

## **AGRITOURISM ENTREPRENEURS ON THE OTHER SIDE: MOTIVATION AND CHALLENGES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Balik Pulau is situated on the remote western part of Penang island. It offers greener and calmer environment compared to the busy Georgetown city. It is famously known among locals for producing high quality durians. Thus, making it a prospective hotspot for agritourism entrepreneurs. This article explores the agritourism activity in Balik Pulau to better understand the motivation and challenges faced by agritourism entrepreneurs in the area. Through in-depth interviews with limited number of willing entrepreneurs, this study has established that the motivation of agricultural entrepreneurs highly depends on their goals in operating the sites. Their motivations are also influenced by financial situation, health concern and eagerness to share and preserve ethnic and agricultural knowledge. This study has identified five challenges faced by agritourism entrepreneurs which are (i) inadequate support from government and private sectors, (ii) difficulties in employing staffs, (iii) insufficient infrastructure, (iv) seasonal income and (v) encroaching urban development. This article suggests Balik Pulau to be marketed as Penang's agritourism hub and a one-stop centre for durian lovers and agritourism activities.*

**Keywords:** agritourism, entrepreneur, tourism supply, motivation.

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Agritourism is becoming increasingly popular nowadays with more competitive entrepreneurs venturing and turning farms into profitable market and protecting it from market fluctuation (Chiang et al., 2017). According to Fortune Business Insights (2020), the estimated global market size is valued at USD 69.24 billion in 2019 and projected to reach USD 117.37 billion by 2027. Chiang et al. (2017) also revealed that agritourism growth is much assisted by the support and initiatives from local or federal government, stimulating innovations in products and services, seeing this as an avenue for economic growth especially in rural areas. Creativity in entrepreneurs allow them discover the various opportunities in this diverse tourism industry (Gunn & Turgut, 2002). Creativity also empower entrepreneurs to provide different touristic experience by utilizing available supplies and incommensurable landscape of their business location.

Agritourism supply offered usually highly depends on the geographic location (Sadowski & Wojcieszak, 2019). Different types of landscape and variety of farming products at agritourism sites create unique experience for visiting tourists. In this case, the chosen study area is located in Balik Pulau, a hilly-gully region on the southwest of Penang Island. Balik Pulau, famously known as on the other side of Penang, is one of the remaining piece of land on the island spared from the rapid development. Home to the remaining high quality and tasty durian orchards, this area is reckoned to be suitable for the agritourism industry. Durian nicknamed as King of Fruits is a new golden commodity and highlighted as an asset that can contribute to Malaysian national income (Hasnan, 2019). Since Chinese

government permitted Malaysian durian to enter the Chinese market as a frozen product in 2011, Malaysia is the second largest exporter of durian after Thailand (Noodaeng, 2017). Hence, Tourism, Arts and Culture Ministry (MOTAC) has urged native durian farm entrepreneurs to expand their farms and provide more durians to supply for China's growing market (Chern, 2019). MOTAC has also encouraged entrepreneurs here to invest more and increase the number of tourists in visiting and stayover at local farms.

In response to this, the shortage of land in Balik Pulau is the main issue in developing this form of niche tourism. New development projects expected to generate billions in terms of revenue, converting available lands and new reclamation lands into industrial areas (Dermawan, 2019). Moreover, studies have shown that the demand for organic food in Penang is growing, but the supply of local organic products is not able to keep up with the increasing demand (Hossain & Lim, 2017; Somasundram, Razali & Santhirasegaram, 2016). In order to develop agritourism in Penang, the issues on supply side should be identified first, as there are limited research done on this niche tourism from this prospective area. Therefore, this research is conducted to understand the factors affecting agritourism supply in Balik Pulau, focusing on motivation and challenges faced by agritourism entrepreneurs at the site.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Agritourism refers to "tourism services provided by agricultural entrepreneurs within their own farm, allowing visitors to take part, directly or indirectly, in agricultural activities" (Philip, Hunter & Blackstock, 2010). Agritourism is the type of tourism which occurs in a fully functioning farm, having the agriculture activities being more superior than touristic activities. This hybrid form of farm and tourism also allows agriculture entrepreneurs to earn extra revenue from their main agriculture operations without leaving their agricultural site (Streifeneder, 2016). The characteristics of each agriculture site is important as it determine the type of farming activities will be carried out and also affects the overall agritourism experience. Different sites with different landforms and landscapes, provide different type of agritourism activities. Touristic activities provided at the agritourism site affect the visitors' intention to visit and provided positive economic returns (Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008). Hung, Din and Lin (2015) noted that the type of farm and its agriculture activities on-site has affected its advantage in the agritourism industry, which had directly affect the variety and amount of touristic activities. Thus, landscape of the sites plays an important role in the sites' performance, which are centered on relevant products and services.

Agritourism entrepreneur is an individual who establish and operate agritourism business with different characteristics depending on the farming activities, income and agritourism activities provided (McGehee & Kim, 2004). Collaboration between the government, private companies and the cultivation community are proposed to promote smart farming among local farmers (Jaabi, 2017). Several pilot programs using drones for crop spraying are launched as farmers cooperate with the government. This eased work and increased efficiency in farming, leading more time to develop agritourism in the vicinity. The various agritourism operations were usually influenced by instable income, tax incentives, meeting target consumer demand, lack of government programs and others' success in agritourism business (Nickerson et al., 2001). The various agriculture landscapes would determine the type of agritourism operation, as consumer demand was determined by customers' landscape preference (Gao et al., 2013). However, agrotourism entrepreneurs' motivation usually hampered by many challenges in this form of industry

such as lack of support, lack of training, lack of facilities or amenities, low occupancy levels and ineffective marketing (Sharpley, 2002).

Besides that, Inkson and Minnaert (2012) mentioned that tourism supply is the businesses and organizations which provides products for the usage of tourists. The supplies provided are meant to fulfil the demand of tourists during their travel. The extra income from agritourism allows the agriculture of the site to run smoothly. Rogerson and Rogerson (2014) further explained that successful agritourism business performances are believed to be influenced by agriculture attributes and the sociocultural environment. Nechar et al. (2014) emphasized that agritourism development can be successful when community, usage of endogenous resources, networking between stakeholders and sustainability practices are incorporated together. It is believed that agritourism industry do not only bring economic benefits to the entrepreneurs but also benefit the public in educating agro knowledge and enhancing their quality of life (Tew & Barbieri, 2012). Agritourism also believed to be able to empower locals involved, vitalize cultural pride and maintain sustainability of natural resources (Srithong et al., 2019). In Malaysia, agritourism is becoming one of the popular travel option among tourists mainly due to desire in seeking peace and having breaks from their hectic lifestyle. Cameron Highlands is one of the famous agritourism destination in Malaysia, alluring tourists with pleasant weather and fresh agriculture produce (Mohd Ariffin et al., 2014). Through staying at agritourism site, tourists will have a deeper connection with the nature (MOTAC, 2017). Agritourism also allows tourists to enjoy their holiday through indulging themselves in agriculture related activities.

### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

This study was conducted in Balik Pulau to investigate local agritourism entrepreneurs' motivation to start their businesses and challenges faced while operating in this area using qualitative method. The reason to use qualitative method is to gain in-depth discussion with the target respondents during interviews. Target respondents were determined by purposive sampling. This sampling is based on the conditions of the person who fulfil the requirements of the research, as he or she is able to provide the valuable information and necessary justification on the topic (Kumar, 2011). Kumar further elaborates that this allows researcher form a better insight, through having a clear understanding regarding the connection between the scenario and circumstances.

Before the interviews, 11 local agritourism entrepreneurs were identified to be actively operating in the area. They were approached through emails and telephone calls in August 2019. However, only six respondents responded and appointments were made prior interviews. The interviews were conducted face-to face at the business site on weekday morning before they start their business operations. During the interviews, their emotions and actions during the discussions were observed and noted. Their voices were recorded using smart phone voice recorder, allowing the researcher to have a clear grasp on the situation. All interviews were recorded upon their consent and transcribed verbatim. The interviews lasted for a minimum of forty minutes and the respondents preferred the researcher to conduct the interview in Hokkien, while some preferred to mix with English. Hokkien is a Chinese dialect, spoken as a mother tongue by most of Penang's Chinese community. Hokkien language is also translated into English, with the help of language experts.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) and King (2004), this analysis provides a highly flexible approach to get a rich, well-structured and detailed data. Thematic analysis is the process of identifying patterns and

themes within the data (Evans, 2018). In other words, this analysis involves recording or identifying passages of text or images that are linked by a common theme or idea and hence, establish a “framework of thematic ideas about it” (Gibbs 2007). This study adhered to Braun and Clarke (2006) steps in conducting thematic analysis. It started with familiarizing with the data by reading and rereading the transcripts. This is followed by generating initial codes to describe data content, search for themes or patterns across the different interviews, review themes, define themes and lastly, write-up.

#### **4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

##### **4.1 Background of the Respondents and Agritourism Sites**

All of the respondents interviewed are of Chinese ethnicity with age ranging from 43 to 58 years old. They do not perceive agritourism business as their main income, except for the eldest respondent working fulltime and showing full commitment as an agritourism entrepreneur. Others have their own companies or is active in other businesses, mostly not related to agriculture nor tourism. These younger entrepreneurs believe that other businesses are more lucrative and provide stable income compared to agritourism business. This has led to smaller scale agritourism business here in Balik Pulau. Usually, main revenues for agritourism sites are from the sale of farm products.

Table 1 presents the background of each respondent and the profile of their agritourism sites. Overall, the operation years of all agritourism sites can be considered still quite young, ranging between three to ten years with land size between 6.9 acres to 33 acres. Only one has been operating more than 10 years. All of the agritourism sites are located within hilly terrain, except one located on flat terrain. Natural streams flows through some of the sites, while others made use of man-made swimming pools and fish pond to create natural element in their sites. The agritourism entrepreneurial ventures include homestays located on durian farms, animal farm and an apiary. The activities on agritourism site are available to the visitors at selective hours. All activities require bookings in advance all year round to ensure there is sufficient manpower and equipment in running the activities. Only durian eating activity is available during durian season.

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Motivation</b>
A	Propagate Hakka culture and traditions
B	A place to gather with friends
C	Farm life
D	Success of other agritourism farms
E	Healthy environment for family
F	Educate durian consumers

Table 1: Motivation of entrepreneurs to operate agritourism site

##### **4.2 Motivation in Operating Agritourism Site**

According to Table 1, every respondent has different motivation in operating their farm. Due to their different motivations, the agritourism activities provided at their site also varies (Table 2). Findings revealed that the motivation behind respondents in operating the site will affect the type of products and services they provide to visitors. These selections are also much influenced by various demands from visitors. For respondent A, the original idea was to have a place for the family to take a break from hectic city lifestyle. The owner has homestays located high in the hills with a tranquil view and surrounded by many varieties of fruit trees. The idea has then developed into the current agritourism site, as they also want to share their Hakka culture and traditions with visitors. As the number of visitors

grow, more activities are added to the list based on request from visitors. They are even willing to tailor make customized tours to satisfy the demand.

“No matter what kind of course the customers want, we can modify can make changes on the details to suit to their needs. We can even create a package according to the customers’ needs” [A]

Respondent B claimed that the place was originally planned for friends and close acquaintances to stay when they get together. Yet due to the tranquil surrounding, he was suggested to rent out rooms for town people to stayover. Positive words-of-mouth drew in bigger crowds and the site has expanded to accommodate this. Diverse motivation among entrepreneurs created variety of activities on the site (Vik & McElwee, 2011).

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>List of Activities</b>	<b>Target Group</b>
A	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Culture centre visit</li> <li>2. Fruit farm visit</li> <li>3. Mountain climbing</li> <li>4. Teambuilding</li> <li>5. Motivational lecture</li> <li>6. Karaoke</li> <li>7. Chess</li> <li>8. Intensive course</li> <li>9. Literature course</li> <li>10. Yoga or sports course</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Retirees</li> <li>2. City dwellers</li> </ol>
B	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Cycling</li> <li>2. Hiking</li> </ol>	Nature lovers
C	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Farm visit</li> <li>2. Animal riding, petting and feeding</li> <li>3. Honey cultivating visit</li> <li>4. Education tour</li> <li>5. Teambuilding</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Family</li> <li>2. Students</li> </ol>
D	Education tour	People from all ages
E	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Farm tours</li> <li>2. Durian eating</li> <li>3. Student camp</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Durian eaters</li> <li>2. Nature lovers</li> <li>3. Students</li> <li>4. Foreigners</li> </ol>
F	Durian farm tour	Durian lovers

Table 2: Activities provided at agritourism site and target group

Living a farm life was the childhood dream of respondent C, hence becoming his motivation venturing into agritourism. He also indicated that his hobby for gardening helped him to materialize his dreams. Respondent D jumped into this business for its lucrative side. The success stories from other agritourism businesses has pushed him to venture into this industry. Even though with minimal knowledge and without prior training, he persevered and did his homework, learning and researching on his own to improve and make the business grow. Respondent E revealed that the original idea was to operate the site as a vacation home and have a safe and healthy environment for his family. His interest grew in agriculture and he tried to adopt sustainability practices within the farm operation and share it with his customers. Similar to previous respondent, the main motivation for respondent F was to educate the visitors on the correct ways to enjoy durian. The

accommodation at his site was built afterwards and slowly grew year by year. During off season period, respondent F still opens his accommodation for visitors to stay, although there was not much entertainment and no durian available.

Most respondents were surprised to know that there are people who are willing to pay and enjoy staying in rural areas. Sadowski and Wojcieszak (2019) explained that main motivation for city dwellers to visit rural areas are to enjoy calm, nature and landscape. Urban areas are usually more polluted than the countryside (Han et al., 2014). The respondents believed that Balik Pulau is an ideal place for agritourism development as the unique landscape here enables various activities to take place.

### **4.3 Challenges Faced by Agritourism Entrepreneurs**

#### 1) Inadequate support from government and private sectors

All six respondents mentioned they did not receive any assistance from the government, even since the start of their involvement in the agritourism industry. They self-funded their sites, started small and grow rather slow.

"We have the money and we did the renovation by ourselves." [A]

"...we have rebuilt and renovated this place for 15 years. We change this place little by little." [B]

Respondent C and F claimed that the government might provide some form of assistance for the industry, but they prefer to rely on self-funding. However, Respondent D lamented that the support from the government is difficult to acquire and he had faced difficulties applying for it.

"I paid the money all by myself... we cannot apply for the financial assistance. The calls made to the phone number posted on newspaper was not answered." [D]

Only one out of six respondents claimed that there is support from the private sectors and the support group community. This community is made up of family, friends and enthusiasts who are passionate and help each other to grow agritourism business. Even though the support is not much, but it did contribute to the agritourism business. Respondent E revealed that the support from the private sectors fulfilled his intention in running the agritourism business, as they participated in the education program regarding agritourism. Respondent E also claimed that the support from the community greatly assisted him since starting his business. The community also helped him to develop the agritourism business, as the respondent has no background in the industry.

"A lot of friends actually help out... I don't know anything about constructions... I don't even know anything about farming. But, it so happens through web, we made friends and all that. The farmer in Cameron, and he taught me everything about composting." [E]

Restricted recognition (Valdivia & Barbieri, 2014) and lack of the promised assistance on financial from the government sector set drawbacks for agritourism development (Sharpley, 2012). Valdivia and Barbieri (2014) further revealed that the support from the government and private sectors are not much compared to the support from family and friends. Usually, financial aid from the government is one-off and creating local agritourism group may expedite funding (Srisomyong & Meyer, 2015). This group can also serve as a platform for networking and greater access to a broader range of potential

funding sources. Up till now the amount of support was still much higher if compared to that from the government.

The public sector actually provides support for agritourism start-ups. This can be seen from the establishment of various research and training centers for agritourism purpose (Mazlan & Juraimi, 2014). For example, Malaysia Agriculture Research and Developments (MARDI), under the Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-Based Industry has established researched centers in almost every states. Mazlan and Juraimi (2014) further explained that successful agriculture technologies and practices introduced to farmers can also be perceived as an added agritourism attraction to visitors. Nevertheless, with support from either government or non-government agencies, there is a golden opportunity for Balik Pulau to be one of the premier research center specifically for durian and thus, entice more tourists to this side of Penang island.

### 2) Difficulties in employing staffs

Four out of six respondents claimed they have difficulties in employing staffs. This is likely due to the difficult and remote location, and poor working conditions. The staffs not only have to travel up the hill to reach their work destination, but also have to work long hours under the hot sun. One respondent lamented that most of the younger generation are not interested to work in rural areas and prefer to work in office with air conditioning. This has led to hiring foreign workers to do hard labour on the farm. The same problem exists in other agriculture industry as locals usually demand higher wages leaving respondents to depend on foreign workers.

Therefore, clear benefits, using latest technogy and frequent updates on agritourism development are among ways to attract youngsters to stay in rural areas and get involved in agritourism industry. This will also reduce the numbers of youngster migrating to the city (Bwana et al., 2015). Hung et al. (2015) revealed that if agritourism site do not have sufficient manpower, the quality of service and products provided to the visitors would be adversely affected.

### 3) Insufficient infrastructure

Half of the respondents claimed that the infrastructures provided at their respective sites are inadequate while the rest believed that they have reached an acceptable standard according to their visitor demand. Respondent A claimed that he was forced to pave the road himself. Due to poor road conditions, he even had to ferry his customers to his agritourism site by four-wheel drive vehicle. Other respondents agreed that continuous maintenance and improvements are needed to keep the business running.

“So far until today, we are still working on developing the farm... 2 main things that need to improve... Create more shades around the farm... increase the amount of attractions for the youngsters to take photos” [C]

Mazlan and Juraimi (2014) highlighted that good transportation link would add market value to the agritourism site and lacking this may hinder tourists from visiting there. Apart from that, basic tourism infrastructure should always be maintained to ensure that the condition is able to attract returning tourists. In this study, the respondents also note that more new photo-worthy and captivating attractions are needed to lure in new generation of tourists. Studies have also shown that Instagram photos and stories may influence decision making of generation Y to visit a destination (Constantoglou & Trihas, 2020; ELTayeb, 2021). This can present an opportunity for the entrepreneurs to market their sites using social media to attract tourists to their destinations.

#### 4) Seasonal income

During the king of fruit season, throngs of tourists and durian lovers will hunt their favourite agritourism sites and stay at homestays. They like to taste the freshness of durian especially seeking for freshly tree-dropped durians. Some tourists would also like to experience searching for durians on their own in the orchard. A few respondents agreed that they experience less tourists during non-season, forcing them to seek other type of activities to attract tourists all year round. They offer other nature related activities and try to explore the available natural resources to keep the business running. Activities such as camping, hiking, teambuilding and educational tour, are some of their ideas that has attracted day-tourists and overnight tourists there. These alternatives represent entrepreneurial traits to be creative and innovate in order to capitalize on marketplace opportunities.

#### 5) Urban development

All respondents claimed that urban development at their agritourism site is rather limited, as they are preserving the natural environment there. This is likely due to their unique location located within the hills, with no proper paved roads. However, developers have seen Balik Pulau as a potential area for urban development and offer a fortune for respondents' land. Two respondents revealed that offers were turned down due to their strong motivation and desire to ensure their legacy will continue and preserve the natural beauty of the area. On the other hand, some of them revealed that urban development also helped to boost their business, making tourists aware and create a much easier path for tourists to find their business. One respondent claimed that there is also negative effect from the urbanization when new land developers purchase the lands at Balik Pulau, they are likely to chop down the old wild durian trees, and replaced it with only famous durian species. In order to enhance plant growth, new land developers heavily depend on chemical fertilizer that will also lead to soil erosion and degrade the water quality. On the other hand, studies have shown that agritourism can adapt well to urbanization (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2014; Schilling & Sullivan, 2014). Agritourism entrepreneurs can use new technologies as a marketing tool to promote, sell, educate and share their site at low cost to attract urban dwellers to delve in agritourism activities.

## **5.0 CONCLUSION**

Agritourism activities provided in agritourism sites vary based on the motivation and readily available natural resources of the area. Motivation of agricultural entrepreneurs depend on their goals in operating the sites which are influenced by financial situation, health concern and eagerness to share and preserve ethnic and agriculture knowledge. Agritourism entrepreneurs in Balik Pulau have strong inclination to be independent. They distant themselves from government support eventhough many agritourism entrepreneurs from other places rely on them. Future research might focus on a comparative study of this topic to different areas in Malaysia, analyzing differences in term of challenges according to region or other context. Balik Pulau offers a unique experience for both local and international tourists. Within less than an hour, one may travel form the bustling city of Georgetown to serene and quiet place to enjoy nature and taste durian at its best. Judging from the remarkable landscapes, vicinity and diverse agritourism activities offered by hardworking, motivated and innovative agritourism entrepreneurs, this paper suggests that Balik Pulau should be marketed as Penang's agritourism hub and a one-stop centre for durian lovers and agritourism activities. A large area should be allocated for only agriculture and agritourism purposes, without intervention of huge-scale, profit-oriented developers for the sustainability of the ecosystem there. This will not only boost Penang tourism industry, but also preserve its natural area and from being converted into another industrial area.



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