

DIVERSITY OF RURAL TOURISM PRODUCTS AND CHALLENGES OF RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN KOTA MARUDU, SABAH

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Abstract: *Kota Marudu has a variety of products with the potential to be developed as unique and attractive rural tourism attractions, especially in terms of its beautiful nature and cultural heritage. Rural tourism offers a variety of attractions and local products, such as ecotourism and agrotourism, as well as the culture and heritage of local communities. This study examines the diversity of rural tourism products in Kota Marudu. The variety of products is classified into three main features, namely physical attractions, cultural attractions, and events, as well as other attractions. The variety of products is also divided into two parts, namely those developed by local communities and those operated by certain organisations or departments. The aspects of challenges and problems in developing rural tourism products are also examined in this paper. In the context of Kota Marudu, a study of rural tourism development needs to be undertaken to identify the diversity of tourism products that can be potentially developed, and to examine the challenges and problems toward such efforts. In short, various initiatives and policies need to be carried out practically and holistically so that rural tourism in this district continues to be developed and remains competent.*

Keywords: *Rural Tourism, Products, Challenges, Kota Marudu*

Introduction

Sabah has a variety of tourism attractions, such as cultural, environmental, or man-made structures. In this regard, the rural tourism sector in Sabah may be further improved in the future with a comprehensive tourism sector development plan by the government (Danting et al., 2018). According to Aytug and Mikaeli (2017), the importance of tourism has been widely recognised globally as an important factor in the development of rural areas. In general, tourism is one of the most important industries in most developed countries as well as in developing countries, because it is able to develop the physical, economic, social, cultural, political, and

technological dimensions (Hausman, 2001). The Sabah Tourism Board is an agency responsible in promoting the tourism industry in Sabah. The government allocated RM228 million from the state budget as stipulated in the State Government Direction Policy, and RM15 million was allocated in the 2018 budget to strengthen rural tourism, as well as to diversify interesting destinations in the state (Sabah Tourism Board, 2019).

In addition, the Sabah Tourism Board has initiated rural tourism development starting in 2014. The Tourism Products Division has been established under the Sabah Tourism Board, which aims to identify potential tourism products developed in rural areas for each district in Sabah. In 2015, the Tourism Products Division introduced rural tourism initiatives to local communities, such as in Tuaran (Kiulu), Ranau, Tambunan, Kota Belud (Kedamaian), Kudat, Keningau, Papar, Tawau, Lahad Datu, and Tenom. In addition, Kota Marudu is one of the districts included in the rural tourism development strategy plan in Sabah. In 2016, the Tourism Products Division under the Sabah Tourism Board collaborated with the Kota Marudu Tourism Association (KOMTDA) to identify potential destinations and tourism products, as well as to examine community involvement in developing the sector according to the rural tourism development strategy plan in the state.

In this regard, this article examines the diversity of rural tourism and further examines its challenges in the context of rural tourism development in the district of Kota Marudu, Sabah. This study of rural tourism development needs to be undertaken to identify aspects of its implementation in empowering communities in the district.

Research Methodology

This study employed an exploratory approach. According to Veal (2006), exploration aims to discover, describe, or map behavioural patterns in areas or activities that have not been studied before. In addition, an exploratory research is conducted when a topic needs to be understood in depth, especially if it has not been conducted before. It is a highly appropriate research approach to understand an issue or a problem well.

Accordingly, this research design is based on a descriptive approach to understand the phenomena and issues to be studied more specifically on a local scale. The main method used was the quantitative method, where data is collected through the distribution of questionnaires. A total of 282 respondents was randomly selected for this study from four villages, namely Kampung Minansad, Kampung Tegudon, Kampung Tonsom, and Kampung Tulid. The data obtained would be analysed in the form of descriptive statistics and presented in the form of tables and diagrams. In addition, the researcher used a qualitative approach by interviewing three informants. Researchers may also use secondary data to support the primary data collected, such as official reports and websites related to the issues under study.

Results

Profile demographic of respondents

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the respondents. In terms respondents' gender, the majority are women, at 58.20% or 164 respondents. Meanwhile, 41.80% or 118 respondents are male. For the age category, the average respondent is in the middle age range. The highest percentage of respondents is in the age category of 31 to 40 years old, with a total of 121 respondents (42.90%). Meanwhile, the group of respondents which recorded the lowest number is in the age range of 18 to 20 years old, at 5.00% with a total of 14 respondents. The range of

differences between age categories is quite large. The age group of 21 to 30 years old recorded 23.80%, with a total of 67 respondents. Meanwhile, the category of respondents aged from 41 to 50 years old has a total of 44 respondents or 15.60%. For the category of 51 to 60 years old, there are 36 respondents (12.80%).

As for the respondents' race, the majority is among the Dusun population, at 85.50% which consists of 241 respondents. Meanwhile, Kadazan recorded 3.90%, with 11 respondents. Bajau, Malay, Chinese, and Rungus are 16 respondents (5.70%), 5 respondents (1.80%), 4 respondents (1.40%) and 5 respondents (1.80%), respectively. In this regard, most respondents have secondary-level education (Forms 1 to 5) with a total of 136 respondents (48.20%). Meanwhile, the group with informal education recorded the lowest number, with 12 respondents (4.30%). Respondents with primary-level education (Years 1 to 6) recorded 17.00% from 48 respondents. Furthermore, the groups with Pre-University/Diploma and higher-level education (Bachelor's/Master's/PhD.) recorded 52 respondents (18.40%) and 34 respondents (12.10%), respectively.

For marital status, the majority of respondents are married (67.40%) with a total of 190 respondents. Meanwhile, there are 86 single-status respondents, recorded at 30.50%. The group of widower / widow / divorcee recorded the lowest percentage, at 2.10% with only 6 respondents. In terms of employment, 19.90% are self-employed respondents, with a total of 56 respondents. Meanwhile, entrepreneurs and housewives included a total of 55 respondents (19.50%) and 50 respondents (17.70%), respectively. This is followed by 44 private sector workers (15.60%), 33 public sector workers (11.70%), 24 students (8.50%), and 20 farmers (7.10%).

Table 1: Respondents' demographic profile

Feature	Criteria	Numbers	Percentage
Gender	Male	118	41.80
	Female	164	58.20
Age	18 - 20 years	14	5.00
	21 - 30 years	67	23.80
	31 - 40 years	121	42.90
	41 - 50 years	44	15.60
	51 - 60 years	36	12.80
Race	Dusun	241	85.50
	Kadazan	11	3.90
	Bajau	16	5.70
	Malay	5	1.80
	Chinese	4	1.40
	Rungus	5	1.80
Education	Informal	12	4.30
	Primary education	48	17.00
	Secondary education	136	48.20
	Pre-University/Diploma	52	18.40
	Higher education (Degree, Master, PhD)	34	12.10

Marital Status	Single	86	30.50
	Married	190	67.40
	Widow/widower/divorcee	6	2.10
Employment	Public sector	33	11.70
	Private sector	44	15.60
	Self-employed	56	19.90
	Entrepreneur	55	19.50
	Student	24	8.50
	Housewife	50	17.70
	Farmer	20	7.10

Diversity of rural tourism product

According to Gokhan and Reyhan (2015), in developing rural tourism, environmental and cultural assets are prerequisites of excellence, as well as important factors that attract tourists to travel to a destination. When it becomes the main motive for tourists to visit the destination, this factor is considered to be a continuous important element in tourism. In the inventory of tourism products, the Kota Marudu district has a variety of attractions that can be developed as unique and attractive rural tourism destinations, especially in terms of its natural beauty and its cultural heritage.

Tourism products developed by local communities

Kota Marudu has various beautiful attractions, unique natures, distinct cultures, and interesting events, as well as other impressive attractions. The district stores various treasures that can attract tourists. The natural asset of its natural environment is the basic source for rural tourism product development (Habibah et al., 2017).

a) Physical attractions

Physical natural attractions in Kota Marudu include rivers, beaches, waterfalls, lakes, adventure sites, and other attractions. Teringai Beach is located in Kampung Teringai, Kota Marudu Sabah. This beach oversees three islands that have their own stories. The product developed by the community is known as Teringai Beach Café & Lodge. Several services and activities are available, such as restaurants, homestays, ATVs, and snorkelling. Apart from that, several rivers are operated by the local community located in Marak Parak village, such as Sungai Lungking, Sungai Pantai Ria Kanarom, and Sungai Pampang Winatu. Meanwhile, Sungai Baliajong is a historical river that is now cultivated by the local community in Kampung Tegudon, Tandek. For adventure and hiking activities, Kota Marudu has several hills and mountains that are favoured by climbers, for example, Gunung Minintinduk (Kg. Serinsim), Bukit Mallas Kallas (Kampung Kirangawan), Bukit Mundan (Kampung Talantang), and Bukit Sagang (Kampung Simpangan). In addition, other attractions include Kampung Mangin Eco-tourism and Marudu Bay Eco-tourism.

b) Cultural and events attractions

In the context of rural tourism in Kota Marudu, several cultural attractions are being developed by local communities. These are local wisdom attractions from multiple ethnic groups such as Dusun Kimaragang, Dusun Garo, Dusun Tagahas, Dusun Gobukon, Dusun Lingkabau, Dusun Sonsogon and Rungus. These ethnic wisdom attractions include traditional costumes, traditional dances, traditional food, and traditional musical instruments. In addition, there is also a homestay development known as the Marudu Bay Homestay, undertaken by the local community located in Goshen Village.

For cultural attractions and other events, one example is the *Walai Tobilung* run by the locals themselves, located in Kampung Minansad, Kota Marudu. *Walai Tobilung* (literal: Tobilung house) is a place that showcases the customs and culture of the Tobilung Dusun ethnic community. Apart from that, there are tourism products, such as the Panaroma Paradise Resort which is run by the locals, located in Kampung Rasak Darat Tigaman. The Panaroma Paradise Resort provides accommodation and views of Marudu Bay's natural beauty.

c) Other attractions

Kota Marudu has other attractions, such as Saujana Hill located in Kampung Timbang Batu which provides fishing services and activities in the fish pond. In addition, Walai Rabbit located in Kampung Panaitan. Apart from that, there are also agricultural industries such as banana factory, *Kacang Panggang* stall (Kampung Tonsom), and *Jagung Bakar* stall and Handicraft (Kampung Minansad).

Table 2: Tourism products developed by local communities
Tourism products developed by departments/organisations

Physical Attractions	Cultural Attractions & Events	Other Attractions
a) Beach - Teringai Beach (Terengai Beach Café & Lodge)	a) Local Wisdom - <i>Dusun Kimaragang</i> - <i>Dusun Tobilung</i> - <i>Dusun Gobukon</i> - <i>Dusun Garo</i> - <i>Dusun Tagahas</i> - <i>Dusun Sonsogon</i> - <i>Dusun Lingkabau</i> - <i>Rungus</i>	- Saujana Hill - <i>Walai Rabbit</i> - <i>Kacang panggang</i> stall - <i>Jagung bakar</i> stall
b) River - Baliajong River - Lungking River - Pampang River Winatu - Pantai Ria Kanarom River	- Food - Musical Instruments - Traditional dances - Traditional costumes - Handicraft	
c) Waterfall - Kinamawali Waterfall - Miru Tiru Waterfall	b) Homestay - <i>Marudu Bay Homestay</i> - Sulap Tokou	
d) Adventure Site - Mount Minintunduk - Mount <i>Cochrane</i> (Mallas Kallas Hill) - Mundan Hill - Sagang Hill	c) Cultural Site - <i>Walai Tobilung</i>	
e) Others - Marudu Bay ecotourism - Mangin ecotourism	d) Others - <i>Kinorout Long House</i> - <i>Panorama Paradise Resort</i> - Kampung Togudon Geotourism (<i>Kinabalu Geopark</i>)	

Apart from tourism products developed by local communities, several destinations have been introduced by selected departments or organisations. These tourist destinations or products have been classified into three main attractions: physical attractions, cultural attractions and events, and other attractions.

a) Physical attractions

Tasik Buyut is located in Kampung Talantang, Kota Marudu. This lake is a Freshwater Fish Breeding Centre and is under the supervision of the Sabah Fisheries Department, Kota Marudu branch. Freshwater fish research and farming activities are carried out in the lake area. Apart from that, the Serinsim Sub-station is located in Kampung Serinsim, 38 km away from Kota Marudu town. This sub-station is located between two rivers, namely Serinsim River and Kinarom River. A part of the Sub-station area had once been opened for agricultural purposes by Serinsim villagers before it was gazetted as Sabah Parks in 1992.

Facilities such as hostels and campsites have been provided by Sabah Parks for the convenience of tourists who want to enjoy the unique nature and to know the history of Serinsim. In addition, there is the Deer Garden conservation with an ex-situ approach. The Serinsim Sub-station also has other natural attractions, such as Mount Nombuyukong (elevation 1,475 metres from sea level), Bat Cave, Misumpak Waterfall, and two attractive rivers (Sungai Serinsim and Sungai Kinarom), which are suitable for recreation and bathing. In addition, there are other newly created facilities such as Chalets and restaurants to accommodate the growing needs of tourists. Such facilities will make it easier for tourists to spend the night.

In addition, there are two forest reserves in the Kota Marudu District under the control of the Sabah Forestry Department, namely Tagaroh Forest Reserve and Mount Cochrane Forest Reserve. Tagaroh Forest Reserve is located in Kampung Tagaroh, Kota Marudu. The forest reserve is a Class III which has an area of 1,592 hectares. There is a fire tower at the peak of its hill, serving to detect any fire that occurs in the Tagaroh Forest Reserve. Meanwhile, Mount Cochrane Forest Reserve is located near Kampung Kirangawan, Kota Marudu. The forest reserve is a Class I, which has an area of 2,924 hectares.

b) Cultural attractions

There are several cultural attractions and/or historical sites, such as the *Makam Si Gunting* and the *Makam Syarif Osman*. In addition, there are events and celebrations, such as *Kaamatan* Festival, Kota Marudu Festival, *Magahau* Festival, and *Monguyas Norutip* Festival under the supervision of certain associations, departments, or organisations.

Makam Si Gunting is located at Taman Serinsim Sub-Station. *Makam Si Gunting* belongs to a hero in the rebellion against British colonialists. He and his followers had waged a guerrilla war against the British and managed to destroy the Police Station which had been built by the British in Kampung Serinsim. At the time, the British also declared war, known as the Si Gunting war (1894 - 1901). Si Gunting died in 1905 at the age of 47 years old.

The *Makam Syarif Osman* is located about 500 metres from the Kudat Regional Forestry Office. Syariff Osman was one of the earliest figures to fight against the colonialists. He is said to be the representative of the Sultanate of Sulu which governed the province in Marudu Bay. The presence of colonialists in North Borneo, especially in Marudu Bay, had disrupted the daily practices of local communities in this district. Consequently, there was a battle between the Syarif Osman faction and the British colonialists. The battle led to the destruction of Sharif

Osman's fort, where he was killed. Now, the fort and the tomb of Syarif Osman have become a historical landmark in the Kota Marudu District.

Finally, there are also events and celebrations held in the Kota Marudu District, such as *Kaamatan* Festival, *Monguyas Norutip* Festival, Kota Marudu Festival, and *Magahau* Festival, which are some of the main attractions for visitors from outside the district. These festivals are organised by ethnic associations in the Kota Marudu District, with cooperation from the Sabah State Government and the Ministry of Rural Development in promoting cultural uniqueness of the district.

c) Other attractions

The Kota Marudu District also has an agricultural industry supervised by the Sabah Department of Agriculture. For example, *Pisang Saba* and corn are the main sources that generate farmers' income. Adequate supply of *Pisang Saba* in the district opens up space for *Industri Kecil dan Sederhana (IKS)* or SME activities based on *Kerepek Pisang* (banana crisps) under the supervision of the *Pertubuhan Peladang Kota Marudu*. *Kerepek Pisang* have been successfully marketed locally and abroad, including to Peninsular Malaysia.

Table 3: Tourism products developed by departments/organisations

Physical Attractions	Cultural Attractions & Events	Others Attractions
a) Lake - Buyut Lake	a) Historical Site - <i>Makam Si Gunting</i> - <i>Makam Sharif Osman</i>	- Agriculture industry - <i>Kerepek Pisang</i> factory
b) Waterfall - Misumpak Waterfall	b) Festival - <i>Kaamatan</i> Festival - Kota Marudu Festival - <i>Magahau</i> Festival - <i>Monguyas Norutip</i> Festival	
c) Cave - <i>Kelawar</i> Cave		
d) River - Serinsim River - Kinarom River		
c) Adventure Site - Mount Nomboyukung		
d) Others - Tagroh Forest Reserve - Mt. Cochrane Forest Reserve - Serinsim Sub-station		

In general, Kota Marudu has high potentials in several aspects, namely physical, cultural, or man-made attractions, as well as other attractions in line with opinions from interviews conducted with informants. This is supported by Informant 1, who said that:

“Kota Marudu district does have a variety of interesting tourism products, especially physical attractions, namely nature. The city of Marudu has many environmental assets such as unexplored forests, rivers, seas, beaches, caves, hills and mountains. Not only that, the cultural attraction that has its own uniqueness has become an iconic tourist in Kota Marudu. This is because, in this district consists of various sub-ethnic Dusun which has its own unique characteristics.”

Besides, there are several nature-based tourism destinations in Kota Marudu that have their own attractions and can be potentially developed if such areas have good facilities and access. This is supported by Habibah et al. (2017), stating that tourism destinations have high potentials to be developed if they have good infrastructure and access facilities, as well as community involvement that can make them successful. The Seven-Level Waterfall, located in Kampung Pinatau, is a forested area which has not been developed as a tourism product by the locals. The area has the potential to be developed due to the waterfall's natural beauty and uniqueness. However, nowadays, the locals are not involved in the development of the product due to certain obstacles, such as the lack of cooperation among villagers.

In a nutshell, understanding the diversity of rural tourism products in the Kota Marudu district is important for local communities to seize advantage of the available potential in developing the rural tourism sector. This is supported by Ivolga (2014), stating that rural tourism products reflect and maintain the natural and cultural identity of existing society and ensure the provision of economic benefits to local communities through the development of rural tourism. For example, employment opportunities and alternative sources of income can be created for the locals.

Challenges faced by local communities in developing rural tourism products

This section discusses the problems and challenges faced by local communities in developing rural tourism products in Kota Marudu. Respondents had the opportunity to express their problems in the form of open-ended questions. The researchers classified respondents' problems and challenges into several themes, including infrastructure and public facilities, capital and finance, tourism facilities, promotional activities, cooperation among residents, knowledge and skills, limited tourist destinations and products, support from outside institutions, and problems with overlapping land-use. The results of the analysis indicated that the lack of capital and finance recorded the highest percentage at 79.1%, followed by the lack of knowledge and skills in the tourism industry, at 44.3% (Table 4).

Table 4: Challenges faced by local communities in developing rural tourism products

No.	Statements		(%)
1.	Lack of capital and finance	223	79.1
2.	Lack of knowledge and skills in the tourism industry	125	44.3
3.	Lack of infrastructure and public facilities	98	34.8
4.	Limited tourist facilities	41	14.5
5.	Lack of cooperation among local communities	41	14.5
6.	Limited destinations and tourism products being offered	26	9.2
7.	Lack of promotional activities for tourism products	26	9.2
8.	Lack of support from outside institutions	23	8.2
9.	Competition among outside entrepreneurs or products tourism	12	4.3
10.	Problems with overlapping land-use	8	2.8

According to Informant 2:

"We as entrepreneurs have the problem of lack of capital in developing the tourism products we have. This makes it a little difficult for us to run our company. "

Generally, entrepreneurs do not want to get involved in developing rural tourism products due to the lack of capital. This is also illustrated in a study by Velnisa et al. (2014), that problems such as the lack of capital are major obstacles in developing rural tourism. This situation shows that the basic factor of poverty hinders efforts toward positive change in a community.

In addition, experience and training are also required in maintaining a business and preventing its failure. The lack of exposure and knowledge in promoting tourism products is difficult for the aim of rising to a higher level. Local communities are given insufficient skills in handling tourism or homestay management skills. If the local communities have little awareness and knowledge on how to manage rural tourism, this will become a serious obstacle in their involvement with the industry, especially in areas where tourism development occurs (Aref & Redzuan, 2009). Plus, according to Poeti (2017), the knowledge of local communities on rural tourism development is important. In addition, according to Informant 3:

"The villagers lack the knowledge and skills in managing and operating the existing tourism and this is one of the main challenges for us in developing tourism products."

Some local communities are interested in running a tourism product, such as homestay management, etc., but insufficient knowledge, skills, and information on tourism management become a constraint for them. According to Chin et al. (2014), insufficient knowledge and skills are among the factors that influence the failure to start a business or to develop a tourism product in rural areas.

Last but not least, problems and challenges with regard to public facilities and infrastructure cause difficulties in advancing the development of rural tourism in Kota Marudu. For example, the supply of clean water is not enough for some villages that have the potential in developing tourism products, such as in the village of Mangaris which offers handicraft and *Jagung Bakar*. In addition, the problem of accessibility to the tourism destination still persists, such as the limited transportation to access Teringai Beach, Panaroma Paradise Resort, and *Walai*

Tobilung, together with the lack of accommodation and stalls meant for selling handicraft and *Jagung Bakar* in Kampung Mangaris.

Conclusions

Kota Marudu has a variety of cultural, environmental, and made-made tourism attractions which involve daily activities and festivals run by local communities and organisations. Most of these attractions are located in rural areas inhabited mostly by farmers, and in the coastal areas inhabited mostly by fishermen. The development of tourism products in Kota Marudu requires the holistic involvement of local communities so that it can be competitive with outside tourism. This involvement must be driven by a high awareness among the local communities.

In the context of rural tourism development in Kota Marudu, several issues persist, such as the lack of infrastructure and public facilities, the lack of capital and finance, the lack of tourism facilities, limited promotional activities, minimal cooperation among residents, inadequate knowledge and skills, limited destinations and tourism products being offered to tourist, the lack of support by outside institutions, and problems with overlapping land-use. Various problems and challenges faced by the local communities need to be addressed in an integrated and holistic approach, with the assistance and support by authorities, especially the Sabah Tourism Board (STB), Majlis Tindakan Pelancongan Kota Marudu (MTPKM), and Kota Marudu Tourism Development Association (KOMTDA). Indirectly, such an initiative will transform Kota Marudu into a competitive rural tourism icon, specifically in Sabah, and generally in Malaysia. Additionally, this requires efforts by several proactive and dynamic institutions to promote various tourism attractions, such as ecotourism, agrotourism, and homestays, which are a golden opportunity for the local communities to be actively involved in developing cultural and environmental resources and becoming tourism entrepreneurs.

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