



**QUALITY OF WILDLIFE-BASED TOURISM SERVICES AT NATIONAL
ELEPHANT CONSERVATION CENTRE, PAHANG, MALAYSIA**

By

ABDULLAH ZAWAWI BIN YAZID

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science**

December 2023

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science

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The National Elephant Conservation Centre (NECC) in Kuala Gandah, Pahang, is important in conserving and protecting Malaysia's wildlife. As NECC endures the goal of conserving and rehabilitating endangered Asian elephants, the significance of enhancing the quality of services offered to visitors becomes of the highest priority. The primary aim is to identify the dimensions of service quality using the ECOPERF Model to enhance the visitor experience and further connect the organization's mission, the elephants' well-being, and community acceptance and understanding. The visitors' expectation and evaluation of the perceived performance of the service quality dimension was measured using a comprehensive cross-sectional approach and gathered data from 450 respondents. The study findings represented visitor profiles of NECC with the majority being Malaysian, first-time visitors spending between 1 – 2 hours at the centre and individuals with higher levels of education. This study also revealed that visitors to NECC rated higher expectations of service quality than the performance of service quality. Overall, visitor satisfaction with the quality of services offered at the NECC has unveiled a concerning finding that visitors were dissatisfied with all the service dimensions. The service quality dimension of Eco-activity, reliability and responsiveness, Eco-learning, and Eco-friendly practices exhibited significant weaknesses. These four service quality attributes that visitors perceive as significant when evaluating their experience at the centre need to be improved to enhance the quality of NECC. The management needs to focus on strategies to ensure more reliable and flexible services, with more Eco-activity, Eco-learning, and eco-practices programmes. As the objective of the NECC is fundamentally dependent on the support and involvement of its visitors, the results highlighted a significant potential for improvement. Thus, by effectively addressing the apparent weaknesses in service quality, there is potential for a positive transformation in visitor experiences, thereby fostering a more profound relationship between the visitors and the centre's conservation efforts.

Keywords: ECOPERF Model, Service quality, Wildlife-based tourism

SDG: GOAL 15: Life on land



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sains

**KUALITI PERKHIDMATAN PELANCONGAN BERASASKAN HIDUPAN
LIAR DI PUSAT KONSERVASI GAJAH KEBANGSAAN (PKGK), PAHANG,
MALAYSIA**

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Pusat Konservasi Gajah Kebangsaan (PKGK) di Kuala Gandah, Pahang, memainkan peranan penting dalam pemuliharaan dan perlindungan hidupan liar Malaysia. Memperbaiki kualiti perkhidmatan yang ditawarkan kepada pengunjung adalah keutamaan bagi PKGK dalam mencapai matlamat pemuliharaan dan pemulihan gajah Asia yang terancam ini. Kajian ini adalah untuk mengenal pasti dimensi-dimensi kualiti dalam perkhidmatan menggunakan Model ECOPERF bagi meningkatkan pengalaman pengunjung dan menghubungkan dengan misi organisasi, kesejahteraan gajah, dan penerimaan serta pemahaman masyarakat. Melalui kaedah kajian rentas, jangkaan pengunjung dan penilaian terhadap prestasi yang dialami bagi dimensi kualiti perkhidmatan diukur dan data dikumpulkan dari 450 responden. Hasil kajian ini mendapati profil pengunjung PKGK terdiri daripada majoriti adalah warga Malaysia, pengunjung pertama kali yang menghabiskan antara 1 - 2 jam di pusat ini dan individu dengan tahap pendidikan yang tinggi. Kajian ini juga mendapati bahawa pengunjung PKGK memberikan jangkaan kualiti perkhidmatan yang lebih tinggi berbanding prestasi kualiti perkhidmatan yang dialami. Secara keseluruhan, kepuasan pengunjung terhadap kualiti perkhidmatan yang ditawarkan di PKGK telah mendedahkan penemuan yang membimbangkan di mana pengunjung tidak puas dengan semua dimensi perkhidmatan. Dimensi kualiti perkhidmatan berkaitan dengan aktiviti ekologi, kebolehpercayaan dan responsif, pembelajaran ekologi, dan amalan mesra alam menunjukkan kelemahan yang signifikan. Keempat-empat atribut kualiti perkhidmatan ini yang pengunjung anggap penting dalam menilai pengalaman mereka di pusat ini dan ianya perlu diperbaiki untuk meningkatkan kualiti PKGK. Pengurusan perlu memberi tumpuan kepada strategi untuk memastikan perkhidmatan yang lebih boleh dipercayai dan fleksibel, dengan lebih banyak program aktiviti ekologi, pembelajaran ekologi, dan amalan mesra alam. Oleh kerana objektif PKGK bergantung pada sokongan dan penglibatan pengunjung, hasil kajian menunjukkan potensi yang besar untuk peningkatan. Dengan mengatasi kelemahan yang jelas dalam kualiti perkhidmatan, terdapat potensi untuk transformasi

positif dalam pengalaman pengunjung, yang akan membina hubungan yang lebih mendalam antara pengunjung dan usaha pemuliharaan pusat ini.

Kata kunci: Model ECOPERF, Kualiti perkhidmatan, Pelancongan berasaskan hidupan liar

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

UPM	Universiti Putra Malaysia
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organisation
NECC	National Elephant Conservation Centre
DWNP	Department of Wildlife and National Parks
ECER	East Coast Economic Region
SERVQUAL	Service quality
QFD	Quality Function Deployment
CA	Correspondence Analysis
EDT	Expectation Disconfirmation Theory
IPA	Important Performance Analysis
IPM	Important Performance Matrix

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 General Background

Tourism is widely considered one of the world's most significant and rapidly growing industries (Ranasinghe et al., 2020) with a total of 1,326 million international tourist arrival and a total of USD 1,340 international tourism receipts in the year 2017 ("UNWTO Tourism Highlights: 2018 Edition," 2018).

Malaysia is indeed a popular destination as a tourism destination. The country has been one of the most popular tourist destinations in Southeast Asia, with twenty-five million inbound tourists (National Tourism Policy 2020-2030, 2020; Shahbaz et al., 2017; Abdullah & Lui, 2018). Malaysia's tourism sector plays an important economic role and is a vital service sector that generates revenue to the country (Rahman, 2014; Wasiul et al., 2020;). Based on Tourism Malaysia Report for 2019, Malaysia recorded a total of 26.1 million tourists and RM86.1 billion in tourist receipts, a 2.4% increase from 2018 (Tourism Malaysia, 2019).

Malaysia has attractive landscapes, majestic ecosystems, biological diversity and a unique culture, giving it a competitive edge in the global tourism industry (Ghazvini et al., 2020; Mohaidin et al., 2017). In addition, Malaysia is one of the leading nature-based tourism destinations as the country is home to some of the oldest rainforests in the world that provide some spectacular scenic wonders, and numerous habitats for a wide range of plant and animal species. The country also has many national parks and wildlife reserves, such as Taman Negara National Park, Kinabalu Park and Bako National Park.

A subset of nature-based tourism destinations, wildlife tourism destinations have also been gaining attention in Malaysia. Some wildlife tourism destinations such as wildlife conservation centres, parks, and zoos in Malaysia that are popular tourist destinations. The frequency of visitors to wildlife tourism destinations has exhibited a consistent upward trend in recent years, suggesting an increasing interest in experiencing natural environments and wildlife, as shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 : The Number of Visitors to Wildlife Tourism Destinations

Wildlife Tourism Malaysia	Description	Total Visitor	Year
National Elephant Conservation Centre Kuala Gandah (NECC)	A sanctuary for retired and injured elephants, and visitors can see these majestic animals up close and learn about their conservation	215,742	2019
The Sun Bear Conservation Centre, Sandakan, Sabah	Sun bears conservation centre where visitors can learn about the conservation of the Malayan Sun Bear and how they are threatened by habitat loss and poaching	84,496	2019
The Langkawi Wildlife Park	A wide variety of animals and reptiles, including crocodiles, snakes, and primates	2 million	2022
Semenggoh Orangutan Centre, Sarawak	One of three orangutan rehabilitation centres in Malaysia. Visitors can see semi-wild orangutans in their natural forest habitat. Semenggoh's staff have trained young orangutans how to survive in the wild more than thirty years	3,569	2022
The Kuala Lumpur Bird Park	Home for more than 3,000 birds from over 200 species, and visitors can see everything from parrots to hornbills to flamingos	200,000	2019

A wildlife conservation centre or wildlife park is a facility or organization dedicated to protecting, preserving, and studying wildlife and their habitats. These centres may focus on specific species or ecosystems and use a variety of activities, such as breeding programmes, habitat restoration, and research, to achieve their goals. Some centres also offer educational programmes and opportunities for visitors to learn about and interact with wildlife. On-site conservation activities may also reaffirm conservation behaviours and encourage long-term changes in zoo visitors (Godinez & Fernandez, 2019). According to a study by Ballantyne and Packer (2016), visiting a wildlife conservation centre allows visitors to learn about the importance of conservation while also experiencing the beauty and diversity of the natural world. Conservation messages delivered by these centres encourage visitors to understand the need for conservation.

1.2 Problem Statement

NECC also plays a vital role in rehabilitation programmes, where orphaned or injured elephants are rescued and provided with care and medical treatment and the goal is to reintroduce these elephants back into the wild. In 2000, the NECC opened its doors to recreation and tourism activities allowing the public to experience the centre with the goal to promote education and awareness to the public regarding the Asian elephant's conservation (Saaban et al., 2011). One of the centre's key activities is the translocation of elephants from areas where they pose a threat to human settlements to protected forests. The NECC works closely with local communities and agencies to mitigate human–elephant conflicts and ensure the well-being of both elephants and humans. Since then, the NECC has been instrumental in safeguarding Asian elephants and playing a vital role in protecting and managing these magnificent creatures.

Since 2010, the centre has been visited by over 2 million visitors (Table 1.2), making it one of Malaysia's prominent nature-based destinations. As a wildlife centre, recreation and tourism activities allow the centre to promote conservation efforts. The NECC is actively educating the public, especially school children and tourists, about the importance of elephant conservation. It also organizes educational programmes and provides opportunities for visitors to learn about elephants and their conservation needs. Therefore, it influences the perception of tourists regarding the efforts undertaken by the NECC in relation to the welfare and conservation of elephants. Thus, assessing whether the centre's actions are in accordance with the expectations and concerns of visitors regarding ethical treatment, conservation impact, and the overall well-being of animals is necessary to evaluate the current service quality.

Table 1.2 : Visitor Statistic at NECC 2010-2021

Year	National	International	Total
2010	142,663	36,008	178,671
2011	140,370	38,608	178,978
2012	144,706	32,398	177,104
2013	100,147	22,627	122,774
2014	137,339	26,959	164,298
2015	166,058	24,587	190,645
2016	188,794	27,290	216,084
2017	196,184	27,002	223,186
2018	184,571	26,983	211,554
2019	188,739	27,003	215,742
2020	94,914	5,611	100,525
2021	57,653	353	58,006
Total	1,742,138	295,429	2,037,567

[(Source: NECC Report, Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP)]

In recreation and tourism, the quality of visitor experience in the context of service quality plays many significant roles. Understanding the correlation between the level of service quality offered at NECC and the loyalty of visitors, as well as their plans to revisit the centre will assist in identifying the primary elements of service quality that exert the most substantial influence on establishing enduring connections with visitors and motivating their next visit to the centre (Melita, 2015; Yee et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2023a).

Furthermore, providing high-quality services, particularly in the context of wildlife centres, plays a pivotal role in attaining their conservation objectives. The quality of the visitor's experiences can exert a substantial influence on visitors' understanding, attitudes, and behaviours on conservation (Ardoin et al., 2015; Ballantyne et al., 2007a; Ballantyne & Packer, 2005; Hofman et al., 2022). Therefore, by obtaining a deeper understanding of the tourist experience, locations may align their offers with the concepts of sustainable tourism. Through evaluating visitor preferences and expectations, destinations can curate experiences that promote the long-term sustainability of the destination while preserving its authentic appeal and attractiveness

(Kalessopoulou, 2021; Pulido-Fernández, 2014). In addition, the significance of tourists' awareness, along with responsibility towards the destinations, also carries considerable importance in ensuring the long-term sustainability of the destinations (Pulido-Fernández, 2014; Zhang et al., 2023a, 2023b).

Besides achieving conservation goals, the quality of services also ensures visitor satisfaction (Oliveri et al., 2019; Seetanah et al., 2020). Satisfied visitors are more likely to re-visit and recommend the destination to others or their peers. Quality services enable destinations to identify unique selling points and competitive advantages (He et al., 2018; Poku & Zakari, 2013; Zhang et al., 2019). By providing exceptional experiences, destinations can attract more visitors, gain a competitive edge, and stand out from other destinations. In addition, assessing service quality helps destination managers and policymakers make informed decisions regarding tourism development and management (Latiff & Imm, 2015; Pandey et al., 2022). It provides insights into areas that require improvement, such as infrastructure, services, attractions, marketing strategies, or activities. By addressing these aspects, destinations can enhance the visitor experience and their services and ensure sustainable tourism development.

Moreover, visitor satisfaction directly influences the economic impact of tourism (Abusaada & Elshater, 2021; Cárdenas-García et al., 2016; Jurdana & Frleta, 2017). Satisfied visitors are likelier to spend more on accommodations, dining, shopping, and other tourism-related activities. Additionally, positive experiences resulting from quality services increase visitor expenditure, length of stays, and visitation, contributing to the local economy and generating revenue and employment opportunities. Furthermore, quality services are vital in destination branding and marketing efforts (Hapsari et al., 2017; Hudson et al., 2015; Jeong & Kim, 2020). Positive experiences generate word-of-mouth recommendations, social media sharing, and positive online reviews that contribute to the destination's reputation and visibility. By delivering exceptional experiences, destinations can build a strong brand identity, attract more visitors, and increase their market share.

Based on the Tourism Life Cycle Model (Butler, 1980), the tourism development in NECC could be in the stagnation phase that requires an intervention for regrowth. Figure 1.1 shows that the centre is now reaching the stagnation phase, where the number of visits recorded no significant increase or decrease in the last five years before the pandemic period.

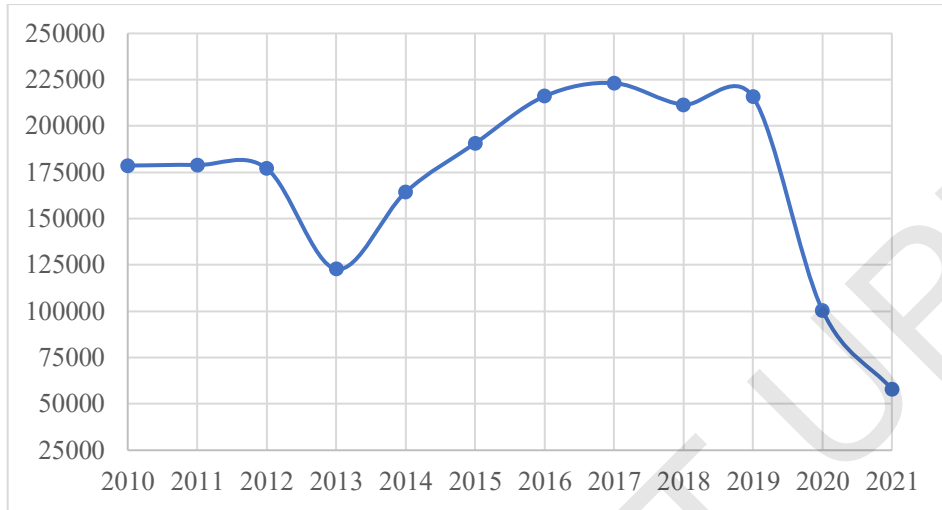


Figure 1.1 : Graph of the Number of NECC Visitors from 2010 to 2021

Besides the number of visitors, other signs indicating a stagnant or declining destination are the negative online review, aging infrastructure, lack of innovation, and negative word of mouth (Benner, 2020; Panfiluk, 2023; Ring et al., 2016).

Prakash et al. (2017), discovered through an analysis of TripAdvisor reviews that a substantial proportion of visitors expressed discontentment with the services rendered by the NECC. They found that visitors were mainly dissatisfied with the poor facilities, including inadequate shops, communication facilities, transportation, shelter, and sanitary facilities in NECC. Such findings suggested the need to identify the area for improvement, especially regarding the service quality provided at NECC. In this case, the destination can prioritize efforts to address those areas by understanding the specific aspects of the visitor experience that are lacking or negatively impacting satisfaction (Kim et al., 2019; Packer & Ballantyne, 2016)

Although the study conducted by Prakash et al., (2017) provided a snippet of information on the quality of services provided at NECC, however, it requires more empirical evidence since their study was limited to the reviews on TripAdvisor without considering the overall components of service quality for ecotourism sites such as the intangible aspects of eco-experiences, Eco-learning, Eco-friendly services, and activities. Therefore, empirical research is crucial to be carried out to fill the gaps in the need to evaluate the service quality provided at NECC, as such information will be helpful to managers and policymakers of wildlife tourism to conservation programmes in the area (Kumar et al., 2020; Johari et al., 2019; Owusu-Frimpong et al., 2013) and contribute to rejuvenating a possible declining destination. This study is expected to fill the gaps that contribute to the further understanding of the quality of services by the NECC.

1.3 Research Questions

In summary, this current study attempts to evaluate the service quality at National Elephant Conservation Centre (NECC) Kuala Gandah, Pahang. As such, this study is concerned with examining the following:

- 1) What are the visitors' expectations and how is the perceived performance regarding the service quality provided at NECC?
- 2) What is the overall level of visitor satisfaction with the service quality at the NECC?
- 3) What are the service quality attributes that visitors consider to be important when evaluating their experience at the NECC?

1.4 Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to evaluate the quality of wildlife-based tourism services provided by the National Elephant Conservation Centre Kuala Gandah, Pahang. The specific objectives are such as the following.

- 1) To evaluate the visitors' expectations and perceived performance regarding the service quality provided at the NECC.
- 2) To assess visitor satisfaction with the service quality provided at the NECC.
- 3) To identify the priority of service quality attributes that needed management attention.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The National Elephant Conservation Centre (NECC) is expected to have a significant impact on both the protection of elephants and the promotion of tourism. Through the evaluation of satisfaction and service quality, this study aims to provide insight into the NECC's efficacy in accomplishing its objectives of conservation and delivering an appealing experience for visitors (Buonincontri et al., 2017; Priskin & McCool, 2006). Furthermore, this study also has benefited NECC, the Department of Wildlife and National Parks, and various related agencies and parties promoting tourism products in Malaysia. This study provides baseline information about the perception and expectation of visitor satisfaction levels to enhance service quality in Malaysia. The management of NECC can be guided in improving the overall visitor experience, which may result in increased visitation and beneficial recommendations. This is in line with the ideas presented in the previous studies which provide valuable insights for Malaysian organizations seeking to enhance their service quality standards within the Malaysian tourism industry (Wong & Chan, 2023; Zakaria et al., 2009)

On the other hand, the level of service quality practiced by the eco-site operators is the greatest influence to promote revisits among visitors. Satisfaction regarding perceived service quality is a key differentiator in a competitive marketplace where wildlife-based tourism premises compete to attract visitors (Ariya et al., 2020; Bhuiyan et al., 2021). The evaluation of service quality is also required to identify tourist satisfaction levels, and this evaluation should be connected to visitor expectations to ascertain how well those expectations were met (Nunkoo et al., 2020). Therefore, information about the level of service quality is expected to help the management improve the service and further increase visitor satisfaction.

In terms of knowledge contribution, this research will examine how the ECOPERF model can possibly be employed to determine the perceived service quality in wildlife-based tourism destinations as evaluated by visitors. The analysis acts as a measurement tool to determine how service quality studies can be done and provide future direction for those interested in empirically examining the potential of wildlife-based tourism destinations. In addition, the ECOPERF model also assists in strengthening each component towards providing a more robust service. Acquiring high-quality knowledge can contribute to a more thorough comprehension of an organization's performance, encompassing its influence on visitors and the environment (Eisingerich & Bell, 2008; Kim et al., 2019)

1.6 Definition and Measurement of Key Terms

These are terms used throughout this thesis. The explanations or definitions below are to give more understanding of each term or concept to the readers.

1.6.1 Service

Services refer to intangible, non-physical activities or benefits that a company or organization provides to its customers. Tourism services can be described as an intangible but identifiable activity providing the satisfaction of needs (Kotler, 1984).

1.6.2 Service Quality

The quality of service is the level of tourist parameters related to the expectations and services that they get that will impact tourist satisfaction (Tarigan et al., 2021; Sembiring, 2021). In this study, service quality also refers to the visitor satisfaction that was measured by contrasting the expectation and performance of service quality attributes.

1.6.3 Service Quality Attributes

Service quality attributes were measured based on the ECOPERF dimensions consisting of the Tangible, Reliability and Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy, Eco-friendly, Eco-Activities, and Eco-learning.

1.6.4 Expectation

Customer expectations may be defined as the desires and wants of consumers and the feeling of what a service provider should offer rather than would offer (Fashola et al., 2023; Kinyanjui, 2020; William et al., 2016). In this study, the expectation was examined by the visitor's expectation of the services provided at NECC as measured via ECOPERF Dimensions.

1.6.5 Performance

The customer's assessment of the product or service's real quality or level of service is referred to as performance (Han & Hyun, 2015; Pakurár et al., 2019). In this study, the performance was evaluated by the visitor's evaluations on the performance of the services provided at NECC as measured via ECOPERF Dimensions.

1.6.6 Satisfaction

Visitor satisfaction is defined as the difference between the customer's pre-consumption expectations and their perceived performance evaluation of the product or services (Phaswana-Mafuya & Haydam, 2005; Ye et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2019b). In this study, visitor satisfaction was determined by the difference between visitor expectations and their evaluation of the performance of the ECOPERF Dimension.

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