

# Building Effective Local Leadership and Community Organizations to Strengthen the Involvement of Indigenous Communities in Ecotourism: Insights from the Batek Community from Malaysia

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## Abstract

This study examines local leadership and community organization's involved in ecotourism in Malaysia. They influence the involvement of indigenous people in ecotourism and, by that, are challenging to jettison. The study intends to contribute to build effective local leadership in the community to strengthen the involvement of Batek indigenous people in ecotourism.

It employs qualitative research methods. Data was collected through two techniques, primary data through in-depth interviews. while secondary data is collected through document analysis. Interviews were carried out with informants among the Batek community which consisted of local leaders and those who are actively involved in ecotourism activities in Kuala Tahan National Park, Pahang Malaysia. Data were analyzed using a qualitative statistical package, NVivo 12 software.

The findings show that the survival and development of the Batek people in ecotourism depend on good leadership. The success in empowering the Batek people's ecotourism also rests on forming the organization's action tourism plans, executing operations, as well as promoting and monitoring the activities being carried out.

**Keywords:** Community Organization; Local Leadership; Ecotourism; Orang Asli Batek; Building & Strengthen.

## Introduction

Tourism is a sector growing rapidly in most developing countries. In today's world, tourism is one of the activities that contribute to the economies and communities (Asmawi et al., 2023). Many countries today promote tourism as the main generator of their national income (Inskeep, 1996; Iwan and Purnawan, 2013; Jazmina et al. 2023). It is also a sector that involves mutual roles between government and non-government organisations as well as the public (Wahab and Cooper, 2003).

Progress of tourism in Malaysia has been affected by significant and potential changes in the tourism industry from time to time. In short, the tourism industry can spur national income; the integrated approach makes it suitable for regular sustainability in the planning and implementation of industry tourism (Khalid, 2006).

In Malaysia, ecotourism is a growing sector. It is vital because it can contribute to the income and growth of the national economy (Ibrahim et al. 2016). Therefore, the government is already developing various ecotourism products nationwide to attract interested tourists, locally and internationally. Among the products promoted in the past and popular with the tourists are heritage, Nature and culture. Indeed, these tourism products are the main attractions for the tourists to visit Malaysia.

Ecotourism is able to generate good jobs and lucrative income for the communities in the vicinities of the locations. The industry improves the incomes of the local communities and even helps increase the national economy. For this reason, indigenous culture and heritage empowerment are already emphasized as one of the alternatives for developing their socio-economics (Jazmina et al., 2023). For instance, the fifth thrust of the Strategic Plan Department, developed by the Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (JAKOA: 2016-2020), is to preserve and highlight the art, culture and heritage of the Orang Asli indigenous community (JAKOA, 2015).

## The Research Issue

The Batek people, especially those who live in Kuala Tahan, are unique quarters of the Orang Asli folks who are rich in culture. They can survive and be recognized by the local or foreign tourists. Their lives still depends on their environment, and naturally form various unique and dynamic knowledge related to it. They thus have a great potential to invent ecotourism products for commercialization. These may involve possessing knowledge, exposure, habits and experiences in the vast forest that they inhabit (Ismail et al., 2023; Ibrahim, 2019, Asmawi et al., 2023). Knowledge they possess related to ecology allows the indigenous people to organize their lives in an orderly and meaningful manner. This knowledge also enables them to exploit resources and valuable elements in the jungle, especially in the usage of flora and fauna as the source of food, economy, housing, medicine and others. They are also very skilled in navigating the intricacies of forests and jungles in the Kuala Tahan Forest Reserve and the National Parks (Fatanah, 2009; Asmawi, 2013 & 2019; Asmawi et al., 2023).



**Fig. 1** Orang Asli Batek  
Source: authors

However, the involvement of the Batek people in eco-tourism industry is still low. A study by Ramle et al. (2016), among Batek people in Kuala Koh National Park, and Zanisah Man et al. (2009) among the Batek people in Kuala Tahan National Park show that only a small percentage of the community is involved in ecotourism. They are also only involved as porters carrying tourists' items for mountain climbing and jungle trekking and as navigators or forest guides. Although the Batek people have a high capacity for success in the sector, these activities are dominated by other communities; in a particular the Malay people. Therefore, the failure of the local community, especially the Batek people, to be involved in local planning will affect the involvement of the local community in tourism development. In fact, according to Hall (2005), it will be hard to predict the potential benefits that they may enjoy due to problems that will arise.

In this context, this paper examines potentials of ecotourism and the leadership and community organizations of Batek people in Indonesia. Its aim is to facilitate the cultivation of good leadership among this community and to help the communities to enter into the industry so that they can yield both economic and social benefits they offer.

Its objectives are to:

1. To examines local leadership and community organisations involved in ecotourism in Malaysia.
2. To provide framework in building effective local leadership in the community to strengthen the involvement of Batek indigenous people in ecotourism.

## Theoretical Framework

### Ecotourism, Leadership and Community Organisations

Ecotourism is a purposeful adventure creating a mutual understanding of the culture and history that belong to the indigenous community, emphasizing care of ecosystems and producing interest in shaping the economy for the local population while encouraging the conservation of Nature (Goeldner et al., 2000; Hawkins, 1994). As stated by Eagles (1996), these factors are quality management environment, limited changes, managing tourists, provision access, expertise market, managing conflict recreation, enforcement law and monitoring, quality guarantee customer, draft facilities, finance powerful garden progress and development community.

In addition, Cater (1994), Asmawi et al. (2023) and Amat Simin et al. (2015) state that eco-tourism will also increase the facilities, infrastructure, and communication provided by the government, such as paved streets, electricity and water, telecommunications, public transportation and others. This will indirectly increase economic development, especially in the rural area. Ecotourism will encourage and strengthen cultural heritage (Goodwin, 2007; Dorjsuren and Palmer, 2018).

### Leadership

The concept of leadership is multi-faceted and cannot be easily captured in a few words, given its different fields and phenomenon. For instance, Siagian (2003) assert that the term 'leadership' encompasses the skill and ability of a person to influence others, whether in a high position, a level, or lower than him. This may be in thinking and acting so that the actual behaviour may be individualistic and selfish turns into organisational behaviour. Vilas-Boas et al. (2018) argue that previous research studies about leadership have constantly given priority to issues relating to: the qualities good of leaders (honesty, optimism, credence, charisma), expected behaviours (giving impetus, setting precedence), intelligence development (spiritual, sentimental, emotional, cognitive) and work attributes (interpersonal, adaptive, strategic).

According to Hersey and Blanchard (1982), the concept of leadership has its origin in the word leader, which means to guide or lead. Furthermore, Purba (2020) adds that leadership is the style of a leader who can influence his subjects so that community or organisational goals are achieved effectively and efficiently. In the same vein, Kerr and Kaufman-Gilliland in Dedi (2020) point out that leadership is the means to have prominence in organised groups to actualize organizational or community goals and objectives. Explicitly, in the words of Muslih

(2014), the traits of a local leader in leading his community to success lie in some combined values and components, which include the ability to rule, the ability to manage endowed with a development mentality.

Iwan and Purnawan (2013) clearly state that leadership and innovation provide an essential basis for the management organization of ecotourism services. This will guide the achievement of ecotourism organisations to generate benefits in ecotourism services and help in building a framework for environmental conservation. Moreover, Martiskainen (2017) and Wood (2017) underscore the role of local community leaders in regional planning and decision-making to constitute, providing overall policy direction, setting priorities and bringing stakeholders together with the resourcefulness to interface with a broad base of constituents and partners. All these qualities speak volumes and are invaluable for the success of many local projects, especially the ones that are multi-dimensional, integrated and multifarious, like ecotourism (Azwar et al., 2023; Islam et al., 2020). Thus, scholars have conceptualised the local leaders to epitomize individuals who make decisions in matters related to human beings and have symbolic and cultural colourations (Vilas-Boas et al. 2018).

### **Community Organisation**

"Community organisation" as a concept represents effort or attempts to plan community welfare services. Numerous scholars and authors have put forward various definitions. For instance, Ross (1967:115) defines community organisation as a "process by which a community identifies its needs or objectives, gives priority to them, develops confidence and will to work at them, finds resources (internal and external) to deal with them, and in doing so, extends and develops cooperative and collaborative attitudes and practices in the community". In his words, a community organisation connotes the process of recognising objectives or needs in a community and moving a step further for the attainment of such needs or objectives.

As far as a community organisation is concerned, specific strategies are put to use. These include meeting decision makers to take up actions for which they will be held accountable, designing programs to implement that meet the needs of the community, and taking a concerted effort to block negative actions or behaviours that can jeopardise developments (Tsaur and Ku, 2019). The basis of a community organising is to build a whole society. This process entails an integrated modus operandi the community put in place to overcome their problems, accomplish their needs and achieve their set objectives (Dave, 2011; Weinstein et al., 2015; Islam et al., 2020).

### **Review of Literature**

The world has recognised ecotourism as widely grown rapidly industry (Palmer and Chuamuangphan, 2018; Nazirullah et al., 2023). For instance, nowadays the ecotourism destinations in Malaysia National Park are the primary choice for tourists worldwide. With this development, involvement in eco-tourism, benefit communities economically and socially (Novelli and Tisch-Rottsteiner, 2012; Dorjsuren and Palmer, 2018). In terms of the economy, ecotourism will increase employment opportunities and income for the local society. Just as the case of Batek people, one of the twenty or so indigenous people of Orang Asli (Primitive People) of Peninsular Malaysia which dated back to 5,000 BC (Hill et al., 2006; Endicott, 2016; Asmawi et al., 2023). Having an aggregate number that stood at over 1500 people (JAKOA 2018b; DOSM 2019).

A cursory look at Batek involvement in ecotourism revealed that their involvement had spanned many annals. Basically, there is strong evidence that this involvement goes back to the 1950s (Lye, 2004). Economically, cultural ecotourism has formed the activities among the indigenous people in which tourists visit their settlements, and other communities who are active in hunting and gathering. Likewise, they earn an income through forestry activities and forest products such as weave basket, wood crafts, bush meat, poles, fuel wood, etc. The Batek people also practice small-scale farming and engage in day labouring (Hitchcock &

Brandenburgh 1990; Picard & Wood 1997; Hamilton 2006; Tonnaer 2010; Cohen 2011; Bolaane 2013; Koot 2013).

Thus, managing such an ecotourism area, some central aspects need to be considered. Accordingly, the community organization leadership is saddled with the responsibility to identify the people and build effective structures that are fundamental in tapping all these such opportunities. All these are seen as resolutions or solutions to the problems identified and others as being persuasion to achieve the intended needs, goals and objectives of the community.

A case in point in this regard is an organizational method that was implemented in the form of 'cooperation' executed by Orang Sungai leaders in Kinabatangan, Sabah. It was a recognized Cooperative Tourism Organization (KOPEL), established by the community to manage and control ecotourism activities involving the environment and culture in their area. KOPEL has successfully incorporate the main ecotourism entities including: Miso Walai Homestay, Mayou do Talud boat service, Wayon Tokou tour guide service, Tungog Eco-Forest Camp, group performance culture and Craft Get out Tokou community (KOPEL, 2023).

Abonor et al. (2021) examined the effect of leadership on development, of which they posited that leadership is a panacea for rural community. Scholars such as Parag and Janda, (2014), Hoppe et al. (2015) and van der Schoor and Scholtens, (2015) have profoundly affirmed that rural community will witness transformation if there is effective leadership that will serves as a catalyst for development. Mgbada (2006) mentioned that community leaders should be seen beyond the bound as people who hold position but rather in addition should be considered as individuals who can exert some pack of influence in the community though they may not hold any formal position.

Baba et al., (2014) pinpointed the leading role played by community leaders in community development projects which include: visualization of feasible projects proportionate to community priorities and needs; arrangement of funds in the form of donations, royalty, levies to finance projects. Rami et al. (2015) mentioned the influence of leadership in actualizing rural community development in the state of Terengganu, Malaysia.

Ajala and Adebajo (2019) concludes that leadership is pivotal for the accomplishment of community development project such as road construction. They further recommends that community members are in need of orientation and training geared towards cooperative effort and as well to strengthen the performance of leadership roles in driving development of local community. In the same vein, Abonor et al. (2021) later suggest that a second thought should be considered in the selection and election of leaders in rural communities so as to make certain that leaders that are installed are of good caliber and having proven practical and cognitive experience to expand development.

## **Research Methodology**

This research employs a qualitative approach to understand the effectiveness of local leadership and community organisations in strengthening the involvement of Batek indigenous people in ecotourism. Qualitative methods help the researchers to obtain comprehensive, curate, and precise data regarding the aspect being studied (Othman, 2012; Ramle et al., 2016). Thus, this research uses ethnography approach, both in the process of data collection and analysis, which explores information about people, social settings, events, or groups to understand the processes and functions (Kurniadi, 2011).

In this study, data collection is done by in-depth interviews and document analysis. Accordingly, the main instruments used to gather the primary data are interviews conducted with eight Batek people and local leaders who are active in the ecotourism activities in Kuala Tahan National Park. Document analysis techniques are also used for acquiring complete and reliable information.

The primary and secondary data analysis is executed using NVivo computer software. The software aids not only in storing, coordinating, transcribing, coding (coding) and making research themes systematic but also helps in managing the data so that it can be easily interpreted and understood.

<b>Informants</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Years of experience in ecotourism activities</b>
Informant 1	Bot man and tourist guide	15 years
Informant 2	Tourist guide and bot man	More than 10 years
Informant 3	Tourist guide, bot man	More than 10 years
Informant 4	Bot man and performer	3 years
Informant 5	Bot man and performer	3 years
Informant 6	Bot man and performer	3 years
Informant 7	Performer	5 years
Informant 8	Performer	4 years

Source: authors

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **a. Fundamentals of Local Champions**

According to Aisah and Norhazliza (2018), the term 'local champion' was conceived by Hamzah and Khalifah (2009). The term was adopted to exemplify the leaders involved in Community-Based Tourism (CBT). Kamarudin (2013) says that in order to develop tourism in the rural area, the person that leads must be a solid local and strong. He must be a respected person in the community and be able to inspire and unite the member communities involved in these tourism programs. As mentioned by the informant:

"Tourism development needs the involvement of all parties related interests, as well leadership and strong politics to ensure widespread participation and build consensus".

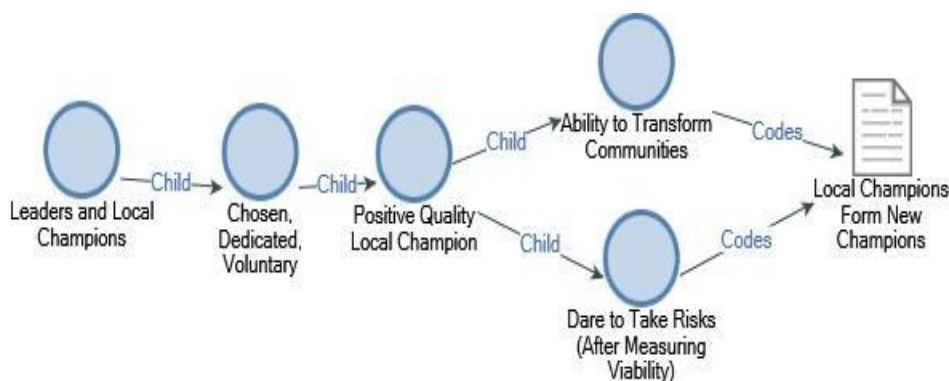
"...to ensure the success of the tourism project in this village, I feel the need to have a good leader to plan, implement the work and encourage other community members to get involved in ecotourism..."

Furthermore, Hamzah and Khalifah (2009) and later Kamarudin (2013) highlight ten prominent indicators of local champion leadership qualities include: (a) trustworthiness; (b) discipline; (c) selflessness; (d) patience; (e) good communicator; (f) perseverance; (g) visionary; (h) resourceful; (i) proactive and; (j) courageous and sensible. Mohamad, Hamzah and Khalifah (2013, 2018) and Aisah and Norhazliza (2018) acknowledge that 'local champion' is one of the driving factors that influence the performance of community-based tourism and community development in rural ecotourism.

In the case of the involvement of the Batek people in ecotourism, the present local leaders or champions appears to be strong. They are able to motivate and empower other members in the community, particularly women and youth, to be regularly active in the empowerment of the local economy. Inner appointment also play a role in empowering the involvement of the Batek people in ecotourism activity. Their experiences in the industry seem to enable them to bring the Batek communities to take part (Figure 2). The informants stated that:

"For the future, the leader train and nurture local champions for the next generation. The role is carrying out by three members of the community who can be considered local champions. They are young, ambitious leaders and are actively involved in eco-tourism".

"...Right now we Batek community do not have a leader who can develop ecotourism activities as a maximum economic resource. We need a leader who can supervise, manage, coordinate, implement and drive the involvement of all members in ecotourism".



**Fig. 2.** Local Leaders and Champions in Empowering Ecotourism

Source: authors

In a clear distinction, ecotourism depends on continuous support from community leaders and members (Stewart, 1994; Vilas-Boas et al., 2018). However, based on the findings, among the six local leaders appointed as officials of Orang Asli Development Department (JAKOA), only one person is in the settlement in Kuala Atok. While the other five people came from outside. Unfortunately, these appointed leaders by JAKOA are not officially recognized by the community members.

### **b. Building Effective Ecotourism Organization**

Specifically, Jailah et al. (2021) have identified the following principles or domains in communities organizing mid the indigenous people in the Philippines: groundwork, indigenous capacity building, community participation and ownership, mobilization, and sustainability. The researchers have further asserted that if strictly adhered to, these principles have the potential in community organization processes among the indigenous population (Jailah et al., 2021).

The need for efficient eco-tourism and organizational effectiveness to carry out planning, operations, and monitoring and promotion of projects is also again a challenge identified mainly in this research. Informants point out that:

"One very important thing for creating a sustainable society must involve all members in the planning process and development. The best ideas in the world no will succeed if only part of the small community is involved".

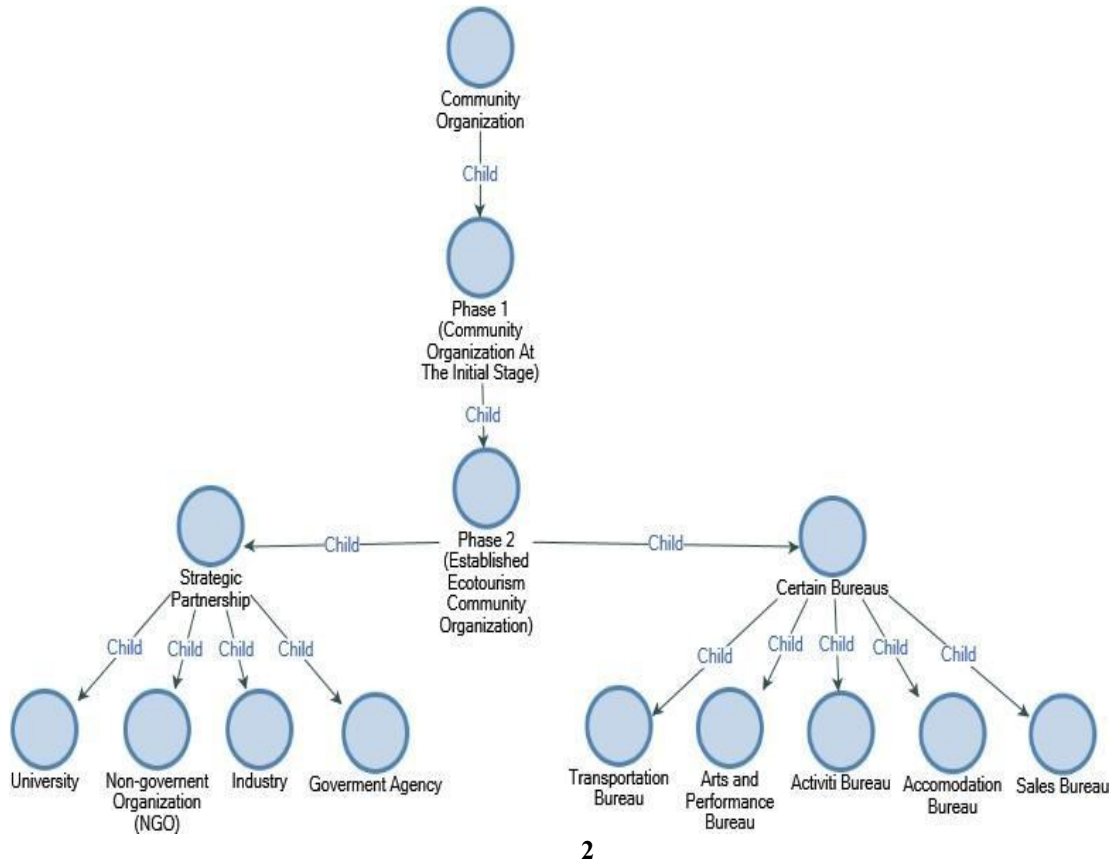
"Batek community don't have an organization to manage ecotourism activities... we have many products that can be sold to tourists... but since we don't have an organization, we just become employees of tourism companies developed by outside communities".

Kamarudin (2013), Aisah and Norhazliza (2018) refer to a study on a rural tourism project in three villages in the East Coast region of Malaysia and say that the beginnings of tourism projects are often small, not complex and managed by local people. However, as the projects develop, more tourists came, while more and more people were involved in the project. Usually, rural tourism will be more complex (mature level). Next, participation is mobilized by every level of society including women, youth and teenagers. In fact, they need to work closely with all the parties, as explained in the Figure 3. All these are encapsulated in the following statements by an informant in the current study:

"There is a need for good support and response to be given to the Batek people to participate in establishing eco-tourism organizations. This can happen if the Batek people can highlight talented individuals from the community".

"...If there is an association like the Malay boat association, I really believe, then we can help and manage all Batek matters in terms of tourism. But now all the work is managed by ourselves or by the company".

"...Mmm, I don't know what to say...if there is a union that manages Batek tourism, it would be good. There will be a strong voice. Moreover no one will be able to trick us".



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**Fig. 3.** Organisation in Empowering Ecotourism

Source: authors

Organisation in empowering ecotourism should take the arrangement of strategic partnership between the universities, governmental agencies non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and tourism industry players as well as community leaders. The community leaders can therefore be saddled with bureaus activities and responsibilities such as transportation, art and performance, accommodation, sales and so on (Figure 3). Therefore, experts should help determine and develop appropriate business models and practices for the tourism community (Kamarudin, 2013). Therefore, the community needs to create a committee to manage the tourism project in the village and collaborate with other partners, including related government agencies, bureaus, universities, NGOs and tourism industry players.

## Conclusion

Conclusively, the survival, along with the development of the Batek people in ecotourism, is highly dependent on the local leadership in supervising, managing, coordinating, implementing and driving all segments of the Batek community. Strong leaders are essential to provide inspiration and clear direction in the eco-tourism industry. Existing local champions, those that experienced and knowledgeable in the said area, can be chosen to lead the Batek people in any proposed ecotourism project.



It is also concluded that, future local champions should be well-bred and trained to be of better quality in changing the society for good. As discussed, among the positive characteristics that must be present in a local leader or champion are being visionary, able to communicate, patient, proactive, innovative, reliable, disciplined, intelligent and suave along with being brave to take risks.

Thus, in order to build effective local leadership and community organizations so as to strengthen the involvement of indigenous communities and achieve success, there is a need in empowering the local leaders of Batek people's and moreover the formation of organizations in planning of tourism actions, implementation of operations, promotion, and monitoring of the activities being carried out.

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