

Exploring the Perception of Rural Farmers on Agro Tourism in Cameron Highlands, Malaysia

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to explore the farmers' perception on agro tourism as a catalyst for community development in Cameron Highlands, Malaysia. Attributes from previous research of local communities' attitude were utilized to construct and implement an initial exploratory investigation to identify the domains. Qualitative approach used in this study that enables the inductive process to explore new themes. Naturalistic inquiry is preferred as the data collection procedure to understand the issue of the farmers' community without being influenced by any assumptions. Thematic analysis used to group and classify the significant variables found. As a result, five themes were identified to have significant contribution in determining farmers' perception on agro tourism. This finding can be used in determining farmers' perception on agro tourism. Thus, the main result can be concluded as the perception of the farmers are influenced by five main themes; awareness and attitude, tourism facilities, tourism benefits, challenges of tourism business and environmental concerns.

Key words: Agro tourism • Inductive • Perception • Farmers • Naturalistic inquiry

INTRODUCTION

Agro tourism, or farm tourism, is a part of rural tourism. However, agro tourism is not the same as rural tourism, although it is closely related. Rural tourism is based on the rural environment in general, whereas agro tourism is based on the farm and the farmer. This means that agro tourism operations are based on agricultural production (e.g., a tractor ride, self-plucking, fishing and milking).

Also known as farm tourism, agro tourism is an alternative, soft type of tourism (not massive, not aggressive and not industrialized), which respects people and the environment [1]. It is a modern but also traditional way of tourism, which describes the local community based upon their geographical characteristics, traditions, culture and customs [2].

There are three main characteristics of agro tourism [3]:

- Accommodation for tourists prepared in the owner's home or independently.
- It includes the involvement of all family members of the farmer, where the customs and traditions can be preserved.
- It allows the tourists to experience a peaceful stay, away from the crowds, assisted by friendly people and in direct touch with nature.

It can also be said that agro tourism is a business activity, aiming at hosting tourists in private houses (mainly farms), or in small hotels. The emergence of tourism can lead to positive economic benefits for the community. These benefits include a diversification of the local industry base, increased employment, higher incomes and business revenue growth. According to [4], the rural smallholders, or farmers, often have unused land as well as underutilized premises, such as rooms. These 'dead' assets can easily be turned into profit-making

propositions. In addition, agro-tourism is considered as a flexible enterprise. Unlike the common accommodation sector: it can expand and contract according to market demands. Therefore, it can be said that the farmers can still concentrate on their agricultural production, when there is a low volume of tourist arrivals.

Examples of Agro Tourism Activities:

- Overnight stays lodgings and camping
- Bed and breakfast
- Camp sites
- Farm vacation (farm stays, feeding animals and picking fruit/vegetables)
- Special events and festivals
- Music festivals
- Harvest festivals
- Off the farm
- Farmers' markets
- Roadside produce stands
- Recreational activities and events
- Fishing
- Horse riding
- Fresh products and value-added products:
- Pick your own fruit/vegetables
- Selling canned foods on the farm: wine, honey and strawberry jams
- Youth and/or adult education
- Organized tours: school groups, senior groups and tour groups
- Education programs: how to grow apples or how to care for cattle
- Nature education programs: wildlife and trees

Several criteria that should be met in order to run a successful agro tourism business [5]:

- An agro tourism area must have beautiful landscape besides cultural, historical and natural attractions.
- Good transportation links are essential to make the area easily accessible from the nearest population centres.
- They must have basic infrastructures, such as accommodation, transportation and catering facilities.
- For marketing purposes, especially to attract international tourists, the particular area must also have stable political conditions.
- It is also very important that the community in the area must be in favour of being involved with agro tourism.

Agro Tourism in Malaysia and Cameron Highlands:

Cameron Highlands was preferred as the study area, because of the well-established Malaysian tourism destination status. [6-7] mentioned that Cameron Highlands as a well known and principle tourism location, in Malaysia. Figure 1 shows a map of Cameron Highlands, which is one of the major tourist destinations in Malaysia. Located 1500 meters above sea level, it is the smallest district in the state of Pahang and is situated in the northwestern corner. With the rapid development of tourism businesses in recent years, it was initially developed purely for tea plantations.

Historically, this highland was founded by a British surveyor, (William Cameron) during a mapping expedition in the year 1885. Thus, the highland adopted his name.

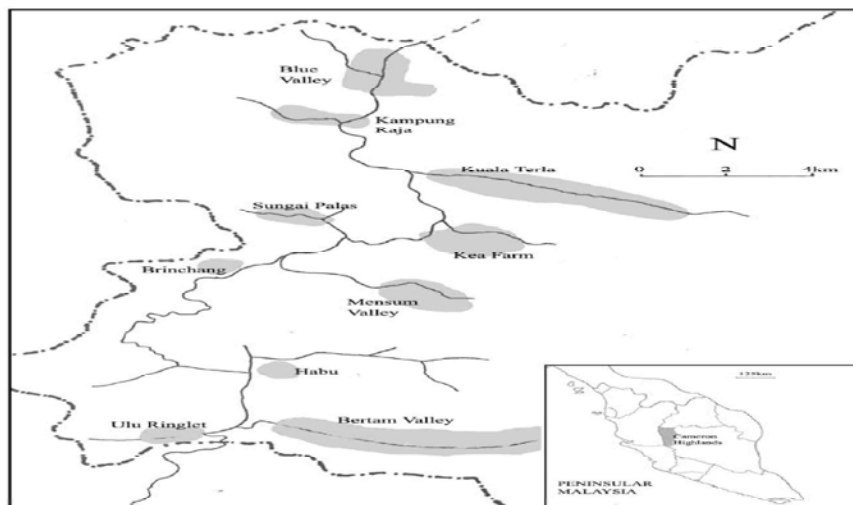


Fig. 1: Map of Cameron Highlands

(District Council of Cameron Highlands, Pahang). Since tea was one of the valuable trade items at that time, higher demand from western countries was received.

Therefore, mass tea plantations were started. Gradually, other forms of farms, such as vegetables, flowers and fruits, developed as well. Due to the cool environment, tourists arriving from other parts of Malaysia and other countries, have always been increasing [6].

Research Question and Objectives: It can be concluded that, there has been limited studies, which attempt to focus on factors influencing the perception of the farmer towards agro tourism. To bridge this knowledge gap, the present study will investigate farmers' perception of agro tourism. In other words, this study attempts to explore the themes that influence farmers' involvement in tourism activities.

Literature Review: Many farmers face positive impacts from the implementation of tourism in agriculture. Additionally, an increasing demand for 'green products' has provided more returns to the part-time farmers. There are few common benefits of agro tourism to the particular community [8]. Public employment will be increased, because of the diversification of the local industry base. More workers would be required as tour guides, housekeeping attendants, drivers and tour packaging officers, etc. Several new types of business will be introduced to rural establishments, such as home stay accommodations, interpretation centres and restaurants.

This positive scenario, will lead to higher income gains amongst the farmers. This situation will gradually cause an enlargement of the tax base and result in business revenue growth.

The contribution of rural tourism can be expressed, in not only financial terms, but it also creates many job opportunities for the rural community [9]. In Galicia, Spain, agro tourism has begun to be utilized as an alternative to traditional agricultural activities. More job opportunities were created in the area since the emergence of tourism.

The farmers or fishermen often have unused land and buildings, as well as underutilized grounds or properties, such as rooms, barns and attics. When there is strategic innovation, these underutilized assets can be converted to profit making business. [4] found that farm tourism also influences the farmer and his family to remain together on the farm by stopping the younger generation migration to cities. It maintains each one of them as a dynamic unit, by offering job to all members of the family, particularly the women.

In addition, the presence of tourists on the farms can lead to new and varied human contacts. This situation is different to their daily routine work on the farm. A rise in the quality of life, achieved through the establishment, of new conveniences, comforts and facilities. For instance, farmers in Israel were searching and developing for an alternative source of income [10].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to understand the real phenomenon in the particular study area, a preliminary data gathering technique was employed. To obtain the data, naturalistic inquiry was deemed appropriate by using a semi-structured interview as a tool. The semi-structured interview was used as an inductive approach to gain new and unexpected responses from the respondents, which prevents the interviewer from assuming potential variables. However, a questionnaire guide was developed and used throughout the interviewing session to obtain the pattern of answers that are appropriate to the objectives of the study.

The data was gathered from three towns (Kampung Raja, Ringlet and Bluevalley) in Cameron Highlands and 12 farmers were interviewed. Since the study area consisted of farmers with various ethnicity languages, the interview was conducted in four languages: English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil. The researcher, together with the translators, went to the farms and conducted the interviews in the particular farmers' language of choice. All the conversations were recorded with the permission of the respondents. However, one respondent refused for the conversation to be recorded. Therefore, the interview was conducted and the conversation was transcribed. The qualitative study was conducted using the seven stages by [11]. They included thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, verifying and reporting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After analyzing 12 recorded semi structured interviews using thematic analysis, five factors were found as important clues to understanding the nature of the perception.

Factor 1: Awareness and Attitude: Generally, many respondents had an awareness of agro tourism. Some farmers, who do not operate any tourism activities, were completely unaware of agro tourism. Although most of the farmers were involved in agro tourism indirectly,

they did not understand the term 'agro tourism'. Therefore, some explanation and examples were provided by the interviewee to help the farmers to give comments:

I know sometimes people will go to visit the flower exhibition, but I am not sure whether that is agro-tourism or not. (Chinese female, 47 years old from Kampung Raja)

However, some of the respondents understood the term 'agro tourism' without any further explanation:

Agro tourism means, we let tourist come to visit our farm (Indian male, 45 years old from Kampung Raja)

I think, if I am not mistaken, agro is agriculture and tourism means travelling. (Chinese male, 51 years old from Ringlet)

Agro tourism is like, fetch tourists, go to vegetable farm, flower farms...(Chinese male, 48 years old from Ringlet).

Some respondents were unaware of the existence of tourism activities in their area. They are not interested in the tourist industry, because they concentrate fully on agriculture production. The main reason that they do not want to be involved in other businesses, is that the profit from their agriculture production is considered adequately sufficient.

I have been living in Cameron Highlands for about 59 years and I have not seen any of my friends (farmers) gain loss from their business. We always get a good return... sometimes, even when the price of the fertilizers is very high, we could always manage to break even at least, (Indian male, 59 years old from Tanah Rata).

Therefore, the awareness of agro tourism is at the lowest level, because of their ignorant attitude towards any secondary businesses. They are reluctant to try other businesses other than agriculture: because the difficulties faced in handling an agriculture business, are many.

Factor 2: Facilities: Another important factor, which emerged from the investigation, was the need for adequate facilities in the agro tourism business. Many respondents felt that accessibility to their farm is the biggest issue, which should be addressed. When asked if the tourists are visiting their farm, most of them gave common negative answers.

No, it is because the farm is too far from main road. If want to go in, we need Land Rover, normal car unable to drive in, (Chinese Male, 45 years old from Kampung Raja).

The farm's location, far from basic facilities, is another deep concern for the farmers. They have great doubt on the satisfaction that can be gained by the tourist, who could potentially visit their farm. A farmer compared his farm with the farms in other areas and gave his recommendation:

If my farm is at Brinchang, there, I will invest in this agro tourism. I feel that Brinchang and Tanah Rata are the two places developing quite well. However, Ringlet will be quieter. Sometimes, I will go drink tea with friends at Brinchang, there I could see a lot of tourist at the night market there. Therefore, if you want to do this agro tourism, you have to consider doing it at a particular place, (Chinese male, 47 years old from Kampung Raja).

Brinchang and Tanah Rata are the areas where agro tourism activities are well established. Therefore, many of the respondents repeatedly compared their farms with these dominant areas, with low motivation tones.

Our farm does not have such good condition like them (other successful agro tourism farms), did not have so many vegetables, the place also not big. If the place is big, we can plant more quantity and more types of vegetables, it can save the cost. This is because, crop plantation needs us to do a lot of work and many workers needed, but now the price of vegetables is very low, we need to pay the salary and fertilizer, the price of fertilizer now is drastically increasing and sometimes we even need to borrow money, (Chinese male, 41 years old from Kampung Raja).

Factor 3: Benefits: The respondents generally agreed that the existence of agro tourism in their area brings in many benefits to Cameron Highlands as a whole. However, farmers in the rural areas argued that they only experienced indirect benefits. Although no tourists are visiting their farms, they can still share the benefits of tourism, where the main roads to their villages have been developed.

However, apart from infrastructural developments, positive social impacts can be seen clearly in the community and are always appreciated by the farmers. One farmer expressed her feelings that she was always glad to see tourists come to her farm, although she is not operating any kind of agro tourism activity. She also mentioned that conversing with tourists is always joyful.

I feel so happy, to be visited by new friends and let them visit to my farm. I can learn about their (tourists') culture. They come from Singapore, Japan and Australia, (Indian female, 39 years old from Ringlet)

Factor 4: Problems: Another problem found, that has become a constraint for farmers to participate in agro tourism, is the Temporary Ownership of Land (TOL) status. The farmers, who are operating business under the TOL status, are not the owners of the land, but they are

allowed to develop the land for agriculture production and they must pay yearly rental fees to the government. Generally, most of the farmers operating TOL status land, gave negative responses:

Now the land status that we hold is just TOL, it is for temporary only. If the government wants it, within 24 hours notice, they can take it. If we spend, (invest for agro tourism) a lot of money for the land and then the government just takes it, what can we do? We will die (bankrupt)! When we want to apply permanent license, we could not manage to get it. (Indian male, 54 years old from Bluevalley)

One respondent responded that agro tourism would reduce their profit from their vegetable and flower sales.

Just visit, I will welcome. Nevertheless, if want to buy vegetables from me, I would not do it. It is because my crops are prepared to be delivered to the market and I do not want to sell it in low volumes. (Indian male, 38 years old from Ringlet)

Factor 5: Environment: Most of the farmers said that the climate in Cameron Highlands is a positive factor that encourages agro tourism. However, one farmer argued that the uncertainty of the weather would affect agro tourism operations:

Weather at Cameron Highlands, if raining continuously, we will get loss. If the weather is good, the vegetables will be more 'beautiful' and the arrival of tourist to my farm will increase. The quantity of vegetables also will increase and then the price will be less. (Chinese male, 42 years old from Blue Valley).

The key informants also generally agreed on the environment destruction caused as a result of tourism development in the area. They are also tend to be more careful in current facilities developments in their area by emphasizing sustainable development.

CONCLUSION

The main aim of this study is to understand the farmers' perception of agro tourism in Cameron Highlands, Malaysia, by using the naturalistic inquiry technique. These factors however, were not unique in literature. However, most studies concentrated only on the impacts of tourism. The result of the study however, does not contradict the social exchange theory, which says that the people who get benefit from tourism, support tourism [12-15]. The farmers from tourism concentrated areas tended to have positive perceptions of agro tourism,

because they were directly involved in tourism. By understanding the critical success factors influencing the farmers' perception, sound decision can be made to improve farmers' participation in agro tourism. Genuine effort and participation of various stakeholders can assist in tourism development [16-19].

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