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# Nature-based rural tourism and its economic benefits: a case study of Kinabalu National Park

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – It has been acknowledged that tourism can play a role in employment creation and in raising the rural community's standard of living. This paper aims to examine the economic benefits emanating from tourism development for a local community in the area of Kinabalu National Park, Sabah.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Qualitative data was used to provide an in-depth analysis of the findings on willingness of residents to participate in tourism activities.

**Findings** – The local community of Kinabalu National Park perceive the tourism sector to have greatly contributed to their economic growth. However, the community has raised other issues in ensuring the sustainability of the park, especially in terms of the provision of facilities.

**Practical implications** – The relevant stakeholders need to carefully plan appropriate policies and regulations to ensure maximum economic benefit is gained by local community participation in tourism development within the limited carrying capacity of Kinabalu National Park.

**Originality/value** – This study provides an understanding of the economic impact of tourism on the local community in Kinabalu National Park. It calls for government action to look into the carrying capacity of the Kinabalu National Park in the near future.

**Keywords** Economic benefit, Rural tourism, Local community, Kinabalu National Park, Rural areas, Tourism, Communities, Malaysia

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Economic viability is an essential element of a sustainable tourism industry. Locations with specific interest such as heritage, mountains and other natural beauty, pleasant



climate, and clean air, serve as free resources of economic value for tourism development (Frederick, 1993). Thus, Balaguer and Cantavella-Jorda (2002) argue that economic efficiencies result in less use of resources, thus raising the potential for less adverse social and environmental impacts. On the other hand, from an economic perspective, many researchers conclude that tourism generates various economic benefits such as foreign-exchange inflows (Mathieson and Wall, 1982), employment opportunities (Keogh, 1990; Martin, 1995; Mason and Cheyne, 2000; Pearce, 1989), increase in personal income (Keogh, 1990; Martin, 1995), improved economic structure, and higher standard of living (Allen *et al.*, 1988; Gilbert and Clark, 1997; Haralambopoulos and Pizam, 1996; Huang, 1993; Teye *et al.*, 2002). Tourism is seen to help stimulate a local economy and to provide significant economic multiplier effects (Machlis and Field, 2000; Richards and Hall, 2000).

Tourism, particularly ecotourism, in developing countries reflects richness of natural and cultural capital, and is considered a sustainable source of revenue for indigenous and rural communities (Briedenhann and Wickens, 2004; Chambers, 2000; Ponting, 2001; Schilcher, 2007). The effects of tourism differ by community. Tourism may have positive or negative effects depending on community context (Kreag, 2001). Economic return includes employment creation and diversification of income through establishment of new and maintenance of existing businesses. Hampton (2005) stresses the importance of active participation of local communities in ensuring development of the tourism industry in Indonesia. However, there is a debate on the contribution of tourism to rural incomes (English Tourist Board, 1991). According to Ghazali and Sirat (2011), rural tourism development has failed in terms of involving a development plan for the local community. They argue that the majority of the plans to develop a region or destination into a tourism site have not sufficiently considered the willingness and ability of local residents to participate in the intended tourism activities. Therefore, the locals, who could have served as labor resources, have become marginalized from tourism development (Sundin, 2011). Moreover, Fleischer and Pizam (1997) and Fleischer and Felsenstein (2000) raise the issue of the small contribution of locals to tourism activities, which are characterized by small-scale enterprises, a highly seasonal market, significant cost of government subsidy, poor services (Hajalager, 1996), unattractive products (Roberts, 1996), and lack of skills (Embacher, 1996). These issues have been a common subject of debate (Sharpley, 2002).

In many areas, rural tourism has been associated with agro-tourism (Sharpley, 2002) or farm tourism (Oppermann, 1996), and national park and wilderness (Ladki, 1993). Different places have different practices as far as rural tourism is concerned (Fleischer and Pizam, 1997). Each place has its own attractions, strengths, and opportunities for local people. Tourism in mountainous areas began in the 1950s and has played a significant role in bringing economic benefits to farmers (Ager, 1958). Perales (2002) acknowledges the increase in rural tourism activities in the 1970s in all developed economies. The growth of tourism markets in rural mountain regions may increase the need for maintenance of local services, allow for diversification of activities in the rural economy, and stimulate support for the preservation of natural landscapes (Canovés *et al.*, 2004). However, Oppermann (1996) puts forward the lack of a comprehensive study on non-farm tourism, saying publications on rural areas are mere “grey literature” and that research on other subjects is more prevalent.

The Seventh Malaysian Plan (1995-2000) was designed to boost the country's tourism industry by popularizing natural attractions (Sadi and Bartels, 1997). In the Eighth Malaysia Plan (2001-2005), the government focuses on nature-based tourism or ecotourism. The rhetoric supporting ecotourism development is reiterated in the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010), which highlights the need to generate income for rural communities while demonstrating the commitment of the government to conserve natural resources (Hitchner *et al.*, 2009). The abovementioned background poses the need for a comprehensive study on rural tourism, specifically one that focuses on the Kinabalu National Park, Sabah. The objective of this paper is to explore the advantages and disadvantages of tourism development from the perspective of members of the local community in Kinabalu National Park.

## 2. Kinabalu National Park

Malaysia has great potential in nature tourism and ecotourism (Backhaus, 2003). Malaysia's tropical rainforests are among the oldest and most diverse ecosystems in the world (Khalifah and Tahir, 1997). National parks are established for the purpose of preservation, hence allowing and encouraging access to education, recreation, and tourism. Kinabalu National Park, which covers an area of 753.7 sq km, was first cited as a national park in Malaysia in 1964. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated Kinabalu National Park as a World Heritage Site in 2000.

The main entrance to the Kinabalu National Park is the Park Headquarters located about 92 km from Kota Kinabalu. The park also has six sub-stations and one controlling post, all of which are in strategic locations for better management and monitoring, and to enhance recreation. Besides Kinabalu which serves as the major attraction of the park, Poring Hot Spring and Mesilau Nature Resort area are other attractions. The number of climbers to Mount Kinabalu had increased from 4,035 in 2007 to 4,784 in 2008, 4,075 in 2009, 4,761 in 2010, and 5,159 in 2011. Among the six sub-stations, Kinabalu Park Headquarters received the highest number of visitors at 341,310 (62 percent), followed by Poring Hot Spring at 306,720 (56 percent), and Mesilau at 22,910 (4 percent) out of the total visitors of 550,826 in 2011.

## 3. Rural tourism

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (1994) defines rural tourism as tourism taking place in the countryside. Reichel *et al.* (2000) associate the term with rural areas, special features of the rural world, small-scale enterprises, open space, and sustainability. Meantime, scholars have proposed various interpretations of rural tourism. Bramwell and Lane (1994) relate it with activities and interest in farms, nature, adventure, sports, health, education arts, and heritage. According to Gartner (2004), there are indications that demand for rural-based tourism will continue to grow.

Many small firms in rural areas are created to respond to the attractions of rural places (Irvine and Anderson, 2004). Brown and Hall (1999) argue that a place that is remote and difficult to reach may be perceived by tourists to have certain qualities symptomatic of its situation, such as natural beauty, quietness, and uniqueness. Hence, the roles played by government and local community in the promotion of entrepreneurship and marketing for ecotourism are considered vital. Efforts to

promote entrepreneurship include creation and combination of existing resources to develop and commercialize new products, and thus serve new customers and markets (Schendel and Hitt, 2007).

### *3.1 Economic benefits and local community participation*

Tourism is seen as a sector that can provide the most significant impact especially on local communities. Throughout Europe (Sharpley, 2002) and the USA (Luloff *et al.*, 1994), and in other countries such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Hall and Jenkins, 1998), tourism serves to address the socio-economic challenges in rural areas. Rural tourism is seen as a valuable and growing sector of the overall tourism market (Hummelbrunner and Miglbauer, 1994). The economic effects of tourism on a local community are easy to determine because it is small and generally easy to assess (Mason, 2003).

Local communities have been involved in tourism activities since time immemorial (McIntosh *et al.*, 1995). However, their serious and thorough involvement began about two decades ago (Brohman, 1996). Tourism can bring changes and development to an area. Saarinen (2006) argues that local communities are geared towards ensuring a high degree of control over tourism activities and receive a significant share of economic benefits in the form of direct revenue, employment, upgraded infrastructure, and housing. By playing a key role in tourism development, local communities are crucial in providing a good environmental condition for tourists, particularly by catering and supplying accommodation, information, transport, facilities, and other services (Godfrey and Clarke, 2000). Development not only brings economic benefits but also improves the quality of life of members of local communities (Godfrey, 1998). However local communities must organize themselves to play a more effective role in development and interact with the government at all levels (McIntyre *et al.*, 1993).

The tourism sector needs manpower to increase productivity. As a service-intensive industry, tourism provides employment to rural residents who are directly involved in tourism activities regardless of whether the population belongs to the class of unskilled or skilled labor (Mokhtar *et al.*, 2012). Liu *et al.* (2012) explain that in practice, nature-based tourism may not be able to produce positive economic benefits to the local people. There are cases where some nature-based tourism produces significant negative socio-economic effects due to lack of involvement of the local community. For example, Mathieson and Wall (1982), Frederick (1992), and Krannich and Petrzelka (2003) warn of the quality of jobs created by tourism activities, saying the jobs tend to be seasonal, part-time, low paying, and of low quality, and offer few benefits and little chance for individual advancement.

## **4. Methodology**

Exploratory and conclusive research designs were applied for this research. Secondary data were derived from the local District Office of Ranau, where the village population and demographic profiles were considered vital internal sources for this study. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 16 local residents residing near predetermined sampling areas within the vicinity of the Kinabalu National Park. A set of pre-determined criteria was used in the selection of interviewees which included respondents who were either involved or not involved in tourism.

### 5. Analysis

An exploratory research was conducted using the in-depth interview technique of data gathering to understand the economic impact of tourism on local residents near the Kinabalu National Park, particularly those who lived in Kundasang, and their participation in tourism activities. The gathering of qualitative data was aimed at understanding both financial and non-financial benefits of tourism for the local people. Those with resources were able to take advantage of opportunities from tourism either by starting up businesses that were directly and indirectly linked to tourism or by securing jobs related to tourism. Financial (e.g. savings and income), human (e.g. education, skills, knowledge, and the ability of the locals to work), and social capital (such as a membership in organizations and networking with others in power) were found to be important determinants of local participation in tourism in Kundasang.

If I had enough money, I would develop a nursery on the land that I have. Tourism development in this area creates demand for plants. A nursery would be profitable.

The above statement was made by a respondent who was not directly involved in tourism business activities. Another respondent involved in tourism and who was working as a tourist guide at the time of the survey said that her knowledge, ability, and experiences contributed to her career. According to her:

I am lucky to have the opportunity to go for training and to be physically fit. My past experiences also were helpful. Those things allow me to excel in my career.

Almost everyone interviewed agreed that tourism development improved public services and living conditions, enhanced the quality of life of most families, and built a good image of the local culture to the outside people. Regardless of their participation, respondents claimed that tourism development in Kinabalu National Park generates a broad range of economic benefits to the local community in Kundasang. Many residents are involved in offering accommodation services in the form of chalets and homestays. Explained one of the respondents who was not participating in tourism economic activities in Kundasang:

These businesses allow the injection of new income to the residents. The business operators and others, such as vegetable farmers and souvenir traders, receive money from tourists because tourists become their customers.

The increase in tourist arrivals in Kundasang is considered a blessing. This was expressed by all the respondents, who were involved either directly or indirectly in tourism, given that tourism has contributed to an increase in the earning opportunities of the residents. One of the respondents, a vegetable farmer who worked as a tour guide on a part-time basis at the time of the interview, said tourism provides extra income to the residents:

Previously, our only source of income was farming. Now with tourism, our income has improved because we have additional source of incomes." Another respondent echoed the same tune and said, "...the livelihood of the people in Kundasang definitely depends on tourists who come into their area.

Results show that all respondents do not feel that tourism has brought any serious negative impact on the local people in Kundasang. The results indicate that the

respondents getting direct financial benefits had more to say on the trivialness of the negative non-financial harms. Although some may feel that tourism is responsible for changes in the lifestyle of the young generation in the area, a respondent who was providing services to tourists at the time of the interview said:

Yes, you may say that the manner of clothing of the youngsters has changed, but I don't believe that the change is due to tourism. The change may be due to the Internet. The religious background established by their parents is strong. They are not easily influenced by the tourists.

Other economic benefits mentioned by the respondents were consistent with the benefits discussed in the tourism literature. Tourism is a diverse industry with the potential to support other economic activities through the creation of income opportunities throughout a complex supply chain of goods and services. Tourists who come to the area and those who work in the tourism industry in the area, or who come to open their businesses in this area, consume a significant amount of local produce and spend money in local restaurants and shops. In addition, tourism development has improved the infrastructure and living conditions of the community, especially through construction and upgrade of the main road. The upgrading of the road has greatly facilitated the sales of vegetables to the outside market, which constituted a major income source for the majority of the rural households. All respondents agreed that tourism had brought economic benefits to the people in Kundasang. Information exchanges between the locals and tourists involve tourist preferences, directions, nature, culture, and resources in the area.

However, the respondents highlighted the need for further infrastructure improvement. A respondent who worked as a teacher at the time of the interview recognized the need for better infrastructure.

I have heard that the tourists complain about the lack of facilities and infrastructure in this area. The area is still underdeveloped. Facilities are few and are not of good quality.

Another non-participating local resident agreed that many tourist facilities are needed in Kundasang to accommodate the increasing number of tourists.

Residents will be affected if we do not have more facilities. For example, the rubbish is becoming a burden already. In order for the tourists to be comfortable, we need more facilities. The facilities are also beneficial to the residents.

A major finding of this study is the high tolerance of the respondents to tourism in Kundasang and the high level of support of the local people for the expansion of tourism activities in the area. All 16 respondents agreed that tourism is important to the community, and they are keen for tourism to be further developed, especially in terms of infrastructure and human capital. The high tolerance is indicated by the favorable remarks they gave regarding future development of tourism in the area. Said one of the respondents:

I do not think that we should limit the number of tourists, but I agree that more facilities are needed. More locals may need to be given opportunities to participate in the economic activities that tourism needs. We want more tourists and we want more benefits from tourism.

This explanation sums up the current situation regarding the capacity of tourism development in Kundasang.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

The tourism sector is generally acknowledged for its ability to contribute economically to rural areas, and Kinabalu National Park is no exception. Nowadays, rural areas, as opposed to urban areas, offer natural beauty and attraction for tourists. The Kinabalu National Park is an important tourist destination in Sabah that offers nature-based tourism activities. As in all other natural areas that are being developed into tourism destinations, the Kinabalu National Park is facing concerns on the need to sustain the well-being of both the environment and the local community. Almost all the respondents agreed that tourism development improved their earnings, living conditions and public services. Local communities are either involved in businesses which are related directly or indirectly to tourism or being employed in tourism businesses. However, they are also concerned over uncontrolled tourism development which could potentially bring a negative perception on the sustainability of the park.

Kundasang is located at the foothill of Mount Kinabalu and thus is bestowed with a temperate climate and a much cooler weather compared with Kota Kinabalu. This has enabled the community to farm vegetables or operate agro-based businesses. Many farmers sell their produce such as cabbage, broccoli, mushroom and leek at the stalls located along Kundasang/Ranau road. Areas in Kundasang also have a scenic view of Mount Kinabalu which adds to the attractiveness of the area. Besides agro-businesses, many entrepreneurs, both locals and outsiders, have banked on these two unique factors to start their accommodation businesses in Kundasang.

The long-term sustainability of nature-based tourism in and near protected areas is determined by its adeptness to improving living conditions of local communities. The development standpoint argues that tourism can be successful only if the majority of the local community is involved and if it receives benefits equitably. However, opportunities for local participation in tourism are not always equally accessible to all community members (Timothy, 2002). Barriers, which include lack of skills, the distance of residence to key tourism sites, hygiene, lack of social status and family connections, and lack of start-up capital, prevent local residents from working in and owning businesses in the tourism industry (Timothy, 2002). This inability to participate may result in a negative attitude of locals toward tourism development.

Opportunities created by tourism in the nature areas will not benefit the local people if they are unable or if they lack the empowerment to participate in the economic activities. An important element of development is to include local communities in tourism planning as well as seek their participation in the implementation and operational aspects of the development. These approaches aim to provide opportunities for alternative sources of income to local communities which may benefit through increased earning capacity and improved awareness of the need for environment conservation (McShane and Wells, 2004).

Regulations that encourage tourism operators to transfer significant amounts of benefits to the locals also need to be put in place. Future studies are encouraged to look into various aspects of nature tourism for the purpose of ensuring sustainability of economic returns to local communities including barriers to resident involvement. From a policy perspective, the findings from the Kundasang study are of great value in

the formulation of relevant interventions in the future. The planners and those responsible for development in Kundasang must design and implement policies aimed at improving the capacity of local households to pursue tourism as a major source of livelihood by augmenting their resources, such as through provision of training to enhance human capital and extension of loans to serve the needs for capital. Finally, despite the economic benefits tourism already provides to this area, the government still needs to look into the capacity of the Kinabalu National Park to accommodate a rising number of tourists.

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