

# Empowering Rural Economies: A Community-Centric Sustainable Ecotourism Model

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Received: 27 April 2024 | Accepted: 10 July 2024 | Published: 31 July 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55057/ijaref.2024.6.2.11>

**Abstract:** *Tourism is a key global industry that impacts millions of lives and has significant potential to drive development. The growing interest in spending leisure time in natural settings and increased environmental awareness has fueled the rapid expansion of ecotourism, now one of the fastest-growing segments in the tourism industry. Unlike traditional mass tourism, ecotourism aims to foster wildlife conservation and promote economic growth, especially in developing countries. The characteristic features of ecotourism include a focus on natural attractions, wildlife, and wilderness habitats, with small-scale operations that are generally low-impact and easier to establish. Ecotourism's success largely depends on active community participation and can offer direct benefits while mitigating pressures from unsustainable resource exploitation. This study explores the Bakun Dam area in the Belaga District to evaluate its potential as a sustainable ecotourism model with community involvement. It aims to address several key objectives, including evaluating local tourist attractions, assessing social and cultural aspects, reviewing infrastructure facilities, and developing a sustainable ecotourism model that involves community participation. The methodology employs a quantitative approach supported by qualitative insights. Data collection instruments include questionnaires, interview guides, and observations, with respondents comprising local authorities, visitors, business owners, and local residents. Simple random sampling ensures a fair representation of the population, and the results are analyzed through descriptive methods focusing on frequencies and distribution. The expected outcomes of this study are multifaceted. By developing a sustainable ecotourism model, it aims to enhance the socioeconomic conditions of local communities, creating employment opportunities, encouraging entrepreneurship, and promoting the sale of local products. The model also seeks to foster community involvement, leading to greater conservation efforts and sustainable practices. This approach can guide national tourism policies, positioning the tourism sector as a significant contributor to the country's GDP. Furthermore, the model's success could generate a positive feedback loop, encouraging similar ecotourism projects across Malaysia and supporting broader sustainable development goals.*

**Keywords:** Ecotourism Model, Community Involvement, Sustainable Ecotourism, Rural Areas, Socioeconomic Development, Malaysia

## 1. Introduction

Tourism is a global industry that significantly impacts millions of lives and holds substantial potential for driving development. With a growing interest in spending leisure time in natural

settings and increased environmental awareness, ecotourism has become one of the fastest-growing segments in the tourism industry. Unlike traditional mass tourism, ecotourism provides stronger sectoral connections, reduces outflows of benefits, creates local jobs, and promotes sustainable development (Belsky, 1999; Khan, 1997). As such, it has been popularized as a means to address wildlife conservation while fostering economic growth, especially in developing countries (Campbell, 2002). Ecotourism typically focuses on natural attractions, wildlife, and wilderness habitats. Many countries choose ecotourism as a form of economic development because it is considered low-impact tourism. Ecotourism operations are generally small-scale and easier to establish. Well-planned and operated ecotourism sites, particularly those involving local community participation, can offer direct benefits that mitigate pressure from less sustainable activities exploiting natural and cultural resources. Duffy (2002) suggested that ecotourism development also addresses criticisms about the divisive social and economic impacts of large-scale tourism.

Ecotourism has created opportunities to sustainably spread and maximize economic benefits to villages, remote areas, and national parks. However, this is only possible when government policies promote tourism in these areas and when local communities have the opportunity to participate. Community involvement in ecotourism is inherently political, as it relates to how groups and individuals are empowered to control their lives. According to Bachrach & Botwinick (1992), participation can enhance one's sense of self-worth and allows people to discover their true interests. It is often argued that communities affected by projects or decisions should have an active role and influence at every stage of decision-making and planning. A community-centered approach in planning provides a basis for tourism policies that benefit both local communities and visitors. Long-term, this can meet local needs for managing the rate of change and align with visitors' interest in preserving the unique characteristics of a destination (Hall, 2000). Community participation in tourism planning generally involves individuals in a tourism-oriented community in the decision-making and implementation process, considering broader political and socioeconomic activities. Nature-based tourism and ecotourism are closely linked with local communities, emphasizing that those affected should play an active role in decision-making and planning, benefiting economically while fostering a commitment to conservation and sustainable development. However, the reality of community participation can be complex, and its success can significantly impact the overall success of ecotourism projects.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the ecotourism potential in the Bakun Dam area. Specifically, the objectives of this study are:

- i. To evaluate the tourism attractions in the area, focusing on natural beauty and recreational activities.
- ii. To assess the social and cultural aspects of the area, including local customs, art and culture, community diversity, and traditional values, and their suitability for tourism development.
- iii. To evaluate the capacity of facilities and infrastructure to support tourism, including transportation, accommodation, and other essential services.
- iv. To develop a sustainable ecotourism model that involves community participation to support the local community.

## 2. Literature Review

Malaysia stands out as a premier tourism destination in Southeast Asia, offering a diverse array of attractions such as stunning beaches, lush tropical rainforests, vibrant theme parks, and a rich cultural heritage. According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO), tourism is



defined as "traveling to a destination and staying in a place outside one's usual environment for no more than one consecutive year during leisure time, and for no less than 24 hours, for business and other purposes."

In Malaysia, tourism is divided into domestic and international segments, playing a significant role in the country's economy. The government has taken numerous initiatives to support and expand the industry, including developing tourism infrastructure, providing incentives to the tourism sector, and promoting domestic tourism. In 2019, the tourism sector significantly contributed to Malaysia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), adding RM86.1 billion or 13.3% of GDP, largely due to 26.1 million international visitors. However, the Covid-19 pandemic caused a dramatic decline in tourist arrivals, from 4.33 million in 2020 to just 130,000 in 2021 (Bernama, 2022). Despite these setbacks, Malaysia's tourism industry is anticipated to rebound, with the country continuing to promote its wide range of attractions.

Ecotourism has gained traction in Malaysia and was included in the 7th and 8th Malaysian Plans. The National Ecotourism Plan (2016-2025), launched in 2015, aims to promote this growing sector. According to Ceballos Lascurain (1988), ecotourism involves exploring areas for purposes such as studying, appreciating, and enjoying diverse flora and fauna species. The International Ecotourism Society (2012) defines ecotourism as responsible tourism that aims to preserve natural areas and the environment, support local communities, and encourage interpretation and education. According to the Malaysian Information Department (2012), ecotourism promotes conservation, minimizes environmental impact, and fosters community involvement in positive socio-economic activities.

One of the primary objectives of ecotourism is to protect unique and valuable areas, including wildlife, scenic landscapes, heritage sites, and secluded spots, while minimizing negative impacts on local environments and communities. Ecotourism also seeks to educate people, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of these areas, and promoting community involvement (Zaki & Johan, 2012). By emphasizing local engagement, ecotourism supports local economies through job creation, tourism-related businesses, and community-led conservation efforts.

Malaysia boasts several ecotourism destinations such as Gua Mulu National Park in Sarawak, Mabul and Sipadan Islands in Sabah, Kuala Tahan National Park in Pahang, Langkawi Island in Kedah, and Kuala Selangor Firefly Park in Selangor. A potential new ecotourism site is the Bakun Dam, a hydroelectric facility in the Belaga district of Sarawak. The construction of this dam led to the relocation of about 10,000 people to the Sungai Asap longhouse village. Previously owned by the federal government and managed by Sarawak Hidro Sdn Bhd, the Bakun Hydroelectric Plant was officially taken over by Sarawak Energy Berhad in 2018 (Yusop, 2018). The Bakun Dam, standing 205 meters tall, is among the world's tallest concrete dams and the largest in Asia outside China's Three Gorges Dam. It can generate 2,400 megawatts of electricity, providing power for approximately 30 to 50 years. The reservoir created by the dam spans 14,750 square kilometers and covers a surface area of 695 square kilometers, forming various-sized islands in the surrounding hilly terrain. These islands are ideal for ecotourism development (Sibon and Ling, 2013).

To further enhance Bakun Lake's potential for ecotourism, two projects are underway: an alternative road to Bakun Lake with a budget of RM47 million and the construction of a jetty with a budget of RM17 million (Akmal, 2021). These projects aim to boost Bakun's status as

an ecotourism destination, offering new opportunities for tourism growth and community engagement.

### **2.1 Community Involvement in Sustainable Ecotourism Development**

Ecotourism thrives on the active participation, ownership, and business opportunities afforded to local communities, particularly in rural areas (Epler Wood, 2002). Engaging local people in the decision-making process is essential, providing them with prior informed consent, full participation, and the resources to benefit from sustainable development. When local communities are excluded from initial decisions—such as setting objectives or defining scope—they are less likely to be invested in a project's success.

In developing ecotourism guidelines, it is crucial to consider the level of control that traditional or indigenous communities have when ecotourism is introduced into their natural habitats. Cater (1994) emphasized that the poorest countries are least equipped to handle adverse sustainability impacts, highlighting the necessity of a sustainable approach to ecotourism development.

Environmental factors are significant in tourism destinations, serving as a backdrop for commercial and recreational activities (Farrell & Runyan, 1991). However, tourism can deplete resources, generate waste, and require specific infrastructure, potentially leading to resource overuse (Duffy, 2002). Since the costs of tourism are often borne by local communities, it is recommended that they be heavily involved in decision-making processes that impact their lives.

Community participation is not only about developing local communities but also ensuring comprehensive sustainable development. Some researchers argue that local communities should be at the forefront of any tourism development, including ecotourism, because they bear the majority of development costs (Simmons, 1994; Tosun & Jenkins, 1998; Scheyvens, 1999; Scheyvens, 2002). The focus has shifted from "nature" to "nature where communities live," underscoring that local communities are integral to ecotourism's success. This relationship is crucial for ensuring the sustainability of ecotourism projects.

### **2.2 Tourism System Theory**

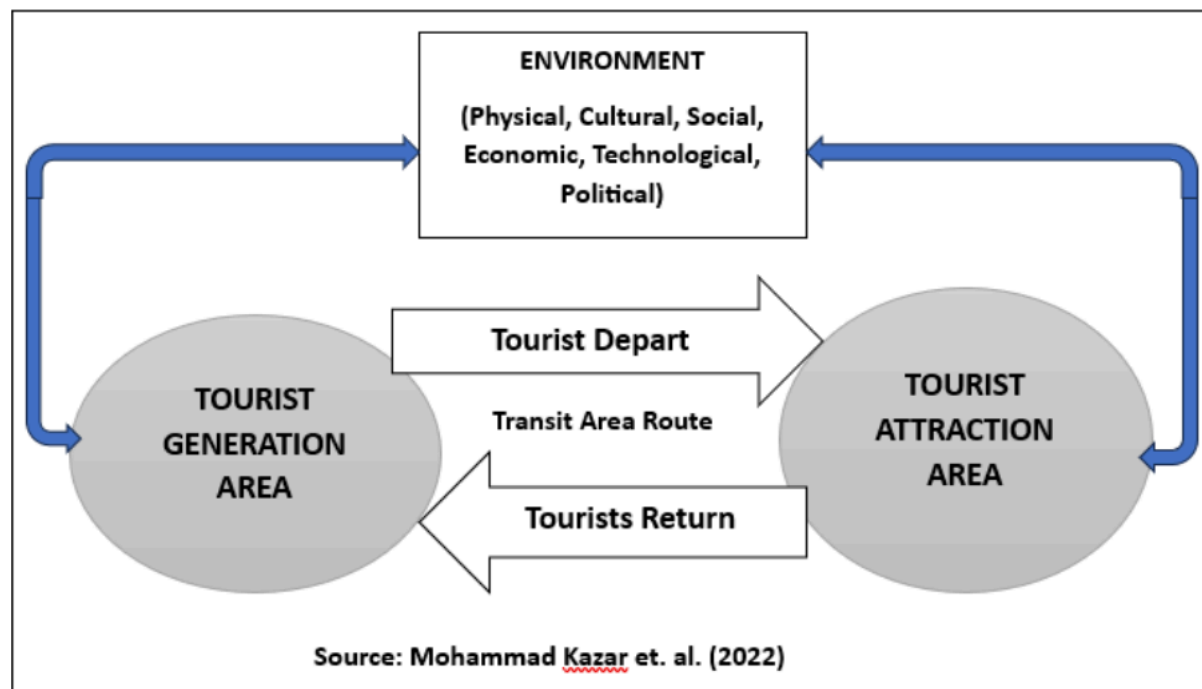
Tourism can be understood as a system with various interconnected components, including tourists, origin areas, transit routes, tourist attractions, and the environment (Leiper, 1979). Initially, modern tourism was categorized into economic, technical, and holistic aspects. However, Leiper's tourism system theory (1981) provides a comprehensive framework for viewing tourism as a system with multiple interacting elements, as depicted in Figure 1.

This system conceptualizes tourism as an open network with broad connections to the environment, human elements (tourists), spatial components (origin areas, transit regions, and chosen destinations), economic components (the tourism industry), and dynamic elements (individuals traveling for leisure, typically for at least a day). Understanding this framework allows researchers to analyze tourist attractions from various perspectives. The tourism system approach is also valuable for planning tourism sites because it considers the array of services, resources, infrastructure, and experiences required for effective tourism planning (Inskeep, 1991; Getz, 1986).

Tourism planning involves making decisions about how to develop a site to prevent negative environmental impacts and avoid adverse effects on local communities (Kimbu & Ngoasong,

2013). This process requires detailed planning, forming the foundation for how a tourist attraction should be structured (Penny, 2013). Tourism planning has evolved from an industrial approach to boosterism, then to land-use planning, and eventually to a community-based approach (Okazaki, 2008). This shift occurred because one of the most significant challenges in tourism planning is community acceptance and their perception of tourism development's impact on their lives (Ben et al., 2013).

Under the guidance of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), every country develops its tourism industry based on its unique resources. The tourism sector has transformed to encompass detailed, flexible, responsive, and systematic planning, emphasizing community involvement (Ibrahim & Razzaq, 2010). This change is driven by recognizing that tourism transforms places into destinations (Dredge & Jenkins, 2003). In Malaysia, the government manages tourism planning at national, state, and local levels. The Malaysia Plan, the country's primary development strategy, guides tourism planning over a five-year period. An essential aspect of effective planning is assessing the current state of a destination and engaging the community in the planning process (Okazaki, 2008).



**Figure 1: Tourism System**

### 3. Methodology

This study will be conducted in the Bakun area, including the Sungai Asap sub-district in Belaga. The research methodology is primarily quantitative, complemented by qualitative data. The instruments used in this study include questionnaires, interview guides, and observations. The main instrument is the questionnaire, targeting respondents such as local authorities, visitors, business owners, and local residents. Simple random sampling, a probability sampling method, will be employed to ensure that every individual in the population has an equal chance of being selected. The questionnaire covers topics such as respondent profiles, purpose and mode of arrival, experiences and activities, and perceptions and suggestions regarding ecotourism in Bakun. The analysis and discussion of the study results are primarily descriptive, using percentages to identify differences and frequencies for each aspect discussed. Observations made during site visits will further strengthen the fieldwork results.



#### **4. Expected Outcomes**

Developing a sustainable ecotourism model with community involvement is expected to yield numerous benefits for both the local area and beyond. By actively engaging the local community, this model aims to improve residents' socioeconomic conditions by creating new employment opportunities, promoting the sale of local products, and encouraging entrepreneurship. It also aims to create a supportive environment for local entrepreneurs to thrive by offering high-quality products and services to tourists.

The active participation of local communities in ecotourism activities can have a significant positive impact on their economic well-being. As community members engage in these activities, they can increase their family incomes and contribute to the national economy. Successful involvement in ecotourism can create a ripple effect, leading to more business ventures and increased job opportunities in nearby regions.

This ecotourism model has the potential to influence national tourism policies and plans, providing a blueprint for promoting the tourism sector at large. By demonstrating a successful approach to sustainable tourism, the model can help establish the tourism sector as a vital contributor to the country's GDP. Additionally, it can attract further investment and encourage the government to support ecotourism projects that align with broader sustainability goals.

Another anticipated outcome is an enhanced sense of community pride and ownership. As local residents become more involved in ecotourism, they are likely to develop a stronger connection to their cultural and environmental heritage. This, in turn, can lead to more proactive efforts in conservation and sustainable practices, fostering a culture of environmental stewardship. Moreover, this model can create a positive feedback loop, where successful community-based ecotourism projects inspire other regions to adopt similar practices, leading to widespread sustainable development in the tourism industry.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The development of a sustainable ecotourism model with community involvement in rural regions offers significant benefits for both local communities and national interests. This study highlights the potential of ecotourism to drive socioeconomic growth, environmental conservation, and cultural preservation. By engaging local communities in every step of the process, from planning to implementation, the model aims to create a framework where tourism supports sustainable development while preserving the unique characteristics of the environment and local culture. Focusing on the Bakun area, including the Sungai Asap sub-district in Belaga, this study aims to develop a model that addresses the specific needs of the local community while fostering sustainable tourism.

The research methodology predominantly uses quantitative data, complemented by qualitative insights. Key instruments, such as questionnaires and interview guides, are used to collect information from various respondents, including local authorities, visitors, business owners, and residents. The simple random sampling technique ensures a fair representation of the population. The study's findings are analyzed using descriptive methods, emphasizing the frequency and distribution of responses.

This study aims to achieve several key objectives by developing a sustainable ecotourism model. It evaluates tourism attractions focusing on natural beauty and recreational activities.

Additionally, it assesses the social and cultural aspects of the area, such as local customs and traditional values, to determine their suitability for tourism development. The evaluation of infrastructure and facilities is also essential to support tourism in terms of transportation, accommodation, and essential services.

The expected outcomes of this model are multifaceted. It aims to provide new economic opportunities for local communities, fostering entrepreneurship, creating jobs, and encouraging the sale of local products. This can have ripple effects on the broader economy, as successful ecotourism projects attract further investment and stimulate growth in related sectors. The model also has the potential to inform national tourism policies, guiding governments to adopt more sustainable and community-centered approaches to tourism development.

Beyond the economic impact, involving local communities in ecotourism can lead to a greater sense of ownership and pride. As residents engage with tourists and share their cultural heritage, they are likely to develop a deeper commitment to conservation and sustainable practices. This community-centered approach not only benefits the residents but also creates a more authentic and meaningful experience for visitors, ultimately contributing to the long-term success of ecotourism projects.

Moreover, this model has broader implications for the tourism sector in Malaysia. By encouraging community participation, this ecotourism approach can support national tourism policies and position the tourism sector as a major contributor to the country's GDP. This holistic approach to ecotourism holds the potential to transform rural areas, ensuring that the benefits of tourism are sustainable and inclusive for all stakeholders involved.

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