

Development strategies for rural-based tourism in supporting sustainable tourism: A comparative study of Indonesia and Malaysia

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Abstract

Rural tourism contributes to community resilience, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship, yet faces persistent sustainability challenges. In Indonesia and Malaysia, rural tourism has emerged as an alternative to urban-centered development, but many destinations struggle to balance economic gains with cultural and ecological sustainability. This study aims to examine the dynamics of rural tourism development in selected sites across both countries by applying Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model and the Sustainable Rural Development (SRD) framework. Drawing upon qualitative fieldwork, comparative case studies, and spatial-temporal analysis, the research explores how tourism initiatives evolve, how communities adapt, and the extent to which tourism fosters inclusive and sustainable development. The study is expected to produce a conceptual model that integrates TALC with SRD, providing a nuanced understanding of tourism growth stages and their socio-environmental implications. Addressing the research gap in cross-country comparative analysis of rural tourism, the findings will offer theoretical and practical insights into designing strategies that enhance sustainability while respecting cultural and ecological contexts. The implications extend to policymakers, local communities, and tourism stakeholders in advancing rural tourism as a catalyst for equitable development aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Keywords: Comparative study, Indonesia, Malaysia, rural based tourism, social entrepreneurship, sustainable rural development

Introduction

Development is a continuous process aimed at improving the quality of human life and transforming societies toward their aspired conditions (Afandi, 2022). However, the notion of "quality of life" is dynamic, varying across time and space, and achieving it requires both resource utilization and advances in science and technology. When resource exploitation is driven by an

anthropocentric worldview, it often results in environmental degradation, disregarding the well-being of other living beings and future generations (Meadows et al., 2004).

Today, environmental damage is evident worldwide, ranging from air and water pollution to deforestation, land degradation from mining, and biodiversity loss due to habitat destruction. Such degradation reduces the earth's carrying capacity, threatening its ability to sustain life (Rockström et al., 2009). Environmental crises are often intertwined with widening economic inequality. As Ningsih, Apendi and Ambar (2024) observes, inequality stems from both natural and structural factors. Natural factors include geographical conditions and uneven infrastructure development, which restrict access to resources and slow regional economic growth (Hababil et al., 2024). Structural or non-natural factors, on the other hand, encompass unequal policy distribution, neoliberal market systems, and limited access to education and decent employment, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups, particularly women (Ningsih, Apendi & Ambar, 2024).

These twin challenges; environmental degradation and socioeconomic inequality have raised global concern and laid the foundation for the sustainable development agenda. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), introduced in 2000, were succeeded by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, with targets to be achieved by 2030. The United Nations' *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* highlights five core pillars: People, aimed at eradicating poverty and hunger while ensuring equality and healthy lives; Planet, focused on protecting ecosystems through sustainable production, consumption, and climate action; Prosperity, emphasizing inclusive economic, social, and technological advancement in harmony with nature; Peace, fostering just, safe, and inclusive societies; and Partnership, revitalizing global cooperation through solidarity and collective commitment (United Nations, 2015).

Rural context and the role of tourism

Rural areas remain the largest contributors to poverty, primarily due to limited access to diverse resources, low levels of education, restricted employment opportunities, and slow adoption of technology, which together marginalize rural communities (Yahya, 2022; Maryani, 2024). One strategy to break the cycle of rural poverty is the development of rural-based tourism, which aims to stimulate economic growth, improve community welfare, reduce unemployment, conserve natural and cultural resources, and foster socio-cultural development (Coordinating Ministry for Economic Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2021).

In Southeast Asia, including Indonesia and Malaysia, a significant proportion of the population lives in rural areas where economic development remains limited (Bouchon, 2015). Since the 1990s, ASEAN member states have emphasized tourism as a driver of regional economic development, given its labor-intensive nature and potential to generate employment (Sugito, 2024). However, rural spaces in ASEAN remain vulnerable due to the shortage of skilled labor, a persistent structural challenge across many industries (Magnusson & Alasia, 2004). Indonesia and Malaysia share not only geographic proximity but also deep cultural, historical, and social ties, rooted in shared Malay identity, customs, and religious traditions (Kompasiana, 2021). Populations in both countries often trace kinship connections, particularly between communities in Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula. Despite these cultural commonalities, rural areas in Malaysia face challenges like those in Indonesia, where economic opportunities remain limited. Traditional

livelihoods such as farming and livestock rearing dominate, yet they are insufficient to drive broader economic transformation. To revitalize rural economies, local communities must explore alternative uses of local resources, particularly through tourism and recreation-oriented policies (Nair & Dipeel, 2020). However, comparative analyses on how rural tourism contributes to poverty alleviation and sustainable livelihoods in Indonesia and Malaysia remain limited

This study therefore seeks to: (1) compare the conceptual perspectives on rural-based tourism in Indonesia and Malaysia; (2) examine strategies for developing sustainable rural-based tourism in both countries; and (3) identify challenges in advancing rural-based tourism development.

Literature review

a. Definition and objectives of sustainable rural-based tourism

Rural-based tourism is often associated with concepts such as ecotourism, green tourism, responsible tourism, and alternative tourism, all of which describe tourism activities in peripheral or countryside areas (Komppula, 2014). Initially driven by urban tourists seeking escape from crowded environments, rural tourism offered healthy, individualized experiences through nature-based activities such as walking, hiking, and cultural immersion. This niche market was supported by educated and individualistic tourists, alongside new suppliers particularly farmers diversifying into tourism as a complementary livelihood strategy (Lane, Elisabeth & Joao, 2022).

Fundamentally, rural-based tourism integrates natural landscapes, rural culture, and community lifestyles into small-scale, locally owned initiatives characterized by personal services and authentic experiences (Lane et al., 2013; Wookhyun & Silverio, 2020). Such destinations cater to growing demand for personalized, authentic, and community-oriented encounters, including locally produced goods and cultural interaction (Chin et al., 2017). For many urban residents disconnected from nature, rural-based tourism represents both leisure and cultural learning in a cleaner and healthier environment (Mwesiumo et al., 2022; Uno, 2021). The objectives of sustainable rural-based tourism are threefold: (1) the optimal and responsible use of natural resources while conserving biodiversity; (2) the preservation of cultural assets, architecture, traditions, and community values; and (3) the provision of equitable socio-economic benefits through employment creation and long-term income opportunities. Thus, rural-based tourism not only supports poverty alleviation and improved quality of life but also contributes to the long-term viability of rural communities (Abdo, 2021; Zielinski et al., 2020).

b. Strategies for developing sustainable rural-based tourism

Development, by nature, seeks improvement through the optimal use of available potential (Maryani, 2019). Strategic planning in rural-based tourism therefore requires long-term objectives, resource allocation, and community-centered priorities (Chandler in Rangkuti, 2013). The ultimate goals are to preserve cultural and environmental assets while generating new employment opportunities beyond agriculture and other primary-sector livelihoods (Hasna, 2024; Coordinating Ministry for Economic Affairs, Republic of Indonesia, 2021; Maryani, 2024).

Effective strategy begins with evaluating internal and external environmental factors, including natural attractiveness, cultural distinctiveness, safety, and overall livability (Ghorbani et

al., 2015; Uno, 2021). Buhalis (2000) identifies six core components (the “6As”) of sustainable tourism development such as attractions, amenities, accessibility, activities, available packages, and ancillary services. Utomo and Satriawan (2017) expand these into seven critical elements: product potential, human resources, community motivation, infrastructure, tourism support services, institutional frameworks, and land availability. Central to all models, however, is active community participation, which remains the cornerstone of successful rural tourism (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009; Nitikasetsoontorn, 2015).

Strategic factors influencing rural-based tourism development can be grouped into three dimensions such as economic, social, and environmental sustainability that requiring entrepreneurship, innovation, collaboration, and effective visitor management (Utami, 2023). Local governments play a critical role in facilitating rural tourism through infrastructure provision, financing, and partnerships with the private sector, while central governments function as regulators and coordinators (Kumar, 2022; Liu et al., 2020). Building project legitimacy, mobilizing social networks, and developing human capital are also essential steps (Mwesiumo, 2022). Moreover, as tourism is an information-intensive industry, digital promotion and social media marketing are increasingly vital (Hay, Page & Buhalis, 2013). Finally, research contributions remain necessary to assess socio-economic, cultural, and governance factors such as land ownership, stakeholder integration, and visitor typologies (Kumar, 2020; Zielinski et al., 2020).

c. Challenges in developing sustainable rural-based tourism

While rural-based tourism holds significant potential for economic growth, employment creation, and cultural and environmental conservation, multiple challenges hinder its development. A global UNWTO survey (2023) of 79 countries implementing community-based tourism initiatives identified infrastructure deficiencies as the foremost barrier, particularly poor accessibility to rural destinations. Other critical challenges include rural depopulation due to urban migration, limited education and training opportunities, and insufficient skills development. The concentration of training programs in urban centers further limits rural residents’ access to capacity-building opportunities.

Additional barriers include restricted access to financial services, limited capacity to innovate tourism products, natural resource degradation, and gaps in data, information, and knowledge management. While rural tourism contributes significantly to economic and social dimensions of sustainable development by generating employment, reducing poverty, and fostering local growth towards contribution to climate action and biodiversity protection remains relatively limited, ranking lower in global priority assessments (UNWTO, 2023).

Proposed conceptual framework

The study adopts an integrated conceptual framework that combines Butler’s Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model with the Sustainable Rural Development (SRD) framework to examine the dynamics of rural-based tourism in Indonesia and Malaysia. Butler’s TALC (1980) provides a temporal and evolutionary lens to assess the developmental stages of rural-based tourism destinations exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, and potential

rejuvenation or decline. This model is useful in capturing the cyclical nature of tourism growth, visitor patterns, and community engagement across different phases of tourism development.

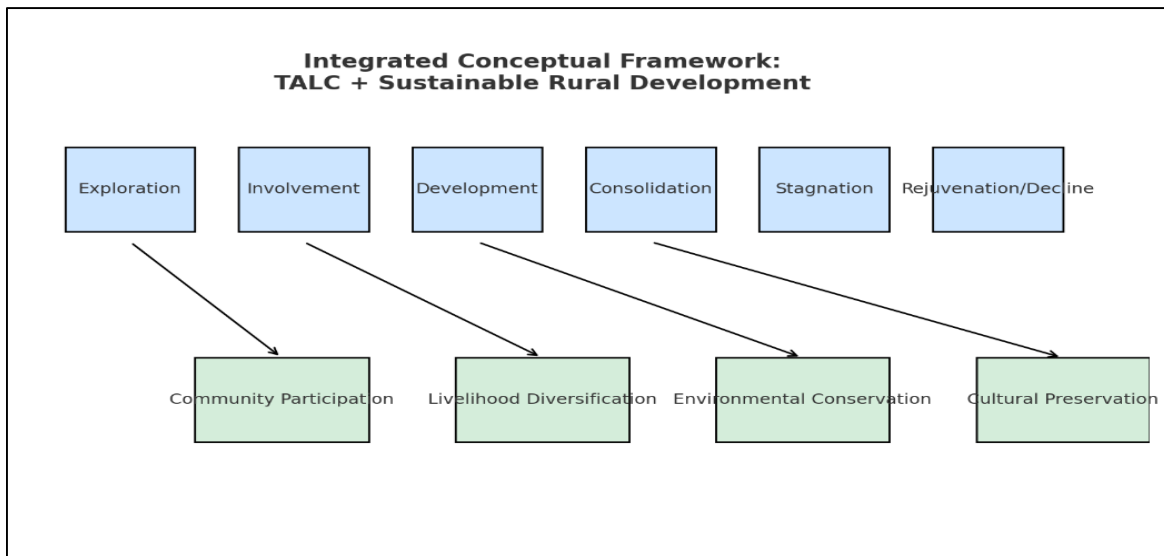
However, TALC has been criticized for its deterministic tendency and insufficient attention to socio-economic and environmental sustainability. To overcome this limitation, the Sustainable Rural Development framework is integrated to contextualize tourism within the broader goals of community well-being, environmental stewardship, and local economic resilience (Sharpley, 2002; Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). This framework emphasizes rural empowerment, equitable benefit distribution, and long-term sustainability, which are particularly relevant in rural contexts where cultural heritage and natural resources are the foundation of tourism. By combining these two approaches, the proposed framework enables a multidimensional analysis: (i) it situates rural-based tourism destinations within their respective life cycle stages as conceptualized by TALC, and (ii) it critically evaluates whether the development trajectory aligns with sustainable rural development indicators such as community participation, livelihood diversification, environmental conservation, and cultural preservation. In this sense, the framework not only maps the evolutionary trajectory of tourism growth but also interrogates the sustainability of this growth in both Indonesian and Malaysian rural settings. Such an integrative framework is particularly useful for a comparative study because it allows the identification of similarities and divergences in the developmental pathways of rural-based tourism between the two countries. It also provides a systematic basis for policy recommendations aimed at balancing tourism expansion with rural sustainability, thus contributing to the global discourse on sustainable tourism and rural development.

The conceptual framework for this study integrates the principles of sustainable rural development with Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model to provide a comprehensive analytical lens for understanding the dynamics of rural-based tourism. By positioning sustainable rural development as the overarching goal, the framework underscores the importance of balancing economic viability, social inclusivity, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship within rural tourism practices. Within this context, Butler's TALC offers a temporal dimension that captures the evolutionary trajectory of rural destinations, moving from exploration and involvement to development, consolidation, stagnation, and possible rejuvenation or decline. This temporal progression is particularly useful in identifying the critical junctures at which sustainability considerations must be embedded to avoid negative socio-economic and ecological outcomes.

The integration of both perspectives allows the framework to examine rural tourism not merely as a set of activities but as a developmental process shaped by stakeholders' interactions, community empowerment, policy interventions, and external market forces. At the micro level, community participation, local knowledge systems, and livelihood diversification form the core drivers that sustain rural-based tourism initiatives. At the macro level, institutional support, governance structures, and global tourism trends act as enablers or constraints that influence the trajectory of tourism development within rural contexts. This dual-layered approach positions the framework as both diagnostic and prescriptive: it enables researchers to assess the current stage of tourism development within a rural setting while also guiding policymakers and practitioners in designing interventions that align with long-term sustainability objectives.

By synthesizing sustainable rural development with the cyclical insights of TALC, the framework establishes a dynamic and holistic foundation for analyzing rural-based tourism. It highlights that the long-term viability of rural destinations depends not only on economic performance but also on the ability to maintain ecological resilience, foster community well-being,

and safeguard cultural heritage. In this sense, the framework serves as an essential tool for both academic inquiry and practical planning, ensuring that rural-based tourism evolves in ways that are equitable, resilient, and aligned with sustainable development goals.



Methodology

This research employed a comparative qualitative case study design to analyze rural-based tourism development strategies in Indonesia and Malaysia. Data is sourced from documentation, government policies and literature studies, both from books and relevant research results to establish a theoretical and policy framework for sustainable rural-based tourism. This review provided the foundation for identifying critical themes such as community participation, environmental sustainability, and the integration of cultural heritage into tourism planning (Scheyvens, 1999; Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015).

To strengthen the analysis, the study also incorporated comparative policy evaluation, focusing on how national strategies in Indonesia and Malaysia align with global sustainability goals, particularly the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNWTO, 2018; Hall, 2019). By juxtaposing Indonesia's village tourism programs, which emphasize community empowerment, with Malaysia's homestay initiatives, which highlight cultural immersion and economic uplift, the research identified similarities and divergences in institutional frameworks and implementation practices.

Additionally, field-based observations and secondary data collection provided empirical depth to the comparative analysis. This included examining case studies of rural communities where tourism has been successfully developed as a driver for local livelihoods and conservation efforts. Such triangulation allowed for the evaluation of best practices, potential risks, and policy gaps that influence the long-term sustainability of rural-based tourism in both countries (Okazaki, 2008; Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2018). The integration of these methods ensured a robust examination of rural-based tourism development. It also enabled a critical understanding of how tourism can function as a tool for balanced socio-economic development, while safeguarding local cultures and ecosystems in Indonesia and Malaysia.

The study applies a most-similar systems design, comparing two culturally and geographically related countries that differ in institutional and policy frameworks. Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model with the Sustainable Rural Development (SRD) framework to examine the dynamics of rural-based tourism in Indonesia and Malaysia .

Results and discussion

Comparative development of rural-based tourism in Indonesia and Malaysia

i. Rural-based tourism in Indonesia

According to the *Tourism Village Development Guideline* (2021), Indonesia has identified 7,275 rural-based tourism sites as alternatives to mass tourism, highlighting rural life, local wisdom, and authentic community practices as key attractions. The concept of “desa” (village) in the Indonesian context is multifaceted, shaped not only by administrative definitions but also by cultural and customary traditions. Local terminology reflects this diversity: rural settlements are known as *kampung* in West Java, *gampong* in Aceh, *nagari* in West Sumatra, *tiyuh* in Lampung, and *huta* in North Sumatra. Beyond geographical borders, the term also applies to culturally distinct enclaves within urban spaces that retain a rural character, such as Kampung Braga and Kampung Pelangi in Bandung, which integrate modernity with traditional village atmospheres.

Geographically, Indonesia's rural-based tourism reflects the nation's ecological diversity, extending across coastal, agricultural, plantation, forestry, and livestock landscapes. This variety is strongly influenced by morphology, hydrology, climate gradients, and soil conditions, resulting in a wide spectrum of tourism potentials across regions.

Indonesia formally categorizes rural-based tourism into four main types: (a) nature-based villages, where natural landscapes such as mountains, rivers, valleys, and coastal areas are the primary attractions; (b) culture-based villages, which emphasize traditions, livelihoods, and religious practices rooted in local heritage; (c) creative villages, highlighting economic and artistic expressions such as handicrafts, performing arts, and culinary heritage; and (d) combination villages, which integrate elements of nature, culture, and creativity into a holistic tourism experience.

The establishment of a rural-based tourism site is guided by several criteria, including the availability of natural, cultural, or creative resources; the presence of an active local community and human resource potential; a formal or informal management institution; adequate facilities and infrastructure; and clear market potential with accessible visitor pathways. The overarching principles stress authenticity, community participation, adherence to local norms and values, and long-term conservation. Tourism development is expected to respect both the carrying capacity of the environment and the resilience of the community, ensuring that economic benefits are balanced with cultural preservation and ecological sustainability.

ii. Development strategies

Indonesia's rural-based tourism development strategy adopts a holistic ecosystem approach, integrating attractions, accessibility, amenities, human resources, stakeholder engagement, community participation, industry collaboration, and branding-advertising-selling (BAS). This

framework mirrors the “8A” model for tourism development, which emphasizes not only the creation of attractions but also the enabling environment that sustains them (Putra & Husain, 2022). Central to this strategy is the diversification of tourism products, both tangible such as handicrafts, culinary traditions, and eco-lodges and intangible, including cultural rituals, storytelling, and community-led performances (Nugroho, 2021). Equally important is community empowerment, particularly through tourism awareness programs that enhance local ownership and ensure residents play an active role in shaping tourism practices (Utami, 2020).

Infrastructure development remains a major priority, encompassing road networks, waterways, and transport access, which serve as critical enablers of rural mobility and visitor flows (Sutrisna & Mahfud, 2021). Public amenities such as electricity, clean water, sanitation, health and safety services, and inclusive access for vulnerable groups form another vital foundation for supporting tourism growth. Complementary facilities, including accommodation, restaurants, visitor information centers, souvenir shops, and e-tourism platforms, strengthen the visitor experience while expanding opportunities for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Human resource development is not confined to villagers but extends across multi-level stakeholders, from national policymakers to village leaders, reflecting a governance approach that encourages synergy across scales (Maryani, 2022). At the same time, industry partnerships are actively fostered to promote SME development, strengthen marketing strategies, and build collaborative networks across the tourism value chain.

To ensure accountability and track progress, Indonesia applies a classification system that categorizes rural tourism villages into four levels: *Rintis* (pioneering), *Berkembang* (developing), *Maju* (advanced), and *Mandiri* (independent). Villages are reclassified at least every two years through joint assessments by local governments and relevant agencies (Tourism Village Development Guideline, 2021). This tiered approach enables the identification of capacity gaps while encouraging continuous improvement toward sustainable rural-based tourism.

iii. Contribution to sustainable development

The development of rural-based tourism in Indonesia has been closely aligned with the global agenda of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This alignment is institutionalized through regulatory frameworks such as the Ministerial Regulation No. 14/2016 on Sustainable Tourism Destinations, later revised under No. 9/2021, which provide guidelines for planning, monitoring, and evaluation of sustainable practices (Republic of Indonesia, 2021). At its core, the framework emphasizes destination management that balances economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions.

Economically, rural tourism is positioned as a catalyst for local development, generating employment opportunities, supporting small enterprises, and encouraging fair trade practices that ensure benefits are equitably distributed within communities (Hampton & Jeyacheya, 2015). Culturally, rural tourism initiatives contribute to safeguarding heritage, protecting intellectual property, and managing visitor interactions in ways that uphold local traditions (Salazar, 2012). Environmentally, tourism development emphasizes conservation through risk management, wildlife protection, renewable energy adoption, and sustainable water and waste management practices. Recent initiatives have also focused on reducing emissions and promoting eco-friendly transport, particularly in rural areas with fragile ecosystems (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). Taken together, these strategies demonstrate that Indonesia’s rural-based tourism serves not only as an economic driver but also as a mechanism for cultural continuity and environmental

stewardship. By embedding sustainability principles into tourism governance, Indonesia aspires to transform its rural landscapes into living laboratories for sustainable development.

iv. Challenges

Despite its potential, rural-based tourism in Indonesia faces several persistent challenges that hinder its effectiveness. The most prominent barrier is the limited human resource capacity, particularly the lack of trained personnel and low levels of community awareness regarding tourism's long-term benefits (Junaed, 2023). While community groups such as *Pokdarwis* (Kelompok Sadar Wisata) have been instrumental in mobilizing participation, their institutional and financial capacities remain underdeveloped, often constraining their ability to manage tourism initiatives effectively (Sumariati, 2025). Infrastructure gaps, particularly in accommodation, transport access, and digital connectivity, continue to impede the competitiveness of rural destinations in both domestic and international markets.

A further challenge lies in the limited adoption of digital technologies for tourism promotion, which restricts rural areas from fully leveraging global tourism networks (Kurniawan, 2020). This is compounded by weak data management systems, which inhibit evidence-based decision-making and the monitoring of tourism impacts. At the cultural and environmental levels, concerns about potential erosion of traditions and ecological degradation underscore the importance of embedding safeguards into tourism planning. These multifaceted challenges suggest that sustainable rural tourism development in Indonesia requires targeted interventions in education and skills training, enhanced institutional support, investment in infrastructure, and stronger integration of digital tools. Only through these measures can rural tourism fulfill its promise as both an engine of economic growth and a model of sustainability.

v. Rural-based tourism in Malaysia

In Malaysia, rural-based tourism is understood as tourism activity centered in rural areas that offers authentic visitor experiences rooted in local culture, nature, and community life. The concept emphasizes active community participation in both hosting and managing tourism, while at the same time safeguarding traditional lifestyles, cultural heritage, and environmental sustainability. This approach is consistent with broader tourism development frameworks promoted by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) and the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (KKDW), particularly those related to Community-Based Tourism (CBT), ecotourism, and agrotourism (MOTAC, 2020).

A key initiative in this regard is the Rural Tourism Development Project (RUTDEP) spearheaded by Kedah Regional Development Authority (KEDA), which integrates agriculture, fisheries, livestock, and agro-based industries to create economic benefits and entrepreneurial opportunities in agro-tourism (KEDA, 2025). Similarly, the Johor South-East Development Authority (KEJORA) highlights the role of homestay programmes that allow tourists to engage in activities such as rubber tapping, paddy farming, and daily village life. These initiatives not only provide immersive cultural experiences but also contribute to rural socio-economic upliftment by diversifying livelihoods (KEJORA, 2025). Among the most prominent initiatives is the Malaysian Homestay Programme, first launched in 1995 under MOTAC, which has since become a flagship model of rural-based tourism. Through this programme, visitors stay with host families and

participate in everyday village activities, fostering intercultural exchange while enhancing the income streams of rural households (MOTAC, 2022).

Malaysia's rural-based tourism development is embedded in the National Tourism Policy (NTP) 2020–2030, which provides a strategic roadmap for sustainable growth. The policy outlines measures to strengthen the governance capacity of tourism agencies, establish Special Tourism Investment Zones (STIZs) to stimulate innovative products, embrace digitalization through Smart Tourism, and enhance demand sophistication by delivering personalized experiences. Equally important, the NTP emphasizes responsible tourism aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and prioritizes human capital development through skills training and capacity-building initiatives (MOTAC, 2020).

The thematic strengths of Malaysia's rural-based tourism can be classified into several categories. Cultural villages highlight traditional arts, cuisine, and vernacular architecture, such as Kampung Morten in Melaka and Kampung Pulai in Kelantan. Ecotourism villages are often located near forests, rivers, or protected areas, including Kampung Batu Puteh in Sabah and Kampung Stay Serendah in Selangor. Agro-tourism villages, such as Homestay Banghuris and Kampung Sungai Haji Dorani in Selangor, provide experiential learning in farming, orchards, and livestock activities. Coastal and island villages, like Kampung Mukut on Tioman Island and Kampung Pulau Gaya in Sabah, focus on fishing traditions and marine-based livelihoods, while creative economy villages promote local industries such as batik, songket weaving, and pottery. By 2022, more than 200 certified villages had joined the Homestay Programme, transforming rural settlements into living museums of Malay tradition while simultaneously serving as incubators for rural entrepreneurship (MOTAC, 2022). These initiatives underscore Malaysia's efforts to position rural-based tourism as both a mechanism of socio-economic empowerment and a means of sustaining cultural and natural heritage.

vi. Strategies for developing rural-based tourism in Malaysia

Malaysia employs a multi-pronged strategy to strengthen rural-based tourism, embedding its development within national frameworks such as the 12th Malaysia Plan (RMKe-12), the National Tourism Policy 2020–2030, and grassroots initiatives like the Homestay Programme. A central approach is Community-Based Tourism (CBT), which emphasizes local ownership and management of tourism ventures. Through capacity building, market facilitation, and adherence to sustainability principles, CBT enables communities to become both beneficiaries and custodians of tourism development (MOTAC, 2022).

Integration with broader national development plans further strengthens rural-based tourism. The RMKe-12 underscores inclusive rural development, environmental sustainability, and digital transformation as policy backbones for tourism advancement. At the same time, collaboration with private actors, NGOs, and social enterprises has played a vital role in providing financial assistance, training, and marketing support to rural tourism operators, thereby complementing government-led initiatives (Nair, 2014).

Operationally, Malaysia's strategies encompass capacity building and training to enhance hospitality, entrepreneurship, cultural storytelling, and digital marketing skills within local communities. Parallel to this, infrastructure development seeks to improve road access, signage, sanitation, homestay amenities, and digital connectivity, ensuring that rural destinations remain attractive and accessible. Product diversification has become another important dimension, with experiential tourism packages combining culture, gastronomy, creative industries, and nature-

based experiences. On the promotional side, campaigns under Cuti-Cuti Malaysia, the MOTAC tourism portals, and social media channels have been instrumental in increasing visibility and brand recognition. Furthermore, governance mechanisms have been formalized through Village Tourism Committees (Jawatankuasa Pelancongan Desa), which act as local coordinating bodies supported by regional and federal authorities. Finally, sustainability considerations have been integrated into the framework by aligning tourism objectives with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to decent work (SDG 8), sustainable communities (SDG 11), and responsible consumption and production (SDG 12).

vii. Challenges in rural-based tourism development

Despite notable achievements, rural-based tourism in Malaysia continues to face several structural and operational challenges. One of the most significant barriers lies in limited community capacity, as inadequate training and entrepreneurial skills among rural residents often undermine the quality and competitiveness of tourism services. Moreover, the sector remains heavily reliant on public funding, raising concerns about its long-term sustainability in the absence of viable business models.

Weak marketing and limited digital presence also hinder many rural villages from accessing urban and international markets. This issue is compounded by infrastructure gaps, including poor road conditions, insufficient sanitation, and inconsistent digital connectivity, all of which diminish the overall tourist experience. Another pressing concern is the risk of cultural erosion and over-commercialisation; whereby unregulated tourism flows can dilute authenticity and commodify local traditions. Likewise, ecotourism destinations face mounting environmental pressures, as unchecked visitor numbers and inadequate conservation practices contribute to degradation of natural resources. These challenges underscore the need for more integrated approaches that balance economic opportunities with cultural and ecological sustainability.

Comparative analysis of development strategies

Across Southeast Asia, rural-based tourism is increasingly viewed as a mechanism to address rural poverty, urbanization pressures, and economic marginalization. Both Indonesia and Malaysia have strategically adopted rural tourism to diversify income sources beyond agriculture while simultaneously conserving cultural heritage and natural landscapes. The UNWTO (2023) defines rural tourism as experiences directly linked to agriculture, rural culture, and natural environments, typically occurring in areas with low population density, agricultural land use, and traditional lifestyles. This conceptualization is echoed in scholarly literature (Lane, 2013; 2022; Komppula, 2014; Wookhyun, 2020) and is clearly reflected in the development trajectories of both Indonesia and Malaysia.

While their overarching objectives are similar, the two countries display notable differences in approach. Indonesia tends to emphasize the valorization of cultural and natural assets, particularly landscapes, rituals, and local creativity, alongside strong reliance on community participation and identity-building at the village level. Malaysia, in contrast, adopts a more policy-driven and institutionalized model, placing greater emphasis on location-based strategies, governance structures, and formalized schemes such as the Homestay Programme. These variations reflect not only differences in governance systems but also the ways in which rural-based tourism is framed as an instrument of national development and sustainability.

Rural-based tourism contributes significantly to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by addressing multiple dimensions of development simultaneously. It plays a crucial role in poverty reduction (SDG 1) by providing alternative income sources beyond farming, while also supporting zero hunger and good health (SDGs 2 and 3) through the diversification of livelihoods and the promotion of healthier food systems embedded in rural gastronomy. At the same time, it enhances quality education (SDG 4) by offering training and capacity-building opportunities in tourism-related skills, and advances gender equality and the reduction of inequality (SDGs 5 and 10) through the empowerment of women, youth, and marginalized groups engaged in rural enterprises. From a spatial perspective, rural-based tourism strengthens rural–urban linkages, thereby contributing to sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11). Equally important, it encourages responsible consumption and production (SDG 12) by promoting local food, crafts, and eco-friendly tourism practices. In terms of environmental impact, rural-based tourism safeguards natural resources and biodiversity, aligning with climate action and environmental goals (SDGs 13 to 15) through ecotourism initiatives. Furthermore, it fosters innovation, infrastructure development, and strategic collaborations (SDGs 9 and 17) by leveraging technology, networks, and public-private partnerships to support sustainable growth. Collectively, these contributions illustrate how rural-based tourism functions as a holistic and multidimensional strategy that balances economic development, cultural preservation, and environmental sustainability in both Indonesia and Malaysia.

Table 1. Comparative perspectives on rural-based tourism development in Indonesia and Malaysia

Aspect	Indonesia	Malaysia
Definition	A thematic alternative to mass tourism that highlights rural activities and local wisdom as key attractions	Rural areas offering authentic experiences to visitors, rooted in the cultural, natural, and socio-economic characteristics of local communities
Types	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Nature-based rural tourism b) Culture-based rural tourism c) Creative rural tourism d) Hybrid models combining nature, culture, and creativity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Community-Based Tourism (CBT) b) Ecotourism c) Agrotourism d) Coastal and island-based tourism e) Creative economy-linked initiatives
Objectives	To develop local potential that stimulates economic growth through a holistic approach integrating nature, culture, creativity, and environmental preservation.	To generate economic benefits and positive spillovers for rural communities through the marketing of agricultural produce and downstream products, while fostering a new generation of competitive and sustainable agrotourism entrepreneurs (e.g., Rural Tourism Development Project in Kedah, RUTDEP–KEDA, 2025)
Criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Presence of tourism attractions (natural, cultural, or creative) 2. Active local community participation 	Not explicitly codified; criteria are embedded in national frameworks such as the National Tourism Policy 2020–2030 and the 12th Malaysia Plan,

	3. Availability of human resources to support tourism activities	emphasizing inclusivity, environmental sustainability, and digital transformation activities
	4. Existence of village-level governance and institutions	
	5. Availability of basic infrastructure and facilities	
	6. Potential for tourism market development	
Development strategies	1. Provision, utilization, and maintenance of tourism infrastructure	1. Capacity building and training
	2. Tourism promotion via cultural festivals and digital platforms	2. Infrastructure development
	3. Training in tourism management	3. Tourism product diversification
	4. Strengthening of village-level tourism governance	4. Branding and promotion
	5. Partnerships with third parties for tourism investment	5. Partnerships and governance mechanisms
	6. Other village-based initiatives agreed through community deliberation	6. Integration of sustainability principles (SDGs-aligned)
Challenges	1. Low human resource capacity and limited community awareness	1. Limited community capacity
	2. Budgetary constraints	2. High dependence on government funding
	3. Weak legal status of local tourism institutions (e.g., <i>Pokdarwis</i>)	3. Weak marketing and limited access to wider markets
	4. Limited infrastructure and accommodation facilities	4. Infrastructure gaps (roads, sanitation, digital)
	5. Gaps in promotion and digital technology adoption	5. Cultural erosion and risks of over-commercialisation
		6. Environmental pressures in ecotourism areas

Although Indonesia and Malaysia share relatively similar strategies in developing rural-based tourism, their priority order differs. In Indonesia, infrastructure development is placed at the forefront, followed by promotion, human resource development, partnerships, and institutional strengthening. By contrast, Malaysia prioritizes capacity building of human resources, then infrastructure, product diversification, promotion, networking, and finally the integration of sustainability principles.

The challenges faced by both countries also overlap, reflecting broader global findings. According to UNWTO (2023), common issues include limited community capacity, budget constraints, weak digital marketing adoption, and insufficient data management. Malaysia has explicitly identified cultural erosion and environmental pressures as critical risks concerns that are

increasingly relevant for Indonesia as well, particularly when urban visitors struggle to adapt to rural cultural norms or when local ethical guidelines are not effectively communicated.

In this context, the role of local tourism institutions such as *Pokdarwis* (Tourism Awareness Groups), community guides, and local governments becomes crucial. They serve not only as managers but also as mediators, conveying information about the unique characteristics of rural-based destinations, including natural hazards, social sensitivities, and cultural etiquette. Effective signage, warning systems, trekking routes, and communication of local taboos are essential to help tourists adapt while preserving authenticity and minimizing risks.

Thematic exploration of cultural heritage, community agency, and tourism development trajectories

The study is expected to generate nuanced insights through thematic analysis of qualitative data, revealing recurring patterns that explain how rural tourism evolves in both Indonesia and Malaysia. By applying the integrated TALC–SRD framework, the findings will highlight critical themes such as community empowerment, sustainability practices, socio-cultural resilience, and institutional support. These themes will not only demonstrate the distinct stages of tourism development but also capture the voices, lived experiences, and aspirations of rural communities. The comparative analysis will showcase context-specific similarities and divergences, providing a deeper understanding of how cultural heritage and local participation shape tourism trajectories. Ultimately, the outputs aim to offer empirically grounded narratives and conceptual refinement that contribute to theory-building while guiding policy and practice in sustainable rural tourism. The thematic analysis revealed three major domains shaping the trajectory of rural-based tourism in Malaysia and Indonesia: (i) community participation and empowerment, (ii) sustainability-economy nexus, and (iii) institutional and governance mechanisms.

Community participation and empowerment emerged as the most critical determinant. In both countries, local communities were not merely beneficiaries but active co-creators of tourism products. In Malaysia, village-based homestay operators demonstrated higher organizational cohesion, often structured under government-certified associations, while in Indonesia, the dynamics were more grassroots-driven with diverse forms of collective agency. This difference reflects the stages outlined in Butler's TALC model: Malaysian rural tourism villages largely exhibit characteristics of the development and consolidation stages, whereas many Indonesian cases remain in the involvement stage with strong social capital but limited infrastructural support.

Sustainability-economy nexus was another recurring theme. Respondents across sites highlighted tourism's potential to diversify household income, reduce rural-urban migration, and preserve cultural heritage. However, tensions surfaced between immediate income needs and long-term sustainability goals. This aligns with the Sustainable Rural Development (SRD) framework, which emphasizes balancing ecological preservation and economic viability. For example, in Bandung and Malang, the pursuit of mass-tourism markets risks accelerating the stagnation stage in TALC if sustainability safeguards are not embedded. In contrast, Malaysian cases such as Pulau Tuba illustrated attempts to integrate eco-friendly practices, though challenges of scaling up remain evident.

Institutional and governance mechanisms represent the enabling or constraining factor for tourism development. Malaysia's experience demonstrates stronger top-down facilitation through structured homestay accreditation and periodic monitoring, while Indonesia reveals a more fragmented but adaptive governance model, where local customary institutions play an active role.

The comparative perspective shows how state-driven formalization (Malaysia) versus community-driven innovation (Indonesia) produces different developmental trajectories, reinforcing the need to contextualize TALC within broader socio-political systems.

The thematic analysis of interviews with Malaysian informants highlights three dominant themes: (i) cultural heritage as a foundation for rural tourism identity, (ii) challenges of sustainability and local participation, and (iii) the role of innovation and youth in sustaining tourism futures.

a) Theme 1: Cultural heritage as a foundation for rural tourism identity

Informants emphasized that rural tourism in Malaysia is strongly anchored in traditional practices, local crafts, and community rituals. These elements not only attract visitors but also reinforce social cohesion within the community. One informant explained:

“Tourists are not only coming to see the scenery, but they want to experience our kampung life, the way we cook, the way we celebrate festivals. This makes our village special.” (Informant M1, female, 48, homestay operator, Kedah)

b) Theme 2: Challenges of sustainability and local participation

While rural tourism has brought income opportunities, there are concerns about uneven participation and environmental stress. Several informants noted the dependency on external agencies and the lack of structured capacity-building. As one remarked:

“We need more training and support. Sometimes the projects are introduced by outsiders, but the community does not fully understand how to sustain them. That’s why many programs fade away.” (Informant M2, male, 55, village leader, Kedah)

c) Theme 3: The role of innovation and youth in sustaining tourism futures

Younger generations are increasingly seen as agents of change, particularly in adopting digital tools and creating innovative tourism products. Their role is crucial in bridging traditional heritage with contemporary demands. One youth entrepreneur reflected:

“Social media helps us to market our homestay and cultural activities. Without online promotion, many tourists would not even know about our village.” (Informant M3, female, 32, youth entrepreneur, Pahang)

These findings suggest that Malaysian rural tourism thrives at the intersection of cultural heritage and modern innovation. However, sustaining this momentum requires stronger community participation, institutional support, and continuous training to empower local actors, especially youth and women. Overall, the analysis illustrates that while both contexts reveal substantial potential for rural tourism to contribute to SDGs, their trajectories differ in terms of institutional support, market orientation, and community agency. The integration of TALC and SRD provides a robust framework to explain these variations: TALC traces the temporal evolution

of tourism, while SRD highlights the structural underpinnings that mediate sustainability outcomes.

Conclusion

Rural-based tourism development has emerged as a strategic priority in both Indonesia and Malaysia, reflecting a shared commitment to advancing the principles of sustainable tourism development. This commitment is manifested through regulatory frameworks, technical guidelines, development criteria, and community-based strategies that accommodate the diverse settings of rural environments. Despite differing governance structures where Indonesia emphasizes decentralized community-based initiatives and Malaysia adopts a more centrally coordinated approach both countries converge on the same sustainability objectives. These initiatives align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 1 (No Poverty), Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and Goal 15 (Life on land).

Ultimately, the Indonesian and Malaysian cases demonstrate that while policy approaches may vary, the essence of rural-based tourism development lies in empowering communities, integrating local wisdom, and ensuring that tourism serves as both an economic driver and a vehicle for cultural and environmental preservation. The insights derived from these cases offer valuable lessons for other ASEAN nations seeking to balance tourism growth with socio-cultural preservation and environmental stewardship.

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