

SMART ALLIANCE

Academia and experts join hands to come up with integrated system to ensure the longevity of our rural tourism destinations

The Responsible Rural Tourism Network (R2TN) project is a clear demonstration of faith for the Malaysian government, through the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), to deliver the multi-dimensional Responsible Rural Tourism Capacity (RRTC) framework for sustainable tourism in Malaysia.

The five-year RM9 million Long Term Research Grant Scheme (LRGS) is headed by Associate Professor Dr. Vikneswaran Nair (or Dr. Vicky in professional circles) - the Programme Leader and also the Director of Research & Development from Taylor's University.

Under the two sub-programmes of this RRTC (as explained in the earlier pages), there are six projects (List 2) that look at various aspects, which will then be used to model the integrated decision support system.

LIST 2

Project 1: Socia-cultural Responsible Rural Tourism Framework (RRTF) led by Prof Dr. Amran Hamzah (Universiti Teknologi Malaysia)

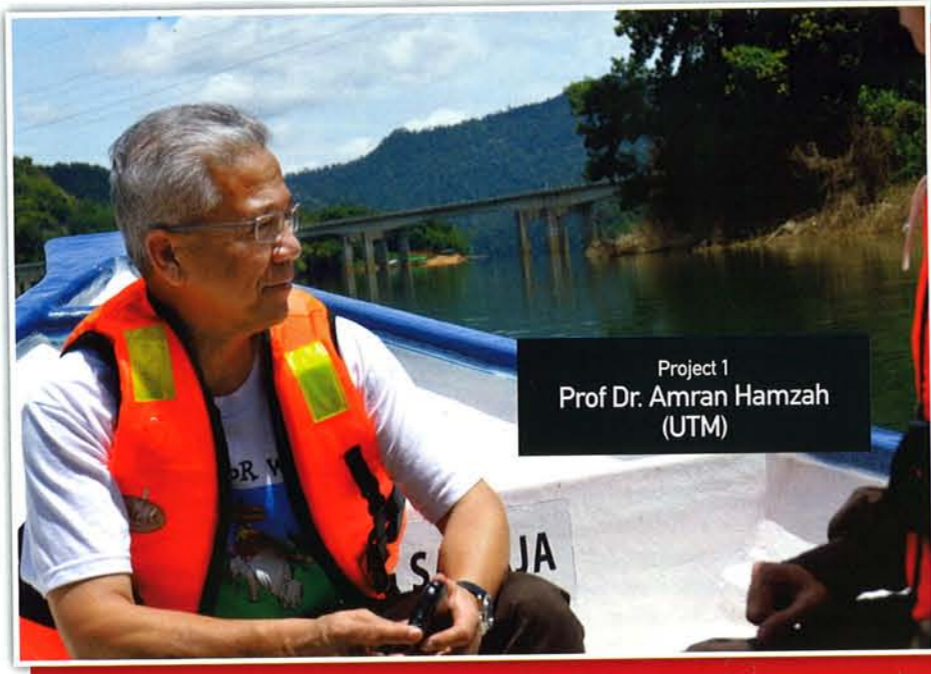
Project 2: Economic RRTF led by Prof. Dr. Ahmad Shuib (Universiti Putra Malaysia)

Project 3: Environmental RRTF led by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Vikneswaran Nair (Taylor's University)

Project 4: Modelling & Management of RRTF led by Dr. Raja Kumar Murugesan (Taylor's University)

Project 5: Socio-Economic Rural Tourism Capacity Framework (RTCF) led by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mastura Jaafar (Universiti Sains Malaysia)

Project 6: Physical & Environmental RTCF led by Prof. Dr. Badaruddin Mohamed (Universiti Sains Malaysia)



Project 1
Prof. Dr. Amran Hamzah
(UTM)

Says Dr. Vicky, lead researcher of Project 3, which looks into the environmental impact: "Primarily, the framework aims to avoid environmental degradation and social conflicts, where the carrying capacity for these sites will put quantitative measures like the maximum number of visitors to a tourist destination at the same time, without causing destruction and an unacceptable decrease in the quality of visitor satisfaction, and from there set limits on tourism development in the said place."

What is impressive about the RRTN is its attempt to cover all three pillars of sustainable development - economic, social, and environmental - by creating an integrated decision support system, providing the government and relevant authorities the tools to ascertain the longevity of the rural tourism destinations, as well as the local communities.

A LOOK ON PEOPLE ISSUES

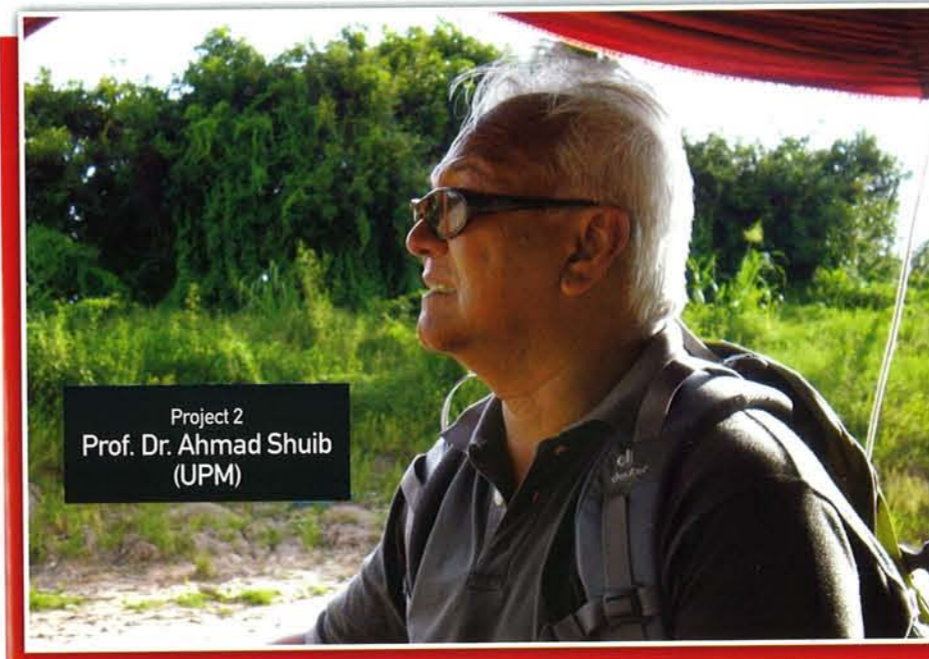
The socio-cultural component of the RRTF is one of the keys as it involves intangible aspects often side-lined in the development of monitoring indicators.

Says Project 1 leader, Prof Dr. Amran Hamzah: "Aspects such as pride in the

community, sense of belonging, self-esteem, demonstration effect and sense of ownership are crucial to the success of community based tourism projects and yet these aspects are difficult to measure and monitor, hence often ignored.

"From our research, we have identified the socio-cultural indicators and tested their suitability by carrying out preliminary surveys at four study areas namely, Mabul, Miso Walai Homestay, Setiu Wetlands and Kilim Geoforest Park. In the second year, we are going to further refine the indicators and design a measurement system that can be used at all study areas. This would then be used to consolidate the socio-cultural component of the rural responsible tourism (RRT) barometer for the whole project."

Among the many positive indicators looked at are: employment opportunities; new infrastructure; increase local pride and standard of living for the social aspect; as well as private sector support for culture at rural tourism destination; economic contribution of cultural product for the cultural aspects. The negative indicators include negative impact on environment; increase price; disruption of the rural lifestyle; lack of access for locals; and



Project 2
Prof. Dr. Ahmad Shuib
(UPM)

displacement for the social aspect; and the cultural ones include commodification; demonstration effect; and acculturation.

"The measurement system we are developing will assign quantitative values or scores for each aspect of the socio-cultural components such as increase in self-esteem and level of confidence. We will also use statistical tools like a scale to measure the perception of the local community in with regard to socio-cultural indicators," he adds.

He believes that to move rural tourism projects in the country up the value chain, notably in support of the ETP, mainstreaming is essential. "One of the key requirements in mainstreaming is having a comprehensive monitoring system, which the RRT barometer will provide. In tandem with a value chain analysis, they will show the distribution of socio-economic benefits of rural tourism projects to the rural community and what and where are the impediments, so that further interventions could be recommended and implemented by policymakers."

THE NEXT ECONOMIC PIECE

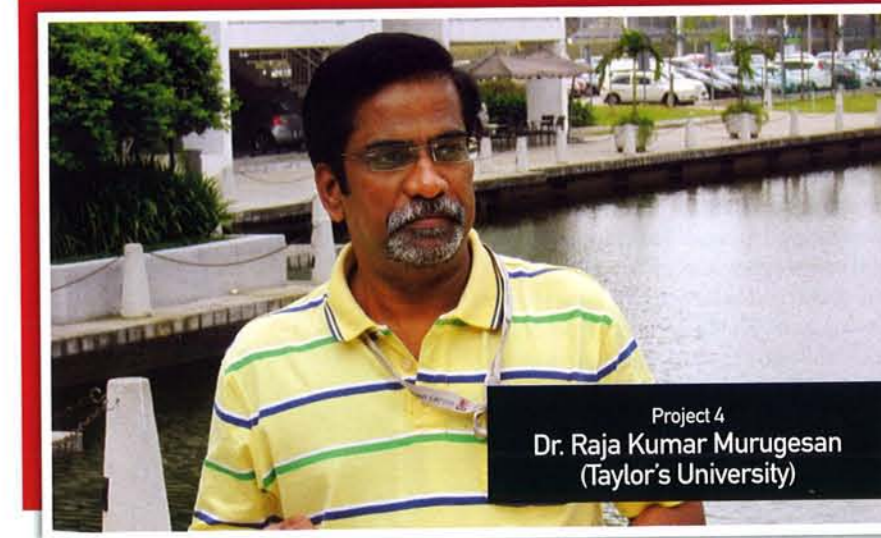
While the human-centric portion is integral to the project, the role of the economy cannot be denied.

In that sense, Prof. Dr. Ahmad Shuib, who heads Project 2, believes that the economic cluster is deemed necessary to make the programme more acceptable. "In a sense, the economic cluster will try to estimate the value of the RRT. Although values can be measured in many forms, a monetary value is more convincing and easily identified by policymakers, business people, local

communities and other stakeholders because the measures are objective. Each cluster derives its own indicators and measures for RRT where the barometer must be practical and easily applied to plan, manage, control, and develop at the end of the programme."

Common indicators and measures are available but Dr. Ahmad's team has to identify specific locational indicators and determine the relevant measures that are applicable to any specified RRT development since it is site specific.

"Quantifying the indicators in economic measures will enable the scientific attributes to be matched up with the human dimensions. Using simple realistic indicators could persuade and convince the pessimists to accept the needs for the indicators to help in planning and development of the RRT," says Dr. Ahmad.



Project 4
Dr. Raja Kumar Murugesan
(Taylor's University)

BY VINODHANI NAIR & NUR ATIFI

He adds: "It can succeed if human capital development is carried out at the same time to bring the communities out of the poverty doldrums, not just in tourism. There is a need to have an inclusive business model so that a more holistic impact of the development can be achieved."

TECHNOLOGY STEPS IN

Having covered the necessary bases with the socio-cultural, economic and environmental aspects, technology then becomes the necessary enabler for RRT.

"As such Project 4 facilitates in providing the ICT framework on leveraging the state-of-the-art technologies and applied to RRT. The prototype developed by my team will provide access in utilisation and alerts on the health of rural tourism destinations in Malaysia," says its leader Dr. Raja Kumar.

The team is currently in the process of designing and developing a web-portal for this entire LRGS project, which would act as the main interface to access the tourism barometer and hence, monitor the health of a rural tourism site over time. The portal could support the stakeholders (the rural community, entrepreneurs/ investors, tourists, decision makers) in decision making.

Moving forward, the team is expected to develop a working prototype. A low-fidelity prototype of the Barometer and the User Interface (the interaction space between the users and the system) is currently being developed.

He adds: "The barometer being developed now will be a stand-alone system until it evolves from a demo system to a working prototype. Once it has been pilot tested, it would be integrated to the web-portal to aid the stakeholders in decision-



Project 5
Associate Prof. Dr. Mastura Jaafar
(USM)

support towards achieving responsible and sustainable rural tourism. The pilot project will be in reference to a case-study at a particular site studied by the programme research team."

He goes on to share that apart from taking input from the research teams involved, the system also aims to capture data on tourism and stakeholder responses from social networking sites.

"Social networking penetration rate in Malaysia is said to be among the highest in this region. As Participatory Action Research (PAR) is used in stakeholder engagement in all phases of this research project, I believe PAR will help the system or the barometer to continuously evolve. The ultimate goal is to ensure that the barometer system would solve the real problems or expectations that stakeholders experience."

CARRYING CAPACITY

The vital pieces of the RRTN programme are Projects 5 and 6, which happen to be in the second sub-programme of this mammoth study, as it revolves around carrying capacities for rural tourism sites.

Project 5, headed by Associate Prof. Dr. Mastura Jaafar, says that her team is looking into economic indicators such as aspect of employment, demand and supply, income, investment and human development index, as well as social indicators like local residents' quality of life, their perception and behaviour towards tourism development. Similarly tourists' perception and satisfaction towards the quality of tourism products and destinations will also be analysed. All these data will be used to determine the economic and social carrying capacity.

She says: "Both indicators are valuable in terms of helping federal and state governments in planning the development of rural tourism destination. It will ensure that tourism development will not only satisfy tourists during their stay in certain destinations but also provide significant benefit to local community."

Dr. Mastura adds: "Our study focuses on social and economic issues of rural tourism, which are fundamentally important for the nation's development. To support the New Economic Model, the government has taken into consideration on the need to transform the low yield rural areas to high yield. Besides that specific research focusing on entrepreneurship, product development and cultural issues will help to enhance the involvement of local community in tourism."

The last piece of the puzzle falls on the co-leader of the RRTN programme, Prof. Dr. Badaruddin Mohamed from Universiti Sains Malaysia.

For his part, he believes the project on Physical Capacity of tourism destination forms a major pillar of the whole LRGS programme.

"This project seeks to address the level of acceptable change a destination should have. If the first year is about laying the foundation, synthesising the literature to find models and frameworks used elsewhere, the project would move into constructing the tools for data collection at the stipulated sites. Some of the sites were visited for initial investigation in the first year," says Dr. Badaruddin.

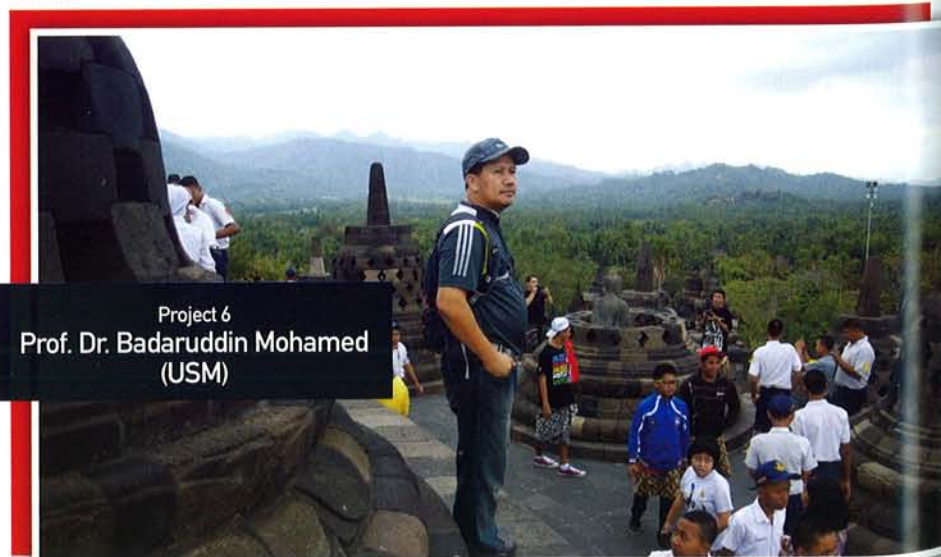
He adds that some of the key indicators include acceptable levels of congestion or density in the key areas; maximum acceptable loss of natural resources; acceptable level of pollution; and intensity of use of transport infrastructure, facilities and services.

Furthermore, the project focuses mainly on the physical capacity, while the human part will be handled by the social and economic capacity project.

"It basically involves a lot of scientific investigations, especially when measuring the depth of pollution levels at certain sites. The process can be complicated as it involves integrated criteria and indicators," he stresses.

Since the project measures the capacity of certain sites, Dr. Badaruddin hopes it will assist planners and decision makers to plan tourism development in a more sustainable way.

"We hope to engage the community in the capacity building part of the project, and at the same time, would lead the decision-makers in the planning and development of tourism," he concludes. **BT**



Project 6
Prof. Dr. Badaruddin Mohamed
(USM)