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**ECO-TOURISM POTENTIALS OF PEAT SOIL FOREST IN MUKAH, SARAWAK**Sridar Ramachandran<sup>1</sup>, Ahmad Shuib<sup>2</sup>, Sulaiman Hj Husaini<sup>3</sup>, Shazali Johari<sup>4</sup>  
and Syamsul Herman Mohd Afandi<sup>5</sup><sup>1&2</sup>*Institute of Agriculture and Food Policy Studies, UPM*<sup>3</sup>*Land Custody and Development Authority, Sarawak*<sup>4&5</sup>*Faculty of Forestry, UPM**\*Corresponding author:***SUMMARY**

Mukah as the administrative centre for the District of Mukah, Sarawak is well known for its sago production. The dependency on peat soil for sago production by the local community as the economic activity has been practiced for decades. However, Mukah is also blessed with long beach, serene rivers system, and the uniqueness of Melanau ethnic community, which offer potentials for a related income generating socio economic activity in the ecotourism sector. Peat soil forest serves important ecological and environmental functions, if managed in a sustainable manner could provide potential eco-tourism benefits to the local communities. The main objective of the study is to determine the agro-forestry benefits derived in the peat soil forest land in Mukah. A sample survey of the villagers living along the fringes of the peat soil forest was undertaken to determine the perception of the communities on the types of potential eco-tourism resources that could be derived and accrued to the local communities. Observational and outdoor recreational inventory surveys were carried out as supplementary data collection. The results of the study are significant at both local and state levels. At the local level, the peat soil forest plays an important role because it could contribute to the communities' income through the development of ecotourism activities relating to natural resources like fishing, wildlife observation, and outdoor endeavors in the natural forest settings. The river systems within the peat soil forest are used for domestic consumption but also provide opportunities for development of water related recreational activities. The communities themselves serve as potential eco-tourism products with respect to their traditional cultural system and lifestyles.

**Keywords:** *recreational, local communities, resource inventory, satisfaction*

**INTRODUCTION**

Local residents can gain competitiveness economically in terms of household income by using the rural resources as an asset (Hjalager, 2004). The primary industry in the rural area is often related to agriculture. In Mukah, Sarawak the primary industry is agroforestry based. Many researchers who focus on the eco-tourism will conclude that the current situation of eco-tourism is currently going through a unique change period (Ilbery, 1998; Walford, Everitt and Napton, 1999). The fast growth in eco-tourism destination poses a challenge to decision makers in the development and implementation of rural resource policies. Thus, based on the difficulty of the situation and the views of environmental critics such as Marsden (1998) and Garrod *et al.* (2006), a rural resource framework has been developed to replicate the segregated changes in the rural sites. According to Butler *et al.* (1997) this complexity and connectivity of the theories could possibly cause conflicts in the stakeholder decision-making process on the rural resources. Progress in turning rural resources into tourism capital has been a challenge especially in the context of environment, society and economy. This is due to the fact that rural setting requires the initiative of stakeholders involvement and in the decision making process. Hence, establishing guidelines to encourage a perception that draws an appropriate balance between the stakeholders' different needs and requirement of a sound ecotourism policy is established.

For example, suggestions pointed at refining the economic position of a particular rural area are often conflicting on environmental grounds, as they are believed to threaten rural ways of life. Nevertheless, the challenges facing the rural tourism destination can be more efficiently handled by employing innovative ways of thinking and doing based on the principles of sustainable development (Sharpley, 2000). One of the challenges in Mukah is to identify resources that can be tourism assets. The perception that any rural resource can be a tourism capital has been proved otherwise. It is therefore critical to identify the right resources that meet these criteria. The findings of this study is hoped to eventually assist the community to not only identify the correct rural resource but to turn it into a tourism capital to their benefit in term of income that will eventually increase their standard of living. The purposes of this study are (i) to identify the rural resources and tourism capital; (ii) to demonstrate the linkages between rural

resources and tourism capital. From this study, the resources that actually match the tourism capital can be clearly established.

### Study Site

Mukah as the administrative centre for the District of Mukah, Sarawak is well known for its sago production. The dependency on peat soil for sago production by the local community as the economic activity has been practiced for decades. However, Mukah is also blessed with long beach, serene rivers system, and the uniqueness of Melanau ethnic community, which offer potentials for a related income generating socio economic activity in the ecotourism sector. Peat soil forest serves important ecological and environmental functions, if managed in a sustainable manner could provide potential eco-tourism benefits to the local communities. The results of the study are significant at both local and state levels. At the local level, the peat soil forest plays an important role because it could contribute to the communities' income through the development of ecotourism activities relating to natural resources like fishing, wildlife observation, and outdoor endeavors in the natural forest settings. The river systems within the peat soil forest are used for domestic consumption but also provide opportunities for development of water related recreational activities. The communities themselves serve as potential eco-tourism products with respect to their traditional cultural system and lifestyles.

This study further identifies that Mukah houses several species of mammals, birds, reptiles and riparian plants. Table 13.1 is an adaptation from (Garrod *et al.*, 2006) which is used in the context of Mukah Sarawak gives a detailed illustration of the elements of which classifies components of rural tourism capital that might be drawn upon by the rural tourism industry at numerous steps of the rural tourism value chain. This can range from the establishment of rural images used to support a rural tourism destination by offering rustic tourists with activities to do and attractions to visit, to the contribution made by natives in making a tourist's holiday unforgettable.

Table 1: Mukah's elements of countryside capital

Elements	Mukah Sarawak
<b>Landscape, including seascape</b>	riparian forests lining the riverbanks, freshwater swamps, peat swamps, mangroves, brackish water lagoon with vegetated sand islands, seagrass beds and beaches
<b>Wildlife, both fauna and flora Biodiversity</b>	sharks, wild boar, deer, mouse deer, birds wetlands, mangroves
<b>Geology and soils</b>	peat soils
<b>Rural settlements, from isolated dwellings to market towns</b>	fisherman villages, local wet market
<b>Woods, forests and plantations Distinctive local customs, languages, costumes, foods, crafts, festivals</b>	sago farms, Melanau cultures, educational hub, tabaloi, local fruits
<b>Agricultural buildings</b>	local dwelling

Source: Adaptation from (Garrod *et al.*, 2006)

### METHODS

This paper looks into the application of the linkages between rural resources and eco-tourism capital. The application of Mukah to the framework is used to understand the relationship between the capital, industry and the end user. The framework is crucial as it looks at the interdependence of rural resources and ecotourism capital.

Eco-tourism is a more widespread terminology used to describe rural resource as a tourism capital. Rural resources that qualify as eco-tourism capital typically come from farm related activities also known as farm tourism and wilderness tourism such as national park, reserve forest (Luloff *et al.*, 1994). They can be found in non-urban territory where the primary economic activity is agriculture. The presence of human is somehow mandatory in these places. As can be seen in these studies, rural resource and tourism capital is a widely studied phenomenon although the exact terminologies were absent in the writing. A clear example is seen in eco-tourism demand drivers such as state and national parks, outdoor recreation, festival and events, agriculture tourism, environmental wonders, scenery and small town atmosphere. All these drivers can be undoubtedly placed into the natural, social and physical atmosphere of eco-tourism capital. Rural resources will remain as a rural resource if its potential is not shifted towards a eco-tourism capital. The aim of this paper is to understand that while rural tourism has long been

seen as an important catalyst towards rural tourism, the understanding of the linkages and dependence of the assets and capital within these vicinities are still lacking.

The main objective of the study is to determine the eco-tourism benefits derived in the peat soil forest land in Mukah. A sample survey of the villagers living along the fringes of the peat soil forest was undertaken to determine the perception of the communities on the types of potential eco-tourism resources that could be derived and accrued to the local communities. Observational and outdoor recreational inventory surveys were carried out as supplementary data collection.

## RESULTS

The potential ecotourism activities (Table 2) of Mukah has been identified namely for its eco-tourism and agro-tourism planning. Key potential areas within Mukah need to be addressed for tourism and recreation. Activities related to eco-tourism and agro-tourism includes river cruise, recreation and home stay. The eco-tourism plan can include targeting psychographics of prospective visitors which includes the following:

1. Domestic and daily visitors
2. Visitors with special interest towards flora and fauna biodiversity
3. Visitors with special interest towards seafood and community traditions
4. Educators, researchers and students with special interest towards fisheries and agriculture
5. Visitors with special interest towards heritage and communities

Table 2: Potential Ecotourism activities for the local communities in Mukah

<b>Role</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>
<b>Boatmen</b>	River cruise to watch the fireflies, river cruises, sea cruises and recreational fishing
<b>Tour Guides</b>	Eco-tour guides for forest trekking, wild fauna and flora observation.
<b>Catering business and food stalls</b>	Ample opportunities for locals to be employed in the food industry and the preparation of local delights (food and fruit)
<b>Resort workers</b>	Resort operators, transport and general operations
<b>Cultural village</b>	Cultural dance and music groups
<b>Handicraft village</b>	Promotion of local handicraft and souvenirs by using the local products.

With this, the plan has also suggested several examples of tourism packages and destinations (Table 3) that could be implemented towards boosting eco-tourism capital. Eco-tourism can generate alternative incomes for local communities, who at present depend almost entirely on the agriculture sector for their livelihood. For ecotourism to be successful and sustainable, local community awareness and commitment is vital.

Table 3: Potential Eco-Tourism Packages suggested for Mukah

<b>Example of Package</b>	<b>Targeted Visitors</b>	<b>Destination of Visit</b>
<b>Fishing</b>	International and local visitors	1. Mukah Aquaculture Village 2. Mukah Deep sea fishing 3. Mukah Recreational fishing
<b>Nature Lovers expedition</b>	International and local visitors,	4. Peat land forest adventure
<b>Farming and agriculture</b>	International and local visitors, Educators, researchers and students with special interest towards fisheries and agriculture	5. Sago farm and factory tour 6. Tabaloi and traditional cake makers 7. Kaul festival 8. Special recreational events
<b>“Balik Kampung” or homecoming</b>	International and local visitors, Visitors with special interest towards heritage and communities and visitors with families	9. Homestay village 10. Historical village 11. Cultural village
<b>River-Cruise, 9 natural wonders</b>	International and local visitors	12. Wetlands Park 13. Mukah River Systems

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that rural resource is an important catalyst for eco-tourism capital. However, there is a lack of understanding on the linkages and dependencies of assets within these areas. Rural resource is a fundamental resource as the stakeholders are able to utilise and understand the relationship between rural resource and eco-tourism. Through the understanding of rural resource as an eco-tourism capital, the importance of a comprehensive approach in managing rural resource will be appreciated by stakeholders. Hence, an urgent need of establishing and promoting best practice policies among stakeholders of the eco-tourism capital. If left unattended, the risk imposed is bound to lead to a decline in the quality of the tourists' experience. This is important as the growth of eco-tourism destinations in Mukah depends heavily on its unique interconnected ecosystems. Therefore, using the resources available, this eco-tourism destination will be able to leverage on the elements of destination imaging in order to create an unambiguous and robust image destination.

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