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# Locals' perceptions towards the impacts of tourism and the importance of local engagement: A comparative study of two islands in Malaysia

## Abstract

*This study investigates the perception of locals residing on two touristic islands in Malaysia about the economic, social, environmental and cultural impacts of tourism development. Additionally, the importance of local engagement in tourism development was also investigated from the perspective of residents. A total of 371 responses were collected (183 local residents on Perhentian island and 188 local residents on Redang island). Results of the study reveal that while residents on both islands perceive the highest environmental impacts of tourism on water quality, wildlife, and air quality, the environmental impacts are perceived to be lower for residents of Redang island than in Perhentian island. Besides the detrimental impacts of tourism on environment, majority of the locals perceive the positive economic, social and cultural impacts of tourism to be larger than its negative impacts. Additionally, the study found that residents perceived the engagement of locals in tourism development to be important. The findings of this study provide invaluable implications to tourism development managers and policy makers.*

*Key words: economic impacts; environmental impacts; social impacts; cultural impacts; locals' perceptions; islands; Malaysia*

## Introduction

Tourism can be perceived both positively and negatively by the local community. Some associate tourism to job creation for locals, investment attraction, income generation, as well as improved welfare and enhanced rural infrastructure and services (Andriotis, 2002; Mitchell & Reid, 2001; Saveriades, 2000), while others are rather concerned with the negative consequences of tourism development including its socio-cultural and environmental costs (Chen, 2000; Perdue, Long & Allen, 1990). Despite the numerous benefits of tourism for national or regional development, it is accompanied by social costs (Davis & Morais, 2004; Lankford, Pfister, Knowles & Williams, 2003) and can lead to socio-cultural, environmental and economic damages to the host population in case its development is not properly

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planned and integrated with local values and environment (Jeonglyeol Lee, Li & Kim, 2007; Tatoglu, Erdal, Ozgur & Azakli, 2002). Since the attitudes of locals towards the development of tourism can determine the success or failure of tourism, it is essential to investigate how locals perceive tourism before implementing any development plan in the tourist destination. Satisfied locals are likely to welcome and show hospitality towards tourists, thus enhancing the image of the tourist destination and attracting more tourists in future. On the contrary, dissatisfied locals may show some hostile attitudes towards tourists which can scare tourists away from an area (WTO, 2004).

There is a close link between attitude and behavior, a positive attitude towards tourism can result in a pro-tourism behavior such as local participation in tourism development and the conservation of the resources necessary for tourism (Lepp, 2007). Therefore, since involvement of locals has been recognized as a key component of effective tourism planning (Chambers, 2002; Wates, 2000), exploring the voices of locals and identifying their perceptions towards the impacts of tourism can benefit policy makers through providing a platform for better understanding the local's attitudes towards tourism and engaging them in tourism development. The majority of studies on community support for tourism have been conducted in the developed and industrialized countries (Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012), and despite a growing number of studies in developing countries (e.g. Abdollahzadeh & Sharifzadeh, 2012; Lepp, 2007), still there is a need for further studies to shed more lights on the perceptions and support of locals for tourism in these contexts.

Since involving the opinions of the host community is an inevitable part of any effort towards the development of sustainable tourism (Abdollahzadeh & Sharifzadeh, 2012), this study seeks to investigate the perception of locals residing in two touristic islands of Malaysia regarding the impacts of tourism development. As tourism impacts are categorized into four main categories, namely environmental, economic, social, and cultural (Chen & Chen, 2010; Jackson, 2008; Nepal, 2008; Pham & Kayat, 2011), this study investigates the perception of local residents in Perhentian and Redang island (Malaysia) in all of these four categories. A number of previous studies has been conducted on examining the effects of tourism impact on community using objective indicators (Crotts & Holland, 1993); the perception of community residents about the economic (e.g. Tosun, 2002; Weaver & Lawton, 2013), social (e.g. Andereck, 1995; Backman & Backman, 1997), cultural (e.g. Tosun, 2002; Wang, Fu, Cecil & Avgoustis, 2006), and environmental impacts of tourism (e.g. Andereck, 1995; Koenen, Chon & Christianson, 1995). Yet Kim, Uysal and Sirgy, (2012) still argue that community impact of tourism is still under studied, especially on islands located in developing countries. Additionally, the perceived importance of local engagement in tourism is another issue which remains relatively unexplored. Hence, to fill this void of research in the area of sustainable tourism, this study aims to find the answer to the following questions:

1. What is the perception of locals towards the economic impacts of tourism?
2. What is the perception of locals towards the social impacts of tourism?
3. What is the perception of locals towards the environmental impacts of tourism?
4. What is the perception of locals towards the cultural impacts of tourism?
5. What is the perception of locals towards the importance of local engagement in tourism development?

## Literature review

A number of previous studies have investigated the perception of local residents on the tourism development. The study by Abdollahzadeh and Sharifzadeh (2012) indicated that positive attitudes were connected with the belief that tourism creates more jobs and opportunities for earning income, increases demand for local products, promotes agricultural markets and improves rural services and a chance to have more welfare. Lepp (2007) explored the attitudes of residents of a village in Uganda with regards to tourism and found that locals considered tourism as one of key means for their community development and generation of income, while boosting agricultural markets. Horn and Simmons (2002) studied the attitudes of locals in two tourist destinations in New Zealand, namely Rotorua and Kaikoura. They found some differences in the attitudes and perception of locals towards tourism. While residents in Rotorua associated tourism to a source of stability that has been locally controlled, people of Kaikoura linked tourism to a series of rapid changes in the region and had less trust to the management of tourism in comparison to residents of Rotorua. This finding indicates the differences in the attitudes of locals towards tourism in destinations in the same cultural context, which might be attributed to the varying relative economic importance of tourism at each destination.

One of the most significant influences on the attitudes of locals towards tourism is the economic benefits resulting from tourism development (Haralambopoulos & Pizam, 1996; Lindberg & Johnson, 1997). Nunkoo and Gursoy (2012) investigated residents' support for tourism in island economy of Mauritius and found that despite the direct link between one's identity and support for tourism, it does not necessarily influence attitudes. Kim *et al.* (2012) examined a theoretical framework investigating the link between perceived impacts of tourism on locals' sense of wellbeing, and health & safety and captured its influence on life satisfaction of residents. Their study demonstrated a link between residents' perceived impacts of tourism and residents' life satisfaction. The results of the study by C.-F. Chen and Chen (2010) in a heritage city in southern Taiwan revealed that the perceived positive impacts of tourism are significantly influenced by community attachment and economic dependence, which in turn resulted in residents' support for tourism development.

Nepal (2008) investigated the attitudes of local residents in Central British Columbia, Canada, towards the socio-economic and recreational opportunities of tourism, and the future of tourism development in the region and found a positive attitude by majority of residents towards tourism. Additionally, the study revealed that despite the low satisfaction level of residents with the existing opportunities of tourism in the region, they perceived the potential benefits of tourism development to exceed its negative impacts. Jackson (2008) explored the perception of residents of Dayton Beach in Florida regarding the social, economic and environmental impacts of special event tourism and found a positive attitude towards tourism as long as the perceived benefits are more than the negative impacts. This is also supported by Jurowski and Gursoy (2004) and C.-F. Chen and Chen (2010) who argued that once residents believe that the benefits of tourism outweigh its potential costs, they will be supportive of tourism development. In a recent study in the context of religious hosts, Wong, McIntosh and Ryan (2013) examined the perceptions of monks and nuns living at the Buddhist sites about tourism. They found that despite acknowledging the existence of disturbances created by visitors, most of the interviewed monks and nuns perceived tourism as a way for enabling people to learn about Buddhism. Additionally, Pham (2012) examined the perceptions of local residents in Ha Long

Bay, which is the Vietnam's first World Heritage Site and found a positive attitude towards tourism among most of the respondents.

Along with the positive attitudes towards tourism, some residents associate tourism development with negative impacts on the society, as they perceive tourism to increase drug abuse, sex, drinking alcohol, and criminal activities in the tourist destination community. This negative attitude towards tourism can arise from the perception that tourists are excessive consumers of sex, alcohol, food and natural resources (Ebron, 1997; Gössling, 2002; Sindiga, 1996; Teye, Sirakaya & F Sönmez, 2002). Some of the earlier studies provide evidence for the negative contribution of tourism to social problems including begging, gambling, drug trafficking, and prostitution, while uprooting traditional society, and causing deterioration of the traditional culture (e.g. Ahmed & Krohn, 1992; Andereck, Valentine, Knopf & Vogt, 2005). Interestingly, the study by Schipani (2013) revealed that despite the modest financial benefits of tourism and relatively negative perception about the cultural, environmental and social impacts of tourism, it was very positively perceived by locals in Lao PDR. Table 1 provides a summary of some of the key studies from different geographical contexts, with a highlight of their key findings.

**Table 1**  
**Summary of some key studies on the perception of locals towards tourism development**

Study	Context	Method	Locals' perceptions
Abdollahzadeh and Sharifzadeh (2012)	Iran	Quantitative (N* = 262)	+
Lepp (2007)	Uganda	Qualitative (N = 48)	+
Horn and Simmons (2002)	New Zealand	Qualitative	Mixed (+ & -)
Wong <i>et al.</i> (2013)	China	Qualitative (N = 25)	+
Schipani (2013)	Laos	Quantitative (N = 391)	+
Gössling (2002)	Tanzania	Qualitative (N = 63)	-
Teye <i>et al.</i> (2002)	Ghana	Quantitative (N = 464)	-
Pham (2012)	Vietnam	Quantitative (N = 417)	+

\* Number of subjects

Overall, the key concepts investigated in this study for the perceived impacts of tourism include economic, environmental, social and cultural influences. In other words, we are interested to examine how tourism development has influenced the local economy, environment, society and culture of two tourist islands in Malaysia, in the eyes of their residents. Both positive and negative impacts of tourism will be measured and accounted for, along with the perceived attitude of locals towards engagement in tourism development. Since the success of tourism development lies in the support and cooperation from the host community, understanding the way it is being perceived and identifying locals' attitudes towards their engagement in tourism development can offer significant insights to tourism managers. According to a social exchange theory (SET), an individual is likely to enter an exchange if the perceived costs (negative impacts) resulting from the exchange do not exceed the benefits derived from the exchange (positive impacts) (Skidmore, 1979). Prior studies which used SET suggest that positive attitudes towards tourism are usually accompanied by the higher level of support for the industry while negative attitudes results in a lower support (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2010; Vargas-Sánchez, de los Ángeles Plaza-Mejía & Porrás-Bueno, 2009). Thus, the way local residents perceive the outcomes of tourism in terms of local economy, society, environment and culture can impact their attitude towards tourism growth and development.

## Research methodology

### The study area

This study was conducted on two touristic islands in the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia, namely Perhentian island and Redang island. Belonging to the state of Terengganu, both islands are neighboring to each other in the South China Sea. Interestingly, Redang island and Perhentian island have been gazetted as marine parks or marine-protected areas by the government in 1991 and 1994 respectively; along with other 40 islands throughout the country. The establishments of marine parks are aimed at protecting, conserving and managing important marine ecosystems especially coral reef and its associated flora and fauna that were found in these islands. Redang island and Perhentian island share similar key selling points; namely the distinctive marine ecosystem, pristine beaches, crystal clear seawater, tropical weather and the rainforests; therefore have become popular destinations to foreign tourists and Malaysians alike. As reported by Motour Terengganu, about 287,149 international tourists visited Terengganu in 2010, of which 90% purposely visited the two islands without visiting any other attractions in the state (Hamzah & Hampton, 2011). Although tourist activities in the islands are stopped during the wet season (north-east monsoon), seasonality has so far not affected the tourism growth of the islands.

Redang island is located approximately 45 kilometers off the mainland coast and it has a total land area of 2672.5 hectare, spanning over 7.5 kilometer in length and 6 kilometer at its widest point (Unit Perancang Ekonomi Negeri Terengganu, 2011). Approximately 80% of the island is made of cliffs and rocky headlands, whereas the remaining of 20% consists of sandy beaches. The island has a small airport and a few private jetties thus it is easily accessible either by air or ferry. The total population of the island in 2010 was approximately two thousand people (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011) or about 200 families. The islanders are predominantly Malay (88.7%), followed by Chinese (4.3%), Indian (0.3%) and foreigner (6.6%).

On the other hand, Perhentian island which is located 20 kilometers off the mainland coast, has a total land area of 1392.1 hectare and is only accessible by water route. The island is comprised of two smaller islands called Perhentian Besar (large Perhentian island) and Perhentian Kecil (small Perhentian island). Perhentian island has almost an equal number of populations as Redang island. Town & Country Planning Department of Peninsular Malaysia reported that about half of the islanders (50%) work in tourism sector, followed by fishing sector (45%), government and businesses (5%) (Loganathan & Subramaniam, 2005).

### Questionnaire design

This study utilized a questionnaire as a survey instrument. Based on a review of relevant literature especially from Mathieson and Wall (1982), a total of 41 items for measuring economic (7 items), social (9 items), environmental (18 items) and cultural impacts (7 items) of tourism were identified. The respondents were required to select their level of agreements with items measuring the perceived impacts of tourism, using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. Prior to the main survey, a pilot survey was conducted and from there, several changes were made, including word replacement and revision to avoid ambiguity and enhancing survey clarity. The final survey instrument was written in Bahasa Malaysia language for the easier understanding by locals.

## Sampling and data collection

The sample chosen in this study were islanders. The survey population was based on the total number of residents resided in the islands. Using the Raosoft Online Sample Size Calculator, the sample size of 239 was calculated for each island; based on 90% of confidence level, 5% of margin error and 50% response distribution. The respondents were selected using a random sampling. The questionnaire was completed by face to face interview with the respondents. Overall, a total of 371 respondents filled up the survey. The participation involved 183 local residents in Perhentian island and 188 local residents in Redang island. The response rate for Perhentian island and Redang island were 76.6% and 78.7% respectively. Table 2 shows a summary of the demographic data for the respondents. Majority of respondents are male with an age ranging from 25 to 59 years old. Additionally, the highest level of education achieved by most of the respondents is high school and they are mainly from a Malay ethnicity.

Table 2  
Demographic profile of respondents (N = 371)

Demographic profile		Perhentian island (N= 183)	Redang island (N= 188)
Gender	Male	145 (79.2 %)	159 (84.6 %)
	Female	38 (20.8 %)	29 (15.4 %)
Age	15-24 years	17 (9.3 %)	25 (13.3 %)
	25-59 years	152 (83.1 %)	150 (79.8 %)
	60-74 years	14 (7.6 %)	13 (6.9 %)
Education	Not enrolled	12 (6.6 %)	9 (4.8 %)
	Primary school	51 (27.9 %)	59 (31.4 %)
	High school	113 (61.7 %)	106 (56.4 %)
	Diploma	5 (2.7 %)	11 (5.9 %)
	Degree	2 (1.1 %)	3 (1.6 %)
Marital status	Single	20 (10.9 %)	25 (13.3 %)
	Married	157 (85.9 %)	157 (83.5 %)
	Widow	3 (1.6 %)	5 (2.7 %)
	Widower	3 (1.6 %)	1 (0.5 %)
Race	Malay	180 (98.5 %)	186 (99.0 %)
	Chinese	1 (0.5 %)	1 (0.5 %)
	German	1 (0.5 %)	-
	Iban	1 (0.5 %)	-
	Filipino	-	1 (0.5 %)

## Findings

First, the perception of residents towards the economic, environmental, social, and cultural impacts of tourism was measured. Table 3 shows the mean score for the perceived positive and negative economic impacts of tourism. Positive impacts were measured with items related to the impacts of tourism in enhancing the income of locals, attracting foreign investment, and its benefits for local population, whereas negative impacts were assessed by items relating to the increased price of goods and property as a result of tourism, and its benefits for outsiders rather than locals. While the perception of respondents

in Perhentian island is more in favor of the economic benefits of tourism (PEI > NEI), local residents in Redang island appear to be more concerned about the negative economic impacts of tourism (NEI > PEI). Besides, results of t-test revealed that the perceived level of positive economic impacts of tourism was significantly higher for residents of Perhentian island compared to residents of Redang island ( $t = 4.58$ , Sig. = 0.000). This could be attributed to the fact that locals play a more important role in running tourism services in Perhentian island compared to Redang island where tourism industry is often controlled by outsiders and large companies.

**Table 3**  
**Descriptive statistics for perceived economic impacts of tourism**

Impact	Island	Mean	Std. deviation
PEI	Perhentian island	4.21	0.56
	Redang island	3.94	0.55
NEI	Perhentian island	3.91	0.59
	Redang island	4.00	0.59

Note: PEI = positive economic impacts; NEI = negative economic impacts.

Furthermore, the perceived environmental impacts of tourism was also measured (Table 4) under 6 categories of environmental impacts, namely "vegetation", "soil, sand and rock", "water quality", "air quality", "landscape", and "wildlife". While locals in both Perhentian and Redang islands perceive the highest environmental impacts of tourism for water quality, wildlife, and air quality, the perceived level of environmental impacts of tourism appears to be lower among the residents of Redang island compared to the perception of residents in Perhentian island, as they have a lower mean score in all categories of environmental impacts. Results of t-test also revealed that the perceived environmental impacts of tourism was significantly higher for residents of Perhentian compared to their peers in Redang island in the following areas: vegetation ( $t = 2.18$ , Sig. = 0.030), Soil, Sand and Rock ( $t = 4.70$ , Sig. = 0.000), landscape ( $t = 2.83$ , Sig. = 0.005), and wildlife ( $t = 3.71$ , Sig. = 0.000).

**Table 4**  
**Descriptive statistics for perceived environmental impacts of tourism**

Category	Island	Mean	Std. deviation
VEG	Perhentian island	3.76	0.97
	Redang island	3.49	1.36
SSR	Perhentian island	3.82	1.29
	Redang island	3.24	1.06
WQ	Perhentian island	3.95	1.84
	Redang island	3.78	1.38
AQ	Perhentian island	3.87	1.07
	Redang island	3.84	2.19
LND	Perhentian island	3.66	0.88
	Redang island	3.40	0.87
WL	Perhentian island	3.95	0.92
	Redang island	3.57	1.02

Note: VEG = perceived impacts of tourism on vegetation; SSR = perceived impacts of tourism on soil, sand and rock; WQ = perceived impacts of tourism on water quality; AQ = perceived impacts of tourism on air quality; LND = perceived impacts of tourism on landscape; WL = perceived impacts of tourism on wildlife.

Overall, it was found that local residents on both islands perceive more positive than negative social impacts for tourism (Table 5). Positive social impacts of tourism involved improvement in public facilities, communications and internet, infrastructure, and transportation. Besides, the negative social impacts of tourism comprised of items related to increased sex, drug abuse, alcohol consumption and criminal activities as a result of tourism. Interestingly, both positive and negative social impacts of tourism are perceived to be higher by residents in Perhentian island compared to Redang island. Nonetheless, the difference in the perception was only significantly different for negative social impacts of tourism ( $t = 6.79$ ,  $Sig. = 0.000$ ).

**Table 5**  
**Descriptive statistics for perceived social impacts of tourism**

Impact	Island	Mean	Std. deviation
PSI	Perhentian island	4.09	0.52
	Redang island	4.05	0.61
NSI	Perhentian island	3.86	0.95
	Redang island	3.16	1.01

Note: PSI = positive social impacts; NSI = negative social impacts.

Lastly, the cultural impacts of tourism were measured (Table 6). Positive cultural impacts involved raising the image of the local culture and helping local people to understand foreign cultures. Additionally, negative cultural impacts included the absorption of western culture, extinction of cultural traditions, and change in the lifestyle and culture of local people along with the development of tourism in the island. It was revealed that residents in Perhentian and Redang islands perceive the positive cultural impacts of tourism to be higher than its negative cultural impacts. Comparison of the perception between the two islands revealed a significantly higher perception towards both positive ( $t = 3.47$ ,  $Sig. = 0.001$ ) and negative ( $t = 5.89$ ,  $Sig. = 0.000$ ) cultural impacts of tourism in Perhentian island than in Redang island.

**Table 6**  
**Descriptive statistics for perceived cultural impacts of tourism**

Impact	Island	Mean	Std. deviation
PCI	Perhentian island	4.31	1.97
	Redang island	3.77	0.78
NCI	Perhentian island	4.30	1.97
	Redang island	3.10	1.17

Note: PCI = positive cultural impacts; NCI = negative cultural impacts.

Overall, other than the environmental impacts of tourism which is an integral the industry, the perception of residents towards tourism appears to be positive as they have a higher perception towards the positive economic, social and cultural impacts of tourism than its negative impacts. Next, the perception of locals towards the importance of local engagement in tourism development was assessed. The findings revealed that residents in both studied islands have a high perception towards the importance of giving priority to local residents in the tourism sector and allowing them to make decisions. Table 7 summarizes the mean score of the perceived importance of local engagement in tourism for residents from both investigated islands. By conducting t-test, it was found that the mean score for perceived



importance of local engagement in tourism was significantly higher for residents in Perhentian compared to residents in Redang ( $t = 6.15$ ,  $\text{Sig.} = 0.000$ ).

Table 7  
**Descriptive statistics for perceived importance of local engagement in tourism**

	Island	Mean	Std. deviation
PILE	Perhentian island	4.28	0.47
	Redang island	3.95	0.59

Note: PILE = perceived importance of local engagement in tourism

## Discussion and conclusion

Findings of this study reveal that residents in Perhentian island have a significantly higher level of perception towards the positive economic impacts of tourism than residents in Redang island which might be caused by their higher level of control over the tourism development as most of the tourism services in Perhentian island are offered and controlled by locals. In contrast, tourism industry in Redang island is dominated by large companies and outsiders. Nonetheless, it appears that residents in Perhentian island still require a higher level of engagement in the development of tourism sector, which could be a response to their higher level of concern towards the environmental impacts of tourism in their island.

Other than the perceived adverse environmental impacts of tourism, residents on both islands found the positive economic, social and cultural impacts of tourism to be higher than its negative impacts. To this end, the findings of this study are supported by some other prior studies (Lepp, 2007; Pham, 2012; Schipani, 2013). Since the residents' levels of satisfaction and their attitudes towards tourism largely depend on their perception towards the impacts of tourism, the findings of this study provide invaluable insights for tourism managers, local government authorities and stakeholders involved in the tourism development of islands. Findings of this study which indicated the overall positive perception of locals towards the economic, social and cultural impacts of tourism, suggest a welcoming attitude which might result in an increase in the revenue of tourism industry on these islands in coming years.

This study is not without its limitations. This research is confined with its sample drawn from two tourism islands in Malaysia and thus the findings cannot be fully extended to other contexts. Additionally, despite the importance of examining the local residents' perceptions on tourism and its impacts, the link between perception and behavior has not been explored. Future studies may investigate the influence of the locals' perceptions about tourism in their behaviors towards tourism industry in general and tourists in particular. Additionally, since tourism development may result in the loss of local identity (Gössling, 2002), future researchers may also examine the perception of locals towards the impacts of tourism on the local identity and investigate its impacts on their support or lack of support for tourism development. While the positive impacts of tourism appear to outweigh its negative impacts from the perspective of locals in this study, the perceived importance of local engagement indicates the concern of local community about the industry and their interest in giving opinions and making decisions regarding the development of tourism on their islands. Thus, policy makers and tourism development managers may engage more local representatives in their development plans and activities to ensure a

higher support by the local community for tourism development. Additionally, by following principles of sustainable tourism, efforts must be made to minimize the detrimental impacts of tourism on the environment and society.

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## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to extend their appreciation to Universiti Sains Malaysia for granting the Research University Grant called Tourism Capacity and Impact Studies [Grant No. 1001/PTS/8660011] that made this study and paper possible.

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Submitted: 20/09/2013

Accepted: 10/06/2014