Performance of Community Resources Indicators for Tourism Development: A Case Study of Mah Meri Community in Carey, Island, Malaysia

[1,4]Puvaneswaran Kunasekaran, [3]Sarjit S Gill, [1,2,4]Sridar Ramachandran,
[3]A.T. Talib and [4]Sudesh Prabhakaran

[1]Institute of Agricultural and Food Policy Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia
[2]Faculty of Economics and Management, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia
[3]Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia
[4]Binary University, IOI Business Park, 47100 Bandar Puchong Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract: This paper presents the significant role of community resources which is utilized by the Mah Meri community in Pulau Carey, Malaysia to practice sustainable tourism. Mah Meri is one of the 18 indigenous tribes in Peninsular Malaysiathat resides at Kampung Sungai Bumbon which is a well established indigenous tourism destination in Malaysia. Survey which was used as the qualitative data collection method helped the researchers to understand the community resources which can encourage sustainable tourism practice. Community resources consisting of cultural, natural, infrastructure, financial and human resources were tested. This study reveals that the community is proud of its natural and cultural resources. However, the community also feels that their tourism business is facing a threat because of scarcity of necessary natural resources. It is hoped that the findings of this study will contribute to existing literature in the indigenous tourism ground that could improve the sector into a more beneficial source of income for the indigenous community.

Key words: Indigenous tourism · Mah Meri · Resources · cultural product · Scarcity

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines indigenous populations as communities that live within, or are attached to, geographically distinct traditional habitats or ancestral territories [1]. However, indigenousness or originality has various interpretations. The term 'indigenousness' is also subject for debate on how to determine indigenousness of a community [2-3]. According to Gomes [4], the indigenous community of Malaysia, the Orang Asli, claim their indigenousness by their earlier existence in the country and the majority Malay community claim their indigenousness on the basis of their civilization's superiority compared to the Orang Asli community. Generally, the indigenous people recognize themselves as being part of a unique public group, originated from groups present in the area before modern states were created and current boundaries described. This rural community also generally maintains cultural and social identities, as well as, social, economic, cultural and political institutions that are separate from the mainstream or dominant society or culture.

Tourism has been an important industry in Malaysia for a number of years [5] and international arrivals reached 27.44 million and 25.70 million respectively in 2014 and 2015, compared to 5.5 million in 1998 [6]. Table 1 shows international tourist arrivals to Malaysia and revenues received from 1998 until 2015.

Growth rates have averaged around five percent since 2007, but slowed in 2011 due to adverse economic conditions globally. Malaysia's popularity can be attributed to a rich natural and cultural heritage and the diversity of attractions in the different states which make up the federation. The fact that Malaysia is a multi-racial

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Corresponding Author: Sridar Ramachandran, Bioresource and Environmental Policy Laboratory, Institute of Agricultural and Food Policy Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia.
Tel: +603-8947 1067, Fax: +603-8947 1087.

Table 1: International tourist arrivals and receipts to Malaysia

Year	Arrivals/million	Receipts/MYR billion
1998	5.5	8.6
1999	7.9	12.3
2000	10.2	17.3
2001	12.7	24.2
2002	13.2	25.8
2003	10.5	21.3
2004	15.7	29.7
2005	16.4	32.0
2006	17.45	36.3
2007	20.9	46.1
2008	22.0	49.6
2009	23.6	53.4
2010	24.6	56.5
2011	24.7	58.3
2012	25.03	60.6
2013	25.72	65.4
2014	27.44	72
2015	25.70	69.1
2016	26.76	82.1

Source: Ministry of Tourism (2017)

country with Malays, Chinese, Indians and various indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak living and working alongside harmoniously has become a selling point and is heavily used to promote tourism in the country (Malaysia, Truly Asia campaign). However, in these promotions, selected groups of indigenous communities are often overlooked.

> *"To know Malaysia is to love Malaysia. A bubbling, bustling melting pot of races and religions where Malays, Indians, Chinese and many other ethnic groups live together in peace and harmony."* [6]

The promotional posters show the representative from Malays, Chinese, Indians and various indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak portraying their unique culture which can lure the international tourists to visit Malaysia in order to experience the "all-in-one" cultural destination. An anthropologist [7] argued that the exclusionof the Orang Asli from the posters of 'cultural package' could be either deliberate or unintentional which can reflect a deeper, subtler and hidden complexity in Malaysian inter-ethnic relations. The omission of the Orang Asli image is still questionable whether the government is serious in including the Orang Asli community in the mainstream tourism business. This scenario can be regarded as a big threat to achieve sustainable indigenous tourism development in Malaysia. Another scholar [8] also argued that the way in which culture is constructed and manipulated are also seen very

clearly in the packaging and development of cultural tourism. Tourism promotion takes place through a number of institutions but primarily through Tourism Malaysia and Ministry of Tourism and Culture (MOTAC).

Literature Review: Cultural aspect in indigenous tourism has been a popular research area highlighting the indigenous people and their unique and authentic lifestyle. In this area, commercialization of culture has brought tourism attractions to be targeted especially on cultural celebrations. The culture of each ethnic by indigenous people represents their identity. The development of tourism strongly depends on their ethnicity, heritage and festivals [9]. The scholars also mentioned that culture has emerged as a powerful attraction not only for tourists but also for entrepreneurs, government agencies and academic researchers.

Many scholars agree that the cultural product has proven to be a medium in boosting tourism development [10]. Tourism emerged as a good way of preserving the Ontario Indian customs and culture, but only if the right people are involved and if tourism does not become a business for some individuals [11]. Tourism can also help in the promotion and presentation of Indian customs and cultures. This is the way to introduce their culture to the world and thus contribute to its preservation. However many authors argued that commoditization is the only way to sell the indigenous culture to tourists [12-13].

From the cultural tourism perspectives, commoditization can enhance local economic growth and develop traditions by reducing poverty levels and increasing the inherent value [14]. However, cultural commoditization has been criticized by several scholars. A leading scholar [15] said that using indigenous culture as a mass tourism product can ultimately cause the loss of authenticity, inherent cultural value and significance. The Naxi indigenous community of China went through cultural commoditization and presented their uniqueness to outsiders with the help of the government but they are still in the belief that their culture is well preserved and not faded [10]. Apart from that, the genuine participation in tourism has allowed the Karen community to 'commoditize' their culture for economic and cultural sustainability benefits.

In the Malaysian context, the government consistently seek to achieve sustainable tourism practice by targeting a balance between business imperatives, cultural heritage preservation and environmental protection [16]. This is evident by the establishment of Orang Asli cultural villages and traditional handicraft

centres such as the Pusat Kraftangan Orang Asli (Orang Asli Handicraft Centre) in Cameron Highlands and Mah Meri Cultural Village at Carey Island [17].

Indigenous tourism in Malaysia has high potential as a unique attraction, apart from eco- tourism, which caters particularly for tourists from Australia, New Zealand and Europe, who prefer to learn about unique and remote communities. At these indigenous villages, visitors will be able to witness the traditional dances, lifestyle and hunting techniques personally. However, the government has prevented tourists from visiting the Orang Asli community in Taman Negara, Pahang [4]. The author also addressed the government's concern that photographs of half naked women in their natural living settings may give a wrong impression regarding the majority Malay community's dressing manner.

Method: 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 153 respondents were interviewed at Kampung Sungai Bumbun. This number was derived after calculation of 95% Confidence Level and Margin of Error of 5%. The size of sample was small because the size of population was also small. From the information given by the Tok Batin of the village, the total population of the village was 450 people. These 450 residents were from 91 families staying in the village. From this number about 270 people (excluding children and teenagers below 16 years old) were eligible to be selected as respondents. Random sampling was employed as the sampling procedure before collection of data. This sampling technique ensures each Mah Meri had an equal chance of being selected in the sample. As a result, 159 respondents were selected randomly as the sample group. Raosoft sample size calculator was referred, to estimate the number of respondents required to obtain valid results. Thus, from an estimated population of 270, a sample size of 159 should be sufficient to represent the population with margin error of 5% and a confidence interval of 95%.

Mah Meri Community of Kampung Sungai Bumbon: Mah Meri community consisted of 2896 members in the year 2004 [18]. The Mah Meri people are also known as 'Besisi' or people with scales [19]. They speak an Austroasiatic language which is originally from the Mon and Khmer's language family. However, the Mah Meri's route to reach Malay Peninsula is still not clear. Several scholars argued that the origin of the community is still based on myths [7, 20]. For this study about seven key informants from

Kampung Sungai Bumbon, Carey Island were interviewed. This village is the most well-established village in terms of tourism operations among other villages in the area. All the respondents selected are full time participants of tourism activities in the village. The interviewed data was analyzed using thematic analysis technique.

Analysis and Discussion
Measuring Level of Community Resources Importance: The perceptions of the community on the importance of the resources were measured through five main dimensions; cultural resources, human resources, financial resources, infrastructure resources and natural resources. The mean scale obtained is according to the data collected using likert scale one to five (strongly disagree to strongly agree).

Table 2 reveals the findings of the analysis using descriptive statistics of five community resource domains. Cultural resources have been the most important asset of the Mah Meri community to run tourism successfully. Wood carving, weaving, Mah Meri dance and Ari Moyang are considered as treasures that determine the identity of the community. For this dimension, high mean values from 4.56 to 4.71 were obtained. From the values, wood carving and Ari Moyang (both 4.71) were considered as the main cultural products of the community. The mean value of 4.63 reveals that the community was also willing to defend and maintain their culture for tourism development. Culture is the primary attraction of the indigenous community but the key challenge of the community is to protect their unique culture[13].

Similarly, for human resource, the community generally agreed that their effort and indigenous knowledge is important to develop tourism. High mean values of 4.31 to 4.39 recorded shows that the rural community knows the importance of possessing the skills of wood carving, dancing and weaving that will be a great advantage to run tourism. The need of teaching and learning indigenous knowledge across generations is also encouraged by the community to maintain tourism continuity to the next generation. Indigenous knowledge teaching and learning alone is not enough for the success of tourism. The community should also be supported by developing international skills [21].

Financial resource is also an important factor in order for the community to perform tourism activities in their village. However, the result shows that the community is not well resourced financially. A mean value 3.10 reveals that the community tries to save its own money to run

Table 2: Level of community resources

Community Resources	Indicators	M	SD
Cultural Resources	Wood carving is an important cultural attraction of Mah Meri.	4.71	0.45
	Weaving is an important tourism product of Mah Meri.	4.61	0.49
	Ari Moyang can pull many visitors to this village.	4.71	0.46
	Uniqueness of Mah Meri dance is an important cultural attraction of Mah Meri.	4.56	0.5
	Mah Meri's willing to maintain culture for tourism development	4.63	0.49
Human Resources	Human resources are important for tourism	4.34	0.48
	Strong indigenous knowledge is important for tourism	4.31	0.53
	Older generation is willing to teach heritage to the youngsters	4.29	0.75
	Ancestral heritage must be preserved for tourism	4.31	0.47
	Youngsters are willing to learn indigenous knowledge from older generation.	4.35	0.48
	Wood carving, dancing and weaving skills important to attract tourists to this village.	4.39	0.49
Financial Resources	Adequate money to run tourism.	2.91	1.12
	Use saving to develop tourism.	3.1	1.3
	Receive financial contribution from government to develop tourism.	2.73	1.19
	Receive financial contribution from middleman to develop tourism.	2.75	1.16
Infrastructure Resources	Adequate public facilities to attract tourists.	3.85	0.94
	Public facilities are in good condition public facilities.	3.93	0.99
	Accessibility to this village is satisfactory to ensure tourists arrival.	4.16	0.73
Natural Resources	Reserves of Nyireh Batu are adequate for carving.	1.72	0.99
	Reserves of Bakau are adequate for carving.	1.82	0.99
	Reserves of Mengkuang are adequate for weaving.	4.05	0.59

N=153 likert scale 5

business. Score values 2.73 and 2.75 shows that the community barely receives financial support from the government and middlemen. However, initial investigation with the key informants revealed that the community is provided with wood carving and weaving materials although no cash was delivered. The government can help the indigenous communities by easing the existing rules and regulations so that their entry into the tourism industry is not unnecessarily difficult [22].

In terms of infrastructure resource, the respondents are generally satisfied with the infrastructure in the village especially the cultural and translation centers. Although the researcher found that the public facilities such as toilets and football field were in bad condition, the community was satisfied with the infrastructure condition (mean 3.93). The mean value of 4.16 shows the accessibility to the village was good and the condition of the roads within the village is well maintained. Another scholar found similar outcomes mentioned that building of a lodge had resulted in the development of the road which brought bus service for the isolated Shangan community in Zimbabwe [23]. Investments in infrastructure development that can provide livelihood benefits can be done using tourism as a tool.

Natural resource is the important element of indigenous tourism because the community is very close to the natural environment. Thus, they are heavily dependent on the natural resources to run tourism. The scarcity of *Nyireh Batu* (1.72) and Bakau (1.82) is a big concern for the community. Without these woods, it is almost impossible to do wood carving. Ironically, this is not the same case for the weavers as the resource of Mengkuang is adequate proved by the significantly higher mean value of 4.05. Oswald et al. (2007) argued that the indigenous communities are highly dependent on natural resources but aggressive harvesting may cause the forest failure to provide them with their daily requirements. The government can assist the indigenous communities in providing them the lacking resources to ensure tourism sustainability [23-26].

CONCLUSION

The initial investigation shows that the indigenous community is proud to portray their culture to the outsiders. They are also proud to be known as the icon of tourism among other Orang Asli sub-groups of Malaysia. This study also reveals that the Mah Meri community is eager to explore tourism opportunities in their village. They 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 outsider 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 perceptions of the community areoften neglected by the authoritiesmaking them 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. According to the Tok Batin, the discussions are considered as a formality task by the officers to respect the villagers, however,the final decision of developmental projects will be taken by the government. If this goes on, the community will feel detached from any tourism developments organized by the government. Thus, the government should not merely consult the community to fulfil procedures, on a token basis[26-27]. 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 growth [28].

The future studies within the scope of Orang Asli and tourism participation should also consider understanding the demand side of the tourism industry. Understanding the supply side of the market alone is inadequate to make indigenous tourism sustainable. The study of tourist motivation tovisit indigenous groups should be done to identify factors influencing the target market to choose indigenous tourism as preferred tourism attraction. By understanding the demand side attributes, a holistic understanding of sustainable indigenous tourism can be attained.

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