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DEVELOPMENT AND CHALLENGES OF AGRITOURISM IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Agritourism started in 1991 in Malaysia as one of tourism diversity activity to improve country account balance. It was included in Sixth Malaysia Plan (1991-1995) where Malaysia's national tourism plan was formulated to increase tourist arrival into the country. This plan was successfully implemented and Malaysia has been in top 10 countries with highest number of international tourist arrival since 2006. At the beginning, most of agritourism places are usually in the form of introducing plants and animal, and its only known to local tourist and cater for the team-building and recreation activities. With the support from governments sectors in marketing and promoting the tourism package, there are many types of activities and packages has been developed and introduced to attract visitors which includes farm stay, pick you own, farm animals, fishing and homestay. The agritourism activities are runs by privates sectors and also local communities. As many of agritourism activities are relate to rural areas, the involvement of local village communities is important to ensure the success of a program and to get returns from the investment. One of such program is Homestay which has successful program to increase the farmers/fisherman income and at the same time introduced the local cultures to visitors. Although tourism has become the second source of income from foreign exchange in the country, the percentage of agritourism contribution is still low compared to other tourism sectors.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the most vibrant economic generators in the world. Agriculture played a significant role in country's development and economic contribution. The manufacturing industry was started in 1970's and since then GDP from agriculture sector has declined from 22.89% in 1980's to 8.49% in 2004 (Kamaruddin and Masron, 2010). In order to expand country's economy, tourism was developed in 1972 with establishment of Tourist Development Corporation Malaysia and the Ministry of Arts, Culture and Tourism (MOCAT) was only set up on 1987. Over the past decades tourism has become one of the largest and fastest growing economic sectors in the country and is the second largest contributor after manufacturing. Figure 1 shows in 2012, the industry is one of the main sectors contributed RM65.3 billion of income from 20.5 million tourist arrival, contributed 9.3% to GDP and provided 8.7% employment opportunity in the country (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2013). The government has acknowledged the tourism industry economic growth potential thus it was identified as one of the priorities areas under 10th Malaysia Plan (10MP) in June 2010 and to expand the tourism industry (Mohamed et al., 2013). Through 10MP, the tourism was included in of the 12 National Key Economic Areas under the Economic Transformation Program, which to in line with the Malaysia Tourism Transformation Plan to achieved the targeted 36 million tourism and RM168 billion in receipts by 2020 (EPU, 2013).

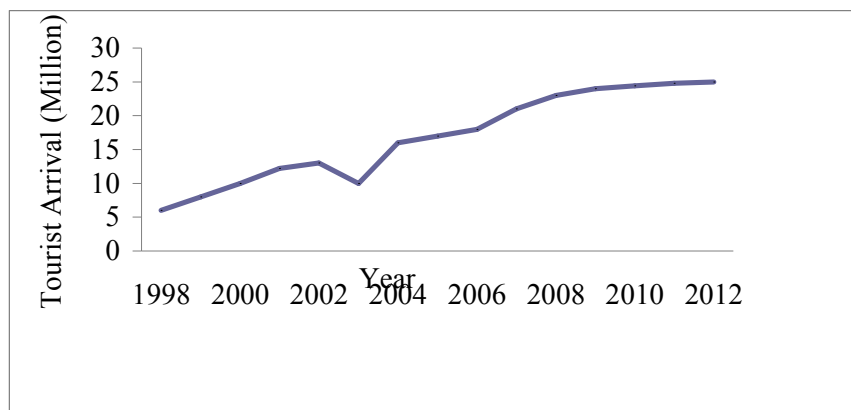


Fig. 1. Tourist arrival in Malaysia from 1998-2012.
Source: World Travel & Tourism Council, 2013

The tourism industry has diversified into new areas such as ecotourism, medical tourism, geotourism, culinary tourism, rural tourism and agritourism which are a subset of rural tourism. Agritourism is a tourist activity to visit a working farm or agri-entrepreneur area for learning or experience farms' life. The agritourism is a catalyst for initiation sustainable tourism activities and diversifying rural activities (Azimi et al., 2012). As agriculture is the fourth contributors to country's economic development, this sector has vast areas to offers visitors to experiences from farms and its resources. The Agritourism concept was first introduced in the country in 1991. It was then followed by International Conference on Agritourism industry held in Kuala Lumpur in 1992, with the objective to clarify the concept of agritourism, learn from other country experiences and to chart development strategy of agritourism in Malaysia (Mohamad, 1994). The tourist arrival to agritourism attraction areas in the country has increased from 0.5 mil in 2007 to 1.5 mil in 2010, which shows an increase of 1 mil within 3 years (Fig. 2).

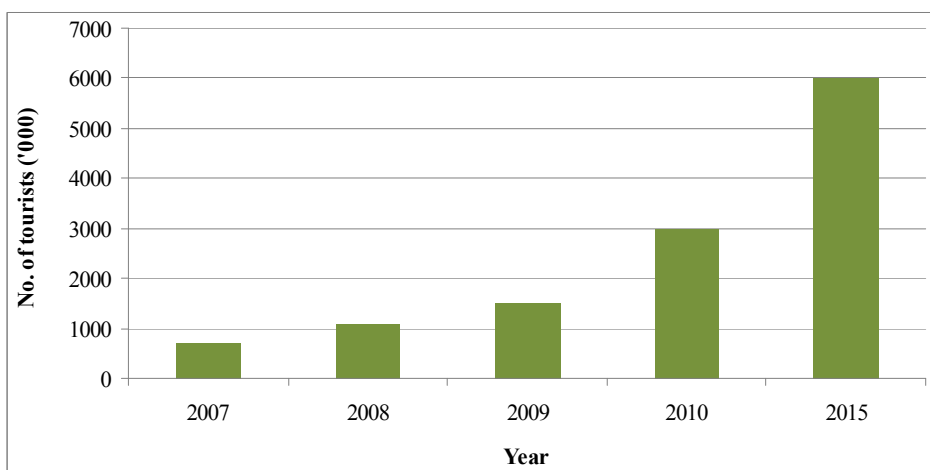


Fig. 2. Number of tourist visited agritourism areas. (2015 and 2020 is estimate number)
Source: Ministry of Agriculture and Agribased Industry, 2012.

It is expected in 2015, the income will be RM3 mil which will be contributed to RM115 billion from tourist received and also contributed to 2 million jobs opportunities in the country (Ministry of Agriculture, 2012). As revenue from agritourism increase, the national agritourism

directions were introduced. The directions has marked agritourism as one of the foundation in national industry, community economy sources, as cultural transformation for agriculture community to become more commercialize, as environmental sustainable practice and as national identity on global stage (Ministry of Agriculture, 2012). The National agritourism Directions was introduced to give direction to support its development through strengthening of the agricultural community by encouraging and giving advices to agricultural communities. The economics of the farmers comes from the local agricultural activities, products and culture. Through agritourism, it could enhance and diversify farmers economic and at the same time, it also reduces the rural-urban migration of the young generation.

NATIONAL AGRITOURISM AUTHORITIES

In Malaysia, the tourism planning involves three-tier form of government administrative starting from federal to state and finally the local authorities. Various governmental agencies are responsible in development and promotion of agritourism industry. The Ministry of Agriculture and Agribased Industry (MOA) with its many departments such as Department of Agriculture (DOA), Department of Fisheries (DOF) and Department of Veterinary (DOV) located at many states are accountable to identifying the areas that could be developed into agritourism attractions. These departments' responsibilities also encompass in giving advices on agriculture technology and cultivation techniques to farmers. At national level, the overall tourism planning activities are carried out by Ministry of Tourism and Culture (MOTAC) while the Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board helps in terms of marketing and promotion (Ministry of Tourism Malaysia, 2011).

AGRITOURISM SECTORS

There are various agritourism attraction in the country manages by public and privates sectors. The public agritourism attractions are usually an establishment research centers and training centers open for public to visit (Fig. 3). Example of research center opened for public visits are Malaysia Agriculture Research and Developments (MARDI) station in Cameron Highlands. It showcasing agriculture technologies to promote high technology production system employed for planting fruits and flowers ex: soilless culture technology for strawberry and ornamental plants. MARDI station at Pulau Langkawi is showcasing technology in planting and cultivating of tropical fruits. Established training centers were also open for public visit, such as Melaka State's Departments of Agriculture, named Melaka Tropical Fruit Farm which surround with varieties of local's common and rare fruit trees, and farm animal; Tenom Agriculture Park managed by Department of Agriculture Sabah. It has various industrial plants such as cocoa and coffee, native orchids, pitchers plants, ornamental gardens, bee centre and museum. It is one of the attraction areas in Sabah. There are also agriculture parks purposely developed as a model farm and located near the cities areas, such as Agriculture Heritage Park and Botanical Garden in Putrajaya. These centers were opened to public with the objective to educate the public on the agriculture and also give a various fun activities to the new generation to recognize the crops.

A successful agriculture technologies adopted and practices by farmers was also introduced as an agritoursim attraction to visitor. The Department of Fishery Sabah had established *Tagal* System to the rural communities situated by the riverside Sabah. *Tagal* System means "fishing in rivers is prohibited by the concerned communities for a certain pre-agreed period of time" aims to restore the depleting fisheries resource, keep the rivers from pollution and generate income to the community. Under this system, the concerned communities are allowed to harvest fish from the rivers but in a sustainable manner (Wong et al., 2009). It is a community based fisheries resources management system, which is a stakeholder-driven system for rehabilitation, protection and conservation of river environment for sustainable development. Fishing is forbidden at this area,

therefore the fishes are friendly and human are able to touches and stroke the fished. The friendliness of the fished has opened agritourism enterprise among the community living in *Tagal* areas by offering activities such as swimming with fish, fish SPA and fish feeding.

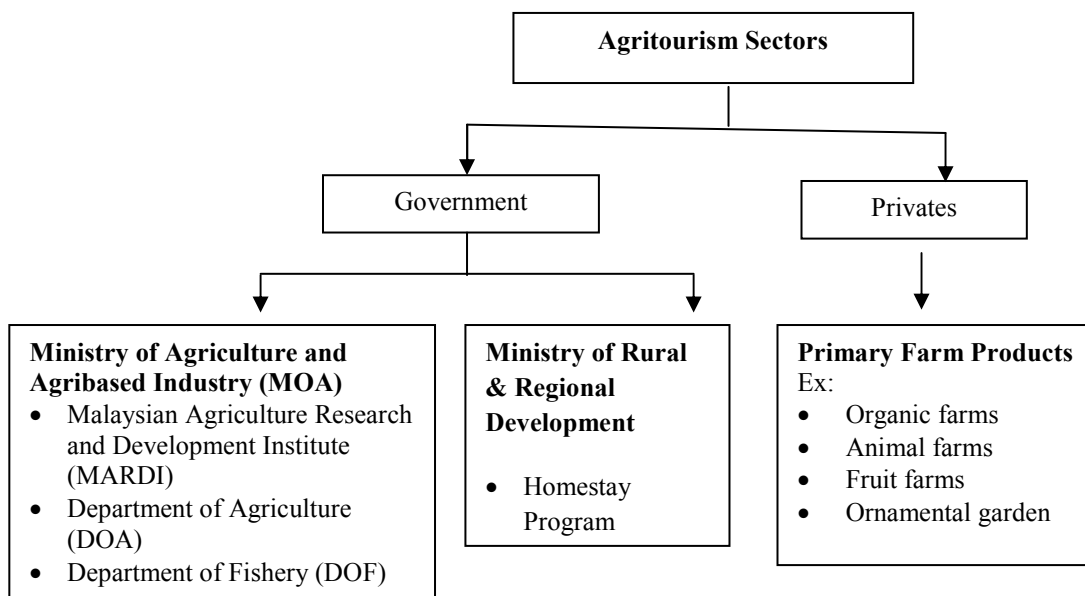


Fig. 3. Agencies involved in agritourism sectors in Malaysia.

The privates sector are usually has a primary farm products, where the farm are an established specialty commercial farm, such as organic farm, animal farms, flower garden etc. The farmer realized the advantages of diversification of income through agritourism, thus this has prompt them to developed facilities and activities in the farms to attract visitors. Many of these farms started as a commercial farms, the farms were opened to visitors, it was found the revenues has increase more than fifty percent or more. Example of private agritourism is farm animal. Farm animals are one of the main attractions to visitors either young or old. One of the most successful farm animal park is the UK Farm in Kluang Johor, which established 2003 for supplying goat's meat, goat's milk and commercialize toiletries product and started agritourism in 2008 (UK Farm, 2013). Since ventured to agritourism, the farm received 5000-7000 visitors monthly from local and international. The famous highland agritourism area in Malaysia is Cameron Highlands. It has boost many tea plantation, strawberries, flowers and honey bee farms to opened an area in their farm for agritourism purposed and in opened their farms to visitors thus attraced 56,700 visitors in 2011.

The Homestay program was formally introduced in 1995 after the launched of Rural Tourism Master Plan which the objective is to increase rural community in tourism industry and reduce rural urban migration. This program is collaboration between MOA, Ministry of Rural Development and MOTAC. These various agencies give supports to homestay operators by giving training, advice and promotion. Homestay is a form of tourism that has element of cross cultural exchange and it involves a community of rural areas. It offers a unique and relaxing lifestyle which is different compared to the other tourism sector. Peterson (2004) reported that the Malaysian homestay is different from countries concept, here the guest staying with operator family thus giving opportunities to interact with local communities and learn directly or indirectly from each other by exchanging culture, heritage and lifestyle. The homestay operator provides an alternative accommodation to tourist, thus the spaces, level of quality and security of homestay houses are very important element in Malaysia homestay.

Homestay provide job opportunities for local communities and improves qualities of life for local people (Bhuiyan et al., 2011). In Malaysia, homestay accommodation operates and organizes by *kampung* (village) people where often located at rural area where the main economic is the agriculture (Clammer, 1996; Kennedy, 1993). Thus the activities always relate to culture, economic activities of the area, visit to cottage industry and nature. To attract the visitors, each homestay operators offered specific experiences to visitor. Many homestays located in Malaysia’s granary areas offered activities related to traditional rice cultivation and harvesting. Homestays in Bagan Datoh, Perak which is country’s coconut production area offered activities related to the coconut production and processing. As cultural exchange is one of the component in homestay program, the traditional games such as batik drawing; kite making and flying; catch fish in mud (*mengagau-gagau ikan*), coconut bowling were also offered to visitor. A visit to *kampungs’* cottage industries is also a part of the homestay program, where the visitor could learnt the making of *kerepek* (crackers), *kuih* (local delicacies), handicrafts and purchased the products at lower prices.

Since introduction of National Plan for Rural Development Plan in 1995, the government through MOCAT had provided a specific fund to assist in the growth of expansion of Homestay program. The program has gained popularity among rural community, thus make them to open up and accepting tourist in their house (Pusiran and Xiao, 2013). This is proven by the increasing number of homestay operator form 286 in 1997 to 4463 in 2009 (Table 1). The program was also supported by the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development in developed the infrastructure of rural communities.

Table :1 Total number of homestay operators in Malaysia from 1997-2009.

Year	No of Homestay
1997	286
1998	321
2002	776
2004	948
2006	1563
2008	3034
2009	4463

Source: Ministry of Culture, Art and Tourism, Malaysia, 2012.

The Homestay Program has progressed well in generating income to community and country. This is reflected from MOCAT statistic which recorded that the total tourist arrival in 2010 and 2011 was 196,472 and 254,981, respectively which showed a 29.8% increment (Table 2). The homestay program have gained popularity especially among Japanese, Korean and Singapore tourist (Jamilah and Amran, 2007). On 15 November 2012, Malaysia received the Ulysses Award as recognition towards Malaysia’s achievement in promoting Homestay Programme. The award was given by the UNWTO to Malaysia signifies the positive development in the homestay program in Malaysia and its ability to attract local and foreign tourists (Abdul Rahim Merican et al., 2014).

To ensure the quality of the accommodation and services offered to homestay visitor is at its best. Homestay operators need to register with MOTAC and attend the Homestay course. The officials from MOTAC will inspect the house to ensure it achieved the minimum requirement. Homestay operator also must meet criteria set by the Malaysian Homestay Association in order for them to get assistance and support from the government and relevant agencies.

Table 2. Comparison of homestay performance in 2010 and 2011.

Item	2010	2011	Increment (%)
Total Tourist Arrival:	196,472	254,981	29.8%
• Domestic	147,346	195,324	32.6%
• International	49,126	59,657	21.4%
Total Revenue (RM)	12.4 mil	15.7 mil	26.8%
Occupancy Rate	25.2%	33.1%	20.4%

Source: Ministry of Culture, Art and Tourism, Malaysia, 2012.

CHALLENGES IN AGRITOURISM

Although the agritourism has shown a good records in its development since is started, there are still improvement could be made to increase the revenue from this industry. It was reported, the overall income generated through tourism in Malaysia keep increasing, however only 25% were contributed from agricultural and agro-based product (Shuib, 2007). The agritourism in Malaysia still considered at young stage compared to other countries such as in European countries and United States. Thus need to go through obstacles to ensure the better route for this industry to develop further in the future. Lacking of maintenance and basic infrastructure is one of the problems facing by the agritourism operator. Visitors will only visit and re-visit to areas which are easily accessible, with proper basic utilities and well maintained farms. Many of the agritourism places located further to the rural areas, thus ggood transportation link is required to attract visitor to these places. Basic tourism amenities such as local transportation, comfortable accommodation and basic food service should be available for tourist. This would add market value to the product. A product would be difficult to market if they are not easily accessible by the public. The government agencies need to consider the location of tourism areas. For instances the access to the location being not too far away or difficult to go is important as most tourist spend a few days only for travelling purposes. As such the agritourism need to identify tourist attractions that are easily located within their vicinity such as natural attraction (waterfall, lakes, flora and fauna) (Pusiran and Xiao, 2013) to offers as activities for visitors.

There is a need to diversify agritourism products to differentiate individual package to attract more visitor. This could be achieved if the local community to be responsible and committed for development of tourism product on their sites. However, obtaining cooperation and commitment from every individual in the community is crucial (Yusnita et al., 2012). Community involvement is a very important factor in agritourism activities. There is needs for the authorities to improve the participation level in communities to ensure the success of projects. Lack of community participation may lead to failure of agritourism program closely related to community, such as the *Tagal* System and Homestay. The lack of good promotion and under-developed marketing strategies were also found to be a factor hindering the agritourism development. Internet is one the best tools for product promotion; however, searching for agritourism park through world wide web would only shown few of agritourism places in the country. The agritourism operator also lacking in networking with tourism industry players to helps them push for a more successful programme and marketing. Communication between the guide/host with the visitor is considered to be an important aspect in achieving good visitor satisfaction. The drawback in agritourism industry, especially at rural areas is the lack of communication skills or mastering the internationally accepted language especially English. (Pusiran and Xiao, 2013).

In the 10MP, the government has introduces six strategies to face these challenges). The first strategy is by diversification of agritourism based on products, such as farm produces, agricultural education, natural conservation and heritage, health, handicraft and culture. Second is to offer

agritourism package specifically by country, this include preparation of suitable food and multilingual guide. The third strategies is to improve and upgrading of infrastructure, transportation and accommodation by given more incentive to agritourism operator and simplify loan application to encouraging them on upgrading their facilities and accommodations. The fourth strategy is to strengthen the agritourism quality and safety through introducing agritourism product rating and certification. The fifth is to prepare agritourism calendar and directories to simplify the agent to make booking and for tourist to plan their visit. The final strategy is to strengthen workforce with all stakeholders such as tour agencies and increase promotion (EPU, 2013). Through these strategies, the government is anticipating the agritourism could develop to higher level and achieve the targeted number of tourist arrival to agritourism area to 6 million.

CONCLUSION

The agritourism industry in Malaysia has plenty to offer to visitors due to plenty of resources available in the country. However, to be able to expand and further develop this industry, problems and challenges need to be overcome. Few problems faced in agritourism are the community participation and language barrier. The 10MP strategies planned to overcome various problems in agritourism, however, do not include community participation and language barrier, which is shown to be problems faced in agritourism products. The current 10MP related to promotion of agritourism product planning is until 2020. There are six more years to achieve the target set. It is imperative for the government to assess the execution of the current strategies to ensure the objective of the plan.

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