

EXPLORING TOURISTS' UNDERSTANDING AND EXPERIENCE OF ECOTOURISM

Siti Intan Nurdiana Wong Abdullah

BERJAYA University College of Hospitality, Malaysia
siti.intannurdiana@berjaya.edu.my

ABSTRACT

By large, ecotourism is gaining popularity in Malaysia as it provides opportunities for tourists especially the city slickers to run away from the busy urban life and enjoy the nature. However, one of the main challenges that the ecotourism industry face is meeting different consumers' demand whilst operating in a sustainable manner. As such, an exploratory qualitative study using in-depth interview and observation were conducted on tourists visiting Rantau Ecopark to gain more knowledge on the understanding of tourists of ecotourism through their personal experience. Based on the interviews conducted; four main themes emerged including cultural interaction, relaxation, fun family outing and challenges faced in ecotourism. Recognising the elements that form tourist experiences are vital for sustainable tourism. As such, the findings from this exploratory study can be used by ecopark operators to differentiate their destinations through family-oriented cultural events and local community involvement to create a more holistic and unforgettable ecotourism experience for the tourists.

Keywords: *Ecotourism, tourists' experience, sustainability, local community, conservation.*

INTRODUCTION

Background

In 2014, Malaysia registered 27.4 million tourist arrivals and RM72 billion in receipts in the year of 2014, making tourism its second largest foreign exchange earner (www.motac.gov.my). As outlined in the Tourism NKEA (National Key Economic Area), Malaysia targets 36 million tourist arrivals and RM168 billion in receipts by 2020. In order to achieve Malaysia' position as one of the top destination for tourists, the Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC) developed 12 Entry Point Projects (EPP) which are grouped into five themes including affordable luxury; nature adventure; family fun; events, entertainment, spa and sports; and lastly business tourism.

In developing countries, visitors preferred rural and exotic environment and this spurred a growth in ecotourism business (Scheyvens, 1999). An important factor of success to sustainable tourism is the involvement of the local community to preserve the cultural aspect and conserve the natural setting to be enjoyed by tourists. Ecotourism includes cultural and environmental tourism and it is often advantageous to the local community. However, due to the exponential growth in Malaysia being one of the holiday destinations, sustainable ecotourism remains at the forefront of every stakeholder's concern.

The tourism industry has been said to be a double-edged sword (Hitchner et al., 2009). In pursuing the financial objectives, there is constantly a pressing need for environmental protection and improvement of the local community's quality of life. Generally, ecotourism activities and accommodation is highly dependent on the natural-setting. Without this, it loses its appeal to the tourists. Hence, ecotourism centres in Malaysia are constantly under pressure to continually attract and retain tourists whilst protecting the natural resources.

Problem Statement

A substantial number of researchers have tried to gain better understanding of general tourists' behaviour such as their motivation and satisfaction but in-depth study on eco-tourist experiences particularly is still lacking (Cohen, 1979). Because eco-tourist experiences are more symbolic and emotional by nature due to underlying ethical values of the individual, developing a general theoretical framework on eco-tourist experiences has been a challenging task.

Additionally, many ecoparks and ecolodges may start out with clear objectives on conservation efforts but slowly loses its appeal due to many reasons. One of it is the lack of maintenance due to uncontrolled large number of tourists. This clearly indicates that some ecotourism operators focus on financial profits rather than environmental protection. Another reason could be because of the lack of enforcement by local and council municipals. Many tourists are turned-off by the degrading natural environment and facilities. Environmental degradation is said to cause the quality of the tourists experience to decrease (Sharpley & Telfer, 2002).

According to Orams (1995), the growing interest in ecotourism lies in the acknowledgement that visitors who are most likely to conserve the natural environment would choose to visit an ecopark or stay in an ecolodge. Nonetheless, each tourist's motivation is different especially when choosing between the usual holiday comforts and the more simple but conservational efforts. Without doubt, trying to understand the expectation of tourists is a demanding task. This is because expectations differ from individual to individual (Christou, 2011). For example, tourist expectations may vary according to the tourist cultural or family background. Judging tourists return visits to an ecopark solely based on outcome satisfaction without knowing their underlying reasons is a common mistake made by many service providers.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

- What is the understanding of tourists towards the term 'ecotourism'?
- How do tourists describe their ecotourism experience?

Significance of Study

Since ecotourism relies on natural setting as a product offering to visitors, the development of ecotourism is concentrated in a few states in Malaysia. Based on the visitors statistics compiled in the Malaysian National Ecotourism Plan (2011), the highest numbers of visitors to ecotourism sites are in Pahang, Kedah, Sabah and Sarawak. Several potential sites have been identified in other states but remain under-developed and unpopular to tourists. It is also essential for ecopark operators to understand tourists' choices and needs. Their values and beliefs leads to motivation to support ecotourism. Hence, an exploratory qualitative study is timely to gain more knowledge on the understanding of tourists of ecotourism through their personal experience. In addition, it is hoped that through this efforts, the study would enhance our knowledge of ecotourism and contribute to a more sustainable tourism development generally.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Tourism Industry in Malaysia

Up until 1970s, the focus of socio-economic development in Malaysia has always been the manufacturing industry. The Tourism Development Corporation (TDC) of Malaysia was set up in 1972 but still Malaysia was not a popular tourist destination. Starting 1980s, due to globalisation and transfer of knowledge, the service sector began to gain more attention worldwide. One of the main reasons of this shift is due to the increasing personal income and leisure time which drove people to travel. With this, the tourism and hospitality industry began to pick up pace.

To manage the rapid growth of the tourism industry, Malaysia then established the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 1987. In 1992, it then became known as the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism (MoCAT). During the 1990s, tourism in Malaysia mainly focused on a few destinations with well-known beachside resorts such as in Langkawi, Penang and Sabah. Subsequently, the government increased its efforts to promote ecotourism in Malaysia by launching home-stay programmes and allocated RM14.2 million (Economic Planning Unit, 2000). Sad to say that the implementation of ecotourism programmes did not follow through according to the Auditor-General's Report (The Star Online, 2008).

In 2004, the division was split and became Ministry of Tourism (MoTour) and finally in 2013, MoTour was transformed to Ministry of Tourism and Culture (MOTAC) (www.motac.gov.my, 2015). Through its successful promotional campaign with the tagline 'Malaysia, Truly Asia', tourists' number grew steadily. This measure was taken to establish Malaysia as a top tourist destination that captures the essence of Asian culture. The available data in Table 1 shows that there has been a stable increase in the number of tourists' arrivals and receipts. However, the decline in 2003 was due to terrorism issues but it continued to grow in 2014 by 6.7%. Malaysia received 27.4 million tourists in 2014 compared to 25.7 million tourists in 2013. (www.motac.gov.my).

The tourism industry plays a pivotal role in any nation by generating revenues and providing employment opportunities for the locals. The services sector is positioned as a major contribution towards the nation's economy (Malaysia's Third Industrial Master Plan, period 2006-2020) and the tourism industry in Malaysia has been identified as a key

contributor to Malaysia's GDP by maintaining an average growth rate of 12% per annum since 2004. It continues to play an imperative role in the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) to secure Malaysia's position as a high-income nation by the year 2020 (<http://etp.pemandu.gov.my>, 2014).

Indeed, Visit Malaysia Year 2014 was a tough year for the country's tourism industry because of three tragedies revolving Malaysia Airlines and AirAsia flights (MH370, MH17 and QZ8501); coastal security issues in Sabah waters and the massive floods that hit several states in Malaysia (The Sun Daily, 2015). Nonetheless, the Deputy Director-General (Promotion), Datuk Azizan Noordin said Tourism Malaysia is positive and confident of achieving the target of getting 29.4 million tourist arrivals in 2015 (Borneo Post Online, 2015).

Table 1: Tourists Arrivals and Receipts in Malaysia (1998-2010)

YEAR	ARRIVALS	RECEIPTS (RM)
2010	24.6 Million	54.2 Billion
2009	23.6 Million	53.4 Billion
2008	22.0 Million	49.6 Billion
2007	20.9 Million	46.1 Billion
2006	17.4 Million	36.3 Billion
2005	16.4 Million	32.0 Billion
2004	15.7 Million	29.7 Billion
2003	10.5 Million	21.3 Billion
2002	13.2 Million	25.8 Billion
2001	12.7 Million	24.2 Billion
2000	10.2 Million	17.3 Billion
1999	7.9 Million	12.3 Billion
1998	5.5 Million	8.6 Billion

(Source: www.motac.gov.my)

Defining Ecotourism

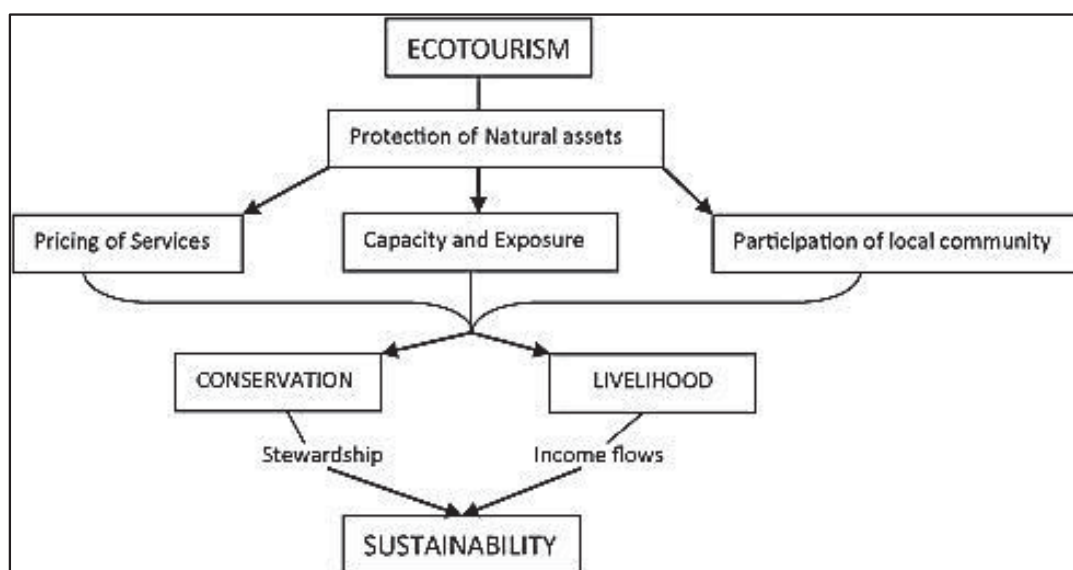
Ecotourism is a sub-category of tourism and tourists who travel far and wide to enjoy and appreciate the culture and nature is not a new trend. It has been known by a variety of names such as green tourism, rural tourism and adventure tourism, just to name a few.

There are a few forms of ecotourism as identified in the National Ecotourism Plan Malaysia (2011). The first is an ecopark which is set in a natural forest area and managed by the local government authority and a minimal entrance fee is charged to the visitors. These entrance fees are used to keep the place in order. Next, is the ecopark that is located in a natural setting but includes a resort for accommodation that is managed by a private company. It is sometimes known as an eco-resort or eco-lodge that requires a bigger investment to build and manage. Although the main objective is to gain profits, some of the conservation activities performed here like using recycled materials and locally-sourced

products may help to promote the well-being of the local community. The next type of ecotourism is whereby the ecopark is owned and managed by a group of people who are members of the local community. The objective is for profits but also to increase the livelihood of other community members around through provision of employment and other eco-products or eco-tours.

The National Ecotourism Plan Malaysia adopted the widely accepted definition of ecotourism by Ceballos-Lascurain (1993), whereby ecotourism is defined as an “environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features, both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations”. The key elements in the definition includes cultural and nature conservation and involvement of the local people. As such, to determine whether or not an activity qualifies as ecotourism depends on where the activity is carried out, how it is carried out and who carried it out.

In fact, all forms of tourism recommended under the National Ecotourism Plan (2011) aims to be sustainable tourism (refer to Figure 1). In an attempt to differentiate ecotourism from other forms of tourism, the activities that the tourists are involved in should be low impact. For example, a birdwatcher must show respect for the environment by making minimal noise and use the service of a local guide. As for the eco-tour operators, they should not go beyond the carrying capacity, support local businesses whenever possible, treat waste properly and recycle.



(Source: Adapted from Ross and Wall, 1999)

Figure 1: The Pathways from Ecotourism to Sustainability

Tourists' Experience

According to past researches, tourists experience can be monitored and evaluated to gather meaningful data. In a study by Ryan (1997), he discussed that tourists experience is made

out of many internal and external factors. According to Gunn (1988), humans are capable of experiencing a variety of emotions and thus it is difficult to identify the factors affecting the experience.

Service satisfaction is often used to measure tourists' loyalty and repeat visits (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Frochot & Hughes, 2000; Kozak, 2001, 2003; Petrik et al., 2001). But in other studies conducted previously, both products and services satisfaction in a destination are dependent on each other to create the overall experience (Williams & Buswell, 2003). However, the concept of tourists' satisfaction is complex and may be affected by a variety of factors and multidimensional, and thus is difficult to measure accurately (Motowidlo et.al.,1986; Ryan 1995). For example, some tourists may claim to be satisfied with their overall vacation but still desire an improvement in certain aspect of it such as the facilities and activities offered.

People travel around to gain unique experiences (Uriely, 2005) and they are often looking for the whole package of culture and adventure to form their tour experience. As Pan et.al., (2007) mentioned in their study, tourists preferred visiting destinations that provided them with cultural and educational learning. Many ecotourism activities involve close interaction between the tourists and the locals hence fostering cultural exchange.

Although the traditional mass tourism is still popular, there has been a shift towards a more individualistic and active participation in creating the ultimate tourist experience (Sharpley & Tefler, 2008). The tourist seeks to be the co-creator of his or her own holiday experience (Edensor, 2001). This is why ecotourists seek for a different experience that takes them out of their daily routine. This trend has modified the tourists' needs and tastes in seeking for a more fulfilling experience (Dweyer, et.al., 2009).

In order to explain human needs and behaviour, numerous studies have applied Ajzen and Fishbein's theory of reasoned action (TRA) (1970) to demonstrate that an individual's values will shape his or her attitudes toward embracing environmental friendly practices. As a result, this triggers the individual's behaviour intention to choose certain eco-friendly brands (Han, et.al., 2009; Kim, et.al., 2013). In particular, Eagles (1992) indicated that there was a sense of self-fulfilment when tourists contributed towards conservation. However, the experience requires the tourists to be involved physically, mentally and emotionally (Booms & Bitner, 1981; Fitzsimmons & Sullivan, 1982).

While the literature review revealed various models to measure how customers perceive products and services (Barsky 1992; Bojanic and Rosen 1994; Saleh and Ryan 1992), there are still very few conclusions on how to assess the antecedents to the level of satisfaction through their experience. Since this is directly related to individual needs and personal values, the evaluations are still quite subjective.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The method used for this research is qualitative and phenomenological in nature. According to Engle & Patton (2001), a qualitative method is most appropriate to seek clarification and to understand phenomena in context-specific settings. Comparatively, the qualitative research method may be able to highlight important details that could be missed by quantitative methods. As this study is to explore the tourists' understanding and their

personal experience towards ecotourism, a qualitative research method is the most appropriate to gain rich and meaningful information.

Research site - Rantau Eco Park, Negeri Sembilan

Set in Negeri Sembilan is the Rantau Eco Park which was selected to conduct this study. For those who are not familiar with Negeri Sembilan, it is located at the south of Selangor and about 45 minutes' drive from Kuala Lumpur (Refer to Figure 2). The capital city of Negeri Sembilan is Seremban and the royal city is Seri Menanti. Negeri Sembilan as one of the states in Malaysia is unique in terms of its royal structure, language, architecture and socio-cultural influence. Negeri Sembilan or loosely translated means “nine states” is deeply influenced by the ‘Minangkabau’ culture which was brought over from Sumatera in the early 14th century. Many of the people in Negeri Sembilan especially the older generation still follow the customary law known as ‘Adat Perpatih’ compared to the other states in Malaysia. Recently, the song titled ‘Rembau Most Wanted’ by the hip-hop group Waris seems to have not only become a radio hit nationwide but also revived the popularity of Negeri Sembilan’s local slang or ‘loghat’. The current Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) of Negeri Sembilan is Yang Amat Berhormat (YAB) Datuk Seri Utama Haji Mohamad bin Haji Hassan who coincidentally spent his childhood days in Rantau (<http://n9kini.com/>).



(Source: Negeri Sembilan Tourism Board)

Figure 2: The States of Malaysia



(Source: www.rantauecopark.com.my)

Figure 4: Local Handmade Handicraft for Sale

Although the Rantau Eco Park hosted some national level events since last year such as the Fishing Carnival, Negeri Sembilan Water Festival and Rantau Marathon, this establishment however was not known to many even the locals. This could be because of the lack of promotional activities and visible road signs. Some could even be confused with the existing Rantau Agro Park located just 10 minutes away at Kampung Solok, Rantau. Additionally, the ecopark does not have any abiotic features like caves or waterfalls. But it is nearby biotic features such as a lowland forest area and a river- Sungai Linggi.

Sampling and Data Collection

The purposive convenience sampling was used for this study. Hence, tourists were the most suitable to be selected as participants because of their experiences relating to the phenomenon being investigated (Kvale, 1996), which is their experience on ecotourism. Firstly, all visitors who have booked a two-night's stay at the ecopark were approached during check-in and invited to participate in the research. Participants who stayed at least two nights at the Rantau Ecopark were chosen for the interview as they would have experienced most of the facilities and activities offered at the ecopark. Another screening criteria used for the interviewees were they have to be at least 18 years old to participate. Those who fulfilled the criteria and agreed to take part in the study were asked to complete and return the consent form. A total of twelve interviews were conducted over a period of 6 days; whereby all were local tourists. After each interview, the contents were transcribed immediately to avoid any loss of information. All the interviews were conducted in English except two which were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia (local language, as requested by the interviewees). Approval from the management of Rantau Ecopark was obtained prior to the study.

As the research design is qualitative and phenomenological in nature, semi-structured interview was conducted to gather sufficient information. Insightful semi-structured questions on individual values and experience were asked. The questions were designed to be "directed to the experiences, feelings, beliefs, and convictions of the theme

being researched” (Welman & Kruger, 1999). Such open-ended questions were developed to allow participants to describe their own experiences using their own senses, feelings, opinions and actions. A semi-structured interview was chosen because it is not too rigid as the structured interview and it allows the participant enough flexibility to elaborate their experiences with a little control by the researcher (Cook, 2008). An interview guide was developed for the purpose of answering the research questions:

- What do you understand with the term ‘ecotourism’?
- What are your thoughts on the development of an ecopark in Rantau?
- How did you find out about this ecopark?
- Describe how you feel when you first arrived at the ecopark.
- How do you find the condition of the ecopark?
- What are the activities that you enjoyed most in this ecopark and why?
- Which aspect of the ecopark that you think was well-maintained?
- Which aspect of the ecopark that you think needs improvement?
- How does the ecopark impact the local community?
- How can the ecopark be further promoted to international tourists?

All the interviewees signed a release form providing informed consent to use their responses as part of this research study. Before the interview started, a brief background and purpose of the interview was explained again. The interviews were conducted on the last night of their stay, after dinner, at the Open Space Café by the lakeside in the Ecopark so that they would be able to relate a more in-depth experience in a relaxed mood. Since the interviews were conducted during their visit, they were more likely to have a more accurate recollection of their experiences. The responses were all audio-recorded. Each interview ranged from one to two hours. In addition to the semi-structured interview, other sources of data included field notes and on-site observations. The tourists were observed as they participated in the activities and interacted with others. The observation was conducted before the face-to-face in-depth interview. Important observations were noted down to provide a better understanding of the tourists’ experience in the Ecopark and included in the analysis to assist in interpreting the interview information.

Pilot Study

According to Merriam (2009), the reliability and validity of a qualitative study’s findings also depends on the credibility of the researcher as the main tool of obtaining information. As such, a pilot study was conducted to improve the interview guide and the interview process. The pilot study was conducted on Mr. Chong, one of the tourists at the Ecopark who was there for a holiday with his family. As discovered during the interview process of the pilot study, more probing questions were required in order to gain substantial information and better choice of words were needed to enable the interviewees to understand the questions asked.

Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

In this study, as the research instrument, I conducted all the interviews personally. All the responses to the interviews and field notes were transcribed to word-processed documents and stored as Word documents. The interviews that were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia

were translated to English. The translated document were checked through and verified by a certified bilingual translator who is also a language instructor at a local university. The process of data analysis began with the coding of interview responses and field notes and the coding process was done after each interview. According to Auerbach & Silverstein's (2003) the data was analyzed using coding procedure as the use of raw data to identify emerging themes and trends relevant to the research study. The formulated meanings are clustered into common categories and labeled as themes. Any new emerging themes were included and the finalised core themes of the ecotourism experience were discussed.

Smith-Sullivan (2008) said that "it is important to be mindful of what is divulged about participants and others involved before publicizing the study". As such, subsequent measures have been taken to ensure that participants who signed the consent form did it voluntarily and are clearly aware of their involvement to partake in this study. To protect their confidentiality, the study did not reveal their full name. They were given a choice to use their surname or a pseudonym. Due to this, the participants feel more at ease to share their experiences during the interview. As this study also used the researcher's personal observation and field notes, the personal emotions and biases are also taken into consideration and clarified accordingly. According to Merriam (2009), researchers as human instruments have personal values and expectations that would influence the conclusion of the study and by going through the process of reflexivity is able to render the readers' point of view.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Understanding of tourists towards the term 'ecotourism'

The first research question that the study seeks to explore is the tourists' understanding of ecotourism. From the interview, two main themes were identified:

Natural Environment

To the tourists, ecotourism revolves around the natural environment and has an element of adventure. As for the destination, an ecopark is said to be set in a rural or forest area. It doesn't seem to bother the tourists if certain superficial man-made structures like the lake or swimming pool were created as a supporting environment. They do not view this as obstructive to the natural environment but rather as an added feature or service provided by the ecopark. During the interview, the respondents mentioned that the ecoparks or ecolodges are situated in a local area or 'kampung' (village) and most likely to be near areas where there are plenty of greeneries, flora and fauna. As one of the respondents mentioned, "Ecotourism is going for holiday to a secluded area in a natural forest, far from the city".

In the accommodation aspect, they know not to expect a standard hotel's package in terms of facilities and services. However, this doesn't mean that they are easily satisfied. The tourists expects the ecopark operators to play a huge part in conserving the natural-setting but they themselves are not necessarily keen on taking action to help with those efforts. As the respondent highlighted that as a paying visitor, the maintenance should be done by the management or owners of the ecopark. Nonetheless, if ecotourism is to produce benefits using a protected natural environment, then it is imperative that an efficient

mechanism be put in place to channel back the fees collected into improving the facilities at the ecopark.

Conservational Efforts

From the interview conducted, the respondents referred ecotourism as a conservation and preservation effort. Ecotourism definitions do imply support for conservation. Some of the terms that they used were recycling efforts, waste management, water conservation and reducing energy consumption. It is in their understanding that the ecopark operators will manage the surrounding resources in a responsible manner. Particularly, for the ecopark to operate in an environmentally friendly manner; that doesn't pollute the natural resources such as the air and water in the surrounding area.

In the last decade, numerous green hotels and eco-resorts have increased their efforts to reduce wastage by donating excess food, unused soap and other items such as towels and bedsheets (Shanklin, et.al., 1991). Interestingly, some eco-friendly establishments in Malaysia have also incorporated furniture and decor made from recycled materials such as pallets and glass bottles. There also has been an increase in the number of hotels and ecoparks practicing a strict 'No Smoking' policy to reduce air pollution. Indeed, the smoke-free policy not only benefits the tourists and the employees working in the ecopark, but it also makes the environment friendly to families with young children. Hence, it is no wonder that the respondents relate ecotourism with environmentally-friendly operations.

Tourist's Experiences towards Ecotourism

This study also attempted to explore the tourist experiences to provide valuable insights on ecotourism. Based on the interviews conducted; four main themes emerged:

Cultural Interaction

The findings implied that one of the experiences that tourists have in the Ecopark is the interaction with the local culture. From the interview, the respondents mentioned items like handicrafts, local food and cultural events and used words like 'enjoy', 'love' and 'wonderful' to describe their experiences. Craik (1997) mentioned that cultural aspects of tourism is gaining a lot of attention and is one of the pull factors that influence the tourists to extend their stay.

Fisher and Price (1991) developed a model that linked intercultural interaction to tourists' perception and attitude. While encouraging cultural interactions among the tourists, these sensory stimuli become important markers for recollection of positive experiences. Just as how the tourists feel engaged when they get to participate in a cultural dance or paint their own handicraft as souvenir. The education provided through cultural experience contributes to the fun element and also as a unique and memorable experience.

Relaxation

The adult travellers on the other hand seek for relaxation to connect with nature and a sort of escapism from their real-world. Ecotourism and adventure tourism is often experienced as a personal indulgence and for leisure (Celsi, et. al., 1993). According to Kleiber et al., (1986) adult leisure trips are either relaxed (passive) or developmental (active) in nature. For these tourists, the trip is meant for a bodily nourishment and mind relaxation and they tend to be less active. From my observation, tourists who came with their spouse were less likely to participate in outdoor nature activities during their visit at the park. From the interview, they shared that they purposely chose to visit an ecopark rather than a city hotel just to enjoy the quiet, stress-free environment. As an interviewee mentioned that he preferred less crowded holiday destinations. The feelings of relaxation are crucial for them and they really enjoyed the scenic views with fresh, clean air at the ecopark.

Fun Family Outing

Similar to a typical Malaysian family, parents make the decisions based on the activities that their children can involve in. Family-friendly activities are most sought after for holiday-goers during the school holiday season. To the visitors who were there with their family, the experience gained is through participating in activities together as a family unit. According to an interviewee who mentioned that during any school holidays, he chose destinations based on its ability and variety of activities to fill up his children's time. From this study, the respondents who travelled with their family responded that their holiday experience is whereby they get to see their children enjoy and participate in fun activities while learning new skills. To describe their emotions, keywords associated to the fun experience were 'excited' and 'uplifted'. As I observed at the ecopark, visitors who brought their families spent almost the whole day participating in the water activities.

Challenges

From the interview, some of the negative experiences from the ecopark were also identified. The respondents mentioned factors like poor road signs, safety issues, language difficulty, lack of standards, boring activities and poor services as the challenges that they faced during their vacation. Although these are negative comments, they are still considered to form a main part in the tourists' experience. Without the challenges that they indicated, their experiences would be deemed as incomplete. On the contrary, tourists do not avoid these negative experiences and sometimes seek the challenge of overcoming them. Likewise, some even expected these challenges. As one respondent put it, "What do you expect? This is not a 5-star resort". The importance of understanding the barriers in the tourists experience has also been discussed by Celsi et. al. (1993) and there seem to be an expected risk when tourists chose to go for ecotourism. Nonetheless, some of the challenges experienced prior to arriving at the ecopark may irritate or emotionally upset the tourists but were acceptable if they had a happy experience during their stay. As the respondent mentioned, "Actually, the place a bit difficult to find... but this place makes me feel relaxed."

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Advancing from this, it is timely to conduct this study as the hospitality and tourism sectors in Malaysia are gaining greater attention due to its foreseeable contribution to the nation. The direct contribution of the tourism industry to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was RM70.4 billion in 2013 (7.2% of total GDP) and is expected to increase by 4.4% annually from 2014 to 2024 (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2014). Consequently, the environmental pollution such as air and water pollution caused by the tourism and hospitality industry have become a growing worldwide concern. Hence, ecotourism is viewed as a solution to not only help preserve the environment but also sustain the well-being of the local people. The management of national parks and natural areas often face a balance between the residents' welfare, the tourist activity and the pressure on ecosystems.

This study has identified that tourists visiting an ecopark may not necessarily link their holiday as ecotourism. There seems to be a gap in the understanding that the tourists have towards ecotourism. The tourists' definition of ecotourism were more swayed towards the environmental conservation and preservation aspect of ecotourism while leaving out the local community aspect. They view ecotourism as a form of vacation that takes place in a rural or natural forest area with a lot of greeneries and away from urbanisation.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from this study is their positive and negative experiences from the ecopark. Although they did not include the local community aspect when defining ecotourism, their experiences revealed the contrary. The local culture elements of ecotourism have significant influence on their experiences as they enjoyed doing and experiencing something new. Through this study, it is clear that tourists may not necessarily link ecotourism to the local culture though they encounter those experiences during their stay.

This study also highlighted the importance of creating a relaxing and natural environment for ecopark tourists as they seek to escape from their daily surroundings. Besides attractive natural resources like the river, flora and fauna, the cultural and fun activities were important influences towards the tourist's experience. As such, proper tourism planning and management has become a crucial element to design effective tourist experiences (Sternberg, 1997). In view that ecotourism is not possible without proper maintenance of the natural environment, ecopark operators must devise ways to encourage a higher spending through in-park activities. By doing this, the earnings can help to contribute back to the conservation efforts of the park area. Tourists that help by buying locally made products and using services provided by local people during their stay can enhance the economic development of the local community (Hvenegaard & Dearden, 1998).

In addition, by knowing the elements that form such experiences, specific ecotour programmes can be created to enhance the relationship between ecopark operators and tour operators. Ceballos-Lascurain (1996) in their study highlighted the importance of strategic partnership between various government agencies, the tourism industry players, NGOs, financial institutions, consumers (the tourists) and local communities to form sustainable ecotourism. Such strategic partnerships should see each stakeholder playing their role to identify appropriate ecotourism activities.

Subsequently, by developing creative cultural activities and educational visitor centres, it may not only induce greater spending, but also serve to encourage and educate tourists on local culture. Further improvement can be made by making information on the ecopark readily available to reduce negative experience amongst tourists. Ecopark operators can leverage of social media platform to facilitate local contact for nearby attractions, restaurants, transportations and special local events which provides tourists with the convenience.

The findings of this study can help marketers to develop a more comprehensive and integrated marketing communications plan for the ecopark. Rather than using common images of the available facilities to attract tourists, ecopark operators should display clear experiential and emotional elements that the destination can provide to the tourists. For example, the marketing communications tool can apply local cultural elements and fun-filled activities for families. Nonetheless, a national board can be put in place to determine the ecopark's fees and carrying capacity. Further investigation into the negative impacts towards the site should also be conducted periodically to ensure that the ecopark's natural environment does not deteriorate to minimize the impact of tourism on protected areas.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

One of the limitations of the study to consider is the location and setting of where the study took place. These tourist experiences may be different based on the personal values, socio-cultural influences and geographical settings. However, the researcher does not intend to generalize the findings from this exploratory study. The findings are from the tourist experiences on a selected ecopark as it is solely based on the recollection of the respondents' memories of those experiences. As the current study is exploratory, the themes identified raise interesting questions for future research. One of which is to conduct further research to understand the various tourists background to uncover why there is a gap in the definition of ecotourism. Moreover, this study focused only on one ecopark, more ecoparks destinations can be included in future studies to compare and confirm if there are new emerging themes that enhance tourist's experiences.

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