

Agrotourism in Malaysia: A Review on Concept, Development, Challenges and Benefits

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ABSTRACT Malaysia has a variety of products with the potential to be developed as unique tourist attractions. In the last decade, agrotourism or agritourism, has gained more attention, especially among the urban populations following the government's initiative to use this platform for income diversification among the rural community. In Malaysia, agrotourism revolves around tourism activities offered by local farm operations in four agricultural branches, which are agriculture, fisheries, livestock, and agro-based industry, to maximize the farmers' income. The primary purpose of this review is to explore the development of agrotourism from the existing literature in the past three decades since its implementation in Malaysia. The concept and challenges of developing agrotourism were discussed in this paper. Besides that, this study also examines the contribution of the agrotourism sector to the local community in Malaysia in economic and social aspects. The literature review approach has been adopted to fulfill the objective of this review. A total of 17 papers were selected and studied for review in the current research. The finding shows that the development and achievement of agrotourism in Malaysia are slow and far behind our neighboring countries. The common challenges faced in establishing farm-based tourism include limitations among farmers and a lack of awareness of this niche besides the underdeveloped infrastructure and facilities in rural areas. Nevertheless, this review found that agrotourism has benefited the local community in economic and social aspects such as income diversification, job creation, and business opportunity. Therefore, agrotourism in Malaysia has a great potential to be one of the poverty alleviation initiatives when the related stakeholders execute proper approaches and policies. This study will help to understand the current scenario of agrotourism and thus hoped to be a basic guideline in farm-based tourism development planning in the future.

KEYWORDS: Agrotourism; farm-based tourism; Malaysia; local community; rural

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Review Article

INTRODUCTION

The "Malaysia, Truly Asia" has been one of the successful slogans used to illustrate and promote the unique travel experience offered by this country's culturally and geographically diverse environment (Lenka & Sarkar, 2014). Some of the popular tourism activities in Malaysia include shopping, entertainment, sightseeing, village visit, and beaches or island activities (MAFI, 2021). One of the fastest growing sectors in the last decade has been agrotourism. Generally, agrotourism is seen as one innovative way to increase the number of activities done on a piece of land, thus increasing the yield of that agricultural area. Like in many developing countries, agriculture plays a vital role in the economy of Malaysia. However, industrialization in the '90s led to a rapid transition to the manufacturing industry, reducing the agriculture sector's dependency. Nowadays, agricultural activities are mainly cultivated by smallholders and rural communities, which are commonly associated with poverty and low quality of life (Annamalah *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, sustainable rural development is essential and relevant. Given the rural community's continued reliance on agriculture, it makes sense to incorporate agrotourism into farm management in order to diversify rural revenue sources.

In Malaysia, agrotourism was introduced in 1991 as an initiative to help farmers in rural areas. Sadly, the development of this sector has been reported to be slow and delayed compared to neighboring countries like Thailand and the Philippines. According to Man & Aspany (2020), the demand for rural tourism is expected to increase due to the rapid urbanization and increasing

environmental stress in the cities. Therefore, the government and related agencies need to join the effort in maturing agrotourism in Malaysia. In order to improve this sector, a holistic overview of the current condition of agrotourism in Malaysia is needed. However, there is limited research related to agrotourism development in developing countries like Malaysia (Weerasooriya *et al.*, 2020). This led to inadequate information to determine the performance and to pinpoint the limitation of agrotourism for improvement purposes. Hence, this review aims to study the concept, development, challenges and benefits of agrotourism in this country. This review is written as a general baseline guideline and reference for development purposes in the future as this sector is recognized as a tool to alleviate poverty and initiate rural development in line with the SDG goals.

METHODOLOGY

The main aim of this review is to explore the agrotourism sector in Malaysia by analyzing the existing scientific literature. This paper intended to summaries literature addressing the concept, development, challenges and benefits of agrotourism in the country. The author applied a non-systematic literature review approach when preparing this review paper. Based on the previous study, the researcher determined the related synonyms for agrotourism. The search keywords are agrotourism, agro-tourism, agritourism, and farm-based tourism. These keywords are then searched for in the Google Scholar and ResearchGate search engines to access the relevant literature. For this study, the authors used both quantitative and qualitative methods. The paper selection must follow the criteria as follow, including the keywords, written in English and Malay, published from 1991 (since the implementation of agrotourism in Malaysia) to 2022. Table 1 shows the process of paper selection in this review. Based on the criteria, a total of 17 papers were selected and reviewed as shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Paper criteria selection

Parameters	Criteria
Keywords	Agritourism, agrotourism, agro-tourism, agri-tourism, farm tourism, farm-based tourism
Language	Papers in English or Malay
Publication Year	1991 – 2022
Type of Papers	16 Article, 1 Dissertation

Table 2. List of selected literatures

No.	Author (Year)	Title
1	Kunasekaran <i>et al.</i> (2011)	Development of farmers perception scale on agro tourism in Cameron Highlands, Malaysia
2	Hamzah <i>et al.</i> (2012)	Socio-economic impact potential of agro tourism activities on Desa Wawasan Nelayan community living in Peninsular Malaysia
3	Muhammad <i>et al.</i> (2012)	Involvement in agrotourism activities among fisherman community in two selected Desa Wawasan Nelayan Villages in Malaysia
4	Tiraieyari <i>et al.</i> (2012)	The socio-economic impact of agrotourism activity on fishing communities in Malaysia
5	Tiraieyari & Hamzah (2012)	Agri-tourism: Potential opportunities for farmers local communities in Malaysia
6	Ismail (2012)	Industri Agro-Pelancongan: Potensi koperasi dalam aktiviti homestay
7	Fahmi <i>et al.</i> (2013)	Involvement in agrotourism activities among communities in Desa Wawasan Nelayan Villages on the East Coast of Malaysia

Table 2. List of selected literatures (cont)

No.	Author (Year)	Title
8	Habsirun (2013)	Visistors' satisfaction on agrotourism project: A case study of the National Botanical Garden, Shah Alam, Malaysia (Dissertation)
9	Mazlan & Juraimi (2014)	Development and challenges of agritourism in Malaysia
10	Mansor <i>et al.</i> (2015)	Agrotourism potential in Malaysia
11	Annamalah <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Agro-Tourism: A cash crop for farmers in Malaysian rural area
12	Ariffin & Yen (2017)	Sustainable agrotourism curating by conferring community involvement in Tanah Rata, Cameron Highlands, Malaysia
13	Leh <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Social impact of agrotourism on local urban residents. Case Study: Cameron Highlands, Malaysia
14	Liew & Ong (2018)	Understanding attributes that motivates tourists' choice towards agritourism destination in Cameron Highlands, Malaysia
15	Bachok <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Rural agrotourism and local community income: The case study of clusteres homestay in Kelantan and Terengganu
16	Azhar <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Agrotourism in Malaysia: A study of its prospects among youth in Pekan Nanas, Pontian
17	Man & Aspany (2020)	Agrotourism preferences factor among urban dwellers in Klang Valley Area

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Concept of Agrotourism in Malaysia

Agrotourism is often used interchangeably with farm-based tourism, agritourism, or rural tourism (Karthik & Gajanand, 2019). The term "agrotourism" has different definitions in different parts of the world. In Malaysia, agrotourism refers to the activity that maximises the use of farm settings and environments, with hospitality in promoting tourism activities (Mansor *et al.*, 2015). Additionally, the National Agro-Food Policy 2011-2020 defines agrotourism as a form of leisure activity founded on agricultural activity that could be utilized in tourism and has a multiplier effect on the farming community's income and the country's GDP. According to Demirezen (2020), the concept of agrotourism is that the agricultural spot should have something to do (picking fruit, tending bees, milking cows), something to eat (organic and farm-fresh fruits), something to buy (agricultural products, handicrafts), or something to see (farms, nature, animals, culture). The presence of these principles in an agrotourism destination would attract more tourist arrival as there are more interesting and unique activities to do in the area. Therefore, countries around the world try to revolve around this concept by adapting the available agricultural resources to create different and unique agrotourism products and services.

In many European countries, agrotourism mainly focuses on farm stays, bed and breakfasts, and winery and vineyard activities. In Malaysia, prior to its implementation in the 90s, agrotourism was in the form of introducing plants and animals mainly for local tourists' recreation and education (Mazlan & Juraimi, 2014). Following the increasing revenue from the agrotourism sector, the government has put a lot of effort into introducing new tourism packages to strengthen and promote this sector. Based on the National Agro-Food Policy 2011-2020, agrotourism in Malaysia consists of four main branches: agriculture, fisheries, livestock, and agro-based industry. These branches were further subdivided into seven agrotourism product categories: agro-heritage-based, farm-based, agricultural-trade-based, culinary-based, ethnic and religious agrotourism, health and

wellbeing agrotourism, and MICE. The agrotourism scope in Malaysia is not limited to agricultural aspects but also covers the customs and traditions of local people in different regions of the country. Therefore, the concept and products of agrotourism in our country are vaster and thus have great potential for future development.

Development of Agrotourism in Malaysia

Agriculture was once the main economic sector of Malaysia in the 1960s, contributing 37% of the country's GDP and employing 66% of the labour force (Jaafar *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, it is not surprising that Malaysia has endless potential for agrotourism, particularly in the rural areas where the local communities are still practising traditional agriculture. According to Mura & Kljucnikov (2018), the rural areas have so much potential, given the variety of traditions, customs and heritage. This is true in Malaysia as the country is well known as a multicultural country. Therefore, the government introduced agrotourism in 1991 through the 6th Malaysian Plan (Shaffril *et al.*, 2015; Leh *et al.*, 2017). With the collaboration of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industries and the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, many tourism packages have been developed to ensure this sector is able to attract both domestic and international tourists (Mazlan & Juraimi, 2014).

Despite being established around the same year, the development and achievement of agrotourism in Malaysia are seen as slow and left behind compared to our neighbouring country, the Philippines. With its beautiful nature and abundance of agricultural resources, the Philippines has been named one of the top agrotourism destinations globally by the Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (SEARCA) (Atijon & Mercado, 2020). Mentioned as one of the three-megadiverse countries in Southeast Asia, Malaysia has the potential to be on par with the other countries as we too have beautiful nature and a rich farming heritage. Unfortunately, due to little attention given to establishing standard agrotourism policies, farm-based tourism was overshadowed by other forms of tourism such as shopping tourism, sports tourism, and ecotourism which are currently the mainstays of the Malaysian tourism industry. The Tourism Report 2017 shows that of the total of RM82.1B in tourism revenue, the agrotourism sector has only contributed about RM24.5M (MAFI, 2021).

Many efforts and initiatives were made to sustain this sector. The first initiatives taken are through the Homestay and KampungStay Programmes, established in 1995 and 2015, respectively. Studies by Ismail (2012) and Bachok *et al.* (2018) stated that homestays have the most potential in agrotourism as the homestay experience variation comes from the culture of the different races in Malaysia. The concept of homestay provides the tourist with a place to stay while participating in agrotourism activities arranged by the owner. In 2012, Malaysia received the Ulysses award from UNWTO for the efficient development of its homestay programme and its outstanding ability to attract local and foreign tourists. Furthermore, media promotion was also continuously used to disseminate knowledge about agrotourism to the public. The latest initiative by the government is the launching of the first "Pasar Tani Agropelancongan" in Langkawi. This agrotourism market was initiated to gather farmers from all over Langkawi and encourage them to participate in agrotourism activities. Through the introduction of the agrotourism market, farmers will have access to a bigger market for their products as well as convince the public to buy local products (Berita Harian, 2021).

Challenges in Agrotourism

Amidst the potential of agrotourism in Malaysia, the sector is faced with impediments that are commonly experienced by other developing countries. From this review, the most common challenges are the farmers' lack of financial, technical and human resources. Farming communities are typically associated with poverty. Thus, limited capital and low financial capacity are some of

the main obstacles faced by farmers in participating in tourism management (Sipatau *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, farmers' size of agricultural land is sometimes too small to be developed into a tourism destination. According to Kunasekaran *et al.* (2011), most farms are small-scale and family-owned, which further curbs the expansion of agricultural development. Unsurprisingly, most of the established agrotourism in Malaysia is either managed by departments or private agencies as many farmers are less capable of diversifying their farm into an agrotourism business.

Secondly, the lack of awareness among farmers and the public is delaying the development of agrotourism. The participation of the local community is very important in determining the success of a project. From this review, it is found that there is low awareness among farmers in Malaysia, particularly in rural areas, about the value-added opportunities from integrating tourism into their farm management (Annamalah *et al.*, 2016). Hence, rural communities thought of agrotourism as a disturbance to their daily routine. This misunderstanding led to moderate participation among rural residents (Muhammad *et al.*, 2012, Fahmi *et al.*, 2013). Besides that, it is also found that the public is also less informed about agrotourism as there is little promotion and exposure. A study by Man & Aspany (2020) shows that urban dwellers are interested in visiting the rural areas if there is enough information about the spot. However, as farmers are mainly from the older generation and have low technology literacy, the younger generation's participation in operating agrotourism business is essential. Sadly, many rural youths see agriculture as a lucrative career and prefer migrating to the city in search of a better quality of life (Pelzom & Katel, 2018). Therefore, the government needs to regulate the position of agrotourism and its relevance so that more people will be interested in engaging in this sector.

A good facility is a key to a successful tourism destination. Nevertheless, like other developing countries, many rural areas in Malaysia are still facing underdeveloped infrastructure and basic facilities. Interestingly, Cameron Highlands, one of the top agrotourism destinations in this country, is still dealing with visitor dissatisfaction concerning the tourism facilities in the area. Mansor *et al.* (2015) study in Cameron Highlands finds that many tourists were unhappy about the facility problems such as broken toilet doors, uncomfortable buses, and unstable roads to reach the spot. Habsirun (2013) and Azhar *et al.* (2020) studies also reveal that limited public transport and poorly maintained facilities are some of the main concerns in agrotourism destinations. This problem may seem small, but when neglected, it will become a severe problem in years to come and impact agrotourism's potential growth. The first impression on the spot is very important to stimulate word-of-mouth marketing. Poor agrotourism management leads to unpleasant experiences among visitors that may lead to lower ratings and a lower possibility for them to return. Therefore, in order to make agrotourism a dream vacation for people of different ages, much more improvement needs to be done, especially on the accommodation, basic facilities, hygiene and attraction attributes (Liew & Ong, 2018).

Economic Benefit of Agrotourism

Many studies have proven that implementing agrotourism on the farm would diversify the farmers' source of income, thus improving the total income generated. In fact, this is the main aim of the introduction of agrotourism in developing countries like Malaysia (Kayat & Mohd Nor, 2006). In developed countries that have a long history of agrotourism, the contribution of this sector can be clearly observed in the rural community's income improvement. For example, in Italy, the agrotourism business contributes to about 23 percent of the farmers' total monthly income (Tiraeyari & Hamzah, 2012). In Malaysia, there is presently limited literature that focuses specifically on how much agrotourism affects the local community's economy. According to Tiraeyari *et al.* (2012) tourism helps improve local communities' income, demand for local products

and create job and business opportunities. However, the agrotourism benefits can be clearly observed through agrotourism homestays, which is one of the main attractions in this industry. Bachok *et al.* (2018) revealed that homestay owners in Selangor earn RM2000 to RM3000 per month. In a worst-case scenario, where the agrotourism activities are not sustainable and the homestays are poorly maintained, the monthly revenue is only about RM200 to RM300. This proves that this industry has good potential to improve the local community's income with proper planning and execution.

According to Fahmi *et al.* (2013) and Bachok *et al.* (2018), income generated from agrotourism is currently not sustainable. This is supported by Mansor *et al.* (2015) study that reveals only those from the higher-income group can really benefit from the social benefits while those from the lower-income group can only work in a low-paying job. Furthermore, this review also found that the benefits of agrotourism are not adequately available to the local community. This is because the local community was only given a position in the association related to the agrotourism program, but the majority of the tourism developments are monopolized by outsiders (Kayat & Mohd Nor, 2006). A similar situation could be observed in other Southeast Asian countries like Timor Leste, where the community feels they have lost authority on tourism development in the area as private companies and investors majorly dominate the management and operation of rural tourism, including agrotourism. Therefore, it can be concluded that the economic benefit of agrotourism in Malaysia is still at a moderate level where only successful ones can significantly impact the nearby community. At the same time, some are only able to provide seasonal income to the individuals involved.

Social Benefit of Agrotourism

One of the social benefits commonly contributed from agrotourism is the employment of local residents. The majority of locals who participated in agrotourism activities agree that the sector has increased employment opportunities in the area (Hamzah *et al.*, 2012; Shaffril *et al.*, 2015). Generally, job opportunities come from the opening of a hotel, traveller's guide, selling souvenirs and many more. Through this event, the rate of unemployment in the area was reduced. This helps the community, specifically the youth to have a better living condition without migrating to the city. Besides that, many business opportunities have emerged from this industry, such as motels, rest houses, homestays, restaurants, petrol stations, shops, travel agencies, and money exchangers. This indirectly improves the entrepreneurship skills among the locals (Tiraeyari & Hamzah, 2012).

Furthermore, it also provides new skills to the local people like in communication. Through the arrival of domestic and international tourists, the residents would be more confident in practising their communication skills, especially in English. Besides that, tourism also helps conserve farming heritage, environmental aspects and the culture of the community living in the region (Ariffin & Yen, 2017). Another social impact that is found in Malaysia is the in-migration to areas with rapid tourism business. This case can be seen in the Cameron Highlands, Pahang and Kundasang, Sabah, where more people migrate to the areas. Through this scenario, urbanization, infrastructure development and an increase in real estate value would be triggered.

CONCLUSION

Malaysia has endless potential for agrotourism. However, despite the three decades of establishment, the growth performance of agrotourism in Malaysia can be considered moderate and still in its maturing stage, in terms of national performance, local community participation and the socioeconomic benefits gained from this sector. Like many other sectors, tourism requires constant and full support from the government, NGOs and the public to be a successful one. In this review, it

is found that there are still no proper policies and standards of procedures for operating agrotourism, making the local community and other potential hosts to think twice before investing or venturing into this industry. Besides that, local farmers also lack awareness about the value-added of integrating tourism into their farm operations. Furthermore, barriers such as lack of infrastructure, poor tourism facilities, and financial crisis need to be addressed to develop more rural regions into tourism spots. As seen from this review, collaborating agriculture with tourism activities did indeed give economic and social benefits. However, despite the primary goal of assisting the local population in rural areas, some believe that agrotourism has failed to benefit the local community. As a result, more sustainable tourism management is required to ensure that this sector can thrive to its full potential. In conclusion, a comprehensive and aggressive approach is required to ensure that agrotourism can compete with other forms of tourism, allowing Malaysia to become one of Southeast Asia's most popular agrotourism destinations.

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