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## Article

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Global Business & Finance Review (GBFR)

### Provided in Cooperation with:

People & Global Business Association (P&GBA), Seoul

*Suggested Citation:* Chan, Jennifer Kim Lian (2023) : Sustainable rural tourism practices from the local tourism stakeholders' perspectives, Global Business & Finance Review (GBFR), ISSN 2384-1648, People & Global Business Association (P&GBA), Seoul, Vol. 28, Iss. 3, pp. 136-149, <https://doi.org/10.17549/gbfr.2023.28.3.136>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/305903>

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## Sustainable Rural Tourism Practices From the Local Tourism Stakeholders' Perspectives

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The paper presents empirical evidence of sustainable practices adopted by rural tourism stakeholders. It explores the concept and meaning of sustainable practices and what motivates rural tourism stakeholders to adopt sustainable tourism practices as well as recommendations to enhance sustainable rural tourism practices.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This paper describes an exploratory qualitative research project designed to investigate sustainable tourism practices of the rural tourism stakeholders. An inductive approach was adopted to address the research objectives. Specifically, this paper focuses on individuals' subjectivity and understanding of sustainable tourism practices in terms of meaning, motivations, and areas of improvement. The respondents' opinions were collected through semi-structured interviews. A total of 29 rural tourism operators participated in the data collection from the two rural tourism associations in Sabah, Malaysia. The data collection was held at Kota Marudu and Kuala Penyu from April to May 2022.

**Findings:** The findings revealed that sustainable tourism practices relate to conservation and preservation, economic benefits, collaboration and protection, environmental impact, future growth, awareness, knowledge, and improvement. Interestingly, the meaning of sustainable tourism practices is strongly connected to the term "fairness," to competitive products and quality attractions, and to meeting tourists' needs. This implies the meaning of sustainable tourism practices is not limited to economic, environmental, and sociocultural impacts; it also relates to quality tourism products and the needs of tourists. Key drivers for sustainability practices include economic, social, environmental, and government support. Relevant approaches for improving sustainable rural tourism practices include greater participation and collaboration among rural tourism operators, conservation and preservation, destination uniqueness, long-term growth, and 3Rs practices (reduce, reuse, and recycle).

**Research limitations/implications:** Findings implicate sustainable rural tourism destination management and the rural tourism stakeholders to adopt and enhance the sustainability of the rural sites and destination. It also extends the scope of existing literature on the meaning, motivation and sustainability practices of rural tourist destinations.

**Originality/value:** This study focuses on the importance of sustainability in rural tourism in Sabah, Malaysia, an area on which limited empirical research has been done. The study provides an in-depth understanding of the meaning and drivers of sustainable practices from the rural tourism operators' perspectives. Additionally, it proposes sound strategies for sustainable rural tourism practices. Such practices and development are attributed to an individual's understanding of the concept of and motives for adopting sustainable development practices, government support, and core infrastructure. Finally, this study offers practical implications for sustainable development of rural tourism.

*Keywords: Rural tourism, Meaning of sustainable practices, Sustainable rural tourism, Motivations, Sabah*

Received: Jan. 16, 2023; Revised: Feb. 23, 2023; Accepted: Feb. 27, 2023

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## I. Introduction

Rural tourism is a form of tourism in rural or remote areas (Borto, 2002). It contributes to revitalization in the economic, ecological, and sociocultural senses with the purpose of improving the status and quality of life of the local community and environment. Thus, rural tourism offers rural communities a chance for growth and ways to enhance or add value to the local nature, cultural attractions, and activities and promotes local food as well as leisure activities within pristine landscapes. It also provides income and employment opportunities to rural areas. It plays a significant role in the reactivation of natural and cultural resources. Thus, rural tourism plays a significant part in the economy of rural regions. Sustainable tourism contributes to the sustainable development of rural areas and the preservation of the local identity, protects the environment, and develops rural areas in accordance with the principles of sustainable development. Developing a sustainable destination is crucial for its economic, social, and environmental development. Sustainable practices address the negative effects of tourism on the destination, improving the lives of rural communities and making the destination more competitive.

Sustainable rural tourism is defined as activities that contribute to the positive economic and social development of rural areas and do not violate the social and natural environment (Jovanović & Manic, 2012). At the same time, managing rural tourism and rural destinations is a complex issue that requires active engagement of rural tourism stakeholders and tourism associations. Most importantly, it is essential that they understand the significance and acceptance of sustainable practices and benefits. Podovac (2016) stated the need to educate stakeholders about the responsible behaviour of rural tourism towards natural resources. Simply put, sustainability refers to the ability to maintain and preserve one's resources and practices over time. The concept of sustainable tourism development and its principles have been widely applied in understanding the sustainability of tourism

destinations. The concept of sustainable tourism implies achieving an equilibrium among environmental, economic, and sociocultural facets based on the triple bottom line (Elkington, 1998), which includes activities, supervision, and growth of tourism that maintain natural, economic, and social integrity and safeguard natural, environmental, and cultural resources while ensuring tourists' satisfaction through meaningful experiences and promoting sustainable tourism practices (Niedziółka, 2012). Environmental, social, and economic factors, as well as long-term growth without depletion or degradation of its resources, are well documented as major areas of interest. Widely, the motives of adopting sustainable practices include environmental protection, cost savings in term of reducing the use of resources, competitiveness and differentiation, destination branding and competition, ethical and legal compliance, and engaging in corporate social responsibility. All are key to adopting sustainable practices.

Rural sites and destinations in Sabah, Malaysia, are blessed with rich varieties of natural and cultural resources as well as unique scenery to attract tourists. These are unique rural tourist attractions that require sustainable practices to create authentic experiences. Furthermore, rural tourism is growing rapidly as more people look for new spaces to escape from working life and the city (Schmidt, 2016). The recent COVID-19 outbreak has changed the behaviours of travellers looking to visit remote areas and those with an interest in rural tourism (Aydin, 2022). Rural tourism provides great opportunities to meet the demands of tourists who want to relax and rejuvenate after the pandemic or participate in physically and psychologically relaxing activities in a natural environment (Ahmad et al., 2021; Rosalina et al., 2021).

Hence, rural tourism offers local communities the opportunities to diversify the economy of rural areas and to revitalize rural sites. Accordingly, sustainability is one of the priorities of rural tourism development to balance the relationship established among the needs of the visitors, the place, and the host community's chance to promote its local economic development (Ivona, 2021). Additionally, sustainability can help to improve living standards by maintaining the balance

among environmental protection, promoting economic benefits, establishing social justice, and maintaining cultural integrity (Liu et al., 2013). Moreover, Kantar and Svržnjak (2017) showed that the integrated sustainability of rural tourism consists of four dimensions: biological, ecological, economic, and sociocultural and political sustainability.

The District Tourism Association was established by the Sabah government to enhance the sustainability of rural tourism planning and development. It also makes sure that sustainable practices are adopted and implemented among the rural tourism stakeholders across the rural tourism sites. Sustainability has been widely acknowledged as a priority focus of rural tourism development. Further, the concept of sustainability is closely associated with the sustainable development goals (SDGs) introduced in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly as a global commitment towards a better sustainable future. Natural and cultural resources are seen as valuable tourist assets that require sustainable development and sustainable practices for conservation and preservation.

However, managing sustainable rural tourism destinations is a complex task. Simply, sustainability is a complex, subjective, and situational matter, as well as a multidimensional one (Ivona, 2021). Hence, managing these destinations requires a deep understanding of the concept of sustainability and the motives of rural tourism operators.

Tourism provides a direct and indirect contribution to the development of rural areas and the livelihood of the local community. But the development must be sustainable. To do so, sustainable practices must be adopted by those involved in rural tourism. Generally, sustainable rural development approaches encompass three main components of life: economic, ecological, and human (Durana et al., 2015). Integrated sustainability of rural tourism consists of four dimensions: biological, ecological, economic, and sociocultural and political sustainability (Kantar & Svržnjak, 2017). Therefore, the economic, ecological, and human components are deemed relevant for sustainable rural tourism development. Sustainable practices enhance socioeconomic benefits for communities that live in tourist destinations and

help to conserve cultural heritage and create authentic tourist experiences. Likewise, the sustainable development perspective is an important aspect of the assessment of destination competitiveness beyond the economic, socioeconomic, and community development perspectives (Luštický & Bednářov, 2018). Likewise, sustainable practices have become a new norm in business in response to societal and governmental demands, along with increasing consumer awareness (Chabowski et al., 2010; Kotler, 2011) of current business practices (Boiral & Henri, 2015) and linking social sustainability and economic performance (Duong, 2022).

## II. Literature Reviews

Rural tourism has been the subject of extensive research from various perspectives. Ruiz-Real et al. (2020) pointed out that rural tourism and its development have attracted significant attention, prompting an increased number of research studies into the subject. Recent research by Nongbri and Singh (2022) examined sustainable rural tourism and entrepreneurship while López-Sanz et al. (2021) focused on rural tourism and the sustainable development goals. An and Alacron (2020) reviewed sustainable rural tourism, and Ivona (2021) examined the sustainability of rural tourism and promotion of local development. Moreover, Martini et al. (2020) investigated the role of female entrepreneurs in sustainable tourism development in marginal rural mountain areas. Radović et al. (2020) studied financing problems in rural tourism. López-Sanz et al. (2021) delved into rural tourists' behaviour regarding sustainable development goals. Additionally, Rosalina et al. (2021) studied the economic impacts of rural tourism while Demirović et al. (2020) investigated rural residents' perceptions of sustainable tourism development. Beyond that, Getz and Carlsen (2000) looked at the characteristics of rural tourism enterprises, and Kastenholz et al. (2018) studied the dimensions of rural tourism experiences. Kantar and Svržnjak (2017) delved into rural tourism development from

sociological perspectives, and Podovac (2016) investigated the importance of sustainable rural tourism development in Serbia. Likewise, extensive studies have been conducted on the conceptualization of rural tourism (Lane, 1994), the basic motivations of rural tourists (Park & Yoon, 2009), and the problems encountered in rural tourism diversification (Sharpley, 2002). Adopting sustainable practices has been a topic of interest in various aspects of the literature. It seems the past studies on rural tourism are fragmented. There has been a prevalence of studies focused on the concept of sustainable rural tourism and the understanding of sustainable tourism from the environmental, economic, and social aspects in a holistic manner and from the customers' perspectives (An & Alarcon, 2020) but not from the tour operator's perspective (Hamid & Isa, 2020). However, sustainable tourism, in particular sustainable practices, requires participation by all the stakeholders in the tourism industry (United Nations Environment Programme & World Tourism Organization, 2005). Little is known about the extent of sustainable practices from the rural tourism operators, especially the meaning of and motives for sustainable practices adopted in rural areas of Sabah. Arguably, such information is vital for state tourism agencies and related policy makers in implementing sustainable development in rural sites with sound strategies. Increasing the competitiveness of rural tourism destinations and increasing the number of quality tourism experiences are critical for long-term sustainable growth.

In the context of Sabah, numerous rural areas rich in natural and cultural resources have the potential to be developed as rural tourism destinations by the local community. Local communities are taking advantage of tourism opportunities to diversify rural economies and local development and as a way of revitalizing their respective districts. Over the years, rural tourism has become an important and fast-growing sector in Sabah, creating unique rural tourism experiences and generating benefits to the local communities, which are crucial to ensure competitiveness and sustainable growth (Chan, 2020). Sustainable rural tourism is vital to ensure the continuation of the abundant resources and unique experiences at the

rural sites. However, it is unknown to what extent the sustainability concept has been applied in the rural context by the rural tourism community and operators. Rural communities are important stakeholders in a tourism destination (Gajdošík et al., 2018) because they co-create the tourism product and can significantly affect the visitors' opinions of the destination. Simply, they are the owners and guardians of their local resources—land, buildings, local products—upon which development is based. Their skills, traditions, knowledge, and energy are the principal resources for rural development; their engagement is vital. These are the people who live in a particular rural area that is the basis for sustainable development. They know best what, how, and why for sustainability practices.

In order to address this research gap, this paper explores the sustainable practices of the rural tourism stakeholders. In particular, this paper explores the underlying meaning and motivational factors to adopt sustainable practices at two rural tourism districts in Sabah from the rural community perspectives.

The objectives of this paper are outlined below:

- Explore the meaning of sustainable tourism practices for the rural tourism stakeholders in Sabah.
- Describe the main motivating factors for sustainable practices among rural tourism stakeholders.
- Identify areas where sustainable tourism practices can be improved in rural tourism sites.
- Propose strategies for sustainable rural tourism.

## A. Rural Tourism and Sustainable Development Practices

There is growing attention to the importance of nature conservation, local culture, and traditional rural societies (Ivona, 2021). Although rural tourism offers a development prospect for rural areas that produce positive economic value, it also has negative social and environmental impacts. Thus, the adoption of sustainable practices by tourism stakeholders is crucial. Such practices include environmental protection, economic development, social equity, and ecological

effects. Hall (1998) indicated that the economic, environmental, and social aspects were three pillars of sustainability in developing sustainable tourism. Seghezze (2009) stated, "Sustainability is usually seen as a guide for the economy and social policymaking in equilibrium with ecological conditions" (p. 539). Thus, sustainability is necessary for the development of rural tourism (Dresner, 2002).

In the development of sustainable tourism, the environmental, economic, and social dimensions play a crucial role in the sustainable tourist destination. In early stages, the environmental dimension is the core focus in sustainable development. Subsequently, the social and economic dimensions become important for achieving true sustainability (Echebarria et al., 2018). This implies that environmental systems that preserve life resources, social systems that aim for equity, and economic systems that offer efficiency in resource use (Glavič & Lukman, 2007) need to be included in a comprehensive system. For example, green or environmentally friendly practices that attract customers and tourists' attention (Mazhenova et al., 2016) and show greater concern for environmental conservation at tourist destinations are important (Miller, 2003). The importance of destination trust as part of the social dimension is necessary to attract tourists in the context of destination sustainability (Han et al., 2020). For the economic aspect, destination trust serves as a tourist motivation to visit the destination (Claver-Cortés et al., 2007). In the same vein, sustainable development and practices enhance the destination residents' quality of life (Bestard & Nadal, 2007).

Presumably, sustainable rural tourism practices are an approach to support sustainable development goals in a variety of ways. Sustainable rural tourism helps to reduce poverty by providing alternative incomes to generations under SDG 1 and to improve access to clean water and health services in rural sites under SDG 3. Such practices also enhance and provide work and economic growth under SDG 6 and reduce inequality growth in rural districts through economic benefits and infrastructure improvement under SDG 10. Moreover, sustainable tourism enhances rural

economic growth through the responsible use of natural resources under SDG 12 and creates a more sustainable rural community under SDG 11. Similarly, the implementation of practices and sustainable development requires the support, cooperation, and partnership of other local government organizations and authorities, particularly the district office, the local government, and the Department of Wildlife and Forestry. They are accountable for local resources and governance.

The tourist destination offers a range of natural attractions and unique tourist experiences that require sustainable development and practices by the destination's stakeholders. Tourism in rural areas provides livelihoods for local people through job creation, encouragement of public-private partnerships, and stimulation of agricultural production. Developing tourism in rural areas improves the relationship among people with different demographic characteristics, especially those in urban and rural areas. In this way, it enhances the appeal of local culture and traditions, in which tourists are especially interested (Podovac & Tončev, 2016). In this sense, rural tourism appears to be an agent for change in rural places or destinations.

With this understanding, rural tourism can bring a valuable contribution to the sustainable development of rural areas. The process of sustainable economic, social, political, cultural, and environmental change, designed to improve the quality of life of the local population of a rural region, is a significant part of rural tourism development (European Summer Academy for Sustainable Rural Development, 2003, p. 4).

## B. Meaning of and Motivation for Adopting Sustainable Practices.

The sustainable practices in the rural tourism are highly dependent upon the acceptance and motives of the rural tourism stakeholders. That acceptance is largely based on the understanding of the concept of sustainable practices and the stakeholders' motives to adopt sustainable practices. Indeed, rural tourism operators may be hesitant due to a lack of understanding

why and how their actions are important to achieving sustainable practices. Understanding how rural tourism operators decide to adopt sustainable practices is important to stimulating further adoption rates.

Pull and push factor theory is a widely used theory to understand the motivation of an individual. Push factors are defined as internal motives or forces towards sustainability such as needs, expectations, learning, and knowledge while pull factors are external forces that drive towards sustainability, such as long-term growth, social development, destination competitiveness or images, attraction to visitors, and environmental sustainability at the destination (Gnoth, 1997). Vaugeois et al. (2019) noted the key motivational factors for sustainable practices include personal values about sustainability, protecting natural and cultural resources, attracting new markets, and cost-savings in operations. Currin (2012) stated the motivational forces for adopting sustainable practices in the business organization can be related to economics advantage, corporate social responsibility, environmental protection, or ethical and regulatory requirements. Menozzi et al. (2015) noted key motivational factors such as meeting consumer expectations and competitive advantage for firms and possessing a destination image that attracts visitors.

Hamid and Isa (2020) studied the motivational factors of tour operators in Malaysia in adopting sustainable practices and found they included facility design, sustainability system, legal compliance, conserving resources, employee development, customer satisfaction, sustainable marketing, and a purchasing strategy.

### C. Sustainable Tourism Development and Principles

The concept of sustainable tourism means "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economy, social, and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and the host communities" (United Nations Environment Programme & World Tourism Organization, 2005, pp. 11-12). The sustainable tourism model captures

the interconnection among the three pillars, as presented in Figure 1 below.

These three dimensions are crucial for the sustainable development of rural tourism, and they must be integrated into the sustainable practices of rural tourism operators. Rural tourism destinations need to align with the three goals of sustainable development, namely economic viability, environmental protection, and social well-being of the community. A proper balance among these three dimensions is needed in order to achieve long-term sustainability (Bhuiyan et al., 2012).

This implies that sustainability, sustainable development, and destination dimensions are important components in evaluating sustainable rural tourism destinations.

The literature documents some key issues in sustainable tourism development as pointed out by Chan (2020):

- Environmental capacities are frequently ignored.
- Local stakeholders often have negative perceptions of ecotourism and lack proper environmental education.
- The language barrier among local stakeholders becomes an obstacle in the sustainable development of ecotourism.
- Development may be profit centred.
- Conflicts may arise between residents and landowners within a protected area.

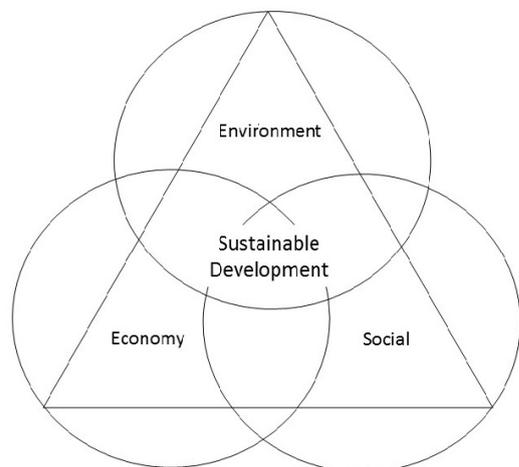


Figure 1. Three dimensions of sustainable development

- Principles of sustainable tourism may be disregarded, or the characteristics of the production and consumption of ecotourism experiences may be ignored.

Much attention has been paid to sustainable tourism research in the context of tourism and ecotourism. Similarly, environmental responsibility, social equity, economic health, and cultural vitality have been the subject of many studies in recent years. In the context of rural tourism, sustainable practices require building consensus among the rural tourism operators and all relevant stakeholders, and strong political leadership at the district level is vital. In addition, we must recognize that the practices of sustainable tourism are an ongoing process and require the monitoring of its impact, allowing for preventive and corrective measures whenever necessary. Therefore, understanding the concepts and significance of sustainable tourism practices and the motivating factors of the stakeholders involved is paramount.

### III. Research Method

This paper describes an exploratory qualitative research project designed to investigate sustainable tourism practices of the rural tourism stakeholders. An inductive approach was adopted to address the research objectives. Specifically, this paper focuses on individuals' subjectivity and understanding of sustainable tourism practices in term of meaning, motivations, and areas of improvement. Hence, personal interviews were deemed a relevant research technique for data collection. A total of 29 respondents participated in the interviews, which were held from April to May 2022. The respondent profile is presented in Table 1 below. The study used a convenience-sampling technique based on the lists provided by the two rural tourism associations, namely Kota Marudu and Kuala Penyu. Fourteen of the 29 were from Kota Marudu, and 15 were from Kuala Penyu. Most of

the respondents were 31-40 years old and married. Most of them were formally educated and had been working in rural tourism for more than 6 years.

We carried out data collection in the two districts and held the data at the facilities offered by the rural tourism operator. The data were cross sectional and collected on-site. The sample size was determined when information and theoretical insights reached saturation, which constituted hearing the same information reported without anything new. Walker (1985) suggested that 20 to 40 in-depth interviews are necessary for qualitative research of this nature. In-depth interviews were conducted with rural tourism operators and lasted an average of 45 min and were audio recorded. Personal interviews were conducted with the consent of the respondents. Prior to the data collection, an invitation letter was sent to all rural tourism operators in the two districts with the assistance of the districts' rural tourism associations. Subsequently, the dates and locations of the interviews were confirmed by email with the presidents of the two district rural tourism associations.

The data were analysed using an inductive qualitative-phenomenological approach. A total of 29 audio tapes

**Table 1.** Respondents' profiles

Demographics	Categories	Number of respondents
Gender	Male	19
	Female	10
Age range	18-20	3
	21-30	6
	31-40	10
	41-50	8
	Above 51	2
Educational	No formal education	5
	Formal education	25
Marital status	Single	4
	Married	25
Years in operations	1-5	8
	6-10	12
	11-20	6
	Above 21	3

from the in-depth interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure the authenticity and richness of the data. The data-analysis process involved identifying keywords or phrases from interview responses, developing and categorising emerging themes, and capturing the meaning and relating it to the research objectives. Coding was mainly based on a single phrase or significant meaningful statements (determined by the wording of the responses) that generated themes related to the research objectives. Key themes and patterns emerged from the coding process. The interview responses were read and reread and analysed by drawing out the key themes and variables relating to the descriptive themes of the meaning of sustainable practices, motivational factors, areas of improvement, and sustainable development strategies. The meaning of sustainable practices was guided by the aforementioned sustainability pillars. The motivational factors for adopting these practices were guided by the pull and push factors and eight themes of sustainable practices in tour operations suggested by Hamid and Isa (2020).

## IV. Results and Discussions

### A. The Meaning of Sustainable Tourism Practices

The respondents' explanations of the meaning of sustainable tourism practices reflected nine major themes that emerged from the interview responses presented in Table 2. These themes are conservation and preservation, economic benefits, growth and minimal impact on the environment, competitive products and quality attractions, collaboration and protection, future generations, fairness, and meeting the needs of tourists. These themes closely reflect the descriptions of sustainable tourism practices as documented in the aforementioned literature.

A significant number of the respondents related the meaning of sustainable tourism practices to the conservation and preservation of resources. For example, as stated by respondents, sustainable tourism "means to conserve and protect the environment and nature" (SG6) and "focuses on the conservation of ecology and natural environment" (WT5) "without damaging the natural conditions and culture" (WT3). Likewise, some respondents also connected sustainable tourism to economic benefits, growth, and future generation of jobs: "The presence of tourists will increase and stimulate the local economic business" (SG5), "providing economic returns" (WT3).

**Table 2.** Meaning of sustainable tourism practice from rural tourism stakeholders

Number	Themes emerged from responses *(KP, DP, WT, SG, KLH & MC)	Concept of sustainable practices
1	Conservation and preservation of environment and resources (S4, KP4, DP1, WT3, WT5, WT9, SG6)	Conservation and preservation
2	Economic benefits (SG9, SG7, SG6, SG5, SG4, SG2, S4, KP, KPTA, WT4, KLH & MC, WT3)	Benefits
3	Long-term growth and minimal impacts on environment (KP, WT9)	Long-term and impacts
4	Competitive products and quality Attractions (DP1, WT6, WT7)	Quality tourism products
5	Collaboration and protection (WT2, WT5, WT7)	Social development
6	Future generations (WT2, SG4)	Future
7	Knowledge, awareness, and improvement (WT10, SG2, WT2)	Knowledge and improvement
8	Fairness	Justice
9	Meeting the needs of tourists (SG7, WT10, KP3)	Tourist satisfaction

\*KP: Kuala Penyu, DP: D'Paying, WT: Walai Tabilong, SG: Stephen Garden, KLH and MC: Kinorout Long Houes and Mt Cochran, S: Sipitang.

\* Respondents originate.

Likewise, collaboration and protection; competitive products and quality tourism attractions; fairness; knowledge, awareness, and improvement; and meeting the tourists' needs were associated with sustainable tourism practices. These meanings were expressed by the respondents: "A collaboration between members of the association" (WT2) and "[it] means products have high attractiveness" (DP1, WT7) and "are competitive and attractive" (WT6); "it means long-term growth and for future generation[s]" (WT2, SG4). Interestingly, the president of the rural tourism association interpreted the meaning as "correcting weaknesses in the association and willingness to improve" (SG7).

These findings seem to indicate that rural tourism operators interpreted sustainable tourism practices in different ways. Evidence suggests that sustainable practices are well linked with the environmental, economic, and social aspects of the rural destination, as well as the pillars of sustainability. Likewise, sustainable practices were also interpreted as long-term growth and aiding future generations, the provision of quality services and the competitiveness of destinations, meeting tourists' needs, and enhancing education and knowledge. Sustainable practices are critical to the sustainability of the rural tourist destination and thus transcend the pillars of sustainability.

## B. Motivations for Adopting Sustainable Practices in Rural Tourism

The empirical evidence revealed seven themes related to motivations to adopt sustainable rural

tourism, as reported in Table 3. The themes related to economic benefits including economic activity and growth, conservation and preservation of natural resources, local and social development, collaboration and cooperation, networking, enhancing knowledge and training to build resilience, government support and governance as well as marketing and competition. These themes can be categorised based on pull and push factors and the sustainability pillars—economy, environment, and society. Overall, the majority of respondents were eager to learn and acquire the necessary knowledge to ensure rural tourism development and more sustainable growth. The findings seem to suggest that rural tourism is seen as a tool to drive economic growth: "Motivated ... because of the economic growth and benefits if we go for sustainable practice" (S5, SG6, SG4).

Likewise, local and social development, including government support, has motivated some of the rural tourism players to implement sustainable practices: "Sustainable practices enable us to collaborate better" (SG8, SG2, WT2, WT8, WT10). Others stated, "The support from the government really motivates us to head towards sustainable practices" (SG7, SG2, S4).

Additionally, respondents also considered their motives to be driven by knowledge, upskilling programs, and awareness of sustainable practices: "[We] wanted to know more, the knowledge and training about sustainable practices are our motivation" (SG2, WT1, WT5).

As evidenced, many of the respondents expressed that they were motivated due to government support and policies. Also, the adoption of sustainable practices

**Table 3.** Motivational factors for adopting sustainable practices

Number	Themes emerged from responses	Pull and push factors	Sustainability dimensions
1	Economic benefits: generate economic activity and growth	Push	Economic benefits
2	Conservation and preservation of natural resources	Pull	Environment
3	Collaboration with the local community, better cooperation and networking	Push	Social benefits
4	Local and social development	Pull	Social benefits
5	Knowledge and training, resilience	Push	Education
6	Government support and policy	Pull	Governance
7	Able to market and compete	Push	Marketing

enabled the rural tourism operators to market and differentiate the rural tourism destinations and thus develop competitive advantages. In term of push and pull factors, economic benefits, social benefits, education, and marketing can be termed as push factors that encourage the rural tourism stakeholders to adopt sustainable practices. The environmental benefits, local and social development, and government support and policies are seen as destination attractions or pull factors that encourage the adoption of sustainable practices. This suggests the importance of push factors for rural tourism stakeholders to adopt sustainable practices.

Based on the findings in Table 3 above, it seems the adoption of sustainable practices was largely motivated by economic benefits, the need to conserve and preserve the environment, and social and local development in terms of collaboration and cooperation. Beyond these elements, knowledge and skills, government support and policies, and improved marketing and competitiveness were documented as important factors in adopting sustainable practices. This implies that the motives for adopting sustainable practices in the rural context are similar to those of the tour operators Hamid and Isa (2020) studied who were motivated by conserving resources, legal compliance, employee development, customer satisfaction, and sustainable marketing. It is interesting to note that the design of the facilities, the sustainability system, and the

procurement strategy were not seen as motivating factors in the field of rural tourism.

### C. Areas of Improvement in Sustainable Rural Tourism Practices

The findings reveal several areas of improvement needed to enhance the sustainable rural tourism practices employed by the rural tourism stakeholders. These areas are presented in Table 4. The six areas of improvement include the activities of participation and collaboration in sustainable practices, knowledge and skills, infrastructure and basic facilities, conservation and preservation of the natural environment, and marketing and recycling. Some of these can be further categorized as social, economic, and environmental aspects.

In order to spearhead sustainable practices at the rural sites, the findings suggest that there is a need to increase the participation of rural tourism players and the community as well as collaborative efforts in the implementation of sustainable practices. This is quite challenging due to different opinions and resulting conflicts. Thus, a deeper understanding of the benefits of sustainable practices in rural tourism is crucial. At the same time, enhancing the related knowledge and skills is essential for the rural tourism players in pursuing sustainable practices. Simply, the

**Table 4.** Areas of improvement in sustainable rural tourism practices

Number	Respondent responses	Theme/s emerged
1	Encourage participation and collaboration from all rural tourism players to ensure sustainable practices within the rural sites. (SG10, SG8, SG5, LHGS, KP, WT4, WT, WT6, SG2, WT5)	Participation and collaboration
2	Offer training courses for upskilling sustainable practices. (SG7, SG6, SG2, S4, WT10, WT5, WT3) Provide guidance. (WT4, WT6, KLH & MC, WT7, D'P2, WT8, WT9)	Training, upskilling
3	Improve basic infrastructure and facilities such as adequate supply of electricity, water, and internet access and create a tourist information centre. (SG1, SG5, SG7, SG9, SG4, D'P, D'P2)	Infrastructure and basic facilities
4	Conserve and preserve the natural and cultural heritages of the rural community. (SG4, S4, WT6)	Conservation, preservation
5	Practice 3Rs (reduce, reuse, recycle). (S5, WT7, SG1, SG5)	Protection of environment and resources
6	Innovative and creative promotion of uniqueness of rural tourism sites to attract more tourists. (SG5, S4, KP)	Creative marketing

understanding of sustainable practices is very limited in the rural communities. The rural tourism players are required to apply sustainable rural tourism practices, knowledge, and skills so as to improve their sustainable practices. Having adequate infrastructure and basic facilities such as water, electricity, and internet is important to rural tourism operations. Many respondents stated there is a need to strengthen the efforts of conservation and preservation as well as use creative marketing in order to attract more tourists to the rural sites. Likewise, sustainable practices can be enhanced by using the 3Rs—reduce, reuse, recycle—more often at the rural sites. These are crucial areas and need additional attention in order to develop sustainable rural tourism in Sabah.

#### D. Sustainable Development Strategies

This paper proposes several strategies to strengthen the adoption of sustainable practices and the roles and capacities of rural tourism stakeholders in the sustainable development of rural tourism.

The development of sustainable rural tourism requires that rural tourism operators understand the concept of sustainable practices and the benefits of their adoption. Sustainable practices require comprehensive collaboration and partnership among all stakeholders to achieve a holistic approach. Such acceptance includes that of sustainable practices of the operators at the rural destination. Rural tourism operators build strong collaborations with tour operators and travel agencies to promote sustainable practices at the destination. The rural tourism association must establish relevant guidelines and a committee for monitoring and applying sustainable practices within the environmental, economic, and social aspects of rural sites. Essentially, all rural tourism operators must embrace sustainable practices and cooperate with one another at the rural sites.

Second, the rural tourism association and the destination management organization should set up a training and development program as part of the development strategy for sustainable rural tourism development. Such a program will provide essential

knowledge and technical skills to support the application of sustainable rural tourism practices. The adoption of sustainable practices and approaches is somewhat new to the rural tourism sector, so incentive programs for rural tourism operators should be developed to encourage them to become more sustainable. The incentives should include both monetary and non-monetary rewards.

Third, major government organisations such as the local government and the Department of Wildlife and Forestry need to support sustainable development in rural areas. This can be initiated through the regional rural tourism association with support from the Sabah tourism council. Thus, the conservation and preservation of natural resources can be achieved.

Fourth, adequate infrastructure and facilities such as water, electricity, internet access, and road access to rural tourism sites are vital to the development of rural tourism. Currently, many rural tourism sites and commercial activities are interrupted or shut down due to the absence of these facilities.

Sustainable practices benefit the development of rural tourism; however, substantial upfront investments and resistance to change in sustainability and practices, as well as the practicality of sustainable practices, can impede the adoption of sustainable practices by rural tourism operators.

#### V. Conclusions and Implications

This paper deepens the understanding of the meaning of and rationale for adopting sustainable practices in the rural tourism destination from the perspective of rural tourism operators. It addresses an area that lacks research and empirical evidence. Rural tourism operators' perspectives are vital because they are the implementers, but their perspectives are often overlooked, so these findings have addressed those gaps. The findings also highlight that the meaning of sustainable practices often transcends the three pillars of sustainability, namely economic, environmental,

and social aspects. Impacts to the destination, quality tourism products, fairness, and visitor satisfaction were linked to sustainable practices. These are important factors that are interpreted in the context of sustainable practices.

We also conclude that economic benefits, social development, environmental protection, upskilling, and government support are the key drivers for rural tourism operators to adopt sustainable practices. Major areas for the improvement of sustainability practices are strongly associated with the three sustainability pillars: training and knowledge, development of rural destination infrastructure and facilities, and efforts to improve collaboration and participation among the rural tourism players. These findings add to the literature on sustainable rural tourism development and have practical implications for rural tourism operators to adopt sustainable practices in their operations at rural sites. Thus, sustainable management of rural tourism and sustainable management of destinations can be carried out in Sabah.

These findings also contribute to a deeper understanding of sustainable practices of the rural tourism operators in the rural tourism context in Sabah. The empirical evidence suggests that the respective district tourism agencies should work to establish a sound approach for the sustainable development of rural tourism. Most importantly, the suggested strategies have practical implications for improving rural sites as sustainable destinations. These strategies are vital in managing or leading the development of sustainable practices for rural tourism. Arguably, rural tourism is perceived as a form of rural development; therefore, sustainability and sustainable practices are essential to the rural tourism community and the long-term sustainable growth of rural tourism. Sustainable practices that adhere to sustainability principles in their economic, environmental, and social development strategies for rural areas cannot be ignored. Above all, rural tourism can be a sustainable development strategy and a tool to differentiate rural tourism products. Financial support and training programs related to sustainability as well as strong collaboration among the local community

members are crucial to ensure the sustainability of rural tourism destinations. The participation of all stakeholders, with the support of the tourism associations and local authorities, helps to overcome the challenges encountered by rural tourism operators.

However, the results of the study need to be examined against a number of limitations. First, the respondents were restricted to two tourism districts. Thus, results cannot be directly generalized to a larger population. A small sample of respondents is restrictive, and the generalizability of the findings is limited to the specific population of a rural area of the country. However, this limitation could encourage a new avenue for research to be carried out in other rural tourism destinations via the quantitative method for data collection. Nevertheless, the findings are deemed useful for sustainable rural tourism practices.

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