

**TAGAL ECOTOURISM AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY  
EMPOWERMENT**



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2023**

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EMPOWERMENT**

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**UMS**

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the material in this thesis is my own except for quotations, equations, summaries and references, which have been duly acknowledged.

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Christiana Binti Jonut  
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## ABSTRACT

The study addresses tagal as an ecotourism product that is practiced Sabah as a tool to improve community livelihood but also to protect the natural environment. It is a community-based tourism venture that has been influenced by the Kadazandusun ethnic's traditional law. The traditional principle of tagal is focused primarily against the individual exploitation of riverine resources of tagal sites and it was later transformed into a tagal ecotourism, a community participation venture. Tagal ecotourism sites are often located by the riverine areas and need care for conservation to foster the growth and survival of tagal ecotourism. Tagal ecotourism requires management of river in a sustainable manner. A smart partnership between the local Kadazandusun community and the government authority particularly the Department of Fisheries Sabah (DoFS) has been successful and it became an instrument to protect, revive and manage the river fish resources. In 2015, Department of Fisheries Sabah (DoFS) had approved a total of 536 tagal sites in support of this smart partnership. Most of the tagal sites were eventually transformed into an ecotourism site as a community-based tourism venture. Tagal ecotourism generates income through job creation for the purpose of uplifting the locals' economic level. Tagal ecotourism sites also have increased environmental awareness among the Kadazandusun local community to love their culture, tradition and environment. This venture helps to promote the sustainability of the eco-tourism. The objective of this study explored the issues and contexts of empowerment related to tagal ecotourism of the local community in managing it. The methodology approaches used for this study is a qualitative approach where semi-structured interview was chosen as the data collection method. A total of 53 local communities from 8 tagal ecotourism sites were interviewed. The result of the study showed positive influences on the elements of economic, political, sociological, psychological, and environment in both tagal ecotourism site and the local community. There are also other needs beyond all the mentioned elements such as sustainability practices which are critical to any ecotourism development. The results showed that the tagal ecotourism significantly contributed to the empowerment of the Kadazandusun community development. The concerted efforts in implementing the tagal law on the preservation of natural resources support the sustainable ecotourism development.

Keywords: Tagal Fish Spa, Ecotourism, Empowerment, CBT, Sustainability

## **ABSTRAK**

### **TAGAL EKOPELANCONGAN DAN PEMERKASAAN KOMUNITI SETEMPAT**

*Kajian ini adalah tentang tagal sebagai produk ekopelancongan yang diamalkan Sabah. Ianya bukan sahaja sebagai satu model bagi meningkatkan kehidupan masyarakat tetapi juga untuk melindungi alam sekitar dan alam semula jadi. Tagal ekotourism adalah usaha pelancongan berasaskan komuniti yang mempunyai pengaruh dari undang-undang tradisional tagal yang dipraktikkan oleh masyarakat Kadazandusun. Prinsip tradisi undang undang tagal pada mulanya tertumpu kepada menghalang eksploitasi individu terhadap atas sumber sungai dan kemudian ianya telah dicipta menjadi sebuah ekopelancongan tagal yang diusahakan oleh masyarakat setempat. Tapak ekopelancongan Tagal biasanya terletak di tepi kawasan sungai dan memerlukan penjagaan pemuliharaan untuk memupuk pertumbuhan dan kemandirian dipersekitarannya. Ekopelancongan Tagal memerlukan pengurusan sungai secara mampan. Perkongsian pintar antara masyarakat Kadazandusun tempatan dan pihak berkuasa kerajaan khususnya Jabatan Perikanan Sabah (DoFS) adalah satu usaha yang berjaya dimana ianya menjadi sebuah instrumen dalam melindungi, menghidupkan dan mengurus sumber ikan sungai. Pada tahun 2015, Jabatan Perikanan Sabah (DoFS) telah meluluskan sejumlah 536 tapak tagal bagi menyokong perkongsian pintar ini. Banyak tapak tagal akhirnya telah dijadikan sebagai tapak ekopelancongan tagal. Ekopelancongan Tagal boleh menjana pendapatan and boleh mencipta pekerjaan bagi tujuan meningkatkan tahap ekonomi penduduk tempatan. Tapak ekopelancongan Tagal juga telah meningkatkan kesedaran alam sekitar dikalangan masyarakat tempatan Kadazandusun. Usaha ini berjaya membantu mempromosikan kelestarian masyarakat dan ekopelancongan tagal. Objektif kajian ini adalah meneroka isu dan konteks pemerikasaan masyarakat setempat melalui ekopelancongan tagal. Pendekatan metodologi yang digunakan untuk kajian ini adalah kualitatif dimana temu bual separa berstruktur digunakan sebagai kaedah pengumpulan data. Sebanyak 53 komuniti tempatan dari 8 tapak ekopelancongan tagal telah ditemu bual. Hasil kajian menunjukkan pengaruh positif terhadap elemen ekonomi, politik, sosiologi, psikologi dan alam sekitar keatas ekopelancongan tagal dan masyarakat yang terlihat. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa ekopelancongan tagal telah menyumbang secara signifikan kepada pemerikasaan pembangunan masyarakat Kadazandusun and usaha bersepadu dalam melaksanakan undang-undang tagal mengenai pemeliharaan sumber asli juga menyokong pembangunan ekopelancongan yang mampan.*

*Kata kunci: Tagal Fish Spa, Tagal Ecotourism, Pemerikasaan, Kelestarian, Sabah*



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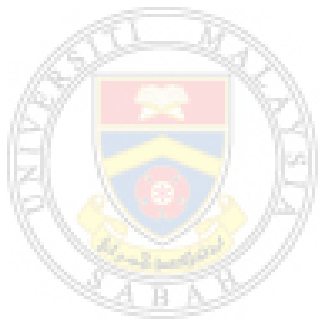
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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- DoFS** - Department of Fishery Sabah
- AGE** - Agreeableness
- KekPAS** - Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment Sabah



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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

This chapter presents the background of the study on *tagal* ecotourism and the local *tagal* ecotourism community empowerment. It also discussed the problem statement, research questions, research objectives and the significance of the study. This chapter ends with the organization of the study.

Empowerment is a term which is prevalently used for the purpose in changing to an individual and the community in eradicating poverty of the society. An empowerment permits change from something undesirable behavior into a well-mannered person to create better outcomes for individual or community. In the global level and among scholars, community empowerment has been a popular topic of discussion. One way to empower community is through ecotourism product activity which it can be used as a tool for creating change and development to community (Mbaiwa, 2005). An ecotourism product has been a popular tool used to empower community in many places mainly in developing countries (Duffy, 2008; KC et al; 2015). In fact, some studies confirmed that ecotourism does provide economic benefits, act as means of community development (Bagul, 2009; Scheyvens, 1999; Scheyvens & Hughes, 2019; Weinberg, et al. 2012; Velan, 2020) and enhance the livelihoods of the rural communities in tourist destinations.

Since ecotourism is a part of the tourism product hence it is relevant to define its importance in the tourism field. Generally, tourism refers to travel from a home base to another destination for a stay of at least one night. As a global industry, tourism has impacted millions lives of people by providing economic benefits. Tourism's economic had impacted numerous related industries such as hotels, restaurants, airlines, trains, cruise lines, attractions, national parks and even

roadside businesses on interstate highways. Tourism had evolved into one of the fastest growing industries worldwide. It becomes the energy force behind the economic development efforts of urban areas and rural communities. Many rural communities in both developed and developing nations, as well as in small island states, have adopted tourism as the most viable option for economic, socio-cultural, as well as environmental sustainability, (UNEP, 2002; WTO, 2002).

The World Tourism Organization (WTO) defines tourism as:

*".. a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes." (UNWTO, 2008)*

The most significant field in the tourism industry is known as ecotourism. Ecotourism supports the growing number of people who put their interest into spending their leisure time in nature and increasing awareness of environmentalism. Hence, ecotourism has become one of the fastest-growing segments of the tourism industry (United Nations, 2001). An ecotourism characterized where tourists not only discover new experiences but do so with utmost respect for the environment. Therefore, ecotourism has gained its popularity as one of the largest industries in the world of tourism (Panos, 1997).

An ecotourism is defined as:

*'...environmentally responsible, enlightening travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features both the past and present) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local population.'* (Cebalos-Lascurain, 1996)

According to the definition above, ecotourism involves both cultural and environmental tourism. In addition to that, ecotourism also offers benefits to the local communities who are the enforcers of the ecotourism activities. In this perspective, ecotourism as a business product can be the main driving force behind *tagal* ecotourism as a popular niche tourism product in Sabah where the local

communities become the social actors who undertakes in running of the community-based business activity. This study explores the essential driving forces that influence the local *tagal* communities to take part in the venture. Furthermore, the researcher is keen to find out the essentials empowerment needed to discover the hike of their consciousness in *tagal* ecotourism. The detail features of *tagal* ecotourism are discussed extensively in Chapter 2.

The tourism sector in Sabah is one of the main contributors to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It was reported, in 2016, Sabah's tourism sector has put in 10% share of the state Gross domestic product (GDP) and was expected to raise more for another five years (Borneo Post; 2016). Another inspiring report on tourism sector was gathered, in the year 2018, tourism sector in Sabah set a new high record of 3,879,413 tourist arrivals, a growth of 5.3% compared to total of tourist arrivals of 3,684,734 in 2017 and consequently contributed to the highest income from tourism sector to RM8.34 billion (TheStar; 2019). Hence, tourism sector is an important sector for the economic growth in Sabah and it is beneficial to the tourism players of various levels particularly the local community.

In Sabah Malaysia, there are many ecotourism products that are touristy operated among the private tour operators as well as the local communities. There were various studies conducted on ecotourism areas and communities in Sabah especially on the east part of Sabah such as Kinabatangan (Velan, 2019; Bagul; 2009). *Tagal* ecotourism product is a well-known tourism product among the kadazandusun community. The core product is the 'fish spa' where fish feeding and river recreational activities are significantly enjoyable activities for tourists and visitors. In Sabah Malaysia, the ecotourism products have been developed rapidly. Sabah has the vast abilities and capacities in ecotourism segments to offer from the endless and abundance beauty of flora and fauna. For example, the *tagal* ecotourism product in Sabah is uniquely offers the river fish massage or spa experience. Sabah Tourism Board, a promotional agent for Sabah's tourism products has stated that the benefit of the *tagal* ecotourism is that the fish massage which are found abundantly in the fast running rivers are believed to have the curative effect for those who suffer from psoriasis (STB, 2010).

The rapid growing of *tagal* ecotourism in Sabah has influenced its further development following the result of the largely publicized development plan for Sabah known as Sabah Development Corridor launched in 2008 by then Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. The Sabah Development Corridor (SDC) had laid out a development plan for various projects which are expected to materialize within eighteen (18) years with a total investment of up to RM105 billion. One of the key objectives of the project was to make Sabah as a gateway for trading, investment, and tourism. The vision for tourism was to make Sabah among the most livable places in Asia by 2025. The project implementation was divided into three-phase periods. The first phase was aimed to focus on addressing the basics tourism development support and laying the foundations for future growth. World-class tourism infrastructure and services were put in place, including nurturing a vibrant arts and culture scene. In the second phase, the project focused on strengthening Sabah's position as a premier eco-adventure destination through conservation, research and sustainable development of new tourism products anchored by signature resorts. The third and final phase, the focus was aiming to see Sabah being transformed into one of the most livable places in Asia – a bustling metropolis within a tropical paradise (SDC, 2008). The World Tourism Organization predicts that the trendiest destinations in the future will be the tops of the highest mountains, the depths of the deepest oceans and the ends of the earth. It was estimated that tourism demand increased by 20% annually compared with 7% for tourism overall. To cater for the rising tourism demands, existing natural attractions need to be enhanced and new nature sites need to be developed in line with the eco-tourism concept (SDC, 2008).

The Ecotourism Society defines the eco-tourism concept as "responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people", there would be concerned on impact on the environmental, carrying capacity, visitor experience and incorporation of local communities into the tourism development as well as natural area management process for all ecotourism sites development. The evolvement of many ecotourism products including the unique concept of *tagal* ecotourism in Sabah has been utilized for local community development. In the meantime, it could effect on the conservation

and tourism conscientious awareness in maintaining the ecotourism's future sustainability.

Sabah is blessed with abundant of natural attractions to offer towards the local and international tourists. It is rich with the beauty of flora and fauna where large land areas are still covered with primary and secondary forests. There are numerous fresh and undisturbed river waters flowing down on fast running streams from the foot of the mount Kinabalu. These rapid rivers are home to various river fishes. Rivers were once offered vast functions to the local kadazandusun ethnic. Rivers were not only used as the source for water and food but also served as a mode of transportation. *Tagal* ecotourism is a local community-based ecotourism venture that is managed by the local community who live at the nearby villages. The local communities were so much attached to the environment at the areas their lives in. It had created a special relationship between the locals and the lands and the environment. As a result, they have developed a way of life that led them to understand and acclimatized to practice sustainable living to prolong their lives (UN, 2014).

## 1.2 Research Issues

There are many reasons that urged the local community to be part of the *tagal* ecotourism venture. The local community's involvement in managing the *tagal* ecotourism plays a vital role to ensure *tagal* ecotourism obtains its goals and objectives of empowerment which is the change. The local *tagal* community who participated in the *tagal* ecotourism venture allows them to decision making for planning, organizing resources, leading, and controlling of the *tagal* ecotourism a community-based tourism enterprise. The local *tagal* community's involvement also showed their voluntarility participatation their willingness to invest their time and money to it. Consequently, they would receive various forms of benefits such as economic benefit, political gain, and psychological gain as the returns of their efforts.

The *tagal* community has conveniently become the doers of *tagal* ecotourism community venture was because the basic principle of the *tagal* concept has already been understood by the *tagal* community as it was part of their law, lifestyles, language, and culture. The meaning of the word *tagal*, in Kadazandusun language, is to 'prohibit' or to 'ban'. *Tagal* law was introduced as a customary law in Sabah to forbid people from taking anything out from the nature. The *tagal* law, which is still practice by the kadazandusun community today, is use as a tool to ban people from taking other's property without consent. The objective of establishing the *tagal* law as the Sabah Customary Law was successful to ensure harmonious living and encourage peaceful life among the local community. The implementation of the *tagal* law is a collective responsibility among all the Kadazandusun community who believe it. It is also expected to be respected by the community because it is the approved local law to manage the limited resources such as the land, river, forest, water catchment and wildlife (Sabah Native Law, 1995). *Tagal* is a traditional Kadazandusun's law is widely practiced as a mechanism to forbid any individual from exploiting river resources. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, *tagal* ecotourism had slowly and steadily gained its popularity being a new tourism product in Sabah. It was a new brand of ecotourism product that was uniquely found in Sabah. It was initiated by the Kadazandusun ethnic community successfully transformed the *tagal* law into a new tourist attraction with a special river fish spa, and river recreational activities. *Tagal* ecotourism was not only offered the popular river fish spa and river recreational activities as their main products but also began offering the rich culture of the Kadazadusun through traditional music performances and traditional dances offered to tourists and visitors while visitng the *tagal* ecotourism site. The *tagal* ecotourism product was a success. As a result, the local communities gained various benefits such as the economic, social, political and psychological.

The benefits received from the *tagal* ecotourism product might overshadow the most important awakening concern in tourism business which is the awareness towards the environment. Apart from providing economic benefits, *tagal* ecotourism is also directly linked to the concern towards the awareness on the conservation of its natural resource, such as the fish and the natural surrounding of the rivers. Tourism is a very fragile industry because it could impact the environment if not

properly managed. The Ministry of Tourism and Culture (MoTAC) is the sole agent on behalf of the Malaysian government to overseeing for Malaysia's tourism activities. It focuses its responsibilities on tourism policies on both nature and ecotourism activities in Malaysia. For example, in support of the ecotourism demands in Malaysia, MoTAC (2014) has put its efforts and has developed the Malaysia National Agenda and policy on adventure and ecotourism to ensure careful development and planning in tourism sector are in place.

Through the *tagal* ecotourism, the kadazandusun communities who control and manage the *tagal* ecotourism are empowered as they have the prerogative to make the right decisions for their future. The sign of empowerment is demonstrated as the change occurred not only to the local *tagal* community and but also visible change on the *tagal* ecotourism development. The involvement of the local *tagal* community is considered the most essential to the success of *tagal* ecotourism. The development of ecotourism will create jobs, not just in tourism services such as restaurants, souvenir shops, and food, but will also impact on economic sectors. The local communities who worked in an ecotourism destination will spend additional income in local area such as spending on housing and consumer goods which will create new jobs (Situmorang, 2007). These facts show that the appropriate development of the ecotourism will improve the welfare of local communities surrounding or within the area of ecotourism destination. The development will also ensure environmental sustainability. Increasing of natural and cultural awareness is the biggest factor that determines the growth of ecotourism, along with concern for the fact that the depletion of natural resources will only lead to social and cultural inequality in tourism destination (Situmorang, 2007).

The researcher believes that the local communities who have obtained empowerment are responsible in planning and managing towards obtaining their future goals. Some significant efforts shown by the local *tagal* communities are including designing strategies to achieve the desired outcomes for the success of their *tagal* ecotourism. The leadership of the *tagal* ecotourism association team is responsible in leading the community by guiding and directing them to work towards the plan's goal, and finally to control and monitor the progress towards the planned goal. However, the empowerment effort might get distorted and fail if

there are poor commitment, lack of essential skills and knowledge among members of the local community (Hart, 2017). Additionally, empowerment may taint the very fundamental meaning of ecotourism and ruin the community's development (Cusack and Dixon, 2006). Research conducted by Campbell emphasized that ecotourism is a means to reconcile wildlife conservation with economic development so that it is a win win for both the environment and development (2002).

It is fundamental to provide solutions to improve the various competencies of the local *tagal* community in support of community empowerment to achieve a state of win-win situation for the local community and the environment. Numerous initiatives can be implemented to change the behavior or mindset among the local community in achieving a successful *tagal* ecotourism. An ecotourism product, such as *tagal* ecotourism as an example, is a viable tool for attaining economic, social, political, psychological benefits and sustainable development (Coetzer *et al*, 2013). Community development is achieved when local communities are given the knowledge, skills, and competency in managing and ensuring the sustainability of *tagal* ecotourism. Thus, through active participation by the local community, the environmental conservation, community empowerment and sustainable development of the ecotourism goals can also be achieved equitably. There is a strong likelihood that ecotourism such as the *tagal* ecotourism might be more successful and sustainable in its future development (WTO, 2004). Hence, the involvement of the local *tagal* community would be more effective and efficient in the *tagal* ecotourism venture through the collaboration with stakeholders i.e. government authorities such as Sabah Tourism Board and Department of Fishery (DoF) Sabah.

The research intent to tackle various issues that relating to this research study. *Tagal* ecotourism is the right tool to gain community empowerment improves standard of living. The development using the *tagal* ecotourism offers hope to improve the local *tagal* community economically in terms of improving their standard of living and *tagal* ecotourism has been the right tool to gain community empowerment. The researcher also raised the concern of empowerment perception according to the *tagal* community's context. The perception of empowerment is