

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM DEVELOPMENT FOR MARGINALISED ISLAND COMMUNITIES IN KELANTAN: EVIDENCE FROM GUGUSAN KEPULAUAN TUMPAT

Syerina Azlin Md Nasir¹

Hatinah Abu Bakar^{2*}

Nurazleena Ismail³

Firman Hajman⁴

¹ Faculty of Computer and Mathematical Science, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan, Malaysia, (E-mail: syerina@uitm.edu.my)

² *Faculty of Business & Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan, Malaysia, (E-mail hatin463@uitm.edu.my)

³ Faculty of Business & Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan, Malaysia, (E-mail: azleena@uitm.edu.my)

⁴ Faculty of Business & Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan, Malaysia, (E-mail: firman@uitm.edu.my)

*Corresponding author

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Abstract: *This study explores sustainable tourism development through a Community-Based Tourism (CBT) initiative in Gugusan Kepulauan Tumpat, Kelantan, with a focus on empowering marginalised island communities. Adopting an exploratory case study approach, the research employs interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and a questionnaire survey involving 29 community members across 10 islands. The study analyses existing community-based economic activities and identifies local tourism resources, which inform the development of a CBT clustering approach comprising three integrated categories: natural heritage, art and cultural heritage, and traditional food. The findings highlight the importance of active community participation, local ownership, and multi-stakeholder collaboration in structuring sustainable CBT initiatives. The proposed clustering framework offers a practical mechanism for enhancing value creation, diversifying livelihoods, and promoting inclusive tourism development, thereby contributing to community empowerment and long-term socio-economic resilience in marginalised island settings.*

Keywords: *Sustainable Tourism Development, Community Based Tourism (CBT), Marginalized Communities*

Introduction

Malaysia's tourism industry has experienced substantial growth over the past decades and has been recognised as one of the fastest-growing sectors contributing to national economic development (Ahmad et al., 2019; World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), 2023). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism constituted a significant share of Malaysia's gross domestic product (GDP) and emerged as a key contributor to the services sector through tourist expenditure and foreign visitor spending (Tourism Malaysia, 2019). However, the industry was severely affected during the pandemic period, with international tourist arrivals declining sharply in 2020 due to global travel restrictions (United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2021). Despite these challenges, tourism continues to be viewed as a vital development mechanism for developing regions, given its potential to generate income, create employment, stimulate local investment, and support related economic sectors (Kobote, 2015; UNWTO, 2022). Importantly, tourism activities can empower local communities by encouraging entrepreneurship and enhancing local participation in economic activities.

In the context of Kelantan, tourism is recognised as the second most important economic contributor after the agricultural sector. Although tourism has contributed meaningfully to the state's economic growth, Kelantan continues to record relatively high poverty levels compared to other states in Malaysia, particularly following the revision of the Poverty Line Income (PLI) in 2020 (Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), 2021). Recent statistics indicate that Kelantan remains among the states with the highest poverty incidence, recording an 11.5 % poverty rate in 2024 (DOSM, 2025). This situation highlights the need for alternative and inclusive tourism models that generate direct and equitable benefits for local communities. Community-Based Tourism (CBT) has gained increasing recognition as a sustainable development approach that emphasises community ownership, participation, and local control over tourism activities (Scheyvens, 2020; UNWTO, 2022). By prioritising local involvement and equitable benefit distribution, CBT functions not only as a tourism strategy but also as a community development mechanism that supports poverty alleviation, social capital formation, and long-term socio-economic resilience (Giampiccoli, Mtapuri, & Dłużewska, 2021).

CBT was initially introduced in Malaysia as an innovative tourism product under the 7th Malaysia Plan (1996-2000), with the aim of strengthening rural communities and reducing economic disparities between rural and urban areas. In Kelantan, the Tumpat district is endowed with distinctive biological, cultural, and economic resources associated with the Kelantan River Delta. Known as Gugusan Kepulauan Tumpat, the area comprises approximately ten small islands (Pulau Teluk Renjuna, Pantai Suri, Pantai Hj. Nik Mat, Pulau Tokang, Pantai Baru, Pulau Seratus, Pulau Beluru, Pulau Che Soh, Pulau Timun and Pulau Chendol) interconnected by rivers and canals, offering considerable potential for river-based and community-oriented tourism. Despite this potential, tourism activities remain largely concentrated on Pulau Suri, which hosts a floating market operating weekly, while other islands receive limited tourism spillover benefits. Previous studies have shown that local communities often derive minimal economic and social gains from tourism development due to weak participation and unequal benefit distribution (Kayat, 2016; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018; Giampiccoli et al., 2021). Moreover, although Kelantan possesses substantial natural and ecotourism assets, many of these resources remain underdeveloped and under-promoted beyond a few established destinations (Datuk Kamarudin Md Nor, *Bernama/TheSun.my*, 2024).

Although CBT is increasingly recognised as a mechanism for inclusive and sustainable development, there is limited empirical evidence on how it can be systematically structured to

improve local participation and livelihood outcomes in marginalised island communities. Therefore, this study aims to develop a sustainable tourism development framework for marginalised communities through a CBT initiative by examining existing community-based economic activities and organising them into integrated tourism clusters. By adopting a CBT approach, tourism development can be repositioned as an inclusive mechanism that supports equitable benefit-sharing and long-term socio-economic resilience (UNWTO, 2022).

Literature Review

Empowerment Theory

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional process that enables marginalised groups to gain control over their socio-economic destinies. In the context of this study, empowerment is understood through Scheyvens' framework, which categorizes it into four levels: economic (steady income), psychological (pride in local culture), social (community cohesion), and political (participation in decision-making). By applying this theory, the study evaluates how the proposed clustering approach shifts power dynamics from external entities back to the local islanders in Tumpat.

Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF)

To further understand the socio-economic resilience of these island communities, this study employs the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF). This framework provides a holistic method for analyzing how communities utilize five key "livelihood capitals": human (local skills), social (community networks), natural (the river-delta ecosystem), physical (infrastructure), and financial (savings and income). The proposed clustering of natural heritage, art, and traditional food serves as a mechanism to systematically strengthen these assets, thereby enhancing the overall livelihood security and reducing the vulnerability of marginalised islanders.

Murphy's seminal work was among the earliest to conceptualise Community-Based Tourism (CBT), positioning tourism as an activity intrinsically linked to host communities, particularly in developing countries (Murphy, 1985). This concept was later expanded by Murphy (2004), who observed the growing adoption of CBT in Southeast Asia over the preceding decades, with early initiatives implemented in countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand during the mid-1990s. Since then, CBT has evolved to place greater emphasis on managing tourism impacts, promoting sustainability, and enhancing the meaningful involvement of local communities in tourism planning and operations (Reid & George, 2004; Lane & Kastenholz, 2015).

Over time, a community-based approach to tourism has become an integral to rural development strategies in the Global South, particularly as alternatives to conventional mass tourism models that often marginalise local communities (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015; Scheyvens, 2020). At its core, CBT aligns closely with sustainable development principles, as community participation in decision-making and implementation processes fosters local learning capacity, empowerment, and social cohesion (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009; Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2016; Giampiccoli et al., 2021). By prioritising local ownership and control, CBT enhances community benefits while mitigating the negative social and environmental impacts associated with the exploitation of local resources. Effective CBT development requires long-term strategic planning and capacity building beginning with strengthening communities' abilities to manage their natural and cultural assets for collective development outcomes (Mearns & Lukhele, 2015). When effectively executed, community-based tourism (CBT) can serve as a poverty alleviation

strategy by creating employment, promoting environmental conservation, and providing income-generating opportunities for local inhabitants (Harold Goodwin, 2017; Anna Spenceley & Meyer, 2019; Jarkko Saarinen, 2020).

One of the primary objectives of CBT is to improve employment opportunities and economic security within host communities (Tamir, 2015). Employment generated through CBT such as tour guiding, hospitality services, craft production and related support roles often includes opportunities accessible to unskilled or semi-skilled individuals, thereby broadening participation among marginalised groups (Sebele, 2010; Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2018). Empirical evidence further supports these outcomes. For example, studies in rural Zimbabwe revealed that community participation in tourism activities has generated a range of social, economic, cultural, and environmental benefits, including the development of community infrastructure funded through tourism revenues (Gohori & van der Merwe, 2020).

International experiences further illustrate the developmental role of CBT. In Botswana, community-based tourism initiatives under the Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) programme have strengthened local institutions, improved rural livelihoods, and contributed to biodiversity conservation by reducing wildlife-related crime (Stone & Stone, 2020). Similarly, community-based conservation and development initiatives in Nepal, including buffer zones and community forestry programmes, have facilitated more participatory development and ensured that tourism revenues are channelled back to local communities, thereby enhancing community empowerment (Nyaupane, Poudel & York, 2020). A single-case study of Huai Nam Guen village in Chiang Rai, Thailand, further demonstrated that CBT operations aligned with sustainable tourism principles through participatory governance, community identity preservation, and the integration of socio-cultural, economic, and ecological resources (Sitikarn, 2021). Recent research reinforces these findings, highlighting that active community participation and behavioural engagement are central to the long-term sustainability of CBT initiatives (Prasad, 2024).

In the Malaysian context, studies have similarly reported positive outcomes from CBT initiatives. Parveen, Arif, and Norizan (2016) found that CBT in Sarawak contributed to community development through income generation, cultural preservation, and enhanced participation in tourism management. More recent studies continue to affirm these findings. For example, CBT initiatives in the Lower Kinabatangan region of Sabah have demonstrated that integrating ecological tourism with CBT not only supports poverty alleviation and local participation but also highlights the role of the natural environment in sustainable rural development (Goh, 2024). Likewise, research on homestay operators in rural Penang identified that while challenges such as reliance on government funding and weak marketing persist, effective capacity building and improved management strategies can enhance economic benefits and sustainability for local communities involved in CBT-based homestays (Mohd Nor, 2025). Despite its potential for local empowerment, the implementation of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) faces significant structural and operational hurdles that often undermine its long-term viability. A critical challenge lies in the digital divide and the lack of technical expertise among local stakeholders; rural communities frequently struggle with limited management capacity and an inability to navigate complex digital marketing landscapes, which restricts their global market reach (Dahles & Prabawa, 2023). Furthermore, the promise of economic inclusivity is often hampered by the unequal distribution of benefits, where financial gains tend to be captured by local elites or individuals with pre-existing capital, thereby further marginalising the most vulnerable segments of the community (Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2024). The sustainability of

these initiatives is also jeopardized by a chronic dependency on external actors, as many projects fail to survive once initial government grants or NGO funding are withdrawn, highlighting a failure to establish self-reliant business models (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2023). Internal social dynamics also present a barrier, where power struggles and conflicting interests among community members can lead to fragmented management and a decline in the quality of the tourism experience (Stone & Stone, 2025). Lastly, for island-based communities, environmental vulnerabilities and the escalating impacts of climate change—such as rising sea levels and extreme seasonal weather—pose direct threats to both the physical infrastructure and the operational continuity of CBT programs (Taufik & Rahman, 2026).

Collectively, the literature identifies three recurring and interrelated themes in successful CBT implementation: (i) community empowerment through participation and ownership, (ii) improved livelihood outcomes via diversified income-generating activities, and (iii) sustainability achieved through the balanced utilisation of natural, cultural, and socio-economic resources. While existing studies provide strong evidence of CBT's benefits, they largely focus on outcomes rather than on how tourism resources can be systematically organised to support these objectives, particularly in marginalised island settings. This study addresses this gap by operationalising these key CBT themes through a clustering approach that organises community-based tourism products into natural heritage, art and cultural heritage, and traditional food clusters. By structuring local resources in this manner, the proposed framework seeks to translate theoretical CBT principles into a practical mechanism that enhances participation, strengthens livelihoods, and supports sustainable tourism development in marginalised island communities.

Methodologies

This study employed an exploratory qualitative case study approach to examine how Community-Based Tourism (CBT) can support sustainable tourism development and livelihood enhancement within marginalised island communities in Gugusan Kepulauan Tumpat, Kelantan. A qualitative case study design was considered appropriate as it enables an in-depth exploration of local socio-economic contexts, community participation, and tourism-related activities within a real-life setting. The study further sought to understand how local resources and existing community-based economic practices could be organised into a sustainable CBT framework that promotes inclusive development and community resilience

Data Collection

Data were collected in September 2020, during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Although tourism activities were significantly disrupted during this period, the timing provided a critical baseline for assessing community resilience and strategic readiness for CBT as a potential recovery mechanism. Crisis contexts are widely recognised as valuable settings for examining adaptive capacity and resilience-building processes (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2021; Adger, 2000; Biggs, Hall, & Stoeckl, 2012). The study employed a purposive sampling technique involving 29 key informants, who served as official community representatives from 10 selected islands. Purposive sampling is widely accepted in qualitative research for selecting information-rich participants who possess relevant experiential and contextual knowledge of the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). These informants were selected from participants of a dedicated CBT development workshop, ensuring that the data reflected informed perspectives from local stakeholders and community leaders directly involved in island management and local development processes.

In qualitative inquiry, emphasis is placed on depth rather than statistical generalisation, where key informants provide rich, context-specific insights into institutional knowledge, livelihood conditions, and tourism potential (Marshall, 1996; Palinkas et al., 2015). Sample adequacy in such studies is determined by information power and thematic saturation rather than sample size alone (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Accordingly, the use of 29 informants is methodologically justified in generating credible and contextually grounded insights into community readiness for CBT development.

In addition, a structured questionnaire survey was administered to collect demographic profiles and background information on respondents' economic activities. The survey data were used descriptively to complement and contextualise qualitative findings, rather than for hypothesis testing, consistent with the exploratory nature of the study design. This integration of qualitative and descriptive quantitative data supports methodological triangulation and strengthens interpretive validity.

Overall, the study involved participants from 10 islands within Gugusan Kepulauan Tumpat, namely Pulau Suri, Pulau Teluk Renjuna, Pulau Beluru, Pulau Che Soh, Pulau Tokang, Pulau Chendol, Pulau Nik Him, Pulau Seratus, Pulau Timun, and Pantai Baru. Participants were selected based on their residency in the study area and involvement in local economic, fishing, trading, or community leadership activities.

Finally, site observations and field assessments were conducted to identify physical, natural, and cultural resources with potential for tourism development. These observations supported the triangulation process by validating community-reported data and providing direct insight into the tourism potential of each island cluster.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data obtained from focus group discussions, interviews, and observations were analysed using a thematic analysis approach. Audio recordings and field notes were transcribed and reviewed systematically. An initial coding process was undertaken to identify recurring patterns related to community resources, existing economic activities, tourism skills, cultural practices, and natural assets. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader analytical themes representing shared characteristics of tourism potential across the islands.

Qualitative data analysis was conducted iteratively until thematic saturation was achieved. Saturation was observed by the 22nd informant, as subsequent data from the remaining representatives across the 10 islands produced no substantially new themes regarding local resources or tourism potential, thereby supporting the robustness and consistency of the emergent tourism clusters.

Researcher positionality and potential interpretive bias were carefully considered throughout the data collection and analysis processes. As the researchers were directly involved in the CBT workshops and community engagement sessions, there was potential for personal assumptions and prior expectations regarding tourism development to influence data interpretation. To minimise this risk, a reflexive approach was adopted whereby the researchers continuously reviewed their interpretations, reflected on interactions with participants, and remained attentive to differing community perspectives during interviews and discussions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, all participants were provided equal opportunities to express their views and experiences to ensure that the findings reflected diverse community voices rather than dominant

opinions or researcher assumptions.

To further strengthen credibility and confirmability, data triangulation was employed by cross-validating qualitative themes with descriptive survey findings and field observations (Patton, 2015). This systematic process enhanced confidence that the identified tourism clusters—natural heritage, art and cultural heritage, and traditional food—emerged from the collective perspectives of the island communities rather than researcher subjectivity

The identified themes informed the development of three tourism clusters namely natural heritage, art and cultural heritage, and traditional food. These clusters were not predefined but emerged inductively from the data through the synthesis of empirical findings and CBT principles emphasising community ownership, participation, and sustainable resource utilisation. Descriptive statistics from the questionnaire survey were used to support and contextualise the qualitative analysis.

CBT Implementation Framework

The core philosophies of CBT emphasize delivering benefits to the community based on factors such as location, size, wealth, involvement, and ownership. These principles highlight the crucial role of tourism stakeholders in addressing the needs and aspirations of communities in all circumstances. CBT serves as a strategy for poverty alleviation, job creation, business development, and the overall improvement of local communities' quality of life. Successful implementation of CBT requires active involvement from multiple stakeholders, including local communities, tourism organizations, and government institutions.

In line with these principles, the proposed CBT implementation framework, illustrated in Figure 1, was developed by integrating empirical findings from this study with established CBT concepts (Simpson, 2008). The framework outlines the roles of key stakeholders in planning, decision-making, and operational activities across the three identified tourism clusters. Local communities are positioned as primary actors responsible for planning, managing, and delivering tourism products within the natural heritage, art and cultural heritage, and traditional food clusters. Meanwhile, government agencies provide institutional support, coordination, and regulatory oversight to facilitate the sustainable development and promotion of CBT initiatives in Gugusan Kepulauan Tumpat.

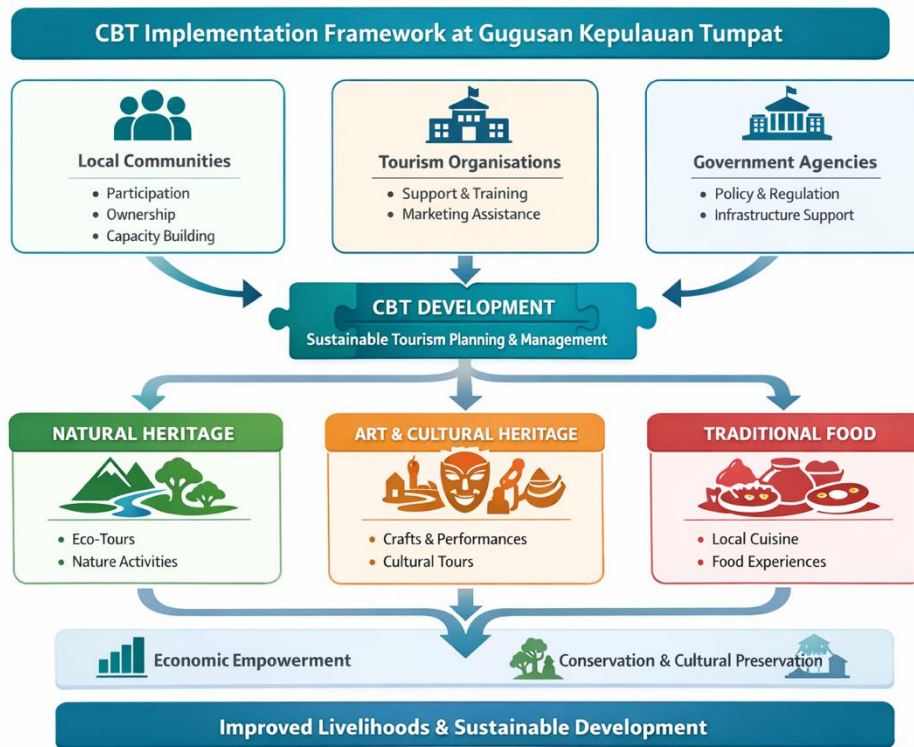


Figure 1: Implementation of CBT at Gugusan Kepulauan Tumpat

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he study ensured data credibility through triangulation, integrating interviews, focus groups, surveys, and site assessments. Although the sample size is relatively small, it is considered appropriate for an exploratory case study aimed at generating contextual insights rather than statistical generalisation. The findings therefore provide an in-depth understanding of CBT potential within marginalised island communities and form a foundation for future comparative and longitudinal studies.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Demographic Profile

Variable	Category	Frequency	%
Island Distribution	PulauTeluk Renjuna	9	31
	Pantai Suri	8	28
	Pantai Hj. Nik Mat	3	10
	Pulau Tokang	1	3
	Pantai Baru	1	3
	Pulau Seratus	2	7
	Pulau Beluru	1	3
	Pulau Che Soh	2	7
	Pulau Nik Him	1	3
	Pulau Timun	1	3
Gender	Male	21	72.4
	Female	8	27.6
Age Group	20–29 years	5	17.2
	30–39 years	8	27.6

	40–49 years	9	31.0
	≥50 years	7	24.2
Primary Occupation	Self-employed	12	41.4
	Small-scale trader	6	20.7
	Fisherman	5	17.2
	Community leaders (Imam/Headmaster)	4	13.8
	Others (boat operator/agricultural worker)	2	6.9
Side Income	Yes	13	44.8
	No	16	55.2

The demographic profile of respondents provide important insights into the socio-economic characteristics of the Gugusan Kepulauan Tumpat community. Of the 29 respondents, the majority were male (21 respondents), Malay, and aged between 20 and 49 years, with most having completed secondary education. The primary occupation for most respondents was self-employment, accounting for 41.38%, while others were engaged in small-scale trading, fishing, manual labour, and community leadership roles such as imam and headmaster. More than half of the respondents, 55.2% of respondents reported having no side income, and only a small portion, 13.8% operated homestay businesses. These findings reflect limited livelihood diversification and economic vulnerability within the island communities, consistent with previous CBT studies that highlight restricted income opportunities in marginalised rural settings (Giampiccoli et al., 2021; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

Qualitative findings from focus group discussions and interviews further reveal that local economic activities are predominantly centred on traditional livelihoods, including fishing, fish processing, snack production, and boat repair. Tourism-related activities remain minimal and unevenly distributed, with Pulau Suri serving as the primary attraction through its weekly floating market. The absence of spillover effects on other islands indicates weak tourism integration and limited community participation beyond a single location. This pattern aligns with Kayat (2016), who noted that tourism benefits often remain concentrated in specific nodes when community involvement and value-chain integration are limited. Moreover, the lack of value-added components in local products and limited marketing capabilities constrain the ability of communities to attract visitors and expand their market reach. Heavy reliance on intermediaries and word-of-mouth promotion, coupled with low adoption of digital platforms such as social media, further isolates local products from broader tourism markets. These constraints mirror challenges identified in prior CBT literature, where limited skills, marketing capacity, and access to technology hinder community empowerment and livelihood enhancement (Sebele, 2010; Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2018).

In response to these challenges, this study proposes a Community-Based Tourism development strategy structured around three integrated clusters: natural heritage, art and cultural heritage, and traditional food. The clustering approach emerged directly from community consultations and reflects the alignment between existing local resources and CBT principles of ownership, participation, and sustainability. By organising tourism products into thematic clusters, the framework seeks to enhance value creation, encourage cross-island linkages, and promote collective participation, thereby addressing the fragmented nature of current tourism activities. This approach resonates with previous studies that emphasise the importance of structured product development and community-led planning in achieving sustainable CBT outcomes (Lane & Kastenzholz, 2015; Bussaba, 2021). The proposed value proposition, “back to heritage memory,” is designed to offer experiential tourism that enables visitors to engage with local

culture, natural environments, and traditional food practices operated and produced by community members. This experiential orientation is consistent with CBT theory, which highlights authentic engagement and cultural preservation as key drivers of sustainable tourism and community empowerment (Murphy, 1985; Scheyvens, 2020). In addition to supporting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the clustering strategy has the potential to improve household incomes, strengthen local identity, and enhance the overall image of Kelantan as a destination offering diverse and community-driven tourism experiences.

Furthermore, the development and management of tourism products within the three clusters are envisioned as community-led processes, supported by institutional collaboration. Ongoing monitoring by researchers, together with support from the Tumpat District and Land Office and cooperation with the Kelantan Department of Wildlife and National Park (Perhilitan), reflects the multi-stakeholder governance model advocated in CBT literature (Simpson, 2008; UNWTO, 2022). Early-stage infrastructure planning and coordinated stakeholder involvement are expected to facilitate river-based tourism and rural industry development in the area. Collectively, these initiatives are anticipated to contribute to socio-economic development in the Tumpat district and the wider state of Kelantan by diversifying tourism offerings, generating employment through support services such as homestays, handicrafts, and food-related enterprises, and strengthening the resilience of marginalised island communities.

Conclusion

This study examined the potential of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) as a mechanism for sustainable tourism development in Gugusan Kepulauan Tumpat, Kelantan, by emphasising active community engagement across ten marginalised island communities. The findings demonstrate that the area possesses substantial natural and cultural assets, including rich river-delta biodiversity and traditional livelihood practices, which provide a strong foundation for CBT development. However, effective implementation depends on sustained community participation and institutional support from relevant government agencies. Based on empirical insights gathered through focus group discussions, interviews, surveys, and site observations, the study proposes a CBT development approach structured around three integrated clusters: natural heritage, art and cultural heritage, and traditional food. This clustering strategy reflects existing community-based economic activities and aligns with CBT principles of ownership, participation, and sustainability. By organising tourism products into these clusters, the study contributes a practical framework for enhancing value creation, diversifying livelihoods, and promoting inclusive tourism development in marginalised island settings.

From a policy and practice perspective, the findings highlight the importance of coordinated stakeholder involvement in CBT initiatives. Active collaboration between local communities, the Tumpat District and Land Office, and supporting agencies such as the Kelantan Department of Wildlife and National Park (Perhilitan) is essential to facilitate infrastructure development, capacity building, and long-term governance of tourism activities. Such collaboration can strengthen river-based tourism and rural industries while contributing to broader socio-economic development at the district and state levels.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The relatively small sample size and reliance on a single case study limit the generalisability of the findings. In addition,

the perspectives of tourists and other tourism stakeholders were not included, and the study focused on current practices rather than long-term socio-economic impacts. Future research should therefore expand the scope of investigation by incorporating multiple stakeholder perspectives, increasing sample coverage, and employing longitudinal designs to assess the sustainability and resilience of CBT initiatives over time. Such efforts would provide deeper insights into the long-term effectiveness of CBT as a development strategy for marginalized communities.

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