

Tourism Development in Rural Areas: Potentials of Appreciative Inquiry Approach

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Abstract

This study attempts to examine the way in which rural tourism is developed by using the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach as a research tool. AI is an increasingly important area as it was able to offer a positive and strength-based approach to the rural community development. It can be seen as an alternative tourism research tool for community development as far as rural tourism is concerned. The qualitative research approach was applied by conducting focus group discussions with the local communities and youth groups at Sungai Sedim Nature Forest (SSNF) in Kedah, Malaysia. SSNF was chosen as the research setting due to its characteristics and future contributions to a host of residents. From the discussion, natural resources, eco-tourism products, Tree Top Walk and historical assets have been identified as the significant strengths at SSNF. Also, the respondents believe that with the development of these products, it will enhance the image and branding of the SSNF as the best eco-tourism destination in Malaysia.

Keywords:

Rural Tourism; Appreciative Inquiry (AI); Malaysia; Qualitative Research; Tourism Development

1 Introduction

Tourism has been acknowledged as an essential Malaysian industry, which creates new products and well-managed tourism destinations. Over the years, the industry has experienced sustained growth and also been an area of significant development in recent years (UNWTO, 2014). Thus, for tourism to be a catalyst for socio-economic development, it is essential that governments pursue the sustainable development of tourism in a comprehensive and planned manner (United Nations, 2006). An ever-increasing number of destinations worldwide have opened up to and invested in tourism, turning tourism into a key driver of socio-economic progress through export revenues, the creation of jobs and enterprises, as well as instigating infrastructure development (WTTC, 2013).

Over the past six decades, tourism industry experienced continued expansion and diversification, becoming one of the largest and fastest-growing economic sectors in the world. Many new destinations have emerged in addition to the traditional favourites of rural destinations. A recent study by WTTC (2013) shows that the numbers of international tourist arrivals worldwide are expected to increase by 3.3 percent a year from 2010 to reach 1.8 billion by 2030. Meanwhile, between 2010 and 2030, entries in emerging destinations are expected to grow at twice the rate of those in advanced economies. In that respect, the tourism industry would significantly boost national economic and social benefits while mitigating its environmental impacts, which additionally can help position the country at the top place in the world (WTTC, 2014).

Rural tourism as one of the vital tourism product has become not only a remarkable complementary income resource, mainly for the rural population but also an essential mechanism for a new balance and a dynamic relation between urban centres and inland locales (Bramwell & Lane, 2008). This dynamic relation will allow the expansion of financial and social tourist activity in time and space (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011a). Rural tourism is related to small-scale tourist activities, of family or co-operative type organization, which are developed in the rural regions by people who are occupied in agriculture. Its primary aim is to provide subsistence-based farmers with alternative solutions for their occupations and also to improve their income and their life quality (McGehee, 2004). The opportunities offered by the tourism industry globally are unquestionable, and every country seeks to stimulate sustainable economic growth based on employment opportunities (Patzelt & Shepherd, 2011).

2 Literature Review

2.1 Overview

There have been several studies in the literature reporting the role of the tourism industry as a generator of jobs and revenues; therefore, it has been identified as a strategic domain and able to integrate a wider regional branding strategy as it is able

to highlight the tourism potential to strengthen the position of the region and the country. However, how to operationalize it remains uncertain, which opens doors for future research (Oliveira, 2014). Also, previous studies suggested the opportunity to provide unique experiences, and managers must first identify and highlight the most significant aspects of the destination's culture, history, and the local way of life that sets it apart from the rest of the tourism world (Kim, 2014). Apart from that, they also should creatively develop cultural activities that can stimulate visitors' senses, which would invoke entertaining and educational experiences. This practice ensure that rural activities may create and deliver meaningful tourism experiences, create a sense of security to the tourist (Ezung, 2012), which results in new local income, increases revenues as well as stimuli for other sectors of the local economy (Carmichael & Ainley, 2014).

Other than that, one of the most significant current discussions about the potential of tourism development is the importance of innovation and technology in service sectors or even in the manufacturing industry (Cosma, Paun, Bota & Fleseriu, 2014). Cosma et al. (2014) claimed that the issue of innovation in tourism increased in the last few years and it is important to highlight the awareness of innovation for business in the rural tourism industry. The change of tourism products as a means to introduce and bring into the market a new or a significantly improved product. Recent developments in the rural industry also have heightened the need for destination image as rural destinations are becoming increasingly popular among urban dwellers and the online marketing and promotion of rural destinations are in urgent need of development (Zhou, 2014). The development of rural tourism also may facilitate rediscovering the value of rural resources that have previously been disregarded in the modernization process of the world economy (Hwang & Lee, 2015). They believed that this development might provide insights to both farmers and policymakers to adopt a broader perspective than to only focus on agricultural products.

Several studies revealed that rural development encompasses such holistic rural activities as agricultural production, lifestyle, and rural amenities to attract people from both urban and rural areas (Egbali, Bakhshandea, Khalil & Ali, 2010; Frederick, 1993; Lane, 2005). Indeed, local communities in rural areas are provided with the chance to develop and preserve the folklore or to revive forgotten arts and practices, as well as to produce traditional products (e.g., textiles, traditional desserts, etc.). Besides, they can revive local customs and organize traditional feasts as well as preserve people's memory of cultural traditions—particularly among the younger generation otherwise mesmerized by Internet-based technologies and mobile devices. All these maintain and do not alienate the character of the countryside, but they highlight the variety and the uniqueness of each place (Park & Boo, 2010).

Furthermore, the connection between remote regions and urban centers is ensured, and the most critical point is that new perspectives are open for the young people of the area. Rural tourism, in particular, comprises both the actual tourist

activities as well as boosting the economy itself. The complexity of the pictures of rural tourism can be explicitly discussed as a tourism product, which emphasizes the importance of supply management and marketing activities. Besides, it is built to introduce rural regions and to utilize other attractions and provide diversified services (Carmichael & Ainley, 2014).

2.2 The Provision of the Appreciative Inquiry Approach

This study expands the literature by considering methods to apply the Appreciative Inquiry approach to rural tourism development at Sungai Sedim Nature Forest (SSNF) in Kedah, Malaysia. Survey of stakeholders' perceptions concerning the development of rural tourism using the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach has contributed to the 'knowledge rich' tourism field. AI is a new approach, and only limited numbers of studies have been conducted, particularly in Malaysia, using this approach. Indeed, there are also limited studies that have been done using the AI approach within the tourism field (Nyaupane & Poudel, 2012; Raymond & Hall, 2008b). Thus, it is crucial for tourism practitioners to extend AI into the area of tourism to create a focus on the strengths of a system instead of using deficit-based thinking (Raymond & Hall, 2008).

AI has been practiced in the community development area, particularly in developing countries. However, despite the successful implementation of the AI approach in development, it has been used regularly for research, specifically in the area of tourism (Nyaupane & Poudel, 2012; Raymond & Hall, 2008b). Even though AI origins are in academia, there is also a considerable body of literature covering its organizational applications and impacts. AI has roots in organizational development and strategies that help organizations transform themselves. It is traditionally used as an approach for analysis, learning, and organizational development. It uniquely seeks to discover, understand and nurture innovation and transformation in human/social systems (Hall & Hammond, 2005; Judy & Hammond, 2006). Different scholars defined the ideas of AI in different ways. In extensive literature, the term of AI is generally understood as an alternative approach, an innovative process, a theory, knowledge or a philosophy (Koster & Lemelin, 2009; Lewis, Passmore, & Cantore, 2008; Raymond & Hall, 2008b).

Until now, AI is a group inquiry that identifies and further develops the best of "what is" in organizations to create a better future (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). In their analysis of AI, they claimed that AI is often used in the organization development field as an approach to large-scale change; it is a means for addressing issues, challenges, changes and concerns of an organization in ways that build on the successful, practical, and energizing experiences of its members. The recent development of AI also found that the AI process not only helps an organization to create images of its future but to create an energy, a renewed commitment to change and a sense of hope among the groups of people working to achieve that future (Michael, 2005).

AI can be categorized as a strength-based participatory action research technique which follows grounded theory procedure and is based on the constructivist paradigm. (Koster & Lemelin, 2009; Raymond & Hall, 2008b). There was various reason why AI was recommended: for example, it used for problem-centric tourism research, whereby understanding the pressing problems and their causes, researchers can address multiple concerns and implement appropriate solutions. More importantly, the AI approach could be a suitable method and may help to empower rural communities since they are often alienated by the use of technology and technical jargon (Nyaupane & Poudel, 2012), and this method does not require respondents to read text-based instrument. Alternative methods like interviews focus groups, as well as brainstorming, may encourage participants to speak more honestly about any problems they may have experienced (Raymond & Hall, 2008a).

3 Methodology

A case-oriented understanding was applied in this study to understand a phenomenon from the standpoint of the participants. It is believed that a qualitative methodology is more suitable for the current research as the development of tourism activities at SSAF is part of a meaning-making process involving complex human thinking and interactions. For that reason, the qualitative approach (e.g., interviews and focus groups) was applied throughout the study. The population samples are those who are involved with and affected by, tourism activities at SSAF. Sampling strategy used in this study is intended to enable researchers to determine the statistical conclusions on the population and deliberately modeled on a group of people who can inform researchers about the best research problems (Creswell, 2007). The choices of the sample are driven by the conceptual questions, not by a concern for probabilistic 'representativeness.'

For this study, the respondent has been selected by the Head of the Sedim District, which included those who are directly involved with or affected by, tourism activities and those who lived in Sedim tourism area. This is to guarantee that the target population will express their feelings and attitudes towards the tourism industry development within their areas. As for the focus group discussions and interviews, the respondent was chosen from local communities, local authorities, tourism operators, and visitors (see Table 1). Thus, the unit of analysis in this study involved a group purposefully selected in the Sedim area, which included in Table 1.

Table 1: Research participants information

Categories	Participants profile	Number of participants	Method used
Local Communities	Residents and youth generation	35	Focus group discussion

Local Authorities	Expert working for the governmental organization in tourism planning and development at the district and state level	5	Semi-structured interviews
Tourism Operators	People who run and manage their businesses at SSAF	7	Semi-structured interviews
Visitors	Domestic and international	12	Semi-structured interviews

Total Participants: 59

AI approach was applied as the primary method for qualitative data collection in this study to reveal the understandings, opinions, and attitudes of tourism stakeholders concerning the development of SSAF. Because of the perceived value of the method and its adaptability discussed in the previous chapter, an AI approach was carried out to assess the potential of applying AI as a methodology in tourism research. To develop an appropriate AI approach in this study, three critical steps were taken as developed by Raymond & Hall (2008b).

First, the change agenda was considered, and the following questions addressed: *“What are you trying to accomplish? What is your purpose?”* This stage involved developing clear research objectives that could be linked to AI. Next, the following questions regarding the form of engagement were asked: *“What is the most appropriate form of engagement given your change agenda, community, and resources?”* (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). Third, an inquiry strategy was developed that responded to the question: *“Having identified the purpose and form of engagement, what decisions and steps must you take along the way to ensure the development’s success?”* (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). This inquiry strategy (see Table 2) provides a practical example of how the 4-Ds of AI can be adapted to suit the focus and objectives of this study.

Table 2: Inquiry strategy of the study

Stage	Steps	Purpose
Grounding	Contact the Head of the Sedim District and invite their participation	Obtain their full support and to get closer to them
	Observe the positive aspects of tourism development by focusing on what they are visibly achieving and how they are doing this (discovery)	Improve the existing positive imagery and develop a positive vision to focus on the benefits and success of rural development
Discovery	Conduct group discussions with	Follow the features of a

(appreciating and valuing the best of 'what is')	residents and youth groups. Explore what is effective and successful in current practices (discovery) and discuss ideas and aspirations for the future (dream)	successful development project so that a preliminary framework of good practice for rural development can be built.
Dream (envision 'what could be')	Conduct interviews with representatives of local authorities, tourism operators, and visitors. Explore what is effective and successful in current practices (discovery) and discuss ideas and aspirations for the future (dream)	

Source: Raymond & Hall (2008b)

It is important to note that one of the benefits of AI is that it could be easily adapted to any particular culture, context, and environment (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010) and may encourage studies to build a strong and reliable foundation in uncovering attitudes, perceptions and ideas of local communities and tourism stakeholders (Nyaupane & Poudel, 2011). The AI approach is still growing, and new approaches continue to grow and thrive (Raymond & Hall, 2008a). In fact, they also claimed that there were three significant critical reasons for the application of AI in tourism study:

- i. AI provided evidence of the potential of taking a friendly approach to tourism research for both the researcher and the researched.
- ii. Applying an AI approach can make an enjoyable research process for all involved as participants had valued the positive reflection that the AI-oriented interview/focus group encouraged.
- iii. Conducting AI only allows participants to approach difficulties in a more positive way by focusing on how things can be improved, rather than the problem itself.

For this study, the data (focus groups and interviews) were recorded using a voice recorder and video recorder to ensure the validity of the data collection process. Once finished, data were transcribed verbatim, which began with a search for key themes using open coding and memos. Codes were used as indexing devices at various stages of abstraction to construct sets of related information units for comparison and analysis. There are two coding activities suggested in the coding process, which is axial and open coding. Coding the data under the key themes may require recoding under new, emerging themes based on the conversations around the original themes. A

primary goal is to reduce and interpret the meanings and through dialogues, confirming that these are the interview meanings.

4 Findings

A critical success factor in the tourism industry at SSAF is the potentials and opportunities that will be offered to tourists. In the past, SSAF was able to promote eco-tourism products, such as white water rafting and flora fauna, which caters to the adventure tourists and embrace a greater visitor experience through the waterfall and Tree Top Walk. The findings of this study indicated that there are apparent direct and indirect potentials and contributions of rural tourism that resulted from an increase in tourism development at SSAF. Several factors were identified as the potentials of SSAF to be promoted and developed as one of the rural tourism products in Malaysia as local communities tended to be more accommodative of outside influences brought by an increase in tourism development. Participants were given an opportunity to express their opinions based on their experiences and observations regarding their interactions with tourists and tourism activities at SSAF. The finding shows the following themes from the study (see Table 3);

Table 3: Summary of Findings for Potentials and Opportunities of SSAF

	Groups of Participants			
	Local Communities (LC) & Youth Group (YG)	Local Authorities (LA)	Tourism Operators (TO)	Visitors (VS)
Key Themes	Niche products	Niche products	Niche products	Infrastructure and facilities development
Other themes	Home-stay Programme	Infrastructure and facilities development	Rural Entrepreneurship Development	Niche products
	Education and Research Centre	Home-stay Programme	Education and Research Centre	Rural Entrepreneurship Development
	Rural Entrepreneurship Development	Education and Research Centre	Home-stay Programme	Education and Research Centre
	Historical, cultural and architectural value	Rural Entrepreneurship Development	Infrastructure and facilities development	

4.1 Key Potential Themes

4.1.1 Promoting "Niche Products Market"

Through the findings of this study, many issues were identified for the potentials and contributions of SSAF. The results (as shown in Table 3) show the potential for promoting a "niche products" of SSAF is the main issue that was addressed by all participants. Local communities, as well as tourism operators that involved in the tourism industry at SSAF, are always searching for new products that will bring tourists to their area. Natural resources (i.e., waterfall, mountain, and flora fauna), culture and heritage (i.e., history of Sedim) as well as the landscape and quality of life, are the types of resources highly valued for SSAF. These resources, coupled with the broad market trends, open a large market of *niche products* that can be a source of competitive advantage for rural tourism at SSAF and should be at the heart of its potential. This can bring in far more revenue and provide more jobs than ever-current products could bring (such as water rafting and kayak). Tourism operators can sell their products beyond the local market and therefore have the higher market potential for increased sales and profits whereas local communities can get the opportunities for small businesses in their area.

4.1.2 Potential for infrastructures and facilities development

The potential for SSAF, especially in the context of infrastructures and facilities development are enormous as SSAF, which is not only endowed with rich nature, flora, and fauna but also has a history of rich culture and heritage. Sedim is not far from the famous town in Kedah, Kulim as well as Butterworth, Penang. However, in spite of its natural gifts, SSAF witnessed poor rates of growth, not only due to violence but also because of poor policy management and lack of infrastructure. Thus, the finding discovered that tourism activities at SSAF would bring needed development to support and facilities not only for local communities but also for the benefits of visitors/ tourists. Most of the participants also highlighted the importance of public facilities (e.g., toilets, shower room and prayer room) to be developed at SSAF due to limited access to these facilities. They believed if proper facilities can be built and managed, the number of tourists will increase and as a result may encourage the development of rural tourism at SSAF.

4.2 Other Potential Themes

4.2.1 Promoting the "Home-stay Programme"

The core component of the home-stay programme in Malaysia, which differentiates a Malaysian home-stay programme with other home-stay elsewhere in the world, is the element whereby guests "*live with*" the hosts who are usually introduced as adopted families (Kayat, 2011; Razzaq et al., 2011). This element

involves the guest eating, cooking, and doing many activities together with their adopted families, which allow both parties with probably different cultural backgrounds to interact and learn from each other. The results from this study indicated that the majority of local communities at Sedim were actively involved and recognized the indirect economic benefits that occurred from the increased tourism activities. This was supported by Ministry of Tourism Malaysia (2013) that acknowledged the benefits of the home-stay program as a vital source of income and employment for local communities, especially in rural areas. They also can promote their traditional culture and heritage besides the hosts (local community) will have the opportunities to be part of the tourism product and may receive the socio-economic benefits.

4.2.2 The human-made site of historical, cultural and architectural value

Tourism currently plays the significant role not just in the economic elements, but also in cultural and historical conservation. It is also identified as the industry that acts as a catalyst for the conservation of the physical environment and contributes towards the continued economic prosperity of the community (Lane, 2005). Thus, tourism as the primary thrust of the government's developmental strategy will allow SSAF to expand beyond its present horizons to ensure its position as one of the historical and cultural centers for tourists and may radically transform the livelihood economy. Indeed, cultural and heritage assets were recognized as one of the strengths at SSAF. However, it is not fully developed and managed by responsible stakeholders. With that matter, the theme called historical value and man-made site emerged to show the potential of developing these products at SSAF according to participants' acknowledgment. From the observation with local communities, the study believed that if cultural and heritage products at SSAF can be developed, maintained, and marketed, definitely, it will boost the value of tourism industry at SSAF as now they already have various valuable products to be promoted.

4.2.3 Rural Entrepreneurship Development (business, craft, skills)

In addition to the opportunities provided in the informal sector, there are other business opportunities available at SSAF, such as operating giving training for agro-culture, entertainment centre, public transportation to reach SSAF, laundry services, establishing catering facilities where local cuisine is prepared, and others. In this case, innovation should be the primary way to gain and retain competitive advantage and capitalize on the opportunities created by the change (Carlisle, Kunc, Jones & Tiffin, 2013; Cosma et al., 2014). The reason for addressing the culture of entrepreneurship in the SSAF is related to the growth of tourism with an increasing demand for new types of tourism because it is composed of small companies. The important thing for them is to capture the opportunities are gap fillers, the ability to monitor the market opportunities and to build up new products or services as well as supply a new source

of employment to the economy (Zhao, Ritchie & Echtner, 2011). Small business entrepreneurs need some driving factors to operate, such as motivations and some specific conditions for success. However, the most important factor is the enabling environment that provides comfort and support to the entrepreneur (Lordkipanidze, 2002).

4.2.4 Education and Research Centre

The importance of education and research centre, some called it an '*incubator*,' is well acknowledged in the previous studies. It covers a wide range of activities that focused on transferring knowledge through natural resources. The resources that were rewarded to SSAF also become one of the factors for SSAF to be a hub or '*incubator*' for education and research. Based on the observations, the study believed that by introducing the education and research centre in SSAF, it would be one of the mechanisms and a key strategy to empower people to take part in the rural development and thus may increase the participation of tourism stakeholders. Also, it will support and uphold the local culture, natural resources, knowledge, and skills as well as to create pride in community values. Therefore, the development of this centre is the foundation for achieving poverty reduction and sustainable development, especially in SSAF's condition.

5 Discussion and Recommendations

From the literature, the study believed that the involvement of local communities in tourism activities at SSAF might allow them to share in the advantages of tourism development, whether economic or social. One of the economic advantages of promoting tourism activities in SSAF is that most of the economic benefits of employment and income received directly by the resident who owns and operate the tourist facilities and services. Some participants from group discussions anticipated that with further tourism development at SSAF, and then more opportunities would be created. There are varieties of products that can be promoted and offered to tourists concerning home-stay programs, such as "*silat*," "*marhaban*," adventure activities, as well as mountain climbing. The majority of the local communities would like to see more tourism facilities and infrastructure so that more tourists would visit SSAF "*...with the existing of the home-stay programme here (SSAF), we will have more spirit to support and attract more tourists.*" There seemed to be a strong positive relationship between the extent of their involvement in tourism development and their support towards an increase in tourism development.

In the changing environment of SSAF and traditional agricultural economies, it is essential to discover new means of livelihood and options for tourism operators. Tourism development may stimulate an informal economic belt, which possesses different skills and creative abilities have the opportunity to earn an income from selling or providing services to tourists. In this matter, the study shows that SSAF's

stakeholders, particularly communities and operators, should become more positive towards the tourism industry. At present, the tourism operators, nature, as well as event organizers are a major feature of SSAF's tourism whereas fruits vendors and rural-based entrepreneurship may offer relevant options. Notably, it can be defined as '*environmentally responsible entrepreneurship*' based on resources and experiences provided by nature at SSAF. Table 4 shows some of the potential advantages of tourism development in SSAF.

Table 5: Potential benefits from rural tourism development at SSAF

Social benefits	Cultural benefits	Economic benefits	Environment benefits
Keeping population locally, as a result, there will be decreased migration, good occupational opportunities and educational background for young generations Improvement of the quality of life Improved educational level (knowledge about managing business)	Strengthening the local culture and identity through promoting local products/ services Raise awareness of the value of heritage and its protection needs	An increase in overall employment An increase in employment agro-tourism Diversification of local economic activity Strengthening and expansion of existing and new enterprise An increase in the number of local operators An increase in the number of investors	Protection and preservation of the rural cultural/ natural heritage Reduction of resources use, minimizing waste and safeguarding environmental qualities thus preserving biodiversity Promotion of sustainable development of tourism products and related business areas Sustainable land management Less ecological impacts due to the small-scale character of rural tourism operators

This study believed that the development of a home-stay product at Sedim area might contribute in a smooth flow of income for the host community. During the survey, it is found that the local community at Sedim area was very helpful, welcoming and always positive towards tourism activities in their village. Proper training and skills, i.e., visitor handling, communication skills and being technology-oriented should be provided to enhance and update local communities' knowledge and skills when they are involved in a home-stay programme. Indeed, a recent study by Bel et al. (2015) also asserted that there is a need to determine which combinations of rural amenities, local products, and tourist services should be promoted to strengthen the development of niche markets in rural tourism. They believed rural development should be built according to the concept of sustainable tourism and that the local community should be trained to manage the tourism products, all by its own, through goal setting exercises, in the maintenance of the area, as well as effective monitoring of all the tourism activities.

The authorities/local governments can make policies that encourage entrepreneurial behaviour, which means that within a generation, people or communities can be much or less entrepreneurial. There should be greater training on various aspects related to tourism services, such as guide training, hospitality management, which may encourage young generations and unemployed people to come forward and start working in this sector. There is a healthy relationship between the people's culture and its tendency to become entrepreneurship (Hawkes & Robert, 2006). Understanding the cultural and social basis of a particular community such as SSNF can give a proper starting point for building a more entrepreneurial society and economy. Many countries are working to improve their entrepreneurship through and reach a high starting a business to contribute to economic growth and development (Heilbrunn, 2010). The government roles in stimulating and creating an appropriate environment in SSNF level to address the supply side of entrepreneurship, is essential, focusing on people who have the motivation, the finances, and the skills to start a new business.

Also, efforts should be made to create a culture that promotes entrepreneurship throughout society and develop the capacity of the population to identify and pursue opportunities (Zampetakis & Kanelakis, 2010). Policies and programmes should be targeted specifically at the entrepreneurial sector to increase the overall education level of the population, ensuring that entrepreneurial training is readily accessible to build up skills and capabilities to start a business and to facilitate the start-ups by influencing the supply of potential entrepreneurs (Kirschenhofer & Lechner, 2012). However, the conflict between developers and residents in rural tourism need to be addressed through the planning process that allows the community to create a set of public value for their communities. Rather than something to fear as detrimental to tourism, community-based action and initial resistance to tourism development holds promise for a community that cares about its future and will invest in specific kinds of tourism development (Bramwell & Lane, 2012; Cosma et al., 2014).

6 Conclusion

Rural tourism development, in general, is complicated, considering the wide variety of companies, agents, and resources to be jointly managed. It is seen as a valuable and growing sector of the overall tourism market, representing a significant source of income to rural communities (Sprangel, Stavros & Cole, 2011). The development of rural tourism also offers potential solutions to many of the problems facing rural areas (Keyim, Yang & Zhang, 2005). Indeed, rural tourism can assist and ameliorate economic, social and identity restructuring processes through its ability to raise income, stabilize populations, sustain cultures, redistribute economic roles besides promoting a positive and ecological friendly image (Pakurar & Olah, 2008). However, if the concept of rural or eco-tourism is seen as the creation of leisure

opportunities rather than as a part of diversification strategies for rural economy, it might affect tourism benefits for the local community (Liu, 2006).

Entrepreneurship is a dominant driving force behind rural and nature-based tourism. Tourism covers mostly small businesses, and it depends on the innovation for new product development. Entrepreneurs can contribute to the economic and social well-being of the local communities (Saleem & Zain-UI-Abideen, 2011). Therefore, the tourism entrepreneur roles are very important for the rural tourism development (Akrivos, Reklitis & Theodoroyiani, 2014). Rural development is increasingly linked to entrepreneurship, which is considered the centre of economic growth and development (Lordkipanidze, 2002; Lordkipanidze, Brezet, & Backman, 2005). Tourism's role in rural development is related to its economic contributions, which can help to maintain and improve the life quality in SSAF's communities. Entrepreneurship is a valuable aspect for the development of rural tourism and entrepreneurs are usually the first who welcome changes in rural areas. Without entrepreneurs, the exchange and circulation between the rural tourism activities and local economy would be impossible.

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