
The Potentials of Appreciative Inquiry Approach within the Tourism Development in Rural Areas

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the development of rural tourism by applying the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach as a research tool. AI is an increasingly important field as it can offer a positive and strength-based approach to the development of rural communities. It can be seen as an alternative tourism research tool for community development in relation to rural tourism. A qualitative research approach is implemented by holding focus group discussions with the local community and youth groups at the Sungai Sedim Natural Forest (SSNF) in Kedah, Malaysia. SSNF was chosen as the research location because of its future characteristics and contributions to several residents. From the study result, natural resources, eco-tourism products, Tree Top Walk and historical assets have been identified as an important strength in SSNF. Furthermore, it is believed that the expansion of this product, would enhance the branding and image of SSNF as the best eco-tourism tourist attraction in Malaysia.

Keywords: Appreciative Inquiry (AI); tourism development; rural area; local community.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has been acknowledged as an essential Malaysian industry, which creates new products and well-managed tourism destinations. Over the years, the industry has experienced sustained growth and also been an area of significant development in recent years [1]. Thus, for tourism to be a catalyst for socio-economic development, it is essential that governments pursue the sustainable development of tourism in a comprehensive and planned manner [2]. An ever-increasing number of destinations worldwide have opened up to and invested in tourism, turning tourism into a key driver of socio-economic progress through export revenues, the creation of jobs and enterprises, as well as instigating infrastructure development [3].

Over the past six decades, tourism industry experienced continued expansion and diversification, becoming one of the largest and fastest-growing economic sectors in the world. Many new destinations have emerged in addition to the traditional favourites of rural destinations. A recent study by WTTC (2013) shows that the numbers of international tourist arrivals worldwide are expected to increase by 3.3 percent a year from 2010 to reach 1.8 billion by 2030. Meanwhile, between 2010 and 2030, entries in emerging destinations are expected to grow at twice the rate of those in advanced economies. Tourism is seen as an alternative to decline in traditional industries such as agriculture in general, particularly in lagging or peripheral regions, where territorial policies promote diversification strategies [4,5]. In that respect, the tourism industry would significantly boost national economic and social benefits while mitigating its environmental impacts, which additionally can help position the country at the top place in the world [3].

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Rural tourism as one of the vital tourism product has become not only a remarkable complementary income resource, mainly for the rural population but also an essential mechanism for a new balance and a dynamic relation between urban centres and inland locales [6]. Rural tourism will bring people of different cultures, faiths, languages and life-styles close to one another and it will provide a broader outlook of life [7]. This dynamic relation will allow the expansion of financial and social tourist activity in time and space [8]. Rural tourism is related to small-scale tourist activities, of family or co-operative type organization, which are developed in the rural regions by people who are occupied in agriculture. Its primary aim is to provide subsistence-based farmers with alternative solutions for their occupations and also to improve their income and their life quality [9]. The opportunities offered by the tourism industry globally are unquestionable, and every country seeks to stimulate sustainable economic growth based on employment opportunities [10].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several studies in the literature that report on the role of the tourism industry as a generator of employment and income; therefore, it has been identified as a strategic domain and can integrate a broader regional branding strategy as it can highlight the potential of tourism to strengthen the position of regions and countries. However, how it operates is uncertain, which opens the door for future research [11]. Also, previous studies indicate opportunities to provide unique experiences, and managers must identify and highlight the most important aspects of local culture, history, and way of life that set them apart from other worlds of tourism [12]. In addition, they should also creatively develop cultural activities that can stimulate the senses of visitors, which will invite entertaining and educational experiences. This practice ensures that rural activities can create and provide a meaningful tourism experience, create a sense of peace for tourists [13], which generates new local income, increases income and even stimulus for other local economic sectors [14].

Moreover, one of the most important current discussions on the potential of tourism development is the importance of innovation and technology in the services sector or even in the manufacturing industry [15]. Cosma et al. [15] claim that the issue of innovation in tourism has increased in recent years and it is important to highlight awareness of innovation for businesses in the rural tourism industry. Changes in tourism products as a tool to introduce and bring new products or products that have been significantly improved. The current developments in the rural industry have also increased the need for destination image as rural destinations are becoming increasingly popular among the urban population and the marketing and promotion of online rural destinations is in dire need of development [16]. The development of rural tourism can also facilitate the rediscovering the value of rural resources that were previously ignored in the process of modernization of the world economy [17]. They believe that these developments can provide insights for farmers and policy makers to apply a broader perspective than just focusing on agricultural products.

Several studies have shown that rural development encompasses comprehensive rural activities such as agricultural production, lifestyle, and rural facilities to attract people from both urban and rural areas [18,19,20]. Indeed, rural communities in rural areas are given the opportunity to develop and preserve folklore or revive forgotten arts and practices, as well as produce traditional products (e.g. textiles, traditional desserts, etc.). In addition, they are able to revive local customs and organize traditional festivals as well as preserve the community's memory of cultural traditions - especially among the younger generation who are fascinated by Internet-based technology and mobile devices. All of these retain and do not isolate rural characters, but they highlight the diversity and uniqueness of each place [21]. Furthermore, the relationship between remote provinces and the city center is secure, and the most critical point is a new perspective open to young people in the area. Rural tourism, in particular, covers both actual tourism activities and also enhances the economy itself. The complexity of rural tourism pictures can be explicitly discussed as tourism products, which emphasizes the importance of offering management and marketing activities. In addition, it is built to introduce rural areas and take advantage of other attractions and provide a variety of services [14].

3. THE PROVISION OF THE APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY APPROACH

This study expands the literature by considering methods to apply the Appreciative Inquiry approach to rural tourism development at Sungai Sedim Nature Forest (SSNF) in Kedah, Malaysia. Survey of stakeholders' perceptions concerning the development of rural tourism using the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach has contributed to the 'knowledge rich' tourism field. AI is a new approach, and only limited numbers of studies have been conducted, particularly in Malaysia, using this approach. Indeed, there are also limited studies that have been done using the AI approach within the tourism field [22,23]. Thus, it is crucial for tourism practitioners to extend AI into the area of tourism to create a focus on the strengths of a system instead of using deficit-based thinking [24]. AI has been practiced in the community development area, particularly in developing countries. However, despite the successful implementation of the AI approach in development, it has been used regularly for research, specifically in the area of tourism [22,23]. Even though AI origins are in academia, there is also a considerable body of literature covering its organizational applications and impacts. AI has roots in organizational development and strategies that help organizations transform themselves. It is traditionally used as an approach for analysis, learning, and organizational development. It uniquely seeks to discover, understand and nurture innovation and transformation in human/social systems [25,26]. Different scholars defined the ideas of AI in different ways. In extensive literature, the term of AI is generally understood as an alternative approach, an innovative process, a theory, knowledge or a philosophy [27,28,23].

Until now, AI is a group inquiry that identifies and further develops the best of "what is" in organizations to create a better future [29]. In their analysis of AI, they claimed that AI is often used in the organization development field as an approach to large-scale change; it is a means for addressing issues, challenges, changes and concerns of an organization in ways that build on the successful, practical, and energizing experiences of its members. The recent development of AI also found that the AI process not only helps an organization to create images of its future but to create an energy, a renewed commitment to change and a sense of hope among the groups of people working to achieve that future [30]. AI can be categorized as a strength-based participatory action research technique which follows grounded theory procedure and is based on the constructivist paradigm [27,23]. There was various reason why AI was recommended: for example, it used for problem-centric tourism research, whereby understanding the pressing problems and their causes, researchers can address multiple concerns and implement appropriate solutions. More importantly, the AI approach could be a suitable method and may help to empower rural communities since they are often alienated by the use of technology and technical jargon [22] and this method does not require respondents to read text-based instrument. Alternative methods like interviews focus groups, as well as brainstorming, may encourage participants to speak more honestly about any problems they may have experienced [24].

4. METHODOLOGY

Case-oriented understanding is applied in this study to understand the phenomenon from the participants' point of view. It is believed that qualitative methodology is more suitable for current research because the development of tourism activities in SSAF is part of the process of making meaning that involves complex human thinking and interaction. For that reason, qualitative approaches (e.g., interviews and focus groups) were applied throughout the study. The population sample is those involved with and engaged in tourism activities at SSAF. The sampling strategy used in this study aims to enable the researcher to determine statistical conclusions about the population and deliberately modeled on a group of people who can tell the researcher about the best research problems (Creswell, 2007). Sample selection is driven by conceptual questions, not by concern for 'representation. For this study, respondents were selected by the Head of Sedim District, which includes those directly involved with or affected by, tourism activities and those living in Sedim tourist areas. This is to ensure that the target population will express their feelings and attitudes towards the development of the tourism industry in their district. For focus group discussions and interviews, respondents were selected from the local community, local authorities, tour operators, and visitors see

Table 1). Therefore, the analysis unit in this study involved a deliberately selected group in the Sedim area, which is included in Table 1.

Table 1. Research participants information

Categories	Participants profile	Number of participants	Method used
Local Communities	Residents and youth generation	35	Focus group discussion
Local Authorities	Expert working for the governmental organization in tourism planning and development at the district and state	5	Semi-structured interviews
Tourism Operators	People who run and manage their businesses at SSAF	7	Semi-structured interviews
Visitors	Domestic and international	12	Semi-structured interviews

AI approach was applied as the primary method for qualitative data collection in this study to reveal the understandings, opinions, and attitudes of tourism stakeholders concerning the development of SSAF. Because of the perceived value of the method and its adaptability discussed in the previous chapter, an AI approach was carried out to assess the potential of applying AI as a methodology in tourism research. To develop an appropriate AI approach in this study, three critical steps were taken as developed by Raymond & Hall [23]. First, the change agenda was considered, and the following questions addressed: *“What are you trying to accomplish? What is your purpose?”* This stage involved developing clear research objectives that could be linked to AI. Next, the following questions regarding the form of engagement were asked: *“What is the most appropriate form of engagement given your change agenda, community, and resources?”* [31]. Third, an inquiry strategy was developed that responded to the question: *“Having identified the purpose and form of engagement, what decisions and steps must you take along the way to ensure the development’s success?”* [31]. This inquiry strategy (see Table 2) provides a practical example of how the 4-Ds of AI can be adapted to suit the focus and objectives of this study.

Table 2. Inquiry strategy of the study

Stage	Steps	Purpose
Grounding	Contact the Head of the Sedim District and invite their participation	Obtain their full support and to get closer to them
	Observe the positive aspects of tourism development by focusing on what they are visibly achieving and how they are doing this (discovery)	Improve the existing positive imagery and develop a positive vision to focus on the benefits and success of rural development
Discovery (appreciating and valuing the best of ‘what is’)	Conduct group discussions with residents and youth groups. Explore what is effective and successful in current practices (discovery) and discuss ideas and aspirations for the future (dream)	Follow the features of a successful development project so that a preliminary framework of good practice for rural development can be built.
Dream (envision ‘what could be’)	Conduct interviews with representatives of local authorities, tourism operators, and visitors. Explore what is effective and successful in current practices (discovery) and discuss ideas and aspirations for the future (dream)	

Source: Raymond & Hall [23]

It is important to note that one of the benefits of AI is that it could be easily adapted to any particular culture, context, and environment [31] and may encourage studies to build a strong and reliable

foundation in uncovering attitudes, perceptions and ideas of local communities and tourism stakeholders [32]. The AI approach is still growing, and new approaches continue to grow and thrive [24]. In fact, they also claimed that there were three significant critical reasons for the application of AI in tourism study:

- i. AI provided evidence of the potential of taking a friendly approach to tourism research for both the researcher and the researched.
- ii. Applying an AI approach can make an enjoyable research process for all involved as participants had valued the positive reflection that the AI- oriented interview/focus group encouraged.
- iii. Conducting AI only allows participants to approach difficulties in a more positive way by focusing on how things can be improved, rather than the problem itself.

For this study, the data (focus groups and interviews) were recorded using a voice recorder and video recorder to ensure the validity of the data collection process. Once finished, data were transcribed verbatim, which began with a search for key themes using open coding and memos. Codes were used as indexing devices at various stages of abstraction to construct sets of related information units for comparison and analysis. There are two coding activities suggested in the coding process, which is axial and open coding. Coding the data under the key themes may require recoding under new, emerging themes based on the conversations around the original themes. A primary goal is to reduce and interpret the meanings and through dialogues, confirming that these are the interview meanings.

5. FINDINGS

A critical success factor in the tourism industry at SSAF is the potential and opportunities that will be offered to tourists. In the past, SSAF was able to promote eco-tourism products, such as rafting and fauna flora, which catered to adventure travelers and enjoyed a greater visitor experience through waterfalls and Tree Top Walk. The results of this study indicate that there is a direct and indirect potential and contribution of rural tourism due to the increased tourism development in SSAF. Several factors have been identified as potential SSAFs to be promoted and developed as one of the rural tourism products in Malaysia as local communities tend to be more accommodating to external influences caused by the increase in tourism development. Participants were given the opportunity to express their opinions based on their experiences and observations on their interactions with tourists and tourism activities at SSAF. The results show the following themes from the study (see Table 3).

Table 3. Summary of findings for potentials and opportunities of SSAF

	Groups of Participants			
	Local Communities (LC) & Youth Group (YG)	Local Authorities (LA)	Tourism Operators (TO)	Visitors (VS)
Key Themes	Niche products	Niche products	Niche products	Infrastructure and facilities development
Other themes	Home-stay Programme	Infrastructure and facilities development	Rural Entrepreneurship Development	Niche products
	Education and Research Centre	Home-stay Programme	Education and Research Centre	Rural Entrepreneurship Development
	Rural Entrepreneurship Development	Education and Research Centre	Home-stay Programme	Education and Research Centre
	Historical, cultural and architectural value	Rural Entrepreneurship Development	Infrastructure and facilities development	

5.1 Key Potential Themes

5.1.1 Promoting “Niche Products Market”

Through the findings of this study, many issues were identified for the potentials and contributions of SSAF. The results (as shown in Table 3) show the potential for promoting a "niche products" of SSAF is the main issue that was addressed by all participants. Local communities, as well as tourism operators that involved in the tourism industry at SSAF, are always searching for new products that will bring tourists to their area. Natural resources (i.e., waterfall, mountain, and flora fauna), culture and heritage (i.e., history of Sedim) as well as the landscape and quality of life, are the types of resources highly valued for SSAF. These resources, coupled with the broad market trends, open a large market of *niche products* that can be a source of competitive advantage for rural tourism at SSAF and should be at the heart of its potential. This can bring in far more revenue and provide more jobs than ever-current products could bring (such as water rafting and kayak). Tourism operators can sell their products beyond the local market and therefore have the higher market potential for increased sales and profits whereas local communities can get the opportunities for small businesses in their area.

5.1.2 Potential for infrastructures and facilities development

The potential for SSAF, especially in the context of infrastructures and facilities development are enormous as SSAF, which is not only endowed with rich nature, flora, and fauna but also has a history of rich culture and heritage. Sedim is not far from the famous town in Kedah, Kulim as well as Butterworth, Penang. However, in spite of its natural gifts, SSAF witnessed poor rates of growth, not only due to violence but also because of poor policy management and lack of infrastructure. Thus, the finding discovered that tourism activities at SSAF would bring needed development to support and facilities not only for local communities but also for the benefits of visitors/ tourists. Most of the participants also highlighted the importance of public facilities (e.g., toilets, shower room and prayer room) to be developed at SSAF due to limited access to these facilities. They believed if proper facilities can be built and managed, the number of tourists will increase and as a result may encourage the development of rural tourism at SSAF.

5.2 Other Potential Themes

5.2.1 Promoting the “Home-stay Programme”

The core component of the home-stay program in Malaysia, which distinguishes the home stay program from other home stays elsewhere in the world, is the element in which guests "live together" with the host usually introduced as an adoptive family (Kayat, 2011; Razzaq et al., [33]). This element involves guests eating, cooking, and doing many activities with their adoptive family, allowing both parties with different cultural backgrounds to interact and learn from each other. The results of this study show that the majority of the local community in Sedim is actively involved and aware of the indirect economic benefits that occur from the increase in tourism activities. This is supported by the Ministry of Tourism Malaysia [34] which recognizes the benefits of the home stay program as an important source of income and employment for the local community, especially in rural areas. They can also promote their traditional culture and heritage as well as the host (local community) will have the opportunity to be a part of tourism products and possibly reap socio-economic benefits.

5.2.2 The human-made site of historical, cultural and architectural value

Tourism currently plays the significant role not just in the economic elements, but also in cultural and historical conservation. It is also identified as the industry that acts as a catalyst for the conservation of the physical environment and contributes towards the continued economic prosperity of the community [20]. Thus, tourism as the primary thrust of the government's developmental strategy will allow SSAF to expand beyond its present horizons to ensure its position as one of the historical and cultural centers for tourists and may radically transform the livelihood economy. Indeed, cultural and heritage assets were recognized as one of the strengths at SSAF. However, it is not fully developed

and managed by responsible stakeholders. With that matter, the theme called historical value and man-made site emerged to show the potential of developing these products at SSAF according to participants' acknowledgment. From the observation with local communities, the study believed that if cultural and heritage products at SSAF can be developed, maintained, and marketed, definitely, it will boost the value of tourism industry at SSAF as now they already have various valuable products to be promoted.

5.2.3 Rural Entrepreneurship Development (business, craft, skills)

In addition to the opportunities provided in the informal sector, there are other business opportunities available at SSAF, such as operating giving training for agro- culture, entertainment centre, public transportation to reach SSAF, laundry services, establishing catering facilities where local cuisine is prepared, and others. In this case, innovation should be the primary way to gain and retain competitive advantage and capitalize on the opportunities created by the change [35,15]. The reason for addressing the culture of entrepreneurship in the SSAF is related to the growth of tourism with an increasing demand for new types of tourism because it is composed of small companies. The important thing for them is to capture the opportunities are gap fillers, the ability to monitor the market opportunities and to build up new products or services as well as supply a new source of employment to the economy [36]. Small business entrepreneurs need some driving factors to operate, such as motivations and some specific conditions for success. However, the most important factor is the enabling environment that provides comfort and support to the entrepreneur [37].

5.2.4 Education and Research Centre

The importance of education and research centers, some call it 'incubators,' was well acknowledged in previous studies. This includes various activities that focus on the transfer of knowledge through natural resources. The resources provided to SSAF are also one of the factors for SSAF to be a hub or 'incubator' for education and research. Based on these observations, this study believes that by introducing an education and research center at SSAF, this will be one of the main mechanisms and strategies to empower the community to participate in rural development and thus increase the participation of tourism stakeholders. Also, will support and uphold local culture, natural resources, knowledge, and skills as well as to create pride in the values of society. Therefore, the development of this center is fundamental to achieving poverty reduction and sustainable development, especially in SSAF conditions.

6. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the literature, the study believes that the involvement of local communities in tourism activities in SSAF may enable them to share the advantages of tourism development, both economic and social. One of the economic advantages of promoting tourism activities in the SSAF is that most of the economic benefits from employment and income are received directly by the population who own and operate tourism facilities and services. Some participants from the group discussions expect that with further tourism expansion at SSAF, and then more opportunities will be created. There are various types of products that can be promoted and offered to tourists regarding home stay programs, such as "martial arts," "marhaban," adventure activities, and even mountaineering. A large number of local people want to see more tourism facilities and infrastructure so that more tourists will visit SSAF "... with the stay program here (SSAF), we will have more enthusiasm to support and attract more tourists." a strong positive relationship between the extent of their involvement in tourism development and their support for increased tourism development.

In the changing environment of the SSAF and the traditional agricultural economy, it is important to find new ways of life and options for tourism operators. Tourism development can stimulate informal economic strings, which have different skills and creative ability to have the opportunity to earn income from the sale or provision of services to tourists. In this regard, studies show that SSAF stakeholders, particularly the community and operators, should be more positive towards the tourism industry. Currently, tour operators, nature, and even event organizers are key features of SSAF

tourism whereas fruit sellers and rural entrepreneurs may offer relevant options. Notably, it can be defined as 'environmentally responsible entrepreneurship' based on the resources and experience provided by nature at SSAF. Table 4 shows some of the potential advantages of tourism development in SSAF.

Table 4. Potential benefits from rural tourism development at SSAF

Social benefits	Cultural benefits	Economic benefits	Environment
Keeping population locally, as a result, there will be decreased migration, good occupational opportunities and educational background for young generations Improvement of the quality of life Improved educational level (knowledge about managing business)	Strengthening the local culture and identity through promoting local products/ services Raise awareness of the value of heritage and its protection needs	An increase in overall employment An increase in employment agro-tourism Diversification of local economic activity Strengthening and expansion of existing and new enterprise An increase in the number of local operators An increase in the number of investors	Protection and preservation of the rural cultural/ natural heritage Reduction of resources use, minimizing waste and safeguarding environmental qualities thus, preserving biodiversity Promotion of sustainable development of tourism products and related business areas Sustainable land management Less ecological impacts due to the small-scale character of rural tourism operators

This study believes that the expansion of residential products in Sedim district may contribute to the smooth flow of income for the host community. During the survey, it was found that the local community in Sedim district is very helpful, friendly and always positive towards tourism activities in their village. Proper training and skills, namely visitor handling, communication skills and technology-oriented should be provided to enhance and update the knowledge and skills of the local community as they engage in home-based programs. Indeed, a recent study by Bel et al. [38] also stressed that there is a need to determine which combination of rural facilities, local products, and tourism services should be promoted to strengthen the expansion of specialized markets in rural tourism. They believe rural development should be built in accordance with the concept of sustainable tourism and that local communities should be trained to manage tourism products, all on their own, through goal-setting training, in the preservation of the area, as well as effective monitoring of all tourism activities.

Local authorities / governments can make policies that encourage entrepreneurial behavior, which means that in one generation, people or communities can become more or less entrepreneurs. There needs to be greater training on various aspects related to tourism services, such as guidance training, hotel management, which can encourage the younger generation and the unemployed to progress and start working in this sector. There is a healthy relationship between community culture and its tendency to become entrepreneurs [39]. Understanding the cultural and social fundamentals of a particular society such as SSNF can provide the right starting point for building a more entrepreneurial society and economy. Many countries strive to increase their entrepreneurship through and achieve high business to contribute to economic growth and development [40]. The role of government in stimulating and creating an appropriate environment at the SSNF level to address the supply side of entrepreneurship is crucial, with a focus on people who have the motivation, finance, and skills to start a new business.

Likewise, efforts should be made to create a culture that promotes entrepreneurship throughout society and develops the ability of the population to identify and pursue opportunities [41]. Policies and programs should be aimed specifically at the entrepreneurship sector to improve the overall education level of the population, ensuring that entrepreneurship training is easily accessible to build skills and abilities to start a business and to facilitate start-up companies by influencing the supply of prospective entrepreneurs [42]. However, conflicts between developers and residents in rural tourism need to be addressed through a planning process that allows communities to create a set of public values for their communities. From something to be feared to harm tourism, community-based actions

and early resistance to tourism development are promising for communities that care about their future and will invest in certain types of tourism development [43,15].

7. CONCLUSION

The development of rural tourism, in general, is complex, given that various companies, agents, and resources must be managed together. It is seen as a valuable and growing sector of the entire tourism market, representing a significant source of income for rural communities [44]. In addition, it is also offering potential solutions to many problems faced by rural areas [45]. Undeniably, rural tourism can help and improve the process of economic, social and identity restructuring through its ability to increase income, stabilize the population, maintain culture, redistribute economic roles while promoting a friendly and positive ecological image [46]. Nevertheless, if the concept of rural or ecotourism is seen as the creation of leisure opportunities and not as part of a diversification strategy for the rural economy, it may affect the benefits of tourism for the local community (Liu, 2006).

Entrepreneurship is the main driver behind rural and nature-based tourism. Tourism covers most small businesses, and this depends on innovation for new product development. The entrepreneurs can contribute to the economic and social well-being of the local community [47]. Hence, the role of tourism operators is vital for the development of rural tourism [48]. Rural development is increasingly associated with entrepreneurship, which is considered the center of economic growth and development [37,49]. The role of tourism in rural development is related to its economic contribution, which can help maintain and improve the quality of life of the SSAF community. The entrepreneurship is a valuable aspect for the development of rural tourism and entrepreneurs are usually the first to welcome change in rural areas. Without entrepreneurs, exchange and circulation between rural tourism activities and the local economy would not be possible.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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