

# *Rural Tourism Communities in Sanya: Current Involvement Status and Enhancement Prospects amidst Rural Revitalization*

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**Abstract:** In recent years, rural tourism has experienced rapid development, with community participation emerging as an inevitable choice for the sustainable development of rural tourism. Defining the fundamental purpose of rural community involvement in tourism as the basis for comprehensive rural community development, it is highlighted that the issue of benefit distribution in rural tourism development fundamentally stems from the irrationality of community participation systems. The root cause of irrational community participation lies in the income distribution and management issues arising from the transformation of tourism resources into assets or capital. This paper focuses on the current participation status of rural tourism communities in Sanya. It conducts an in-depth analysis of the involvement of residents in these communities, elucidating the shortcomings and deficiencies in their participation in tourism development. Furthermore, it proposes measures to optimize community residents' participation in rural tourism development. Based on field research data, an optimized participation model for rural tourism communities in Sanya is formulated. This model aims to enhance the enthusiasm of rural tourism community residents in Sanya, enrich their participation models, and further promote the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy in the area.

## **1. Introduction**

Since the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy in 2017, various levels of government departments in Sanya have attached great importance to the development of rural tourism, dedicating significant efforts to the development of rural tourism industry in Sanya. The construction of rural tourism in Sanya has achieved initial success, forming a tourism pattern with distinctive local characteristics in Hainan. The vigorous development of tourism-related products has stimulated local economic growth. The integration of new ecology, new rural customs, and new culture into the rural landscape has attracted an increasing number of people to experience tourism<sup>[1]</sup>. The rural industry has presented a more diverse appearance, with increasingly rich forms and content. Tourism has evidently become a key driver for rural revitalization. This study focuses on the participation of rural tourism communities in Sanya, conducting investigations and analyses of various rural tourism communities in Sanya through methods such as field research. It aims to

explore the current status and issues of community participation in rural tourism development in Sanya and propose corresponding improvement strategies. This, in turn, will facilitate the government and communities to manage relations with external enterprises effectively, improve various participatory and benefit distribution systems, and promote the upgrading and development of the tourism industry in Sanya.

## 2. Analysis of the Current Participation Status of Rural Tourism Communities in Sanya

At the end of September 2018, the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council issued the "Rural Revitalization Strategy Plan (2018-2022)", which repeatedly mentions rural ecological tourism, cultural tourism, etc., serving as new windows for rural revitalization and urban-rural integration. Since August 2020, Hainan has officially started the construction of the Hainan Free Trade Port with Chinese characteristics, with the tourism industry being an important component of the construction of the Hainan Free Trade Port. Against the backdrop of becoming an international tourism consumption center, Hainan's rural development has encountered excellent development opportunities<sup>[2]</sup>. Since the proposal of the rural revitalization strategy in 2017, the Hainan provincial government has actively constructed beautiful villages and conducted rural poverty alleviation work in accordance with national development strategies. Under the background of rural revitalization strategy construction, rural tourism in Hainan has rapidly developed. As of the end of 2019, there were 516 rural tourism sites under construction in Hainan, distributed across various counties and cities, indicating a considerable number and wide distribution of tourism sites. Against this backdrop, the rural tourism industry in Sanya has also made significant progress, as detailed below:

Firstly, in terms of the number of rural tourism constructions, since the implementation of the comprehensive tourism construction in 2016, Sanya has been committed to the development and construction of rural tourism. By the end of December 2020, Sanya had established three five-coconut-level rural tourism sites, one four-coconut-level rural tourism site, and eight provincial-level rural tourism demonstration sites<sup>[3]</sup>. The development of rural tourism in Sanya has been steadily advancing, with relatively complete infrastructure in terms of food, accommodation, transportation, shopping, and entertainment. Rural tourism has become a new highlight and important component of Sanya's tourism product structure.

Secondly, in terms of community participation, based on the current development status of rural tourism in Hainan and field research, there are mainly four participation models for rural tourism communities in Hainan, namely: "enterprise + farmers" model, "government + farmers" model, "government + enterprise + farmers" model, and "government + enterprise + rural cooperative + travel agency" model<sup>[4]</sup>.

Finally, in terms of participation level, the development of rural tourism in Sanya presents the following status: First, in terms of the number of participants, the number of residents participating in rural tourism development is increasing, but the initiative and autonomy of participation are low; Second, in terms of participation content, residents' participation in rural tourism development is relatively single, mainly in the form of restaurants, farmhouse inns, or hired positions, mostly individual operations with low grades, monotonous business content, and lack of characteristics, indicating that the participation of local rural tourism development remains at a relatively shallow level; Third, in terms of institutionalization of participation, the participation of community residents in rural tourism development is passive, with the vast majority of rural tourism development and tourism activity decisions being made by higher authorities, rather than by community residents taking the initiative based on local resources to launch distinctive tourism activities, lacking the guarantee of participation mechanisms<sup>[5]</sup>.

### 3. Shortcomings and Issues in the Participation of Rural Tourism Communities in Sanya

#### 3.1 Single and Shallow Participation Models

According to the survey findings, the participation model in rural tourism communities in Sanya is generally the "farmer + farmer" model<sup>[6]</sup>. The main issues with this model are as follows: firstly, while it preserves the authenticity of rural areas, it hinders innovation; secondly, it lacks standards, as many farmhouse operators have not undergone professional training in the tourism service industry, resulting in non-standard operating methods and lack of standardization in food, accommodation, and transportation, posing certain risks to hygiene, health, and public fire safety, and compromising product quality and service levels without guarantees; thirdly, slow product updates and iterations<sup>[7]</sup>. Generally speaking, the quality and vision of farmers will also limit the development of rural tourism. Due to the idea of once and for all, products remain single and unchanged for a long time, leading to a decrease in attractiveness over time, gradually entering a dilemma of low profits and low sales in the later stages; fourthly, simple product structures. With the theme of farmhouse inns, the products sold are also related to farmhouse inns, resulting in a simple product structure, single form, and low economic benefits; fifthly, individual marketing difficulties due to low profits and sales, pessimistic economic returns, lack of marketing funds, narrow marketing channels, and backward marketing methods. Additionally, due to the simple product structure and insufficient product innovation, marketing becomes challenging. For instance, the issues present at Arong Seafood Farmhouse Inn in Haitang District, Sanya, are prevalent among numerous similar farmhouse inns in Sanya, leading to severe homogeneity and a limited variety of operated products. Individual farmhouse operators, owing to their small-scale operations, often face limited engagement from professional financing institutions. This leads to insufficient external funding and poses challenges in transforming into large-scale chain farmhouse inns.

#### 3.2 Moderate Level of Participation

Through interview surveys, the extent of local residents' participation in rural tourism community construction is classified into high, moderate, and low levels. It can be concluded that the degree of local residents' participation is at a moderate level. This can be inferred from the following data regarding rural residents' understanding of rural tourism and their attitudes towards participating in rural tourism: In terms of residents' understanding, 14.33% are highly knowledgeable, 42.33% have some understanding, 35.33% have limited understanding, and the remaining 8% have no understanding. Secondly, regarding the attitude towards participating in rural tourism, 36% of residents are very willing, 46.33% are moderately willing, 15.67% are unwilling, and the remaining 2% are very unwilling. Overall, residents' participation is at a moderate level. For example, residents of the Haitang Bay Rice National Park community in Sanya have a moderate level of participation in community construction. The main area of the park covers over 2000 acres of rice fields, with the park's functions primarily focusing on rice science education. The concept of "new" permeates the entire park, including new technologies, new concepts, and new products. While community residents generally possess basic skills in rice cultivation, they are unable to participate in "new" rice planting activities. The park features Hainan Li ethnic culture, and some residents can participate, although their numbers are few, and the nature of their work is relatively simple, mainly focused on sales. Therefore, overall participation is moderate.

#### 3.3 Low Enthusiasm of Community Residents in Participation

In the era of the experience economy, tourists emphasize their own feelings more, attaching

greater importance to the experiential value that tourism products bring to them. Most tourists prefer to have the initiative in their hands, no longer passively accepting the inducement of enterprises, but rather choosing products and services themselves. In today's rapid development of rural tourism, tourists' experience depends on the attitude of community residents' participation. Active participation can provide tourists with a comfortable experience, whereas passive participation by residents is likely to bring negative emotions to tourists. Through investigation, it was found that current community residents are mostly passively involved in rural tourism construction. Villagers are not fully integrated into tourism construction and cannot actively engage in rural tourism development. For example, Qingtang Village faces the aforementioned issues. In 2016, the Sanya municipal government initiated the construction of Qingtang Village as a beautiful countryside, commencing road traffic, landscaping, commercial services, and other constructions, adopting a "government + enterprise + farmers" operating model. On one hand, the employment opportunities provided by the government and enterprises cannot meet the employment needs of all villagers. On the other hand, although the living environment of villagers has been improved, some villagers were primarily engaged in crop cultivation work previously. Due to the development of Qingtang Village, villagers passively choose to participate in rural tourism construction, thereby changing their jobs.

## **4. Enhancing Strategies for Community Participation in Rural Tourism in Sanya**

### **4.1 Enriching Participation Models**

Firstly, the cooperative model between community organizations and jurisdictional units. The cooperative participation model refers to a community participation model that does not require external forces for intervention. Community organizations and jurisdictional units can reach agreements through democratic consultations and self-sufficiency in resource sharing. Firstly, community residents jointly own community infrastructure and work together to ensure public safety. Secondly, farmer organizations can act as lubricants between the government and society, which not only enhances farmers' enthusiasm for active participation but also integrates farmers into the planning, implementation, and management of tourist protection areas. Additionally, it enables the proposal of feasible plans based on farmers' suggestions and provides technical and resource support for rural tourism development when planning rural tourism. Secondly, the "mutual cooperation system" model. This model is developed based on the "company + farmers" model. Participating companies have a certain level of development and continuously absorb various forms of foreign capital. Firstly, this model ensures the unity and equality of goals between farmers and business owners, which helps to enhance farmers' sense of responsibility and improve corporate culture. Secondly, in terms of income distribution, distributing according to labor effectively stimulates employees' enthusiasm for work. Finally, this model applies democratic decision-making and management to operations and management, allowing farmers in cooperative companies to participate in decision-making and management.

### **4.2 Enhancing Community Participation**

Primarily, the government should encourage local residents to actively engage in the construction of rural tourism communities. Direct government involvement in rural tourism construction may lead to mismatches between rural tourism resources and income, resulting in reduced participation and enthusiasm among local residents over time. Therefore, the government, in the process of enhancing rural tourism communities, must adopt a neutral stance, acting as decision-makers and observers, guiding, coordinating, and supervising local residents on how to

participate or how to improve the economic benefits brought about by rural tourism construction. This includes managing resource allocation reasonably to avoid excessive waste. Thus, the government plays a neutral role in enhancing community participation, internally coordinating residents' enthusiasm for participation, externally actively promoting tourism project resources to residents, and handling conflicts between developers and local residents, becoming a bridge and link between them.

Furthermore, the government should also introduce a series of supportive policies to encourage local residents to participate in tourism development, such as encouraging funds and support funds. This can significantly stimulate residents' enthusiasm for participating in rural tourism construction and provide job opportunities for some unemployed individuals locally. Rational distribution of economic income and employment opportunities for rural residents will greatly stimulate their enthusiasm and passion for participating in tourism development, thereby ensuring the sustainable and healthy development of rural tourism.

#### **4.3 Enhancing Community Residents' Participation Initiative**

Primarily, tourism development is a novel external factor for local residents. Involving residents may sometimes seem like forcing a duck onto a perch. To genuinely engage residents, it is essential to actively disseminate rural tourism knowledge, enabling residents to understand the benefits it brings to them personally. Through proactive promotion, residents can willingly participate. Secondly, climbing to higher ground requires adequate capability, which can be acquired through practice. Governments and enterprises can offer more employment opportunities to community residents, allowing them to further engage with and understand rural tourism knowledge. Through practical activities, residents can experience the benefits of rural tourism and gradually develop the necessary skills for employment. Lastly, the combination of theory and practice is an enduring truth. The change in community residents' attitudes and the improvement of their quality are closely linked to education and training, especially in rural tourism sites with well-preserved natural landscapes but relatively backward conditions and unfavorable geographical locations. Integrating theory with practice is crucial for achieving better outcomes.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The research reveals that community residents' involvement in rural tourism development in Sanya is still in its infancy, hindered by numerous factors. As the tourism industry evolves, rural tourism is poised to become a popular activity in the future, with community residents' participation becoming indispensable. However, different communities may adopt diverse models and approaches for tourism participation and development. Thus, further research and exploration are required in both the study and practice of community involvement in rural tourism development to identify the optimal participation models for rural tourism development in Sanya. With increased support from the Sanya municipal government and intensified tourism promotion efforts, the construction of beautiful rural areas in Sanya is expected to proceed more smoothly, ensuring greater community involvement in tourism development. Moreover, as the education level of community residents in rural tourism areas in Sanya gradually improves, along with the enhancement of environmental awareness, equality consciousness, and rights protection awareness, the enthusiasm of community residents for participating in rural tourism development will further increase, thereby contributing to the rejuvenation of rural areas in Sanya.

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