

Indigenous Cultural Tourism in Malaysia

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KEYWORDS:

Indigenous Culture
Malaysia Tourism
Orang Asli
Challenges

CITATION:

Nur Khalidah Dahlan et al. (2023).
Indigenous Cultural Tourism in Malaysia.
*Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and
Humanities (MJSSH)*, 8(7), e002408.
<https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v8i7.2408>

ABSTRACT

There are almost 500 million indigenous people in the world, in over 90 countries. Each of the indigenous groups has its own culture, belief, and skills. This has made them a very special community in the world. The uniqueness of the indigenous people has attracted people to come to learn and experience their culture. Thus, indigenous culture has been used as part of tourist attractions in many countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. The tourism sector will benefit the indigenous community and the government itself. The indigenous community gets to improve their socio-economy and will continue to practice their culture and the government gets to improve their revenue through tourism. Malaysia is home to almost 200,000 thousand Indigenous people (Orang Asli) from three main ethnic groups. Thus, Malaysia has implemented the indigenous culture of Orang Asli as part of its tourism sector. Hence, this study is conducted to analyze the law and practice of indigenous cultural tourism in the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia. Apart from that, a comparison will be made to Australia to study its law and practice in promoting aboriginal cultural tourism. However, this study finds that challenges remain in the need to balance the protection of Orang Asli's culture and socio-economic development. Furthermore, the inefficiency of local management remains a challenge in promoting indigenous cultural tourism in Malaysia. Therefore, Malaysia needs to improve on its management to enhance indigenous cultural tourism in Malaysia.

Contribution/Originality: This study undertakes to analyze the law relating to indigenous cultural tourism in Peninsular Malaysia.

1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the sectors that support the growth of Malaysia's economy. In 2019, the tourism sector contributes RM86.14 billion to Malaysia's economy ([Tourism Malaysia, 2019](#)). The national slogan of Malaysia tourism, 'Malaysia truly Asia' reflects the uniqueness of Malaysia as a place for tourist destinations. In the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010), the government has recognized the role of culture, arts, and heritage as sources of economic growth and has allocated a significant fund to promote tourism activities that relate to culture, arts, and heritage ([Ida Madieha, 2018](#)). According to the [World Tourism Organisation \(UNWTO\) \(2019\)](#), cultural tourism can be defined as a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience, and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination. These attractions/products are related to a set of distinctive material, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional features of a society that encompasses arts and architecture, historical and cultural heritage, culinary heritage, literature, music, creative industries, and the living cultures with their lifestyles, value systems, beliefs, and traditions".

The diversity of Malaysian culture is also reflected by the indigenous people communities that reside in Malaysia. As of 2018, the indigenous people of Malaysia comprise 178,203 thousand people which contributes to 13.8% of the national population. It encompasses three ethnic groups of *Negrito*, *Senoi*, and Proto Malay. The *Negrito* ethnic group consists of several tribes which are *Kensiu*, *Kintaq*, *Jahai*, *Mendriq*, *Bateq*, and *Lanoh* while the *Senoi* tribe consists of *Temiar*, *Semai*, *Jah Hut*, *Che Wong*, *Semoq Beri*, and *Mah Meri*. On the other hand, Proto-Malay ethnic group consists of *Orang Seletar*, *Jakun*, *Kanaq*, *Orang Kuala*, *Temuan* and *Semelai* ([Masron, 2013](#)). The culture of every ethnic group of indigenous people can attract local and foreign tourists. The indigenous people have their unique features and their novel and authentic way of life.

Realizing the potential of the indigenous people as part of cultural tourism, the Malaysian government has made a proactive approach to exploring this subject. The Malaysian government under the Ministry of Tourism has organized several programs that focus on indigenous cultural expression for tourism purposes such as National Craft Fair and Rainforest Music Festivals ([Ida Madieha, 2018](#)). The promotion of indigenous tourism is also reflected in the programs conducted by the state government such as the Selangor International Indigenous Arts Festival 2019. It is worthy to note that, indigenous cultural tourism is also being practiced in other countries such as Australia and Canada. This has benefitted the indigenous people and the government itself.

However, certain issues would likely affect indigenous tourism in Malaysia such as displacement due to urban development and the lack of legal protection. The uniqueness of indigenous tourism lies in their culture. So, if their culture and land are not protected this would impact the indigenous cultural tourism industry in Malaysia. Hence, this study undertakes to analyze the law relating to indigenous cultural tourism in Peninsular Malaysia. Apart from that, a comparison will be made to countries such as Australia to study their law and practice relating to indigenous cultural tourism. Thereafter, a recommendation will be made to improve the current law and practice relating to indigenous cultural tourism.

2. Concept of Indigenous Cultural Tourism

Globally, roughly 370 million indigenous people belong to 5,000 different groups. In addition, each group represents its own cultures, traditions, and languages (Jennings, 2017). Indigenous cultural tourism has been used as part of a country's attraction for tourists. The uniqueness of their culture has become the drive to include the indigenous people as part of a tourism attraction. Tourist would want to hear stories of alternative ways of living that is out of the urbanization that we live within.

It is important to note that there is no conclusive definition of what connotes indigenous cultural tourism. However, reference can be made to Butler and Hinch (2009), who defined indigenous tourism as an opportunity for the indigenous people to gain economic independence and rejuvenate their culture. On the other hand, Puvaneswaran et al. (2013), define indigenous cultural tourism as a type of tourism that allows the tourist to visit the settlement of indigenous people and experience their way of life. It may also refer to activities that involve the participation of indigenous people in serving their culture as the essence of attraction. This type of tourism relies on activities relating to their culture, heritage, and lifestyle (Siti Hajar & Norlida Hanim, 2018). In simple words, indigenous cultural tourism is a type of tourism where a tourist may experience the culture and the way of life of indigenous people and through this tourism, the indigenous people may upgrade their livelihoods while maintaining their culture and self-determination.

There are four important elements to consider in developing indigenous cultural tourism which are the 4 Hs (Habitat, Heritage, History, and Handicrafts). Firstly, consideration must be made of the habitat or location of where the indigenous people reside in exercising their culture and way of life. Next, is the ethnography of their heritage that was inherited from their ancestors (Smith, 1996). This is important to attract the tourist to learn about their culture. The third element is their handicrafts. Their handicrafts can be marketed as tourism products and indirectly it can introduce their creativity to the outside world. The fourth element is the history of their cultural background and how they interact with the outside world. This could be the key factor in attracting the tourist to join in their activities through the tourism packages. The reason is from the demand-side, the tourist that is attracted to this type of tourism is likely to be adventurous, seek authenticity, education, and desire personal interaction. If the indigenous people could fulfill this demand, it could contribute to a more holistic view of indigenous cultural tourism.

According to Rasoolimanesh et al. (2018), the involvement of indigenous people would benefit their local communities. Through tourism, the indigenous people's life has been uplifted in terms of economic development, household income, education, religious belief, and cultural aspects. They might also reaffirm their identities and rejuvenate their skills in artifact making and would be able to enact their rituals and festivals (Anzarya, 2004). Apart from that, well-managed indigenous tourism would be able to alleviate poverty, curbs rural flight migration, encourage tourism product diversification, and will allow the indigenous people to retain their relationship with the land, and this would indirectly nurture their sense of pride. In simple words, well-managed indigenous tourism would improve their livelihoods while promoting their culture to the world (World Tourism Organization, 2019).

3. Law Relating to The Indigenous Cultural Tourism in Malaysia

3.1. Aboriginal People Act 1954 (APA Act)

The *Aboriginal People Act 1954* is enacted to protect and promote the well-being and advancement of the aboriginal people of Peninsular Malaysia. The Act defined an aborigine as a person where the male parent is a member of an aboriginal group, follows an aboriginal way of life, custom, and belief, or a person who is adopted by aborigines and follows aboriginal ways of life, customs, and belief or the child of the union between aboriginal female and male of another race. Under this Act, the Director General (DG), who was appointed as the DG of the Department of Orang Asli Development, is responsible for the welfare and advancement of aborigines. Section 6 of the Act allow the state authority to declare any area that is inhabited by aborigine as an aboriginal reserve under section 7. Nonetheless, the Act does not expressly mention tourism since the initial aim of the Act is to protect the land and preserve the rights of Aborigines. However, based on section 4 of the Act, allows any actions that will promote the advancement of the aborigines. Through tourism, the aborigines will have the chance to improve their socio-economic position and may upgrade their livelihoods.

3.2. Tourism Industry Act 1992 (TI Act)

Tourism Industry Act 1992 is an act that provides licensing and provide regulations to tourism enterprises and for matters related therewith. Part II of the Act stressed the need for tourism enterprises to be licensed. For example, section 14 states that all tourism enterprises must be licensed whether they are operating a tourism business or travel agency business. the failure to do so would entitle a person to a fine not exceeding RM50,000. While Part III of the Act list down the requirement and duties of the licensed tourism enterprise. Section 14 requires a tourism enterprise to display a license at their premise and is responsible to submit information and particulars relating to business operations such as financial statements, itineraries for both inbound and outbound tours, and other details of business activities such as charges for and terms and conditions of such activities. Failure to adhere to the law would entitle a person to a fine not exceeding RM20,000 or imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years or both. The Act also prohibits the use of a vehicle for transportation for tourists except for excursion vehicles that have been licensed by authorities and prohibition a person to become a tourist guide without having a proper license.

3.3. Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board Act 1992 (MTPB Act)

The *Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board Act 1992* is enacted for the establishment of the Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board. This Act superseded the Tourist Development Corporation of Malaysia Act 1972 in March 2006. Section 4 of the Act set out the functions of the Board such as to 1) stimulate and promote tourism to and within Malaysia 2) stimulate and market Malaysia as a tourist destination internationally or locally 3) coordinate any promotion activity about tourism conducted by the government 4) make recommendations for matter on methods and programs to be adopted to facilitate the development of tourism industry. Subsection 2 of the Act provides power to the Board to expedite activities relating to tourism, to co-operate with or act as an agent on behalf of any agency or organization whether locally or internationally. In addition, the Board may secure local or overseas publicity for the promotion of Malaysia as a tourist destination and may enter into negotiations and arrangements necessary to exercise its functions.

3.4. National Heritage Act 2005 (NH Act)

The *National Heritage Act 2005* was formulated for the conservation and preservation of National Heritage. However, this Act only applies to products that have been listed as national heritage through the Act. This Act is related to tourism as there are indigenous products or culture that has been listed as national heritage such as the *MayinJooh*, and the *Mah Meri* cultural dance. Apart from that, a representative of *Mah Meri*, *Maznah Anak Unyan*, has been recognized as *Warisan Kebangsaan Orang Hidup* (WAKOH) for her indigenous traditional handicraft weaving. The recognition of indigenous culture as a national heritage signifies a greater value to the indigenous people (Ida Madieha, 2018). Section 3 of the Act allows the formulation of policy or directives relating to the conservation and preservation of heritage while section 60 mentions the conservation of intangible heritage by the owner of the heritage.

4. Agencies Involved in the Promotion of Indigenous Cultural Tourism

Two main agencies are directly involved in promoting indigenous cultural tourism in Malaysia namely the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA) and the Ministry of Tourism, Art and Culture (MOTAC).

JAKOA is established on 14th January 2011 under the Prime Minister's Department. However, on 9th March 2020, the JAKOA was transferred to the Ministry of Rural Development (KPLB). The JAKOA is the current agency that oversees the affairs of indigenous people in Peninsular Malaysia. Based on the *Aboriginal People Act 1954*, JAKOA is responsible to promote development to improve the socio-economic status and the quality of life of indigenous people in Peninsular Malaysia. Apart from that, JAKOA is mandated to protect the culture of life of the indigenous people. JAKOA sees the potential of the indigenous people's culture as part of tourist attractions. This is an alternative way to improve the economic development of the indigenous people. Among the initiatives done by JAKOA to promote indigenous cultural tourism are the establishment of Muzium *Orang Asli* and Mah Meri Cultural Village.

MOTAC is established on 15th May 2013 under the name of the Ministry of Tourism and Culture. However, on 2nd July 2018, the Ministry was renamed to Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture. The ministry has promoted indigenous culture as part of its tourism activities such as the establishment of Muzium Seni Kraf Orang Asli. Apart from that, the initiatives continued through sub-agencies of MOTAC such as the National Department of Culture and Arts (JKNN) and Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board (MTPB). For example, International Indigenous and Aborigines Art Festival 2015 is hosted in collaboration with JKNN and JAKOA while MTPB has promoted the festival to attract tourists locally and internationally

4.1. The Indigenous Cultural Tourism in Malaysia: Museums

Two museums reflect the culture of Orang Asli which are the Orang Asli Craft Museum dan the Orang Asli Museum. The Orang Asli Craft Museum is located in Kuala Lumpur, nearby to the National Museum. Several 138 Orang Asli handicrafts are collected here as an alternative to conserve their cultural heritage. The handicrafts collected are masks, wooden sculptures, weavings, hunting equipment, music instruments, and personal embellishment. The handicrafts are collected from the Orang Asli in Malaysia.

Two Orang Asli museums were built by JAKOA. The first museum is located in Gombak and the other one is located in Jeli, Kelantan. Both museums function as a center of the history, tradition, and background of the Orang Asli community. Apart from that, the museums also display artifacts collections for public view. Among the artifacts collected in the museums are Orang Asli's barkcloth costumes, carved sculptures, *buluh sumpit*, musical instruments, *simpai* bracelets, and *tempok*.

4.2. The Indigenous Cultural Tourism in Malaysia: Festival

In 2015, the National Department of Culture and Arts (JKN), Kuala Lumpur City Hall, and Jakoa has collaborated to host the International Aborigines & Indigenous Arts Festival. This festival received international participation where indigenous people from Ghana, Indonesia, New Zealand, Canada, China, Philippines, and Thailand came to showcase their culture to the public ([New Straits Times, 2015](#)). The JAKOA had launched the Festival Kebudayaan & Kesenian Masyarakat Orang Asli Negeri Kelantan & Terengganu in 2019. Ten groups of indigenous people from *Temiar*, *Bateq*, *Jahai*, and *Mendriq* have come to join in the festival. JAKOA has collaborated with other agencies such as UniSZA, ASWARA, Asyik FM, KESEDAR, and PDRM to conduct the festival ([JAKOA, 2019](#)). There is also another festival that was launched to promote indigenous culture for tourism purposes such as Festival Orang Asli 2014 in the National Museum and the Selangor International Arts Festival 2017.

4.3. The Indigenous Cultural Tourism in Malaysia: Mah Meri Cultural Village

The Mah Meri belongs to the *Senoi* subgroup of indigenous people in Malaysia. Approximately there are 1,400 people reside in the Kampung Sungai Bumbun on Carey Island. Their local language is *Besisi* and is often called 'Ocean People' since they live along the coast that faces the ocean. Sometimes they are also called 'Masked Men' due to their woodcarving skills and leaves origami.

In May 2011, the then Ministry of Tourism & Culture (now called MOTAC) built the Mah Meri Cultural Village for the Mah Meri to showcase their culture. This cultural village is headed by Rashid Esa, a longtime activist and an advocate of Orang Asli, where he organized packages and marketing of crafts on behalf of the Mah Meri people. People who visited the village would be able to see their ancient indigenous cultures such as cultural performances, carvings, weavings, and ceremonial rituals.

MayinJooh, the traditional mask dance, is the main cultural performance that will be shown to the tourist. This mask dance is a non-ritualistic dance where the Mah Meri will dance events such as *Ari Moyang*, weddings, and other blissful events to welcome their ancestor's spirit. To perform the *Jo'oh*, the female Mah Meri people will play conventional Mah Meri instruments such as *rebana*, *gong*, and the famous *Centong Buloh*. The performance would also be accompanied by seven dancers (two males and five females) where the two male dancers will wear masks known as *Tok Pongkola* and *Tok Nania* and wear special clothes made of natural resources. The male dancer will speak to their profound progenitors to allure them to join the dance. The legend behind the dance is that two Mah Meri siblings survived a great flood and it turns out they were the last two humans on earth. It is believed that all of today's humanity is the children of these two ancient survivors ([Norwaliza et al., 2020](#)). This make dance has been listed as a national heritage in 2012 as a recognition of its value as an intangible cultural heritage.

Apart from that, the visitors would be able to see their wood and mask carvings. It is believed that the wood carvings are used for healing ceremonies. A shaman will transfer the spirit that causes the sickness from a person's body into the wood carvings and will leave it in the jungle or throw it into the river or the sea. The wooden sculptures that are still being carved are the *Moyang Belangkas*, *Moyang Mengkok*, *Moyang Tijau Didi*, *Moyang Lanjut* and *Moyang Belalang*. On the other hand, the mask carvings are specially made for their ancestors and they perceived their ancestors as gatekeepers which allow them to live in peace and harmony till today. The mask carving is either made of Pulai wood, which is light weight and whitish wood, or *Nyireh Batu*, a rosy hardwood (Norwaliza et al., 2020). Visitors would also get the chance to learn weavings from the Mah Meri tribe. The weavings are made of pandanus leaves which it is used to create mats, bins, *bujam*, and another personal embellishment.

4.4. The Indigenous Cultural Tourism in Malaysia: Temuan Community in Tadam Hill

Tadam Hill is a home for the *Temuan* tribe, from the Proto-Malay ethnic group and they speak Bahasa *Temuan* (also called *Benua Niap*). According to the legend, Tadam is named after the daughter of the founder who was looking for a new place to settle (New Straits Times, 2020). In 2015, the area was developed by Datuk Lai Yeng Fock, into a private resort named Tadam Hill Resorts. The *Temuan* has a clear written agreement with conditions to lease their land to the resort developer. The agreement expressly prohibits any construction that will cause damage to the environment and indigenous beliefs of the *Temuan* people for the land (Nur Aliah et al., 2019). Therefore, the chalet in the resort is built from bamboo, the traditional building material of Orang Asli.

The *Temuan* community is actively involved in promoting and preserving the area. Around 60% of *Temuan* people are working directly with tourists and had experienced a positive change in their economic development (Nur Aliah et al., 2019). Their culture has introduced the tourist through a program conducted in the resort such as the 'Mini Karnival Kebudayaan Orang Asli di Tadam Hill Resort'. Through this program, the *Temuan* people get to introduce their wood carvings, barkcloth, weavings, cultural dance, and blowpipe constructions to the tourist.

5. Challenges in Promoting Indigenous Cultural Tourism in Malaysia

5.1. Balancing the Orang Asli culture and socio-economic development

One of the main challenges in promoting indigenous cultural tourism is to create a balance between the need to protect the Orang Asli's culture and to allow socio-economic development. The federal government and JAKOA have progressively aided in the new settlement or relocation of the Orang Asli community in Peninsular Malaysia. For example, in 2012, JAKOA has relocated six Orang Asli villages namely Kampung Kuala Suar, Lanai Baru, Perangkap, Tisut, Nyentil, Harong and Telom River. The Orang Asli community has been resettled under the Integrated Program for Remote Areas – Program Bersepadu Daerah Terencil (PROSDET) at the Kuala Medang, Pahang, Malaysia. The resettlement aims to provide better-integrated services and to improve their socio-economy. However, when the Orang Asli communities were resettled in the brick detached houses they can no longer practice their culture and daily activities such as farming or hunting (Jamalunlaili Abdullah et al., 2016).

Apart from that, the Orang Asli community in Kampung Sungai Ruil has also been relocated due to a landslide that happened in the village. The effect of the relocation is that the Orang Asli are now working in the public or private sector and no longer practice their way of life as Orang Asli. They no longer go into the forest to search for natural resources the way they did before ([Sinar Harian, 2021](#)). On a side note, the Mah Meri Tribe is also threatened by the development surrounding the Mah Meri Cultural Village. In 2017, there was a proposal to expand the Carey Island port which will impact their cultural village. The Mah Meri tribe has opposed the project as they claimed that they have resided in the area for more than 20 years and have a great attachment to the village ([Malaymail, 2017](#)). If the proposal is allowed, they might need to be relocated and the Mah Meri Cultural Village needs to be demolished. This will affect one of the indigenous cultural tourism sectors that currently exist in Malaysia.

This situation is different from what is being practiced by the Australian government. Any development for the aboriginal people must be assessed on the possible impact on their culture and identity. The government believed that the ancestral land and their culture have a deep connection to their identity as aboriginal people. Therefore, any development to be constructed must not affect their culture and their land. Furthermore, even if the development is to be conducted nearby their land, it must be assessed on the impact on their value as aboriginal people (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984; [Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999](#)).

The biggest problem with the development of the Orang Asli socio-economy is that the Orang Asli communities can barely practice their culture and their way of life. Relocation of their settlement will surely influence their identity as Orang Asli ([Hafazah et al., 2010](#)). If this continuously happens, this might potentially influence their culture as well. The reason is, that their traditional land, which had been resettled for generations, has a deep connection to their culture and identity. If they can no longer practice their daily activities and culture, thus, the government could not market their culture as part of tourism. This would eventually be a great loss to our country.

5.2. Poor Management of Local Government on the Indigenous Cultural Tourism

This study finds that JAKOA is the main agency that has continuously supported the development of the Orang Asli either in the economic aspect or in their cultural aspect. In this context, supposedly the government should impose a national approach to join hand in hand with JAKOA to promote more cultural activities of Orang Asli at the national and international levels. It is not fair to put the burden on JAKOA alone in promoting the Orang Asli's culture. The JAKOA and the government would be able to discuss the area that needs improvement to market their culture to the world. The reason is, that the JAKOA might be knowledgeable about the specialties and uniqueness of each of the Orang Asli tribes so, this information will be useful to the government to plan the necessary cultural activities to be marketed as a tourist attraction in Malaysia.

It is also important to note that, most of the state government does not play an active role in enhancing and promoting the indigenous cultural tourism of Orang Asli in its respective state. Again, all the burdens are shifted to JAKOA to promote their culture to the tourists. Supposedly, the state government must emphasize the indigenous culture as part of its tourism attraction in the state. Having said that, they also need to impose an action plan to achieve this goal. Take Australia as a reference, each of its state government has implemented individual action plan to enhance and improve its aboriginal cultural

tourism to the world. They have spent millions of money to make its aboriginal culture part of each state's attraction. The state government in Malaysia should impose the same management.

Apart from that, the promotion of Indigenous Cultural Tourism in Malaysia highly depends on MTPB as the national agency of tourism promotion board. However, this study finds that the Board is promoting not many Orang Asli cultural activities. This brings disadvantages to indigenous cultural tourism in Malaysia. Supposedly, the MTPB should make proper information about indigenous cultural tourism in Malaysia for example the Mah Meri Cultural Village. Although the village is not fully owned by the government, it should not be an excuse to not promote the village as a tourist attraction.

5.3. The Lack of Law and Policies in Governing the Indigenous Cultural Tourism

Malaysia does not have robust laws and policies governing indigenous cultural tourism. Most of the initiatives to develop Orang Asli cultural activities are done by the private sector. For example, is the Tadom Hill Resort. The resort was developed by the private sector based on the lease agreement between the company and the *Temuan* people. Malaysia should have imposed more rigorous laws and policies to enhance indigenous cultural tourism in Malaysia. Moreover, a strong law and policy would smoothen the administration so it would be easier for the state to manage the Orang Asli community to improve their socio-economy value.

6. Recommendations and Conclusion

In conclusion, Malaysia has the potential to market its indigenous cultural tourism to the world. This would surely benefit the government and will improve the socio-economy of the Orang Asli. However, the challenges remain in the need to provide improved management in managing indigenous cultural tourism. The federal and state government should cooperate in improving indigenous cultural tourism in each state. They should refer to Australia on how it manages the aboriginal cultural tourism industry. It would be impossible to put the burden to market cultural tourism on the federal alone or the JAKOA alone. All sectors need to cooperate to provide a greater support system to the government.

Apart from that, Malaysia needs to improvise its law and policies relating the indigenous cultural tourism as the current law and policies do not support this type of tourism industry. Malaysia should have a law that can protect the Orang Asli's culture while promoting its culture to the world. This includes protecting their land from any kind of development that would impact their culture and identity as Orang Asli. The relocation and resettlement of Orang Asli have indeed impacted their way of life, culture, and identity. Therefore, Malaysia should improvise on the current practice in managing the Orang Asli.

Funding

This paper is part of a project funded by the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS): FRGS/1/2022/SSI12/UKM/02/11.

Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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