

## An Appraisal of the Institutional Structure of Rural Tourism in Malaysia: A Conceptual Framework

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**Abstract:** This conceptual paper seeks to examine the institutional obstacles that affect rural tourism in Malaysia. Identifying the government institutions involved in the planning and development of rural tourism is itself problematic. The jurisdictions of federal agencies and state agencies may overlap, thus resulting in haphazard planning and mismatched objectives. Studies on this area are limited and have become outmoded due to the shifting governmental landscape in the country. The jurisdictional boundaries of various institutions continue to change, thus causing a gap in the identification of responsible government agencies and their corresponding portfolios. An institutional appraisal of rural tourism in Malaysia is therefore necessary. In this regard, the effectiveness of governmental institutions should be evaluated in terms of (a) the promotion of environmentally sustainable rural tourism; (b) the protection of host community interests; and (c) facilitating the effective enforcement of laws and regulations pertaining to rural tourism. The conceptual framework facilitates the development of a responsible rural tourism institutional framework at local, state and national levels.

**Keywords:** *environmental protection, government institutions, host communities, Malaysia, rural tourism, sustainability*

### 1. Introduction

Government planning and actions impact on almost every sphere of tourism activities. According to Dredge and Jenkins (2007), the multiplicity and complexity of legal and planning issues affecting tourism must be recognized. Faced with resource constraints and competing claims, there are bound to be winners and losers in tourism development. This conceptual paper lays down the appraisal framework for the institutions responsible for rural tourism in Malaysia. In this context, the term 'institution' refers broadly to federal agencies, state agencies and municipal authorities. The purpose of this appraisal framework is to evaluate the effectiveness of the institutions involved in rural tourism planning and development. This is because institutional arrangement severely affects the tourism industry, regardless of

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segmentation. As Richter (1989) pointed out, the success or failure of tourism is highly affected by political and administrative actions.

In Malaysia, there are many government agencies (both at federal and state levels) responsible in overseeing or promoting rural tourism activities. Further, a myriad of laws and policies affect tourism destinations, operators and host communities. While some of these laws and policies enhance tourism, they can also be prohibitive, such that the desired tourism activities in certain destinations cannot be carried out (Nimmonratana, 2000). Government institutions determine the allocation of resources and this has serious consequences on rural tourism. Literature shows that tourism brings both positive and negative socio-cultural, economic and environmental impacts to destination areas (Mbaiwa, 2011; Andriotis, 2003; Harrison, 1996). This leads to the issue of whether the interests of the host communities are sufficiently protected in rural tourism planning and development.

The negative repercussions of tourism are numerous. Debicka and Oniszczyk-Jastrzabek (2014: 190) highlight the following problems faced by tourist destinations: “growing traffic, crowded places and popular routes, devastation of the landscape by chaotic development and poorly laid out infrastructure, over-exploitation of natural resources, shrinking valuable natural areas, climate change, adverse social changes such as prostitution or begging”. In view that rural tourism development can conflict with environmental protection and host community interests, various issues arise. For example, how do we safeguard the destinations from these problems? Should the involvement of the host community be encouraged – should this encompass consultation or active participation? In terms of approach, governmental agencies and law-makers have to decide whether to make consultation compulsory or to encourage voluntary dialogue.

There are some studies concerning the institutional structure of tourism in Malaysia (Hamzah, 2004; Marzuki, 2010). However, there is no similar study that focuses specifically on rural tourism in the country. Existing studies have also become outmoded due to the shifting governmental landscape in the country. The jurisdictional boundaries of various institutions continue to change, thus causing a gap in the identification of responsible government agencies and their corresponding portfolios. Further, new policies have emerged, in particular, the Northern Corridor Economic Region (NCER) and the Eastern Corridor Economic Region (ECER) affect development priorities in the northern and eastern states of Malaysia. New laws, such as the Environmental Quality (Prescribed Activities) (Environmental Impact Assessment), Order 2015 (EIA Order 2015), also impact on the institutional arrangement of rural tourism. In light of this, an institutional appraisal of rural tourism in Malaysia is timely.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Definition of 'rural tourism' uncertain**

Delimiting what constitutes 'rural tourism' is itself challenging. Broadly, rural tourism can be defined as tourism that takes place in rural areas (Ghaderi & Henderson, 2012). The problem is that opinions differ on what constitutes 'rural', and the concept may be interpreted differently from one country to another (Sharpley & Roberts, 2004). Adopting a minimalist definition, one would, at the very least, attribute rural tourism with the following characteristics: low population density, traditional way of life, natural landscape and geographical attraction, low built-up environment of the destination and relatively remote in terms of travel (OECD, 1994).

In Malaysia, the Rural Tourism Master Plan 2001 defines rural tourism as (cited in Hamzah, 2004: 9): "tourism that provides opportunities to visitors to visit rural areas and rural attractions, and to experience the culture and heritage of Malaysia, thereby providing socio-economic benefits for local communities ... the proximity of many of these rural areas to the hinterland and rainforest also offers visitors an opportunity to extend their holiday and enjoy those unique natural resources."

According to Nair et al (2014), this official definition is vague and narrow, particularly because the definition focuses on homestay programs, when in fact; rural tourism has far wider potentials. This definition should be improved "to reflect the needs and complexities of the current environment". A clear definition of rural tourism is necessary in order to avoid "wrong representations and expectations in rural tourism destinations" (Nair et al, 2014: 21).

### **2.2 Institutional framework important to rural tourism**

The institutional structure of a country significantly impacts on the tourism industry. According to Lintzmeyer, Siegrist, and Hass (2006), external factors such as international standards, legal framework, public subsidies, financial resources, and cooperation with participating stakeholders, were key success factors in nature-based tourism in protected areas. In a study on tourism development in the Okavanga Delta (Botswana), it was found that the government's harsh approach to land zoning and the extension of park boundaries significantly reduced the host communities' access to the land and resources they previously enjoyed. Consequently, the host communities had not benefited to the degree anticipated from the rural and nature-based tourism there (Mbaiwa, Ngwenya & Kgathi, 2008).

A government can directly spearhead rural tourism projects through the injection of capital pursuant to favourable developmental policies. For example, in the 1990s

the Sarawak Economic Development Corporation (SEDC) – an agency of Sarawak state – invested over RM 550 million to build five international standard hotels and other tourism properties, plus downtown shopping complexes in Kuching. In addition, the Sarawak Cultural Village was developed as a ‘living museum’ that showcased the authentic dwelling styles, arts, crafts, games, foods, music, and dance of seven of Sarawak’s major resident cultures. SEDC also developed two resorts, Bukit Saban and Royal Mulu, which were located deep within Borneo’s interior rainforest. These resorts served as a comfortable base for ecotourism adventures (Edmonds & Leposky, 2000).

These projects were undertaken by the Sarawak state government independently of the federal government of Malaysia. While this demonstrates proactive tourism initiatives by the state government, it must be remembered that mismatched objectives and lack of cooperation between state government and federal government can hinder development. Timothy (2000) highlighted the lack of cooperation between the Johor state government and the federal government as one reason that contributed to the lack-luster development of the Singapore-Johor-Riau Growth Triangle in the 1990s.

Once it is acknowledged that institutional structure significantly impact on rural tourism, the next question is, what are the institutions responsible for rural tourism? This question is not easily addressed because rural tourism may encompass many aspects. For example, a rural tourist destination in a coastal area may also be classified as coastal tourism; whereas a rural tourist destination in a national park may be deemed an ecotourism destination.

The Ministry of Tourism and Culture (MOTAC) is responsible for the overall planning, marketing and promotion of tourism in Malaysia. Apart from that, the following federal departments may also be directly involved in the development of tourism (Hamzah, 2004: 4):

- Department of Agriculture (agri-tourism);
- Department of Forestry (ecotourism);
- Department of Fisheries (coastal tourism);
- Department of Wildlife and National Parks (ecotourism);
- Department of Orang Asli Development (aboriginal/ethnic tourism);
- Department of Museums and Antiquities (heritage/cultural tourism).

Hamzah (2004) highlighted the problem of overlapping jurisdictions among these federal government agencies. In addition, each state has its own State Economic Planning Unit and each state in Peninsular Malaysia has a State Tourism Action

Council that oversees tourism matters at state level. Unfortunately, coordination between these state agencies and the federal government was not very effective.

### **2.3 Environmental protection under the existing enforcement regime**

At present, Malaysia faces the following environmental problems: inland water and marine pollution from various sources; air pollution from traffic, industry and agricultural activities; deforestation due to logging and land clearance activities; mismanagement of waste and sewage discharges; dangerous discharge of hazardous and toxic wastes; and air pollution due to conditions of haze (Mustafa, 2009). Arguably, these environmental threats affect, directly and indirectly, every sphere of the country's economic activities, including the tourism industry.

A good institutional framework for rural tourism depends on the existence of effective laws as well. The Environmental Quality Act 1974 (EQA) and the Environmental Quality (Prescribed Activities) (Environmental Impact Assessment) Order 1987 (EIA Order 1987) reflect the government's stance on environmental protection in general. More recently, the EIA Order 2015 has revoked the EIA Order 1987.

The EQA imposes, *inter alia*, the requirement of an environmental impact assessment (EIA) where a party proposes a project that potentially impacts on the environment. An EIA is a study undertaken with the purpose of assessing the likely impact of a project on the environment, and where applicable, whether suitable measures can be implemented to mitigate the negative impact of the proposed project. Not every project is subjected to an EIA, the same only has to be undertaken where a project falls under the category of 'Prescribed Activities' as listed in the EIA Order 1987. Study conducted by Nair, Abdullah and Abdullah (2011) found that the list of Prescribed Activities was not very comprehensive. The study recommended that a more comprehensive list of Prescribed Activities be introduced through the amendment of the EIA Order 1987. In addition, the study found many uncertainties surrounding the interpretation of Prescribed Activities. Among state decision-makers, opinions differ on what kind of projects require EIA. Further, EIAs were often carried out by consultants whose fees were paid by project proponents. This gave rise to doubts concerning the impartiality of the EIA reports.

Now that the EIA Order 1987 has been revoked and replaced by the EIA Order 2015, has the list of Prescribed Activities widened? To a certain extent, the EIA Order 2015 has increased the number of Prescribed Activities, and thus imposes the requirement of EIA on more developments. For example, the EIA Order 2015 remedied a legal loophole by imposing the EIA requirement on proposed

development in slope areas. However, more could have been done to increase the effectiveness of the new EIA system.

To prevent circumvention of the EIA requirements, Nair et al. (2011) had proposed that a category called 'Others' be added to the Prescribed Activities in the EIA Order 1987 as a 'catch-all' provision. Thus, where the Director-General of Environment considers a proposed project to require an EIA, such requirement can be imposed notwithstanding that a proposed project does not fall within any of the Prescribed Activities. Unfortunately, such 'catch-all' provision has not been included in the EIA Order 2015.

To compound the problem further, enforcement of the EQA rests – with overlapping jurisdictions – on various federal departments and state departments. The drawback of a federal system resurfaces again to hamper the enforcement of these laws. At the federal level, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment has overall supervisory role in the enforcement of the EQA. More specifically, the Department of Environment (DOE) within the Ministry oversees EIA compliance. However, there are various authorities that have to be consulted in the EIA process. For example, where a project concerns the alienation, transfer or a change in category of land use (e.g. from agricultural to residential), the relevant land office/land registry of the state is involved. Thus far, coordination between these departments was not particularly seamless.

According to Suhaimi (2013), Malaysia's colonial past still influences the direction of the country's current environmental practices. Prior to Malaya's independence in 1957, the laws enacted by the colonial administration largely facilitated the exploitation of Malaya's natural resources, namely, tin, timber, rubber and palm oil. These mining, logging and agricultural activities required the systematic clearing of land. Conservation was therefore not a primary concern during the colonial era. Upon independence, Malaya inherited laws that arguably could not ensure the country's 'essential stewardship of its own environment' (Suhaimi, 2013: ccii).

In Suhaimi's (2013) view, the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibility' should apply in evaluating a country's capacity for environmental protection. Basically, in determining a country's obligation towards sustainable development and conservation, the country's historical background, political regime, economic growth, social structure and a host of other factors should be considered. Under the Stockholm Declaration 1972, it was recognized that "the developed and the developing countries were not at the same level playing field when it came to their obligations in protecting the environment." Further, most of the world's bio-resources were located at the developing world and that these countries were mostly

ill-equipped to protect their environment. Thus, “concessions were needed to ensure successful sustainability of shared concerns” (UNCHE, 1972, Principle 9).

However, Suhaimi (2013) acknowledged that colonialism could not excuse the slow progress in environmental protection. Comparison with New Zealand showed that the legacy of colonialism had not hampered the country’s progress in the pursuit of sustainable development and environmental protection. Further comparisons with other decolonized countries, such as Australia (Nijar, 1997) and India (Ansari, 2004) will also show that colonial past is not a permanent obstacle to a country’s commitment towards environmental sustainability.

#### **2.4 Public participation and regulatory constraints**

Where host communities were able to participate in the decision-making, implementation and operation of tourism activities, the level of acceptance and cooperation between the tourism enterprises and the host communities are generally higher (Ghaderi & Henderson, 2012). Using national parks in the UK as case study, Hewlett and Edwards (2013) pointed out that the planning and management of such tourist destinations should ideally be a ‘tri-sector partnership’ between the public sector, representatives of tourism small and medium-sized enterprises and local residents. However, such collaboration is complex and the findings show that in reality, only a small number of people are consulted. This type of community engagement may be perceived by the wider community as tokenistic or disingenuous. Similarly, Haukeland’s (2011) study on the management of two national parks in Norway indicated that local tourism stakeholders were not very involved in the management planning process and had very little influence in the final management decisions. Interestingly, the study showed that some respondents considered the management of the national parks to be too cautious in their conservation measures, and that some of the precautions were unnecessary. They also felt that the park management authorities were “uninformed about recent developments in user interests and unaware of emerging patterns of tourist behaviour” (Haukeland, 2011: 145-146). The qualitative studies carried out by Hewlett and Edwards (2013) and Haukeland (2011) were extensive in that sufficient number of representatives from the stakeholder groups (residents, tourism businesses and park management authority) were interviewed and the emergent themes and findings showed in-depth considerations.

What we can surmise from the literature is that host communities and tourism stakeholders can give valuable input in terms of planning and management of tourist

destinations. Yet, the consultation process failed to give voice to the majority, be they residents or tourism stakeholders.

Returning to the EIA process, where applicable, an EIA is conducted prior to the inception of a project. Ideally, an EIA process should include the participation of the host community. The views of the local population should be considered in determining whether the project concerned should be undertaken, and if so, whether precautionary/pre-emptive measures are necessary to avoid/mitigate negative impact on the environment.

The requirement of public participation in the preparation of an EIA depends on the kind of EIA report. In a 'preliminary assessment', public engagement is not necessary (DOE, 1994). Public participation is only necessary in a 'detailed assessment' (DOE, 1995). Unfortunately, as Briffett, Obbard and Mackee (2004) pointed out, most of the EIA reports submitted in Malaysia were preliminary assessments that did not require public participation. For example, between 1988 and 1999, out of the 1317 EIA reports that were submitted to the DOE, only 15 reports were detailed assessment (Memon, 2000).

What are the avenues available to a host community in challenging a project that is approved following an EIA? This depends on whether an individual has sufficient interest or has suffered special damage, such that he has locus standi or standing to commence a legal action. In a case where a project affects the entire community, it is not easy for an individual within that host community to establish interest in or special damage consequent of the project. A litigant must show that he suffered special injury over and above the injury common to other members of his community. This proves to be a stumbling block when representatives of a host community seek to challenge a planning permission or project that affects his community (Maidin, 2012).

### **3. Methodology**

The analysis of the institutions responsible for rural tourism involves mainly secondary data from published sources in Malaysia and other countries. Such secondary data includes journal articles, news reports, government reports and international guidelines, especially the principles or code of conduct issued by the UNEP or the UNWTO. The analysis of secondary data from abroad facilitates a comparative approach towards the identification of threats/challenges affecting rural tourism in Malaysia.

To identify the institutions responsible for rural tourism in Malaysia, secondary data from published sources in Malaysia were examined. This includes government documents that were publicly available, official statements issued by ministries via

the press or their respective websites. To identify the laws and regulations pertaining to rural tourism, statutes, bylaws and legal texts in Malaysia were examined. To ensure that the latest amendments were reflected in the secondary sources analysed, where applicable, the official versions published in the Attorney-General's Chamber's 'e-Federal Gazette' (<http://www.federalgazette.agc.gov.my/>) were referred to.

Government policy papers were examined as well, as they throw light on the legislative directions of a country and heavily influence the interpretation of laws. Strictly, policies such as the NCER and the ECER are not legally binding. However, since they embody government plans, officials and private actors may be inclined to organize their actions in accordance with the policies and guidelines.

Primary data will be collected for the purpose of assessing the level of environmental protection in rural tourist destinations; and to evaluate the economic involvement of a host community in tourism businesses. In this regard, the qualitative method will be used. The majority of the sample population will consist of individuals within the host community. In addition, key informants such as community leaders and government officials responsible for the development of the locality will be interviewed.

The Royal Belum State Park in Perak is selected as the case study on the assumption that this locality is typical of many rural tourist destinations in Malaysia, such that the findings derived from this proposed research are indicative of the issues faced by other host communities (Burns, 1997).

The participants will be derived through two methods:

(a) convenience sampling – to be applied in the selection of individuals within the host community; and

(b) purposive sampling – to be applied in the selection of key informants.

Data collection will be conducted through semi-structured face to face interviews with the respondents. The purpose of approaching data collection through this manner is to facilitate discussion and to enable more effective comparison of responses.

Size of the sample population can only be determined during fieldwork when data collection is in progress. Successive number of respondents will be approached for interview until the responses obtained reach a saturation point, namely, where a significant number of the responses are relatively similar. Analysis of the qualitative data gathered will be undertaken thematically. The data will be clustered according to themes and patterns, analysis of which should lead to coherent and interpretable findings. Figure 1 shows the framework of study that will be adopted.

In terms of limitation of the study, reliability of the data may be affected where the respondents are not forthright about their true opinions. In other words, some respondents may be hesitant in speaking their minds due to fear (real or illusory) of reprisals from the host community or government authorities. In addition, the subjectivity of a qualitative study means that the findings are not generalizable (Kumar, 2014).

#### **4. Appraisal Criteria and Research Questions**

To appraise the institutional framework of rural tourism in terms of effectiveness, clear criteria should be adopted. In this regard, the research seeks to analyze the effectiveness of the relevant institutions from three perspectives, namely (a) environmentally sustainable development; (b) the protection of host communities interests; and (c) the effective enforcement of laws and regulations pertaining to rural tourism. These criteria are used to evaluate the institutional structure of rural tourism because of the strong relationship between tourism development, sustainability and host communities. At the same time, an effective enforcement regime facilitates sustainable tourism development and protects host community interests. According to Ferreira (2011), there is a symbiotic relationship between tourism development, the host community and the ecology of the tourist destination. Using Table Mountain National Park, South Africa as a case study, Ferreira argued that the National Park could only be successful as a tourist destination by ensuring (i) proper conservation of the National Park's unique biodiversity; and (ii) by improving the socio-economic conditions of the local community through job creation and social upliftment measures. In short, symbiosis in tourism development is the attainment of win-win strategy between tourism businesses on the one hand and ecology and host community interests on the other hand.

Where a tourist destination is developed without regard for conservation and host community interests, tourism development becomes a competing force. Rural tourism development that neglects environmental protection may lead to erosion, land degradation, littering, fire risks, rapid construction, depletion of natural resources, vandalism, traffic congestion, noise pollution and even parking woes (Ghaderi & Henderson, 2012). Negative impacts on a host community range from decline in traditional livelihood activities (Mbaiwa, 2011), exclusion from territories central to the community's culture and livelihood (Mbaiwa, Ngwenya & Kgathi, 2008) to the decline in the community's culture or the 'commodification' of culture (DEAT, 2002: 35). Ideally, tourism should be developed in a manner that the host community acquires a sense of stewardship towards the tourist destination and its ecosystem (Ferreira, 2011). Where a balance between development, sustainability and the host

community's interests cannot be achieved, each faction – project proponents, environmentalists and host community – have competing goals.

These competing goals are not necessarily irreconcilable. The fact that tourism development may impact on (therefore competes with) environmental protection does not mean that the latter has to be sacrificed. This is evident from the concept of 'sustainable development' under the Brundtland Report 1987, namely, a development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987: 43). In this respect, environmental protection is an integral element of sustainable development (WCED, 1987: 28-29).

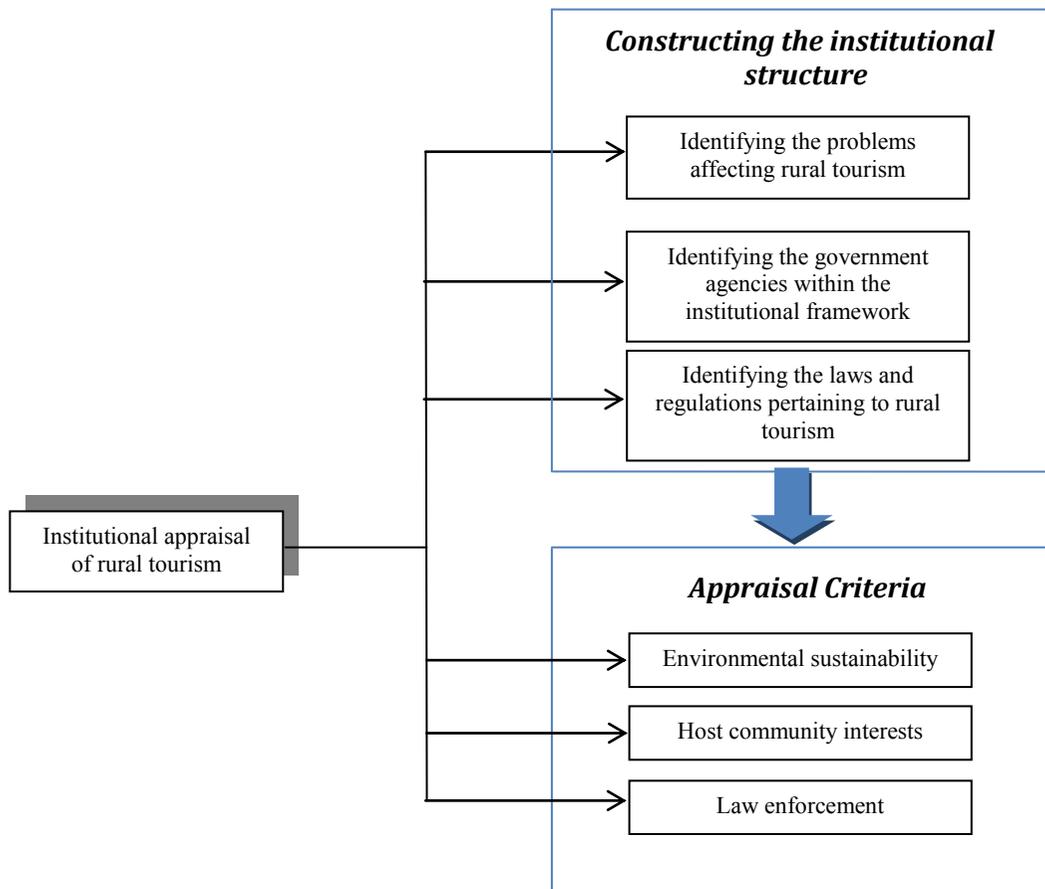
The importance of balancing these competing goals is also inherent in the concept of sustainable tourism. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defined sustainable tourism as: "Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities" (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005: 11). This definition emphasizes the involvement of host community in sustainable tourism. The presumption is that a host community has an interest in ensuring the sustainable development of its locality. Thus, engaging the community through consultation and active involvement can contribute towards sustainable tourism development. From this perspective, sustainable development and the protection of host communities interests constitute a common goal.

The appraisal criteria adopted in this study reflects the symbiotic relationship between tourism development, environmental sustainability and the protection of host community interests (Ferreira, 2011). Effective enforcement of laws and regulations is used as an appraisal criterion because good governance is highly dependent on proper law enforcement (Fisher, Lange & Scotford, 2013). The research questions are therefore as follows:

1. What are the institutional reforms necessary to improve the environmental protection of rural tourism destinations and how effective is the current enforcement regime?

The effectiveness of the institutional structure is appraised in accordance with the first criterion, namely, environmental sustainability. This involves a critical evaluation of government actions (at various levels) in this area. It is also necessary to examine the current loopholes in the laws pertaining to environmental protection in Malaysia. Does the current structure/division of responsibility enable the government to promote tourism development in a sustainable manner? The state-

federal relationship in the planning of tourism destinations and environmental protection should be explored. A comparative study of the institutional structure of other countries should be undertaken, since this may shed light on alternative approaches.



**Figure 2.** Conceptual framework

2. What are the institutions responsible for promoting the interests of host communities in rural tourist destinations, and how effective are they?

By contrast to the first research question, the institutional structure is appraised in accordance with the second criterion, namely, the protection of host community interests. Thus, 'effectiveness' is assessed in terms of the government agencies' ability to balance tourism development and host community interests. In this regard, consultation/participation of the host communities in tourism planning and development is very important. Further, this research question seeks to examine the

extent to which tourism development is consistent with the collective intention of the host community.

3. What is the most effective institutional structure required to govern planning and development of the rural tourism sector?

Presently, there is much confusion concerning 'who does what' in terms of environmental protection in Malaysia. Certain areas come under federal power while other areas fall under the competence of state authorities. The coordination between various governmental agencies is either lacking or haphazard, thus it is pertinent to identify a good institutional model for rural tourism.

## 5. Conclusions

The analysis on the problems affecting rural tourism, the current institutional structure and the prevailing laws and regulations lead to the drawing up of the appraisal framework as depicted in Figure 2. The first stage in the appraisal process is the construction of the institutional structure governing rural tourism in Malaysia. This requires three analyses to be undertaken. Firstly, the problems affecting rural tourism in Malaysia must be identified. Secondly, the institutions responsible for the governance of rural tourism must be drawn up. Thirdly, the laws and regulations pertaining to rural tourism must be identified. These are the preconditions that must be fulfilled before the appraisal criteria can be applied at the second stage of the appraisal process.

The appraisal criteria are selected with reference to the first stage in the appraisal process. The first appraisal criterion seeks to evaluate rural tourism planning and development in terms of environmental sustainability – the biggest problem that rural tourism in Malaysia confronts. The second appraisal criterion seeks to assess the extent which host community interests are protected in rural tourism planning. In particular, whether a rural host community can participate in tourism planning? The third appraisal criterion evaluates the enforcement of laws and regulations in terms of effectiveness.

This conceptual paper guides a research on the institutional structure of rural tourism in Malaysia. While there are existing studies concerning the institutional and governance structure in Malaysia (Suhaimi, 2013; Maidin, 2012; Harding, 1999; Nijar, 1997), there is limited literature on the specific institutional structure that governs rural tourism (Hamzah, 2004; Mustafa, 2011). Further, existing studies on this area are fast becoming obsolete due to the ever changing landscape of Malaysia's institutional structure. New departments are created, the jurisdictions of existing departments redrawn subtly or sometimes overtly. Laws are amended or new laws

enacted; new interpretations of existing laws either clarify or obfuscate the issues further. This appraisal framework contributes to the determination of jurisdictional boundaries between various institutions, with the aim of charting the latest institutional structure for rural tourism and the present challenges.

The study on the institutional structure for rural tourism may demonstrate the problems in coordinating the planning and development of rural tourism. The overlapping jurisdictions of various government agencies may become apparent. Existing literature highlights such probabilities and this study is likely to indicate the extent of progress (or lack of progress) in this respect. It is generally agreed that the environmental protection regime in Malaysia should be improved (Mustafa, 2011). In this vein, the study may find that more has to be done to ensure the environmental protection of rural tourist destinations. The literature on other countries suggest that host communities are not adequately consulted in rural tourism development, and that they rarely participate effectively in tourism businesses (Mbaiwa, 2011; Ghaderi & Henderson, 2012). There is therefore a high likelihood that this study may show that the interests of host communities are not well protected in rural tourism development in Malaysia. In particular, the indigenous communities may not necessarily benefit significantly from rural tourism. The findings on the economic involvement of a host community in rural tourism businesses may be indicative of its economic well-being. Where the host community's involvement is a direct consequence of government intervention, the level of involvement is a means of assessing the success of the relevant initiatives. The research outcomes can be utilized in identifying suitable development policies for rural tourism.

A host community's receptiveness towards tourism development enables the government to identify measures that can lower resistance towards a project. In particular, whether educating a community about the benefits of tourism activities, or engaging a community in the planning of a tourism project can minimize opposition towards the same. This is especially important as progress has been slow since Malaysia's National Ecotourism Plan was formulated in 1996. Further, rural tourism (and the tourism sector as a whole) is vital under Malaysia's Economic Transformation Program (Nair & Lo, 2014). Identifying the weaknesses in the current institutional structure will help in the government's planning and implementation plan for rural tourism. Towards this end, the conceptual framework facilitates the search for suitable constructs in the development of a responsible rural tourism institutional framework at local, state and national levels.

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