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

Nurlelawati Ab Jalil[1], Nurul Hamiruddin Salleh[2], Julaila Abdul Rahman[3], Norhanis Diyana Nizaruddin[4], Syakir Amir Ab Rahman[5], Fadzli Irwan Bahrudin[6], Khalilah Zakariya[7]

[1-7] *Kulliyyah of Architecture and Environmental Design,*
UNIVERSITI ISLAM ANTARABANGSA MALAYSIA

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 community participation are essential for revitalising Pasir Salak and similar heritage sites.

Keywords: Community-based Tourism, Benchmarking, Heritage Conservation, Community Empowerment, Pasir Salak, Kampung Morten.

[1] Corresponding author. Email: nurlelawati@iium.edu.my

INTRODUCTION

Heritage conservation and community-based tourism (CBT) are intrinsically interconnected as both emphasise the safeguarding of cultural identity while fostering sustainable socio-economic development. Heritage conservation refers to a systematic process of protecting, maintaining and managing both tangible and intangible cultural heritage for future generations without compromising its authenticity and integrity (Ahmad, 2006; Jokilehto, 2017). The practice encompasses the preservation of built heritage, cultural landscapes, artefacts and traditional knowledge systems that together embody a community's history, values and identity. Community-based tourism (CBT), on the other hand, provides a participatory framework that allows local communities to play an active role in conserving and interpreting their heritage, ensuring that cultural assets such as traditional architecture, crafts and historic narratives are not only preserved but also valorised as tourism resources (Wijayanti et al., 2023).

In Malaysia, heritage conservation is guided by the National Heritage Act 2005 (Act 645) and international frameworks such as the Burra Charter and the Venice Charter. The framework aims to strike a balance between protecting and sustainably using the unique character and meaning that heritage holds for a community, while also adapting to contemporary needs. Although there are acts for local heritage conservation, the initiatives are somehow not rigorous, selective and not widely known. For example, while urban heritage sites such as George Town and Melaka have benefited from the UNESCO World Heritage status, small rural heritage sites like Pasir Salak face different challenges, like limited funding, underdeveloped tourism infrastructure and inadequate conservation expertise as found in Harun (2018) and Hashim et al. (2025).

Although Pasir Salak was once a significant heritage and tourism asset to Perak, developed with proper infrastructure and governance in its local authority planning (Isa et al., 2022), over the years, Pasir Salak has been facing a decline in its tourism charms due to promotion challenges and stakeholder coordination issues, as found in Mohamed et al. (2023). Numerous studies have highlighted declining issues in Pasir Salak and proposed various strategies. Yet, only one study by Hashim et al. (2025) has emphasised the local community's role as a significant tourism agent for Pasir Salak's regenerative tourism. Community-led tourism, also known as community-based tourism (CBT), according to Rocca & Zielinski (2022), is a tourism model that involves local active participation, along with government initiatives, in equitable decision-making regarding its development and management, thereby sustaining local benefits from its economic, social, and cultural impacts. The model emphasises the community as the foundation for transforming mainstream tourism into sustainable, identity-preserving, and economically beneficial activities (Prasad, K. (2024).

This study seeks to address the gap by evaluating the potential of Pasir Salak as a heritage-driven CBT destination through community perceptions and benchmarking against Kampung Morten. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Examine community awareness, perceptions and interest in CBT for heritage conservation in Pasir Salak.
2. Analyse lessons from Kampung Morten as a benchmarking model for heritage-driven CBT, and
3. Identify policy and governance implications for revitalising Pasir Salak

By linking benchmarking with CBT models and community empowerment frameworks, this study contributes to the discourse on heritage conservation within Malaysian planning scholarship, offering insights into how rural heritage tourism can align with cultural sustainability and the SDGs.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Heritage Conservation in Malaysia: Urban and Rural Contrasts
Pasir Salak is a vital and rich in tourism potential site for Perak Tengah that could contribute to its economic revitalisation. The place boasts a vast cultural heritage, comprising unique culture and art, traditional knowledge, natural beauty, and more (Harun, 2018). Although Malaysia's heritage conservation framework is shaped by the National Heritage Act 2005 and influenced by international charters, yet, conservation outcomes vary between urban and rural contexts. Urban heritage sites such as George Town and Melaka benefit from UNESCO designation, which brings investment, policy attention and global visibility (Harun, 2018). In contrast, rural heritage destinations like Pasir Salak face persistent challenges, including limited promotion, declining visitor numbers, fragmented stakeholder coordination, and insufficient conservation expertise (Isa et al., 2022; Mohamed et al., 2023; Hashim et al., 2025). Despite these constraints, Pasir Salak retains strong cultural assets and symbolic values as a site of national history, making it a candidate for CBT revitalisation.

Models of CBT: Participation, Sustainability and Governance
Several CBT models offer evaluative lenses for analysing tourism development (Table 1). Tosun (2000; 2006) conceptualised community participation along a continuum of coercive, induced and spontaneous, highlighting the barriers to empowerment in developing context. He et al. (2021) advanced a sustainability evaluation framework that integrates economic, socio-cultural, environmental and institutional dimensions. Pasanchay and Schott (2021) demonstrated how homestay enterprises can preserve cultural heritage while advancing livelihoods.

Rocca and Zielinski (2022) underscored governance and social capital, emphasising networks, trust and institutional support as prerequisites for CBT success. More recently, Abreu et al. (2024) aligned CBT directly with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), showing how heritage-based tourism can contribute to inclusive development. Collectively, these models provide a multi-dimensional framework to assess CBT practices in Pasir Salak.

Table 1: Summary of CBT models for Pasir Salak Benchmarking Literature Review

CBT Model	Key Dimensions	Variables
Tosun (2000; 2006) – Normative Model of Community Participation	Level of participation: Coercive, Induced, Spontaneous	Movement of Pasir Salak community from induced to spontaneous participation
He et al. (2021) – Sustainability Evaluation Framework	Economic; Socio–cultural; Environmental; Institutional	Changes in institutional support, community awareness of sustainability principles, and initial tourism product/service improvement
Pasanchay & Schott (2021) – Homestay Enterprise – Outcomes Model	Local enterprise practice; Cultural heritage preservation; Economic	Lessons from Kampung Morten homestay model, Potential for Pasir Salak to develop enterprises
Rocca & Zielinski (2022) – Governance & Social Capital Model	Governance structure; Social networks; Trust building; Institutional	Roles of MOTEC, Bahagian. Promosi Pelancongan, and Perak agency in supporting CBT
Abreu et al. (2024) – SDG Aligned Assessment Framework	Alignment with SDGs; Policy integration; Inclusive	Mapping benchmarking visit outcomes to SDGs

Lessons from Kampung Morten as a Benchmark

Kampung Morten is a Malay settlement located just outside Melaka's UNESCO World Heritage buffer zone. The Melaka State Government has declared it a heritage village under the state's conservation enactment, preserving its vernacular architecture and cultural identity amid rising urban development (Sukri, 2017). Kampung Morten is a living heritage village actively engaged in tourism activities, including homestays, cultural performances, tours, traditional products, and delicacies, among others. Study in Radzuan and Ahmad (2020) highlights that although many residents are highly interested in the tourism initiative, fewer feel empowered to contribute their opinions to tourism planning and decision-making, which is the gap between involvement and empowerment.

Additionally, they highlighted the issues with relying on limited incentive programs for heritage conservation, illustrating the challenges of maintaining cultural authenticity and sustaining community interest in tourism. In essence, the village exemplifies how CBT is adapted to preserve heritage, culture, architecture and livelihood. It demonstrates both the strength in community involvement and cultural authenticity, while also highlighting challenges such as limited agency and a lack of alignment between policy and community. This makes Kampung Morten an excellent benchmarking reference for Pasir Salak's CBT initiative.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design
The study adopts a mixed method approach combining field benchmarking visits as an experiential learning tool, community survey analysis, participant observation, focus group discussions (FDGs) and field notes. This design ensured both quantitative insight through surveys and qualitative depth through FDGs and observations, aligning with recommendations for participatory tourism research (Tosun, 2006; Rocca & Zielinski, 2022).

Benchmarking Approach, Sampling and Participants
A benchmarking visit was organised to Melaka, including a visit to Kampung Morten for discussions and exchange ideas between the communities, visits to the state and local authorities, Ministry of Tourism (MOTAC) Melaka and Bahagian Promosi Pelancongan Melaka (BPP). The benchmarking exercise aimed to expose the Pasir Salak community to established heritage tourism models and facilitate mutual learning through observation and dialogue. Participants comprised the Ketua Kampung (village head), local villagers, small entrepreneurs, and representatives from the Perak state government, reflecting a diverse and inclusive group of community stakeholders.

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling approach focusing on individuals actively involved or interested in heritage and tourism development. The selection process was coordinated by the Ketua Kampung and PAMIS chairman, who identified community members who were available and eager to participate after the program was publicly announced. In total, 38 participants joined the program, among whom 18 respondents completed the pre-survey and 16 respondents completed the post-survey (n = 18 pre-visit, n = 16 post-visit). The survey measured awareness, perceptions, motivation, and perceived roles of the community in tourism development. The data were analysed descriptively, supported by thematic insights from discussions during benchmarking activities.

Although the sample size was modest, it reflects the active engagement from key community actors, consistent with CBT research norms that emphasise depth of participation over breadth of representation. Purposive sampling is considered appropriate in such contexts, as it captures the perspectives of directly involved stakeholders and those capable of influencing local tourism initiatives (Pasanchay & Schott, 2021; Tosun, 2006). This approach ensures that the analysis reflects the authentic voice of the Pasir Salak community, aligning with participatory and empowerment-oriented principles central to community-based tourism studies.

Data Analysis and Methodological Framework
Survey data were analysed descriptively using frequency distributions and percentage comparisons to identify changes in awareness, perceptions, and interest in CBT. Qualitative data (FDGs and field notes), on the other hand, were analysed thematically, guided by CBT models (Tosun, 2006; He et al., 2021; Rocca & Zielinski, 2022; Abreu et al., 2024). To ensure systematic extraction of lessons from Kampung Morten, the benchmarking framework employed a structured comparative approach guided by three analytical lenses derived from established CBT models: (i) community participation and empowerment, (ii) governance and institutional support, and (iii) socio-economic and cultural sustainability. Field observations and focus group discussions were supported by an observation checklist that covered governance structure, community roles, enterprise activities, heritage presentation, and tourism promotion (Figure 2). Qualitative notes and discussion transcripts were then thematically coded according to these categories to identify transferable lessons applicable to Pasir Salak (Table 2). This systematic process ensured that the benchmarking findings were not merely descriptive but analytically grounded in established CBT and sustainable frameworks.

Table 2: Benchmarking Analytical Dimensions and Transferable Lessons

Analytical Dimension	Example Criteria Observed at Kampung Morten	Lesson Transferred to Pasir Salak
Governance Structure	Village committee linked to MOTAC and local authority	Proposed establishment of Pasir Salak Heritage Committee to coordinate tourism initiatives
Community Participation	Residents involved in homestay and cultural events	Strengthen local involvement through participatory tourism activities

Analytical Dimension	Example Criteria Observed at Kampung Morten	Lesson Transferred to Pasir Salak
Cultural Branding	Heritage interpretation, traditional performances and cohesive visual identity	Develop local cultural branding and interpretive materials
Enterprise Development	Homestay and souvenir-based microenterprises	Encourage community microbusiness and skills training
Heritage Presentation	Preservation of vernacular houses as tourism assets	Adapt traditional houses in Pasir Salak for educational tourism

A triangulation strategy was employed to integrate quantitative and qualitative findings, thereby enhancing validity. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual-methodological framework, linking benchmarking activities, community survey data and CBT models to heritage conservation outcomes.
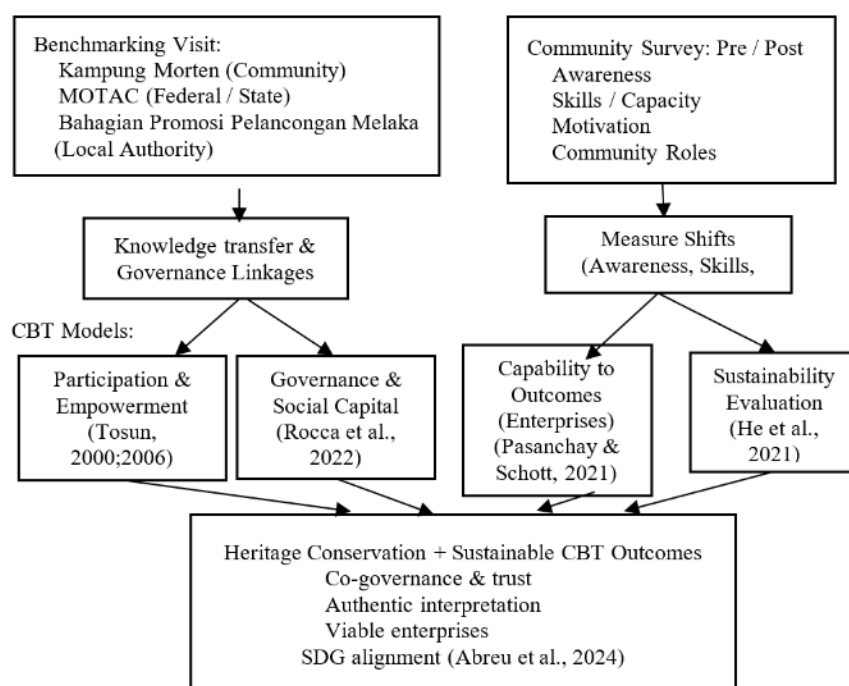

Figure 1: Methodological framework - linking benchmarking and survey with CBT models.

Figure 2: Benchmarking visit at Kampung Morten (a & b), discussion with Kampung Morten community (c), and sessions with MOTAC Melaka and Bahagian Promosi Pelancongan (BPP) Melaka (d-f)

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis focuses on understanding how benchmarking exposure and participatory engagement influenced the Pasir Salak community's awareness, perception and readiness toward community-based tourism (CBT). By comparing pre- and post-survey data, the study explores how knowledge exchange occurs during the benchmarking visits. The findings provide insights into the evolving relationship between local empowerment, government support and cultural preservation. The interpretations were made through relevant and established models from Tosun (2006), He et al. (2021), and Rocca et al. (2022), which reveal how the benchmarking method facilitated knowledge transfer while highlighting existing gaps in institutional collaboration and community capacity for heritage conservation through CBT.

Demographically, pre-visit survey respondents were more varied in age groups, with ages ranging from the 20s to the 50s (n = 18). Post-visit respondents (n = 16), on the other hand, had slightly older participants, which reflects greater involvement from active community members. Gender distribution was roughly balanced in both phases.

To strengthen the analytical depth, both quantitative and qualitative findings were comparatively interpreted. While descriptive statistics illustrated percentage shifts before and after the benchmarking visit, the interpretations were guided by comparative observation of patterns rather than statistical significance due to the modest sample size. Nevertheless, these shifts reflect meaningful tendencies that correspond to the exposure and knowledge exchange experienced during the benchmarking activities. Qualitative data from FDGs were thematically coded using key dimensions derived from the CBT models: community participation, governance and sustainability practices, to capture emerging narratives of empowerment. For example, participants frequently mentioned the importance of "seeing how Kampung Morten worked together with local authorities," highlighting increased awareness of collaborative governance. These quotes substantiate the perceived improvements in knowledge and readiness observed after the benchmarking program.

Awareness of CBT

The pre-visit survey revealed that 83.3% (n = 15) of respondents acknowledged familiarity with the CBT concept. The post-visit survey showed slightly lower awareness, with 75% (n = 16) of respondents aware of the CBT concept. Awareness was already high, but he benchmarking visit did not significantly change the proportion, suggesting that prior sensitisation from local initiatives had already taken effect. However, the quality of knowledge may have improved.

Perception of Tourism Development in Pasir Salak

The pre-visit survey showed split responses across 'getting less' (33.3%), 'uncertain' (33.3%) and 'no progress' (27.8%). The post-visit survey showed major shifts to 'uncertain' (57.1%) and 'no progress (21.4%). The pattern shows community perception is pessimistic before and after the visit, suggesting exposure to Melaka's success story made respondents more reflective and cautious about Pasir Salak's current state.

Community Capacity

The data showed an apparent positive change after the visit, with 44.4% respondents being confident in local capacity earlier, increasing to 64.3%. The no-confidence vote showed a decreasing pattern, from 38.9% to 21.4%, after the visit. The pattern showed improved confidence in local community capacity among respondents, aligning with CBT models that emphasise learning through exposure (Tosun, 2006; Rocca & Zielinski, 2022).

Interest in CBT Contribution

Both surveys showed high scores, with 72.2% of respondents being very interested in CBT before the visit, and this interest increased to 78.6%. The pattern indicates a strengthened interest after benchmarking, suggesting a foundation for implementing CBT, provided that structural or governance support increases high enthusiasm.

The benchmarking method appears to work as an intervention in improving perceptions of capacity and slightly boosting motivation among the Pasir Salak community. The exposure to Melaka's governance and its community that implements CBT in Kampung Morten and conservation strategies provides transferable insights that can be localised for Pasir Salak. This aligns with the CBT models that emphasise empowerment, role clarity between government and community, and participatory governance, supporting Rocca & Zielinski's (2022) model and Tosun's (2006) emphasis on community participation as central to tourism sustainability.

Policy and Planning Implications

The benchmarking facilitated reflection and capacity-building, showing its value beyond simple comparison. Planners should institutionalise benchmarking visits as part of heritage tourism development strategies. In terms of community empowerment, transitioning from awareness to decision-making authority is crucial for achieving genuine empowerment, aligning with Tosun's (2006) suggestion for spontaneous participation. Additionally, stronger linkages between Perak authorities, MOTAC and local associations like PAMIS, and states that have been recognised by UNESCO, are needed to sustain initiatives.

In the SDGs alignment, positioning Pasir Salak's CBT within the SDG framework, especially in Goal 8 (Decent Work), Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities & Communities) and Goal 17 (Partnerships), can attract broader support and funding.

In aligning the findings with the theoretical frameworks, Pasir Salak's case demonstrates a transition from induced participation towards spontaneous participation, consistent with Tonsun's (2006) model, as community members begin to assume more proactive roles following the benchmarking visit. The enhanced collaboration between villagers, PAMIS and local authorities also support Rocca & Zielinski's (2022) governance and social capital model, indicating that exposure to successful CBT governance structures can reinforce trust and collective agency. Furthermore, the benchmarking outcomes directly contribute to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) through potential community entrepreneurship, SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) by promoting heritage conservation, and SGD 17 (Partnership for Goals) through strengthened institutional linkages. This integration positions benchmarking not only as an experiential learning tool but also as a strategic mechanism to operationalise the SDGs within heritage driven community tourism initiatives.

CONCLUSION
Empirical Findings
This study examined the potential of Pasir Salak, Perak, as a heritage-driven Community-Based Tourism (CBT) site by benchmarking it against Kampung Morten and other related Melaka tourism governance agencies. Empirically, the benchmarking visit enhanced community awareness, confidence and motivation toward CBT participation. The pre- and post-survey results demonstrated positive shifts in local capacity perception, while focus group discussions revealed increased understanding of co-governance and collaborative tourism planning. These findings confirm that exposure to successful models, such as Kampung Morten, fosters reflective learning and readiness among community stakeholders in Pasir Salak.

Conceptual Contributions
Conceptually, the study positions benchmarking as more than a comparative exercise. It also serves as a practical tool for experiential learning, capacity building and policy reflection within heritage tourism planning. By linking the benchmarking outcomes to established CBT models (Tosun, 2006; Rocca & Zielinski, 2022; He et al., 2021) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 8, 11, and 17), this research demonstrates how benchmarking can operationalise community empowerment and sustainability principles within heritage contexts. The integration of community perception data with governance analysis extends

the theoretical understanding of CBT as a participatory and adaptive planning framework.

Recommendations

1. Policy implications: Strengthen coordination between state agencies (e.g., MOTAC Perak and Perak authorities) and local associations (e.g., PAMIS) to institutionalise benchmarking programs as part of rural tourism policy.
2. Practical implications: Develop continuous training modules, small enterprise incubation and heritage interpretation programs to sustain community engagement post-benchmarking.
3. Future research: Conduct longitudinal studies across multiple heritage villages to evaluate long-term impacts of benchmarking on community empowerment, governance effectiveness and sustainable tourism outcomes.

In summary, this study contributes both empirical evidence and conceptual advancements by demonstrating that benchmarking, when systematically implemented, not only enhances community awareness and collaboration but also serves as a replicable planning mechanism for heritage conservation and community-based tourism development.

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