



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

***ECOTOURISTS' PERCEPTION OF OUTDOOR RECREATION SERVICE
QUALITY AT SUNGAI ITEK, GOPENG, PERAK, MALAYSIA***

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By

MOHD NOORAZLAN BIN AB AZIZ

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

June 2016

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

ECOTOURISTS' PERCEPTION OF OUTDOOR RECREATION SERVICE QUALITY AT SUNGAI ITEK, GOPENG, PERAK, MALAYSIA

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June 2016

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Tourism has been identified by the Malaysian government as one of the 12 potential areas to generate income in the National Key Economic Areas through the Economic Transformation Program. About RM 103.6 billion has been targeted by the government to be contributed by this industry toward the Gross National Income (GNI) by year 2020. Realizing the essential of tourism sector to the Malaysian economy and local community development, ecotourism has been acknowledged as an important niche area for tourism industry in Malaysia.

Ecotourism products in Malaysia are normally associated with outdoor recreation activities which are based on the existing cultural, historical and natural resources. However, there are concerns raised by the outdoor recreation industry itself on the sustainability of the natural resources. Similarly, there are also concerns on how excellent of service quality has been practiced in outdoor recreation activity to satisfy the clients (tourist or ecotourist). Moreover, it was undeniable that doing this commercialized outdoor recreation activities would lead to the issues of service quality since the nature of business are servicing. A poor quality of service would lead to the dissatisfaction of clients (tourist or ecotourist).

Therefore, this study has been conducted to identify the service quality level of outdoor recreation activities at Sungai Itek, Gopeng, Perak as evaluated by ecotourists. This study has employed the Ecotourists Service Quality (ECOSERV) model to assess the perceived service quality level of both tangible and intangible aspects such as service quality and conservation of natural resources. This study was based on the Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory which is the result of satisfaction of a person (tourist or ecotourist) towards service quality was determined from the perception of expectation and perception of performance gaps analysis ($Q=P-E$). A total numbers of 376 ecotourists had completed the questionnaire distributed. The main analysis used in this study is descriptive analysis and paired sample T-test.

The study showed that ecotourists who participated in three types of outdoor recreation activities such as land based, water based, cultural and historical based were satisfied with the perceived service quality. The overall findings had revealed positive gaps pattern in all 30 attributes in 6 dimensions of ECOSERV. This indicated that the levels of perceived service quality of ecotourists in outdoor recreation experience toward recreational sites at Sungai Itek, Gopeng, Perak had managed to meet their perception of expectation. Findings from this study are of practical use to the Government of Malaysia and several related tourism agency which are seeking empirical evidence regarding ecotourism and service quality issues. In addition, instead of focusing just on business and profit making, those parties could use this study as a reference towards the current issues, challenge and problems that literally occurred day by day regarding service quality and conservation issues. True to the philosophy of ecotourism, results from this study can give awareness to particular tourism agencies, local community, tourists and ecotourists toward fulfilling their moral obligation to help in preserving the quantity and quality of natural and historical resources.

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

**PERSEPSI EKOPELANCONG TERHADAP KUALITI PERKHIDMATAN
REKREASI LUAR DI SUNGAI ITEK, GOPENG, PERAK, MALAYSIA.**

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Pelancongan telah dikenal pasti oleh kerajaan Malaysia sebagai salah satu daripada 12 bidang yang berpotensi untuk menjana pendapatan dalam Bidang Ekonomi Utama Negara menerusi Program Transformasi Ekonomi. Sejumlah RM 103.6 bilion telah disasarkan oleh kerajaan yang bakal disumbangkan oleh industri ini kepada Pendapatan Negara Kasar (GNI) menjelang tahun 2020. Menyedari akan kepentingan sektor pelancongan kepada ekonomi Malaysia dan pembangunan komuniti setempat, ekopelancongan telah diakui sebagai satu bidang yang khusus bagi industri pelancongan di Malaysia.

Produk-produk ekopelancongan di Malaysia kebiasaannya berkait rapat dengan aktiviti-aktiviti rekreasi luar yang mana bersumberkan kebudayaan, sejarah dan sumber alam semulajadi yang sedia ada. Walau bagaimanapun, terdapat pelbagai isu yang timbul dalam industri rekreasi luar itu sendiri berkaitan dengan kemampuan sumber semulajadi. Sehubungan dengan itu, terdapat juga isu berkaitan sejauh manakah tahap kualiti perkhidmatan yang dipraktikkan dalam aktiviti rekreasi luar bagi memberi kepuasan kepada para pelanggan. Tambahan lagi, tidak dapat dinafikan bahawa aktiviti-aktiviti rekreasi luar yang dikomersialkan ini akan membawa kepada isu-isu berkaitan kualiti perkhidmatan oleh kerana skop perniagaan yang dijalankan adalah berasaskan perkhidmatan. Kualiti perkhidmatan yang rendah akan membuatkan pelanggan-pelanggan (pelancong/ ekopelancong) tidak berpuas hati

Justeru itu, kajian ini telah dijalankan untuk mengenal pasti tahap kualiti perkhidmatan dalam aktiviti-aktiviti rekreasi luar di Sungai Itek, Gopeng, Perak, yang dinilai oleh ekopelancong. Kajian ini telah menggunakan model Kualiti Perkhidmatan Ekopelancong (ECOSERV) untuk menilai tahap kualiti perkhidmatan yang diterima sama ada dari aspek yang boleh dinilai (tangible) dan sukar untuk dinilai (intangible) seperti kualiti perkhidmatan dan pemuliharaan sumber semulajadi. Kajian ini bersandarkan kepada *Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory* yang mana keputusan daripada kepuasan seseorang individu (pelancong atau ekopelancong) terhadap kualiti perkhidmatan diperolehi melalui analisis jurang persepsi jangkaan dan persepsi prestasi ($Q=P-E$). Sejumlah 376 orang ekopelancong telah menjawab soal selidik yang

diedarkan. Analisis- analisis utama yang digunakan dalam kajian ini ialah, analisis diskriptif dan analisis ujian T berpasangan.

Kajian ini menunjukkan ekopelancong-ekopelancong yang mengambil bahagian dalam 3 bentuk aktiviti- aktiviti rekreasi luar yang bersumberkan daratan, air, dan kebudayaan dan sejarah ini, telah berpuas hati dengan kualiti perkhidmatan yang diterima. Secara keseluruhan, dapatan kajian menunjukkan terdapat jurang positif dalam kesemua 30 atribut yang berada dalam 6 dimensi ECOSERV. Ini menunjukkan bahawa, kualiti perkhidmatan yang diterima oleh para ekopelancong dalam pengalaman rekreasi luar di kawasan-kawasan rekreasi di Sungai Itek, Gopeng, Perak adalah memenuhi persepsi jangkaan mereka. Dapatan daripada kajian ini, adalah praktikal untuk digunakan oleh Kerajaan Malaysia dan agensi pelancongan yang memerlukan bukti empirikal berkaitan ekopelancongan dan isu-isu berkenaan kualiti perkhidmatan. Sebagai tambahan, selain daripada hanya memfokuskan perniagaan dan membuat keuntungan, pihak-pihak berkaitan juga boleh menggunakan kajian ini sebagai rujukan kepada isu-isu semasa, cabaran, dan permasalahan yang berlaku dari hari ke hari berkaitan isu-isu kualiti perkhidmatan dan pemuliharaan. Selaras dengan falsafah ekopelancongan, hasil daripada kajian ini, secara langsung boleh membantu agensi-agensi pelancongan, penduduk setempat, pelancong dan ekopelancong dalam usaha untuk mengekalkan kuantiti dan kualiti alam semulajadi dan sumber sejarah.

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I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 29 June 2016 to conduct the final examination of Mohd Noorazlan bin Ab Aziz on his thesis entitled "Ecotourists' Perception of Outdoor Recreation Service Quality at Sungai Itek Gopeng, Perak, Malaysia" in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Master of Science.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	i
ABSTRAK	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
APPROVAL	vi
DECLARATION	viii
LIST OF TABLES	xii
LIST OF FIGURES	xiv
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 General Background	1
1.2 Problem Statement	2
1.3 Research Objectives	4
1.4 Significance of the Study	5
1.5 Definition and Measurement of Key Terms	6
1.5.1 ECOSERV	6
1.5.2 Ecotourism	6
1.5.3 Ecotourists	6
1.5.4 The Perception of Expectation on Service Quality	6
1.5.5 The Perception of Performance on Service Quality	7
1.5.6 Outdoor Recreation Activity	7
1.5.7 Service Quality	7
2 LITERATURE REVIEW	8
2.1 Definition and the Concept of Ecotourism	8
2.2 Definition of Ecotourist	9
2.3 Definition of Outdoor Recreation	10
2.4 Definition of Service Quality	11
2.5 Service Quality Models	14
2.6 Gap Analysis Model	15
2.7 Measuring Service Quality in a Specific Outdoor Recreation Context	17
2.8 Theoretical Framework	19
2.9 Theoretical Foundation Related to Service Quality	21
2.10 Application of Expectancy Disconfirmation Model	23
2.11 Ecotourists Intention to involvement in outdoor recreation activity	24
2.12 The Importance of Service Quality in Outdoor Recreation and Ecotourism services	25
3 METHODOLOGY	27
3.1 Background of Study Area	27
3.2 Sampling Technique	29
3.3 Sample Size	30
3.4 Instrumentation	32

3.5	Reliability and Validity of Questionnaire	33
3.6	Data Collection	34
3.6.1	Pilot Survey	34
3.6.2	Actual survey	38
3.7	Data Analysis Technique	38
3.7.1	Descriptive analysis	38
3.7.2	Paired Sample T- Test	39
4	RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	40
4.1	Data Screening	40
4.1.1	Missing Data and Outliers	40
4.2	Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents	42
4.2.1	Gender of Respondents	42
4.2.2	Age of Respondents	42
4.2.3	Marital Status of Respondents	43
4.2.4	Origin of Respondents	43
4.2.5	Education Level of Respondents	43
4.2.6	Employment Sector of Respondents	44
4.3	Inferential Statistical Analyses	44
4.3.1	Research Question 1	44
4.3.2	Research Question 2	48
4.3.3	Research Question 3	51
5	SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	54
5.1	Summary of Findings	54
5.2	Conclusion	55
5.3	Implication of the Study	56
5.3.1	Knowledge Contribution	56
5.3.2	Practical Contribution	57
5.4	Limitation and Recommendation for Future Research	58
	REFERENCES	60
	APPENDICES	71
	BIODATA OF STUDENT	89
	LIST OF PUBLICATIONS	90

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1.1 Tourists Arrivals and Revenues to Malaysia for the Year 2002 to 2012.	2
2.1 Comparison of selected service quality definitions	13
2.2 Six Major Dimensions in ECOSERV Scale adapted from Khan (2003).	20
3.1 Outdoor Recreation Activities that were participated by Ecotourists at Sungai Itek, Gopeng, Perak.	30
3.2 Response Rate of Respondents	32
3.3 Items measuring Service Quality based on six dimensions of ECOSERV for the study	33
3.4 Cronbach Alpha Coefficient Range	35
3.5 Cronbach's Alpha for internal consistency coefficients during the pilot study and final stage.	36
3.6 Item measuring Assurance for the study	36
3.7 Item measuring Empathy for the study	36
3.8 Item measuring Reliability for the study	37
3.9 Item measuring Tangible for the study	37
3.10 Item measuring Responsiveness for the study	37
3.11 Item measuring Ecotangible for the study	38
4.1 Respondents' Gender	42
4.2 Respondents' Age	42
4.3 Respondents' Marital Status	43
4.4 Respondents' Origin	43
4.5 Respondents' Education Level	43
4.6 Respondents' Employment Sector	44

4.7	Service Quality Values and Gaps between Ecotourists' Perception of Performance and Perception of Expectation on 30 Attributes	45
4.8	Differences in Mean Scores between Perception of Expectations and Perception of Performance for each dimension	49
4.9	Ecotourists Overall Satisfaction Level	51



LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
2.1 An Overview of Tourism	8
2.2 Gap Analysis Model	15
2.3 Theoretical Framework for the Research	19
2.4 Expectancy Disconfirmation with Performance Model adapted from; Oliver (1997).	22
3.1 Map of Recreational Study Site at Sungai Itek, Gopeng, Perak, Malaysia.	28
4.1 Box Plot Test of Outliers	41

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ECOSERV	Ecotourists Service Quality Model
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
WWF	World Wildlife Fund
MOTAC	Ministry of Tourism and Culture
SERVQUAL	Service Quality Model
(E)	Perception of Expectation
(P)	Perception of Performance
(E>P)	Perception of expectation is higher than perception of performance
(E<P)	Perception of expectation is lower than perception of performance
(P>E)	Perception of performance is higher than perception of expectation
(P<E)	Perception of performance is lower than perception of expectation
(E=P)	Perception of expectation equals to perception of performance
GGNP	Gunung Gading National Park
NNP	Niah National Park
KSNP	Kuala Selangor Nature Park
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Science

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 General Background

Over decades, tourism has for so long bursts as one of the most influential industries that benefit the growth of economy and at the same time promoting some countries to the world. According to Rosli and Azhar (2007) tourism industry has contributed 3.8 percent to the global gross domestic product (GDP) and was acknowledged as the second largest industry in 2005 as reported by World Travel and Tourism Council. In supporting such notion, tourism industry is an important source of foreign exchange earnings and applicable to represent a significant share in GDP of most countries (Harun & Hanafiah, 2010). Thus, it is very important for developed and developing countries to ensure that their tourism industry keep promoting potential tourism activities to the global to stimulate the economic growth. Tatoglu, Erdal, Ozgur, and Azakli (2000); Harun and Hanafiah (2010) stated that a country also would be possible to manage the financial and currency flow to increase income through the tourism industry. Therefore, it is crucial for each country to dynamically diversify their tourism products in various fields for instance, historical places, cultures, nature (flora & fauna), foods, sporting event, recreation activity and many more.

In Malaysia, the tourism industry is also continuously progressing and developing. As in line with the western countries, Malaysia is also taking part towards generating income from this industry to make profit while promoting Malaysia to the world. In the year of 2013, about RM 65.44 billion (US\$ 20 billion) was contributed to the Malaysia's Gross Domestic Product from the tourism industry. In fact, this industry was acknowledged as the fifth largest important industry in Malaysia and consistently becomes the forefront of economic development. In Malaysia, as shown in Table 1.1, the tourist arrivals rose from 13.29 million in 2002 to 25.03 in 2012. The revenues of the tourists also had increased from RM 25.8 billion to RM 60.6 billion during the same period within a decade. The sharp increase on the gross profits of the country was the main factor from the increment of tourist arrivals in this country.

In order to increase the number of tourists visiting Malaysia which contributes to continuous revenue generated to the country, it is important to ensure that tourists perceive high level of satisfaction. According to Hoffman and Bateson (2011), satisfaction of the tourists while visiting any particular country is crucial to ensure them spreading the positive word of mouth and better retention rate. Therefore, it is very important to determine and have a better understanding of related factors that revealed tourists satisfaction.

Table 1.1: Tourists Arrivals and Revenues to Malaysia for the Year 2002 to 2012.

Year	Arrivals (Million)	Revenues (Billion)
2012	25.03	60.6
2011	24.71	58.3
2010	24.58	56.5
2009	23.65	53.4
2008	22.05	49.6
2007	20.97	46.1
2006	17.55	36.3
2005	16.43	32.0
2004	15.70	29.7
2003	10.58	21.3
2002	13.29	25.8

Source: Tourism Malaysia, National Development (2014).

In many countries, ecotourism has been used progressively by government to attract ecotourists to visit to nature (Schillinger, 1995). In fact, researchers have associated ecotourism and environment as interrelated topics which referred to the specific characteristics that described those topics. For instance, Ceballos-Lascurain (1996) defined ecotourism as an environmentally responsible and awareness trip to the protected and undisturbed natural areas. The main objective of ecotourism concept is encouraging people towards conservation and sustainability of the natural resources to avoid any high impact activity that could destroy the resources. In addition, ecotourism activities would provide various opportunities to the local population such as stakeholder in socioeconomic involvement. In supporting such notion, Scheyvens (1999) suggested that local population such as stakeholder must coordinate and benefit from the tourism industry to create ecotourism activities. According to Jaafar and Maideen (2012) ecotourism activities are related to natural attractions and cultural features of a destination.

1.2 Problem Statement

As mentioned by Khalifah and Tahir (1997), Malaysia has valuable potential in tourism related with nature and ecotourism. About RM 655 million are earned annually from this sector as estimated by World Wildlife Fund (WWF). Ecotourism has rapidly increases at the rate of 30% per year and has created several recreational activities in recreational forest (Siow, Abidin, Nair, Ramachandran & Shuib, 2011). Recreational forest such as national park and other recreational areas are the most interesting places to promote tourism activity even though those places have been officially gazetted for conservation, education and research studies. In this context, some critical issues have been raised up and those are potentially related to the issues of whether the impacts of the ecotourism development to this area extend to the ecotourists satisfaction, what the impacts are, both positive and negative, and how the impacts are felt among ecotourists. According to Muzzammil, Mastura and Diana (2015), issues regarding the sustainability for ecotourism industry in Malaysia have been discussed as the impact from the increasing trend in tourists' arrival and pressures from environmental, socioeconomic, social and local resources. Therefore, these activities in some way would destroy the resources if the operators are more concerned towards making profits rather

than practising and putting some efforts towards the sustainability development of natural resources.

Logically, human beings always feel close to nature. The diversity of flora and fauna are the major attraction for tourists to show deep appreciation towards nature and enjoy the uniqueness. One of the famous ecotourism products in Malaysia is outdoor recreation activity. Nowadays, outdoor recreation is one of the marketable activities which contribute to the rapid development for tourism industry in Malaysia which attracts both domestic and foreign tourists. According to Lim, Radzliyana and Cheah (2014), programmes such as sports and recreation are parts of business in hospitality and tourism industries which are very marketable, profitable and always grow and develop. Hence, the government of Malaysia has actively encouraging private sectors such as travel agency and outdoor recreation operators to play their parts to develop and promote ecotourism destinations to attract visitors (MOTAC, 2014). Unfortunately, many agencies and outdoor recreation operators that offer ecotourism in Malaysia are still new and inexperienced. According to Badaruddin (2012), more or less than 30% of the agencies have little or no interaction with the government to guide them to promote and implement ecotourism in the right way. Moreover, almost 80% activities offered by these agencies and operators tend to be fun-filled or adventurous only, but lacking in terms of getting to know the nature as in line with the concept of actual ecotourism where it precisely provides knowledge, awareness and sustainability practise toward the nature (Badaruddin, 2012).

Recently, outdoor recreation activity which is one of the ecotourism products has gained serious attention from ecotourists either from local or abroad. Mostly, many of the outdoor recreation operators in Malaysia which manage outdoor recreation activity are led by the private operators. Therefore, it is crucial to those operators to provide excellent service quality to their clients to ensure in return they (operators) have positive words of mouth, good reputations and known as worldwide companies as acknowledge by their clients. Ecotourists satisfaction and service quality are closely interrelated and essential to the outdoor recreation managers and marketers to design effective management and marketing strategies. To support such notion, Brady and Robertson (2001); Greenwell, Fink and Pastore (2002); Kang, Okamoto and Donovan (2004) stated satisfaction and service quality are considerable as a body of research in broader management and marketing literature that is crucial to be discussed to determine future intention of customers. However, the issue is there is lack of empirical evidence discussing intangible elements such as service quality in outdoor setting (Muse et al., 2009; Yoshida & James, 2011). Based on the previous studies, several researchers have agreed that satisfaction is a consequence of service quality (Zeithaml 1988; McDougall & Levesque 1994; 2000; Brady & Robertson 2001).

In Malaysia, there are a few studies that have discussed issues regarding satisfaction and service quality in outdoor setting. However, those studies only conducted assessment of service quality at national parks where most of the visitors only came to visit the park and do some light activities. Therefore, the respondents were only able to evaluate the tangible aspects such as the

appearance of the personnel, soft skills and hard skills, accommodation, transportation, food and beverages and others. Hence, intangible aspects are more than that.

According to Ching and Goh (2015) in their studies on “Intangible values and tourists’ motivations: The case of the Pahang National Park”, those researchers stated that intangible aspects are something that are subjective to be measured such as recreational activity, cultural and spiritual, educational, artistic and aesthetic and existential values. In supporting such notion, Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1991); Lim et al., (2014) stated in the context of sport and recreation programmes, the targets of quality evaluation include (1) the core service; (2) the physical context including the facilities and equipment in which service is provided; and (3) the interpersonal interaction in the performance of the service. Moreover, this present study was also modified, added up and undertook the consideration which was recommended by Lim et al., (2014) in their studies for future research regarding assessing service quality in the context of recreational sports industry, types of recreational activities and types of respondents.

Therefore, concerning with the issue, a study that evaluates programme management which specifically focuses on service quality in outdoor recreation setting that looks into tangible and intangible elements shall be conducted systematically. This study is also important to be conducted as to determine how serious and aware are outdoor recreation operators at the selected study site in practicing ecotourism concept as evaluated by ecotourists.

As such, this study is concerned about examining:

- 1) What is the perceived service quality of outdoor recreation activities as evaluated by ecotourists at Sungai Itek, Gopeng, Perak?
- 2) Is there any difference between the perception of expectation and the perception of performance of ecotourists on service quality in outdoor recreation activities at Sungai Itek, Gopeng, Perak?
- 3) What are the overall satisfactions of ecotourists regarding perceived service quality of outdoor recreation activities at Sungai Itek, Gopeng, Perak?

In summary, this current study attempts to examine what are the perceptions of ecotourists on service quality in outdoor recreation activities provided at Sungai Itek, Gopeng, Perak, as an ecotourism destination.

1.3 Research Objectives

The general objective of this study is to examine the ecotourists’ perception of outdoor recreation service quality provided at Sungai Itek, Gopeng, Perak. Whereas, the specific objectives are:

- 1) To evaluate the perceived service quality of outdoor recreation activities provided at Sungai Itek, Gopeng, Perak, as evaluated by ecotourists.

- 2) To determine the differences between the perception of expectations and the perceptions of performance of ecotourists on service quality in outdoor recreation activities at Sungai Itek, Gopeng, Perak.
- 3) To examine the overall satisfactions of ecotourists regarding the perceived service quality in outdoor recreation activities at Sungai Itek, Gopeng, Perak.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study has gained benefits to various related agencies and parties which promote outdoor recreation activity as new ecotourism products in Malaysia. This study provides baseline information to the Ministry of Tourism and Culture (MOTAC) Malaysia on what course of actions that are suitable to develop and market the recreational activities for future ecotourism destination based on ecotourists demand. Indeed, service quality plays vital roles to ensure the successful of promoting outdoor recreation activities as ecotourism products. The level of service quality practised by outdoor recreation operator is the greatest influence to promote revisits among ecotourists. Satisfaction regarding perceived service quality is seen as a key differentiator in a competitive marketplace where commercial outdoor recreation competes to attract ecotourists. Robert (2008) had stated that price or costs is not the main reason that customers care most, but poor qualities of customer service is what they are really concerned. Apart from that, some factors such as social, economic and environmental well-being rely on the sustainable management of natural resources. In fact, various outdoor recreation activities offered by outdoor recreation operators use natural outdoor setting. As a consequence, this may lead to degradation of natural resources from time to time. Therefore, the current study can serve as an initial examination on both issues and hopefully will end up to some directions for future endeavour to take.

In addition, this study will also provide information on how private commercial outdoor recreation operators and tourism agencies should go about in promoting ecotourism to ecotourists that is either foreign or domestic. By promoting and introducing outdoor recreation activities as a new ecotourism product in Malaysia, this will help the private commercial outdoor recreation operators and agencies to diversify our outdoor recreational sites. The importance of such diversification effort is to ensure that we are no longer depending too much on the existing ecotourism attraction like national and state parks. Emphasizing outdoor recreation activities as ecotourism products will attract more ecotourists to stay longer to experience the meaningful vacation. From resource management and conservation stand points, diversification strategies play important roles in a way that it helps to lessen the negative impacts from tourism concentrating at a particular destination. By dispersing ecotourists to many other destinations, it will assist resource managers to contemplate strategies to use ecotourism resources in sustainable manners.

In terms of knowledge contribution, this research will provide further examination on how ECOSERV Scale can possibly be employed to determine the perceived service quality in outdoor recreation programme as evaluated by

ecotourists. The analysis acts as a measurement tool to be used to find out how service quality study can be done and provide future direction for those who are interested to examine the potential of commercial outdoor recreation activities empirically.

1.5 Definition and Measurement of Key Terms

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

1.5.1 ECOSERV

Ecotourists' Service Quality (ECOSERV) model is a modification of service quality model introduced by Khan (2003). This model was adapted from original SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1990). Khan (2003) developed the ECOSERV model to measure service quality in ecotourism using 30 items that were categorized into six major dimensions such as ecotangible, assurance, reliability, responsiveness, empathy, and tangible. In this study, ECOSERV framework had been used to measure perceived service quality in outdoor recreation activities as evaluated by ecotourists as ecotourism products.

1.5.2 Ecotourism

It can be defined as an insightful, mindful and participatory travel experience to natural and cultural environments, assisting the well-being of the local cultures and environments for future generations (Ceballos- Lascurain, 1987). In this study, researcher considered outdoor recreation activity as the products for ecotourism.

1.5.3 Ecotourists

Ecotourists or nature tourists can be defined as tourists who travel to nature based area (Mehmettoglu, 2007). Ecotourists either foreign or locals which participated in outdoor recreation activities were selected as respondents for this study in order to evaluate the service quality in outdoor recreation activities when this study was conducted.

1.5.4 The Perception of Expectation on Service Quality

The perception of expectation on service quality refers to the service level that customers believe they should get from the service operator (Khan, 2003). In this study, the perception of expectation of ecotourists had been measured before they participate in any outdoor recreation activities at the site as a pre-test.

1.5.5 The Perception of Performance on Service Quality

The perception of performance on service quality refers to customers' evaluation and judgement of the actual performance of a service (Elmayar, 2011). In this study, the perception of performance of ecotourists had been measured after they have completely participated in outdoor recreation activities at the site as a post-test.

1.5.6 Outdoor Recreation Activity

Outdoor recreation activity is referred to as any form of experience during a person's leisure time where an individual voluntarily chooses to engage either physically or mentally in activities due to personal expectation, satisfaction and enjoyment (Krumpe, 2006). In this study, outdoor recreation activities were divided into three categories which are land based activity, water based activity and cultural and historical activity.

1.5.7 Service Quality

Service quality refers to the comparison customers make between their perception of expectation and their perception of performance on the service received (Gronroos, 1982; Lewis & Boom, 1983; Parasuraman et al., 1985;1988). In this study, service quality was measured by comparing between the perception of expectation and the perception of performance of ecotourists.

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