

# FACTORS AFFECTING FARMERS' AGRO TOURISM INVOLVEMENT IN CAMERON HIGHLANDS, PAHANG

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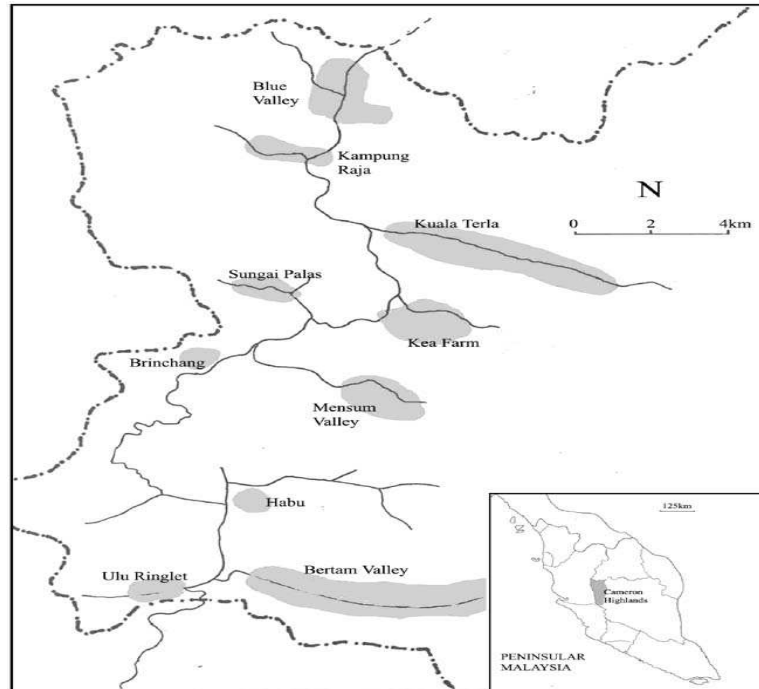
**Abstract:** This paper presents a review and understanding of the concept agro tourism as a sustainable tourism product. Data drawn from Cameron Highlands, Pahang, a well established agro tourism destination in Malaysia. Agro tourism or farm tourism is a subset of rural tourism which allows the tourists to experience the farming activities. Rural tourism is based on rural environment in general whereas agro tourism is based on the farm and farmer within the rural area. This means that agro tourism operations are based on the agricultural production (e.g., a tractor ride, self plucking, fishing, milking). The misconception of agro tourism as a product that is less profitable appeared due to the existence of other dominant rural tourism products such as eco tourism and nature tourism. Inadequate previous research on the farmers' perception of agro tourism has created a clear gap in this area. Gaps identified include inadequate research done on agro tourism practices among farmers and their attitude towards diversifying agricultural to obtain added value. Naturalistic inquiry technique was used to elicit the data from ground. The awareness and knowledge of agro tourism practice from the point of view of the farmers were captured. The understanding of the farmers' opinion on agro tourism is essential because they are the key players of the agro tourism industry. The results also show that the farmers from the concentrated tourism areas

tended to have a positive perception of agro tourism, because they were directly involved in tourism. The outcome supports the social exchange theory, where it is evident that people who obtain benefits from tourism, support tourism.

**Keywords:** Agro tourism; Naturalistic inquiry; Sustainable tourism.

## INTRODUCTION

Agro tourism is an alternative rural tourism, that is associated with soft activities (not massive, not aggressive, and not industrialized), which respects people and the environment [1]. Tourists will be exposed to the daily life of a farmer and his culture. It is a modern but also traditional way of tourism, which describes the local community based upon their geographical characteristics, traditions, culture and customs [2]. It can also be said that agro tourism is a business activity, aiming at hosting tourists in private houses (mainly farms), or in small hotels. The emergence of tourism in the rural area can lead to positive economic benefits for the community. These benefits include a diversification of the local industry base, increased employment, higher incomes and business revenue growth.



**Figure 1:** Map of Cameron Highlands

Many farmers face positive impacts from the implementation of tourism in agriculture. Additionally, an increasing demand for 'green products' has provided more returns to the part-time farmers. There are few common benefits of agro tourism to the particular community [3]. Public employment will be increased, because of the diversification of the local industry base. More workers would be required as tour guides, housekeeping attendants, drivers, and tour packaging officers, etc. Several new types of business will be introduced to rural establishments, such as home stay accommodations, interpretation centres and restaurants. This positive scenario, will lead to higher income gains amongst the farmers. This situation will gradually cause an enlargement of the tax base and result in business revenue growth.

Even though many studies have been conducted to identify the impacts of agro tourism, the outcomes were only focused on the perception of the host community and the tourists. Evidence shows that very few studies have attempted to understand the impact of agro tourism from the farmers' point of view. Focusing on the farmers' perception alone is very important, as they are the industries key players [4]. Therefore, it can be concluded that, there has

been no studies, which attempt to focus on opinions or factors, which influence the perception of the farmer towards agro tourism. To bridge this knowledge gap, the present study will investigate and measure the farmers' perception of agro tourism.

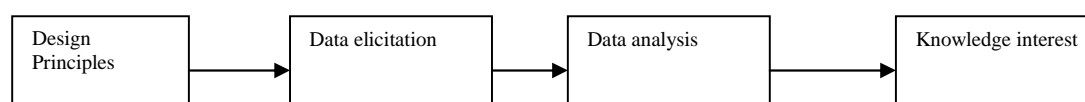
The Malaysian government, through the 9<sup>th</sup> Malaysian Plan, has opened opportunities for farmers to expand and diversify agricultural products and their related industries, such as agro tourism. The importance of local participation in tourism was also stressed in the 7<sup>th</sup> Malaysian Plan 1996–2000 (Government of Malaysia, 1996). Cameron Highlands was chosen as the study area, because it is a well-established Malaysian, agro tourism destination. Wells [5] also listed Cameron Highlands as a well known, and principle tourism location, in Malaysia. Thus, Cameron Highlands is considered as the most suitable agro tourism destination in the country, to conduct a study.

Figure 1 shows a map of Cameron Highlands, which is one of the major tourist destinations in Malaysia. Located 1500 meters above sea level, it is the smallest district in the state of Pahang and is situated in the northwestern corner. With the rapid development of tourism businesses in recent years, it was initially developed purely for tea plantations.

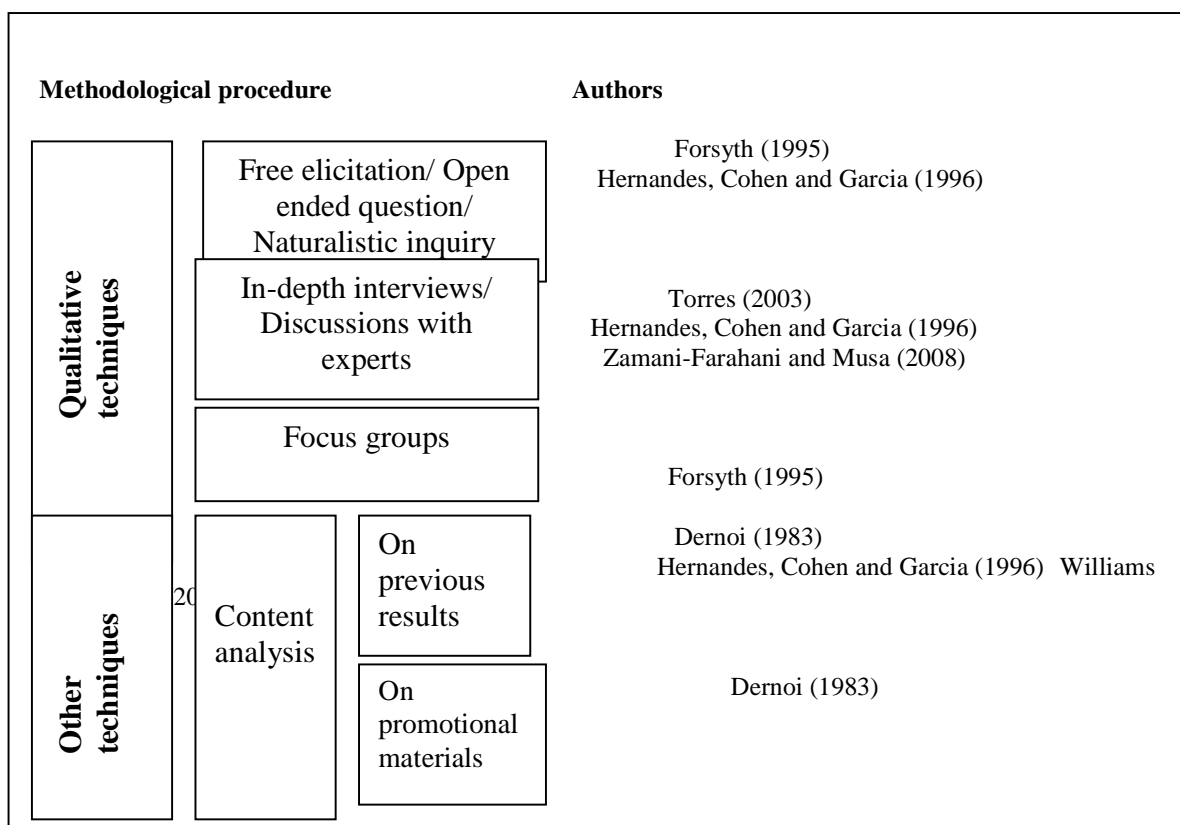
**Table 1:** Arrival of tourists, Cameron Highlands, 2002-2019

	2002	2005 (expected)	2010 (expected)	2015 (expected)	2019 (expected)	Expected Growth Rate (%)
<b>High</b>	364,930	485,722	782,260	1,259,837	1,844,528	10.00
<b>Average</b>	364,930	437,720	592,708	802,575	1,022,825	6.25
<b>Low</b>	364,930	387,267	427,574	472,076	510,990	2.00

Source: District Council of Cameron Highlands, Pahang (2002)



**Figure 2:** Four Dimensions in Social Research



**Figure 3:** Taxonomy Review of Non-quantitative Methods for Measuring Tourism Impact

Historically, this highland was founded by a British survey, (William Cameron) during a mapping expedition in the year 1885. Thus, the highland adopted his name. (District Council of Cameron Highlands, Pahang). Since tea was one of the valuable trade items at that time, higher demand from western countries was received.

Therefore, mass tea plantations were started. Gradually, other forms of farms, such as vegetables, flowers and fruits, developed as well. Due to the cool environment, tourists arriving from other parts of Malaysia, and other countries, have always been increasing. As seen in Table 1.

Cameron Highlands can be divided into three main subdivisions: Hulu Telum, Tanah Rata and Ringlet with 27 villages. Tanah Rata and Brinchang are the main tourism areas with well developed public facilities.

#### **METHODS AND MATERIALS**

Four dimensions in social research, as shown in Figure 2, drawn from the work of Bauer [6] are utilized in this research. The qualitative approach was used to collect and analyze data to get holistic understanding on the topic.

#### **Design Principles**

This is an exploratory study into understanding farmers and their environment. It is also important to understand the extent of their awareness, what they feel and think about a given situation. The farmers in this study are considered as the main stakeholders of the agro tourism industry. To understand their real problems, an inductive research must be conducted, followed by the statistical procedure. The qualitative research paradigm, which was used in this research, is a naturalistic inquiry, also known as 'constructionism'. This inductive method will be very useful to help understand the real phenomena, rather than a conventional positivism approach alone [7].

#### **Data Elicitation**

Having adapted the above design principle, an individual semi-structured interview technique has been the preferred choice for data elicitation. Data elicitation means drawing out data from the field. The qualitative survey used semi-structured interviews when regarding the community's perception of agro tourism. The questions that were asked were open-ended and unstructured. The interview was conducted in an informal way. Respondents were asked questions until the impacts of agro tourism were identified. The purpose of the semi-structured interview is not to count numbers of opinions but to understand the meanings, opinions and any issues regarding agro tourism. In this scenario, snowballing sampling and theoretical sampling will be utilized to

construct the phenomena. Snowballing [8] and theoretical sampling [9] are the combined selection procedures that will be used to carry out this research. Snowball sampling means the researcher gets to know the following respondent from the previous respondent. After gaining information from the first respondent, gaps can be identified to whom to speak to next. This is when theoretical sampling will be used. The investigation will end when the data collected is considered to be at the saturation level. When information from respondents is found to be the same as the previous respondents' information, the information gaps are filled and the research comes to a point of saturation. This is where the number of respondents will be finalized.

#### **Data Analysis**

Analysis of qualitative methods to select an appropriate tool to derive an outcome according to the objectives set.

Figure 3 shows the methods used previous studies, regarding tourism impact in rural areas. After reviewing the objectives of this study, naturalistic inquiry was found to be the most suitable procedure in aiming to understand the farmers' perception of agro tourism. The data from the naturalistic inquiry was analyzed using a content analysis technique. Content analysis is a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories, based on explicit rules of coding [10]. Discourse analysis was not preferable as it does not provide tangible answers to problems based on scientific research, but only enables access to the ontological and epistemological assumptions behind a statement [11]. The usage of content analysis gives importance to the identification of all factors in the recorded conversations. A group of similar meanings and connotations is treated as a factor.

#### **Naturalistic Inquiry**

In order to understand the real phenomenon in the particular study area, a preliminary data gathering technique was employed. To obtain the data, naturalistic inquiry was deemed appropriate by using a semi-structured interview as a tool. The semi-structured interview was used as an inductive approach to gain new and unexpected responses from the respondents, which prevents the interviewer from assuming potential variables. However, a questionnaire guide was developed and used throughout the interviewing session to obtain the pattern of answers that are appropriate to the objectives of the study.

The data was gathered from three towns (Kampung Raja, Ringlet and Bluevalley) in Cameron Highlands, and 42 farmers were interviewed. Since the study area consisted of farmers with various ethnicity

languages, the interview was conducted in four languages: English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil. The researcher, together with the enumerators, went to the farms and conducted the interviews in the particular farmers' language of choice. All the conversations were recorded with the permission of the respondents. However, one respondent refused for the conversation to be recorded. Therefore, the interview was conducted and the conversation was transcribed.

The qualitative study was conducted using the seven stages by Kvale [12]. They included thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, verifying, and reporting. Each step will be briefly examined below, with strategies for their implementation.

### ***Thematizing***

The first stage of the process is to clarify the purpose of the interviews and determine the variables that must be addressed. The purpose of the interview is to ascertain the farmers' perceptions of agro tourism. Once this general purpose is decided, the semi-structured interview was selected as the tool to obtain the data.

### ***Designing***

After determining the purpose, and what data was required, the next essential thing, is the discovery method. Consequently, an interview guide was designed as a list of questions and probing follow-ups, to guide you through the interview. The main reason that the interview guide was selected was to help the researcher stay on track. It also helped to ensure that the important issues/variables were addressed. In addition, the interview guide also provided a framework and sequence for the questions and helped maintain consistency across interviews with different respondents from different towns, such as Kampung Raja, Ringlet and Bluevalley.

There are three basic parts of the interview guide, which were utilized in this study. The face sheet was used to record information, such as time, date and place of interview. For example, the third farmer interviewed in Bluevalley was labelled as B3 Basic. Demographic information about the interviewee was also noted on the face sheet.

The second part of the interview guide was comprised of the actual interview questions, probing questions or statements, and the anticipated follow-up questions. Question on awareness and basic understanding of agro tourism, and the impacts to the farmers, were included.

The final part of the interview guide provided a place to write down notes after the interview, detailing the feelings, interpretations, and any other comments. Although the conversations were recorded, the

researcher was able to note down the feelings and their own interpretations, by observing the farmers.

### ***Interviewing***

To create a good rapport with the farmers, the interview session began with some introductions by the researcher on the research topic, and the objectives. Some easy questions were asked regarding knowledge of agro tourism. There were no questions with 'yes' or 'no' answers. However, some of the respondents answered that they 'did not know' or 'I had no idea'. For this scenario, the interview guide was very helpful, where probing questions were asked by giving some examples to the farmers. Each interview conducted was approximately 15 to 30 minutes long. The interview ended by giving thanks to the respondents.

### ***Transcribing***

Transcribing involves creating a written text of the interviews. This step involves bringing together all the information gathered into one written form. For the conversations that were not in English, the text was first written down verbatim in the original language and then translated into English. For instance, a recorded conversation of an interview conducted in Mandarin, was transcribed by first writing down the actual conversation in Mandarin, and then the conversation was translated into English.

### ***Analyzing***

This important step involves determining the meaning of the information gathered, in relation to the purpose of the study. This important information including themes, commonalities, and patterns, were looked at and analyzed in an attempt to make sense of the information. Some of the points or factors were easily visible, because they were similar to findings from past studies. However, some new variables that emerged were also addressed in this process.

### ***Verifying***

Verifying involves checking the credibility and validity of the information gathered. Triangulation was implemented in this next stage, where a new questionnaire scale was designed by combining both established and emerging variables that were tested later.

### ***Reporting***

The final step of the process is to share the outcome from the semi-structured interviews with other internal and external stakeholders. After incorporating the variables found in the naturalistic inquiry, they were tested again using a qualitative tool for factor analysis. Thus, the final report was derived consisting of mixed methods.

### **Knowledge Interest**

The purpose of this exercise is theory building, which can be achieved, due the nature of the semi-structured interview. The outcome of this study should be viewed as an exploratory process in understanding "Agro tourism and the farmers' perception". Several unexpected factors were identified in the naturalistic inquiry. This new piece of information is very useful for the next stage of the research and fills the knowledge gap, in this particular area of study.

### **RESULT**

After analyzing 42 recorded semi structured interviews using content analysis, five factors were found as important clues to understanding the nature of the problem.

#### **Factor 1: Awareness and Attitude**

Generally, many respondents had an awareness of agro tourism. Some farmers, who do not operate any tourism activities, were completely unaware of agro tourism. Although most of the farmers were involved in agro tourism indirectly, they did not understand the term 'agro tourism'. Therefore, some explanation and examples were provided by the interviewee to help the farmers to give comments:

I know sometimes people will go to visit the flower exhibition, but I am not sure whether that is agro-tourism or not. (Chinese female, 47 years old from Kampung Raja)

However, some of the respondents understood the term 'agro tourism' without any further explanation:

Agro tourism means, we let tourist comes to visit our farm (Indian male, 45 years old from Kampung Raja)

I think, if I am not mistaken, agro is agriculture and tourism means travelling. (Chinese male, 51 years old from Ringlet)

Agro tourism is like, fetch tourists, go to visit and travel; fetch them, go to your vegetable farm, flower farm like this, (Chinese male, 48 years old from Ringlet).

Some respondents were unaware of the existence of tourism activities in their area. They are not interested in the tourist industry, because they concentrate fully on agriculture production. The main reason that they do not want to be involved in other businesses, is that the profit from their agriculture production is considered adequately sufficient.

I have been living in Cameron Highlands for about 59 years and I have not seen any of my friends (farmers) gain loss from their business. We always get a good return... sometimes, even when the price of the fertilizers is very high, we could always

manage to break even at least, (Indian male, 59 years old from Tanah Rata).

Therefore, the awareness of agro tourism is at the lowest level, because of their ignorant attitude towards any secondary businesses. They are reluctant to try other businesses other than agriculture: because the difficulties faced in handling an agriculture business, are many.

#### **Factor 2: Facilities**

Another important factor, which emerged from the investigation, was the need for adequate facilities in the agro tourism business. Many respondents felt that accessibility to their farm is the biggest issue, which should be addressed. When asked if the tourists are visiting their farm, most of them gave common negative answers.

No, it is because the farm is too far from main road. If want to go in, we need Land Rover, normal car unable to drive in, (Chinese Male, 45 years old from Kampung Raja).

The farm's location, far from basic facilities, is another deep concern for the farmers. They have great doubts on the satisfaction that can be gained by the tourist, who could potentially visit their farm. A farmer compared his farm with the farms in other areas, and gave his recommendation:

If my farm is at Brinchang, there, I will invest in this agro tourism. I feel that Brinchang and Tanah Rata are the two places developing quite well. However, Ringlet will be quieter. Sometimes, I will go drink tea with friends at Brinchang, there I could see a lot of tourist at the night market there. Therefore, if you want to do this agro tourism, you have to consider doing it at a particular place, (Chinese male, 47 years old from Kampung Raja).

Brinchang and Tanah Rata are the areas where agro tourism activities are well established. Therefore, many of the respondents repeatedly compared their farms with these dominant areas, with low motivation tones.

Our farm does not have such good condition like them (other successful agro tourism farms), did not have so many vegetables, the place also not big. If the place is big, we can plant more quantity and more types of vegetables, it can save the cost. This is because, crop plantation needs us to do a lot of work, and many workers needed, but now the price of vegetables is very low, we need to pay the salary and fertilizer, the price of fertilizer now is drastically increasing, and sometimes we even need to borrow money, (Chinese male, 41 years old from Kampung Raja).

### Factor 3: Benefits

The respondents generally agreed that the existence of agro tourism in their area brings in many benefits to Cameron Highlands as a whole. However, farmers in the rural areas argued that they only experienced indirect benefits. Although no tourists are visiting their farms, they can still share the benefits of tourism, where the main roads to their villages have been developed.

However, apart from infrastructural developments, positive social impacts can be seen clearly in the community and are always appreciated by the farmers. One farmer expressed her feelings that she was always glad to see tourists come to her farm, although she is not operating any kind of agro tourism activity. She also mentioned that conversing with tourists is always joyful.

I feel so happy, to be visited by new friends, and let them visit to my farm. I can learn about their (tourists') culture. They come from Singapore, Japan and Australia, (Indian female, 39 years old from Ringlet)

### Factor 4: Problems

Another problem found, that has become a constraint for farmers to participate in agro tourism, is the Temporary Ownership of Land (TOL) status. The farmers, who are operating business under the TOL status, are not the owners of the land, but they are allowed to develop the land for agriculture production, and they must pay yearly rental fees to the government. Generally, most of the farmers operating TOL status land, gave negative responses:

Now the land status that we hold is just TOL, it is for temporary only. If the government wants it, within 24 hours notice, they can take it. If we spend, (invest for agro tourism) a lot of money for the land and then the government just takes it, what can we do? We will die (bankrupt)! When we want to apply permanent license, we could not manage to get it. (Indian male, 54 years old from Bluevalley)

One respondent responded that agro tourism would reduce their profit from their vegetable and flower sales.

Just visit, I will welcome. Nevertheless, if want to buy vegetables from me, I would not do it. It is because my crops are prepared to be delivered to the market, and I do not want to sell it in low volumes. (Indian male, 38 years old from Ringlet)

### Factor 5: Environment

Most of the farmers said that the climate in Cameron Highlands is a positive factor that encourages agro tourism. However, one farmer argued that the

uncertainty of the weather would affect agro tourism operations:

Weather at Cameron Highlands, if raining continuously, we will get loss. If the weather is good, the vegetables will be more 'beautiful' and the arrival of tourist to my farm will increase. The quantity of vegetables also will increase and then the price will be less. (Chinese male, 42 years old from Blue Valley)

### CONCLUSION

The findings of factors, like Temporary Ownership of Land (TOL) and entrepreneurial knowledge, would be beneficial for an investigation of general perception, of the local community on tourism. These factors however, were not found in literature, because most of the studies concentrated only on the impacts of tourism. However, the factor of land issues has made a unique contribution, which examines the applicability of matters, such as ownership of land and farms, which directly influences the perception of the farmers.

The result of the study however, does not contradict the social exchange theory, which says that the people who get benefit from tourism, support tourism [13]. The farmers from tourism concentrated areas such as Tanah Rata and Brinchang tended to have positive perceptions of agro tourism, because they were directly involved in tourism. A practical contribution could be done by various agro tourism stakeholders like government agencies, local authorities and the local community on the significance of demographic profiles. By giving specific attention to the significant demographic profiles, the inequality of demographic characteristics, in terms of agro tourism involvement, could be addressed.

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