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## Degree of Contact and Local Perceptions of Tourism Impacts: A Case Study of Homestay Programme in Sarawak

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### Abstract

This paper examines the relationship of the different degrees of contact between the locals and the tourists which affect the locals' perceptions of the tourism impacts, and analyses how these perceptions explain their support for additional tourism development or restrictions at Kampung Benuk (KB) homestay. A semi-structured interview based on snowball sampling was conducted and the data were analysed manually. Results revealed that different degrees of contact affect the locals' perceptions of the tourism impacts and the support for tourism development. The findings provided strategies for the government and other tourism agencies to increase the benefits of the homestay programme.

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### 1. Introduction

In Malaysia, a homestay programme is one of the tourism initiatives by the government. The local people that have the interest to share knowledge of culture are encouraged to get involved in the tourism activities. The local people can generate income from the selling of the handmade-handicraft products, for example, bangles or basket made from rattan. The homestay programme in Malaysia also gives chance to the locals to get to know other people from other countries during the homestay visits. This homestay programme gives the opportunities to the tourists to

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experience the lifestyles of the local people (Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia, MOTAC, 2013). A number of past studies on the homestay programme have been conducted (Bhuiyan, Siwar & Mohamad Ismail, 2013; Jamaludin, Othman & Awang, 2012). However, the findings of these past studies were limited because the researchers had observed the local people as a homogeneous group (Brunt & Courtney, 1999). While the number of studies about the homestay programme is increasing, a recent study conducted by Ebrahimi and Khalifah (2014) highlighted the lack of the perception study that involves the other members of the host community besides the homestay operators. They emphasized that the “communities are not a homogeneous people either they support or do not support the tourism industry” (p.29). Thus, besides considering the perceptions from the homestay operators, the perceptions from the other members of the host community are also crucial to be studied otherwise “problems and conflicts arise may delay the pace of tourism development” (Ebrahimi & Khalifah, 2014, p.29). Earlier on, Brunt and Courtney (1999) affirmed that diverse perceptions can be obtained if the local people are viewed as a heterogeneous group despite living in a small community. Thus, their perceptions can either be positive or negative. This also means that the impacts of tourism can either influence the local people to support for additional tourism development or support for restrictions on tourism development. To obtain information from the local people, a qualitative approach was employed in this study. As highlighted by Ebrahimi and Khalifah (2014), this approach is suitable to obtain information for a study that involves the other members of the host community besides the homestay operators. Thus, the purpose of this research was to examine how the degrees of contact between the locals and the tourists affect their perceptions of the social and cultural impacts of tourism and lead to their perceptions toward support for additional tourism development or restrictions on tourism development in KB. The research questions for this study were:

- How do the degrees of contact affect the local perceptions of the social impact of tourism in KB?
- How do the degrees of contact affect the local perceptions of the cultural impact of tourism in KB?
- To what extent the perceptions of the social and cultural impacts of tourism derived from the different degrees of contact, relate to the local support for additional tourism development or support for restrictions on tourism development in KB?

## **2. Degree of Contact and Local Perceptions of Tourism Impacts**

The local perceptions of the impacts of tourism can be understood by looking into the different degrees of contact between the locals and the tourists. Understanding these perceptions is crucial because the involvement of local people in tourism indicates the presence of decision-making processes in a tourism destination. A study on residents' perceptions and attitudes toward the tourism impacts in Folgaria, Italy by Brida, Osti and Faccioli (2011) found the significant differences from each group of locals. In their study, the ‘protectionist’ group perceived that tourism had more negative impacts than positive impacts. For example, tourism benefited only a certain group of local people. Based on this explanation, although the impacts of tourism are many, the perceptions from the local people are various owing to the differences in the degrees of contact with the tourists in the tourism destination. The perceptions of tourism impacts from the local people depend on how they view the tourism activities in the destination. Numerous authors found out that local people were positive with the social impacts if they accept the changes in tourism (Long, 2012). Therefore, perceptions from the local people are worth to be identified because some locals are enjoying the tourism activities while others feel inconvenience by noise or crowd associated with the activities. Gjerald (2005) stated that “in order to see how tourism affects small local communities, one has to look into the residents’ own perceptions of the tourism impacts” (p.42). Some past studies revealed that the local people were positive toward the future of tourism development in their area, although tourism has impacted them negatively (Horn, Simmons & Fairweather, 2000). Brida *et al.*, (2011) stated a number of positive responds from the residents. In their study, tourism was considered as a factor that contributes to a higher standard of living and tourism provided more facilities and services to the residents. The cultural impact of tourism is not easy to measure as compared to the social impact. The “diversity of the culture” (Frater, 1996, p.7) leads to various ways of how the local people perceive the tourism impacts in their area. A great cultural exchange between the local people and the tourists in tourism “changes the traditional culture, and it decreases the lifestyle quality” (Spanou, 2007, p.152) of the local people. Furthermore, Frater (1996) stated that “because differences in cultural behaviour between tourists and local communities are sometimes so great, the mutual understanding is replaced by antipathy” (p.32), and then the relationship between the local people and the tourists converges to form the negative impacts. Not only that, the increasing demand for cultural

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