

Chapter 11

A Strategic Framework for Managing the Challenges of Developing Rural Tourism Destination Branding

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the importance and challenges of branding for rural tourism destination. In the wider context of destination branding construct, empirical studies on the strategies to manage the identifiable challenges have received fewer academic interests. In this chapter, triangulation of data sources was used in the collection of data that included in-depth interviews with 31 multiple stakeholders in Bario, Miri, and Kuching in Malaysia. Findings show destination branding is important and there are several factors inhibiting rural tourism destination brand development. In terms of contributions to the existing knowledge, this study has produced a strategic framework for managing the challenges of rural tourism destination branding. Implications for practice, host community, and directions for future studies are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of every destination is to position itself in such a way that the visitors' experiences of that place will bring about repeat visits and create unsolicited ambassadors for the destination (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2010). This phenomenon has led many rural destinations to look into the potentials and strategies involved in developing their destination brand. Extant studies on place and destination branding, tourism destination marketing, and phases involved in building a tourism destination branding indicate there are challenges of destination brand development (Baker & Cameron, 2008; Morrison, 2013), particularly in a rural place. Notably, in the wider context of destination branding construct, strategies to manage the identifiable challenges have received fewer academic interests.

Furthermore, the capability in terms of location advantage may not be readily available for a rural destination. According to Cai (2002), destination branding involves selecting a consistent mix of brand elements to identify and distinguish a destination through positive image building. Morrison and Anderson (2002) describe destination branding as a way of disseminating the uniqueness of a destination identity through differentiable features from other competing locations. The purpose of rural tourism destination brand building is to create a unique identity for rural place that differentiates it from competing rural destinations. There are similarities in the way rural tourism destinations are promoted and marketed. This view is consistent with Greaves and Skinner's (2010) study that rural destination in the United Kingdom promote themselves on their superb scenery, offer for relaxation, outdoor leisure activities, quality accommodation, locally-sourced food, a range of attractions and a full calendar year of rural events and festivals.

The current study was conducted in Bario a rural destination and predominantly a rice farming community without amenities such as good roads, water, electricity, hotels and modern houses. This rural community is located in the heart of Kelabits highlands in Sarawak, East Malaysia. Bario is situated 3, 200 feet above sea level or at an altitude of about 1,100m (Jiwan, Paul, Teo & Jiwan, 2006). This rural place has a population of about 1,200 people (Malaysian Government, 2011). Accessibility to this village is via an 18 - seater Otter aircraft twice a day depending on the weather conditions. Bario lacks a network of good roads as a result it takes about 14 hours in a four-wheel drive on a logging road from Miri the gate way city to the village.

It should be noted that less than 10 per cent of total tourist arrivals in Malaysia visit rural tourism destinations due to poor planning resulting in tourist discomfort, low patronage and a negatively impacting overall satisfaction (Government of Malaysia, 2010). Likewise, some of the few rural destinations in Malaysia that have attracted tourists in the past are no longer attractive to tourists to visit due to the greed of the tourism economy, a lack of planning and an overuse of these rural

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