

Assessing Key Satisfiers and Sustainable Ecolodge Experience Management Through Profile Accumulation Techniques

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Abstract: The paper presents a pioneering investigation of qualitative empirical findings of experiential responses to ecolodge accommodation as a place of experience consumption from the guest perspective. It identifies the key satisfying experiential dimensions; and subsequently to recommend strategies for developing sustainable quality ecolodge experience strategies that arise from the key experiential dimensions identified within the study. The profile accumulation technique (PAT) developed by Johns and Lee-Ross (1997) as a novel research tool, was extended to investigate ecolodge service experiences, which are deemed to offer a more valid and rounded methodology, shifting away from quantifying the types of satisfying dimensions. A total of fifty-three PAT survey forms were completed by guests who stayed in ecolodges in Lower Kinabatangan, Sabah, Malaysia. Four key satisfying experiential consumption dimensions are seen to be important in describing and evaluating ecolodge experiences: ecolodge location/landscape; pristine natural environment and peaceful atmosphere; novelty in experiences and eco-recreation-based activities. Guest satisfying experiences are largely dependent upon ecolodge external environmental aspects - surrounding natural environment and attractions (wildlife and pristine landscape), eco-activities and the emotive aspects of the guests. Experiential consumption offered by ecolodge accommodation seems to be attributed to guest emotions more than the cognitive aspects of ecolodge service performance, which differs from that provided by other traditional and specialist types of accommodation. The findings have significant implications for managing and operating an ecolodge as a place of quality experiences consumption. Significant attention is needed to conserve and preserve the ecolodge's natural and environmental attraction as these elements are attributed to the satisfying dimensions and thus, significantly affect guest satisfaction. Ecolodge operators should capitalise on these satisfying experiential dimensions as part of their marketing and selling strategy as well as sustainable development quality ecolodge experiences. The satisfying experiential dimensions add to the existing tourist experience literature and the ecolodge experiences. Sustainable ecolodge management need to focus on guest satisfying key experiential consumption dimensions rather than on service quality dimensions.

Key words:Experiential consumption • Guest experiences • Ecolodge accommodation • Profile Accumulation Technique (PAT)

INTRODUCTION

Experience has long been seen as central to the tourism and hospitality product and service. Ostensibly, the steady shift towards an experience economy means that enhancing the customer experience is seen as the best way to add value and increase the competitiveness of many types of businesses [1]. Experiential views of consumption or consumers' subjective and emotional

reactions to product and services consumption have become an important area of study [2]. This is apparent in leisure/tourism and hospitality consumption since the hedonic, emotional and imaginary outcomes of consumption seem to have a central place in the understanding of consumer behaviour. Tourism researchers and practitioners have expressed a renewed interest in understanding the visitor experience, in order to enhance visitor satisfaction and destination

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sustainability [3]. Consequent empirical research has focused on various tourism sectors such as tourist experiences in natural [4] and heritage environments [5-7], museums [8], river rafting [9, 10], heritage parks [Prentice *et al.*, 1998] and heritage sites [11-13], boutique accommodation [14] and nature-based sites [15]. These findings make a significant contribution to the management of their respective areas in relation to quality experiences and satisfaction in the service experience context.

Likewise, experiential consumption has become an important research avenue for the marketing and management of tourism and hospitality products/services. Marketing for tourism and hospitality products has become increasingly complex as it is not only associated with conveying an image of a place, but also with selling an experience in relation to the lifestyle constructs of consumers. Subsequently, the evocation of emotions and the proffering of sensations through experiential marketing has become the focus of tourism marketing and tourism product development [14, 16].

Tourist accommodation, such as ecolodges, constitute overnight sleeping facilities that generate experiences. From the service experience perspective, understanding the experiential nature of consumption and attitudes of the consumers are vital as these can be translated into future action, both from the economic and personal perspectives. Hence, it is logical to identify and understand the underlying attributes of the experiences from the guest perspective. Such evidence may offer a significant contribution towards the offering of sustainable ecolodge experiences in terms of their management and operations, especially since they can form part of the core dimensions of ecotourism destination attractiveness. Nevertheless, there is limited literature on guests' emotive aspects within the ecolodge consumption context. Even though accommodation has a clear functional component, it is arguable that experiential benefits remain a critical part of the evaluation process. For example, the physical environment (servicescape) of the accommodation may tend to have a strong influence on the emotional and subjective reactions of the guests during the evaluation and service delivery process as well as impacting on guest satisfaction. Most research has taken an instrumental (tangible/functional) perspective [3]. A number of researchers have questioned this approach and called for a closer consideration of the affective (intangible/expressive) dimensions of the guest experience when assessing satisfaction.

Likewise, previous studies have suggested the possibility of different experiences being realized in different forms of accommodation [15, 17, 18]. The experiential aspect of accommodation provision remains relatively unexplored, in particular that relating to guest experiential reactions in non-traditional forms of small specialist accommodation such as the ecolodge. From an experiential point of view, in order to attract and satisfy guests in non-traditional accommodation such as ecolodges, operators need to understand their guests in terms of their personal experiential reactions. The ability of accommodation providers to identify, promote and provide guests with a range of experiential benefits would seemingly contribute to their ability to ensure that they provide their guests with high levels of satisfaction. As such, an understanding of guest experiences in ecolodge accommodation can contribute to an understanding of the ways in which such establishments can provide intangible experiential qualities for guests, facilitating feelings, emotions, imagination, knowledge, satisfaction and beneficial experiences.

Numerous studies have sought to focus on the influence of mood and emotion on service evaluation and experiences in leisure and tourism settings [19, 20, 21]. Emotional reactions and subjective responses seem to be the prime determinants of tourist satisfaction and post-consumption behaviour [14] and such reactions often prevail amongst consumers [22]. The affective component of the service experience has been shown to comprise subjective, emotional and highly personal responses to various aspects of the service delivery. Otto and Ritchie [23] developed six construct domains for the service experience, as shown in Table 1.

Studies on ecolodges have focused on several areas, namely ecolodge performance goals and evaluation [24], the definition of an ecolodge [25], resort ecotourism [26], ecotourist characteristics, behaviour and needs and market segment [27-29]. Despite the widespread acknowledgement that ecolodges are nature dependent and an experience management unit of accommodation, there is limited literature on the ecolodge experience and little empirical evidence or academic research that focuses on guest experiential reactions and their satisfying experiences dimensions in ecolodge accommodation. Thus, given the lack of such published research evidence, the study was designed to investigate the guest experiential reaction and their satisfying experiences in ecolodges at Lower Kinabatangan, Sabah and to suggest strategies for achieving a more sustainable management of ecolodges.

Table 1: The Construct Domains of the Service Experience

Dimension	Examples
Hedonic	Excitement, Enjoyment, Memorability
Interactive	Meeting people, Being part of the process, Having choice
Novelty	Escape, Doing something new
Comfort	Physical comfort, Relaxation
Safety	Personal safety, Security of belongings
Stimulation	Educational and informative, Challenging

(Source: Otto and Ritchie 1996:169)

Research Objectives and Questions: The paper addresses two main objectives: a) from the guest perspective, to identify the key satisfying experiences sought through the use of the profile accumulation techniques (PAT); and b) to identify ways to enhance the sustainable management of ecolodge experiences through the provision of quality experiences. The key research question is as follows: What are the key satisfying ecolodge experiential dimensions that contribute to ecolodge quality experiences?

Experiences Conceptual Framework in the Tourism and Recreation Context: Experiences can be defined as “*the subjective mental state felt by participants during a service encounter*” [23]. The experience one forms is a complex amalgam of individual perceptions and images of a locality and the products consumed, which can be influenced by individual, environmental, situational and personality-related factors as well as the degree of communication with other people [30]. This means that the guest experience is a complex combination of factors, which shape the guest’s feelings and attitudes towards his or her visit [31]. It is argued that experiences are individualistic, subjective and emotional in nature, while the service experience is inherently interpretive, subjective and affective [32, 33]. Any on-site experience within the tourism and hospitality context can be influenced both by tangible or functional aspects such as the facilities and services provided and by intangible or expressive aspects which are influenced in part by the emotional states that visitors bring with them.

Experiences have been documented in literature as dynamic and fluctuate over the course of engagement and are interpreted differently by every visitor. It involves a “transaction among environmental context, mood states, focus of attention and perceptions of risk and competence which shapes the character and quality of the experiences” [34]. A review shows various ways to understand experiences in the travel context.

Predominantly, experiences can be studied through looking at a series of stages or events [35], from the understanding of individual tourists’ perspectives (emotional states are integral) [36], or in relation to character, or context of the interaction, or related to modes of lived emotions -such as sensible feelings, loved body feelings, intentional value feelings and moral feelings [37]. The literature documents four approaches to understanding visitor experiences - the satisfaction approach, the benefit-based approach, the experience-based approach and the meanings-based approach. This implies that experience is not only dynamic but can also be documented at a multitude of levels and through different methodological approaches. It is therefore argued that tourism holds the potential to elicit strong emotional and experiential reactions by tourists and thus visitor interpretations of their experiences are vital to maintain quality experiences and satisfaction in any tourism environment.

Characteristics of Ecolodge Accommodation in Malaysia: Ecolodges are new, small, specialist, nature-dependent and environmentally-friendly accommodation units with a focus on experience management [26]. Conceptually, ecolodge accommodation is defined as “*a nature-dependent tourist lodge that meets the philosophy and principles of ecotourism*” [25] with an emphasis on ecological sensitivity and a focus on the delivery of educational or experiential concepts. Parallel to ecotourism principles and philosophy, ecolodges can play a role in contributing to enhanced tourist awareness of and support for, conservation and participation in environmental management practices. This is further supported by the need to improve sustainable management and operations for tourist accommodation [38, 39]. Similar to historical houses or theme parks, ecolodges may be primarily consumed for their experiential/emotional (or service) dimensions than their functional properties. It was found that tourists generally choose the natural environment that they wish to experience before they consider accommodation [40]. However, there is little empirical evidence to describe the key satisfying experiential dimensions of ecolodge accommodation and the extent to which its experiential aspects contribute to sustainable ecolodge experiences and management. Previous studies also allude to the fact that some ecolodge accommodation uses environmentally friendly building aspects/design, which play an important role in shaping the motivations or experiences of guests [26] and environmentally conscious operators [27, 41-44].

In order for ecolodge operators to provide sustainable quality experiences in the ecolodge, it is crucial to get into the mind of guests to understand their desires in terms of experiential dimensions. The understanding of guest satisfying experiential dimensions can contribute to more sustainable practices and operations of ecolodges as well as enhancing guest satisfaction. These key satisfying dimensions may be key critical components for marketing strategies of ecolodge accommodation. They can be converted into memorable guest experiences and can be capitalised on by ecolodge operators to produce flawless services to the said guests.

Unlike other types of tourist accommodation, ecolodges aim to offer tourists/guests an educational and participatory experience; they focus on environmental standards and long-term sustainability [45] and provide a high-contact service environment. Indeed, they are the key component and the necessary infrastructure for ecotourists/visitors to stay overnight at eco-sites and are not perceived primarily as bed providers in the wilderness. Rather, they offer a wide range of “add-ons”, such as programmes, guides, activities, interpretation of nature, a sense of place and environmental sensitivity as an extension of the ecotourism experience [40]. In general, ecolodge accommodation located within the proximity of the natural environment, natural attractions and the surrounding environment has a vital influence on the guest stay. Nevertheless, it is not certain if the location and its natural environment can be considered as key experiential dimensions, although these have been recognized as important features of the ecolodge accommodation in Malaysia [29]. In order to achieve this, the ecolodge operators need to give primary focus to the experiencing of natural areas, which fosters guest satisfying experiences by enabling guests to relate to the environment and nature, thereby understanding and appreciating the need for conservation. It is argued that the ecolodge has the potential to generate high levels of tourist satisfaction via the creation of memorable (authentic) experiences and value added products which can lead to profit maximisation [46]. Hence, the attraction of ecolodges depends on their ability to provide unique experiences derived from substantial biodiversity, wildlife and pristine landscapes.

Profile Accumulation Techniques as a Research Tool for Ecolodge Experiences: The Profile Accumulation Technique (PAT) developed by Johns and Lee-Ross [47], as a novel research tool to investigate the service

experience, was adopted to investigate key experiential dimensions of the ecolodge accommodation. PAT is an alternative technique (open-ended survey form) and is used to overcome the ambiguity and limitations of closed-ended questionnaires. Close-ended questionnaires are deemed less relevant and their answers convey a general impression rather than referring specifically to what was asked. It is believed that different people have different interpretations and survey questionnaires are rigidly set and offer no in-depth answers as well as bias [47]. PAT is a free response data collection technique and has been used to assess the quality of various customer services, including hotels and is especially appropriate for “experienced-oriented” services. It is a self-written assessment, with great flexibility, used to assess the service experience [47, 48]. Thus, it collects more authentic data from the informants through their own written text. This means that respondents respond freely and flexibly by saying exactly what they want. Also, it allows the capturing and recording of personally valued experiences sought and gained by the respondents as expressed by them in their own words. Thus, the data is not tainted by possible irrelevant assumptions of the service providers or any prompts on the part of the researcher [47]. Hence PAT produces a more natural and detailed service quality evaluation from the guests as compared to a closed-ended questionnaire survey and reduces bias and limitations imposed by the quantitative technique. At the same time, it allows qualitative and quantitative analysis with a minimum sample size of 50, sufficient to generate meaningful information [48]. The use of PAT enables the respondents to discuss their experiences, not only in terms of description of the environment, but also the feelings experienced while in the ecolodge environment. It is evident that an experience evolves through a complex process that has positive and negative components and is dependent in part to the said context.

Study Site: Ecolodges in Sukau, Lower Kinabatangan, Sabah: Ecolodges in Malaysia aim to provide comfortable basic needs, unique character style, with a focus on activities in nature and education [29]. Their development is integrated with the local environment. For example, wood and palm-based construction materials are used for building the accommodation premises. Operational emphasis is on small/individual company ownership and profit maximization based on products that fulfill ecotourist expectations, through strategic design, location

and the quality of the natural surroundings. Environment is the key attraction and the guides and nature interpreters are the main focus of operation [49]. In Sabah, ecolodges are generally located within special ecosystem zones (such as lowlands, highlands, coastal areas, territorial seas, islands and natural boundaries) which are surrounded by a well-protected setting of biodiversity, wildlife and a pristine landscape [50]. However, it is uncertain to what extent location and natural environment contribute to guest satisfaction and quality experiences of an ecolodge. In the same vein, there is a lack of empirical evidence on the underlying guest satisfaction consumption dimensions.

Research Method: The paper describes a qualitative research. An inductive approach was adopted to meet the research objectives, with the nature of study subjective and within an interpretative paradigm; and deems to offer an explanation of human leisure behaviour. Interpretative analysis is especially appropriate for guest experiences in the hospitality context to understand consumer behaviour and motivations [51]. Qualitative research is able to generate a deeper understanding of complicated behaviour rather than seeking to quantify, generalize or predict it [52, 53]; it provides insight into how guests think and feel and reasons for those thoughts and feelings that may be difficult for them to express or may even be beyond their awareness. Specifically, the paper focuses on the key satisfying experiential factors contributing to guest experiences, based on the individual perception of service experience in the ecolodge and on “on-site experiential” behaviour. Satisfying experiences can be explored from the individual subjective, emotive state of mind via the use of PAT. An investigation into guest experiences needs to be grounded in the realities that the guests themselves describe. Affective or emotional elements arguably form the basis of the quality of the service experience, which is increasingly important in order to understand consumer behaviour in managing accommodation, such as ecolodges.

PAT was a feasible and practical way to collect data, as there was good cooperation from the ecolodge operators. The PAT survey forms were given to the respondents by the receptionists during check-in, to be completed and returned at check-out time. Sampling was based on purposive techniques; the selection of the respondents was based on the guest arrival lists and the availability and ease with which the researcher could access them when the research was being conducted.

The data was on-site and cross-sectional. The sample respondents were mainly English-speaking European visitors who had stayed in ecolodges in Sukau, Lower Kinabatangan from November 2004 to March 2005. These visitors were, in fact, the primary market for ecolodges in Sukau. Sukau is a wildlife sanctuary and also a zone for nature and ecotourism attractions offering eco-experiences. Sample size was determined when information and theoretical insights reached saturation, which constitutes of hearing the same information reported without anything new being added. Data collection stopped at 53 respondents.

The respondents were asked to describe their perception of their ecolodge experiences and to detail the personal experience that most satisfied and most dissatisfied them during their stays, as well as the respective reasons why. This was to discover the elements leading to the encountered negative or positive experiences. The respondents were provided considerable freedom to select the elements or events (experiences) on which they wished to report. The researcher was then able to determine their experiential dimensions from the positive and negative experiences described and subsequently the experiential attributes that described their ecolodge stays.

Data Analysis: The PAT responses were analysed using qualitative analysis techniques based on responses (meanings of single phrase/statement). The responses were read and re-read until a set of comprehensive categories and themes emerged for each question. Categories and themes emerged from guest response data on positive and negative experiences sought and the key experiential nature of ecolodge accommodation. These responses are categorised based on Otto and Ritchie’s service experience constructs and meaning of experiences in relation to three dimensions: social/human aspects of the experiences, the environmental aspects of the experience and aspect of activities within those environments. Themes about the experiential elements attributed to guest experience emerged from the positive and negative guest experiences, which are based on key factors of the products and services provided by the ecolodge: the location, natural and cultural attractions, facilities, food activities and general atmosphere [54].

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Respondent Profiles: Table 2 illustrates the sampling frame for PAT survey responses.

Table 2: Sampling Frame for PAT Survey Responses

Name of Ecolodge	Number of PAT Survey Responses
Sukau River Lodge	30
Sukau Proboscis Lodge	23
Sukau Rainforest Lodge	Low season and no European guests
Total	53

Table 3: Positive Key Experiential Dimensions of Ecolodge Accommodation in Sukau

Item	Responses from PAT	Positive experience dimensions
1	<p>Good location to see a big variety of wildlife; the lodge was a lovely place and in beautiful setting, very peaceful and quiet environment. (PAT 3)</p> <p>The way in which the lodge had been built and not intrusive in its surrounding. Natural materials have been used and blend in beautifully whilst still remaining practical. (PAT 27)</p> <p>The lodge has preserved the forest and nature environment; learning more about the place, especially the protection of the natural environment. (PAT 25)</p> <p>Way in which the lodge had been built and not intrusive in its surrounding. Natural materials have been used and blend in beautifully whilst still remaining practical. (PAT 42)</p>	Environmental aspects of experiences (location)
2	<p>Wildlife in its natural habitat; wildlife experiences are an important part of the ecolodge experience. (PAT 38)</p> <p>Beautiful place, nice accommodation, well-prepared garden and lake area... (PAT 33)</p> <p>Wildlife in natural environment and Oxbow Lake.... good and unforgettable experience on wildlife... something new and unique for me. (PAT 41)</p>	Environmental aspects of experiences Novelty
3	<p>Connection with nature, yes, ah... the nature ...walking in the jungle or sitting alone on the riverside to relax...(PAT 50)</p> <p>We like to hear, see and experience the sounds, smells and terrain of the rainforest.(PAT 46)</p> <p>Lodge is in excellent setting - peaceful and beautiful, quiet and its scenery is outstanding; the physical environment was a very relaxing atmosphere.(PAT 20)</p> <p>To experience and see the wildlife in nature and the clean environment; clean environment and pleasant environment with basic comfort accommodation. (PAT 9).</p>	Environmental aspect of experience (Nature environment) Relaxation Pristine environment
4	<p>What a great way to view wildlife in a comfortable way, an opportunity to cruise along the longest river in Sabah to see the rainforest and I really enjoy it! (PAT 22)</p> <p>Relaxed and pleasant riverboat trip and also close to wildlife. (PAT 16)</p> <p>The riverboat trip was the reason we went to Sukau and it was a memorable one; relaxed and pleasant riverboat trip and also close to wildlife. (PAT 49)</p>	Activities experiences (Riverboat cruise activities)

Table 4: Negative Key Experiential Dimensions of Ecolodge Accommodation

Item	Negative Verbal Expressive Dimensions	Negative Ecolodge dimensions
1	Don't want/don't like/hate noise and fumes from boat engines, very unpleasant experience to hear those noises from the boat engines. (PAT 23, 28, 38)	Environmental aspects of experiences (Nature and pristine environment)
2	Feeling sad/unhappy for not being able to see specific types of wildlife..... it is our luck! (PAT 1, 3, 8, 45)	Environmental aspects of experiences (Wildlife)
3	Disappointment and frustration with the poor maintenance of bedrooms. (PAT 6,10,46)	Ecolodge accommodation

Guest's Perception of Ecolodge Experiences: The respondents' ecolodge experiences are associated with three major themes: (1) environmental aspects (nature attraction and environment - wildlife, rainforest and local culture); (2) activities aspects (riverboat cruises, activities and jungle walks); and (3) human/social aspects (friendly staff and guides, meeting other tourists with similar interests). A significant number of respondents related their ecolodge experience to activities such as wildlife viewing and riverboat cruise trips and the experience and appreciation of the natural environment. In general, the

respondents noted the primacy of nature and the environment surrounding the ecolodge, as evidenced in Table 3 and Table 4.

Environmental Aspects (Nature Attraction and Environment - Wildlife, Rainforest, Local Culture): In general, the respondents' recognition of the primacy of nature and the environment of ecolodges emerged clearly from the responses: "I think also in connection with nature, yes, ah... the nature ...walking in the jungle or sitting alone on the riverside to relax" (PAT 20) and

“It means to see a lot of wildlife... to see different things.... see the rainforest and physically to be there, to feel it....” (PAT 18).

The importance of a clean and undisturbed environment and their emotional experience when encountering nature contributed an important part of the ecolodge stays. One respondent indicated that it was important “to see wildlife in its natural habitat and in an undisturbed way” (PAT 6) and another respondent stated “I expect to experience and see the wildlife in nature and the clean environment and the preserved forest and nature environment” (PAT 13). A respondent described it as an emotional experience by saying that “It is an emotional experience to see wildlife, especially to see the orang utan and also the crocodile in the river” (PAT 7). Also, another respondent stated that: “I expected it to reflect the local customs and culture generally... I would like to see the villages, getting some ideas on how locals live” (PAT 2).

Likewise, learning and acquiring knowledge of nature and the environment emerged as another important aspect of the ecolodge experiential component. Learning activities contribute a significant part to the ecotourism experience. As one respondent stated: “It means learning more about the place, especially the protection of the natural environment and finding out more; and so you are more knowledgeable about it” (PAT 24). Another respondent noted that ecolodge experiences “mean to see and learn about the wildlife and environment” (PAT 10).

Activities Aspects (Riverboat Cruises and Jungle Walks): A significant number of respondents related their ecolodge stays to activities (such as wildlife viewing and riverboat cruise trips), local customs and culture and the experience and appreciation of the natural environment. As stated by respondents, for example: “To see nature and wildlife with my own eyes and the riverboat cruises....” (PAT 14), or “the morning and evening riverboat cruises were incredible and unique experiences for me to see wildlife via cruises...” (PAT 3).

Human/social Aspects: The findings reveal that the ecolodge experiences also mean having interactions with service staff, guides and other group of tourists. This was indicated by one respondent who noted that the ecolodge experience is “having knowledgeable, skilful guides, friendly staff and meeting other tourists who share similar interests...” (PAT 9), or that “it means good interactions with staff and other tour members made the stay very different” (PAT 2).

Based on the empirical evidence, there seem to be no ecolodge service performance that contributes to the satisfying dimensions.

Key Experiential Dimensions of Ecolodge

Accommodation: The responses from the guests’ positive and negative experiences are categorised into the meaning of ecolodge experience dimensions as presented in Tables 3 and 4 respectively. Evidently, guests tend to describe positive experiences attributed to environmental, activities and social/human aspects.

Likewise, the negative experiences responses are reported in Table 4. It shows clear evidence that tourists tend to describe their negative experiences attributed to “bad services” or “bad luck” in association with the activities (riverboat engines) and environmental aspects of experiences (wildlife and ecolodge maintenance). These negative experiences are important areas for improvement in order to achieve quality experiences for the ecolodge operators.

The responses presented in Table 3 and 4 reveal that guests relate their experiences and the enjoyment of ecolodge accommodation to sensory and experiential aspects. Indeed, the analyzed PAT responses revealed the importance of emotion and personalised attention as important integral aspects of the ecolodge accommodation experience. Guests reported that they had experienced certain emotions from staying in the ecolodge that they found to be beneficial. The emotions that respondents described include feelings of “excitement”, “enjoyment”, “memorableness”, “novelty”, “comfort”, “peacefulness”, “being part of the process” and “restfulness”. Respondents also reported that the benefits they had gained from the experience of staying in ecolodge accommodation included: “learning experiences of nature environment”, “learning more about wildlife”, “opportunity to meet with people of similar interests”, “being close to the nature and wildlife”, “relaxation ” and “comfort and tranquillity”. These qualities were often cited by respondents as part of the ecolodge’s uniqueness that contributed to their ecolodge stays as compared to other traditional holiday accommodation such as resort hotels. This implies that the guests place importance on the unique experiences gained from their stay, which is derived from both the internal and external environment to the ecolodge. It also highlights the importance of the emotive aspects of the guests themselves. It would appear that guest interaction with and proximity to the natural environment and wildlife and their participation in activities provided are a key

experiential nature of ecolodge accommodation. This finding seems to correspond well with the description of ecolodge accommodation in literature and consistent with the quality of experience dimensions developed by Otto and Ritchie [23].

Findings from the guest experiences revealed that the majority of the respondents noted that the environmental aspects of experiences contribute significantly to the guest experiences. The environmental aspects are largely drawn from the nature attractions and environmental aspects of ecolodges - locations and landscapes. The informants noted the importance of lodge location in terms of proximity to nature and wildlife. Others indicated that ecolodge aesthetics in terms of landscape and its natural characteristics and design are important. Thus, the findings seem to confirm that the unique aspects of an environmentally-friendly building contribute significantly towards the experiential nature of ecolodge accommodation. The human and social aspects derived from friendly service by the lodge staff contributed to their comfort and enjoyment as well as their feeling of being welcomed.

The evidence clearly highlights that guests tend to take into account the quality of natural and environmental resources and the ecolodge's contribution to the guests' enjoyment and understanding of those resources. This is consistent with the findings in Ayala [55]. In the same vein, HLA and ARA Consultants [56] pointed out that natural settings, wildlife viewing and the experiences gained from the activities are of primary importance for visitors staying in the ecolodges. This suggests that core products and services of ecolodges can be described as "beneficial experiences" gained by the guests and expressed in their own words. These include intangible "products" or services, which means that, in essence, an ecolodge involves the consumption of an experience that provides attractions and environment for visiting guests. Thus, the key emotive aspects from the guests are also highlighted.

Responses from guests reveal the key dimensions of ecolodge accommodation experiences. These dimensions are related to environmental aspects of ecolodges: unique architecture design/features, pristine natural environment and attractions, relaxed and peaceful atmosphere, novelty and eco-recreation-based activities. These dimensions corresponded well to the common attributes of ecolodge accommodation [54]. A significant number of respondents regarded location and resources protection, natural resources, atmosphere and activities as the most influential dimensions that contribute to the ecolodge

accommodation experiences in Lower Kinabatangan, Sabah. Many respondents acknowledged that the ecolodge location in the wildlife zone and its natural attractions as well as the conservation and protection of natural resources, especially that of endangered wildlife species, are important aspects that made the ecolodge experience unique in Sukau. In addition, the findings found that the riverboat cruise was a primary leisure activity for viewing wildlife and experiencing the natural environment in Sukau. Respondents generally reacted positively towards the cruise and commented that it offered an opportunity to view a variety of wildlife in close proximity without any physical disruption. Thus, these dimensions contribute to the unique characteristics of the ecolodge and subsequently the quality of experience in ecolodge accommodation. These are the areas that require substantial attention in order to manage the ecolodge accommodation successfully and to attract more guests, as well as to secure the quality experience of the guests. This evidence is presented in Table 3. In short, these findings of experiential dimensions of ecolodges from guest perspectives can be presented as the realm of ecolodge experiential dimensions. The experiential dimensions of ecolodges can be divided into three dimensions - environmental aspects of experiences, human/social aspect and activities aspects of experiences within the ecolodge's service experience context and the guest emotive aspects. Guest perception and evaluation of their stay at the ecolodge are illustrated in these dimensions. It also implies that sustainable ecolodge experiences can be built by relating to these three dimensions. Clearly, the realm of ecolodge experiences consist of these dimensions and can be deemed to be useful for managing and operating ecolodge in a more sustainable manner; and can also be regarded as a useful tool to be used by ecolodge operators to market and manage their accommodation. It means that the preservation and conservation of natural resources/attractions and maintenance of the landscape are crucial.

Many ecolodges in Malaysia have established their own private reserves, enabling them to directly manage the natural resources they depend on for their business. This implies that conservation and preservation of natural environment is an important aspect for ecolodge sustainable management and operations. Researchers have recognised the importance of natural environment to the ecolodge accommodation as the key motivator of guests [29, 27]; thus ecolodge operators need to improve its sustainability within such a fragile and limited natural

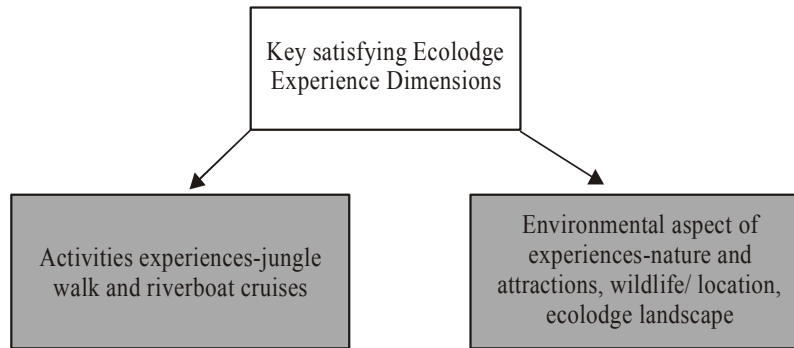


Fig. 1: The Realm of Ecolodge Experiences

resources environment. Likewise, Albacete-Saez *et al.* [57], in their study of rural accommodation, clearly pointed out that natural surroundings and infrastructure that provide activities to bring the tourist in contact with nature are important elements in choosing a destination. This can also be reflected in ecolodge accommodation whereby ecolodges in Malaysia are generally located in special ecosystem zones (such as lowlands, highlands, coastal areas, territorial seas, islands and natural boundaries) which are surrounded by a well-protected setting of biodiversity, wildlife and a pristine landscape [50]. The main ecolodge product refers to the experience a guest receives from what the operator supplies. Perceived key factors contributing to the ecolodge product include location, natural and cultural attractions, facilities, food, activities and the general atmosphere [54]. Likewise, guests will take into account not only the quality of service and accommodation, but also the nearby natural and cultural resources and the ecolodge's contribution to the visitors' enjoyment and understanding of those resources [55]. In the same vein, HLA and ARA Consultants [56] pointed out that natural setting, wildlife viewing and the experiences gained from the activities are of primary importance for guests staying at the ecolodges.

In short, ecolodge accommodation is regarded as a holistic experience-based product that has a clear ecological, cultural and geographical identity, often in wilderness settings and pristine areas that offer a sense of closeness to nature [58]. These experiential attributes form an important part of the guest experience at the ecolodge. Just like any other experience, guest experiences can be achieved when the ecolodge operators use "services as the stage and goods as props to engage individual customer in an inherently personal way". In the hospitality and lodging industry, "almost any service can be leveraged to stage a more compelling experience" [59].

Thus, the guest stay is likely to be perceived as more of an expressive experience transaction. Simply, ecolodge accommodation provides diverse products and services that can be categorized as both a service and an experience. In general, tourists tend to refer their positive experiences reflecting on culture/heritage of an area, beautiful scenery, social factors and social interaction/exchange of host community and that are of their control. Their negative experiences are most likely to be attributed to "bad luck" and "bad services"; support and customer services are often regarded as disappointing facets of the tourism experience. Similarly, guests tend to articulate their meaning of experiences in relation to three dimensions: social/human aspects of the experiences (meeting the same individuals or social group of similar interests with whom they can interact at different destinations); the environmental aspects of the experience (feelings about the need to protect and preserve fragile resources); and aspect of activities within those environments as the experiences (intense feeling being part and parcel attached to the activities). These three dimensions can be extended to explain the ecolodge experience accommodation and as the realm of ecolodge experiences as illustrated in Figure 1. These dimensions are vital and useful aspects for ecolodge operators to strengthen the ecolodge quality experience management and operations in order to remain in a competitive environment.

This suggests that if the operators understand the type of experiences expected and valued by their customers, they will be able to develop more effective strategic marketing initiatives and communication such as advertising and publicity. In order for ecolodge management to continue to operate in a sustainable manner, it is reasonable to consider and understand the factors leading to guest satisfying experiences and the benefits sought from the demand side.

Sustainable Ecodge Quality Experience Management and Operations: Empirical evidence shows that satisfying experience attributes are associated with three dimensions - environmental, activities and human/social aspects within the ecolodge context. This implies that sustainable ecolodge experiences depend significantly upon environmental and natural attractions. Thus, the preservation and conservation of the ecolodge natural environment and its attractions will lead to more sustainable ecolodge experiences. Similarly, it was found that both human/social aspects, as well as activities, provided aspects attributed to the sustainability of the ecolodge experience to some extent. It is therefore suggested that ecolodge operators must give equal attention to these two issues when setting strategies for sustainable experiences. By use of these key satisfying experiences dimensions - environmental, human and activities - ecolodge operators are able to provide delightful experiences that encourage guests to spend more time at the ecolodge and to further develop additional experiential value to the ecolodge stay. This may contribute to positive word-of-mouth on the personal experiences gained, forming an effective marketing tool.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The paper concludes that ecolodge accommodation in Lower Kinabatangan is more of a 'nature-dependent and environmentally-friendly type of accommodation' and thus the qualities of experiences of ecolodges depend significantly on their environmentally-friendly design, surrounding natural environment and attractions (such as wildlife and pristine landscape). This finding echoes that of Hawkins and Epler Wood [54] and acknowledge that ecolodge experiential concepts are derived from the lodge's close proximity to the natural environment and wildlife, its architectural design and the offering of nature-related activities. The study points out the four key experiential dimensions that are seen as important in the guest evaluation of ecolodge accommodation: unique architecture design/features, pristine natural environment and attractions, relaxed and peaceful atmosphere, novelty and eco- recreation-based activities. This implies that the ecolodge accommodation is dependent upon its natural and environmental-friendly concept and is really more of experiential place consumption. The paper suggests that guests tend to describe and evaluate their ecolodge experiences with reference to their personal experiential aspects rather than the service performance of the

ecolodge. Experiential consumption thus becomes the key feature for managing and marketing ecolodges. It is evident that ecolodges are being evaluated and consumed by guests in a different manner from that of traditional and specialist types of accommodation and the paper points out the ways in which the experiential quality offered by ecolodge accommodation is perceived to differ. It suggests that ecolodge operators therefore should pay more attention to guest experiential dimensions as they are what guests tend to evaluate. Guest satisfaction is more significantly affected by the environment, activities and human/social aspects of experiences than ecolodge service performance. The identified seven key dimensions are experiential values/benefits sought by guests during their stays and thus they are regarded as valuable empirical findings adding to the existing body of knowledge in terms of the experiential nature of non-traditional accommodation. It provides a more meaningful insight into the way in which guests perceive and evaluate ecolodge experience and sustainable ecolodge accommodation management and operation.

In the same vein, these findings have significant implications for the marketing and managing of ecolodge accommodation. It suggests that operators should place the ecolodge as an experiential consumption product in relation to the identified key experiential aspects rather than its service quality dimensions. Firstly, the identified key experiential dimensions can be regarded as unique selling points, which may form a competitive edge that can be capitalised on by the ecolodge accommodation in Sukau. Secondly, instead of adopting a traditional marketing approach, it suggests that the ecolodge operator could consider the experiential marketing approach to implement their marketing strategies to attract and promote ecolodge accommodation, as guests in this context tend to be more emotion-driven (as opposed to being rational) in terms of making purchase decisions. In other words, they are emotional beings who are focused on achieving pleasurable experiences within the ecolodge accommodation. These identified experiential dimensions act as important attributes that are capable of providing a pleasing ecolodge accommodation experience whereby guests would be encouraged to spend more nights at the ecolodge. Hence, this implies that ecolodge operators need to focus on the design of both tangible and intangible elements of ecolodge accommodation that contribute towards unique experiences and experiential values. Understanding the experiential dimensions from the guest perspective would enable an operator to turn them into valuable and memorable experiences, which in

turn generate revenue and profits. Ec lodge operators can consider varying their promotional and positioning strategies to differentiate their ec lodge from others via the ec lodge design which generates special experiential themes to attract guests. Thus, ec lodge accommodation recognized as “places with the place“ of the ecotourism site, would be known as ec lodge place experiences. Finally, it is argued that consumers within the tourism and hospitality sector, in this new age, are shifting away from the rational feature-and-benefits approach towards consumer experiences whereby their emotional being, concerned with achieving pleasurable experiences, often prevail in the decision making process. This means that ec lodge operators should also reconsider and shift their marketing approach towards the experiential approach. This is further supported by the fact that experiential marketing is widely acknowledged to be the dominant marketing tool of the future [60].

In terms of ec lodge management, it is vital that ec lodge operators recognize that their accommodation is different from that of other traditional types of accommodation. This paper suggests that great attention must be given to the four identified dimensions that empirically and significantly contribute to guest experiences during their stay; and subsequently to the success of the operations of ec lodge accommodation. Indeed, the findings provide useful information about the aspects of the experiential nature of ec lodge accommodation, which can be specifically targeted for further improvement and result in more appropriate decision-making. For example, boat engines can be improved by reducing noise and fume pollution in the operation of riverboat cruises. This means the ec lodge accommodation operator is able to tailor the particular experiential dimensions to an ec lodge as opposed to developing one broad strategy across all dimensions. In the same vein, the paper seems to conclude that an ec lodge is an experience consumption place product and not merely a sleeping facility. Its experiential aspects contribute significantly to the evaluation of ec lodge stays by the guests. In this regard, it is vital for ec lodge operators to maintain flawless service and pay more attention to what constitutes a memorable experience for the guests. Indeed, managing and marketing ec lodge accommodation goes beyond service-selling; the provision of delightful and memorable experiences is vital to guest satisfaction and sustainable ec lodge management and operation.

It is also suggested that the marketing of ec lodges should focus on personal experiential aspects - quality of

experiences rather than tangible elements of the ec lodge as a traditional approach of marketing. Thus, it is possible to position the ec lodge as place consumption service experiences. Hence, it is expected that innovative experience design will become a critical component of any successful accommodation management. This implies that ec lodge operators go beyond service excellence and pay more attention to staging new and memorable guest experiences in creating new value, for long term sustainable growth. More importantly, one needs to gain an understanding in the fundamental axioms of ec lodge satisfying experiences and benefits sought by guests.

The paper illuminates the key satisfying experiential nature of ec lodge accommodation at ecotourism sites. However, the conclusions drawn should be analysed with an awareness of the limitations faced. The limitations arose, in part, from the qualitative approach used to enhance the study’s generalization and usefulness. The research recognizes the shortcomings of qualitative research in that a study of this nature cannot achieve the same outcomes, in terms of generalizability, as compared to quantitative methods. Limitations include the small sample size, limited to European English-speaking guests; and the sample frame that was neither representative nor large. Also, the open-ended written PAT form may not capture the “whole” opinion and response from some of the respondents who were reluctant to write and may have preferred to be interviewed instead. Data collected in this form may not be able to clarify the points if there are doubts. Thus, it is suggested that focus groups or in-depth interviews may be used in future to generate wider views and explanations. It is suggested that comparative studies with other ec lodge accommodations with a larger sample size at different locations will improve the degree of generalizability. Although the sample was neither statistically representative nor large, it has strong ecological validity as the data was collected on site. Furthermore, the use of PAT as a data collection tool to investigate service experiences was grounded on the respondents’ own words, thus bias is reduced on the data collected, enhance the reliability and validity of the said qualitative method.

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