mah Meri Cultural Village, where they reported positive community participation.

Tourism development is considered 'successful' only if the local community has some measure of control over the tourism planning, decision making, and sharing of economic benefits. For instance,



Cole (2006) opined that empowerment is one of the key requirements to accomplish the goal of sustainable tourism. This was evident and supported in a study by Sebele (2010) in Khama Rhino Sanctuary Trust, central district of Botswana. Table 2 shows the means and standard deviation of the items for the dimension of empowerment. From the results of the analysis, the respondents were more likely to agree with the statements that; “I can make a decision in life

without relying on others” for which the result is $M = 3.78$, $SD = .99$ and that “I encourage other residents to engage in tourism” for which the result is $M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.17$. However, the respondents disagreed with the statements that; “I can control the development of this area” for which the result is $M = 2.34$, $SD = 1.23$ and that “I always take part in tourism programmes during tourist arrivals to this area” for which the result is $M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.26$.

Table 2 Means and standard deviation of empowerment items

	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. I am involved in tourism planning in this area	2.55	1.13
2. I always look for opportunities to improve tourism services in this area.	2.58	1.39
3. I am always involved in evaluating and submitting proposals to improve tourism products in this area.	2.46	1.26
4. I always take part in tourism programs during tourist arrivals to this area.	2.43	1.26
5. I encourage other residents to engage in tourism	3.32	1.17
6. I have been working on improving knowledge to develop tourism services in this area	2.88	1.09
7. I can make a decision in life without relying on others	3.78	0.99
8. I can control the development of this area	2.34	1.23

Note: Measurement scale, 1= Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree

It can be concluded that community empowerment in tourism development in Taiping was minimal. This was inconsistent with the finding of Kunasekaran et al., (2015)’s study. The local residents felt that they could not control the development of Taiping and they would not encourage other residents to engage in tourism and they seldom took part in tourism programs during tourist arrivals. This was further enhanced by the findings which indicated that 88.1% of the respondents did not participate in tourism and therefore, their agreement on empowerment was minimal.

IV. CONCLUSION

The initial investigation shows that the community strongly believe that the tourism business can create many positive outcomes. Apart from that, the community also agrees that the non-economic benefits such as cultural sustainability and environmental sustainability are driven by the emergence of tourism in their village. The results also clearly show that the community is very much open to outsiders and encourage any tourism development efforts in their area. Tourism is perceived as a strong tool to connect them to the outside world. Existence of tourism in their area not only enabled governmental, non-governmental and inter-ethnic affiliations, but also direct international exposure to the community.

The perception of the community often neglected by the authorities makes the community feel that they are not empowered. The community agreed that the outsiders especially the government always discuss with the community before any implementation of projects. The final decision of developmental projects however will be taken by the government. If this goes on, the community will feel detached with any tourism developments organized by the government. Thus, the government should not merely consult the community to fulfil procedures, on a token basis. They should respect the community’s ideas and give them

opportunities of trial and error. By doing this, the community can learn themselves and improve their level.

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