

Capacity and Readiness of the Jakun Orang Asli Community in Community-Based Tourism Development

Muhammad Affan Bin Mohd Zolkefeli*, Rohayu Binti Roddin, Nurul Farisha Anis Binti Abdul Rashid

Fakulti Pendidikan Teknikal dan Vokasional, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the capacity and readiness of the Jakun Orang Asli community in Kampung Tanah Abang, Johor, to participate in community-based tourism (CBT) development. Drawing on a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. The findings reveal that the Jakun community possesses substantial cultural capital, traditional ecological knowledge, and emerging entrepreneurial skills that provide a strong foundation for tourism development. However, these strengths are tempered by persistent barriers, including insufficient infrastructure, limited digital literacy, and environmental threats such as deforestation and habitat degradation.

The revised analysis incorporates critical theoretical perspectives, including CBT theory, empowerment theory, and Indigenous epistemologies, to situate the findings within a decolonial and rights-based framework. Power dynamics between external agencies and the community are examined to reveal how decision-making processes and benefit-sharing structures influence tourism outcomes. The study also draws comparative insights from other Indigenous-led CBT initiatives in Malaysia and abroad to highlight transferable best practices. Recommendations include the establishment of a community-led tourism cooperative, the implementation of targeted capacity-building programmes in entrepreneurship and digital marketing, and the integration of environmental conservation into tourism planning. This research contributes to the growing scholarship on Indigenous tourism by offering context-specific strategies that balance socio-economic benefits with cultural preservation and ecological sustainability.

Keywords: Community-Based Tourism, Jakun Orang Asli, Indigenous Epistemologies, Empowerment, Environmental Sustainability, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Community-based tourism (CBT) has emerged over the past three decades as a widely recognised strategy for promoting sustainable development in rural and Indigenous communities (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). Unlike conventional mass tourism, CBT is grounded in principles of local ownership, participatory governance, equitable benefit distribution, and environmental stewardship. By placing communities at the centre of decision-making, CBT seeks to empower local stakeholders to shape tourism in ways that align with their cultural values and development priorities. For Indigenous communities, such as the Orang Asli of Malaysia, CBT offers a potential pathway to economic diversification, cultural revitalisation, and enhanced political agency (Scheyvens, 1999; Moscardo, 2008).

The Orang Asli—Malaysia's Indigenous peoples—are culturally diverse, comprising 18 sub-ethnic groups within three main categories: Negrito, Senoi, and Proto-Malay (Nicholas et al., 2010). The Jakun, a Proto-Malay subgroup, primarily reside in the southern states of Johor and Pahang. Despite their proximity to ecologically rich landscapes and distinctive cultural traditions, many Jakun communities remain socio-economically marginalised, with limited access to infrastructure, markets, and policy-making processes (Hassan, 2017). This structural marginalisation restricts their participation in mainstream economic activities, including tourism.

As shown in **Figure 1**, Kampung Tanah Abang in Mersing, Johor, is strategically located near key natural and cultural attractions. The village lies adjacent to high-value ecological assets such as the Endau River, firefly habitats, and forest reserves adjoining Endau-Rompin National Park—resources that align closely with global trends towards nature-based and experiential travel.



Figure 1. Map of Kampung Tanah Abang and surrounding ecotourism sites.

The community's cultural heritage, rooted in Jakun traditions, provides an authentic basis for tourism products such as guided forest walks, traditional fishing experiences, handicraft production, and homestay accommodations. In recent years, small-scale tourism ventures—including raft house operations and homestay services—have emerged, yet many lack the institutional support, marketing reach, and long-term sustainability planning necessary to compete in broader tourism markets.

This revised study builds upon earlier findings by integrating critical theory and Indigenous epistemologies to address deeper structural and cultural dimensions of tourism development. It interrogates power relations between external actors—such as government agencies, NGOs, and private investors—and the Jakun community, exploring how these dynamics influence decision-making, benefit-sharing, and long-term sustainability. The analysis also engages more explicitly with environmental dimensions, including the implications of deforestation, habitat degradation, and biodiversity loss on tourism viability. Comparative insights from other Indigenous CBT initiatives in Malaysia and abroad are incorporated to provide a broader context and identify adaptable models for the Jakun community.

By examining both capacity—the skills, knowledge, social capital, and institutional resources that enable participation—and readiness—the willingness and preparedness of the community to adapt and engage with tourism markets—this study offers a nuanced perspective on sustainable, culturally respectful, and economically viable tourism development.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do the skills, resources, and cultural assets of the Jakun Orang Asli community contribute to their capacity for community-based tourism development?

2. What are the prevailing power dynamics between the Jakun community and external actors, and how do these dynamics influence decision-making and benefit distribution in tourism initiatives?
3. How can lessons from other Indigenous-led CBT models—both within Malaysia and internationally—be adapted to strengthen the sustainability and inclusivity of tourism development in Kampung Tanah Abang?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community-Based Tourism: Concepts and Principles

Community-based tourism (CBT) is widely recognised as an alternative development model that prioritises local control, equitable benefit-sharing, and cultural preservation over profit maximisation (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). CBT operates on the premise that tourism can be harnessed as a tool for community empowerment, provided that decision-making authority and economic benefits remain within the community (Scheyvens, 1999; Zapata et al., 2011). This stands in contrast to conventional top-down tourism development models, which often marginalise local voices and create dependency on external investors (Tosun, 2000).

The core principles of CBT—local ownership, capacity building, participatory governance, and environmental stewardship—align closely with the sustainable development goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 15 (Life on Land). For Indigenous communities, CBT is not merely an economic strategy but a means of safeguarding cultural identity, strengthening social cohesion, and asserting land and resource rights (Moscardo, 2008; Hiwasaki, 2006). Building upon these principles, the present study adopts a conceptual framework that positions capacity and readiness as interrelated components influenced by external enabling factors. This framework serves as a guiding structure for analysing the community's current situation, identifying gaps, and formulating strategies for sustainable and culturally respectful CBT development (Figure 2).

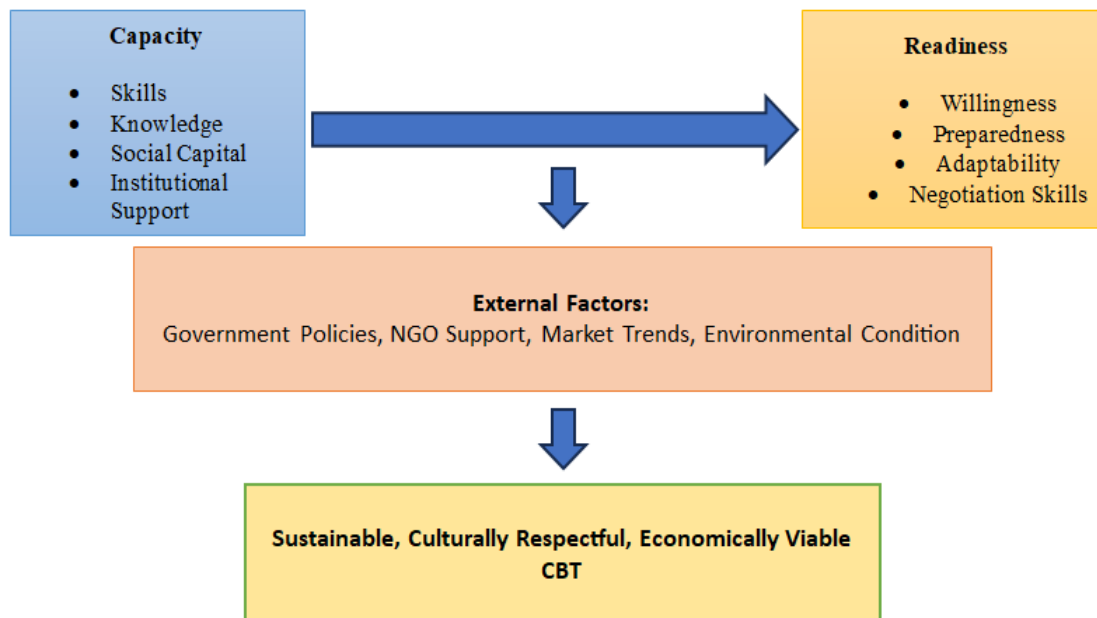


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of Capacity and Readiness in Community-Based Tourism (CBT)

As illustrated in Figure 2, capacity refers to the community's tangible and intangible resources—including skills, knowledge, social capital, and institutional support—that enable active participation in CBT. Readiness encompasses the willingness, preparedness, adaptability, and negotiation skills required to engage effectively with tourism markets and stakeholders. External factors such as government policies, NGO support, market trends, and environmental conditions shape both capacity and readiness, ultimately determining the potential for achieving sustainable, culturally respectful, and economically viable CBT. This framework not only reflects the interconnected nature of these elements but also provides a basis for the methodological design and thematic analysis undertaken in this study. This conceptual framework provides the analytical lens through

which the study interprets both capacity-building processes and readiness indicators, ensuring that the analysis remains grounded in the community's lived realities while aligned with global sustainable tourism principles.

Empowerment Theory and Tourism Development

Empowerment theory provides an analytical framework for assessing the transformative potential of tourism at multiple levels:

- **Economic empowerment:** expanding income-generating opportunities and reducing dependence on subsistence livelihoods.
- **Social empowerment:** fostering community pride, social cohesion, and inclusive participation.
- **Psychological empowerment:** building self-confidence and challenging internalised perceptions of marginalisation.
- **Political empowerment:** enabling communities to influence policy and negotiate with external stakeholders (Zimmerman, 2000; Scheyvens, 1999).

Empowerment in tourism requires both internal capacity and external enabling conditions. Studies in Southeast Asia have shown that while training programmes can enhance local skills, the absence of market access, infrastructure, and supportive policies can limit the long-term impact of such interventions (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2014).

Indigenous Epistemologies and Postcolonial Critiques

Indigenous epistemologies offer a worldview that emphasises the interconnectedness of people, land, and culture (Smith, 2012). From this perspective, tourism is not solely an economic activity but a relational practice that carries responsibilities towards the environment and future generations. Incorporating Indigenous knowledge systems into tourism planning can enhance authenticity, ensure cultural sensitivity, and support ecological sustainability (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2009).

Postcolonial critiques of tourism warn against the uncritical adoption of Western development models in Indigenous contexts. External interventions, even when well-intentioned, can reproduce dependency, displace traditional governance systems, and commodify cultural heritage (Hollinshead, 2007; Carr, Ruhanen & Whitford, 2016). In Malaysia, scholars have highlighted how Orang Asli tourism projects can become overly reliant on NGO or government support, leading to vulnerability when funding cycles end (Hassan, 2017; Lim, 2019).

Environmental Sustainability and Tourism Viability

Environmental integrity is central to the success of CBT, particularly in ecotourism-focused initiatives. Deforestation, habitat degradation, and climate change pose direct threats to the natural assets that form the foundation of tourism products (Buckley, 2009). In the case of Kampung Tanah Abang, logging upstream of the Endau River has been reported to cause sedimentation, reduce fish populations, and disrupt the firefly ecosystem—a key tourism attraction. Internationally, similar patterns have been documented in rural Thailand, where forest clearance led to a significant decline in ecotourism viability (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2005).

Effective environmental management in CBT requires integrated planning that combines conservation measures with livelihood strategies, such as payment for ecosystem services (PES), eco-certification, and community-led monitoring systems (Stronza & Gordillo, 2008).

Comparative Models of CBT in Indigenous Contexts

Examples of successful CBT models in other Indigenous communities offer valuable lessons for the Jakun of Kampung Tanah Abang. In New Zealand, Māori tourism enterprises in Rotorua integrate cultural performance, storytelling, and environmental education, with profits reinvested into community welfare and conservation (Harmsworth, 2002). In the Philippines, the Cordillera communities operate cooperative-managed homestay programmes, where revenue-sharing mechanisms ensure equitable benefits across households (Salazar, 2012).

Closer to home, the Semai Orang Asli in Pahang have developed a cooperative model that pools resources from handicraft sales, guided tours, and homestay services. This structure allows for collective decision-making and financial reinvestment into infrastructure improvements and cultural events. These examples demonstrate that governance structures, legal recognition of land rights, and diversified tourism products are key to long-term CBT success.

Gaps in the Literature

While the literature on CBT and Indigenous tourism in Malaysia has expanded over the past decade, significant gaps remain in understanding the interplay between capacity, readiness, and power dynamics in specific community contexts. Few studies integrate Indigenous epistemologies into tourism analysis, and even fewer address the long-term sustainability of CBT when external support diminishes. Additionally, there is limited empirical work on how environmental threats and digital divides intersect with tourism readiness in Orang Asli communities. This study addresses these gaps by examining the Jakun community's capacity and readiness through both a practical and theoretical lens, incorporating comparative insights and a critical engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the capacity and readiness of the Jakun Orang Asli community in Kampung Tanah Abang for community-based tourism (CBT) development. The case study approach was chosen for its strength in providing an in-depth, holistic understanding of complex social phenomena within their real-life contexts (Yin, 2018). This design was particularly suited to examining the intersection of cultural heritage, environmental stewardship, and tourism development from an Indigenous perspective.

Study Site

Kampung Tanah Abang is located in the district of Mersing, Johor, Malaysia. The village is situated near the Endau River and borders the Endau-Rompin National Park, making it a location of high ecological and cultural value. The community is composed predominantly of the Jakun Orang Asli, a Proto-Malay subgroup known for their strong connection to the land, traditional ecological knowledge, and artisanal craft skills. Key tourism-related assets include firefly habitats, pristine forest trails, river-based activities, and cultural experiences such as traditional fishing and handicraft-making.

Sampling Strategy and Participants

The study utilised a **snowball sampling** technique, beginning with the Tok Batin (village head) and other community leaders, who then recommended additional participants actively involved in tourism-related activities. This method ensured the inclusion of individuals with diverse roles and experiences in the community's tourism sector.

A total of 15 participants were recruited, including:

- **Community leaders** (Tok Batin, village committee members)
- **Homestay operators**
- **Raft house operators**
- **Artisans and handicraft producers**
- **Younger community members** engaged in tourism training programmes

Participants were selected based on their involvement in tourism or tourism-adjacent livelihoods, ensuring that the study captured a range of perspectives on capacity, readiness, and development priorities.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted with all participants, focusing on their experiences, skills, perceptions of tourism opportunities, challenges, and aspirations for future development. The semi-structured format allowed for consistency in key questions while enabling participants to share narratives in their own words, facilitating the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives.

Non-Participant Observation

Field observations were conducted at tourism-related sites, including raft houses, homestays, handicraft workshops, and ecologically significant locations such as firefly habitats and forest trails. Observations focused on tourism infrastructure, environmental conditions, visitor interactions, and community engagement in tourism activities.

Document Analysis

Relevant documents—including government policy reports, NGO training manuals, tourism promotional materials, and photographic records—were reviewed to triangulate data from interviews and observations. This helped contextualise findings within broader policy frameworks and tourism market trends.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (2014), which involves three concurrent flows of activity:

1. **Data condensation** – organising interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents into manageable formats.
2. **Data display** – constructing thematic matrices and visual diagrams to identify patterns and relationships.
3. **Conclusion drawing and verification** – interpreting patterns through the lens of CBT theory, empowerment theory, and Indigenous epistemologies.

NVivo 12 software was used to assist with coding and categorisation, enabling systematic identification of themes relating to capacity, readiness, environmental threats, and power dynamics with external actors.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university research ethics committee. Informed consent was secured from all participants, with explanations provided in the Jakun dialect or Malay language as needed. Participants were assured of confidentiality, and pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reporting. Community feedback sessions were conducted to validate findings, ensuring that interpretations aligned with participants' perspectives and that the research process was transparent and respectful.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis identified five interrelated themes that collectively describe the capacity and readiness of the Jakun Orang Asli community in Kampung Tanah Abang for community-based tourism (CBT) development. These themes also reveal underlying structural, cultural, and environmental dimensions that influence tourism sustainability.

Community Socioeconomic Conditions

The socioeconomic profile of Kampung Tanah Abang is characterised by a combination of traditional subsistence livelihoods—such as fishing, small-scale agriculture, and forest product gathering—and emerging

tourism-related activities. Tourism engagement is often supplementary, with income generated from homestays, raft house rentals, handicraft sales, and occasional guiding services.

While these ventures provide new income opportunities, their contribution to overall household earnings remains modest. For instance, one homestay operator reported earning RM400–RM600 monthly from visitors, but only during peak seasons linked to public holidays and school breaks. This pattern mirrors other Orang Asli CBT experiences in Malaysia, such as the Semai in Pahang, where inconsistent visitor flows limit the economic viability of tourism enterprises (Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli, 2023).

From an empowerment theory perspective, the community exhibits early-stage economic empowerment—tourism income is present but not yet transformative. Achieving higher levels of empowerment will require diversification of tourism products, improved marketing, and infrastructure development.

Environmental and Natural Assets

Kampung Tanah Abang is endowed with ecologically valuable assets, including the Endau River, firefly habitats, and forest reserves adjoining the Endau-Rompin National Park. These resources form the backbone of potential ecotourism offerings, appealing to niche markets interested in river cruises, firefly watching, and forest trekking.

However, the study found that these assets are under threat from logging and agricultural expansion, particularly oil palm cultivation. Sedimentation in the Endau River—caused by upstream deforestation—has reduced water clarity and fish stocks, directly impacting fishing-based tourism. Firefly populations, a key attraction, have declined due to habitat loss from riverside clearing, echoing patterns observed in Kampung Kuantan, Selangor, where firefly ecotourism revenues dropped by over 50% after habitat degradation (WWF-Malaysia, 2022).

From an Indigenous epistemology standpoint, these environmental changes are not merely economic losses but disruptions to the Jakun's relational connection with the land and river systems. Sustainable tourism development must therefore integrate ecological monitoring and conservation, led by community custodianship.

Skills, Training, and Digital Literacy

Training programmes by JAKOA, state tourism bodies, and NGOs have focused on basic hospitality, handicraft production, and environmental awareness. While beneficial, these initiatives often lack continuity, limiting the community's ability to build cumulative expertise. A notable example was a six-month handicraft marketing workshop in 2022, which improved product quality but ended without establishing permanent sales channels—resulting in unsold inventory.

Digital literacy remains a significant gap. Although some youth are familiar with platforms like Facebook and TikTok, most tourism operators rely on word-of-mouth or sporadic postings without a structured marketing strategy. In comparison, the Māori tourism sector in Rotorua, New Zealand, has leveraged digital storytelling to reach global audiences, suggesting that targeted training in digital marketing could yield significant returns for the Jakun.

Power Dynamics with External Actors

While external agencies and NGOs provide critical financial, technical, and promotional support, the study revealed imbalances in decision-making power. In several cases, project priorities were externally determined without full community consultation. For example, a proposed river cruise programme funded in 2021 was designed around visitor preferences identified by the donor agency, rather than Jakun cultural narratives. This led to low local ownership and eventual project abandonment.

Such dynamics align with postcolonial critiques of tourism, which caution against development models that perpetuate dependency and limit community autonomy (Hollinshead, 2007). Successful CBT requires shifting

from externally driven interventions to co-created initiatives that position the community as equal partners in planning and execution.

Comparative Insights from Other CBT Models

Comparative analysis underscores the importance of structured governance and market diversification in sustaining CBT ventures. The Semai cooperative in Pahang has institutionalised revenue-sharing mechanisms that reinvest profits into infrastructure and education. In the Philippines, the Cordillera homestay cooperative ensures equitable benefit distribution through rotational hosting schedules, preventing overdependence on a few operators.

These models offer relevant lessons for Kampung Tanah Abang:

1. **Formalising governance structures** (e.g., tourism cooperatives) to manage funds and coordinate marketing.
2. **Diversifying tourism products** to balance seasonal fluctuations.
3. **Strengthening legal rights** over land and resources to protect against environmentally harmful external projects.

Intersections of Capacity and Readiness

The findings indicate that capacity and readiness are interdependent but unevenly developed. While the Jakun community demonstrates strong cultural capital, ecological knowledge, and willingness to engage in tourism, gaps in entrepreneurship, digital skills, and environmental management constrain readiness. This mirrors patterns identified by Aref and Ma'rof (2009), who argue that without institutional support and market integration, community willingness cannot translate into long-term sustainability. To synthesise these thematic findings, Figure 3 integrates the key elements of capacity, readiness, and external factors into a cohesive framework for understanding the Jakun community's position in community-based tourism development.

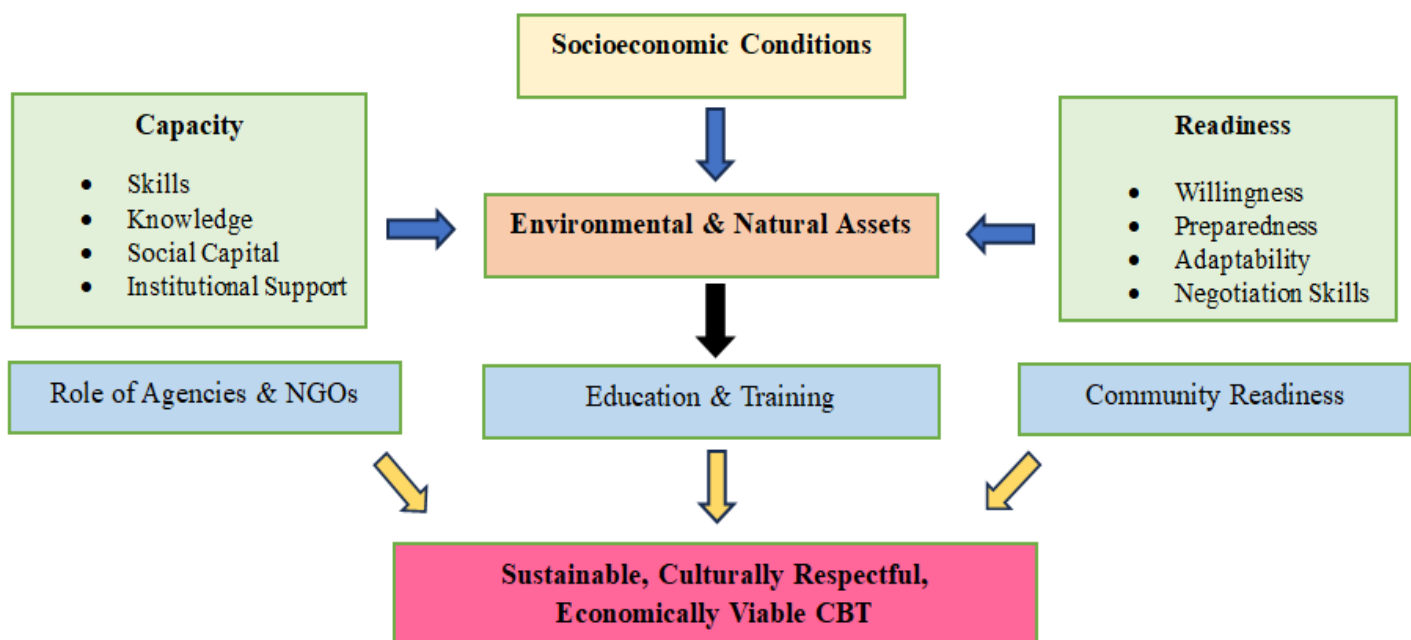


Figure 3: Thematic Framework of Capacity and Readiness in CBT

As shown in Figure 3, the community's capacity—encompassing skills, knowledge, social capital, and institutional support—works in tandem with readiness elements such as willingness, preparedness, adaptability, and negotiation skills. These are shaped by external factors including socioeconomic conditions, environmental assets, education and training opportunities, and the role of agencies and NGOs. Together, these dimensions determine the extent to which the community can achieve a sustainable, culturally respectful, and economically viable CBT model.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have implications at theoretical, practical, and policy levels.

From a theoretical perspective, the integration of *CBT theory*, *empowerment theory*, and *Indigenous epistemologies* enriches the understanding of tourism readiness in marginalised contexts. By embedding Indigenous worldviews into tourism planning, the study shifts away from purely economic models towards relational and rights-based approaches. This perspective challenges dominant development paradigms and emphasises the community's agency in defining tourism's purpose and scope.

From a practical standpoint, the results highlight the need for targeted capacity-building in entrepreneurship, hospitality management, and digital marketing. Without such skills, tourism ventures remain vulnerable to market fluctuations and external dependency. Comparative case studies suggest that structured governance—such as tourism cooperatives—can significantly improve coordination, resource pooling, and equitable benefit-sharing.

At the policy level, the study underscores the necessity for long-term infrastructure investment in rural and Indigenous areas, alongside legal recognition of community land rights. Such measures are essential to protect natural resources from unsustainable exploitation and to ensure that tourism growth does not come at the expense of ecological or cultural integrity. Strengthened partnerships between government agencies, NGOs, and communities must be based on principles of co-creation and mutual accountability, rather than top-down project delivery.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's findings, the following strategies are proposed to enhance the capacity and readiness of the Jakun Orang Asli community for CBT development in Kampung Tanah Abang:

1. Establish a Community Tourism Cooperative

A cooperative model can centralise management, coordinate bookings, oversee financial transparency, and ensure equitable revenue distribution. This governance approach has been successful in both domestic and international Indigenous CBT models.

2. Implement Targeted Digital Literacy and Marketing Training

Programmes should focus on social media marketing, online booking systems, and visual storytelling to reach broader markets. Youth can be positioned as “digital ambassadors” to lead online promotional activities.

3. Integrate Environmental Conservation into Tourism Planning

Community-led monitoring of river and forest health should be institutionalised, alongside habitat restoration projects for key attractions such as firefly colonies. Partnerships with conservation NGOs could provide technical and funding support.

4. Co-Design Tourism Products with the Community

External agencies should collaborate with local stakeholders from the outset to ensure that tourism products reflect Jakun cultural narratives, ecological values, and visitor expectations.

5. Pilot and Evaluate New Initiatives

Before scaling up, pilot programmes—such as guided eco-tours, handicraft workshops, and agro-tourism experiences—should be tested, with feedback loops to refine products based on visitor and community input.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that the Jakun Orang Asli community of Kampung Tanah Abang possesses both tangible and intangible assets necessary for successful CBT development. Their rich cultural heritage, traditional ecological knowledge, and emerging tourism initiatives provide a strong foundation for growth. However, the interplay between capacity and readiness reveals that willingness alone is insufficient without corresponding skills, infrastructure, and environmental safeguards.

By integrating Indigenous epistemologies with established tourism development theories, this research advances a more holistic understanding of CBT in Indigenous contexts. It also highlights the importance of addressing power imbalances between communities and external actors, ensuring that tourism development is genuinely participatory and beneficial to all stakeholders.

The future of CBT in Kampung Tanah Abang will depend on sustained investments in capacity-building, governance structures, and environmental stewardship. With inclusive partnerships and a commitment to co-created development, the village has the potential to emerge as a model for sustainable, culturally grounded, and economically resilient Indigenous tourism in Malaysia.

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