Rural Tourism Destination Performance in East Malaysia: Influencing Factors from the Communities' Perspective

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Abstract

Rural tourism is a rapidly growing tourism segment and has been given increasing importance, in view of its potential to contribute economic growth to the rural areas. However, any rural tourism destination development should be implemented in a way that maximises destination performance. In our study, we examine the relationship between support and participation of the local government, community leadership in tourism, community attitudes towards tourism, and community support towards tourism with destination performance (from the economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects), from the local community perspective. We obtained, as voluntary respondents, 176 residents of a local community at a rural tourism destination in Sabah, Malaysia. *SmartPLS 2.0 (M3)* was applied to assess the developed model. Thereafter, to generate the standard error of the estimate and t-values, bootstrapping with 200 re-samples was applied. The findings suggested that community attitudes and community leadership in tourism have a significant positive impact on destination performance, whereas local government participation and support, and community support for tourism, had little impact on the same. Implications of these findings were further discussed.

Keywords: rural tourism, destination performance, community attitudes, community support, government support, community leadership

1. Introduction

Past Malaysia Plans, the New Economic Model and the Economic Transformation Programme have identified tourism as a key economic sector able to generate a high income level, providing significant potential for growth and development. Because Malaysia has an abundance of biodiversity, the government has identified ecotourism (and hence rural tourism) as an area to be further developed, with the condition that it is well managed according to the principles of long-term sustainability, in order to improve and maintain tourist yield (Economic Transformation Programme: A Roadmap for Malaysia, 2010).

It is only in the past decade or so that rural tourism has been identified as a niche market (Mintel, 2007), and it is already a main priority in many European countries (Swarbrooke, 1996). Rural tourism has been noted for many perceived benefits: revitalisation of declining rural areas and local economies (Kulcsar, 2009; Sharpley, 2002), maintenance of local infrastructure, employment/income opportunities (Liu, 2006; Sharpley, 2002; Kulcsar, 2009), growing awareness of the local cultural heritage (Sharpley, 2002) and broadened cultural provision (Kulcsar, 2009); but it is not without its problems (Sharpley, 2002; Su, 2011; Liu, 2006). Therefore, it is essential that the development of any rural tourism destination should be performed in a way that maximises destination performance from the economic, socio-cultural and environmental perspectives.

In this study, destination performance from the perspective of the local community is examined. The local community is an important stakeholder group living in or in close proximity with the destination. As such, their viewpoints on rural destination performance, from the economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects, should be seriously considered, due to two factors. The local community may act as a tourism supplier (of goods and services) within the rural destination and has a vested interest in the said site as a tourism destination. Therefore, they would be well aware of the success factors/elements (or lack thereof) at the destination in question and would be in a good position to offer accurate insight. Local community representatives with no direct vested interests are also in the position to give feedback as they are residents and are privy to destination-specific insider knowledge.

In this study, we examine specifically whether community attitudes towards tourism, community's support for tourism, support and participation of the local government and community leadership in tourism have an impact on rural destination performance.

2. Literature Review

The success of every tourism destination is very much affected by the competitiveness factors linked to the performance of the said destination (Enright & Newton, 2005). Destination performance itself has been linked to destination sustainability and competitiveness (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Poon, 1993); competitiveness can be perceived from the perspective of the tourist (attractiveness) and the destination itself (Buhalis, 2000). Destination sustainability refers to the extent of the economic, social and environmental impacts of tourism on the destination in question (World Tourism Organisation, 2004).

Communities in tourism destinations are believed to have different attitudes towards tourism development in their respective areas (Mason & Cheyne, 2000; Andereck & Vogt, 2000). Andereck and Vogt (2000) also noted from their research that in general, residents had positive perceptions of tourism and supported most types of tourism development, and that this translated to a relationship between attitudes and support for development. Likewise, Abas and Mohd Hanafiah's (2014) study revealed that local community who garnered personal benefit from tourism development, as well as those who perceived positive benefits arising from it, would support future tourism development. Interestingly, they also noted that local community who perceived negative impact from tourism activities would also support future tourism development if their main income was derived from the tourism sector. This is supported by Harrill (2004), Dyer, Gursoy, Sharma and Carter (2007), Cavus and Tanrisevdi (2003) and Faulkner and Tideswell (1997). The importance of the involvement of local community leaders in order to achieve sustainable tourism development is highlighted by Murphy (1985); a sustainable tourism-related economy and resident satisfaction are also linked to residents' involvement in the tourism planning process (Lo, Ramayah & Lee, 2014). In view of the foregoing, it is imperative that the attitudes of the local community toward tourism be continually assessed to increase their satisfaction (Allen, Long, Perdue & Kieselbach, 1988). In summary, the attitude of the local community has an impact on their support for tourism development, especially the sustainable type, as well as on their involvement in the tourism planning process and subsequent satisfaction. In this study, it is postulated that community attitudes towards tourism will have a relationship with destination performance, as it is expected that a tourism destination cannot perform well without a positive local community attitude towards tourism.

The tourism industry is expected to experience rapid growth if and when boosted by local community support, be it in urban or rural areas, and regardless of whether the said local community is directly or indirectly involved (Hanafiah, Jamaluddin & Zulkifly, 2013). Community support, especially the attitude and hospitality level of local tourism workers, are important to ensure that tourism is successful (Dwyer, Livaic & Mellor, 2003; Long, Perdue, Allen, 1990; Murphy, 1985; Perdue, Long & Kang, 1995), as they influence tourist treatment and hence the tourists' impressions of the said community; this thereafter affects the tourists' level of satisfaction, expenditure level, the intention to revisit and also word of mouth about particular destinations (Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004). The community can even be a source of experience enhancers, by ensuring service excellence and providing authentic experiences (Heath, 2002). Tourism development may not have the residents' support (McCool & Martin, 1994) as their lives could be disrupted as the result of a temporary population increase in the tourist season. Other negative factors would include the residents being displaced by new developments, value conflicts, and harmful impacts on the local culture. In view of the fact that community support for tourism is seen to be so important, it is postulated that it is directly related to rural tourism destination performance.

In rural tourism development, the local government participates and provides support by providing the necessary funding, creating and maintaining the necessary infrastructure (e.g. transportation links, utilities), zoning and maintaining the cleanliness and aesthetics of the site, and education and occupational support for tourism-related parties (Wilson, Fesenmaier, Fesenmaier & Van Es, 2001; Crouch, 2007; Heath, 2002; Dwyer et al., 2003; Dwyer, Cvelbar, Edwards & Mihalic, 2012; Enright & Newton, 2005). The local government also supports tourism policy (Lee & Thomson, 2006), and promotes and manages the destination (Crouch, 2007; Heath, 2002; Sharpley, 2002; Dwyer et al., 2003). Ogechi and Igbojekwe (2013) were of the view that a broad-based community participation via the local government, partnering with the federal and state governments as well as the industry, is necessary. Hence, it is postulated that local government support and participation in tourism is important for rural destination performance.

Community leadership refers to leaders in a local community who understand tourism and its importance, and hence provide support and funding, as well as engage in relevant promotional initiatives. Such leaders comprise

local government officers, the business community, community groups, and non-profit organisations such as chambers of commerce and convention and visitors bureaus (Crouch, 2007; Heath, 2002). Community leadership activities leading to capacity building for tourism development include searching for ways to overcome the root barriers of tourism development, active involvement to develop tourism, communicating and reporting the necessary information to the rest of the local community, developing new community leaders, creating leadership opportunities for the youth in the tourism industry and supporting the involvement of tourism stakeholders (Aref, Redzuan & Embry, 2009). As community leadership refers to a proactive initiative from the community to promote and support tourism, we postulate that it is favourable towards positive rural destination performance.

3. Research Questions

For this study, we formulated the following research questions. Based on the community's perspective:

(a) do community attitudes towards tourism have a positive correlation with rural destination performance (from the economic, socio-cultural and environmental perspective)?

(b) does community support for tourism have a positive correlation to rural destination performance (from the economic, socio-cultural and environmental perspective)?

(c) does local government participation and support for tourism have a positive correlation to rural destination performance (from the economic, socio-cultural and environmental perspective)?

(d) does community leadership in tourism have a positive correlation to rural destination performance (from the economic, socio-cultural and environmental perspective)?

The research questions are expressed diagrammatically in Figure 1.

4. Method

This study focuses on the local community in Donggongan, Penampang, Sabah as a population of interest. The latest population figure for the said site, as at 2010, was 121,934 (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2010). Random sampling was conducted. Sample size of 250 was considered adequate, at a confidence level of 95% and confidence interval of 7%. Hence, a total of 250 questionnaires was personally distributed to the said community; the large number of questionnaires given out was to ensure a sufficient number of returned questionnaires. Out of the 250 questionnaires, only 176 questionnaires were used for analysis.



Figure 1. Research model

5. Findings

The research model as shown in Figure 1 is assessed accordingly using SmartPLS 2.0 (M3), based on path modelling, and bootstrapping (Chin, 1998; Tenenhaus, Vinzi, Chatelin, & Lauro, 2005; Wetzels, Schroder & Oppen, 2009). The standard error of the estimate and t-values were generated using 5000 re-samples.

5.1 Assessment of the Measurement Model

To test the reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the scales, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted. Tables 1 and 2 showed that most item loadings were larger than 0.5 (significant at p < 0.01). All Average Variance Extracted (AVEs) were either near to or exceeded 0.5, as shown in Table 2 (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). For all variables, it was noted that the Composite Reliability (CRs) exceeded 0.7 (Gefen, Straub and Boudreau, 2000); and the Cronbach alpha values were either near to or exceeded 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978). All indicators loaded much higher on their hypothesised factor (own loading) than on other factors (cross loadings) (Chin, 1998, 2010), and hence convergent validity is confirmed. To ensure discriminant validity, the square root of the AVE was tested against the inter-correlations of the construct with the other constructs in the model (see Table 4) (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Chin, 2010, 1998); it was noted that the said square root exceeded the inter-correlations. In view of the evidence presented pertaining to adequate reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, the measurement model was therefore considered satisfactory.

Table 1. Loading and cross loading	Table 1	. Loading	g and	cross	loading
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	Govern-	Community	Community	Community	Economic	Socio-	Environ-
	ment	Leadership	Attitudes	Support	Performance	cultural	mental
	Support					Performance	Performance
GOV_SUPPORT_01	0.905	0.686	0.285	0.178	0.185	0.309	0.119
GOV_SUPPORT_02	0.897	0.671	0.293	0.123	0.262	0.367	0.170
GOV_SUPPORT_03	0.896	0.697	0.256	0.127	0.255	0.319	0.166
GOV_SUPPORT_04	0.877	0.679	0.309	0.235	0.309	0.342	0.269
LEADERSHIP_01	0.665	0.884	0.241	0.247	0.270	0.350	0.177
LEADERSHIP_02	0.663	0.906	0.294	0.255	0.321	0.390	0.293
LEADERSHIP_03	0.658	0.890	0.293	0.210	0.279	0.371	0.270
LEADERSHIP_04	0.648	0.892	0.234	0.254	0.230	0.372	0.192
LEADERSHIP_05	0.692	0.857	0.215	0.208	0.221	0.396	0.195
LEADERSHIP_06	0.699	0.815	0.251	0.210	0.252	0.334	0.155
ATTITUDES_01	0.226	0.281	0.775	0.088	0.383	0.364	0.316
ATTITUDES_02	0.190	0.239	0.797	0.115	0.395	0.362	0.382
ATTITUDES_03	0.524	0.499	0.502	0.152	0.205	0.400	0.157
ATTITUDES_04	0.136	0.138	0.714	-0.004	0.384	0.303	0.393
ATTITUDES_05	0.222	0.204	0.826	0.025	0.495	0.368	0.414
ATTITUDES_06	0.286	0.180	0.835	0.074	0.578	0.405	0.393
ATTITUDES_07	0.178	0.094	0.664	0.078	0.516	0.255	0.303
COM_SUPPORT_01	0.123	0.205	0.139	0.832	0.208	0.155	0.062
COM_SUPPORT_02	0.110	0.236	0.095	0.869	0.093	0.047	0.057
COM_SUPPORT_03	0.178	0.241	0.063	0.875	0.137	0.111	0.066
COM_SUPPORT_04	0.145	0.181	0.043	0.851	0.110	0.060	0.101
COM_SUPPORT_05	0.152	0.233	0.051	0.829	0.066	0.118	0.053
COM_SUPPORT_06	0.221	0.231	0.053	0.768	0.123	0.147	0.059
ECONOMIC_01	0.309	0.281	0.532	0.154	0.806	0.481	0.362
ECONOMIC_02	0.156	0.183	0.339	0.110	0.662	0.284	0.310
ECONOMIC_04	0.287	0.249	0.451	0.150	0.780	0.443	0.494
ECONOMIC_06	0.140	0.132	0.366	0.037	0.620	0.380	0.386
ECONOMIC_08	0.058	0.186	0.342	0.091	0.629	0.363	0.519
CULTURAL_01	0.376	0.442	0.295	0.108	0.382	0.670	0.191
CULTURAL_05	0.166	0.306	0.299	0.156	0.369	0.724	0.324
CULTURAL_06	0.181	0.216	0.278	0.149	0.373	0.682	0.222
CULTURAL_08	0.066	0.208	0.249	0.075	0.251	0.563	0.258
CULTURAL_09	0.458	0.310	0.297	0.010	0.291	0.664	0.266
CULTURAL_10	0.139	0.110	0.424	0.050	0.530	0.612	0.495
ENVIRONMENT_01	0.277	0.326	0.331	0.091	0.410	0.545	0.684
ENVIRONMENT_03	0.032	0.025	0.213	0.127	0.278	0.071	0.551
ENVIRONMENT_04	0.164	0.156	0.391	-0.017	0.445	0.218	0.781
ENVIRONMENT_05	0.037	0.104	0.309	0.054	0.421	0.283	0.698

Noted: ECONOMIC_03, ECONOMIC_05, ECONOMIC_07, CULTURAL_02, CULTURAL_03, CULTURAL_04, CULTURAL_07, ENVIRONMENT_02 were deleted due to low loadings.

Model Construct	Measurement Item	Loading	AVE ^a	CR ^b
Government Support	GOV_SUPPORT_01	0.905	0.799	0.941
	GOV_SUPPORT_02	0.897		
	GOV_SUPPORT_03	0.896		
	GOV_SUPPORT_04	0.877		
Community Leadership	LEADERSHIP_01	0.844	0.765	0.951
	LEADERSHIP_02	0.906		
	LEADERSHIP_03	0.890		
	LEADERSHIP_04	0.892		
	LEADERSHIP_05	0.857		
	LEADERSHIP_06	0.815		
Community Attitudes	ATTITUDES_01	0.775	0.546	0.892
	ATTITUDES_02	0.797		
	ATTITUDES_03	0.502		
	ATTITUDES_04	0.714		
	ATTITUDES_05	0.826		
	ATTITUDES_06	0.835		
	ATTITUDES_07	0.664		
Community Support	COM_SUPPORT_01	0.832	0.702	0.934
	COM_SUPPORT_02	0.869		
	COM_SUPPORT_03	0.875		
	COM_SUPPORT_04	0.851		
	COM_SUPPORT_05	0.829		
	COM_SUPPORT_06	0.768		
Economic Performance	ECONOMIC_01	0.806	0.496	0.829
	ECONOMIC_02	0.662		
	ECONOMIC_04	0.780		
	ECONOMIC_06	0.620		
	ECONOMIC_08	0.629		
Socio-cultural Performance	CULTURAL_01	0.670	0.428	0.817
	CULTURAL_05	0.724		
	CULTURAL_06	0.682		
	CULTURAL_08	0.563		
	CULTURAL_09	0.664		
	CULTURAL_10	0.612		
Environmental Performance	ENVIRONMENT_01	0.684	0.467	0.776
	ENVIRONMENT_03	0.551		
	ENVIRONMENT_04	0.781		
	ENVIRONMENT_05	0.698		

Table 2. Results of measurement model

Note: ^a Average Variance Extracted **(AVE)** = (the square of the factor loadings summed)/(the square of the factor loadings summed + the error variances summed)

^b Composite Reliability **(CR)** = (square of the factor loadings summed)/(square of the factor loadings summed + square of the error variances summed)

Table 3. Summary results of the model constructs	

Model Construct	Measurement Item	Standardised	t-value
		estimate	
Government Support	GOV_SUPPORT_01	0.905	47.572
	GOV_SUPPORT_02	0.897	42.694
	GOV_SUPPORT_03	0.896	39.018
	GOV_SUPPORT_04	0.877	34.477
Community Leadership	LEADERSHIP_01	0.844	45.754
	LEADERSHIP_02	0.906	63.496
	LEADERSHIP_03	0.890	50.049
	LEADERSHIP_04	0.892	50.112
	LEADERSHIP_05	0.857	38.151
	LEADERSHIP_06	0.815	26.440
Community Attitudes	ATTITUDES_01	0.775	15.259
	ATTITUDES_02	0.797	19.863
	ATTITUDES_03	0.502	4.788
	ATTITUDES_04	0.714	12.944
	ATTITUDES_05	0.826	29.670
	ATTITUDES_06	0.835	26.678
	ATTITUDES_07	0.664	10.610
Community Support	COM_SUPPORT_01	0.832	9.286
	COM_SUPPORT_02	0.869	9.408
	COM_SUPPORT_03	0.875	10.216
	COM_SUPPORT_04	0.851	9.682
	COM_SUPPORT_05	0.829	8.664
	COM_SUPPORT_06	0.768	7.533
Economic Performance	ECONOMIC_01	0.806	29.044
	ECONOMIC_02	0.662	7.898
	ECONOMIC_04	0.780	15.962
	ECONOMIC_06	0.620	7.653
	ECONOMIC_08	0.629	9.173
Socio-cultural Performance	CULTURAL_01	0.670	10.420
	CULTURAL_05	0.724	12.947
	CULTURAL_06	0.682	8.092
	CULTURAL_08	0.563	6.743
	CULTURAL_09	0.664	6.860
	CULTURAL_10	0.612	7.500
Environmental Performance	ENVIRONMENT_01	0.684	9.028
	ENVIRONMENT_03	0.551	4.747
	ENVIRONMENT_04	0.781	15.441
	ENVIRONMENT_05	0.698	9.137

p<0.05, **p<0.01

	Community	Community	Community	Economic	Environmental	Government	Socio-cultural
	Attitudes	Leadership	Support	Performance	Performance	Support	Performance
Community	0.739						
Attitudes							
Community	0.293	0.875					
Leadership							
Community	0.095	0.264	0.838				
Support							
Economic	0.589	0.302	0.161	0.704			
Performance							
Environmental	0.467	0.249	0.079	0.579	0.684		
Performance							
Government	0.322	0.765	0.188	0.289	0.209	0.894	
Support							
Socio-cultural	0.470	0.422	0.138	0.563	0.442	0.377	0.655
Performance							

Table 4. Discriminant validity of constructs

Note: Diagonals represent the square root of the average variance extracted while the other entries represent the correlations.

5.2 Assessment of the Structural Model

The results of the hypotheses testing are presented in Table 6 and Figure 3 and showed that four hypotheses were found to be significantly related to the repositioning and communities value. The hypotheses, H1, H2, H3, H5 and H6 were supported and H4, H7, H8, H9, H10, H11 and H12 were not.

A global fit measure (GoF) assessment was performed for PLS path modelling, which is the geometric mean of the average communality and average R² (for endogenous constructs; Tenenhaus et al., 2005) following Akter, D'Ambra and Ray's (2011) procedure. Guidelines by Wetzels et al. (2009) were used to estimate the GoF values (see formula below) for cut-off values to globally validate the PLS model. The GoF value of 0.43 (average R² was 0.305, and the average AVE was 0.600) for the (main effects) model exceeds the cut-off value of 0.36 for large effect sizes of R². As such, we therefore conclude that in comparison with baseline values ($GoF_{small}=0.1$, $GoF_{nedium}=0.25$, $GoF_{large}=0.36$) (Akter et al., 2011), our model has better explanatory power. Also, adequate support has been obtained to globally validate the PLS model (Wetzels et al., 2009).

 $GoF = \sqrt{\overline{AVE}x\overline{R^2}}$

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Model Construct	Magguramant Itam	Crophach's a	Logding range	Number of
Widder Construct	Measurement Item	Cronbach s &	Loading range	items
Government Support	GOV SUPPORT 01	0.917	0 877- 0 905	4(4)
Government Support	GOV SUPPORT 02	0.717	0.077 0.905	
	GOV SUPPORT 03			
	GOV SUPPORT 04			
Community Leadershin	LEADERSHIP 01	0.938	0.815-0.906	6(6)
Community Leadership	LEADERSHIP_02	0.750	0.012 0.900	0(0)
	LEADERSHIP_02			
	LEADERSHIP 04			
	LEADERSHIP 05			
	LEADERSHIP 06			
Community Attitudes	ATTITUDES 01	0.856	0.664-0.835	7(7)
······································	ATTITUDES 02			
	ATTITUDES 03			
	ATTITUDES 04			
	ATTITUDES 05			
	ATTITUDES 06			
	ATTITUDES 07			
Community Support	COM_SUPPORT_01	0.916	0.768-0.875	6(6)
	COM_SUPPORT_02			
	COM_SUPPORT_03			
	COM_SUPPORT_04			
	COM_SUPPORT_05			
	COM_SUPPORT_06			
Economic Performance	ECONOMIC_01	0.744	0.620- 0.806	8(5)
	ECONOMIC_02			
	ECONOMIC_04			
	ECONOMIC_06			
	ECONOMIC_08			
Socio-cultural Performance	CULTURAL_01	0.733	0.563-0.724	10(6)
	CULTURAL_05			
	CULTURAL_06			
	CULTURAL_08			
	CULTURAL_09			
	CULTURAL_10			
Environmental Performance	ENVIRONMENT_01	0.624	0.684- 0.781	5(4)
	ENVIRONMENT_03			
	ENVIRONMENT_04			
	ENVIRONMENT_05			

Table 5 Result of reliability test

Initial items numbers (final numbers)



Figure 2. Results of the path analysis

Hypothesis	Relationship	Coefficients	Standard Error	t-value	Supported
H1	Community Attitudes -> Economic Performance	0.544	0.057	9.597**	YES
H2	Community Attitudes -> Socio-cultural Performance	0.374	0.075	5.015**	YES
Н3	Community Attitudes -> Environmental Performance	0.437	0.064	6.837**	YES
H4	Community Leadership -> Economic Performance	0.110	0.074	1.487	NO
H5	Community Leadership -> Socio-cultural Performance	0.275	0.118	2.322*	YES
H6	Community Leadership -> Environmental Performance	0.163	0.098	1.659*	YES
H7	Community Support -> Economic Performance	0.077	0.055	1.397	NO
H8	Community Support -> Socio-cultural Performance	0.022	0.049	0.460	NO
Н9	Community Support -> Environmental Performance	0.005	0.055	0.089	NO
H10	Government Support -> Economic Performance	0.015	0.054	0.284	NO
H11	Government Support -> Socio-cultural Performance	0.042	0.079	0.534	NO
H12	Government Support -> Environmental Performance	-0.057	0.080	0.713	NO

*p<0.05, **p<0.01



Figure 3. Research model with t-values

6. Discussion

From the findings, we see that community attitudes towards tourism have had a significant positive impact on destination performance at Penampang, Sabah. Positive attitudes included agreement that tourism should be actively encouraged in the community, as well as support for it to become an important part of the community. Respondents generally agreed that their town council was correct in supporting the promotion of tourism, and that it was important to have developed plans to manage tourism growth. Economically-wise, the local community was of the opinion that the tourism sector would continue to play a major role in the local economy, and that it could improve the local standard of living. In other words, the positive benefits of tourism outweigh the negative impacts.

Community leadership in tourism also has had a positive and significant impact on destination performance, but from the perspective of socio-cultural and environmental aspects only. Community leadership, in this context, involves finding solutions to tourism development barriers, active involvement in tourism development, communicating and reporting tourism progress to local residents, taking initiative to develop new leaders from the local community, providing leadership opportunities for youths in the tourism industry and encouraging and supporting tourism stakeholder involvement. A possible reason why tourism is not perceived to be directly linked to economic performance in Penampang is that the area concerned is not highly dependent, economically-wise, on tourism activities. Most of the local population work in Kota Kinabalu, the capital of Sabah, which is located just 10-15 minutes' drive away. The main economic activities in Penampang include commercial and trading, as well as large-scale poultry farming and subsistence farming (Jabatan Perancang Bandar dan Wilayah Negeri Sabah, n.d.).

However, tourism is perceived to have an impact on the socio-cultural aspect of destination performance. This is most likely due to the fact that Penampang is considered as a stronghold of the Kadazandusun community. The Kadazandusun people are the largest ethnic group in Sabah and have a rich traditional history. Penampang is the main centre for the cultural development of the Kadazandusun, and the Kadazandusun Cultural Association community hall is the centre for most of the local festivities, particularly the famous annual Kaamatan or harvest festival. Other culture-related tourist attractions located in the Penampang district include the Monsopiad Cultural Village, in which is located the House of Skulls. There are also the Pogunon Community Museum and the Sabah Art Gallery; the latter houses over 3000 paintings, carvings and scultures and is the first green building in Sabah as well as Borneo (Wikipedia, n.d.). In view of the many culturally-centred tourist attractions, it is not surprising that from the local community's perspective, tourism as led by the local community has had a positive

and significant impact on the socio-cultural aspect of destination performance.

As for the environmental aspect, tourism was seen to also have had a positive and significant impact. This could be linked to the existence of nature-related tourism attractions in existence in the area, such as the Lok Kawi Wildlife Park, which is a zoological and botanical park, with a Children's Zoo (Sabah Tourism, n.d.a), and the Kipandi Butterfly Park, which contains many butterfly specimens and plants, and runs a program aimed at raising awareness on the entomofauna of Sabah (Sabah Tourism, n.d.b). Another famous attraction is the Tamu Donggongan Penampang, which is a market whereby traders sell natural produce and handicraft; local products include the *lihing* (rice wine), *bambangan* (picked wild mango), *tuhau* (a minced ginger-like plant) and sago worms (Sabah Tourism, n.d.).

However, community support for tourism is found not to have any correlation with destination performance, from any aspect. Community support is reflected in the participation in tourism-related activities, involvement in the planning and management of tourism within the community, participation in cultural exchanges with visitors as well as in the promotion of environmental education and conservation, and co-operation with tourism planning and development initiatives. This appears to be due to the fact that the majority of the local community were not the main players in tourism and instead were involved mostly in other economic activities, as mentioned earlier.

Likewise, our findings also reveal no correlation between local government support and participation and destination performance. Local government support and participation includes the following elements: tourism development and promotion funding, the development and maintenance of tourism-specific infrastructure (such as land, sea and air transportation services and a reliable water and electricity supply), appropriate zoning and maintenance of public areas to ensure tourist appeal, and the provision of education and occupational support for tourism-related personnel. In the Penampang district, the local community did not appear to perceive a significant amount of local government involvement in the tourism promotion of the area. This was probably due to the fact that tourism was seen as more of a state-wide initiative, whereby the creation and maintenance of tourism infrastructure, and the promotion of tourism attractions were done directly by the Sabah Tourism Board.

From the above, it would appear that community support for tourism and local government support and participation are not factors leading to destination performance. This could be because Penampang, as a rural tourism destination, is already on the higher spectrum of tourism development, and has reached a stage whereby the state government, via the tourism ministry, has involved itself in terms of funding provision, the building of tourism infrastructure and tourism promotion. In view of the foregoing, tourism in Penampang is most likely not handled as a communal effort, except where cultural activities are concerned.

In summary, community attitudes towards tourism and community leadership in tourism are in general closely and positively related to destination performance, while community and local government support have little or no correlation. The following section discusses the implications of the findings.

7. Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations

From the foregoing, the local community appeared to play a secondary role in the tourism development process. This does not appear to be a positive circumstance and should be rectified. A larger platform could be given to the local community to have an input into the direction of tourism in the area, to be given more influence amongst the various stakeholder parties, and subsequently to be more empowered as part of the implementation process. It is equitable that the people who live in a tourism destination be consulted on tourism policies and planning as tourism is an industry that has direct impacts on the study area and on the local community from the economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects.

The findings also revealed that local government support was not perceived to contribute towards tourism development efforts. As earlier mentioned, a possible reason was the perception of tourism as a state-wide effort rather than a local administrative one. This would leave an unused resource that could have been leveraged upon, and any rural tourism destination should consider involving the local government, especially in terms of input into local tourism infrastructure and local tourism events to be promoted.

This study provides value in the investigation of the local community's perspective on factors contributing towards rural competitive advantage, with a focus on a rural tourism destination that is located near an urban area. Therefore, this paper provides contribution to the literature on rural tourism in a developing country and rural competitive advantage. Study findings can be used as input to develop a rural tourism destination competency index; such an index can be used by help tourism, economic and town/country planners to devise policies and programmes to meet specific development objectives. Government planners may utilise such an

index to provide an objective basis to set rural/tourism sector goals, and to establish investment priorities; the index can also be used to measure, monitor and rank different rural destinations within Malaysia and beyond. To date, such an index has never been developed for rural destinations per se, although indexes have been developed to measure general destination competitiveness (Levy, Brent Ritchie & Crouch, 2004), travel and tourism competitiveness at the country/continent level (Blanke & Chiesa, 2011) and island tourism destination competitiveness (Yong, Hong & Gwang, n.d.).

The limitations of this study arise from the lack of generalisability of findings; however this can be mitigated by using a larger sample, as well as sampling at more locations, which should include remote rural destinations as well as rural destinations in proximity to urban areas. This study is also limited in the temporal context, due to the use of the cross-sectional data methodology, which focused only on the period during which the study was carried out.

Suggestions for future research include a longitudinal study investigating the same factors of tourism destination performance from the local community perspective, to capture the changing attitudes and effects over time. Once tourism activity is proactively detected to be at the critical mass level, measures can be taken to deal with or curb it; hence such a study would have practical benefit for tourism implementers and decision makers.

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