Chapter 2
Exploring Experiential Dimensions and Socio-Economic Impacts of Rural and Mountain Tourism on Local Communities in Sabah, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT
The chapter explores the key experiential dimensions of rural and mountain tourism and determines the economic and social aspects of rural tourism development on a selected site, namely Melangkap Tiong, an emerging new rural and mountain tourists’ destination in Sabah, Malaysia. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section briefly introduces rural and mountain tourism, and reviews the key components of the experiential dimensions of rural tourism and mountain destinations. The second section reports the key experiential dimensions and main economic and social benefits of rural and mountain tourism based on the interview responses from a total of 15 rural tourism operators located in Melangkap Tiong, Sabah, Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION
There has been a rapid growth in rural tourism and visitation to mountains, especially in Sabah, Malaysia. Rural and mountain tourism sites and regions with an abundance of natural features are popular locations to visit. The associated travel industry is a flourishing industry that creates both positive and negative impacts on the respective site and on local communities. Social, cultural, environmental, economical,
and historical value are significant components of rural and mountain tourism. Together, they comprise a relevant foundation for creating diversification strategies for these destinations.

Ostensibly, natural and cultural resources are vital components of rural and mountain sites, as (to a considerable extent) these resources form an array of interesting tourism attractions and activities. Moreover, as Bagri and Kala (2016) pointed out, rural tourism is a niche branch of the tourism industry and one that may include ecotourism, nature tourism, adventure, and cultural heritage. Thus, rural tourism is a complex and multifaceted kind of activity.

The United Nations World Tourism Organization’s Market Intelligence division defines the term **rural tourism** as being

*a type of tourism activity in which the visitor’s experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/culture, angling and sightseeing. These activities take place in non-urban (rural) [settings] dominated by agriculture and forestry, and [can include aspects of] traditional social structure and lifestyle. (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2009)*

By contrast, it defines **mountain tourism** as being

*a type of tourism activity which takes place in a defined and limited geographical space such as hills or mountains with distinctive characteristics and attributes that are inherent to a specific landscape, topography, climate, biodiversity (flora and fauna)and local community. It encompasses a broad range of outdoor leisure and sports activities. (ibid.)*

Rural tourism is thriving as a form of tourism business in most nations (Chuang, 2010; Koster, 2009; Laurerio, 2008; Lee, 2009; Yagüe, 2002). Literature postulated that tourists visiting rural and mountain tourism sites are in search of phenomenal, amazing, and momentous experiences (Kastenholz, Carneiro, Marques, & Loureiro, 2018). This requires the respective local tourism suppliers or operators cultivate recognizable, appealing, and value-added offerings. Simply put, the many attractive qualities of rural and mountainous areas offer unique and attractive visitation options and thus meet the diverse motivations of tourists. Along the same lines, mountains are becoming attractive tourist destinations as a diversion from the hectic and the taxing lifestyle of urban life, and also due to their beauty, as well as their natural diversity and associated cultural diversity.

Mountain tourism has both positive and negative economic and sociocultural impacts on host communities. Negative impacts include environmental damage. Thus, this risk links well to adopting a robust set of sustainability initiatives as a potentially beneficial approach for preserving and conserving natural resources in rural and mountain tourism locales. In practice, however, this remains a great challenge (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). Accordingly, sustainable development in the context of tourism is closely interconnected to those economic, environmental, and sociocultural factors which have a strong presence in rural and/or mountain tourism sites.

The increased popularity in visiting mountainous areas has encouraged new entrepreneurial development of tourism business activities among the local community—with people moving away from the traditional rural kinship system to a more contemporary and knowledge-based business model (Xue, Kerstetter, & Hunt, 2017). Therefore, it can be determined that both rural-related and mountain-related forms of tourism are key players in local economic and social development. This implies that tourism brings benefits and economic development to rural and mountain sites. It also affects the local communities in many ways. Nevertheless, there is little empirical evidence with regard to the impacts on local