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## Rural tourism destination competitiveness: A study on Annah Rais Longhouse Homestay, Sarawak

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### Abstract

Tourism industry is known as one of the largest economic sectors in most of the countries and highly contributes to the economic growth in Malaysia. Contemporary, the sustainability of tourism destination become crucial and highly contributes to the competitiveness of a rural tourism destination. Nonetheless, the high competitive environment in this industry forces tourism players to provide better services to their visitors in order to stay competitive. Hence, multiple components of environmental construct, namely, environmental conservation, environmental education, cultural heritage attractions, tourism infrastructure, and natural resources play crucial roles in attracting tourists to visit and gain sustainability for rural tourism destination. Local communities' attitudes toward tourism development highly influence the success and failure of tourism development at the destinations. The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of multi-environmental components towards development of tourism destination competitiveness from local communities' perspective. A total of 80 local communities from Annah Rais Longhouse Homestay, Sarawak voluntarily took part in this study. To assess the developed model, SmartPLS 2.0 (M3) is applied based on path modeling and then bootstrapping. Interestingly, the findings from this study revealed that both cultural heritage attractions and natural resources found to have positive impact towards development of destination competitiveness from local communities' perspective. Implications of these findings are discussed further.

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## 1. Introduction

Tourism sector is defined as an industry associated with leisure and travel (Cunha & Cunha, 2005), and is considered as one of the top and fastest growing sectors in the world which significantly contributes to the country's economy growth as well as contributing to the economic benefits of local communities (Osman & Sentosa, 2013). In the past few decades, tourism experienced tremendous growth as visitors are seeking for places for relaxant and release their stress (Lin & Yeh, 2013). With that, rural tourism has attracted increased attention from governments, non-governmental organization (NGO), and industry players because its plays a significant role in leading economy activity and help in an increase in communities' income (Egbali, Nosrat, & Alipour, 2011).

Past studies (e.g., Moshabaki & Malek, 2004; Yu, Chancellor, & Cole, 2011) have envisaged that tourism development should be to increase the quality of life for local residents through increased job opportunities and household income. Nonetheless, mass tourism development brings negative impact to the environment (e.g., pollution, deforestation, deplete in natural resources) and generally reduce the support from local communities toward rural tourism development (Miller, 2006). Furthermore, residents' attitudes toward rural tourism development constantly overlooked when tourism begins growing in a community and has led to the dissatisfaction of local communities toward tourism development (Banks, 2010). Hence, it is vital to gain local communities' support for the sustainability of the rural tourism development (Spencer & Nsiah, 2013) and conservation of local resources and culture (Tosun, 2006). Overall, a well strategized rural tourism will benefit tourism stakeholder such as local communities and industry players in term of welfare and also tourists for the good experience with natural and cultural resources. Thus, the development of sustainable tourism resources is important to ensure the competitiveness of tourism destination. Within this context, given the fact that there is limited empirical research on destination competitiveness and the importance of environmental dimensions toward development of success tourism sites, this paper aims to investigate the impact of environment constructs and its contributions to the development of destination competitiveness.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Rural tourism

Rural tourism refers to activity that takes place at the countryside and tourism is known as one of the priority tools for rural planning in Malaysia (Liu, 2006). Tourism is known to have contributed to the development of individual's welfare (local communities), traveler experience as well as country's income (Peptenatu, Pintilii, Draghici, & Stoian, 2009). Past researchers have elucidated the main challenges faced by Malaysia tourism industry is image (Phang, Liew, Cheuk, & Razli, 2009). Thus, in promoting tourism destination, image and strategies to be used for the targeted areas should be emphasized. In the past, various studies had highlighted the importance of environmental component towards the sustainability of tourism industry (e.g., Chandralal, 2010; Miller, 2001) and the development of destination competitiveness strategy (Kim, 2012). In addition, major cultural and heritage attractions (e.g., handicrafts, cultural amenities) also play a pivotal role in rural tourism industry and enabling communities to increase their income (Rahmani, Hajari, Karimian, & Hajilo, 2013).

### 2.2. Environmental education

O'Hearn (1982) defined environmental education as a process directed to increase biological and cultural knowledge, awareness of environment problems, and creating motivation to act responsibly in support of an ecologically sustainable environment (Department of the Environment and Heritage, 2000). Commonly, the main aim of environmental education is to increase knowledge and understanding on environmental issues, create awareness and skill development for environmental conservation and simultaneously, achieve sustainable development of tourism destination (Blum, 2008). In other words, environmental education is also focus on the way to teach and educate the public about the function of natural environments according to sustainability (Bhuiyan, Siwa, & Islam, 2010).

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