TOURIST SATISFACTION AT NATURE-BASED TOURISM DESTINATION AROUND KOTA KINABALU, SABAH

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ABSTRACT. Kota Kinabalu, Sabah has been famed as Nature Resort City where nature-based destinations in and around the city have been the major tourist attractions. Nonetheless, the question whether the visitors are satisfied with their experience at the major nature-based tourism destination or otherwise is still vague. The purpose of this study is to understand the recreational experience and satisfaction of tourist in selected nature-based tourism sites in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. A mixed-method approach incorporating quantitative data derived using Driver's Recreation Experience Preference Scale, and qualitative data using Herzberg's Critical Incident Technique were deployed. The sampling technique used in this study was purposive non-probability sampling with the participation of 240 tourists. Factor analysis was run on the quantitative dataset to derive the major outcome which is the set of profile on tourist recreational experience. While content analysis was conducted on the qualitative dataset to derive explanation for tourist satisfaction/dissatisfaction. Triangulation between the two types of datasets strengthens the major finding which is the tourist satisfaction in nature-based tourism destination around Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. The finding of this study is crucial for satisfaction enhancement and critical for identification of areas to be improved, subsequently solutions to be recommended.

KEYWORDS. Tourist Satisfaction, Nature-Based Tourism

INTRODUCTION

The term nature-based tourism is generally applied to tourism activities depending on the use of natural resources which remain in a relatively undeveloped state, including scenery, topography, waterways, vegetation, wildlife, and cultural heritage (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). Tourists travel to various places and experience the fascinating variety in what every destination has to offer. As such, their behaviour is the foundation for tourism study (Pearce, 2005). Pine and Gilmore (1999) suggested that enhancing customer's experience is the best way to add value and increase competitiveness for tourism and leisure organizations. They contended that experiences are more than just services. Experiences have to be memorable and remain with one for a long time. Understanding tourist experience and what satisfy or dissatisfy them is crucial for any tourism destination. Although there has been an increase in the trend of tourist influx in Sabah, it is not known whether they are satisfied with their experience or otherwise. Comprehensive studies assessing tourist experience in Sabah are limited specifically empirical evidence on the understanding of tourist experience and satisfaction (Chan, 2006). A few previous studies on experience assessment in nature-based tourism in Sabah include a qualitative study of eco-lodge experience in Lower Kinabatangan (Chan & Baum, 2007), as well as tropical forest recreation experience assessment in Kinabalu Park (Talib, 2011), nonetheless, could not provide the overall understanding on tourist experience and satisfaction in the various types of nature-based attractions available.

The development of specially designed instrument to assess tourist recreational experience and satisfaction in nature-based tourism is worthwhile as tourists will often visit more than one destination during the trip and thus will typically experience a range of natural and cultural

environments (Dodds & Butler, 2010). It is deemed necessary not only to increase tourist arrival but equally important is that they are satisfied with their experience. This is so that they could bring back with them meaningful and memorable experiences to ensure repeat visits in the future as well as promoting good reputation through words of mouth communication. In order to prevent negative impact from dissatisfying experience which they could encounter, it is vital for this kind of study to be conducted.

The main aim of this study is to understand tourist experience and satisfaction in nature-based tourism around Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. The end result is how much recreation experience preferences are satisfied through their visit and the dimensions of satisfaction and dissatisfaction of visitors.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A mix-method approach incorporating quantitative data using Recreation Experience Preference (REP) scale (Driver *et al.,* 1991), for recreation experience and satisfaction measurement; while qualitative data using Herzberg's Critical Incident Technique (Herzberg, 1972) for satisfaction-dissatisfaction dimension elicitation, were used. Nature-based destinations around Kota Kinabalu were chosen based on the justification that Kota Kinabalu is the "gateway" of Sabah. Nature-based attractions around Kota Kinabalu identified through Sabah Tourism Board website are the Tunku Abdul Rahman Park (5 islands), Nexus Resort Karambunai, Tanjung Aru Beach, Mari-Mari Cultural Village, Kiansom Waterfall in Inanam, Jesselton Point Waterfront, Signal Hill Observatory Tanjung Lipat, Likas Public Park, ODEC UMS and Kota Kinabalu Wetland.

Purposive non-probability sampling technique was employed, where only tourists who have been to the above destinations were selected as respondents. A total of 240 tourists participated in this particular study. The survey instrument for the quantitative data acquisition listed out 32 items, while the qualitative data were acquired using a series of questions guided by Herzberg's Critical Incident Technique**.** The questionnaire survey form was specially designed to measure the types of experiences the visitors have acquired. The experience measurement indices were based primarily on the Recreation Experience Preference (REP) scale (Driver *et al.,* 1991), where the instructional set asked subjects to indicate the extent to which the items were gained throughout their participation, on a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 for "strongly disagree" to 5 for "strongly agree". To elicit dimensions of experience description for satisfying and dissatisfying experience, a series of open-ended questions adapted from Herzberg's (1972) were employed. The original application of Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory in job satisfaction consisted of a series of interviews that sought to elicit responses to the questions regarding job experience involving good and bad feeling on their job. In applying this to elicit responses of participants on their recreational experience in nature-based tourism, they were adapted according to the setting, in particular the location and activity involved.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The final sample size for this particular study was 240 which comprised of 100% foreign tourists and dominated by male respondents (about 51%). Age group ranged from 18 years old and more than 58 years old where the 18 to 27 year-old were the largest age group (about 35%). Majority of the respondents were first-timers (80%).

As for the qualitative data, a total of 77 responded for their good experiences and 30 responded for the bad experiences. Most of the respondents for both the satisfying and dissatisfying experience were male (about 55% and 60% respectively) with both from age group 18 to 27 as the majority (about 36% for both). Participants from the United Kingdom formed the majority of the respondents for both satisfying and dissatisfying experience (about 21% and 20% respectively), followed by participants from the United States (about 13% for both) and subsequently other European countries.

The REP items' reliability measurement was extracted using Chronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient before the data were analysed for experience rating. Result shows that the reliability coefficient (r = 0.93), was well above the minimum acceptable standard for reliability (r = 0.6) (Coakes & Steed, 2007). Table 1 presents the mean score comparison between items comprised of 19 domains of experience. It reveals that the highest attained experience was "enjoy nature" with mean score of 4.40, while the lowest attained experience was "being on my own' with mean score of 3.12, which indicates the respondents almost did not attain the experience. The results also indicate that the top ten highest attained experiences were from the domain "enjoy nature" (item ranked 1, 4, 6 and 10, as indicated in bold letters in Table 1).

Table 1: Mean score comparisons between experience domains.

No.	Item	Mean Score	S.D.
1.	**Enjoyed the scenery**	**4.4**	**0.846**
2.	Gained an experience I can look back on	4.34	0.809
3.	Being away from the usual demands of life	4.28	0.866
4.	**Being closed to nature**	**4.23**	**0.858**
5.	Relaxed physically	4.11	0.866
6.	**Enjoyed the smells and sounds of nature**	**4.08**	**0.930**
7.	Gave mind a rest	4.07	0.907
8.	Telling others about the trip	4.03	0.976
9.	Experienced a nicer temperature	4.01	1.031
10.	**Obtained a feeling of harmony with nature**	**3.99**	**0.937**
11.	Experienced new and different things	3.96	1.012
12.	Experienced the peace and calm	3.94	0.973
13.	Released or reduced tension	3.92	0.876
14.	Realized a good experience for the family	3.91	1.116
15.	Enjoyed the quietness and beauty	3.9	0.991
16.	Experienced excitement	3.82	1.011
17.	Gained a new perspective in life	3.82	1.095
18.	Being with people who have similar interest	3.81	0.932
19.	Being near with considerate people	3.72	0.964
20.	Keep physically fit	3.71	1.073
21.	Learnt more about things here	3.68	1.083
22.	Being away from crowded situations for a while	3.61	1.179
23.	Doing things by my own way	3.61	1.186
24.	Met new people	3.48	1.161

25.	Experienced the uncertainty of not knowing what will happen	3.51	1.142
26.	Being away from other people	3.39	1.170
27.	Helped me understand better what my life is all about	3.31	1.171
28.	Developed personal, spiritual values	3.25	1.148
31.	Helped others learn about things here	3.12	1.172
32.	Being own my own	3.12	1.276

Factor analysis was performed on the data to discern the underlying perceptual dimensions within the 19 domains of REP in order to see the simple structure of the overall experience using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test. KMO values near 0.8 or 0.9 are usually very promising for informative factor analysis result, while KMOs near 0.5 or o.6 are much less promising. Thus in this study, factor loadings with KMO less than 0.5 were excluded. Labelling of factors for each new category were based on the researchers' overall judgement and understanding of what the participants have gone through. In labelling the new factor categories, items with dual or triple loadings and lower factor loadings (below 5.00) were excluded to produce a more meaningful interpretation. Thus, this has resulted in only 5 factor categories.

Table 2 presents the mean scores and ranks of underlying dimensions of experience attained, which indicates the range of recreation experience acquired from visiting the sites. The 5 factor categories were "Enjoy Nature-Reduce Tensions- Achievement", "social Security- Reduce Tension", "Outdoor Learning", "Escape Physical Stressors", and "Introspection- Understand Life". Since the REP scales were intended to measure the types of psychological benefits or goal states desired from recreation or leisure participation, this range of experiences could also be interpreted as the psychological needs satisfied through their visit to the nature-based attractions around Kota Kinabalu. Thus, the mean score for each dimension indicates the degree of attainment for "the psychological needs to enjoy nature, to reduce tensions and to achieve something", "the need for security and to reduce tension", "the need to learn new things", as well as "introspection and to understand what life is all about".

Table 2: Mean scores and ranks of experience dimensions.

Underlying Dimension (Label)	Mean Score (Rank)
Factor1 (Enjoy nature– Achievement)	4.15 (1)
Factor6 (Security– Reduce Tension)	4.01 (2)
Factor3 (Outdoor Learning- Solitude)	3.71 (3)
Factor4 (Learning–New Things)	3.59 (4)
Factor2 (Introspection- Understand Life)	3.49 (5)

A content analysis (Patton, 2002) of the responses for the satisfying and dissatisfying experiences was carried out by identifying keyword/s for the source or factors for good experience (Driver *et al.,* 1991) and factors for bad experience (Talib, 2011).

Table 3: Factors for satisfying experiences dimensions

No.	Source of Good Feeling	Example of descriptions	N	%
1.	Enjoy Nature	"..beautiful beach, corals, fishes, sunset, nature..especially the wetland"	47	61.04
2.	Share Similar values	"..the locals are great, good food, good tourist guide.."	13	17.11
3.	Outdoor Learning	"..learn about culture at cultural village.."	8	10.39
4.	Achievement/Stimulation	"..exciting zip-line at Pulau Sapi.."	4	5.19
5.	Risk Reduction	"..not too crowded, safe.."	3	3.90
6.	Escape Physical Stressor	"..enjoying the quietness.."	2	2.60
7.	Reduce Tension	"..relaxing in the shadow on the beach.."	2	2.60
8.	Agreeable Temperature	"..diving in good weather.."	1	1.30

The results of factors for satisfying and dissatisfying experience dimensions are presented in Table 3 and Table 4 respectively. Eight sources of good feeling or factors for satisfying experiences emerged and 4 sources of bad feeling or factors for dissatisfying experiences emerged from the tourist responses.

Table 4: Factors for dissatisfying experiences dimensions

No.	Source of Bad Feeling	Example of descriptions	N	%
1.	Maintenance	"..rubbish that I found too much.."	20	66.67
2.	Environment	"..the haze is bad.."	6	20.00
3.	Physical Body Limitation	"..fell ill due to stomach ache.."	3	10.00
4.	Weather	"..the weather is hot and humid but not that bad.."	1	3.33

Triangulation between the quantitative data analysis and the qualitative data from open ended tourist responses found consistency as shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Triangulations between quantitative and qualitative data analysis

No.	Source of Bad Feeling	
	Quantitative	Qualitative
1.	Enjoy Nature	F1 (Enjoy Nature – Achievement)
2.	Share Similar Values	F4 (Social security-Reduce Tension)
3.	Outdoor Learning	F5 (Outdoor Learning)

CONCLUSIONS

The main aim of this study was to understand tourist experience and satisfaction in nature-based tourism destinations around Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, with the specific objectives to see how much recreation experience preferences are satisfied through their visit and to understand the dimensions of satisfaction and dissatisfaction of tourist.

Apart from having achieved the above main aim, this study has also found that the core products of the nature- based destinations are the psychological benefits gained by visitors. In another words, visitors' satisfaction in the nature-based destinations are related to the psychological benefits gained (the experience content), while visitors' dissatisfaction is related to the physical condition of the setting where the experience took place (the experience context). This is in accordance with Herzberg's Two-Factor theory that there exist two separate themes for satisfaction and dissatisfaction. This mixed-method approach (combination of quantitative and qualitative, incorporating REP and Herzberg's Two-Factor theory) have provided support for the holistic perspective into the understanding of tourists experience and satisfaction in nature-based setting.

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