IS RURAL TOURISM IMPORTANT TO MALAYSIAN TOUR OPERATORS?

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Abstract

In addition to other tourism products, rural tourism, in particular, has recently been gaining the recognition that is accelerating it into a growing segment of the tourism industry. Culture, environment, gastronomy, sports, and wildlife are examples of rural tourism products. Despite the thousands of the rural tourism products available, it would not be possible to successfully promote rural tourism without collaboration from all parties that directly involve in promoting those products, such as government authorities, public agencies and tour operators. As intermediaries between tourists and tourism service providers, tour operators can influence the choices, the practices of suppliers and the development patterns of destinations among tourists. This unique role means that tour operators play a key role and are a catalyst to the tourism development. In other words, their action can make an important contribution to furthering the goals of sustainable tourism development and protecting the environmental and cultural resources on which the tourism industry depends for its existence and growth.

This paper reviews rural tourism attributes as well addressing the related issues in the Malaysia context and tour operators’ action behavior in promoting the rural tourism. Understanding the tour operator’s perceptions of the importance of the rural tourism attributes and their behavioral action are crucial in helping the government in promoting the rural tourism.

Key words: Rural Tourism, Perceived Importance, Tour Operator, Malaysia

Introduction

No doubt that tourism is ever becoming one of the rapidly growing industry in the world (Tang and Tan, 2014) and act as a vehicle to enhance the long-term economic growth and giving indirect and direct impact to the infrastructure and improve the urban and the local economy (Schubert, Brida & Risso, 2010). Owing

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to its contribution, those players who closely related to the industry are urged to upgrade and maintain
the existing one as well as creating and finding new tourism products. Lien (2010) stated that, a range of
new tourism products will be created in addition to the conventional ones to motivate travelers to travel
a particular destination. In fact, niche tourism products, rural tourism in particular have recently been
gaining the recognition that accelerates a growing segment of the tourism industry (Novelli, 2005).
Cultural, environmental, gastronomy, sport, wildlife, rural tourism and other are the examples of rural
tourism products (Jack (2012).

The rural tourism in actual fact is not a new market segment, but what is new is relate the promotion
undertaking the authorities and mainstream media. Besides others the rural tourism is among the fastest
growing sectors within the tourism industry (Kim, 2005). Othman, Sazali & Mohamed (2013) classified the
rural tourism brings back the tourists to nature, roots, or basics, and the return to origins or originality.
The rural tourism act as one of the solution of economic development (Rid, Ezeeduji & Haider, 2014) and

Due to a wide range of benefits, several countries like the United States, Australia, and the United
Kingdom, just to name few started to increase the effectiveness of rural tourism (Irshad, 2010). The U.K.
Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs (2013) for instance revealed that its government is
taking serious initiatives by investing 25 million dollars to improve the quality of their rural tourism
attractions. The United States government takes an opportunity in enhancing the value of the rural
tourism in attracting the local and international tourists (CHF International, 2008). Similar efforts have
been taken by the Asian countries like Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and many others (Fahmi,
Hamzah, Muhammad, Yassin, Samah, D’Silva, & Shaffril, 2013).

In line with above notion, scholars argued that despite thousands of the rural tourism products in the
industry, it is still less able to successfully be promoted without the collaboration of all parties that directly
involve in promoting those products such as government authorities, public agencies and tour operators
without an exception (Yusoff, Zahari, Kutut, & Sharif, 2013; Khairil & Yuhanis, 2011) otherwise
all of those products will become wasted. For instance, ecotourism, wildlife tourism, agro-tourism,
cultural, gastronomy, adventures tourism are among those rural tourism products (Holland, Burian &
Dixey, 2003). Ashley, Brine, Lehr & Wilde (2007) argued that the government and other tourism players
together with small or large tour operators play an important role in bringing range of tourists thus
contribute to economic prosperity to the remote areas. In other word, tour operator act as catalyst not
only influencing but promoting besides urban yet to rural tourism (Trunfio, Petruzzellis & Nigro, 2006).
The prosperous of the rural tourism as postulated by Trezner (2012) is highly dependent on the public
agencies especially tour operators. Thus, the local community can receive significant impact on the
economy and employment opportunities when tour operators actively promoting the rural tourism to
traveler (Metzger, 2003; Jaafar, Kayat, Tangit & Yacob, 2013).

Literature Review

Rural Tourism

The phenomenon of the rural tourism among the unconventional tourism products has received
significant attention among the travellers and researchers (Trunfio, Petruzzellis & Nigro, 2006). Few
scholars have introduced different definitions that relate to rural tourism and the studies on it have
initially started since 1980’s (Opperman, 1996). He described that the rural tourism is associated with
farm, bed and breakfast, rural hotels or guest-houses and camping often form of the accommodation in peripheral areas. Sharpley (2002) has included that agro-tourism in the definition of rural tourism or farm tourism whereas Mohd (2012) included cottages and Knight (1996) posit rural tourism as a second homes. However, not all scholars agreed with those definitions. McDonald and Jolliffe (2003) argued that the rural tourism is interrelated with the concept of culture, rural and tourism. Mihailovic & Moric (2012) noted that the rural tourism as a sustainable, multi-functional activity which are based on local resources, culture and natural resources. Hence, they further argued that the rural tourism is a multidimensional branch of tourism that related to natural attractions and human connections which contribute to the local community and country economy.

Cultural as Rural Tourism Attributes

The concept of culture has been one of the important ideas since the past 19th century and it is interrelated with rural and tourism (Richardson & Crompton, 1988). Tourists who travel from urban places to rural area are attracted by the characteristics of the cultural appeals (Vela, 2008). He noted that, cultural and historic wealth can be found in the rural destinations thus portrayed the strong image of the rural destination itself likes in Spain, Portugal, Greece and Italy. McDonald & Jollife (2003) postulated that culture is a valuable resource which is often well preserved in the rural areas and helpful in sustaining the local community economy. In other words, Liu (2005) stated that by integrating cultural attributes and rustic values of rural areas into tourism its help in shaping the emerging form of the rural tourism.

Natural as Rural Tourism Attributes

The natural resources in destinations are important elements and served as part of attractions for people to spend their leisure time (Lee, Kruger, Whang, Uysal & Sirgy, 2014). Parks, lakes, forests, rivers and mountain for instance are the resources of natural attributes and produce economic benefits to the local community (Majmudar, 2011). Others noted that scenic, historical, cultural, archeological and scientific values are offered by natural areas (Kim, Lee, & Klenosky, 2002) and satisfy visitors with several of motivations.

However, Ryan, (2002), Ko, (2005), Blancas, Oyola, Gonzalez, Guerrero & Caballero, (2011), Ghaderi & Henderson, (2012), and Stone (2013) argued that the natural resources seem to be declining and they associated it with sustainability. Owing that reason, tourism in rural areas has received attention and has been acknowledged and Stone (2013) suggested that tourism policies and programs that adhere to the principles of sustainability need to be addressed.

Historical as Rural Tourism Attributes

The word historical has strong relationship with the word heritage and according to Braithwaite and Lee (2008), heritage serve as an interest for particular group of people and historical subject as a platform in the development of tourist attractions. In other words, heritage is closely associated with the distant past, implicating castle, battlefields and similar historical phenomena that worthy for protection (Weaver, 2012). Weaver’s noted that the local communities’ heritage inventories would be including the site of coverage. In fact, Wang and Bramwell (2011) pointed out that historic resources can be facilitated the revenue towards community and country’s economic growth particularly through tourism. Due to this benefit, governments are keen to use heritage resources as a platform for encouraging tourism activities particularly in the rural areas (Laing, Wheeler, Reeves & Frost, 2014).
Action Behavior

Action is defined as an act that one consciously wills and either by physical or mental activity (dictionary.com) and behavior with portrayals of action arising after the fact simultaneously with the action (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). Syed (2009) stated that behavior is a response which an individual shows to the environment in different times. Theory Reasoned Action (TRA) is a theory of social-psychological research on attitudes and the attitude-behavior relationship developed by Ajzen & Fishbein (1975) has been widely used especially in studying human behavior’s and attitudes. The theory is a prediction of behavioral attention, attitude and behavior (Roberto, Shafer & Marmo, 2014).

Action Behavior in Tourism

No denying the fact that tourism products contribute to the country economic growth thus lead to mushrooming of studies which explore the latest trends on the individual behavior towards tourism products. Many researchers used TRA model by Ajzen & Fishbein (1975) in studying diversities of human behavior. Juvan & Dolnicar (2014) used this model to explore the attitude-behavior gap in the sustainable tourism. Hwang, Chi & Lee (2013) also investigate the social structural approach on community involvement using the TRA model. Therefore, TRA model will be used as theoretical underpinning in assessing the action behavior among the tour operators in this study.

Rural Tourism and Malaysian Tour Operators

As with other countries, Malaysia besides other tourism products perceived rural tourism as another mechanism to push country economic. This effort in undertaking is through the government interventions in facilitating the rural tourism development by giving allocation of budget, policy and guidelines. Ministry of Rural and Regional Development for instance, spent RM6.7 million in 2008 for infrastructure development related to rural tourism projects (Harun, Hassan, Razzaq & Mustafa, 2012). In addition, the rural tourism development is becoming one of the main agenda under the 10th Malaysia Plan for the year 2011 to 2015 (Economic Planning Unit, 2010). The government realizes besides urban development the relationship between rural tourism and the local community could also contribute to the country’s economic (Husin & Kunjumaran, 2014). As stated in the Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010, the purpose of development in the rural area is to provide greater opportunities to rural community to reduce the poverty level of the community, uplifting their economy and creating opportunity of employment (Ibrahim & Razzaq, 2010; Nair & Hussain, 2013). Out of many initiative undertakings by government to develop and facilitating the rural tourism development one of them is through Community-Based Tourism (CBT).

Jamal & Getz, (1995), Reed, (1997), Okazaki, (2008), Othman, Sazali & Mohamed, (2013), Mohamad & Hamzah, (2013), Husin & Kunjumara, (2014) noted that CBT as an agenda in tourism that involves the local community in participating on the tourism development within their area. This involvement creates a direct employment opportunities as well as to increase the income levels and to reduce the level of poverty of the rural communities. Traditional culture, custom, local dishes, wildlife, local farm produces, Homestay, rural landscape and other are the examples of the rural Community-Based Tourism (CBT) products (Rid et. al, 2014). As postulated by the Ex-Tourism Minister Datuk Seri Ng Yen Yen, as a whole tourism player, especially public agencies need to learn and understand what tourists want to boost Malaysia tourism industry. She further noted the participation of tourists in green or eco-tourism including the local culture and food should engrossly be emphasized (The Star, 2013). However, any tourism products cannot aggressively be promoted, recognized or able to attract the international tourists in particular, if the lack of support and collaboration from government bodies, public agencies, travel agencies and the tour operators without exception (Khairil & Yuhannis, 2011). Strong
collaboration and commitment from those parties therefore are required to further develop the rural tourism sector (PEMANDU, 2012).

Taking one examples, the Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Seri Musa Aman said that to boost tourist arrival in the rural areas all government and public agencies including the tour operators need to promote cultures and customs of the local people (Bernama, 2013). In this context, without doubt tour operators are an important part and play a key role in the tourism industry. According to the International Federation of Tour Operators, outbound tour operators signify 12 percent of international arrivals, while in Europe they represent 35 percent of leisure air holidays. This figure does not take into account packages sold by inbound tour operators, or incoming agents, directly to tourists in destinations (Carbone, 2003). As intermediaries between tourists and tourism service providers, tour operators can influence the choices of consumers, the practices of suppliers and the development patterns of destinations (Pearce, 2008). This unique role means that tour operators are key and catalyst factors in tourism realm including the rural tourism. In other words, their action can make an important contribution to furthering the goals of sustainable tourism development and protecting the environmental and cultural resources on which the tourism industry depends for its existence and growth (Metzger, 2003).

From the aforementioned notion, questions arise especially related to Malaysian tour operators toward the rural tourism products. How the local tour operators perceived the importance of rural tourism attributes and their behavioral actions toward this market? To be more specific, do the rural tourism attributes are perceived importance by the Malaysian tour operators? If yes, what are their actions toward promoting rural tourism sites as part of their tour packages? In other words, does visiting the rural tourism sites should be include in their tour itineraries? Therefore, the understanding of tour operators perceived importance of the rural tourism attributes and their behavioral action are crucial in helping the government in promoting the rural tourism.

To date, despite the diverse dimensions of rural tourism have been studied by many researchers ranging from rural nature and development (Place, 1991), images and sustainability (McClinchey, 1999) demand (Skuras, Petrou & Clark, 2006), supply (Garcia, 2005) motivation (Pesonen et al, 2011) and many others (Kim, 2005; Silkes, 2007; Tay & Chan, 2013) have been studied, little has been touched on the importance of the rural tourism from tour operators perspective (Ćejvanović, Đurić & Vujić, 2006) and limited attention is looking from the Malaysia tour operators. With this gap, there is a need an empirical investigation on Malaysian perspective. With that, further investigation on the Malaysian tour operators’ action behavior on the rural tourism is still under investigation. The understanding on this issue would reveal whether the Malaysian tour operators are promoting the rural tourism either aggressively or not.

**Conclusion**

It is undeniably that the tourism sector is one of the major contributors to the country’s economy and the rural tourism is among of tourism products that contribute to the growth of the economy (Buhalis, 2000). However, owing to limited of studies looking at the tour operators’ behavioral action in response to the opportunity of the rural tourism product, this empirical research without doubt not only provide the understanding on the performance “rural tourism”, closing the gaps in the current research but extending the local and the international body of the literatures. It also wills most likely leading to other potential researchers to look more in depth or broader scope related to the rural tourism perspectives.
Again, as the tour operators’ behavioral action in response to the opportunity of the rural tourism products has not been widely researched, the understanding on the perceived importance of it from the tour operator’s point of view significantly provide some insights not only for them but it also goes the government, agencies and related bodies to plan several actions. In this context, one of the actions that could be undertaken is through collaboration with the local tour operators in promoting this tourism product. With all communality Malaysia rural tourism products hastily be recognized through by the international tourists, thus continuously contributes to country economy.

References


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