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SUNGAI BUMBUN: EMPOWERING INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE LOCAL TOURISM

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates various approaches aimed at enhancing the capability of the Orang Asli community residing in Sungai Bumbun to engage in and derive advantages from the sustainable development of local tourism. The primary focus of this study pertains to the potential adverse effects of tourism on indigenous cultures and habitats. This study aims to investigate the design of local tourism programmes that can effectively empower the Orang Asli community, while also safeguarding its cultural legacy and natural resources. A qualitative methodology was utilised to conduct in-depth interviews with key stakeholders engaged in community empowerment and local tourist initiatives. The significance of collaboration among the Orang Asli community, government entities, and non-governmental organisations was unveiled through data analysis. Education has become a crucial element, providing the community with the necessary skills and information to efficiently handle tourism. The results underscore the importance of incorporating cultural preservation into tourism endeavours and advocating for sustainable methods to mitigate environmental consequences. The findings of this study hold substantial significance for the advancement of sustainable tourism in indigenous communities. Local tourism in Sungai Bumbun can enhance the economic and social welfare of the Orang Asli people by promoting cooperation, empowering communities via education, and giving priority to cultural and environmental sustainability. This approach also ensures the protection of their distinct identity and environment.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Sungai Bumbun, located in Carey Island, Malaysia, is home to the Mah Meri, an indigenous community known for their rich cultural heritage and traditional handicrafts. The Mah Meri engage in subsistence activities, including fishing and agriculture, alongside their cultural practices, which are integral to their identity. With increasing global interest in indigenous tourism, Sungai Bumbun has emerged as a significant area for exploring how tourism can be harmonized with indigenous rights and sustainable development (Roddin et al., 2021; Hamid et al., 2022). Indigenous tourism in Malaysia, particularly in locations like Sungai Bumbun, offers opportunities for cultural exchange while also presenting challenges in ensuring the safeguarding of indigenous rights and traditions (Idris & Saleh, 2018; Dahlan et al., 2023).

Despite the recognized potential of indigenous tourism for promoting economic development within communities such as the Mah Meri, there is a noticeable gap in research specifically addressing the dynamics of indigenous tourism in Malaysia compared to developed countries (Latip et al., 2018; Whitford & Ruhanen, 2016). Current literature highlights the need to assess how tourism development affects indigenous people, particularly concerning their cultural identity, economic benefits, and community involvement (Carr et al., 2016; Dahlan et al., 2023). Therefore, this study aims to address the scarcity of localized research regarding the impacts of indigenous tourism focusing on understanding how such developments can be implemented sustainably, benefiting both the community and visitors.

This study seeks to explore several key questions:

1. What are the perceptions of the Mah Meri community towards tourism development in Sungai Bumbun?
2. How does tourism engagement affect the cultural identity and economic opportunities for the Mah Meri?
3. What measures can be taken to ensure that tourism initiatives respect and empower the community?

By conducting qualitative and quantitative research among the Mah Meri, the study will gather insights into their experiences and expectations of tourism, which is critical for developing inclusive tourism strategies (Hamid et al., 2022; Hamid et al., 2023).

This research is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it contributes to the broader understanding of indigenous rights within the tourism sector, illuminating how tourism can become a sustainable economic driver while preserving the unique cultural heritage of the Mah Meri (Latip et al., 2018; Roddin et al., 2021; Jamal et al., 2022). Secondly, by focusing on the Mah Meri in Sungai Bumbun, this study can provide a model for indigenous tourism practices that could be applied in other regions of Malaysia and beyond, offering lessons in balancing tourist interest with local community needs (Kunasekaran et al., 2017; Othman et al., 2019; Hamid et al., 2023). Lastly, the findings may inform policymakers and stakeholders in the tourism industry about best practices for facilitating sustainable tourism development that aligns with the aspirations of indigenous communities (Ismail et al., 2021; Fletcher et al., 2016; Carr et al., 2016).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable tourism encompasses approaches that aim to balance economic growth, environmental stewardship, and social equity within the tourism sector. Literature suggests that for tourism to genuinely be sustainable, it must not only address economic benefits but also enhance the well-being of local communities and conserve natural resources (Štreimikienė et al., 2020; Zielinski et al., 2020). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outline a framework for shaping tourism as a vehicle for sustainable community empowerment. The implementation of such frameworks is pivotal in fostering responsible tourist behavior and promoting sustainable practices within tourism businesses (Zielinski et al., 2020).

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In the context of Indigenous community empowerment, sustainable tourism can serve as a means of fortifying cultural heritage and fostering economic independence among these communities. Community-based tourism (CBT) initiatives have been integral in peripheral and rural areas, providing local populations with a direct stake in tourism development, allowing them to manage and benefit from their cultural heritage and natural resources (Zielinski et al., 2020)(Kamarudin et al., 2020). Such models, by promoting local ownership and decision-making, can yield substantial socio-economic benefits and enhance local agency (Zielinski et al., 2020). Thus, sustainable tourism acts as a catalyst for the empowerment of Indigenous communities, giving them both a voice and the economic means to sustain their cultural identity.

In Malaysia, community-based tourism models have emerged as effective frameworks for promoting local economic development while ensuring the conservation of natural and cultural resources. Homestay programs, for instance, serve as platforms for rural communities to engage in tourism, leveraging their cultural heritage and natural landscapes to attract visitors ("Rural Tourism in Malaysia: A Homestay Program", 2013; (Nurhuda, 2023). Through these initiatives, local stakeholders are actively involved in planning and managing tourism, which leads to improved socio-economic conditions and the preservation of traditional practices (Azmi & Ahmad, 2022). However, the sustainability of these models often hinges on ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities for all members of the community, addressing challenges such as community governance and equitable benefit distribution (Kamarudin et al., 2020).

The theoretical underpinnings of the literature on sustainable tourism often draw from empowerment theory and participatory development. Empowerment theory focuses on enhancing the capabilities of individuals and communities to make informed choices and foster social change (Aguzman et al., 2021). This is closely aligned with participatory development, which emphasizes the involvement of communities in decision-making regarding their development trajectory (Zielinski et al., 2020). Collectively, these frameworks suggest that the engagement and empowerment of local communities are critical to achieving sustainable tourism outcomes.

Case studies in Malaysia exemplify the significant impact of sustainable tourism and community empowerment. The integration of local culture in tourism practices has not only boosted local economies but also fostered a sense of ownership and pride among community members (Nurhuda, 2023). Furthermore, examinations of rural tourism, particularly in the context of the homestay program, demonstrate the role of local participation in enhancing tourism sustainability and community resilience (Kamarudin et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the need for robust frameworks that support tourism recovery while ensuring that recovery benefits are widely distributed among community members (Samsudin et al., 2024).

In summary, the literature indicates that sustainable tourism provides a pathway to empower Indigenous and local communities through community-based initiatives. The success of these models hinges on active participation and collaboration among stakeholders, grounded in the principles of empowerment and participatory development. This holistic approach could lead to sustainable tourism practices that are not only economically beneficial but also culturally enriching and environmentally sound.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

For this study, a qualitative methodology was employed, focusing on conducting in-depth interviews with key stakeholders involved in empowering the indigenous community for sustainable local tourism in Sungai Bumbun. The objective was to understand the strategies and initiatives aimed at empowering the indigenous community to engage in and benefit from local tourism activities.

Two individuals with expertise and direct involvement in community empowerment and local tourism initiatives were selected for interviews. Each interview lasted approximately two hours and was conducted either face-to-face or via video conferencing, depending on the participants' preferences and logistical considerations.

Data collection involved scheduling interviews with the selected individuals and engaging them in discussions centered on empowering the indigenous community for sustainable local tourism. Throughout the interview's, detailed notes were manually taken, capturing key insights, strategies, challenges, and recommendations discussed by the participants.

The data analysis process entailed transcribing the interview recordings and organizing the manually collected notes. A manual coding approach was employed, where the transcripts and notes were carefully reviewed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and categories relevant to empowering the indigenous community for sustainable local tourism in Sungai Bumbun. The coding process was iterative, ensuring thorough coverage of the data and refining categories and themes as needed.

Upon completion of the coding process, the data were systematically analyzed to extract meaningful insights and identify effective strategies for empowering the indigenous community in Sungai Bumbun for sustainable local tourism. The findings were interpreted within the context of existing literature on community empowerment and sustainable tourism practices, aiming to provide valuable recommendations for fostering inclusive and sustainable tourism development in the indigenous community.

Summary of the Participants

Code	Designation	Job Description
Mr. A	Chairman	Oversees the operations of the Orang Asli Village under the Village Development and Safety Committee (JPKKOA), ensuring effective management and coordination.
Mr. S	Handicraft Master	Serves as a custodian of indigenous cultural heritage by transmitting traditional artisanal methods to younger generations, while also fostering economic opportunities through cultural tourism.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined the role of tourism in Sungai Bumbun through the lens of the Mah Meri community's perceptions, its impact on their cultural identity and economy, and measures that ensure tourism development respects and empowers them. Four major themes emerged: Education, Cultural Identity, Economic Empowerment, and Community Participation.

1. Education as a Tool for Cultural Empowerment

(Previously discussed – summarized here)

Education emerged as a powerful enabler for preserving and sharing Mah Meri heritage. It supports internal cultural continuity and external cultural understanding, ensuring tourism development aligns with the community's values and aspirations. Education also enhances skills for economic participation, transforming cultural assets into viable tourism offerings.

2. Cultural Identity and Heritage Preservation

The Mah Meri people expressed strong concerns and hopes around how tourism impacts their cultural identity. While many participants viewed tourism as a platform to showcase their unique customs, they also highlighted risks of cultural dilution or misrepresentation. As one elder mentioned:

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“We want people to know about us, but not to change who we are.”

This sentiment reflects a desire to balance visibility and integrity. Performances of the Mayin Jo-oh dance, traditional wood carving, and storytelling are seen as valuable expressions of identity—but only if they remain authentic and community-controlled.

Tourism, when respectful, was described as a protective factor that encourages youth to take pride in their culture. However, participants warned against “tourist tailoring,” where practices are altered merely to entertain. This emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive tourism guidelines co-developed with the community.

3. Economic Empowerment through Cultural Tourism

Tourism has opened economic avenues for many Mah Meri families. Handmade masks, wood carvings, traditional attire, and performances have become sources of income and entrepreneurship. Younger members shared that:

“Now we don’t only rely on fishing. We can earn from our stories and our hands.”

This shift supports Research Question 2, highlighting that tourism provides alternative livelihoods while reducing dependency on natural resources. However, not all community members benefit equally. Limited access to training, lack of infrastructure, and intermediaries who take advantage of artisans were cited as challenges.

Therefore, capacity-building workshops, fair trade practices, and cooperative models were suggested to ensure inclusive and sustainable economic benefits.

4. Community Participation and Ownership in Tourism Planning

A key factor in successful tourism identified by participants is genuine community participation. Several villagers noted that past initiatives failed because they were “outsider-driven” without sufficient consultation. One respondent emphasized:

“We must be involved from the start—not just when it’s time to perform.”

This speaks directly to Research Question 3. Empowerment comes not only from participation but from ownership—having control over the narrative, products, and direction of tourism development. Inclusive planning, transparent decision-making, and recognizing the Mah Meri as equal partners are essential.

Some success stories emerged where collaborative partnerships with NGOs and universities allowed the community to take the lead. These examples show how respectful, co-created tourism models can build trust and long-term success.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

As a means of fostering sustainable local tourist development in Sungai Bumbun, this excerpt emphasises the significance of collaboration between many stakeholders and the empowerment of the Orang Asli community. Interviews with key stakeholders, such as the Chairperson (who is responsible for the well-being of the community) and a Handicraft Master (who is the custodian of cultural property), were conducted as part of the qualitative methodology, which yielded useful insights. With the use of education, the Orang Asli are not only able to acquire the skills they need, but they are also able to preserve their cultural heritage through the process of recording and passing it down to subsequent generations.

Recommendations

1. **Foster Collaboration:** Establish a collaborative platform involving the Orang Asli community, government agencies, and NGOs to develop and implement sustainable tourism initiatives.
2. **Empowerment through Education:** Develop educational programs that equip Orang Asli community members with the skills and knowledge necessary to participate effectively in tourism development and management.
3. **Cultural Preservation:** Integrate cultural preservation strategies into tourism activities, ensuring respect for Orang Asli traditions and heritage.
4. **Sustainable Practices:** Promote and implement sustainable tourism practices that minimize environmental impact and protect natural resources.
5. **Capacity Building:** Provide capacity-building programs to equip Orang Asli community members with hospitality and business skills to manage tourism enterprises effectively.

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