

Promoting Ecotourism Product Development In Kilim Geopark Based On Tourists' Perceptions

Mohd Firdous Yacob*, Mastura Jaafar and Azizan Marzuki
School of Housing, Building and Planning, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang,
MALAYSIA

Langkawi is currently re-developing its brand as an international geopark tourism spot. Popular for its boating activities, KilimGeopark features its natural as attractions as its main products. With assistance from the government, tourism development helps spur the growth of local businesses. Successful community cooperation in offering services to the visitors is significant in sustaining such development. However, having an annually increasing number of tourists visiting the area has resulted in a dilemma between maintaining the environment's sustainability and the local community's economic gains. Given that high economic returns are based on tourist satisfaction, this study explores the levels of clients' satisfaction with the tourism products and services offered in Kilim. The results indicate that tourists prefer exploring the new ecotourism products being offered. However, as a newly emerging tourism spot, there are many steps that must be undertaken to improve the services. With limitations in the product offered, this study's results can provide insights to the main stakeholders.

Key words: ecotourism, product development, tourism product and services, tourists' perceptions, KilimGeopark

Introduction

Tourism is one of the largest industries throughout the world (Bjork, 1997). It has played a vital part in invigorating the economic growth of many developed and developing countries (Chaiboonsri&Chaitip, 2008). The official website of Tourism Malaysia states that the country has had 23.6 million international tourists in 2009. Meanwhile, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), tourism ranked as the second largest industry in 2005, accounting for 3.8 percent of global GDP (Rosli&Azhar, 2007). At present, the islands of Malaysia continue to be developed into tourist spots, attracting a continuous number of arrivals (Mohamed et al., 2006).

In many countries, government agencies have used the term "ecotourism" to promote and attract travelers worldwide (Schillinger, 1995). Ecotourism is a type of tourism industry that is nature-based and is very attractive compared with other types of tourism (Bjork, 1997). Ecotourism can be distinguished as a visit to a certain destination that is wealthy with untainted and unobstructed nature for the purpose of

*Email: firdaus871987@gmail.com

studying and enjoying the beauty of wildlife and any existing cultural features in that area (Bjork, 1997; Litvin, 1996). Jaafar and Maideen (2012) refer to ecotourism as a nature-based visit to value the natural attractions and cultural features of a destination.

Currently, there are limited numbers of studies on ecotourism product development. Originally, the product development model is described as the process of creating product from scratch (generating idea) until it becomes available in the open market. Matilla (2011) states that tourism product development, according to the holistic approach, usually begins with some minor improvements to the existing products; furthermore, entrepreneurs must be creative and innovative in developing new tourism products in their effort to provide meaningful experiences to tourists.

Tourists nowadays have developed awareness of their right to be involved in the process of creating meaningful experiences during their vacation; their inputs are normally based on their prior knowledge and experiences. Therefore, it is essential for the service provider to identify and understand the clients' needs (Matilla, 2011). Taneva (2009) argues that tourism products must adhere to the specifications and requirements earlier set by the clients in order to provide meaningful experiences that meet their expectations. The consideration of this aspect is of paramount importance, because tourism sells nature-based products as well as experiences and satisfaction.

The knowledge gaps in this topic are addressed in the current work by exploring ecotourism product development in a Geopark site in Malaysia. The objective of the paper is to study the ecotourism products offered in Kilim and the satisfaction levels of tourists who visited KilimGeopark in terms of using the services and activities offered in the destination. The paper starts with a brief introduction on tourism product development in KilimGeopark and other worldwide views. We then present the methodology and instruments used in our research, followed by our analysis of the results, and finally, the findings of our research.

KilimGeopark

Kilim Karst Geopark Area is one of the three designated areas in LangkawiGeopark. It was recognized as a UNESCO Global Geoparks Network in 2007. This recognition facilitated the re-branding of Langkawi as a "Geopark Island" by the local government. By 2011, tourist arrivals to Langkawi reached 6 million, signifying a sharp increase from previous years. Kilim Karst also benefitted from this re-branding when it recorded a high number of tourist arrivals over the past 5 years from 78,145 in 2007 to 159,338 in 2011 (KCS, 2012).

Despite the recent success, however, Kilim has already attracted tourist attention since the late 1990s, especially foreign travelers seeking to experience the vast nature-based attractions in the surrounding the area. Tourism development in Kilimbegan with initiatives taken by the Kilim Cooperative Society (KCS). Previously known as the Kilim Fishermen Association, this organization has successfully convinced the Langkawi Development Authority (LADA) to provide some basic infrastructure, including a jetty, to allow the community to launch related tourism businesses. The cooperative also acts as intermediary with the local authorities as regards issues related to the tourism development in the area. Their responsibility is to supervise businesses in Kilim and encourage the locals to engage in entrepreneurship and help improve the economic status of the community. The involvement of the local community in providing boating services to cater to the needs of tourists first started in 1999 and has been carried out independently by a few individual boat owners. By 1999, the government, led by LADA, developed Kilim's

mangrove forest for tourism purposes. Thus KCS has been given the full responsibility of ensuring the sustainability of tourism product and activities offered in Kilim.

Literature Review

The Development of Eco-Tourism Product

Generally, the concept of ecotourism is derived from two different notions, namely, ecology and tourism. Ecology is the study of the relationship between living organisms and their natural or developed environment (Encarta Dictionary, 2009), while tourism is the act of travelling to benefit from a particular service or activity that is unavailable at one's home (Encarta Dictionary, 2009). In fact, tourism is an activity where the authorities, tourists, and locals cooperate to make it possible for tourists to study and admire the beauty of nature and the local culture, while maintaining the sustainability of the area (Bjork, 1997). Bjork further states that each ecotourism program should consider the following factors: 1) the impact on the environment, 2) the impact on the host cultures, 3) the economic benefits for the host country, and 4) the tourists' recreational satisfaction. There are several principles of ecotourism that ensure environmental protection, provide first-hand experiences, involve all parties (local community, authority, and tourists), promote partnership and responsibilities among parties, as well as provide long-term benefits to the resources, local community and the industry (Wight, 1993).

Tourism Product and Satisfaction

International researchers portray tourism as comprising of "products" rather than "services," despite the fact that tourism is actually classified as a service industry (Carlos et al., 2007; Osmund & Sunday, 2010). Instead, the term "service" should be used to describe product development within the specific service industry (Osmund & Sunday, 2010).

However, Matilla (2011) opines that it is rather difficult to distinguish between tourism products and tourism services. To date, there are no definite definitions of tourism products that can best describe tourism products. Magnar et al. (2012) define a tourism product as a service or process that facilitates tourism and promotes activities carried out by individuals beyond their familiar environment; in addition, tourism products also consist of natural and cultural resources, facilities, infrastructure, accommodation, and restaurants (Eraqi, 2006). From a marketing perspective, tourism products cover any physical objects, services, places, organizations or ideas that are open to the market and are influential in satisfying the clients' demands (Smith, 2001; Chaiboonsri & Chaitip, 2008; Magnar et al., 2012).

One of the essential features of a tourism product is its quality, which must be measured in order to determine the prices of the products. Quality is an important consideration because it provides the appropriate product equivalent to the amount of fixed price; it is also related to the clients' satisfaction with the tourism products. The quality of tourism product can only be determined by gauging the clients' experiences as to whether or not the product has fulfilled their expectations. Different clients have different expectations that are normally based on their prior experiences and knowledge of the prices of services offered (Matilla, 2011).

Customers' satisfaction is related to a complete assessment of the performance of products or services offered (Bartikowski&Llosa, 2004), which consists of certain characteristics' of a product or service in innumerable industry (Albayrak et al., 2010; Choi, 2005; Herrick & McDonald, 1992). In providing the best services to the clients, service providers are continuously pressured to provide individualized services that meet client expectations (Osmund& Sunday, 2010).

Xu (2010) argues that tourists encounter a wide range of tourism products in various destinations. Many researchers believe that the variety of products offered at different tourism destinations contributes to several memorable experiences for different clients (Albayrak et al., 2010). Tourism product management is a system of managing skills and activities that are used to arrange and systematize tourism for a specific tourism destination; in line with this, Chaiboonsri and Chaitip (2008) state that tourism product management must deal with the following factors: a) attractions, b) amenities, c) accessibility, d) image and e) price of the product or service.

Methodology

Respondents (Setting and Sampling)

The data collection process was conducted throughout March 2012, and took place in KilimGeopark, Langkawi, Malaysia. The method chosen was questionnaire-based survey. The questionnaires were distributed to the respondents in person. Using area sampling, the selected respondents included consumers of the ecotourism products currently being provided in KilimGeopark. The total number of valid responses was 341.

Instrument and Data Analysis

A four-point Likert scale was used to measure the tourists' satisfaction of the activities and services offered in KilimGeopark. The choices were represented by the following levels: least satisfied, satisfied, most satisfied, and not applicable. Descriptive statistics analysis was run to map the tourists' demographic profiles and measure their satisfaction level. The satisfaction levels per item were determined using the mean score and standard deviation of each item. The highest mean score indicated the highest satisfaction level.

Findings

Table 1 depicts the respondents' profile. Out of 341 respondents, 47.5 percent were male and 52.5 percent were female. The majority of the respondentfell under the following age groups: between 21–30 years old (37.2 percent), 31–40 years old (22.3 percent), 41–50 years old (18.8 percent), and 51 years old or above (17.3 percent). In terms of educational background, most respondents had formal education (98.5 percent), and only few have no prior formal education (1.5 percent). As for employment status, majority of the respondents are in the private sector (62.4 percent), the government sector (17.6 percent), students (9.1 percent), and others (10.8 percent). For marital status, majority of the respondents are married (61.9 percent) and the rest (32.6 percent) are single. The nationality of the respondents indicated that majority are local (45.5 percent), followed by Asian (23.4 percent) and Western tourists (31.8 percent).

Table 1: Demographic profile of the respondents.

Demographic	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	162	47.5
	Female	179	52.5
Age	18-20	15	4.4
	21-30	127	37.2
	31-40	76	22.3
	41-50	64	18.8
	51 or above	59	17.3
Educational	No formal education	5	1.5
	Formal education	336	98.5
Employment	Government sector	60	17.6
	Private sector	213	62.4
	Student	31	9.1
	Others	37	10.8
Marital status	Single	111	32.6
	Married	211	61.9
	Others	19	5.6
Nationality	Asian	79	23.4
	Western	107	31.8
	Local	155	45.5

Table 2: Types of ecotourism activities offered in KilimGeopark and customer satisfaction levels.

Eco-tourism activities	Mean Rank
Fishing trip	5.68
Food served at floating restaurant	5.19
Open sea	5.17
Fish feeding	4.98
Eagle feeding	4.86
Mangrove sightseeing	4.86
Floating fish farm	4.77
Bat cave	4.74
Crocodile cave	4.74

Chi-Square=75.571, Asymp. Sig.=0.000

Table 2 shows the results of the levels of tourist satisfaction with the ecotourism activities in KilimGeopark. Generally, fishing trip activities have the highest mean rank score (5.68), while visits to the crocodile and the bat caves garner the lowest mean rank values (both 4.74). The other activities that the respondents are satisfied with are visits to the floating restaurant (5.19), open sea viewing (5.17), fish feeding (4.98), eagle feeding (4.86), mangrove sightseeing (4.86), and visits to the floating fish farm (4.77).

Table 3: Customers' satisfaction with the services offered in Kilim.

Services	Mean	Std. Deviation
Natural attraction		
Visual appeal of the natural attraction	2.66	.790
Uncrowded and unspoiled environment	2.59	.795
Appealing and good condition	2.56	.789
Services		
Willingness to assist tourists	2.64	.791
Responding to tourists' questions	2.61	.803
Providing timely and punctual services	2.60	.815
Convenient operating hours	2.59	.813
Giving additional information about KilimGeopark	2.58	.810
Providing accurate information	2.58	.780
Prompt services to tourists	2.57	.800
Understanding the special needs of tourists	2.57	.811
Knowledge to answer tourists' questions	2.55	.760
Giving personal attention to tourists	2.53	.828
Neat appearance of the staff	2.50	.803
Adequate safety facilities	2.47	.746
Facilities		
Adequate safety facilities	2.58	.765
Information center with relevant information about park	2.57	.836
Price		
Cheap recreational activities	2.58	.856
Reasonable prices	2.54	.802

Table 3 shows the levels of tourist satisfaction with the services offered in KilimGeopark. The satisfaction levels were determined by the highest mean value. Visual appeal of the natural attraction garner the highest score (mean of 2.66, SD = 0.790), followed by willingness to assist tourists (2.64, SD = 0.791), responding to tourists' questions (2.61, SD = 0.803), providing timely and punctual services (2.60, SD = 0.815), and knowledge to answer tourists' questions (2.60, SD = 0.794). The lowest satisfactory level was determined by the lowest mean value. Adequate safety facilities garner the highest score (2.47, SD = 0.746), while neat appearance of staff obtain the second lowest score (2.50, SD = 0.803).

Discussion

For a geopark site to be officially recognized by UNESCO, KCS have to maintain the sustainability of mangrove environments. The attractiveness of a natural environment has been used by KCS to embark on tourism business development in Kilim. Several remarkable activities have been conducted throughout KilimGeopark and are managed by the local community, including mangrove sightseeing, eagle feeding, fishing trip, and tour to several exciting places (e.g., floating restaurant, fish farm, bat cave, crocodile cave, and so on). Jaafar and Maideen (2011) raised concerns over the extensive use of certain areas that, in turn, brings difficulties to balance between conservation and tourism activities. According to Stephen et al. (1998), striking a balance between financial goals and environmental-social objectives is important in ensuring the sustainable development of the tourism industry. Thus, the current article

explores the levels of customers' satisfaction with using the product offered besides other requirement for them to indicate their perception on different services offered in KilimGeopark.

The increasing number of tourists visiting Kilim every year explains the continued satisfaction with and patronage of the tourism product and services offered by the KCS. However Apart from various elements of tourism-related products and services identified in the literature, such as natural and cultural resources, facilities, infrastructure, accommodation and restaurants (Eraqi, 2006), as well as wider elements for tourism product from marketing perspective (Smith, 2001; Chaiboonsri&Chaitip, 2008; Magnar et al., 2012), the collected data are only limited to services offered in KilimGeopark.

Based on the findings of this research, the most satisfactory activity determined from the descriptive analysis is the fishing trip, which has received the highest mean score; this is followed by activities offered in packages. However tourists have different satisfaction levels with the different product offered. Although activities are offered as part of the same packages, their levels of enjoyment and satisfaction can still differ. Mostly, we find that they enjoyed and are satisfied with the food served at the floating restaurant and the open sea scenario; in comparison, they did not enjoy visiting the caves.

Overall, there has been a positive perception on the initiatives done by the KCS. Currently, the combination of natural attractiveness and isolated and unspoiled environment has been maximized by KCS in its attempt to offer the best services to tourists. After four years of being recognized by UNESCO, KCS – as a responsible agency – has maintained the natural attractiveness of Kilim. Furthermore, the excellent services offered provide added value to the product in attracting national and international tourists. KCS has successfully developed their marketing ability with a focus on customer's satisfaction. We find that that satisfied tourists are most likely to (1) provide a positive feedback and have the highest possibility to become regular customers, and (2) have a tendency to promote the destination to the other people. Thus, the positive image of the tourism destination itself will be developed while increasing the destination's market ability at the same time.

This paper widens our understanding of the tourists' level of satisfaction with the tourism products offered in KilimGeopark. As argued by Murphy et al. (2000) and Albayrak et al. (2010), a tourism destination is a collection of individual products and experiences that come together to develop a complete total experience for the visitors. The effort of service providers to fulfill the tourist's requirements can also provide a meaningful experience to these tourists (Matilla, 2011). Based on our results, we find that the products and services offered in Kilim could have fulfilled the respondent's requirement in terms of its cleanliness, beauty, safety, and environmentally friendly features, which support the findings of Chaiboonsri and Chaitip (2008) and Swanson and Horridge (2004). In general, tourists are satisfied with tour or boat operator that know how to assist tourists, are able to respond to their questions, and can provide timely and punctual services.

However, some improvements still need to be done to increase the respondents' satisfaction levels. For instance, KCS needs to reconsider its prices, increase their knowledge of tour or boat operators, as well as improve the staff's appearance and its on-site safety facilities. As a newly emerging tourist spot, the local community sees the opportunity to venture into business under the management of KCS. Depending on local attractiveness, local business operators must also enhance their service from time to time. In addition, the international visitors might not be too

concerned with the prices of services offered, but it could be a different matter for local visitors. With an international geopark attraction, KCS should improve their services while exploring new attractive tourist spots in the area. However KCS must also focus on sustainability, because increasing boating services to meet the higher demand from visitors can affect the environment. Indeed, carrying capacity could be important measures for future sustainability business of local people.

Conclusion

This study provides significant insights for various stakeholders, such as the tourist, government agencies and local community and businesses, who are operating in internationally recognized geoparks. The tourism sector is continuously growing worldwide especially in Langkawi, Malaysia. At present, the re-branding of Langkawi as a “Geopark Island” has pushed the tourism development at their optimum carrying capacity. With various ecotourism attractions, Langkawi today has managed to attract both foreign and local tourists. The aim of this study is to determine the levels of tourists’ satisfaction with the tourism products and services offered in KilimGeopark. In this study, the term “tourism products” has been extended to the “services” offered to tourists during their visit to the destination. The results reveal that, in general, tourists prefer the fishing trip, which garnered the highest satisfaction level compared with the other types of activities offered. Regarding the tourists’ satisfaction with the services offered, they are most satisfied with the visual appeal of the natural attractions and related services offered during their tour.

Nevertheless, the results and analysis of this study need to be viewed in light of the following limitations. First, this study is based on a sample of tourists who have visited and experienced the activities and services offered in KilimGeopark. Thus, their assessment of the products offered may be limited. Furthermore, the small size of this study is restrictive, and the results’ generalizability is limited to the particular population in a specific country. However, our findings are highly significant for KCS by providing insights into marketing and service improvement measures. This study not only provides signals to KCS, but is also a sign that the government must improve the facilities in Kilim. However, regardless of whether ecotourism or nature-based tourism products are developed, the local community, government, and the private sector need to join forces so as to preserve the environment, ensuring the viability of small businesses. Thus, the present study has provided meaningful documentation on the tourism products offered in KilimGeopark, Langkawi, Malaysia. In light of this, KCS and other stakeholders must focus on the feedback provided by tourists towards further tourism development in Kilim.

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