

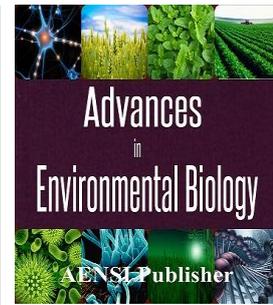


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Potential of Seaweed Cultivation as a Community-Based Rural Tourism Product: A Stakeholders' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Community-based tourism (CBT) in developing countries has been given a serious attention by the government because it has great potential to enhance the socio-economic well-being of the community who participate in it. This paper explores the views and perceptions of stakeholders who are in charge of the development of community based tourism that is based on seaweed farming in the District of Semporna, Sabah, East Malaysia. This study was carried out between 2013 until June 2014. Interviews were conducted with local stakeholders in the tourism industry and were analysed using qualitative analysis techniques. The results indicate that there were positive views and perceptions among the stakeholders where they sincerely welcomed the initiatives of making seaweed farming as a tourism product. Stakeholders also agreed that tourism activities which are based on seaweed farming could be used to enhance the socio-economic status of the community who engage in them. The paper suggests that parties who have authority should play a role in the development of CBT and seaweed farming. The study is significant to the tourism industry in Malaysia, because seaweed farming is growing on a large scale in selected places and has a great potential for becoming a unique tourism product.

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism sector in a country needs the support and collaboration from every party that involves in the development of tourism. These parties are commonly known as 'stakeholders'. Kayat [1] stressed "Stakeholder engagement in tourism development has begun to give serious attention by the researchers in the field of tourism whereby to involve stakeholders, researchers and planners must identify and appreciate the stakeholders' elements of interest and concerns thereby allowing the planners to take into account the specific interest areas in the planning, development, and management processes". A component that should involve the stakeholders' participation in the development of tourism in Malaysia is rural tourism. Rural tourism in Malaysia has existed a long time ago and been given emphasis especially when the government of Malaysia introduced the policy of 'Rural Tourism Master Plan 2001'. This policy plays a part as a guideline and ensures the rural tourism is on the right track.

The main objective of the rural tourism is to enhance the standard of living of the communities in rural areas which are less lucky in terms of socioeconomic aspect. Moreover, it encourages them to engage themselves in the development of tourism and make them feel motivated to implement the tourism activities in their own ways. Other than that, rural tourism adds the benefits to the poor community from the tourism conducted in rural areas and enhances the level of participation of the community in operating tourism products in their respective areas [2]. Rural tourism in Malaysia has a great potential to expand and could contribute to the country's economy through the arrivals of domestic and international tourists to destinations which attract them.

A form of rural tourism which is largely popular in Malaysia is a Homestay programme. The homestay programme has been regarded as a community-based tourism and has been undertaken by the community in the

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rural areas in Malaysia. In Peninsular Malaysia, the homestay programme has started to operate in 1970s in the Village of Cheranting Lama in Pahang, where a lady named Mak Long offered an accommodation, breakfast and dinner to drifters/hippies in her home [3]. In 1988, the first homestay programme was successfully conducted by the community of Temerloh, Pahang and other villages took part such as Desa Murni Sannggang, Desa Murni Sonsang, Desa Murni Kerbau, Desa Murni Ketam and Desa Murni Perangap [4]. East Malaysia, like Sabah has also experienced the homestay programme and it has been conducted in few places such as Atamis Homestay in Kundasang [5], Village Homestay in Kiulu Pukak [6], and Miso Walai Homestay in Batu Puteh, Kinabatangan [7]. This means to say, the community in rural areas of Sabah started to operate the homestay programme where they believed that this kind of homestay business could enhance their lives to become better than how it was before.

Research Methodology:

This study aims to identify the stakeholders' perspectives in promoting seaweed cultivation as a tourism product based on homestay programme and the potential to grow in Bum Bum Island Semporna, Sabah. The study was carried out in 2013 until June 2014. The data was collected from the usage of in-depth interviews and field observation methods. The interviews were carried out with stakeholders such as government officials (Sabah Tourism Board), private sectors and entrepreneurs (seaweed entrepreneur), local community (head of village involved in seaweed cultivation) and interested groups (NGOs) that have significant relationships in the development of tourism. In this study, tourists are also categorised as one of the stakeholders in the interested group. The selection of respondents for interview was by purposive sampling whereby respondents who were in the best position to provide information for this study [24]. All of the data gained from the interview were analysed using 'framework' approach developed by Ritchie and Spencer [25].

Findings and Discussion:

In-depth interviews were carried out with stakeholders in the tourism industry which involve government official, private sector and entrepreneur, local community as well as interested groups. The respondents were asked about their perceptions and views on the development of homestay tourism based on seaweed cultivation in Semporna, Sabah and the potential benefits that will be received by them if the development is successfully implemented. The respondents gave their perceptions on this issue as follows:

Government official:

An interview was carried out with a government official who represents Sabah Tourism Board. He revealed that homestay programmes in Sabah have a bright future if they are systematically implemented. He responded that, his organisation is ready to accept any tourism product through homestay programme if the product is truly ready to be promoted. His perception regarding development of homestay tourism based on seaweed cultivation was "*homestay programme is generally known as community-based tourism and have a great potential to engage together the community...*" of course seaweed farming can be promote as a tourism product, the potential is there..." before it promote as a tourism product under the homestay programme, everybody must have a enough knowledge first then only it could be,". He seriously supports this idea.

Private sector and entrepreneur:

An interview with seaweed trader indicates that homestay programme based on seaweed cultivation could become a tourism product in his settlement. He has a positive perception regarding this idea by stating "*For me i always welcoming any product which have potential to promote and gain profit...same goes to seaweed..if its ready to promote i will make a plan to set up the homestay in my area*". He is also ready and interested to set up a homestay programme if the product is ready to be promoted. From this, it could be said that homestay programme based on seaweed cultivation could bring economic benefits and the local communities who are engage in tourism activities are given the chance to become entrepreneurs by having their own businesses. Based on the interview with this stakeholder, it is proven that homestay business has the potential to grow if this idea is drastically and systematically introduced to the study site.

Local community:

Two heads of two different villages were interviewed to identify their perceptions on the development of homestay tourism based on seaweed cultivation on their island. The first respondent gave a positive perception towards this idea by stating "*I think this is the good idea and i quite interested to participate in it..for us we waiting to participate any programme which could increase our income and livelihood.. If anybody teach how to participate, for sure i want step into this field*". The other respondent also agreed with this idea and his opinion "*For me i eagerly waiting to promote our seaweed as a tourism product in our area...i think it is have a potential to promote as one of the tourism product in our area*". Results from these interviews revealed that the

development of homestay tourism based on seaweed cultivation could become a new tourism product in Sabah and the local communities enthusiastically welcome this idea.

Interested groups:

This study also tries to seek some perceptions from the NGO representative because seaweed cultivation has a significant relationship with the environment. An official from WWF gave her opinion regarding this idea and stating that *"I think it is a good idea and can increase the livelihood of the seaweed farmers..as far as i know seaweed is a good product and environmental friendly and i urge the stakeholders in this field must take into consideration the environmental issue for long sustainability"*. Results from this interview indicates that the respondent was impressed with the idea in the study site and she emphasised that environment issue should be taken into consideration without bringing negative impacts to the environment. Other than that, an international tourist who visited to Sabah gave a different perception regarding the development of homestay programme based on seaweed cultivation in the study site. Answering the question is it you (respondent) welcoming this idea and he responded as *"I do not know anything about seaweed and the programme, i also do not know how important is in Sabah...if it is traditional and interesting and i think it is a good idea*. In addition, the respondent has an interest if the homestay tourism based on seaweed cultivation develop conventionally and nice to visit. Based on the interview results, tourists do not know anything about seaweed and proper strategies need to be carried out. Strategies proposed are such as marketing and promoting this idea widely so that the development of homestay tourism based on seaweed cultivation could be realised.

Conclusion:

The results of this study concluded that the majority of the respondents (all stakeholders mentioned above) had positive views on the offerings of seaweed cultivation as a tourism product in their area. This is a good thing where they realise that this offerings will not only provide additional income but would also increase their potential to become entrepreneurs in the field of tourism when they set up a homestay program in their area as well as making seaweed cultivation as a unique tourism product. This study is proposed to all the stakeholders, particularly the tourism industry in the state of Sabah and the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment Minister should introduce measures that would encourage rural communities to participate in the tourism business particularly in the homestay programme.

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