

## **S.W.O.T + APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY - S.O.A.R ANALYSIS A NEW MODEL FOR THE STRATEGIC SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AND SPECIAL INTEREST TOURISM**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study has explored the prospect and future development of rural tourism at SSAF using the AI approach and it is the first of its kind to conduct a field test using the AI approach in tourism development besides the integration of social exchange theory. The objectives of the study were to explore the strengths, potential, impacts, and perceptions of tourism stakeholders (local communities, local authorities, tourism operators, and visitors) towards sustainable rural tourism development at SSAF. This case study has made some contributions to theoretical and conceptual understanding of AI approach and SET in tourism field.

**KEYWORDS:** SOAR. DEVELOPMENT. SPECIAL INTEREST TOURISM. DESTINATIONS.

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## INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development is a visionary development paradigm. Over the past 20 years, government and private sector businesses have accepted it as a guiding principle (Nzama, 2008). More sustainable development directions are needed. However, this requires new discussion, cooperation and most importantly, dedication from tourism-related businesses (Tsonis & Cheuk, 2000). Although rural tourism in Malaysia has been under development for a long time, major gaps still exist in this industry, especially in the field of sustainable rural tourism. It is, perhaps, for this reason that increasing attention is now being paid to tourism's potential contribution to poverty alleviation because tourism has always been viewed as a means of reducing poverty through its contribution to income and employment generation (Sharpley, 2009).

Many efforts have been made to enhance the demand for rural tourism as well as to improve the planning, management and development approaches for rural tourism. Nevertheless, efforts have been insufficient, as of yet, and there are still disturbing issues which do not reflect accepted sustainable rural tourism practices (Castellani & Sala, 2010; Scott, 2011). The development of rural tourism has been seen as a tool to improve the accessibility to remote areas, where it provides wider opportunities between tourists and local communities and the roles of consumers and service providers (Mathew, 2005). It should be given a high value of sustainability and planners must remain aware of the need preserve fragile environments and support conservation (WTO, 2001). The purpose of the integration of sustainable development in studies of things considered rural is to contribute to the knowledge base as to how stakeholders can be more effectively involved in the implementation of it.

## BACKGROUND OF STUDY

### SPECIAL INTEREST TOURISM AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM APPROACH: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Special Interest Tourism (SIT) comprises different special interest travel forms which have become known as niche markets over the years and gained popularity among the actors of the tourism industry. It has been highlighted as one of the growing phenomenon in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Mathew, 2005) and continuously growing until to date. While there is not a limit to these niche markets and some of them have become more sustainable and considered categories of special interest tourism. These main categories along with a short description for some of them are: i) Adventure tourism ii) Rural Tourism; iii) Cultural tourism; iv) Religious tourism; v) Ecotourism; vi) Culinary tourism; vii) Wildlife tourism; viii) Heritage tourism; viiii) Medical tourism.

Special interest tourists enjoy activities in contact with nature, beauty of a conserved natural area, the pleasure of watching the fauna in its natural habitat, of exploring, discovering and learning, overcoming obstacles and feeling the pleasure of overcoming them. Furthermore they like to discover how easy it is to read a map, navigate a river and learn climbing techniques, diving, horse riding, canoeing, driving cattle, packing and carrying a rucksack. For that tourist the physical effort involved is a small price to pay for enjoying the view of a mountain, camping next to a lake of still clear water or watching an eagle soaring in the wind. Above all there is the pleasure of sharing experiences with friends and relatives.

With regards to sustainable development, it has been emerged to tackle environment concerns as major central point in developmental programmes and become an important discourse in development theories. The sustainable tourism approach is refer to a set of philosophies in developmental programmes and a framework to guide how should a very friendly development plans can be taken by the stakeholders including tourism (Sharpley, 1999). A sustainable approach in tourism

means that neither the natural environment nor the socio-cultural fabric of host communities will be impaired by the arrival of tourist (Ogârlaci & Popa, 2005). Initially, the natural environment and the local communities should benefit from tourism economically and culturally. Indeed, sustainable tourism also must ensure the sustainability and equitability of economic operations, employment opportunities and social services to local community while contributing to poverty alleviation (Dwyer & Edwards, 2010). Besides ensuring the preservation of the environment, tourism activities also preserve the culture of the local communities and provide adequate economic opportunities for local communities whilst guarding them against exploitation (Castellani & Sala, 2010).

Due to the nature of tourism industry, sustainable development should be based on coordinated actions between the different sectors involved (Santagata, Paolo & Giovanna, 2007). Indeed, integrated and meaningful multi-stakeholder participation from a broad spectrum of the host communities is needed. At the same time, partnership should be at the federal, states and local level and should be backed by strong political leadership (Randelović et al., 2012). Within the extensive body of literature in sustainable tourism, its successful implementation is an emerging and important theme. Indeed, the lack of it or ineffective stakeholder participation is a major obstacle to sustainable development realisation (Waligo, Clarke, & Hawkins, 2013). In addition, they also claimed that there is no clear understanding of how best to solve the problems, although there are increasing recommendations for the involvement of stakeholders in sustainable development.

In countries like Malaysia, the careful balances of economic and environmental concerns are truly important because the tourism industry also provides important sources of income, employment, and wealth to the country. In ensuring the sustainability of the industry, the protection of the environment is very important. Indeed, sustainable development has become an important criterion in attracting tourists and its sustainability in tourism can only be achieved if all the stakeholders really apply the concept and practices of sustainability (Jaini et al., 2012). Thus, we

argued that ST can be considered as one of the special branch within the realm of SIT and very popular tourism approach in developing countries especially in Malaysia.

### **S.W.O.T ANALYSIS VS S.O.A.R ANALYSIS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY**

For many, traditional approaches to strategy development begin with an analysis of external and internal factors, followed by some visioning, then planning. Included in the analysis phase is often a “SWOT”, a thorough examination of internal Strengths and Weaknesses, as well as external Opportunities and Threats. SWOTs are praised for capturing both the positive (strengths and opportunities) and the negative (weaknesses and threats) features (Khavarian-Garmsir & Zare, 2014). Nowadays, organizations are under increased pressure for higher levels of innovation and faster results. While the SWOT approach can uncover strengths and weaknesses, SOAR provides the enhancement of moving from an “as is” analysis to a framework of leveraging strengths and opportunities to co-create individual and organizational aspirations to achieve measurable results (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2007).

The traditional approach of analysis starts with S.W.O.T (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) to evaluate any kind of situation or condition. However, recent analysis emerged from an interesting approach together with the core principle of AI, called S.O.A.R (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results) (Khavarian-Garmsir & Zare, 2014). This model provides a flexible approach to strategic thinking, planning and leading that invites the whole system into strategic planning by including all those with a stake in the success of the organisation’s future (Khavarian-Garmsir & Zare, 2014; Stavros & Cole, 2013). In order to understand the rural development at SSAF using the AI approach, the S.O.A.R analysis was performed based on the interviews and literature. Stories of success, opportunities available, aspirations for the future as well as results available are needed to attain our aspirations (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2007). They also highlighted that, although S.O.A.R is considered a relatively new concept among the practitioners, scholarly research agendas and basic and applied research using S.O.A.R is

increasing. Thus, this study took the assumption that S.O.A.R might assist in the strategic assessment process, starting with an inquiry to discover how the SSAF will be developed in future.

S.O.A.R has emerged as an effective and flexible strategic framework that releases an organization's energy, creativity, and engagement. This framework accelerates strategic planning sessions and processes by using Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a guiding approach to best inquire into strengths, opportunities, aspirations and measurable results; imagine the most preferred future; create innovative strategies, plans, systems, designs and structures; build a sustainable culture; and inspire organizational stakeholders to S.O.A.R (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2007). In order for an organization to sustain itself in the 21st century, it must take advantage of opportunities, leverage internal strengths and use its human capital for building a society that enhances our planet. AI already has demonstrated success in sustainability projects, and links to design thinking – which is itself a bridge between management and design. Connections between design thinking and sustainability also exist, so we now juxtapose and review the central precepts of each area (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2007).

#### **RESEARCH SETTING: SUNGAI SEDIM AMENITY FOREST (SSAF), KULIM, KEDAH**

Kulim is one of the small towns in Kedah that has several great attractions, particularly eco-tourism sites and its interestingly unique natural landscape with 13 existing tourist destinations. In addition, 25 areas committed for development have been identified as a source of tourist attractions. Of those, 17 areas are classified as new destinations while another eight are targeted for upgrading. With the overwhelming and rapid industrial development in Kulim, exemplified by Malaysia's first high-tech drive in Kulim Hi-Tech Park, investment from abroad in the form of developing high-tech factories has introduced thousands of jobs to the local people, especially for rural communities (Kulim District Council, 2004). There is a dramatic increase in population and rapid growth in this area.

Sungai Sedim Amenity Forest (SSAF), one of the most popular destinations in Kulim, was chosen as the research setting due to its characteristics and future contributions to host residents. It was recognized as one of the “*Top Five Chosen Destinations in Asia Pacific*” with 24 waterfall cascades along a 15 kilometre stretch (Kulim District Office, 2011). The forest is located in the north of Peninsular Malaysia, within Sedim’s area and near Karangan, 30km from Kulim’s town. The World’s Longest Canopy Walk, the 925m long and 50m high Tree Top Walk (TTW) (see Figure 1), is among the best attractions at SSAF and offers great aerial views of the natural forest (Kulim District Council, 2013).

**Figure 1: Tree Top Walk at Sungai Sedim Amenity Forest, Kedah**



Source: Kulim District Council (2004)

SSAF has a lot of potential to satisfy this type of tourists where it has unique ecological features that provide significant but under-utilized tourism potential, including natural forest, mountainous terrain, rivers, parks, and protected areas (Kulim District Office, 2014). Its various resources can make it a unique destination among the neighbouring states. On the other hand, the international demand is present and

increasing, so a lot of opportunities are there for Malaysian tourism too. There are people, as mentioned above, who would be willing to pay hundreds of dollars for a tour package that satisfies their craving for adventure, nature exploration and admiration. Actually, special interest tourism is developed to a certain extent in SSAF. There are only few tour operators who offer special interest tourism, mainly adventure tourism as their primary product. The majority of tour operators that offer special interest tourism services consider them as an extent to their primary product which is travelling outside Malaysia. The demand for the later has increased considerably during the last decade and it generates more income than other types of travelling. Therefore one feasible option for the development of tourism would be special interest tourism. It has several advantages which can make it a good choice particularly for SSAF and tour operators. Some of these advantages would be:

- a) Low start up investments compared to investments needed to develop mass sun and beach tourism;
- b) The attractions, being those natural, religious or cultural do exist. The challenge is to find the right way to use and manage them;
- c) This type of tourism does not depend entirely on the development of infrastructure;
- d) Customers prefer more the tourism that offers new experiences and new unseen places.

The potential of SSAF to be the best eco-tourism destinations in Malaysia can be seen from the rich, natural resource base that includes an adventurous waterfall that was promoted as being among the best white water rafting challenges internationally (Kulim District Council, 2013; Tourism Development Council, 2012). In addition to this, it has a rich combination of tourism endowments, such as forest recreational park, waterfalls, and mountains. Adventurous visitors can test their endurance by taking on the rapids with rafting, kayaking, or canoeing while the less daring can opt for soft adventure activities. Having the world's longest Tree Top Walk, SSAF also offers various



types of eco-tourism activities like bird-watching, education tourism and research centre visits (Kulim District Office, 2014).

**Figure 2: SSAF's tourism activities and products**



Source: Fieldwork, (2016)

In addition, according to the Kedah Tourism Board, the SSAF, as well as the Merbok River Cruise, are expected to attract more tourists to the mainland of Kedah (see Figure 2). This will help the tourism industry to create a more balanced inflow of tourists to the state (PEMANDU, 2009). The tourism board also will be continuously promoting Kedah's eco-tourism products on a low-key basis in the future and will be waiting for the government to improve the basic infrastructure in SSAF like public toilets, changing rooms as well as small shelters for the visitors. Tourism has become the priority tool of rural planning at SSAF, which tourism helps to energize the rural economy and plays an important role in creating a value-added commercial channel for local produce.

One of the most significant current discussions related to the prospects and future development at SSAF is the nature of tourism products at SSAF, such as the

adventure's waterfall and surrounding pristine forest. This often involves small-scale operations and the availability of culturally based or farm-based products can be conducive to wide community participation. There are also reasons why it is important to develop SSAF as a rural tourism destination in Kedah, namely: (i) to create economic growth and outline environmental objectives and (ii) to improve the social conditions of the local communities and tourism operators. Besides that, tourism development at SSAF can bring a range of other benefits to Kulim's areas, such as infrastructural development and spin-off enterprise opportunities.

There are developmental reasons to promote tourism at SSAF as a growth pole, such as diversifying a state's tourism image and travel packages or alleviating bottlenecks in popular sites. One key opportunity of involving more of the people in tourism activities at SSAF is to develop tourism enterprises where they live. But this is not to say that they will necessarily own an enterprise or even provide the labour just because it is located in a rural area. In this context, sustainable development is one of the best alternatives to be practiced and adopted in any tourism-related development, particularly in SSAF. Thus, various stakeholders must be assisted through capacity building in order to involve the local community in developing a sound tourism development plan that has potential for generating positive outputs to all (Ibrahim & Ahmad, 2008).

### **S.W.O.T + APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY = S.O.A.R ANALYSIS**

Generally, we are familiar with S.W.O.T analysis when we attempt to explore any conditions/situations. However, after learning about and implementing AI, this study found the significance of the S.O.A.R analysis in this study. Indeed, by applying the S.O.A.R analysis, none of the weaknesses and threats were highlighted and discussed. It is strictly positive, provides an overview of the current rural development and revealed insights for developing possible policies at SSAF. The S.O.A.R analysis has a qualitative nature, which helps one to discover information about values and resources a SSAF

possesses. The results of the S.O.A.R analysis of SSAF development are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: S. O. A. R. analysis of tourism development at SSAF**

	<b>STRENGTHS</b>	<b>OPPORTUNITIES</b>
<b>S T R A T E G I C  I N Q U I R Y</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Having the World Longest Tree Top Walk</li> <li>2. Rich with historical story and heritage</li> <li>3. Purely resources based such as adventurous waterfall for white water rafting</li> <li>4. Good eco-tourism based and increased demand for the product</li> <li>5. Diversify of natural and cultural resources</li> <li>6. Safety and security procedures provided in all activities</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Rural characteristic of SSAF favourable for eco-tourism and entrepreneurship development</li> <li>2. Economic growth</li> <li>3. Give opportunity to promote SSAF for new business establishments</li> <li>4. Employment opportunities</li> <li>5. Strengthening and improving local identities and culture</li> <li>6. Niche market opportunities</li> <li>7. Development of innovation</li> <li>8. Development of youth entrepreneurships</li> </ol>
	<b>ASPIRATIONS</b>	<b>RESULTS</b>
<b>A P P R E C I A T I V E  I N Q U I R Y</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Build image and branding for SSAF</li> <li>2. Wider networking and collaboration among stakeholders</li> <li>3. Enhance the promotion and marketing strategies</li> <li>4. More public facilities for visitors</li> <li>5. Increase level of competition</li> <li>6. Increase local cultural and climate of SSAF</li> <li>7. High investment in people (education and training)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Decrease level of migration among local people at SSAF</li> <li>2. Enhance the livelihood of people</li> <li>3. Diversify the product and activities offered at SSAF</li> <li>4. Increase number of visitors to SSAF</li> <li>5. Maintaining and improving facilities for visitors</li> <li>6. Increase level of infrastructures provided to SSAF (i.e. networking, internet)</li> </ol>

Source: Authors' own, (2016)

Strengths relate to the key assets of the SSAF that offer some basis upon which rural development is dependent. An important asset of SSAF is it having the world's longest Tree Top Walk, which can be experienced only at SSAF with a minimum fee for and open for public. Additionally, SSAF also rewarded with diversity of natural and cultural resources together with rural characteristics, which provides a favourable

environment for rural development as well as for tourism activities. Due to these characteristics, the demand for nature and culture tourism products at SSAF is increasing. These factors are also supported by the safety and security at SSAF, which are among the most important preconditions for rural development. In order to maintain the strength factors, active promotion policies by local authorities and tourism officers are necessary to increase the supply of eco-tourism. Tourism operators, local communities, as well as local authorities can also initiate development of synergies of tourism and agriculture (i.e. fruit plantation and farm-tourism). Additionally, establishment of partnerships among the actors involved in rural development will ensure that promotional information about the SSAF is accessible to all parties involved in tourism development process.

Opportunities identify potential sources of future benefits as it can be considered as rural characteristics that offer for eco-tourism as well as entrepreneurship development. There are also opportunities for economic growth and more jobs from SSAF's products, but the opportunities depend on, and/or it could be achieved together with, the aspirations element. There is a need for appropriate support to ensure that the area can build on the strengths identified earlier in order to take advantage of these opportunities. Another opportunity that can be highlighted at SSAF is the establishment of an entrepreneurship centre or incubator centre that should be available for tourism operators in order to enhance their level of business acumen.

Although a diversity of natural and cultural resources together with a good tourism base were identified as strengths at SSAF, however marketing strategies and product diversification also were seen as one of the most obvious sources of opportunity at SSAF, especially for niche market products such as culture and heritage tourism besides the eco-tourism activities. There are also many opportunities for entrepreneurship development, especially for local communities and youth generation, who through gaining necessary skills and competencies could make a valuable contribution to new and existing economic activities. Encouraging innovation is important if success is to be achieved and sustained. This can be achieved through the

supporting of potential entrepreneurs with innovative ideas, providing incentives, and awards. There are many rapids and mountain scrapes, which can be utilised for tourism attractions and activities at SSAF, such as *Gunung Inas* and *Gunung Bintang* that suit ecotourists.

Most of the previous studies using problem-solving approaches looked at the weaknesses of the particular place as one of their results. However, in using the AI approach, the weaknesses elements were replaced by aspiration, which looked at the potentials of the place. In this sense, many of the aspirations identified for SSAF revealed a few important elements, which are enhancing the environment for rural development at SSAF. The main aspiration is related to building image and branding for SSAF as for now there are no specific products or activities that show the real image of SSAF. Another part of aspiration that can be built is through the coordination, cooperation, and linkages between tourism stakeholders in services, management, and products offered to customers. It is important for SSAF's image because they have few operators that are managing and offering the products and services to customers. The next element is the need for stimulation of rural tourism development through education/training and provision of information, which are also observed as aspiration points.

The last part of S.O.A.R analysis of SSAF's development is to create a results-driven plan as well as to determine appropriate action and strategies for future planning. From the complete assessment of the strengths, exploring the opportunities available and the aspirations targets from the study, it is now to turn all of these elements into action. By engaging all elements and relevant stakeholders, the possibility for a greater understanding of tourism development at SSAF will be achieved. It also will contribute to the decrease level of migration among local people, as SSAF later will provide more opportunities and resources available. Indeed, it may enhance the livelihood of people through the various entrepreneurship development at SSAF. With the diversity of natural resources together with water-based activities, SSAF may attract many visitors with diversification of the products and activities offered to them. There are also significant results to maintaining and improving the facilities and

infrastructures not just for local people, indeed for SSAF's visitors. This will involve the energy, commitment, and tactical plans of all stakeholders to implement the strategies to achieve the results.

One of the most significant issues in rural tourism development is the implementation of the sustainable development plans and strategies, especially in improvement management practices and process. This is why tourism activities should be focused on a type of resource management in which all economic, social and aesthetic requirements are fulfilled (Hardy & Beeton, 2001). The analysis from this study is also in agreement with Said, Aziz, and Adlan (2012, p. 188), who claimed that:

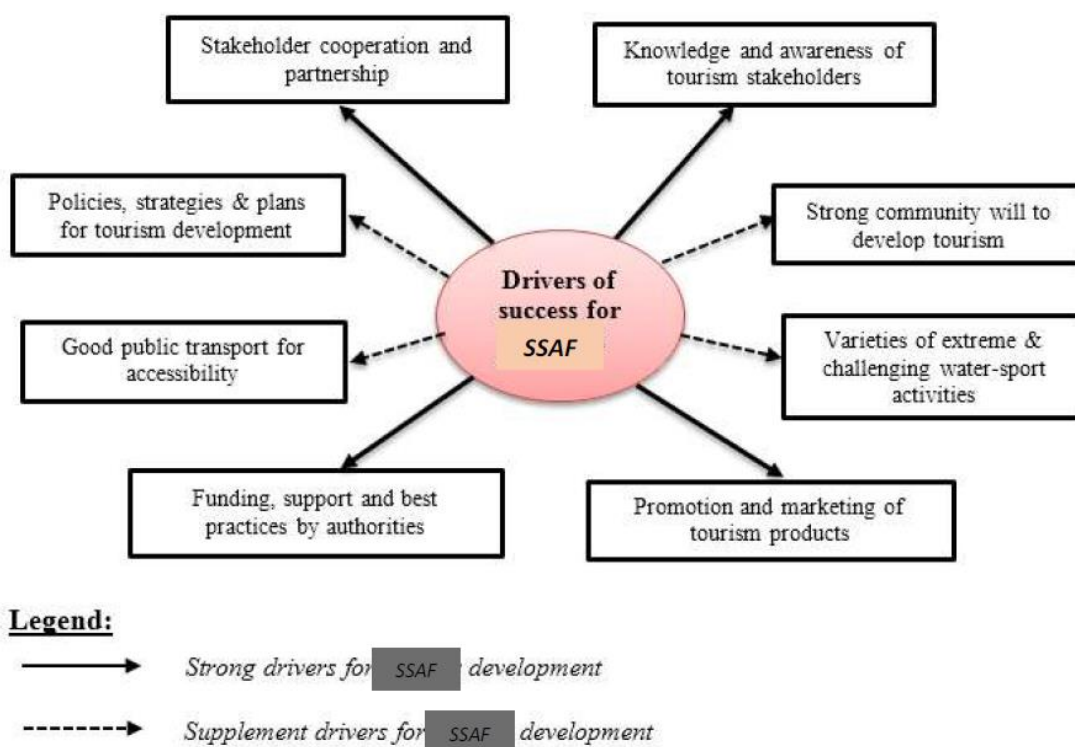
“...there are numbers of rules need to be considered in order to develop tourism attraction. First, a largely authentic natural or small scale and richly structured cultural landscape is desirable. Second, a landscape, which offers beauty as well as other cultural, historical, or natural attractions, would add value to the products. Third, good transportation links are required to make easily accessible by the public, and lastly basic tourism amenities too should be available (i.e. comfortable accommodations) as well as the acceptance and support by local people”.

## **DRIVING FORCES FOR SSAF**

The study believed that these suggestions are important to ensure the sustainability of tourism attractions at SSAF for present and future visitors as well as to provide a more energetic businesses environment to attract other businesses and small industries. Another finding from this study also revealed several drivers of success that were highlighted by the participants to have an influence in developing tourism activities at SSAF as well as to create a sustainable tourism development. This is important as sustainable tourism is considered a complex system which requires the integration of tourism stakeholders involvement – local communities, local authorities, tourism operators and visitors (Carlisle, Kunc, Jones, & Tiffin, 2013; Ghasemi & Hamzah, 2014).

In order to fill the gap in this study, the finding will extensively discuss a number of drivers of success to SSAF's development, which later would contribute to putting this concept into practice. In this context, the factors identified came out from the discussions with participants and encompasses those factors that have a positive influence on promoting sustainable tourism development at SSAF. The drivers were divided into several groups (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Driving factors for SSAF's development**



Source: Authors' own, 2016

Most factors that were identified from the discussion with the participants relate to stakeholder cooperation and partnership, knowledge and awareness of tourism stakeholders, funding, support and best practices by authorities as well as the

promotion and marketing of tourism products. These factors can be identified as “*Strong driving factors*”, which required more attention and action by all stakeholders. The group of factors included policies, strategies, and plans for tourism development, good public transport for accessibility, strong community support as well as varieties of extreme and challenging water-sport activities were classified as “*Supplement driving factors*”.

These factors are seen as important factors that complement and contribute to achieving sustainable tourism development at SSAF. Different stakeholders indicated their own interest towards the development of SSAF, as one of the participants noted that “*should balance between tourism development and nature resources to ensure the sustainability of SSAF in future*”. Previous studies also discussed the need and the importance of sustainable tourism development (see Dwyer & Edwards, 2010) and the complex nature of this concept, which requires strong support and cooperation between multiple stakeholders involved in tourism development.

The *stakeholder cooperation and partnership*, which includes local communities and tourism operators (as internal agents) with local authorities and visitors (as external agents), were acknowledged as an important factor that contributes to SSAF’s development. Any kind of business or development should have an integration and involvement of multiple parties to ensure that sustainable of tourism development will be achieved (Byrd et al., 2009). Furthermore, if the positive impacts of tourism at SSAF are to be maximised and the negative consequences kept to a minimum, local authorities need to allocate some *funding, create a support centre, and promote best practices* for tourism development. Hence, it should develop policies, plans, and strategies to achieve a better quality of life both for the local communities and for the nature resources upon which they depend.

The next strong driver factors were identified as *knowledge and awareness of tourism stakeholders*, which is necessity when planning and managing tourism products particularly in rural area likes SSAF. This factor can be complemented with *strong community support* and engagement with tourism activities, thus contributing



significantly to the success of tourism development (Maxim, 2015). Indeed, knowledge and understanding of tourism planning would help in adopting and implementing sustainable tourism initiatives in practice (Byrd, et al. 2009).

*Promotion and marketing strategies* relates to SSAF's assets, such as how history and cultural values play an important role, which is aimed at promoting it as one of the tourism products at SSAF in order to attract more tourists, especially for *heritage-tourists*. Indeed, it may have more to do with gaining economic benefits from tourism development through the establishment of new tourism products at SSAF (e.g. extreme and challenging water-sport activities). This factor was identified by Gössling and Scott (2012) as necessary and may build a strong influence on the tourism industry and tourism stakeholders to offer a service mix that is perceived by the core customers as superior in achieving a competitive advantage.

*Good public transport for accessibility* to SSAF was identified as one of the driver factors for successful tourism development, which it related to public transportation, such as bus and taxi. It may positively contribute to this development by providing good public transportation from the nearest cities, Kulim, Sungai Petani and Penang that may facilitate the transportation and attract many tourists to SSAF, especially international tourists. This was highlighted by a few of the participants who stated "*although the main element of SSAF to be developed is through the attraction of tourism products, however the role of public transport to get to SSAF also important, especially for tourists*". Not just for local communities to have an access to the nearest city likes Kulim. In particular, Dodds (2012) asserted that transportation as one of the sectors which influences the level of tourism development at any destinations. Thus, it is also important for local authorities to consider this for future planning of SSAF's development.

In addition to this, there is a number of other factors identified that contribute to the successful implementation of tourism development at SSAF by the local communities and tourism operators that were not mentioned by the local authorities. These include the formal training and education for managing business in tourism industry. In terms of training and education, it is believed that authorities should provide them with proper

training and knowledge about the tourism industry so that they will understand the significant value of the tourism industry in their area. Besides, they will understand the concept of sustainable tourism and the advantages of implementing this concept into SSAF's development.

This is supported by Maxim (2015), who indicated that there are a combination of drivers that may contribute to the successful implementation of sustainable tourism at the local level and that their interaction should be carefully considered by policy-makers. Indeed, working and consulting with partnerships between tourism stakeholders at SSAF in planning and development may create a harmonious contribution, could overcome possible conflicts and bring more resources and expertise to achieving sustainable tourism development. However, the lack of resources allocated for tourism, together with a lack of policies and strategies for the planning and management of tourism development could have significant negative consequences, particularly in the long-term (e.g. damaging the natural resources, diminished quality of life for local residents and leading to poor visitor experience) (Maxim, 2015). Therefore, it is believed that the sustainable concept at SSAF' condition needs to be high on the agenda of local authorities and needs to be considered a priority for all levels of development.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has explored the prospect and future development of rural tourism at SSAF using the AI approach and it is the first of its kind to conduct a field test using the AI approach in tourism development besides the integration of social exchange theory (Chuang, 2010; Coulson, MacLaren, McKenzie, & O'Gorman, 2014; Kayat, 2002; Latkova & Vogt, 2011; Yutyunyong & Scott, 2009). The objectives of the study were to explore the strengths, potential, impacts, and perceptions of tourism stakeholders (local communities, local authorities, tourism operators, and visitors) towards sustainable rural tourism development at SSAF. This case study has made some contributions to

theoretical and conceptual understanding of AI approach and SET in tourism field. The study has gone some way towards enhancing our understanding of rural tourism as well as the significance of sustainable tourism development in rural area. As discussed earlier, the key strengths of this study provide a new understanding of the integration of social exchange theory and AI approach in tourism research.

Special interest tourism is one of the most interesting tourism sectors in Malaysia which has a great potential to successfully develop this type of tourism. It started slow but nowadays more and more tour operators and other tourism stakeholders are showing interest toward it. Investments in this sector are growing and resourceful but unknown locations are coming into existence. The tourism development in SSAF can be described as exceptionally successful. In less than three years the economic impact of tourism has grown from zero to highly considerable on the income of many families in the village. Tourism development is now seen as a realistic chance by the regional and national administration.

By using both elements in this study, the findings can contribute to the current literature and extend our knowledge of the application of AI approach in tourism field. As the WTO's reports that Malaysian tourism, have two main strengths: the unique environment and nature of the country, and the local people themselves. The industry has also become an important foreign-exchange earner, contributing to economic growth, providing employment, and attracting investments. In fact, the growth of Malaysian economy is related to the tourism industry because it has been identified as the most vital sector and acts as the best engine and driver for development. There are also reasons why it is important to develop SSAF as rural tourism destination in Kedah. The study attempts to explore the past, current and future rural tourism development at SSAF in order to create economic growth and outline environmental objectives. It helps to improve the social conditions of the local communities and tourism operators at SSAF by recommending implementation of substantial involvement of the local residents in order to sustain vital rural tourism interrelationship between tourism development, biodiversity conservation, as well as livelihood improvement.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study like any other study is not without its limitations and shortcomings. The main limitation of this study is the issue of generalization. As discussed before, the study was conducted at Sungai Sedim Amenity Forest, Kulim, Kedah. Therefore, generalization to communities in other states of Malaysia and even in other regions of the country may be limited. As we are aware, residents in other local communities of Malaysia may have different perceptions towards tourism development in their areas. The finding of this study may be applicable to the surrounding area of Sedim and Kulim district only. It is hoped that the findings of this study may help to discover the potentials and opportunities that may exist within the rural tourism activities and local communities at SSAF for the development of economic, social, and environmental conditions.

There are also limitations on how far the ideas/concept of AI approach can be applied throughout the study. One of the problems with this issue was regarding to the researcher and participant's availability. The lack of facilitators' understanding and strategies employed during both the data collection and data analysis phases emerged as another disadvantage of this study. As a result, to practice in exploring, probing and discussing in some issues may be limited to some extent and need to be improved for embarking on the next AI's study. This is supported by previous study that claimed AI can be no more than a daydream or a false hope if the process is not carefully followed which may lead to further alienation and frustration in participants (Nyaupane & Poudel, 2012). Thus, to remedy this limitation, the researcher needs to pay more attention to all groups of participants, encourage, and create an environment that allows them to feel comfortable sharing their stories and experiences.

This research has encountered many questions that are in need of further investigation to enhance the scope and dimensions of this study. It is hoped that the findings from this may enhance the current phenomenon and create understanding

towards rural tourism development in Malaysia besides it could be used as guidelines in developing tourism activities in other areas of concern. Therefore, it is recommended that further research be undertaken to expand the study through a comparison approach between rural tourism areas in Malaysia. As for future research in this field, it is suggested to explore on how tourism development has affected the level of supports among tourism stakeholders. The results of the study may contribute to the expansion of tourism market in rural areas to meet the needs of tourists/visitors. More information and investigation on this field would be helpful in order to establish not only a greater degree of accuracy on this matter, but for a better understanding of communities' support towards rural tourism and tourism development in Malaysia.

**D.A.F.O + INVESTIGACIÓN APRECIATIVA: NUEVO MODELO PARA UN DESARROLLO DE TURISMO SUSTENTABLE Y TURISMO DE INTERES CULTURAL**

**RESUMEN**

El presente estudio explora los pro y contras del turismo rural usando la inteligencia artificial dentro del campo del turismo sustentable y el turismo de interes cultural. Los objetivos versan en estudiar las fortalezas, potenciales riesgos, impactos y percepciones de los diferentes actores del sistema turístico como ser comunidad local, autoridades, operadores y turistas. El caso no sólo rescata buenas practicas en turismo sustentable sino que revela los aportes de AI y el SIT en turismo.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** SOAR. DESARROLLO. TURISMO DE INTERES. DESTINOS.

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