

## POTENTIAL AND CHALLENGES: TOURISM STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS MUSLIM FRIENDLY GEOTOURISM IN LANGKAWI UGGP

Siti Syahirah Saffinee<sup>1\*</sup>, Mohammad Aizat Jamaludin<sup>2</sup>, Sharina Abdul Halim<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1 2</sup> International Institute for Halal Research and Training (INHART), Level 3, KICT Building, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), 53100, Selangor, Malaysia, mohdaizat@iium.edu.my

<sup>3</sup> Langkawi Research Center, Institute for Environment and Development, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Langkawi, Kedah, Malaysia, sharinahalim@ukm.edu.my

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### ABSTRACT

This study provides the current practices, utilising qualitative data among tourism stakeholders on Muslim Friendly Geotourism (MFGT) in Langkawi UGGP. MFGT has grown as a valuable tourism sector in both Muslim and non-Muslim countries. Langkawi UGGP has a Malay culture, and the majority of the local communities are Muslim. Previous study shows the tourism business has long been part of the so-called 'unfriendly to Muslim' faith-based needs. However, the issues were limited of approach related to MFGT concept among tourism stakeholders. Consequently, MFT solves this predicament, allowing more Muslims to participate in geotourism activities without having any issues performing their faith. Besides, findings shows the potential and challenges of MFGT to be implemented in Langkawi UGGP. All tourism stakeholders are positive in their responses and aware on the importance of implementation MFGT for Langkawi UGGP economic development, protection of the environment and participation of local community. Therefore, this study strives to enhancing knowledge in geotourism literature, particularly in the cross-cultural context manner.

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### Corresponding Author:

Siti Syahirah Saffinee

International Institute for Halal Research and Training (INHART)

Email: [syahirah.saffinee@live.iium.edu.my](mailto:syahirah.saffinee@live.iium.edu.my)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has become an attractive niche for Muslim visitors from all over the world to enjoy Muslim tourism. Malaysia is known as a country with a class of 8.3 in Muslim-friendly tourist destinations in other Muslim countries like Egypt, the UAE, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, which provide friendly Muslims with a first ranking. However, it is not only Muslim tourists but all other tourists in Malaysia who travel to Malaysia that apply to the scope of a Muslim-friendly tourism industry in Malaysia. Malaysia is a Muslim majority country with a greater potential to expand the tourism industry in a Muslim-friendly way. Concerning the Muslim Friendly Tourism (MFT) industry, Malaysia has a competitive advantage that gives opportunities to create more market share. Significantly, the country has 26.4 million tourist arrivals in 2018 and approximately the citizenry will continue to increase to 2.2 billion in 2030 (MyTourismData, 2018). Reuters (2015) estimated that in line with human population growth, the global expenses of Muslim consumers on tourism will be worth USD1,128 million in 2018, which is supposed to increase to USD1,585 million by 2020. The growth creates a potential prime market for MFT, halal food, Muslim Friendly accommodation, Islamic tour package, and the logistic segment. Despite this rapid increase, it is known that there is lack of awareness on MFT concept in geotourism destination to meet the demand. In Langkawi, geotourism was briefly introduced in adding value to the old folks' myths and legends as well as in linking the geology to the diverse ecosystems (Unjah & Abdul Halim, 2018). This may be problematic and cause difficulties among Muslim travellers who do not wish to compromise their faith-based need while experience the destination. Thus, understanding the potential and challenges of these concepts is required to fulfil the demands-side.

### Overview of Langkawi UNESCO Global Geoparks

Malaysian tourism has been positively impacted by the arrival of traveller's visits to the nature-based destination. Ehsan et al. (2016) claim that there is a lot of opportunities for Malaysia to attract more inbound travellers. In Malaysia, Langkawi UNESCO Global Geopark (LUGGP) is the first global geopark in Southeast Asia region to be recognized by the Global Geopark Network (GGN). Langkawi UGGP earned the title in 2007 saw an increasing

number of travellers from more than 20 million travellers in 2007 to 36 million travellers in 2017 who came to the island because of its unique natural environment and culture.

Geoparks underpin its seventh goal (GGN, 2010). Among the goals are to protect and preserve the historical elements for present and future generations, aside from to inform and raise public awareness of earth science and natural environment issues, establish sustainable development practices, and ensure participatory schemes and alliances to promote and manage heritage appropriately. The literature suggests that there is interest in studying Langkawi's Geopark, but much work is still needed (Azman et al., 2010; Mahmood & Nurunnabi, 2019; Noor et al., 2020). Therefore, the present study noted the limitation on the supply-side study (Thompson et al., 2018) and less influence on non-economic factors such as environmental among local communities to support sustainable tourism at Langkawi UGG (Eslami et al., 2018). However, the three geopark's main components i.e. protection, sustainable development related to tourism, and education, need to be maintained (Mohd Fauzi et al., 2018). Therefore, the literature seems to strongly argue that the sustainable development of tourism depends on the direct and indirect participation of the local community.

In Langkawi UGGp, Langkawi Development Authority (LADA) is no power to enforce but only can encourage other tourism stakeholders to participate in the tourism economy. Whereas the Kedah Forestry Department (KFD) is responsible for managing the Kedah state's environment had declines its responsibility after Langkawi received Geopark status (Thompson et al., 2018). It affects local entrepreneurs' way based on what is right for managing tourism without knowing how the Langkawi UGGp should be managed (Marzuki & Khoo, 2016). In addition, the tourist guides of Langkawi UGGp have to attend 1200 credit hours to cover in the Continual Tourism Related Education (CTRE) syllabus, which covers nature guides and city guides under Langkawi Tour Guides Association (LTGA) (Marzuki & Khoo, 2016). However, the finding by Mohd Yusof et al. (2019) shows the conflicts of information among the tourist guide in Langkawi, such as the knowledge about the geopark branding itself. People do not care about the geopark's objectives as long as they can get jobs and profit from tourism (Ah et al., 2018; Mohd Yusof et al., 2019). As a consequence, a fundamental approach to knowledge is desired.

#### **Muslim Friendly Tourism in Malaysia**

The word 'MFT' is used frequently in Malaysia. While, west country like Dubai and Egypt prefer to Islamic term or Halal, except Tunisia and Kuwait preferred same as Malaysia. In South Korea, preferred to use 'Halal-friendly'. Basically, MFT aims to provide tourism product and services friendly with Muslim traveller in accordance to Islamic perspective (Saffinee et al., 2019). MFT is essential to differentiate between the basis of society to support tourism policy and management following Islamic law. However, it is also friendly to non-Muslims, who find the beauty of Islam is accompanied by safety and comfort. The distinction made by non-Muslim countries as Brazil, Japan, Korea, and The Philippines between the commercial aims of modern mass tourism and the Islamic concept of travelling can be seen in their packages of visits and facilities (Vargas-Sánchez & Moral-Moral, 2019). The destination, on the other hand, is suitable for Muslim travellers seeking enlightenment from their travels and has a positive impact. In that scenario, the journey could be necessary because it leads to positive results.

Remarkably, increasing numbers of studies on MFT have consistently shown that the concept is fascinating and relevant in terms of the tourism industry and methodological implications. Research in this field has therefore increased dramatically and resulted in the emergence of many unique works with their specific findings on MFT concepts including the Islamic product (Bahadori et al., 2018), Muslim Friendly services (Jaelani, 2016; Nassar et al., 2015; Rahman & Laderlah, 2018), attraction destination (Suid et al., 2017; Mulyani & Wilis, 2018; Saffinee, Jamaludin, et al., 2019) and methods such as spiritual tourism (Ghani, 2016). Each idea of MFT has its particular characteristics and its effect on the proposition that it promotes. As a result, term such as MFGT is employed in the tourism sector to reflect these goals and desires. Therefore, it is important to understand the potentials and challenges of tourism stakeholder's practices in order to implement the MFGT in Langkawi UGGp.

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

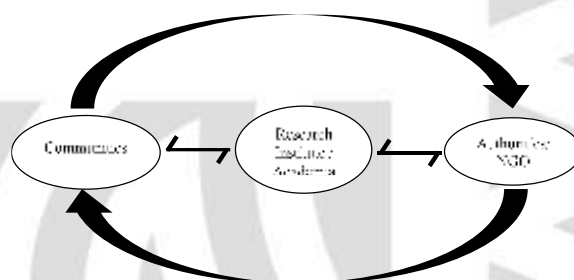
This paper was written using the qualitative research method. The information was mostly gathered from secondary sources. However, primary data from informal focus group discussions and the researchers' participant observation has been included. Three main local communities from Kilim, Kubang Badak, and Kuala Teriang, Langkawi were purposely selected consisted of 30 key-informants to participate in a Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The conversation took place from April 6<sup>th</sup> to April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Each session of FGDs conducted lasted approximately three hours. All data analysed using thematic analysis technique, in which consisted of two main themes, namely i) Potential of MFGT application in Langkawi UGGp and ii) Challenges of MFGT.



## Potential of MFGT application in Langkawi UGGp

### a) Generate MFGT Awareness

Awareness is a relative concept in which a person may be subconsciously aware, partially aware, or fully aware of any MFT products permitted by Allah or in accordance with Shariah law. Briz and Ward (2009) noted that potential customers may be unaware of the concept or may have the wrong perception even if they are aware, and awareness is thought to be based on consciousness (Ibrahim (2016)). As a result, in order to educate the public about MFGT, Muslim-friendly hoteliers, restaurant owners, and tour guides must be aware of the concept that is appropriate for Muslims to consume and participate in activities. The important of the cooperation and collaboration among tourism stakeholders as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Collaboration among Tourism Stakeholders

The 2012-2030 Langkawi Geopark Management Plan (MFGT) states identifying Langkawi champions among the local community are crucial to promote and sustained geopark initiatives, similarly for creating awareness of MFGT would benefit from local champions to facilitate the process of awareness and understanding of this concept. Typically in the context of awareness and understanding, five roles and responsibilities are needed to ensure that MFGT components are taken care of between the local communities. They include faith and justice, friendliness, helpfulness, kindness, and trust. It was generally observed, for Langkawi UGGp cultural and social context that predominantly consisting of Malay community has helped to boost the development of Muslim tourism niche due to the growing Muslims tourism market (such as Arab tourists).

Another important role by the Langkawi Research Center or *Pusat Penyelidikan Langkawi* (PPL) is a pillar of geopark research development in the island, which generates awareness among local communities, private sectors, authorities, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). PPL organises frequent research and scientific trips, as well as seminars, short courses, workshops, training, and lectures for a variety of stakeholders. In that sense, researchers from a higher institution, such as PPL, can act as a bridge for innovative information in terms of socio-economic progress, environmental improvement, and global concern for the future, particularly in ensuring sustainable development goals are achieved. More collaborative effort between inter-and intra-researchers from all higher educational institutions are strongly encouraged and needed, such as efforts from the International Institute for Halal Research and Training (INHART), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) working closely together with PPL, particularly on disseminating sustainability concept through the Islamic value in tourism industry through awareness on MFGT.

For Langkawi Development Authority (LADA), as one of the main authorities in Langkawi UGGp, mostly collaborate closely with research institutions, to act and work on ensuring consistent programmes conducted for geopark education workshops at all level and all walks of life. Examples of these programmes are observed from 'Geopark goes to School, School Goes to Geopark', and Tour Guides Geopark Awareness. Based on the discussions conducted during all FGDs sessions, suggestions obtained from the participants on ways to promote MFGT on the island is through strengthening local tourism authorities and NGOs to include Islamic values in all of their operations and services related to Muslim tourism segments. Local communities and other tourist stakeholders should be made aware of the aim of the development of MFT in general and MFGTs in particular by the government. For example, through educational activities, people's awareness of the issue is raised, and they are equipped with the knowledge they need to address environmental conservation, socio-economic and well-being matters in a holistic manner. For instance, existing environmental programmes on the island shared by one of the participant is through Trash Hero Langkawi, has successfully contributed towards raising greater awareness on managing domestic waste, in which would be a good partner to disseminate awareness on linking MFGT in environmental management of the island.

### b) Adaptation of MFGT in Local Products

The concept of MFGT discussed in the Islamic context demonstrates that it provides evidence of Shariah's ability to evolve and adapt to time and context. There are numerous ways to adapt the display to the user's current requirements.

The tourism industry in Langkawi UGG has the potential to develop and implement MFGT branding. The availability of halal food and beverages throughout the island, a recognised Muslim Friendly hotel, a safe transportation system, and a Muslim Friendly destination are all factors that contribute to the suggestion. As a result, the researchers proposed a hybrid of adaptive service and products, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 : Hybrid of Adaptive Service and Products in MFGT**

<b>Halal Food</b>	MFS-GT Halal food services must adhere to Shariah law and religious practises. The primary role of halal food establishments is to provide halal, safe food and not to provide services involving non-halal materials. Because there are 90 Muslims in the Langkawi UGG community, visitors from all over the world can easily find halal food and beverages.
<b>Muslim Friendly Accommodation</b>	MFS-GT is accompanied by the implementation of MFT-based accommodations. It is designed to meet the basic needs of Muslim travellers, such as halal food, safe and convenient lodging, and a clean place to pray. Strong environmental law, education, and infrastructure development will identify vulnerabilities and threats by providing travellers with safe accommodations, better planning, and privacy. Kedah Islamic Religious Department or <i>Jabatan Agama Islam Kedah</i> (JAIK) has already certified 12 hotel kitchens on Langkawi.
<b>Safety Transportation</b>	Islam emphasises the importance of providing accessible transportation to meet human needs. Transportation services must have a security system and adhere to standard ethics, particularly Islamic principles. Some areas should be set aside for all Muslim visitors who are participating in religious activities. It is preferable to provide specialised transportation while using existing transportation as an icon for the area.
<b>Destination</b>	The destinations on Langkawi are said to be influenced by foreign cultures, but they must still be regulated. If the response contradicts Islamic teachings, the future of Islamic tourism will be called into question. Department of Islamic Development Malaysia or <i>Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia</i> (JAKIM) has established guidelines for activities and entertainment that address unrestrained, unregulated, and mixed entertainment. The need for Muslim-Friendly branding in tourism is to avoid going against the law and jeopardising the larger and more important Islamic principles.

### Challenges of MFGT

#### a) Lack of MFGT product promotions

Langkawi UGGp is yet to generate MFT in order to market the island's tourism potential and promote Muslim friendly in environmental destinations; nonetheless, it is critical to promote it from the bottom up. Langkawi UGGp is no exception to the various forms of tourism marketing used by each state or country to promote sites of interest in their area. As stated by the informant:

*'In Langkawi, LADA which covers all tourism-related activities. While, the district office focuses on social tourism, and if there are entrepreneurs in the area, we examine them and assist them in connecting with the agency. When a grant is received, we try to share and approve the product.'*

Moreover, this concept is still in the research stage. If the implement rating has no influence, as the expression goes. Therefore, among the informant, they upbring the challenges happened in Langkawi UGGp.

*'The challenge is that if there is a body that implements it, I can confirm that it can be executed. As long as there are people watching, people who care, and officers observing, keep confirming success, that's all. If Langkawi, LADA, the government must also push. Geopark has a community component.'*

In general, most participants are positive in their responses and awareness on the importance of implementation MFGT for Langkawi UGGp economic development, protection of the environment and participation of local community.

#### b) Lack of Awareness on MFGT

In truth, the major objective of this Muslim-friendly product is to benefit Muslims, although Muslim visitors and non-Muslims alike can benefit from it. As a consumer, the product should be safely, healthily and without any difficulties. When food is certified by Malaysian halal certification, it is undoubtedly safe and healthy than other foodstuffs and is unquestionable. However, this misconception must be corrected; the assumption is not always right. As a result, halal certification must be considered in order to avoid causing harm to religion and human life. As mention by informant:

*'It is not well known among societies when talking about Muslim-friendly products here. Because they do not even apply the halal logo, they may think halal does not matter anymore. The product is made for them by Muslims, and they trust it is halal.'*



### 3. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the government should raise awareness of the purpose of the formation of MFGT among local communities as well as other tourism stakeholders. It can be executed in partnership with the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, as well as Tourism Malaysia and the Islamic Tourism Center. As a result, effective, appropriate, and integrity-focused monitoring and enforcement will be established. The emergence has exposed a lack of comprehension. The reason for this is that Islamic influences are present in both informal and formal activities and jobs. Therefore, it was suggested to research more on the implementation strategy to cater the nature tourism destination as a part of the Halal ecosystem development.

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