

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

**RESPONSIBLE TOURISM
PRACTICES AND PARTICIPATION
INTENTION IN ECOTOURISM
ISLANDS: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL
NORMS AND SUSTAINABILITY
PRACTICES APPROACH**

TRESSY BELLY

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ABSTRACT

Although ecotourism participation intention plays a critical role in promoting responsible and sustainable tourism practices, particularly in island destinations, there remains a significant gap in understanding its behavioural drivers from the perspectives of tourists, especially within the context of protected parks. Grounded in the Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), and the concept of Environmentally Responsible Behaviour (ERB), this study bridges the gap by examining the influence of responsible tourists' values and views, responsible tourism practices, social norms, and sustainability practices on ecotourism participation intention. A quantitative approach was employed, collecting survey data from 512 international and domestic tourists visiting Tunku Abdul Rahman Park (TARP) islands, Sabah. The data were analysed using Partial Least Square-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings reveal that responsible tourist views, responsible tourism practices, and social norms significantly and positively influence ecotourism participation intention. However, responsible tourist values and sustainability practices did not significantly affect participation intention. Notably, social norms mediated the relationship between responsible tourism practices and participation intention, highlighting the critical role of social norms in transforming responsible attitudes into active engagement. In contrast, sustainability practices did not mediate this relationship. This dual finding suggests that while social norms motivate participation, tourists may not fully recognise or connect with existing sustainability practices at the destination. The study advances theoretical understanding by demonstrating the mediating effect of social norms and offers a novel contribution to ecotourism literature, particularly within the context of protected island destinations. Practically, the findings inform stakeholders, including policymakers and tourism operators, on how to align tourism practices with tourist motivations to promote ecotourism. The lack of significant influence from sustainability practices suggests the need to reassess and effectively communicate the importance of sustainable actions to tourists. The study's originality lies in its focus on tourist-driven perspectives and the specific role of social norms in shaping ecotourism intentions. This approach highlights the importance of leveraging social influences to foster sustainable tourism development at island destinations. This research contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable tourism in ecologically sensitive island tourism destinations by addressing current theoretical gaps and immediate practical challenges.

Keywords: *Ecotourism participation intention; Responsible tourist values; Responsible tourist views; Responsible tourism practices; Social norms; Sustainability practices*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Preamble

This chapter discusses the research background and problem statement of the study. The research objectives are aligned with the issues highlighted in the problem statement. To support the main objectives and to achieve the main goals of the study, the research hypotheses is presented next. It is followed by further discussion explaining the significance of this study. Finally, this chapter discusses the definition of key operational terms used throughout the research and the thesis organisation.

1.2 Background of the Study

The tourism industry is expanding rapidly worldwide, with emerging countries experiencing an increase in demand (Naseem, 2021). As one of the fastest-growing global industries, tourism plays a significant role in national economies through economic growth, job creation, and currency exchange (WTTC, 2020). In fact, tourism contributed USD 356.8 billion (1.7% of GDP) in 2020, underscoring its profound impact on the global economy (International Trade Administration, 2020). This sector is especially vital for job creation and income generation, with long-term benefits for developing ecotourism destinations (Cobbinah et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2023).

In 2019, Malaysia, a prominent Southeast Asian nation, saw a substantial rise in tourist arrivals, welcoming 25.8 million visitors and ranking 15th globally in terms of international arrivals. This growth underscores Malaysia's rising prominence as a must-visit destination in Asia (Hashim et al., 2020; Shawhong, 2020). The Malaysian tourism industry has witnessed considerable expansion, generating substantial revenues for the country (Ainin et al., 2020; Hamid et al., 2021; Karim et al., 2020). In 2019 alone, domestic and international tourists generated approximately RM 86.1 billion in revenue, highlighting the importance of tourism as a market focus for the Malaysian government (Tourism Malaysia, 2019).