

## A MALAYSIAN RURAL COMMUNITY'S PERCEPTION OF SLOW TOURISM: THE CASE OF ARAU, PERLIS

Farah Atiqah Mohamad Noor

Sunway University, Selangor, Malaysia

### INTRODUCTION

The idea of slowness was made famous by Honore (2004) and his critically-acclaimed book, "In Praise of Slowness". In his book, the author praises the Slow Movement and other movements concentrating on attaining a slower pace. The slow movements of the world cover all aspects of life including the recent practice of slow tourism. Slow tourism research is usually tied to the concept of sustainable tourism (Oh et al., 2014) and low carbon tourism (Vorster, 2012). Slow tourism is a tourism concept which promotes equitable socioeconomics benefits to local communities, curbs environmental pressures, and fulfils the rising demand for responsible tourism favored by a more consciously motivated group of travellers (Conway & Timms, 2010).

While slow tourism can be pursued in an urban or rural environment, the choice to study the perception of slow tourism in a rural landscape will serve as a contributing factor towards the shift of tourism growth to rural destinations. It is clear that the type of environment chosen is rural and the attributes of rural destinations are explored to add dimensions to slow tourism. There are places or areas that can be called as 'slow' areas, indicating a certain character to the area that could be suitable for slow tourism.

### PROBLEM STATEMENT

Many researches that have been conducted on this topic spans the definition (Lumsdon & McGrath, 2011), types of slow tourists (Zago, 2013) and how slow tourism works in popular tourist destinations such as the islands of the Caribbean (Conway & Timms, 2012). However, there is limited research that is conducted on the perception of the local community on slow tourism in a rural destination. In fact, slow tourism researches are usually to the concept of sustainable tourism (Oh et al., 2014). The recent years have displayed the shift of slow tourism studies from being environmental sustainability-driven to a renewed focus of the time relation, individual satisfaction and the well-being of the local community (Parkins & Craig, 2006).

On the other hand, Moore and Shafer (2001) stated that rural areas sometimes become the recreational ground for domestic and international tourists (Reis & Jellum, 2012). Rural areas may have other distinctive functions, such as being a suitable environment to pursue slow tourism. The recent awareness of slow tourism brought a renewed understanding of how one should spend their time during travelling (Oh et al., 2014). Slow tourism values time enrichment (Zago, 2013) that could possibly be achieved in a rural setting. However, there is little consensus on the definition of slow tourism in the context of rural settings. The current literature of slow tourism mostly concentrates on reinforcing its definition (Lumsdon & McGrath, 2011), characteristics (Yurtseven, 2011) and types of slow tourism (Nilsson et.al, 2011) rather than a suitable environment to pursue slow tourism. While natural areas are mentioned as a



requirement for the slow lifestyle (Miele, 2008), rural areas have not been linked directly to be a part of slow tourism.

Until recently, other researchers have recognised slow tourism as a responsible form of tourism (Mintel, 2009). On the other hand, rural tourism is likened to the preservation of culture as well as surrounding environments (Kastenholz & Lima, 2013). Even though it has been suggested that slow tourism could be a subset of sustainable tourism (Oh et al., 2014), this study is not entirely about creating subsets, but only to merge the key ideas of slow tourism and rural tourism to understand the ideal capacities of pursuing slow tourism in a rural destination. It is due to the fact that a type of tourism in a rural destination is normally referred to as rural tourism, while it actually could be another type of tourism such as slow tourism.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The key research questions of this study are:

1. What are the perceptions of the local community on slow tourism?  
In this study, the identified perceptions of the local community will then contribute to the construction of a new framework that will assist future slow tourism studies involving the local communities of an area of interest. In order to contribute to the development of civic agency, the identification of community engagement is one of the main indicators (Boyte, 2008).
2. How can slow tourism relate to the notion of rurality?  
Even though the study is not suggesting that slow tourism is directly related to rurality, the relation of slow tourism to rurality can be explored. The possible similarities between the concept of slow tourism and the concept of rurality will be investigated through the interaction with the local community.
3. Are rural destinations a suitable setting or landscape to pursue slow tourism?  
Rural life is often connected to words like peace, calm, quiet and rest, describing the characteristics of a rural lifestyle (Russell & Pratt, 1980). The image of rural destinations is usually portrayed in terms of a contrast between rural and urban environments (Kastenholz & Lima, 2013). Hence, it will be interesting to find out if rural destinations could be a suitable landscape for slow tourism aside from urban destinations.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The main purpose of the study is to investigate the perception of the slow tourism concept by concentrating on the views of the local community in their rural hometown. The recent emergence of slow tourism as a niche of tourism is seen as a fresh attempt by tourism stakeholders in certain parts of Europe to retain the authenticity of their tourism destinations (Zago, 2013). The importance of authenticity has been fairly linked to the preservation of a rural destination in literature, such as in Marie and Vilard (1977). Therefore, this study will investigate the prospect of establishing slow tourism as a method to retain the authentic character of a rural destination. It is beneficial to obtain the local rural community's perception because the community may be directly or indirectly contributing to tourism development in their rural town. The approach can be seen as a top-down method to evaluate the local



community's initial views of slow tourism if it is going to be marketed in their rural town.

Secondly, the study also focuses on relating the concept of slow tourism to the notion of rurality. This investigation is of an exploratory nature and aims at providing both a theoretical discussion and an empirical observation of the connection between slow tourism and rurality. In this study, the contextualization of how well slow tourism corresponds in a rural destinations were explored.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Literature Review is provided in Section 5 while Section 6 describes the methodology undertaken in this study. Section 7 is comprised of the findings of this study and followed by conclusions in Section 8.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this section, the concept of slowness will introduce the theoretical understanding of slow tourism as a significant type of tourism. It is followed by the literature of slow tourism and rural tourism; bridging both type of tourism in the literature review as a connection specifically identified to meet the research objectives of this study.

### **Slow Food Movement, Slow City Movement and Slow Tourism**

As a non-profit, member-supported, eco-gastronomic organization, The Slow Food movement established in 1989 aimed to decrease the eating trend of fast food and fast life, and instead bring back the traditions of local food and people's interest in the food they eat, its origins and how our food options affect the rest of the world (Slow Food, 2010 cited in Heitmann, et al., 2011). Through Slow Food, there is an awareness to redefine the future food system to have food of a higher quality, produced with social justice, and to be environmentally sustainable (Petrini, 2003). After Slow Food, the idea to include the philosophy of slowness in a network of small towns through their urban design and planning was launched by Carlo Petrini, the founder of Slow Food at the Slow Food World Congress in 1997 (Miele, 2008).

Shortly after that, the Cittaslow Movement was established in 1999 to proceed with the inception of Cittaslow towns (Yurtseven & Kaya, 2011). Cittaslow, which means slow city, carries on an environmental policy to maintain and develop the characteristics of the urban fabric and the territory; ensuring new technologies are used properly for the quality improvement of the environment; fostering the usage of natural and organic food products produced with environmentally-friendly techniques; safeguarding traditional and cultural indigenous products while maintaining direct contact between consumers and quality producers; as well as eliminating structural and cultural problems that might negatively affect a proper diffusion of the town's resources (Yurtseven & Kaya, 2011). The Slow City (CittaSlow) movement is a non-profit organization that appears from the principles of Slow Food movement which further emphasizes the need to adopt the slowness of life against the fast pace of the 21st century (Knox, 2005).

Through Slow Food and Slow City movement, the birth of a new type of tourism called slow tourism has slowly encapsulated the belief that domestic, regional and international tourism could adapt the approach of slow travel through the

transportation used (Lumsdon & McGrath, 2011), cuisine experienced (Folorunso Adeyinka-Ojo & Khoo-Lattimore, 2013) and changing the perception of travel values (Nilsson et.al, 2011). Slow tourism as a new form of tourism is characterized by "a greater segmentation, offering flexibility and authentic tourism experiences, retaining and/or enhancing local conditions, sensitizing demand and ethical values' supply and forming a new form of consciousness owing to a profound and involving experience" (Conway & Timms, 2010; Georgic, et.al., 2013).

### **The Indicators of Slow Tourism**

The indicators of time, length, contamination, authenticity, sustainability and emotion were presented by Zago (2013). Zago (2013) explained the indicators as such:

1. Time: Explicit medium to long term planning with strategic orientation; time provision to analyze, understand, incorporate improvements for the business at the destination for the workers and customers, time availability of multiple services, giving a comfortable stay in line with the guest's time.
2. Length: Supplying the goods and services of slow tourism at a slow pace that is not hectic, non-massified, engaging and involving the guest in a thorough and meaningful experience, allowing for the gradual assimilation of relationships with the local community.
3. Contamination: the scope of relationships amongst individuals of varied opinions, values, cultures, knowledge and the supply system's capability to generate productive opportunities of exchange between them.
4. Authenticity: Being capable to provide and create a characterized, original, and strong culturally-linked experience.
5. Sustainability: Undertaking a long-term ecologically-sustainable approach with good economic status and ethical fairness for the local community.
6. Emotion: Plan and supply the service that can encourage or facilitate emotions within the planned ad-hoc (external environment stimulus) situations and events that link individual answers (internal) differing by individuals' interpretation.

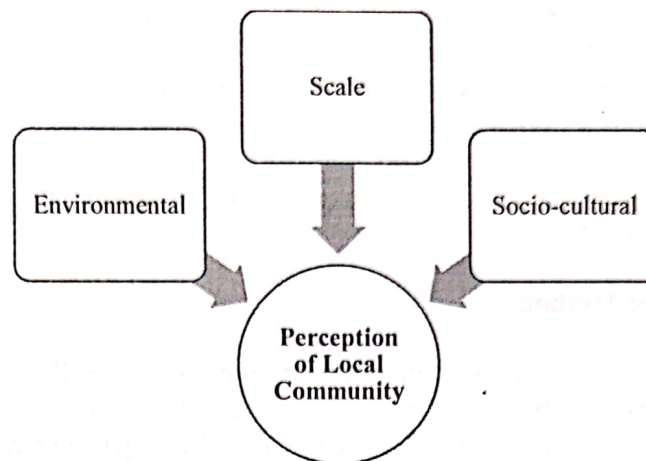
One of the few constructs that intertwine all indicators is rurality. Also, there exists the exploration of linking rurality to slow tourism and the identification of a connection existing between rurality as well as slow tourism. Every indicator presented such as time, length, contamination, authenticity, sustainability and emotion portray the key elements of understanding the general concept of slow tourism.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Figure 1 displays the theoretical framework guided by the literature of this study. The theoretical framework considered the possible indicators of slow tourism when it comes to investigating the local community's perception of slow tourism in a rural area (Noor, Nair & Mura, 2015). The indicators mentioned comprise of scale, environmental and sociocultural aspects to be a part of the perception of slow tourism in a rural destination.



Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of Slow Tourism's Perception by the Local Community in a Rural Destination



Source: Noor, Nair & Mura (2015)

It is essential for tourists to pay attention to the sociocultural characteristics of a rural community in order to appreciate cultural differences (Liu, 2006). Past studies reveal slow tourism itself as a sociocultural phenomenon (Lumsdon & McGrath, 2010). Besides that, the environmental aspect of slow tourism is about raising the awareness of green consciousness, highlighted by behavioural changes of the tourist and the local community of a tourism destination (Dolnicar, Crouch, & Long, 2009). Rural tourism destinations are expected to contribute to the livelihood of the local residents and simultaneously mitigate environmental impact by addressing the usage of natural resources (Akyeampong, 2011).

There are multiple approaches in which the promotion of local rural production goes hand-in-hand with small-scale tourism development. In terms of a 'slow city', the Slow Food volunteers in Italy helped the local farmers in the restoration work of their farms and in keeping the foot paths for visitors in order (Zago, 2013). A small scale tourism development is also said to minimise the impact on the environment and build a more genuine relationship with local communities (Markwell, Fullagar & Wilson,

## RESEARCH METHOD

The type of qualitative research method adapted for this research is face-to-face interviews with participation from the local residents chosen from the area of study. During the data collection process, the researcher will keep interviewing respondents until the respondents mention similar descriptions regarding their perception of slow tourism. Data collection is stopped once there is no new information provided by the respondents.

In order to explore the concept of slow tourism in a rural environment, the location that is selected for this research is Arau, a small rural town located in Perlis, northern Malaysia. According to Goh et.al (2014), Perlis is a state situated between the borders of Malaysia and Thailand. Arau, Perlis, is characterized to be a rural area surrounded by hinterland and rainforests (Hamzah, 2004), idyllic to Malaysia's typical

representation of a “*kampung*”, defined as a place of “real Malay tradition and culture” (Liu, 2006). In the case of Arau’s tourism development, most of the attractions in Arau or other parts of Perlis are not in the level of quality as other international attractions, thus making it difficult to promote the area as a tourism destination (Perlis to develop tourism sector to boost tourist arrivals, 2013). This will remain a constraint and sometimes certain attractions will have limited capacity for additional development (Dickinson & Lumsdon, 2010). Therefore, rather than further growth, Arau may focus on constructing ‘slow’ experiences using elements and knowledge which are deeply embedded in the local culture; taking into consideration the need to be prepared (Zago, 2013).

### **Sampling Method**

In this research, the sampling method opted is snowball sampling which is defined as the process in which a researcher will ask for assistance from their acquaintances, by referring to their friends or relatives to be a participant of their quantitative or qualitative study (Emerson, 2015). In this study, the interviewed participants were driven from a network which started from the researcher’s acquaintance in Arau. The first interviewed participant was the researcher’s acquaintance and then she introduced the researcher to her peer, a lady who was working in one of Arau’s budget hotel for more than five years. After that particular session, the researcher asked the lady to introduce her to a group of villagers who live in a nearby village. Subsequently, as the interviews progressed, the sample size grew from the network of the villagers until theoretical saturation of their perception on slow tourism was reached.

The villagers were relevant to this research because the majority of them were born and bred in Arau while a number of them have lived in Arau for more than five years. Participant-driven sampling such as snowball sampling greatly assists the identification of the scattered target group for this study. It eliminates the long period of time that is usually needed for the participant recruitment of a qualitative study (Welch, 1975). The added advantage is the diversity of the participants in Arau, achieved from referrals and networks. The participants ranges from a housewife, retired government servant to a grocery store owner and restaurant operator in Arau.

The participants must be a permanent resident of more than 5 years or was born in the location of study, Arau, Perlis. The participants must also be a member of the local community living or working in Arau, Perlis. The age group chosen will be from the ages of 18 to 60 years old. The age of adulthood according to Malaysia’s national policy is 18 years old. Meanwhile, the maximum age of 60 years old is chosen because it is the starting age for senior citizenship in Malaysia. Therefore, the range of 18 to 60 years old is the appropriate age group of adults to be interviewed in this research. There are no direct specifications of employment. The local residents can either be employed or unemployed. The status of employment may not affect the perception of the local community of the research topic.

### **Demographic Characteristics of the Participants**

Participants of the face-to-face interviews were selected from the members of the local community in Arau, Perlis. A total of 19 participants were interviewed for this



study. The ages of the participants range from 21 to 50 years old, comprising males and females. More than half of the participants are married while the other half is single. 36.8 percent of the interviewees were born in Arau while the other 63.2 percent were individuals who lived in Arau for more than 5 years. It was observed that only one of the participants has a level of primary education. The education level of other participants ranged from the tertiary level (21 percent) to the secondary level of education (73.7 percent). In terms of employment status, 36.8 percent of the participants were full time employees, 10.5 percent were part time employees and 15.8 percent were unemployed. Another 36.8 percent of the participants were students and retirees.

## **FINDINGS**

Sub-section 7.1 focuses on the discussion of findings in reference to existing slow tourism studies. Sub-section 7.2 displays the final results of the study which were obtained from the interviews conducted with the local community in Arau, Perlis.

### **Discussion of Findings**

It is observed that the local community's perception of slow tourism in a rural destination are possible economic contribution, agricultural linkage, green living and the connection to rural lifestyle. In terms of possible economic contribution, the local community perceives a potential of slow tourism to bring entrepreneurial opportunities in sectors such as handmade merchandises and souvenirs. This finding supports a slow tourism study by Orientale and Terre (2013), who stated that tourists participating in slow tourism would support local craft because it signifies the local identities.

Handmade merchandises are novel items for tourists and often, tourists would not mind to pay a slightly higher price knowing that it is authentically made by locals (Lowry & Lee, 2011). Therefore, the practice of supporting local entrepreneurs in slow tourism could induce higher income tourists to visit a rural destination (Alonso & Liu, 2013). The advantages of having higher income tourists participating in slow tourism is that the town will have lower tourist arrivals but higher tourism receipts (Buckley, 2010). The lower number of tourists could encourage the preservation and conservation of a destination's natural environment, despite the presence of touristic activities (Georgic et.al, 2004).

In this study, the connection of slow tourism to agriculture is one of the perception of the rural community. According to Liu (2004), rural areas in Malaysia largely include tourism planning upon the focus of utilizing its physical, natural or cultural resources. In terms of contextualizing slow tourism in Peninsular Malaysia, features such as 'Harumanis' mango and paddy fields bring about the philosophy of rurality in slow tourism. Nilsson, et.al (2011) described the importance of slow tourism towards maintaining the traditional elements of a rural town, such as agricultural and cultural heritage. Alonso and Liu (2011) described the increased success of the flower and garden festival of the Blackwood River Valley in Western Australia to emphasize its rural charm as its tourism marketing strategy. Therefore, the connection of slow tourism to agricultural activities is seen as a positive indicator of slow tourism in a rural destination.



Aside from economic contribution and agricultural linkage, the construct of green living is also one of the local community's perception of slow tourism. It supports the practice of green living, clearly seen in the Blue Mountains, Australia, an area accorded with 'Slow City' status (Pink & Lewis, 2014). Due to 'Slow City' status, only 11 percent of The Blue Mountains remains habitable, while the rest of the area maintains its green environment (Pink & Lewis, 2014). According to Georgic et al. (2004), the global tourism economy should transition to a green economy in which environmental sustainability practises the philosophy of Slow Tourism. According to Mayer and Knox (2006), environmental protection in rural areas will be compromised if rural areas still depend on extractive industries. Therefore, rural areas would be able to protect its natural environment by moving on to a more sustainable industry or sector, such as slow tourism.

Another significant contribution of this study is the connection of slow tourism to the rural lifestyle. Rural lifestyle means the presence of a peaceful environment, an unrushed economic development and a strong sense of community in rural areas. The existing literature on slow tourism does not mention a clear connection to rural lifestyle other than the sustainability indicator of slow tourism (Lumsdon & McGrath, 2011; Markwell, Fullagar & Wilson, 2012; Mayer & Knox, 2006; Timms & Conway, 2011). Lumsdon & McGrath (2011) stated that the process of slow tourism should include slowing down to enjoy the landscape of a destination but an ideal type of environment for slow tourism was not mentioned. Therefore, the association of rural lifestyle and rural areas to the concept of slow tourism are one of the novel contributions of this study.

## Results

The concepts of slow tourism are environmental, scale and socio-cultural. The authentication of the three concepts was based upon the analysis of the interview data. Four new themes were attained from the three concepts, which were actively communicated by the participants during their interviews.

The environmental theme of slow tourism identified two concepts: agriculture and green living. In terms of agriculture, paddy cultivation, traditional production and local produce such as the 'Harumanis' mango are some significant perspectives obtained from the participants. The concept of green living was divided into the perspectives of environmental preservation efforts and the observation of nature. On the other hand, the theme of scale identified the concept of possible economic contribution while the theme of socio-culture spanned on the concept of the connection to rural lifestyle.

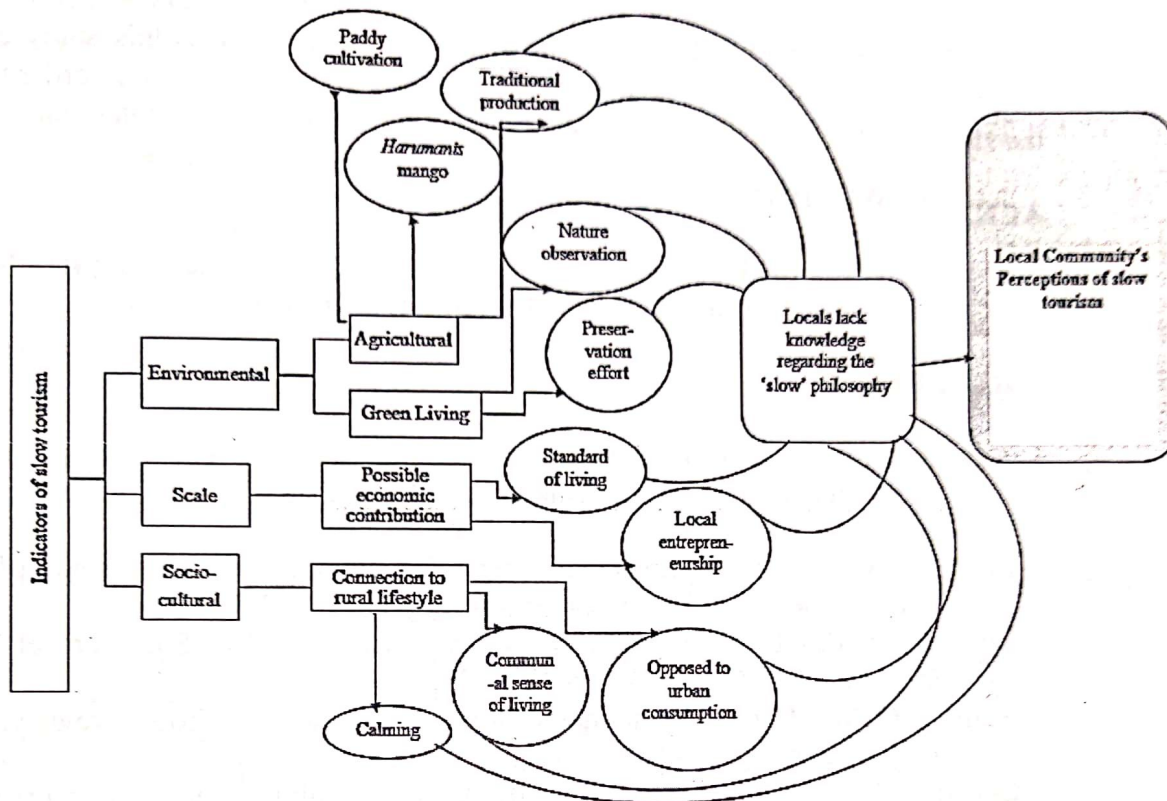
The perspectives identified under the concept of possible economic contribution are improved locals' standard of living and the opportunities of local entrepreneurship. Besides that, the perspectives identified under the concept of the connection to rural lifestyle are communal sense of living, calming atmosphere and the absence of urban consumption. The lack of awareness regarding the philosophy of slow tourism was evident during the interviews with the participants.

While a number of new constructs were obtained from the data, it is apparent that most of the answers were from surface level of the topic rather than being of in-depth quality. This was identified as one of the challenges of the study. However, it is



considerably normal for a study of a recently developed type of tourism (Butler, 1999). The final findings displayed in Figure 2 reflect the perception of the local community of Arau, Perlis on the topic of slow tourism.

Figure 2: Local Community's Perception of Slow Tourism in a Rural Destination



## CONCLUSION

In this study, a novel contribution in the field of slow tourism was identified through the feedback obtained from a local community. The contributions are the realisation that slow tourism is not often perceived by the local communities as a positive type of tourism; and this has not been mentioned by other researchers in the field of slow tourism. In terms of generating a source of income for the local community, most of them believed that the preference of the mass market would result in a large number of tourist arrivals. In contrast, the emphasis of slow tourism will lead to low tourist arrivals because of the tendency of destinations to limit the number of tourists due to sustainability issues. Therefore, the local community in this study believed that it is an unprofitable venture for them if they were to depend on slow tourism as a source of income.

This study also explored the notion of rurality. Previous researchers have stated that slow tourism is a type of tourism which takes place in an urban environment (Zago, 2013; Simon, Fullagar & Wilson, 2009; Reis & Jellum, 2012; Conway & Timms, 2012) rather than a rural destination. The rural lifestyle, agricultural connection, green living and economic contribution are the new indicators of slow tourism in a rural destination identified in this study.



Further research can be conducted to obtain the perception of local stakeholders on the contextualization of slow tourism in the rural areas. It is highly relevant to identify the perception of local stakeholders after obtaining such information from the local community. The contextualization of slow tourism through the eyes of stakeholders will serve as an important aspect in identifying the possibility of slow tourism to be developed in rural areas. Its importance is due to the fact that the development of any type of tourism will have to include investments by the stakeholders and approval of the state government. It is imperative that the constructs of this study are further researched in a different environment and subjected to refinement in order to enhance the significance of this research topic- slow tourism in a rural destination.

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