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EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES FOR HERITAGE CONSERVATION THROUGH COMMUNITY BASED TOURISM: INSIGHTS FROM UNESCO SITE BENCHMARKING AND LOCAL PERCEPTIONS

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Jalil, Nurlelawati Ab; Salleh, Nurul Hamiruddin; Rahman, Julaila Abdul; Nizaruddin, Norhanis Diyana; Rahman, Syakir Amir Ab; +2 authors

Kulliyah of Architecture and Environmental Design, UNIVERSITI ISLAM ANTARABANGSA, Malaysia

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Abstract

Community-based Tourism (CBT) has gained increasing attention as a sustainable approach that empowers local communities while conserving cultural heritage. This study examines the potential of Pasir Salak, Perak, as a heritage-driven CBT destination by benchmarking it against Kampung Morten, Melaka, a recognised living heritage village. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research combines a benchmarking visit, pre- and post-surveys of community members (N = 38), focus group discussions, and field observations to evaluate community perceptions, participation, and empowerment. Findings indicate that while Pasir Salak community demonstrates strong cultural pride and in CBT, challenges remain in governance support, infrastructure and policy framework. The benchmarking exercise highlighted transferable lessons from Kampung Morten, especially in governance structures, cultural branding, and enterprise development, as challenges of empowerment and policy alignment persist. This study contributes to planning discourse by positioning benchmarking as both an evaluative and capacity-building tool in heritage tourism and by linking CBT practices to sustainable development and cultural resilience. Policy implications suggest that strengthening co-governance mechanisms, aligning initiatives with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and fostering inclusive

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Authors (7)

[Jalil, Nurlelawati Ab](#)

[Salleh, Nurul Hamiruddin](#)

[Rahman, Julaila Abdul](#)

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[Corresponding author](#)