

The Socio-Economic Impact of Agro-Tourism Activity on Fishing Communities in Malaysia

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Abstract: The main attempt of this study is to explore the socio-economic impacts of agro-tourism activity of fishing communities in Malaysia. As many studies with regard to tourism are placing their focus on tourism in general, less has been placed on agro-tourism and the expected findings from this study can fill the existing gap. This is a quantitative study where data were gained through developed questionnaires. A total of 880 respondents from eight Desa Wawasan Nelayan villages had been selected randomly. Findings have confirmed that agro-tourism activities were able to increase villagers' income, provide employment opportunities and increase demand for local products. Albeit its advantages were economic, it can be concluded that agro-tourism activities embolden healthy relationships within the community while at the same time uplifting their quality of life.

Key words: Social benefits, economic benefits, agro-tourism, community development, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry and the agriculture sector are two separate areas but can be integrated in many ways. The integration of these two sectors which results in what we call agro-tourism, indeed has the capability to uplift a community's socio-economic situation. Agro-tourism has become well developed globally and this is not surprising as efforts to develop this sector started as early as 211 years ago (Karabati *et al.*, 2009). Agro-tourism is largely associated with agricultural activities. Usually, it includes aspects such as homestay programs, farms visits and rural activities. In addition, the radar of agro-tourism covers activities such as shopping, food, recreation, entertainment and education. The agro-tourism industry is a rapidly growing sector in developing and third world countries which not only increases the income of the local residents but also helps to improve the countries' economies. Specifically, agro-tourism can bring about numerous economic benefits such as small business development and foreign exchange earnings.

Development of tourism and resorts in Malaysia has primarily focused on areas close to coastal and seawater. Malaysia has taken a step forward in the tourism industry with the Fisheries Development Authority of Malaysia (LKIM) program based on the concept of fishermen agro-tourism. Started in 2007, this program has been developed in the fishing villages through the Fishermen

Association. With a view to rebranding the areas in question and ensuring fishing villages are promoted, LKIM held the Desa Wawasan Nelayan award competition annually at state and national level. This was intended to spark off and encourage activity among the fishing society so as to bring about changes in the image of fishing villages and develop them into attractive areas which then indirectly enhances the income of fishermen's families through agro-tourism activity. Through this program, other positive changes have been seen; these are associated with physical developments relating to facility and infrastructure such as more reliable roads, jetties, fish markets and community halls.

Natural beauty, fishermen experience, traditional living, relaxation, peace, serenity and calmness compared to the city are among the main attractions of fishing villages. There are also many agro-tourism activities and facilities which have been implemented in fishing villages such as sport fishing, kelong (which are fishing houses that sit on the sea), homestays, chalets, grilled and crispy fish outlets, village tours, firefly watching, river cruises and picnics. Based on data provided by LKIM in 2008, this program successfully generated income of RM6.7 million a year and attracted as many as 62,000 tourists a year.

Past studies, both local and international, had focused specifically on the impact of agro-tourism in the farming community (Kunasekaran *et al.*, 2011) and there

has been inadequate research on fishermen communities, resulting in a gap in this area. Most studies have proven that agro-tourism has a significant positive impact on the socio-economic situations in farming communities; nonetheless it is questionable whether similar cases can be found in the context of agro-tourism relating to fishing communities in Malaysia. Hence, this study attempts to consider the impact of agro-tourism on the socio-economic situation of fishing communities in Malaysia in order to fill this gap; the findings of the research will also contribute to the body of knowledge by providing results of assessments on the agro-tourism program in Desa Wawasan Nelayan. The findings of this study will also aid in the proper planning of strategic development programs for agro-tourism sustainability in fishing communities.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data for this study was gathered via questionnaires from 880 respondents that were randomly selected from fishing communities in eight Desa Wawasan Nelayan villages in Peninsular Malaysia. The eight villages selected for this study included: Rhu 10 (Terengganu), Sempang Pantai (Malacca), Tanjung Piai (Johore), Sedeli Kecil (Johore), Kuala Sungai Yan (Kedah), Kuala Sungai Baru (Perlis), Tok Adam (Selangor) and Pantai Suri (Kelantan). The locations were chosen based on a list obtained from LKIM’s database of fishing villages that had won the Desa Wawasan Nelayan competition at state level.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first section contained questions relating to the demographic profile of the respondents, however no names or identity card numbers were collected, thus maintaining respondents’ privacy. The second part was related to economic and social aspects of tourism. A 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Somewhat disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree) was given for respondents to rate the items, except for the first section which required respondents to choose one answer that appropriately described their demographic information. Each respondent was guided by an enumerator to answer the questionnaire and took an average time of 20-30 min to complete it. The latest SPSS statistical software was used to analyze the data and descriptive analyses were also performed.

RESULTS

The sample size for this study was 880 respondents. The results of the demographic profile of the study are

provided in Table 1 which shows the frequencies and percentages relating to gender, age, education level and income of the respondents in this study. The respondents in this study 48.9% were male and 51.1% were female. The majority of respondents were aged between 41-60 years old (39.8%) and 21-40 years old (36.9%) with a mean age of M = 41.0. In terms of educational background, 31.8% of respondents have obtained SPM/SPMV/MCE (SPM/SPMV/MCE refers to Malaysian Higher Education Certificate/Malaysian Vocational Education Certificate) and 30.7% have received a non-formal education. The majority of the respondents’ income was <RM1000 (80.1%) with a mean of M = 838.27.

Table 2 presents the percentage for each statement used to measure the impact of agro-tourism on the economy of fishing communities according to the perceptions of respondents and based on the 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. The majority of respondents strongly agreed with two statements which are that local entrepreneurs are not taking advantage of tourists (41.3%) and that agro-tourism activity does not increase the cost of living (33.1%). The respondents also agreed with the statement that agro-tourism activities in Desa Wawasan Nelayan can increase income (54.4%), employment (43.6%) and demand for local products (50.5%) and diversify economic activities (53.2%), business networking (52.2%) and the culture of having additional job (54.8%). The overall mean score is M = 3.66

Table 1: Social demographic profile of the respondents

Demographic profile	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Mean
Gender			
Male	430	48.9	
Female	450	51.1	
Total	880	100.0	
Age (years)			
<20	105	11.9	41.00
21-40	325	36.9	
41-60	350	39.8	
61-80	98	11.1	
>81	2	0.3	
Total	880	100.0	
Education level			
Non-formal education	99	11.3	
Primary school	270	30.7	
PMR/SRP/LCE	175	19.9	
SPM/SPMV/MCE	280	31.8	
Skill certificate	19	2.2	
STPM/Diploma	25	2.7	
Bachelor’s/Master’s/PhD	12	1.4	
Total	880	100.0	838.27
Income			
<RM1000	705	80.1	
RM1001-2000	128	14.5	
RM2001-3000	27	3.1	
RM3001-4000	8	0.9	
RM4001-5000	5	0.6	
>RM5001	7	0.8	
Total	880	100.0	

Table 2: Indicator impact of agro-tourism on the economy

Bil	Statements	Percentage (%)					Mean±SD
		1	2	3	4	5	
1	Desa Wawasan Nelayan agro-tourism activities will increase the local community's income	2.3	8.9	9.2	54.4	25.2	3.91±0.947
2	Desa Wawasan Nelayan agro-tourism activities provide job opportunities to both the skilled and the unskilled	5.1	7.8	10.2	53.7	23.2	3.82±1.038
3	Desa Wawasan Nelayan agro-tourism activities increase demand for local products	4.2	9.4	9.5	50.5	26.4	3.85±1.046
4	Desa Wawasan Nelayan agro-tourism activities diversify economic activities	5.7	6.5	9.3	53.2	25.3	3.86±1.048
5	Desa Wawasan Nelayan agro-tourism activities create opportunities to build business links with people from outside the community	5.9	8.3	10.0	52.2	23.6	3.79±1.076
6	It is become a culture for community to have >1 job	8.2	7.2	8.9	54.7	21.0	3.73±1.119
7	The local community offers training/courses to enable people to take advantage of the business opportunities available	8.5	36.3	11.6	22.8	20.8	3.11±1.324
8	Local entrepreneurs do not take advantage of tourists by charging higher prices	3.5	13.9	9.4	31.9	41.3	3.94±1.173
9	Desa Wawasan Nelayan agro-tourism activities do not increase the cost of living	6.1	30.1	11.0	19.7	33.1	3.43±1.371
10	Villagers earn good salaries for work done	13.6	22.2	20.3	22.6	21.3	3.16±1.349
	Overall (N = 880)						3.66±0.544

Table 3: Indicator impact of agro-tourism on social aspects

Bil	Statements	Percentage (%)					Mean±SD
		1	2	3	4	5	
1	There are elements of healthy competition among the community in terms of achieving development	1.1	5.7	7.2	53.5	32.5	4.11±0.846
2	Through Desa Wawasan Nelayan agro-tourism activities, quality of life is improving (in terms of cooperation, unity, etc.)	2.4	4.3	7.0	58.5	27.8	4.05±0.857
3	The local community appreciates the importance of history in highlighting their village as a tourist destination	42.9	10.1	6.1	30.6	10.3	2.55±1.529
4	Desa Wawasan Nelayan agro-tourism activities strengthen relationships between village leaders and government agencies	6.5	6.5	7.8	59.0	20.2	3.80±1.041
5	Education of young children is not affected due by Desa Wawasan Nelayan agro-tourism activities	2.4	14.5	9.9	28.1	45.1	3.99±1.610
6	Imbalances between spiritual and physical development are not caused by Desa Wawasan Nelayan agro-tourism activities	2.7	15.6	12.4	27.7	41.6	3.99±1.183
7	Desa Wawasan Nelayan agro-tourism activities do not result in increases of theft and security problems within the community	1.3	14.0	14.7	22.0	48.2	4.02±1.140
8	Desa Wawasan Nelayan agro-tourism activities do not result in increases in drug and alcohol problems	1.5	13.9	12.4	26.6	45.6	4.01±1.127
	Overall (N = 880)						3.80±0.580

*1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Somewhat disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree

(SD = 0.544) and the means for all of the statements range from M = 3.11-3.94. It can be noted that the highest mean score was M = 3.94 for the statement local entrepreneurs are not taking advantage of tourists by charging higher prices; this was followed by the mean score for Desa Wawasan Nelayan agro-tourism activities will increase the local community's income which was recorded at M = 3.91. Meanwhile, the lowest mean score (M = 3.11) was recorded for the statement the local community offers training/courses to enable people to take advantage of the business opportunities available.

Table 3 shows the mean score for each statement used to measure the impact of agro-tourism activity towards social aspects of the respondents and the community. The majority of respondents agreed that agro-tourism does not contribute to lessening the safety of residents (48.1%), does not contribute to drug and

alcohol problems (45.7%), does not negatively affect the education of young people (45.1%) and does not contribute to spiritual and physical problems (41.6%). In addition, respondents agreed with the statements that agro-tourism activities improved the relationship between village leaders and government agencies (59%), improved quality of life (58.4%) and promoted healthy competition between communities for development (53.5%). The mean scores for these range from M = 2.55-4.11. The overall mean score was recorded as M = 3.80 (SD = 0.580). The highest mean score (M = 4.11) was recorded for the statement; there are elements of healthy competition among the community in terms of achieving development and the lowest mean score (M = 2.55) was identified for the statement; the local community appreciates the importance of history in highlighting their village as a tourist destination.

DISCUSSION

The findings in Table 2 and 3 show the percentage and mean scores for the respondents' perceptions of the effects of agro-tourism activities on the socio-economic situation in Desa Wawasan Nelayan fishing communities. In general, the respondents strongly agree or agree with statements regarding the effects of agro-tourism activities on the economy, specifically that local entrepreneurs do not take advantage of tourists by imposing higher charges and agro-tourism activity does not increase the cost of living in the study area, increases local communities' incomes, provides job opportunities, increases demand for local products, diversifies economic activities, creates opportunities to build business links and a culture for community to have less than one job. This can be clearly seen in the existence of plenty of restaurants and places selling crispy coated fish (ikan celup tepung), chalets and homestays, boat rental activities, kelong for sport fishing and also small and medium industries such as traditional cookies. The findings here are similar to those found in previous studies by Eshliki and Kaboudi (2012), who indicated that tourism activity will positively impact economic aspects such as creating job opportunities and diversifying sources of income and business links. However, the serious involvement and engagement of communities in agro-tourism activities plays an important role that will improve quality of life and generate alternative or additional income (Tosun, 2000). Based on the findings of this study, the average income of respondents (M = 838.27) is <RM1000. This indicates the villagers earn lower salaries for work done or perhaps another factor such as the community has not really taken the opportunity to enhance their involvement in the agro-tourism activities or the existence of management problems in the success of this activity and insufficient attention to local capacity-building by government (Liu, 2006) in terms of the provision of training or courses to enable residents to make the most of the business opportunities available. Such situations will cause agro-tourism development projects to be monopolized by outsiders (Kalsom and Nor Ashikin, 2006), thereby minimizing the positive benefits to the local community as well as their ability to respond to new employment opportunities brought about by agro-tourism activity. The results of this study confirmed the past study conducted by Eshliki and Kaboudi (2012) who claimed that the agro-tourism activities do not increase the cost of living.

From a social perspective, past research by Spanou (2007) has tried to associate tourism activity with social problems; however, the findings in this study do not seem to agree that agro-tourism is the main culprit in this regard. As shown in Table 3, the majority of respondents agree that agro-tourism does not affect theft levels or the safety of residents or cause drug and alcohol problems or moral degradation. Moreover, they also agreed that agro-tourism activities positively contribute to improving the relationships between village leaders and government agencies, improve quality of life and promote healthy competition between communities in terms of development. In addition, these programs tend to increase individuals' participation in community activities (Ohmann *et al.*, 2006). From observations conducted during the research activity, unity and cooperation were clearly seen among villagers from different races, ages, genders and professions such as during village and community activities including Eid celebrations, rewang (feasts) and making the villages clean and beautiful.

CONCLUSION

Tourism has been growing rapidly in developing and third world countries and Malaysia is no exception. One of the tourism products offered is agro-tourism which is expected to play an important role in the simultaneous growth of both agriculture and tourism in rural communities. Fishing communities are typically associated with poverty and thus a transformation approach has been taken by LKIM to promote the uniqueness and originality of life within fishing communities in order to place or even rebrand them as new tourist attractions. This indirectly fosters changes and developments within these communities as well as generating additional income.

The findings of this study expounded on the perceptions of fishing communities regarding the impacts of agro-tourism activity on their individual and community socio-economic situations. Regarding respondents' perceptions of the impact of economy, the results of the data analysis showed that most agreed that agro-tourism can increase income, create job opportunities, increase demand for local products, diversify local economic activities and build business linkages.

In addition, they believe that agro-tourism does not increase the cost of living and that local entrepreneurs do not currently take advantage of tourists by charging higher prices. From a social perspective, the respondents agree that quality of life is improving following the introduction of agro-tourism and that it does not contribute to social ills such as theft or drug and alcohol problems and does not cause a decline in education among young people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study suggest that many more improvements and means of empowerment should be put in place to ensure the success of this agro-tourism program. This may include local capacity-building in terms of offering training in specific skills, improving the relationship and cooperation between the villages' committee members and intensifying promotion in the mass media. Moreover, more research is required in order to help empower the prime-movers of this agro-tourism program. Hopefully in the future, more research will provide additional detail about the perceptions of decision makers, implementers, village leaders and tourists which will help the authorities to improve the planning of strategic development programs for agro-tourism sustainability.

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