

Challenges and Opportunities in Ecotourism Development among the Jakun Orang Asli Community in Kampung Tanah Abang

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

Ecotourism has been widely promoted as a sustainable development pathway for rural and Indigenous communities, combining environmental conservation with socio-economic empowerment. This study examines the challenges and opportunities in ecotourism development among the Jakun Orang Asli community in Kampung Tanah Abang, Johor, through the analytical lens of Community-Based Tourism (CBT), empowerment theory, and postcolonial ecotourism critiques. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document analysis, ensuring methodological triangulation and cultural sensitivity. The findings reveal a complex interplay between internal and external dynamics. Internally, the community demonstrates rich cultural heritage, ecological knowledge, and willingness to engage in tourism, but faces gaps in entrepreneurship skills, digital literacy, and intra-community cohesion. Externally, agencies and NGOs provide financial and technical support, yet imbalances in decision-making power and dependency risks limit long-term sustainability. Environmental threats, including deforestation, habitat degradation, and sedimentation in the Endau River, undermine tourism potential. Comparative insights from other Orang Asli CBT models, such as the Semai cooperative in Pahang, and international examples like Māori tourism in New Zealand, highlight strategies for governance, market diversification, and cultural safeguarding. Quantitative indicators, including seasonal visitor flows and average homestay earnings, complement the qualitative analysis, offering a fuller picture of tourism's economic impact. The study underscores the need for co-designed interventions, inclusive governance, and targeted capacity building—particularly in digital marketing and environmental stewardship—to ensure that ecotourism development benefits the Jakun community while preserving cultural integrity and ecological sustainability.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Community-Based Tourism, Indigenous Tourism, Jakun Orang Asli, Sustainable Development, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism has emerged as a prominent strategy for sustainable development, offering a model that integrates environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and socio-economic empowerment (Scheyvens, 1999; Moscardo, 2008). For Indigenous communities, ecotourism represents more than an economic opportunity—it is also a vehicle for safeguarding land rights, revitalising cultural practices, and strengthening community resilience. When grounded in the principles of Community-Based Tourism (CBT), ecotourism places local stakeholders at the centre of decision-making, ensuring that benefits are equitably distributed and tourism development aligns with community values (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009).

In Malaysia, the Orang Asli—comprising 18 sub-ethnic groups across the Negrito, Senoi, and Proto-Malay categories—remain among the most socio-economically marginalised populations (Nicholas et al., 2010). The

Jakun, a Proto-Malay subgroup, inhabit parts of Johor and Pahang, often in proximity to ecologically rich landscapes that hold significant tourism potential. However, historical marginalisation, limited infrastructure, and restricted market access have constrained their ability to capitalise on such opportunities (Hassan, 2017).

Kampung Tanah Abang in Mersing, Johor, exemplifies this dual reality of potential and constraint. Surrounded by high-value ecological assets—such as the Endau River, firefly habitats, and forests adjoining Endau-Rompin National Park—the village offers an ideal setting for ecotourism ventures that blend nature-based and cultural experiences. Current tourism initiatives include homestays, raft house rentals, handicraft production, and guided nature tours. While these activities contribute supplementary income, they remain small-scale, seasonal, and heavily reliant on external support for marketing and training.

Figure 1 below illustrates the geographical location of Kampung Tanah Abang and surrounding ecotourism sites, including natural and cultural attractions that form the backbone of potential ecotourism development in the area. This visual representation provides context for understanding the community's environmental assets and their strategic position in relation to regional tourism routes.

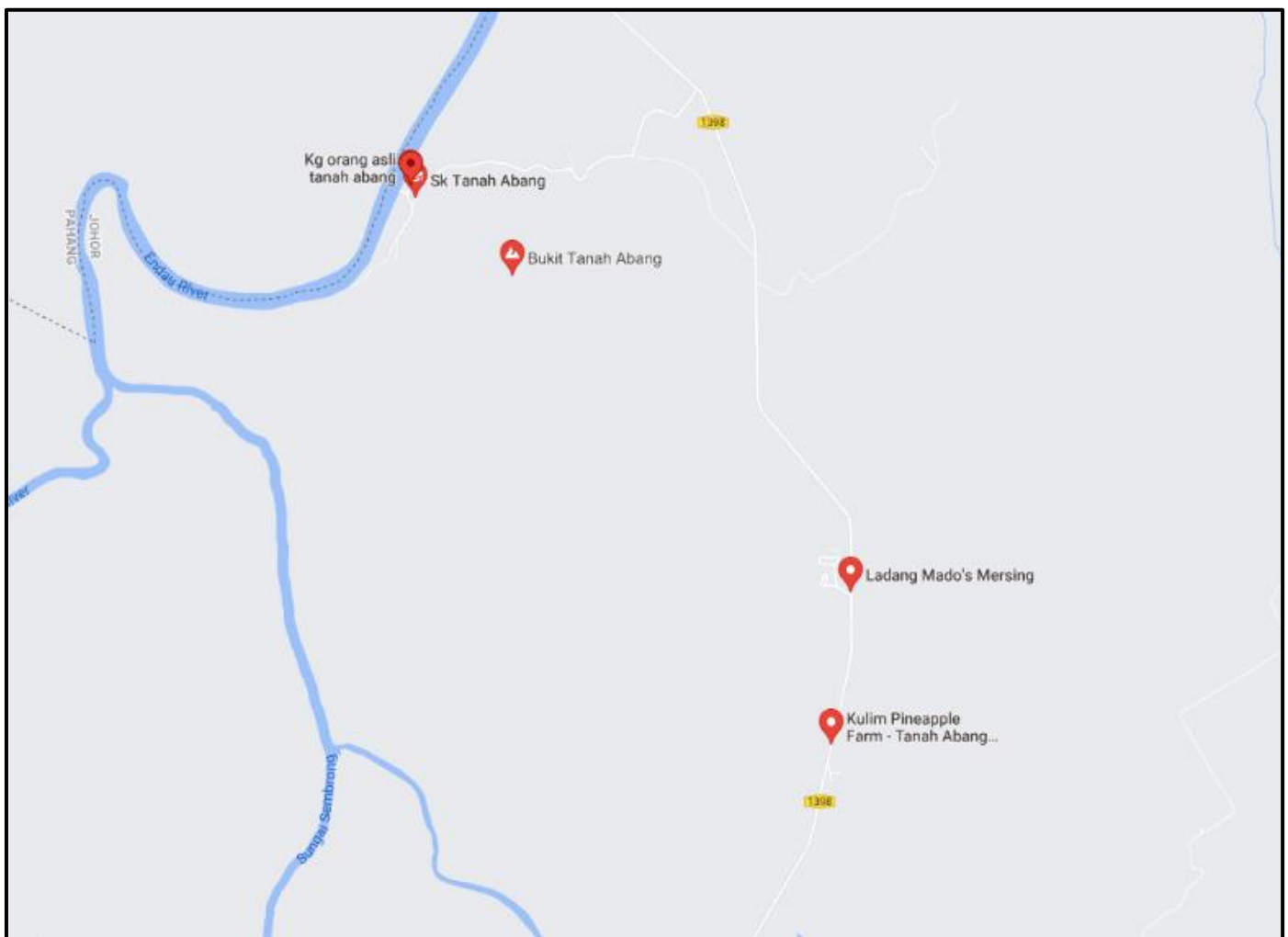


Figure 1. Map of Kampung Tanah Abang and Surrounding Ecotourism Sites.

This study responds to calls for deeper theoretical engagement in Indigenous tourism research by framing the analysis through CBT, empowerment theory, and postcolonial ecotourism critiques. The CBT perspective emphasises local ownership, capacity building, and participatory governance. Empowerment theory provides a lens for assessing how tourism participation can enhance economic, psychological, and political agency (Scheyvens, 1999). Meanwhile, postcolonial ecotourism critiques interrogate the power imbalances between external actors—such as government agencies, NGOs, and private investors—and Indigenous communities, particularly in determining development priorities and benefit-sharing (Hollinshead, 2007).

Research Questions

Against this backdrop, the study seeks to address three central research questions:

1. What are the main challenges faced by the Jakun Orang Asli community in developing ecotourism in Kampung Tanah Abang?
2. What opportunities can be leveraged to strengthen and expand ecotourism in the community?
3. How can strategic interventions be implemented to ensure that ecotourism benefits the community while preserving environmental and cultural integrity?

By integrating critical theory with grounded empirical data, the study aims to contribute both to academic debates and to practical strategies for sustainable Indigenous tourism development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community-Based Tourism: Concepts and Principles

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) is recognised as an alternative development model that prioritises local ownership, equitable benefit-sharing, and cultural preservation over profit maximisation (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). It operates on the premise that tourism can be a tool for community empowerment, provided that decision-making authority and economic returns remain primarily 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 United Nations' 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 also a means of safeguarding cultural identity, strengthening social cohesion, and asserting land and resource rights (Moscardo, 2008; Hiwasaki, 2006).

Empowerment Theory in Tourism Development

Empowerment theory provides a framework for understanding how tourism participation can influence community agency across four interrelated dimensions: economic, psychological, social, and political empowerment (Scheyvens, 1999). Economic empowerment involves increasing local income and control over financial resources, while psychological empowerment refers to enhanced self-esteem and pride in cultural identity. Social empowerment strengthens community networks and cooperation, and political empowerment expands the capacity to influence decisions affecting the community.

In the context of the Jakun Orang Asli, empowerment through tourism is contingent on overcoming barriers such as limited digital literacy, inadequate infrastructure, and restricted market access. Studies on Indigenous tourism globally, such as Māori tourism in New Zealand and First Nations tourism in Canada, highlight the importance of building capacity across all four empowerment dimensions to achieve sustainable outcomes (Carr, Ruhanen, & Whitford, 2016). Building upon these insights, the study integrates both theoretical foundations and empirical findings to develop a conceptual framework for understanding the challenges and opportunities in ecotourism development within the Jakun Orang Asli community. This framework, as shown in Figure 2, highlights the interplay between capacity, readiness, external factors, and their collective influence on achieving sustainable, culturally respectful, and economically viable ecotourism.

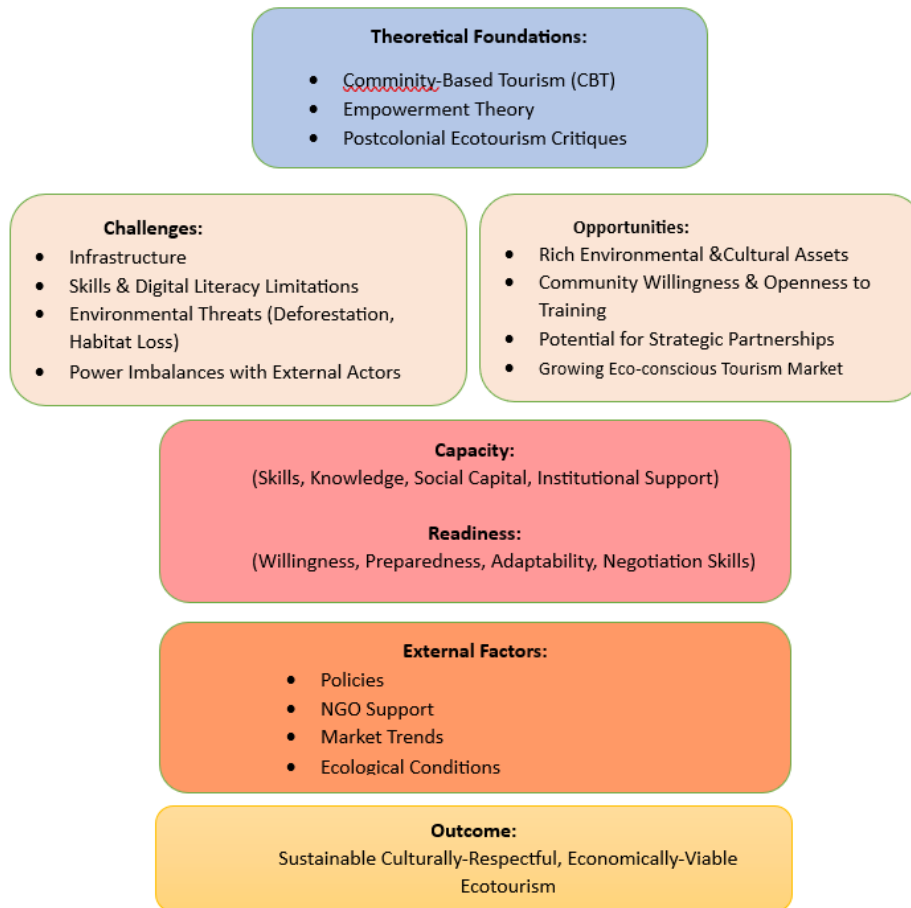


Figure 2. Conceptual framework illustrating the challenges and opportunities in ecotourism development among the Jakun Orang Asli community.

Postcolonial Ecotourism Critiques and Power Dynamics

Postcolonial ecotourism critiques examine how tourism development in Indigenous contexts is shaped by historical and structural inequalities, including land dispossession, cultural commodification, and dependency on external funding (Hollinshead, 2007). These critiques caution that without careful governance, ecotourism can reproduce colonial power dynamics, where external actors—such as government agencies, NGOs, or private investors—set development agendas, control resources, and dominate decision-making processes.

Research in Southeast Asia has documented cases where external interventions in Indigenous tourism were designed with limited community consultation, leading to low ownership and eventual project failure (Cole, 2006). Conversely, co-created models that position communities as equal partners in planning and implementation have been associated with higher levels of satisfaction, economic benefit, and cultural preservation (Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2014).

Ecotourism in the Malaysian Indigenous Context

Ecotourism has been promoted in Malaysia as a strategy for rural and Indigenous economic development. However, its success varies widely across communities due to differences in ecological resources, market access, and governance structures. Hassan (2017) found that Orang Asli communities in the Cameron Highlands faced significant constraints in marketing and infrastructure despite having attractive natural and cultural products. Lim (2019) emphasised the potential of ecotourism to economically empower Orang Asli but warned of the risks posed by unsustainable land use, such as logging and monoculture plantations.

The Jakun community in Kampung Tanah Abang possesses both ecological richness and cultural authenticity, making it well-positioned for ecotourism development. Yet, as with other Indigenous groups, achieving

sustainable outcomes will require addressing environmental threats, strengthening community governance, and enhancing skills in entrepreneurship, hospitality, and digital marketing.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study design to provide an in-depth understanding of the challenges and opportunities in ecotourism development among the Jakun Orang Asli community in Kampung Tanah Abang, Johor. The case study approach was selected because it allows for rich, contextualised insights into the lived experiences of the community while accommodating the complex interplay between socio-economic, cultural, and environmental factors (Yin, 2014).

Research Site

Kampung Tanah Abang is located in the district of Mersing, Johor, and is home to approximately 200 Jakun residents. The village is situated near ecologically significant sites such as the Endau River, firefly habitats, and the forest reserves adjoining Endau-Rompin National Park. These assets form the foundation for potential ecotourism products, including homestays, raft house experiences, traditional fishing tours, handicraft production, and guided forest walks.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected between February and May 2024 using three complementary qualitative methods to ensure robust triangulation:

1. **Semi-Structured Interviews** – Conducted with 15 participants, including the Tok Batin (village head), homestay operators, raft house owners, handicraft artisans, youth involved in digital promotion, and elders with traditional ecological knowledge. The interview guide was designed to explore participants' perceptions of tourism opportunities, barriers to development, and visions for sustainable ecotourism.
2. **Non-Participant Observations** – Conducted at key tourism-related sites, including homestay facilities, raft houses, firefly viewing areas, and riverside fishing spots. Observations focused on infrastructure quality, visitor engagement, environmental conditions, and tourism activity patterns.
3. **Document Analysis** – Included reviewing government and NGO reports, tourism promotional materials, local development plans, and photographic records. This method provided contextual and historical information to complement interview and observation data.

Sampling Strategy

A snowball sampling technique was used to recruit participants with direct involvement in or knowledge of tourism-related activities. Initial participants were identified through community leaders, who then referred other relevant individuals. This approach ensured diversity in perspectives across gender, age, and tourism roles.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using the thematic analysis framework of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which involved three stages:

- **Data Condensation** – Transcripts, observation notes, and documents were reviewed to identify significant statements and reduce data into meaningful segments.
- **Data Display** – Thematic matrices were created to categorise data according to key analytical themes, such as socio-economic conditions, environmental assets, skill development, power dynamics, and comparative insights from other CBT models.
- **Conclusion Drawing and Verification** – Themes were refined through iterative comparison across data sources, ensuring consistency and accuracy.

This approach allowed for both inductive insights emerging from the data and deductive analysis informed by CBT principles, empowerment theory, and postcolonial ecotourism critiques.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM) Research Ethics Committee. All participants were informed of the study's purpose, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Written or verbal consent was obtained before each interview. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identities, and sensitive cultural knowledge was shared only with explicit permission from community elders.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis identified five interrelated themes that collectively illustrate the capacity and readiness of the Jakun Orang Asli community in Kampung Tanah Abang for ecotourism development. Each theme is interpreted through the lens of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) principles, empowerment theory, and postcolonial ecotourism critiques to provide a deeper analytical framing.

Community Socioeconomic Conditions

The socioeconomic structure of Kampung Tanah Abang is characterised by a combination of traditional livelihoods—such as fishing, small-scale agriculture, and forest product gathering—and emerging tourism activities. Tourism income is generally supplementary, with some households operating homestays, raft houses, and selling handicrafts. However, these ventures face seasonal fluctuations. For example, one homestay operator reported earning RM400–RM600 per month during peak seasons but having no guests during off-peak months. This mirrors patterns observed in other Orang Asli CBT settings, such as the Semai in Pahang, where irregular visitor flows limit economic sustainability (Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli, 2023).

From an empowerment theory perspective, the community is at an early stage of economic empowerment. While tourism provides additional income, it is insufficient to drive structural change without product diversification, improved marketing, and infrastructure investment.

Environmental and Natural Assets

Kampung Tanah Abang benefits from high-value ecological assets such as the Endau River, firefly habitats, and forests adjoining Endau-Rompin National Park. These resources support niche tourism products like river cruises, firefly watching, and forest trekking.

However, environmental degradation threatens these assets. Deforestation for logging and oil palm cultivation has caused sedimentation in the Endau River, reducing water clarity and fish populations. Firefly numbers have declined due to riverside clearing, a phenomenon also documented in Kampung Kuantan, Selangor, where habitat loss led to a 50% drop in ecotourism revenue (WWF-Malaysia, 2022).

Through an Indigenous epistemology lens, these are not just economic losses but also cultural disruptions. The Jakun's relationship with the river and forest is integral to their identity, and environmental decline directly impacts their cultural continuity. Sustainability strategies must integrate community-led conservation and ecological monitoring.

Skills, Training, and Digital Literacy

Training programmes by JAKOA, state tourism agencies, and NGOs have focused on hospitality, handicraft production, and environmental awareness. While useful, these are often short-term initiatives without follow-up. A six-month handicraft workshop in 2022 improved product quality but failed to secure long-term sales channels, leaving artisans with unsold inventory.

The digital divide is a major constraint. While some younger residents use Facebook and TikTok, most tourism operators lack structured marketing strategies. Internet coverage in the village is intermittent, and many households lack access to high-speed connections or devices suitable for content creation. Without addressing

these infrastructural barriers, digital marketing initiatives risk excluding less tech-savvy or resource-limited members, potentially reinforcing inequalities.

Comparatively, Māori tourism operators in Rotorua, New Zealand, have used digital storytelling effectively to attract global markets, suggesting that targeted, ongoing digital skills training could significantly enhance the Jakun's market reach.

Power Dynamics with External Actors

While external agencies and NGOs provide crucial support in funding, technical assistance, and promotion, decision-making power often rests with these external actors. Several projects have been externally designed with minimal community input. For instance, a donor-funded river cruise programme in 2021 focused on visitor preferences identified by the agency rather than Jakun cultural narratives, leading to low local ownership and eventual abandonment.

This reflects postcolonial critiques that caution against top-down development approaches which perpetuate dependency (Hollinshead, 2007). Sustainable CBT requires co-created planning processes where the community has equal say in defining project objectives, implementation methods, and benefit-sharing mechanisms.

Long-Term Sustainability and Comparative Insights

The sustainability of ecotourism in Kampung Tanah Abang depends on striking a balance between building community capacity and ensuring long-term readiness to manage tourism independently. Comparative analysis with the Semai cooperative in Pahang and the Cordillera homestay cooperative in the Philippines reveals that well-structured governance—particularly through cooperatives with transparent revenue-sharing mechanisms—can safeguard community interests, ensure reinvestment in infrastructure, and maintain equitable benefit distribution.

However, without contingency planning for the withdrawal of external support, CBT initiatives risk collapsing under financial or managerial strain. Developing pilot programmes for guided eco-tours, cultural workshops, and digital marketing campaigns—co-created with the community—could serve as practical testbeds for sustainable and scalable tourism models.

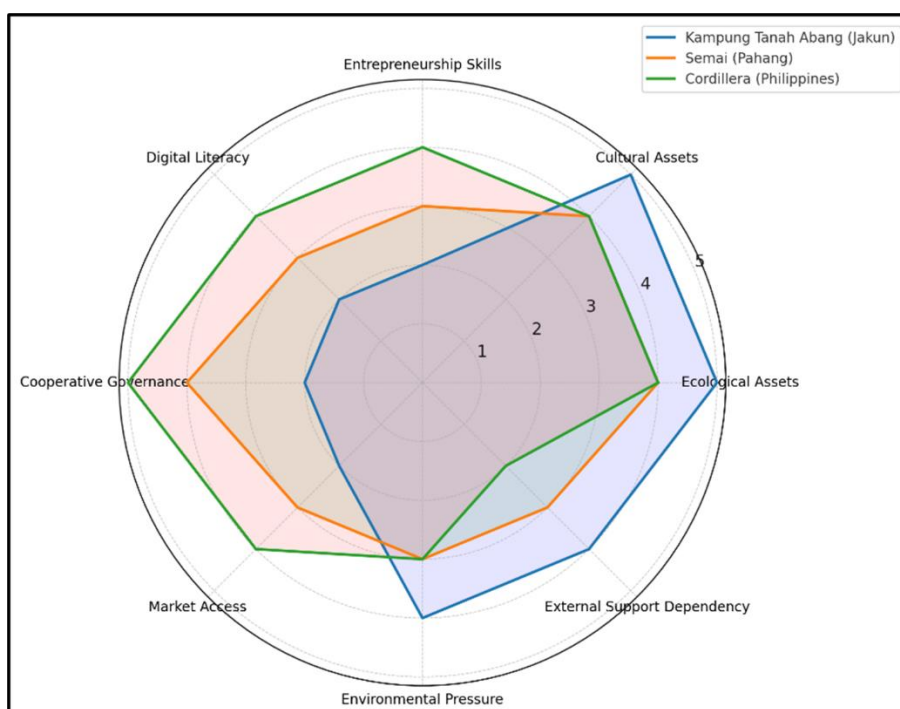


Figure 3. Comparative radar chart of key CBT indicators across three Indigenous communities.

Figure 3 presents a comparative radar chart illustrating seven key CBT indicators for Kampung Tanah Abang (Jakun), the Semai cooperative in Pahang, and the Cordillera cooperative in the Philippines. The indicators include:

1. Ecological and cultural assets
2. Entrepreneurship skills
3. Digital literacy
4. Governance structure
5. Market access
6. Environmental pressures
7. External support dependency

The visual comparison highlights that while Kampung Tanah Abang scores relatively high in ecological and cultural assets, it lags behind in entrepreneurship skills, governance, and digital literacy compared to the other two models. The Semai cooperative demonstrates stronger governance and market integration, while the Cordillera cooperative excels in reducing dependency on external actors through diversified revenue streams. These findings suggest that Kampung Tanah Abang could strengthen its long-term sustainability by:

1. Formalising governance structures to manage tourism activities collectively.
2. Building targeted entrepreneurship and digital marketing skills.
3. Establishing diversified income streams to reduce reliance on seasonal visitor flows and external funding.

By adopting and adapting proven strategies from these more mature CBT models, the Jakun community can enhance resilience, maintain cultural integrity, and secure economic benefits for future generations.

Intersections of Capacity and Readiness

Findings reveal that capacity (skills, knowledge, social capital, institutional support) and readiness (willingness, adaptability, negotiation skills) are interdependent but unevenly developed. The Jakun community exhibits strong cultural capital and ecological knowledge but lacks sustained entrepreneurship support and market integration.

This aligns with Aref and Ma'rof (2009), who argue that willingness alone cannot drive sustainable CBT without systemic support. Addressing both dimensions through integrated capacity-building, inclusive governance, and environmental stewardship is essential for the community's long-term tourism success.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has significant implications for theory, practice, and policy in the context of Indigenous-led ecotourism. By grounding the analysis in Community-Based Tourism (CBT) principles, empowerment theory, and postcolonial ecotourism critiques, the research moves beyond a purely descriptive account of challenges and opportunities to offer a deeper understanding of the structural and cultural factors influencing tourism sustainability in Indigenous settings.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the growing discourse on the intersection of capacity and readiness in CBT development. It extends empowerment theory by highlighting how economic, social, and cultural empowerment are unevenly achieved when structural power imbalances remain unresolved. The postcolonial lens also reveals that externally driven tourism initiatives—no matter how well-intentioned—can reinforce dependency unless communities are genuine co-creators in the process. These insights encourage future research to explore intra-community governance, power-sharing mechanisms, and the role of Indigenous epistemologies in defining tourism success.

From a practical standpoint, the findings point to several priorities for enhancing tourism viability. First, targeted capacity-building programmes should be long-term and modular, allowing skills to accumulate rather

than dissipate after short training sessions. Digital marketing should be integrated into these programmes, but with specific provisions for bridging the digital divide, such as subsidised internet access, provision of devices, and peer mentoring for less tech-savvy members. Second, product diversification—combining river-based tours, handicrafts, homestays, and cultural performances—can help smooth seasonal fluctuations in visitor flows. Third, cooperative governance models, as demonstrated by successful examples among the Semai in Malaysia and the Cordillera in the Philippines, could institutionalise benefit-sharing and strengthen accountability.

At the policy level, the study underscores the urgent need for integrated and inclusive tourism policies that recognise the land rights, cultural heritage, and ecological stewardship roles of Indigenous communities. State and federal agencies should ensure that tourism planning processes are participatory, with Indigenous voices having decisive authority over the direction and scope of projects. Environmental sustainability must also be embedded in policy, with safeguards against logging, habitat destruction, and other threats to biodiversity that underpin ecotourism. Furthermore, funding schemes should be designed to support self-sustaining, community-managed enterprises, reducing reliance on intermittent donor or government support.

In summary, this study advocates for an inclusive, capacity-driven, and rights-based approach to ecotourism development—one that places the Jakun Orang Asli not just as participants but as equal partners and custodians of their natural and cultural heritage. By embedding empowerment, environmental stewardship, and equitable governance into the core of tourism planning, policymakers and practitioners can foster a model of ecotourism that is economically viable, culturally respectful, and environmentally sustainable in the long term.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Building on the study's findings and the theoretical frameworks of Community-Based Tourism (CBT), empowerment theory, and postcolonial ecotourism critiques, the following recommendations are proposed to address existing challenges, maximise opportunities, and ensure the long-term sustainability of ecotourism in Kampung Tanah Abang. These recommendations are framed within short-term, medium-term, and long-term strategies to allow for phased implementation.

Short-Term (0–2 Years)

Immediate actions should focus on strengthening foundational skills and organisational structures within the community.

- **Digital Literacy and Marketing Training:** Introduce tailored workshops on using platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok for tourism promotion. Training should be hands-on, community-based, and supported with follow-up mentoring to overcome the digital divide.
- **Product Enhancement:** Improve existing tourism products—such as raft house stays, handicrafts, and guided tours—through quality control, cultural storytelling integration, and standardised pricing to enhance market appeal.
- **Environmental Stewardship Initiatives:** Establish community-led conservation groups responsible for monitoring river health, firefly habitats, and forest resources, ensuring environmental sustainability as a core tourism value.

Medium-Term (2–5 Years)

Once foundational skills are in place, the focus should shift towards diversifying tourism offerings and formalising governance mechanisms.

- **Formation of a Community Tourism Cooperative:** Develop a legally registered cooperative to manage tourism activities, coordinate marketing, and ensure equitable benefit distribution.

- **Tourism Product Diversification:** Introduce new experiences such as cultural workshops, traditional fishing demonstrations, night-time firefly tours, and eco-trekking packages.
- **Strategic Partnerships:** Forge long-term collaborations with JAKOA, state tourism boards, NGOs, and universities to access funding, training, and research support.

Long-Term (Beyond 5 Years)

Sustainability and resilience will require institutionalising community ownership and embedding tourism into broader socio-economic development plans.

- **Land and Resource Rights Advocacy:** Work with legal aid organisations and Indigenous rights groups to secure formal recognition of land and resource rights, protecting the community from environmentally harmful external projects.
- **Integrated Tourism Development Plan:** Co-develop a master plan with all stakeholders that aligns tourism growth with infrastructure upgrades, education, and environmental management.
- **Replication and Knowledge Sharing:** Position Kampung Tanah Abang as a model of Indigenous-led ecotourism by documenting best practices, hosting inter-community exchanges, and sharing lessons learned with other Orang Asli communities in Malaysia.

These recommendations are designed to transition the Jakun Orang Asli community from a position of emerging participation to full ownership and leadership in tourism development. By addressing skill gaps, balancing power dynamics, protecting environmental assets, and embedding cultural integrity in tourism offerings, Kampung Tanah Abang can establish itself as a sustainable, competitive, and culturally vibrant ecotourism destination.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that the Jakun Orang Asli community in Kampung Tanah Abang possesses both the cultural heritage and environmental assets required to develop a distinctive and sustainable ecotourism offering. The community's willingness to participate in tourism, combined with existing traditional knowledge, handicraft skills, and experiential activities such as raft house stays and guided forest tours, provides a strong foundation for growth.

However, the study also highlights several structural, cultural, and environmental challenges that must be addressed to ensure the long-term viability of ecotourism. These include limited infrastructure, insufficient entrepreneurship and digital marketing skills, imbalances in decision-making power between external agencies and the community, and threats to biodiversity from deforestation and habitat loss. Without targeted interventions, these constraints risk undermining both the economic and cultural potential of tourism development.

From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to the literature on Community-Based Tourism (CBT) by integrating empowerment theory and postcolonial ecotourism critiques into the analysis of Indigenous tourism. It demonstrates that sustainable development requires more than simply providing economic opportunities—it must also involve addressing structural inequities, strengthening local governance, and embedding environmental stewardship in tourism practices.

The practical recommendations outlined in this study provide a roadmap for building community capacity, diversifying tourism products, bridging the digital divide, and securing land and resource rights. These strategies are designed to transition the community from an emerging participant to a fully empowered leader in tourism development.

In conclusion, the future of ecotourism in Kampung Tanah Abang hinges on the community's ability to assert ownership over its tourism ventures, the willingness of external partners to engage in equitable collaborations,

and the implementation of policies that safeguard both cultural integrity and environmental sustainability. With sustained commitment, inclusive planning, and respect for Indigenous knowledge systems, Kampung Tanah Abang has the potential to become a flagship model of Indigenous-led sustainable tourism in Malaysia and beyond.

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