

# **A Review on Rural Tourism Development in Malaysia**

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## **Abstract:-**

Rural tourism is considered to be one of the most viable development strategies for the rural areas and was included in the five-year development plans in Malaysia. However, the effort to introduce tourism as a development tool and soliciting local involvement in a backward region of a country can be daunting. This paper reviewed the approach taken by the Malaysian government in planning and developing rural tourism development. The discussion centers around the local capacity and problems encountered in the programs; which can be partly attributed to the level of participation by the residents and their readiness to be involved in the tourism programs. It is concluded that although indigenous people involvement is expected whereby the rural communities are registered, trained and licensed for some tourism activities, the skills necessary for running, managing, and promoting a tourist product are yet to be developed.

**Keywords:** Rural tourism, Rural tourism master plan, local involvement, Baling, Malaysia

## **INTRODUCTION**

According to Blaine, Mohamed & Var (1993: 770), rural tourism has increasingly being capitalised for 'a sustainable economic growth and development' to enhance the rural economy of Western countries, especially since farm agriculture is unable to generate sufficient income for rural communities (Swinnerton, 1982; Ying & Zhou, 2007). The progress of rural tourism development has been successful in generating secondary incomes in agricultural households and also diversified the rural economy in the process. It has also reduced out migration by providing employment opportunities and a new living experience to rural communities (Dernoi, 1991). As rural economy is strongly influenced by agricultural activities and products, the advantages of remote location with the scenic values and natural landscapes could attract people from urban areas. This could

provide more options in term of economic activities for people in rural areas for the purpose of improving the regional economy. With regards to the above discussion, this article attempts to review the implementation of rural tourism development in Malaysia with a specific focus on a case study of Baling, Kedah.

## **Rural and Regional Development in Malaysia**

In order to understand the context of which rural tourism came about, it is imperative that some policies on rural and regional development be reviewed especially the emphasis of the programs in addressing productivity and income.

## **Rural Development Policies and Strategies**

The development of the rural areas in Malaysia has started even before Malaysia secured its independence from the British in 1957. However, for the first few decades of the twentieth century, it was centered on the provision of irrigation and drainage systems with advisory services to farmers, an effort to ensure that food supply to urban areas would be sustained (Maimunah and Bahaman, 1992). Under the colonial government, development in rural areas was in the forms of large plantations to serve the colonial economy and provisions of irrigation for agriculture. Needless to say, a vast majority of the rural population was not affected by these developments and thus remained in poverty.

Table 2 provides a summary of Malaysian Development Policies (Maimunah I., 1989). During Draft Development Plan, covering the period of 1950 to 1955, the emphasis was given on infrastructural development and continued growth in agriculture. Accordingly, to address the continued backwardness of the rural population, a Rural Industrial Development Authority (RIDA) was formed in 1950 with the aim to promote training and development of small industries. However, this effort met with little success as the population was still lacking in basic amenities, health and education.

**Table 2: Summary of Rural Development Policies in Malaysia**

| Period      | Phase of Development | Major Development Policy                                |
|-------------|----------------------|---|
| Before 1950 | Colonial Based       | Production of Primary Commodities                       |
| 1951-1955   | Draft                | Infrastructural development and economic growth through |

|           | Development Plan                  | primary commodities   |
|-----------|-----------------------------------|---|
| 1956-1960 | First Malaya Plan                 | Economic Growth and Infrastructural Development especially towards the achievement of independence      |
| 1961-1965 | Second Malaya Plan                | Economic Growth and Infrastructural Development   |
| 1966-1970 | First Malaysia Plan               | Infrastructural Development, economic growth and eradication of poverty                                 |
| 1971-75   | Second Malaysia Plan (NEP begins) | Policies are:<br>1. Intensification of rural development  |
| 1976-1980 | Third Malaysia Plan               | 2. Increase the participation of people in planning, implementation and gaining benefits of development |
| 1981-1985 | Fourth Malaysia Plan              | 3. Equal opportunities for provisions such as education, health and housing                             |
| 1986-1990 | Fifth Malaysia Plan               | 4. Increase job opportunities in public and private sectors   |
|           |                                   | 5. Creation of agencies based on commodities, target groups and regions                                 |
|           |                                   | 6. Integrated regional development  |
|           |                                   | 7. Economic growth through industry and manufacturing   |

(Source: Maimunah I., 1982)

Despite the progress achieved during the period of 1950-1965 in terms of provisions of social and economic infrastructure such as roads, irrigation, and basic amenities like electricity, piped water, and schools, the rural Malay population still remained backward and relatively unaffected (Maimunah, 1992). Some observers associate the phenomenon to three interrelated and mutually reinforcing factors: low agricultural productivity, low income, and poverty (Fisk and Osman, 1982). With the social unrest of 1969, a new development plan targeting specifically to eradicate poverty was introduced. The New Economic Policy embedded in the Second Malaysia Plan also addressed distributive issues of income inequality and targeted eradication of poverty.

During the 1970s, a few agencies were set up to develop the rural areas and to reduce the incidence of poverty. The Third Malaysia Plan outlined poverty eradication through: 1) expanding employment opportunities through new land development and establishment of new growth centers, and 2) enhancing the productive capacity of the poor by increasing access to land, water supplies, credit, markets, and extension services. As a result, not only new areas were opened, infrastructure and road services were also improved. The 1970s and 1980s also saw intensification of agricultural activities with IADP becoming part of the Integrated Rural Development programs. The development of new towns in frontier regions also helped develop rural areas particularly by providing urban amenities in rural areas. This strategy is one of the approaches taken by the government to develop rural areas while linking them up with existing and new town centers within a region. The next section will examine regional development policies in Malaysia.

### ***Regional Development Policies***

Regional development in Malaysia has been translated into four strategies which are concurrent and interrelated: 1) resource and new land development; 2) in-situ rural development; 3) industrial dispersal; and 4) rural urbanization and the creation of new growth centers (Johari, 1983). The first strategy is generally targeted at poorer regions of the east coast of Malaysia, in which the development of natural resources (agriculture, mining, and forestry) is seen as a viable means of improving economic conditions. In-situ developments such as those implemented in the coastal plains of Kedah, seek to improve the agricultural production of established settlements primarily through modernizing and improving the methods of agricultural production. While these two strategies emphasize the development of the primary sector, the third and fourth strategies have their focus on secondary and tertiary sectors and because of their mixed results (economically, socially, and spatially), they are also more vulnerable to criticism. Industrial dispersal strategy involves directing new manufacturing industries to certain areas of the less developed regions. Although the advantages from both social and political standpoints are clear, this strategy is often viewed by economists as counterproductive to overall national growth. Furthermore, compared to government incentives, agglomeration economies proved to be a more powerful factor in attracting industries to the large centers, hence the rapid growth of industries in Kuala Lumpur and Penang during the same period (Kausar, 1993). There are also mixed results in the creation of growth center strategy. Urban centers that are designated as growth centers sometimes fail to perform their expected functions, among which involve the creation of urban employment and strengthening

the production linkages between the centers and the rural areas. Kuantan, in particular, was not an effective growth center due to the weak production and transportation linkages with its hinterland, which in turn explained the sparseness of smaller towns in the region.

The aim of equalizing opportunities and development among regions has been pursued in many ways. "Rural urbanization" is one other concept employed in regional development in Malaysia, which seeks to provide rural areas with "facilities for health, education, utilities, recreation, housing, and most important of all, opportunities for social and economic advancement" (Third Malaysia Plan, 1976). It is argued that such opportunities can be achieved by dispersing the urban way of life in rural areas (Choguill, 1989), and by providing urban type environment, facilities, and services and by promoting industrial and commercial activities in rural areas (Johari, 1983).

Many regional development authorities were set-up to address regional development inequalities by employing these strategies to achieve New Economic Policy objectives. These development agencies have been successful in reducing rural poverty, however, it is still questionable if the opening up of new land is able to contribute substantially in narrowing intra-rural income disparities. This strategy also does not directly address existing structural problems in the rural areas such as land ownership, over dependence on landlord, and middlemen, and traditional practices that result in uneconomic farm sizes (Kruger, 1982). Spatial considerations, along with economic, political, and social considerations, became an important feature of Malaysian development planning, primarily because of the large differences in standards of living of different ethnic groups and the consequent racial connotations of development programs.

As a result of a fifty over years of development, Malaysia can be proud of its accomplishments in developing rural areas: from being neglected, to being provided with basic services and amenities, to intensification of agricultural projects and diversification of its economic base. It seems a natural process for these rural areas to benefit from the service sector of tourism. It has a lot of potential if properly planned and strategised. With the booming tourism sector, rural population could also stand to benefit by offering tourism products ranging from eco-tourism to cultural tourism where the lifestyle of the country folks can be shared and experienced by tourists.

### **Rural Tourism Development in Malaysia**

#### *Defining Rural Tourism*

Various types of tourism activities run in rural areas had puzzled people in the industry about the right definition of rural tourism. Although, the Organization of Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) defines rural tourism as '*a tourism taking place in the countryside*' (OECD, 1994 in Raichel, Lowengart & Milman 2000: 451), this general definition failed to specifically explain the real nature of rural tourism. As explained by Petric (2003: p. 3), the complexity to find the right definition of rural tourism mostly caused by several factors such as:

1. Rural areas where rural tourism occurs are difficult to define since criteria used by different nations vary enormously;
2. Not all tourism which takes place in rural areas is strictly "rural" – it can be urban in form, and merely be located in a rural area;
3. Different forms of rural tourism have developed in different regions and hence it is hard to find characteristics that are common to all of the countries;
4. Rural areas are in a complex process of change due to the impact of global markets, communications and telecommunications that have changed market conditions and orientations for traditional products.

Oppermann (1996) also argues that the lack of studies in the field has caused a myriad of definitions to really represent the real meaning of rural tourism. Sometimes, rural tourism is related with outdoor recreation and tourism in the wilderness areas and national parks (Ladki, 1993; Owens, 1984) while others correlate with second homes in rural areas (Pearce, 1990), and some even excluded all of these elements (Dernoi, 1991). Pakurar and Olah (2008: p. 778) suggest that "*rural tourism is a tourism product that is built for introducing rural regions, and to utilize other attractions and provide diversified services*". Oppermann (1996) however suggests that the definition of rural tourism should be in line with Dernoi's suggestion which stated rural tourism as '*a tourism in non-urban territory where human (land related economic) activity is going on, primarily agriculture; a permanent human presence seems a qualifying requirement*' (Dernoi, 1991: p. 45). Following this definition, Oppermann (1996) developed a conceptual model of non-urban tourism to distinguish the differences between wilderness tourism and rural tourism (Table 1).

**Table 1: Model of Non-Urban Tourism**

| <b>Non-Urban Tourism</b>  |  |
|---|--|
| <i>Wilderness Tourism</i>   | <i>Rural Tourism</i>   |
| Outdoor recreation in wilderness areas, National Parks, National forests, and generally uninhibited areas | Farm tourism<br>Non-farm tourism in rural areas, and communities |

| <i>Accommodation Range</i> |                  |               |
|----------------------------|------------------|---------------|
| Camping                    | Isolated Resorts | Self-Catering |
| B&Bs                       | Rural Hotels     | Second Homes  |

Source: Oppermann (1996)

According to the Oppermann's model (1996), rural tourism comprises three main components of; farm tourism, non-farm tourism and communities. Wilderness tourism however, focuses more on nature activities in isolated areas such as national parks and forests, and uninhabited areas, and popularly known as eco-tourism (Campbell, 1999). Nevertheless, both rural and wilderness tourism share similarity in types of accommodation, ranging from camping sites, isolated resorts, B&Bs, self-catering, second homes and rural hotels. In fact, the bed and breakfast (B&Bs) and self-catering units are considered as major elements in rural tourism (Fleischer and Pizam, 1997) and normally operated as family businesses (Robinson, 1990; Gilbert & Tung, 1990).

As rural tourism links to tourism products, it's also connects leisure activities in rural areas which could be combined with tourism activities and cultural elements (Pakurar and Olah, 2008: p. 778). However, in the context of economic development strategies, many other important components are required to ensure the successfulness of rural tourism development. According to Wilson *et al.* (2001: p. 132), this will include (1) attractions: the natural and manmade features both within and adjacent to a community; (2) promotion: the marketing of a community and its tourism attractions to potential tourists; (3) tourism infrastructure: access facilities (roads, airports, trains, and buses), water and power services, parking, signs, and recreation facilities; (4) services: lodging, restaurants, and the various retail businesses needed to take care of tourists' needs; and (5) hospitality: how tourists are treated by both community residents and employees in tourism businesses and attractions.

#### *Rural Tourism Development in Malaysia: a review of approaches*

The discussion of rural tourism development in Malaysia will be based on the approach taken by the Federal Government as explained in the National Five Years Plan and supported with further elaboration the National Rural Tourism Master Plan prepared by the Ministry of tourism in 2001. In Malaysia, the development of rural areas has taken many forms since the inception of Malaya Development Plans in 1950 which then became the five-year Malaysia Plans. Compared to the 1950s, where the focus was on providing infrastructure and improving accessibilities, the government strategies has evolved to not only increase agricultural productivity but also to improve social services, providing settlements and

employment for rural communities. From 1970s to 1980s, land development efforts have been intensified, together with crop diversification and increased support services. However, none of the Malaysia five-year plans produced during that period were directly deals with rural tourism development.

Concurrently, a boost in the tourism industry during the late 90s has seen a more vigorous effort by the Malaysian government to tap all available resources, including rural tourism products. Rural tourism as well as the service sector in general, has been molded to be one of the most viable development strategies for the rural areas and included in the five-year development plans. The policy of the tourism sector is targeted to achieve sustainable tourism growth and to tap the full potential of employment and income-generation capabilities at the national, state and local levels. As such, tourism development was focused on optimal impact of the resources allocated. To ensure the development of sustainable rural tourism, there must be a balance between the needs of the visitors, the environment, and the local community (Murphy, 1991). Although rural tourism tends to exploit rural resources, for the most part it has low ecological impact as it attracts a relatively small number of visitors who are particularly interested in local cultures and traditions. In addition, areas of rural tourism are often sparsely populated with limited mass tourist accommodation and activities (Fatimah *et al.*, 2006).

As an economic activity, rural tourism has been known to stimulate declining rural economy through job creation, farm support, nature conservation, rural supplies and services, landscape and nature conservation, rural arts and crafts, and enrichment of heritage (Ratz & Puczko, 1998). Two of the most rigorous tourism development strategies pursued in the Eighth Malaysia Plan (2001-2005) include: emphasizing sustainable tourism development; and focusing on a holistic and integrated approach to tourism development. Embedded in these strategies are rural tourism, recreational tourism, and agro-tourism which have the potential to regenerate the rural economy, and redistribute the benefits of tourism industry especially in cases where local involvement is widespread.

In line with above strategies, the National Rural Tourism Master Plan completed in 2001 stressed on agro-tourism and homestay programs to provide more opportunities for local community involvement to generate a new possible source of income. Previously, during the Seventh Malaysia Plan period (1996-2000), a total of 19 agro-tourism locations were identified, with products ranging from day visits, farmstay and agro-tourism packages to be participated by farmers and

fishermen in the country. Correspondingly, by the end of the plan period, 612 homestay operators in 31 villages were registered and offered accommodation with a taste of local culture and hospitality, a beautiful landscape, as well as authentic historical and architectural sites.

In the Ninth Malaysia Plan which covers the period of 2006-2010, the government allocation for the tourism industry has doubled from RM 783.6 million to RM 1847.9 million. This provision will focus on maintaining and upgrading infrastructure and providing adequate tourism-related amenities and facilities. The Plan also maintains sustainable tourism as the top priority whereby the protection and preservation of the natural habitats and environmental concern become increasingly important. As a result, in 2006, the number of registered, licensed and trained homestay operators amounts to 1089 in 79 villages. More tourism products such as farmstay, visits to agricultural parks and research stations, participation in pottery-making have been introduced under the homestay and agro-tourism programs.

#### *The Malaysian Rural Tourism Master Plan*

The Rural Tourism Master Plan (RTMP) was prepared in 2001 to plan and guide rural tourism development in the country. The RTMP study aims to increase visitor spending in rural areas from RM 350 million to RM 1 billion within five years periods (Hamzah, 2004). This will be achieved through promoting and rebranding rural tourism development in the country as follows (RTMP, 2001):

- featuring the attractive scenery of lush tropical landscape;
- presenting activities and amenities to participate in, and enjoy in safety;
- providing new and improved ranges of accommodation;
- offering a smiling and friendly customer care approach.

The RTMP has defined rural tourism as:

‘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 of jungle and rainforest also offers visitors an opportunity to extend their holiday and enjoy those unique natural resources’ (RTMP, 2001: p. 22).

The definitions of rural tourism suggests that rural tourism development in the country should exploit all existing attractions in rural areas to encourage

potential visitors for a long stay during their visit. This strategy aims to increase visitor spending for socio-economic benefit of local community. According to Hamzah (2004), the RTMP has recommended that rural tourism development in Malaysia need to be transformed for a huge growth throughout the country, and will include an improvement in rural infrastructure, capacity building and human resources development.

In relation to the proposal of infrastructure improvement, the RTMP also aiming on improving the standard of accommodations, upgrading visitor facilities and amenities, and ensuring continuous maintenance of products and facilities. Accordingly, the Malaysian Government has allocated a total of RM100 million funds to take care of rural tourism development in the country over a period of five years by increasing the quality of tourism product and services offered in the rural areas.

The government also admitted that developing a new rural tourism product can be challenging as it requires an integrated approach of how the destination is presented, managed, and promoted. Since most of individual enterprises are small and inexperienced in catering for visitor needs, one of the strategies outlined in the Rural Tourism Master Plan was to start with a selective number of destinations and operators where the standards being promoted can be delivered. This is done through the creation of Priority Districts in every state to ensure that the available resources could be concentrated into a few areas and spread across the country.

#### *Case Study: Rural Tourism Development in Baling, Malaysia*

To demonstrate how the government strategy works within the Rural Tourism Master Plan framework, the Priority District of Baling in the State of Kedah was reviewed for further discussion. The selection of the Priority District of Baling was based on the study presented in the Rural Tourism Master Plan (RTMP). A study of rural tourism development in Baling was based on a review from the Rural Tourism Master Plan (RTMP, 2001) and the State of Kedah Structure Plan (JPBD, 2005).

The discussion centers around the problems encountered in the programs; which can be partly attributed to the level of participation by the residents and their readiness to be involved in the tourism programs. The district of Baling is located on the western area of the state of Kedah with Thailand bordering on the east and the state of Perak to the south. It covers an area of 1350 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of 124,947 in 2000 with a Malay majority (80%). It is a two hours drive from Penang Island and Alor Star, the state capital. Although it is mainly an agricultural area with paddy, rubber, palm oil, coconut and fruits, the area is also

covered with forests, water falls, hills and thick lushes green.

There are three main attractions in Baling: 1) Hot Springs at Ulu Legong, 2) Bukit Hijau Recreational Forest Park, and 3) Asam Jawa Waterfall at Lata Bayu which offered several eco-tourism activities such as jungle trekking and camping (Figure 1).

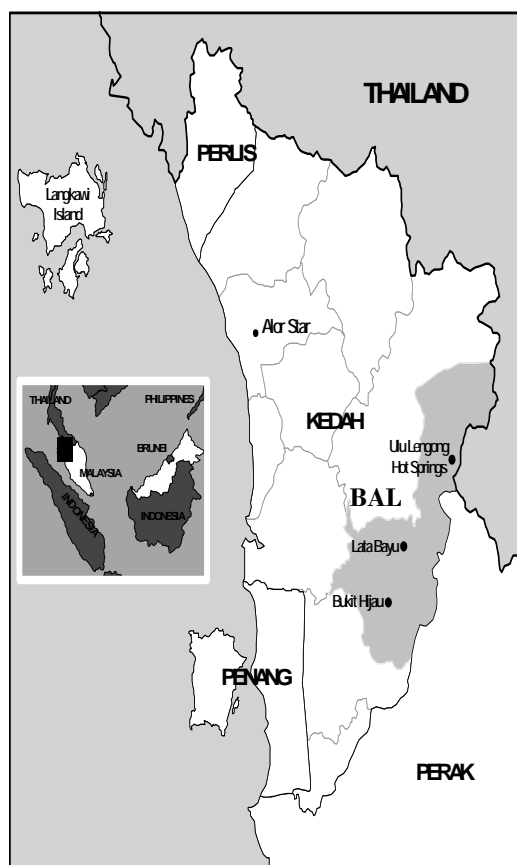


Figure 1: District of Baling, Kedah

However, the main constraint to Baling is its shortage of good accommodation that will hold visitors long enough for other activities. The Rural Tourism Master Plan has outlined a few suggestions to develop Baling into an active tourism destination.

First, it was proposed that some infrastructural improvement be made in Baling, namely setting up a 3-star lodge, upgrading the recreation complex, adding other health related activities such as massages, reflexology, and acupuncture services, as well as souvenir shops and stalls. Likewise, ongoing maintenance and quality management of the attraction area are a must to upgrade the facility to an international standard.

Secondly, the existing facilities such as picnic areas, pools, food stall and toilet must be physically upgraded and improved. There is also room for improvement in the service sector for clear signage,

dissemination of information, and manning of visitor centers. Thirdly, it was also proposed that a visit to a rubber plantation be included as one of the attractions. In addition to rubber tapping, it was also suggested that the whole process from tree planting to final production be shown on audio-visual presentations, and a real visit to a manufacturing plant nearby be made. Of course, other facilities such as ample parking spaces, toilets, and accessibility need to be taken care of.

Finally, since Baling holds an historic event, it is suggested that a center be set up to commemorate the amnesty talk that took place in 1955 between the government and the communist party. A reenactment of the meeting, a presentation on audio-visual as well as discussions on the subject can all be held in an improved facility.

### Discussion

Although the Rural Tourism Master Plan suggestions were reasonable and possible to be achieved, these recommendations required full commitment from three parties involved: the host area and its peoples, the visitors, and the tourism industry. It must also be noted that a balance must be obtained between pursuing economic growth of rural tourism and the conservation needs of the environment. As a development target, it is imperative that the rural communities participate in and benefit from these activities.

The sustainable approach to rural tourism will not only sustain the culture and character of local communities, but also invite the locals to participate in tourism activities. By doing this, it is hoped that the benefit will trickle to the local communities and consequently improve their economic standing. But the question then becomes: are the rural communities ready to take on the challenges posed by tourism activities, and are they prepared to change some of their ways of doing things. In other words, to what extent are they capable and ready to get involved? As with many top-down development strategies and programs, local communities are expected to carry out the implementer's role while their capability and readiness are still not fully realized.

This fact is pointed out as one of the major deficiencies in Malaysia's approach to tourism development whereby effective mechanisms for encouraging local participation is lacking (Din, 1997). However, this issue is being addressed in the Rural Tourism Mater Plan, whereby indigenous involvement is not only expected but the rural communities are also registered, trained and licensed for some tourism activities. Yet, the gap of expectations between the local community and the tourists themselves seems to be widening. As Liu (2006) pointed out, *the quest for high sophistication to achieve international standards is conspicuously incompatible with the local*

situation, given the inherent backwardness and economic sluggishness of the rural setting (2006: 6-7).

Rural tourism stands a better chance of being successful when it complements the existing local economy rather than competes for its limited resources (Butler and Clark, 1992). In the Baling homestay program, for instance, the operators are local elites rather than small entrepreneurs who are inexperienced and have little exposure to non-rural activities. Tourism in this case might have aggravated the income and employment inequalities even further. Liu (2006) also argues that the forms of tourism development prevailing in Malaysia's rural areas seldom complement traditional economic activities, and "bear little linkages to rural conditions (that they) might actually demoralize the nurturing of local entrepreneurs".

### Conclusion

Policy No. 8 of the 2005 Malaysian National Physical Plan states that each tourism development zone should concentrate on different packages of tourist products to maximize resources and location advantages. This means that rural areas should establish linkages with special feature towns, nature tourist attraction areas, or agricultural areas. In addition to high value added agricultural activities, the rural people should be exposed to and integrated with tourism activities which are suggested by the Rural Tourism Master Plan (RTMP). The RTMP suggestion aims to ensure that tourism activities in rural areas will connect tourism products and cultural resources with possibilities for economic development. Based on the case of Baling, this paper however, found that the Rural Tourism Master Plan suggestion of local community involvement in the tourism activities are merely limited to cultural performances, exhibition of crafts making and the manning of facilities. This is worsened by the fact that some tourism ventures actually called for corporate are sometimes controlled by metropolitan based organizations for the planning, marketing, and management of local tourism facility. The core concerns of rural tourism suggesting of local resources mobilization and diversification of the economic base are yet to be achieved which is against the aim and objectives of Rural Tourism Master Plan to foster local community involvement for their benefits and sustainability of rural tourism development. It is shown that the development of rural tourism in Baling has only focused cultural activities compared to other economic products. Other main issues in Baling tourism development include low service standards and poorly maintained tourism facilities, as well as a lack of knowledge and skills in hospitality as a business endeavor. As such, some undertakings are short-

lived, while others are not up to international standards even for some basic necessities like cleanliness, although some facilities are in fact, popular with domestic tourists especially from around the state. Because of the remote location of the area and lack of exposure in the tourism industry, local communities are not well equipped with skills necessary for running, managing, and promoting a tourist product.

There is a possible danger of over commercialization of rural tourism products, or the heavy involvement of foreign operators or corporations that could strip the rural communities of their local pride, in which case, not only the local communities are demoralized and their enthusiasm short-lived, but the concept of mobilization of local resources is also lost. Alternatively, small-scaled craft or indigenous-based industry as well as rural living lifestyle should be introduced as the main attractions. As such, rural tourism will no longer depend solely on the scenery and natural environment but also diversify to include the cultural attributes as well.

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