

Research Paper

Mountain Guiding in Kinabalu Park: An Evaluation of Visitor Satisfaction

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Abstract: Kinabalu Park is one of the most popular destinations in Sabah, Malaysia. Malaysia's tallest mountain has increasingly gained popularity due to government initiatives aimed at attracting more visitors. Additionally, efforts have been made to create employment opportunities for the local communities. The purpose of the current study is to analyse the ways in which the services provided by Kinabalu Park have contributed to development of visitor attraction and satisfaction within the tourism sector. Interviews were conducted with mountain guides to collect qualitative data. The findings reveal that guides associated with mountain climbing in Kinabalu Park acquire professional and personal development in communication, decision making, problem solving, analytical and people management skills. The mastery of these skills is beneficial in enhancing the quality of climbing and tourism services provided to visitors which ultimately, will increase their satisfaction with the destination.

Keywords: Mountain guides, visitor satisfaction, local communities, training, Kinabalu Park, professional development

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Introduction

Kinabalu Park is one of the most popular protected areas of Malaysia and is located in the Sabah state on Borneo Island. Established in 1964 after the gazettelement of the Sabah National Parks Ordinance in 1962, the park has a total area of 754 sq km and falls under The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Type II protected area. In 2000, it was also declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO after meeting the criteria of both categories Type II and IV. The uncertain weather conditions in this park is a major hindrance to the safety of tourists. For climbing groups, the guide acts as the coordinator. This is a contributory factor to the enhanced experience of tourists due to implementation of diversity and management skills of the guides and also foster better teamwork and decision making during critical situations.

The government ensures the provision of timely training related to first aid services, emergency rescue and risk management to guides, which have contributed to better safety and security management of the visitors. In the past, a major factor hindering satisfaction and service quality of tourists was the voluntary participation of climbing guides in workshops and training procedures. Today, however, these training sessions and workshops are mandatory for all guides to ensure the safety of the climbers and also to enhance their mountain climbing experience.

The repeat purchase behaviour of visitors to Kinabalu Park is one of the key factors responsible for the sustainability and higher revenue generation of the tourism sector in Sabah. When guides apply their analytical and problem solving skills, it uplifts the tourism experience of visitors. Moreover, emotional intelligence, empathy and public speaking skills are important competencies that can foster the emotional bond and relationship between guides and tourists for a satisfactory visit and experience.

Kinabalu Park is well known for attracting visitors from all across the world who love to explore mountains from the Himalayas to the high mountains of New Guinea. The height of Mount Kinabalu is 4,095 metres and the altitudinal range is approximately 150 metres. The mountain is also home to more than 4,000 species of flora and fauna including 140 families of flowering plants such as orchids and ferns as well as pitcher plants, *Rafflesia* and rhododendrons. One of the primary factors attracting thousands of visitors to Kinabalu Park is its mountainous landscape and picturesque location. In 1965, the total number of visitors in Kinabalu Park was 829 which subsequently increased to 434,903 in 2005. The park is responsible for a revenue generation worth RM547,5421; approximately 53% of total revenue generated under the Sabah Park ordinance is from Kinabalu Park.

Visitors like to visit this park for the many activities provided and among these, one of the favourites is mountain climbing. Between 1989 and 2005, a total of 9% of trips made to this park accounted for mountain climbing. In 2005, this rate

increased to 22% amounting to 46,084 trips. Mountain climbing also contributed to higher revenue generation, thus making it one of the important sources of income for the park. Essentially, mountain climbing is regarded as one of the significant aspects of Malaysia's tourism sector, being responsible for 53% of the park's revenue.

Given the importance of this park to Malaysia's tourism sector, it is important to identify and assess the different factors that impact park visitor satisfaction. Thus, this study examines the initiatives from the Malaysian government and Sabah government in enhancing visitor experience, from the aspect of services and behaviour of guides. Specifically, the study looks at government initiatives and local initiatives in enhancing and uplifting the skills and knowledge of the mountain guides in Kinabalu Park that serves to be one of the influential factors in impacting the satisfaction of tourists and their repeat visits.

Concept of Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism is a new concept in the field of tourism that focuses on empowering local communities or society, developing the local economy as well as protecting and safeguarding the natural surroundings of a destination in the course of tourism development. Similarly, for Kinabalu Park, the protection of the local communities is an integral aspect of sustainable tourism by empowering and equipping them as well as supporting their economic development. According to Wan Mohamad Ariffin and Ching (2019), the increasing number of visitors to Kinabalu Park for tourism and mountain climbing has also led to the development of the guides' knowledge and skills. Subsequently, more employment opportunities were created and this plays a significant role in community development through sustainable tourism.

Referencing Chan and Talib (2023), the problem statement of the present study is related to the development of the Malaysian tourism sector, in particular visitor numbers and revenue generation in Kinabalu Park. Kunjuraman and Aziz (2019) shed light on the interrelationship between skill development of guides and visitor experience and satisfaction level. In this regard, the problem statement formulated looks at the relationship between visitor experience and satisfaction and the skills and service quality of local guides, which appears to be an essential element of community development in the context of sustainable tourism. Further, as highlighted by Yaakob (2019), many of the local communities in Sabah live below poverty levels and lack financial as well as social empowerment.

Nevertheless, the increasing number of visitors to Kinabalu Park has exposed the local communities and guides to many foreign cultures and boosted their professional development as well as cultural literacy. The current study aims to understand factors that affect quality of service and visitor satisfaction in Kinabalu Park, specifically in relation to the local guides.

Role of Protected Areas in Tourism Development and Satisfaction of Visitors

The main function of protected areas has always been to safeguard the environment, but at times, at the expense of the well-being and development of the local communities. One of the main challenges that plagues the tourism sector of Malaysia is the lack of focus on local communities in protected areas, resulting in their development being neglected and overlooked. However, guided by UNESCO on the protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage, the management of Kinabalu Park endeavours to empower the local communities in the park (Karuppiyah et al., 2022). Further, in embracing the concept of sustainable tourism, Kinabalu Park also strives to balance the protection of the environment along with securing stable employment opportunities and growth of the local community.

In supporting the professional development of the local guides, Kinabalu Park also indirectly uplifts the social as well as economic aspects of the local communities. Since the early years, visitors to Kinabalu Park have and continue to be mainly attracted by mountain climbing activities and this provided the main source of income to the park (Maidin et al., 2021). The visitors rely on local guides for the mountain climbing activities, and this in turn, contributed to the economic development of the guides and local communities. Guiding allowed the local guides to become acquainted with people from diverse national and cultural backgrounds, and their cultural and diversity management knowledge increased to a great extent. In the past, the lack of exposure to the outside world was also a drawback for the local community to become acquainted with outsiders.

According to Goh (2021), the governments of Malaysia and Sabah have initiated a range of training and development activities for the local communities in order to increase their engagement with the tourism sector. The aim of these training and development programs is to develop and hone their skills and knowledge so that they could provide better tourism experience and satisfactory climbing sessions to visitors.

The high revenue generated by the climbing activities and tours in Kinabalu Park has led to increased job opportunities for mountain climbing guides. Further, in accordance with Park Enactment No 10 of 2002, it is mandatory for all individuals who want to climb Mount Kinabalu to be accompanied by a local mountain guide for their safety and security (Abdullah et al., 2023). Safety and security in climbing and other adventurous activities is an integral factor in service quality that contributes to visitor satisfaction. In the earlier years, one of the hindrances faced by the local communities was the lack of skills and knowledge for mountain climbing (Chew et al., 2023).

Additionally, the lack of cultural knowledge and literacy was recognised as a major hindrance for the local guides and local community to communicate with tourists or visitors. In this regard, the Sabah government and tourism agency carried out numerous capacity building programmes to help the local guides and community

overcome linguistic or cultural barriers for a satisfactory tourism experience. A satisfactory tourism experience culminates in positive perception and attitude, which again leads to higher visitor satisfaction.

The professional development of the mountain climbing guides is an essential factor for the sustainability and growth of the Sabah tourism sector. As explained earlier, the skills and knowledge of the guides is one of the major influential factors for visitor satisfaction, which in turn, affects repeat visits. Sakolnakorn (2020) highlighted that training and professional development programmes initiated by the government not only empowers and develops the local community, but also lead to repeat purchase behaviour of visitors as a result of their satisfaction with the service quality. The likeliness of tourists to visit a destination again also rests on the extent to which they have knowledge and information about it. In this context, the role and responsibility of the guides should also include providing information on the historic, geographical and cultural values of the destination to visitors.

Guides must constantly strive to provide the best experiences to visitors and help meet their expectations. In this context, guides undertake appropriate training and development programs so that they could provide the best service quality to visitors and at the same time, enhance their professional development. Part of the guides' professional development include acquiring or mastering certain competencies to provide a satisfactory tourism experience. According to Geetha et al. (2023), competency refers to the possession of skills and knowledge by individuals. In this regard, it should be noted that the management of visitor security and safety for mountain climbing activities also significantly influences visitors' repeat purchase behaviour. Henceforth, the guides should also be trained on practices and procedures related to the security and safety management visitors to Kinabalu Park.

Methodology

As stated earlier, the aim of the present study is to understand better the factors that contribute to the satisfaction of visitors in Kinabalu Park. A qualitative approach was adopted, and data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview technique was deemed the most suitable to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perceptions of visitors, as well as guides' views on professional development programs and how they affect service delivery. Semi-structured interviews provide flexibility, where participants are able to respond freely while still having a guided structure for providing feedback. A total of 40 interviews were conducted with guides and visitors in Kinabalu Park.

As the primary targeted audience of this research are guides and visitors, they were also selected as participants of this study (Lintang et al., 2022). Purposive sampling was used to select the sample of guides and visitors. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling where participants are selected because they fulfil specific

criteria according to research objectives. For this particular study, the participants must be those who have had personal direct experiences in Kinabalu Park (Azlizam, 2021) to ensure the conclusions are meaningful and indicative of real-life experiences.

Participants were first approached by remunerators and given a brief introduction of the purpose and context of the study. If the participant agreed, they were provided with an informed consent form (Kamarudin et al., 2020). The participants were only allowed to participate in the study after their consent was obtained. All the participants were also briefed that their participation is fully voluntary and that they can withdraw from the study at any time, to ensure maximum ethical consideration was adhered to.

The semi-structured interviews consisted a mix of structured and open-ended questions, allowing the participants to share their experiences and views in-depth. The interviews were conducted face-to-face inside Kinabalu Park, where participants felt at ease and convenient. For guides, the interviews started with their background and experience with guiding in Kinabalu Park. This was continued with more specific questions relating to professional development and training. The visitors were queried regarding their expectations, encounters with the guides, and satisfaction with the services provided. The semi-structured nature of the interview enabled the interviewer to ask more questions to elicit further details from the participants, so that they can elaborate and explain critical points as required. In order to be inclusive, one of the foreign participants who did not speak the local language was provided with an interpreter. This helped to make interview clear and ensure that varied perspectives were included.

Thematic analysis was utilised to examine the qualitative data gathered from interviews. This method was deemed appropriate since it allows common recurring threads and patterns across participants' accounts to be identified. The analytical process commenced with data familiarisation, where tape-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and read several times to gain a good insight into their content. The next step entailed initial coding, where noteworthy phrases and comments were coded routinely to bring forward important points involving visitor satisfaction as well as guide services.

The codes were then categorised together into more general themes, including guide professionalism, communication effectiveness, expectations of visitors, and service development. Next, these themes were developed to make sure that they effectively captured the data gathered and can be used for the purposes of the study. Lastly, an interpretative analysis was undertaken, whereby the themes identified were analysed against the research questions to gain a clear understanding of visitor satisfaction in Kinabalu Park.

Through thematic analysis, the study was able to capture the depth and richness of the participants' experiences, acquiring meaningful insights into the ways guiding

services impact visitor satisfaction. The findings contribute valuable suggestions on how to better develop professional guide programs as well as ways to increase the satisfaction of Kinabalu Park visitors. This qualitative process guaranteed that both guides' and visitors' perspectives were taken into account to provide the full picture of strengths and weaknesses regarding mountain guiding services in the park.

Discussion

Role of Kinabalu Park in Visitor Satisfaction

It is a generally known that the government of Malaysia and Sabah has made it mandatory for mountain climbers in Kinabalu Park to be accompanied by local guides who come from local villages or communities in the adjacent regions. The interview responses reveal that a majority of the participants stated that they provide information on the historical or geographical values of the places that they take their visitors to. This reflects the guides' knowledge level in the course of providing tourism services to visitors. Further, knowledge gained about geographical and historical aspects of places in the park contributes to visitor satisfaction and their willingness to visit the place again.

An informal arrangement between Sabah Parks and the local communities has allowed the provision of job opportunities to the local population. A total of 32 participants shared that they received training from the government agency on an array of fields including knowledge of places, people management skills, safety management practices in mountains, and diversity management to help them cater to national and international tourists. All these skills and competencies related to people management, diversity and inclusion, and effective communication contribute to visitor satisfaction. Additionally, the participants explained that they also work closely with agencies on weather updates so that they can take precautions during mountain climbing activities.

In this regard, teamwork and collaboration among the guides and related agencies is also critical for satisfactory tourism services. When visitors feel confident that their safety and well-being are taken care of, this adds to their satisfaction and service experience. The responses of 37 participants indicate that they can provide visitor satisfaction and meet their expectations, due to their enhanced people management and communication skills that helps them build stronger bonds.

The local guides are also exposed to a range of human resource practices that support their professional development as well. In the beginning, Kinabalu Park recruited guides from nearby villages, including Kampung Kiau and Bundu Tuhan. However, over time and with increasing visitors, the park started hiring people from other parks and villages as well. These inexperienced and untrained guides were then sent for training.

The local communities were also trained to adhere to sustainable practices such as renewal of licenses issued by Sabah Parks to safeguard the park's flora and fauna (Chan et al., 2021). Similarly, it was mandatory for the guides to be trained in safeguarding the natural environment and surroundings. Of the participants interviewed, 24 admitted that they have received training on environmental sustainability. According to them, this training has helped them support the Sabah Parks in taking better care of Kinabalu Park.

Findings also reveal that Park Ordinance of 2000 has made it compulsory for Sabah Parks to provide employment to all guides throughout the year. However, seasonal fluctuations in the climbing tours or activities has been identified as one of the primary contributors to job insecurity amongst the local guides (Hassan et al., 2022). This poses an impediment to their professional development and career stability. To address this, the Malaysian government has and continues to embark on aggressive marketing strategies to attract more tourists throughout the year, so that there is adequate work for all the guides.

Another issue that was raised in the interviews was the inadequate salary of the guides. A majority of the participants (90.8%) stated their dissatisfaction with their remuneration and salary structure. This is a major issue that can affect visitor satisfaction as inadequate remuneration can lead to poor service quality in the long run. According to Chong et al. (2021), low income is a major influential factor in the motivational level of individuals. In this context, inadequate or low income levels can lead to decreased willingness amongst guides to improve and upgrade themselves through training and skill courses, subsequently hindering professional growth and development.

One way the low income issue has been resolved is by increasing the climber group size, which means higher income per tour. This also allows guides to work on their diversity management and communication skills as well as foster better teamwork and decision making during uncertain weather conditions. Many visitors are often not well-versed to speak in English. This requires the guides to learn quickly and cope with other languages for communication, leading to guides becoming familiar with a number of languages. The professional and soft skills of guides enhance further visitors' experience and satisfaction. Further, large groups allow visitors to meet other new people of diverse backgrounds which adds value to their experience.

The workshops and training sessions conducted by Sabah Parks has been a significant factor in the higher satisfaction rate of visitors. These sessions usually include a brief introduction of the parks along with knowledge on safety management and precautions. The workshop participants are also provided with training related to first aid services and emergency management skills. In the 1990s, the local guides can voluntarily join these workshops and training sessions (Nurvianti & Hastuti, 2021). However, given that the safety of the visitors is of utmost importance, along

with ensuring the growth of the tourism sector, these workshops and training have now been made mandatory for guides so that they have the right knowledge and skills needed to provide exceptional service to climbers and visitors.

It should be noted that the interview findings revealed some discrepancies. Almost 40% of the study participants admitted that they are not proficient in English, which reflects the ineffectiveness on the part of Sabah Parks to provide the right training and workshop sessions to enhance their diversity management and communication skills (Azlizam, 2021). This finding suggests that English-speaking tourists may not be fully satisfied since they not able to communicate with the guides effectively.

Quality of Mountain Guiding Services and Impact on Visitor Satisfaction

As discussed earlier, one of the key factors responsible for repeat purchase behaviour of visitors in Kinabalu Park is the quality of service and experience they receive. As mentioned by Mohamad Yusof et al. (2021), part of the responsibility of local guides is enhancing the quality of service they provide to tourists, by imparting valuable knowledge of the locality such as information on the local flora and fauna. In order to do this, the guides must first acquire the knowledge. Most of the participants (39) have stated that they indulge in regular educational training to acquire new information on the park's geographic, biological and cultural aspects. Enhancing the visitors' knowledge base with valuable information can lead to high levels of satisfaction.

Additionally, 27 participants also stated that they pay utmost attention to safety and security when they lead a climber group. They consider the safety of the visitors as their main responsibility and regularly attend workshops and training on safety management to keep themselves updated and competent. Further, the guides must be alert on weather conditions as well as any changes in the geography of the area or climbing trail. The valuable expertise and knowledge of the local guides are key attributes of high satisfactory levels of tourists.

Geetha et al. (2021) revealed that the major reason tourists visit Kinabalu Park is mountain climbing. Thus, the exceptional experience and service quality of the local guides are critical in influencing their behaviour and likelihood of visiting the park again. Since, the livelihood of the guides depends highly on the repeat purchase behaviour of the visitors, 35 participants admitted that they strive hard to foster effective communication with the visitors so that they will leave with a good impression and return another day.

Apart from that, the guides are also aware that they need to be friendly and cater to visitors' needs to create a good tourism experience. Visitors should be able to easily share any grievances and expect support or help from the guides. A majority of the participants also stated that they have faced uncertain weather conditions or safety related issues in the mountains at least once in their lifetime. Thus, a strong

presence of mind is indispensable in managing any crises or incidents and protect the visitors. Such experiences not only hone their decision-making skills in critical situations, but also strengthen their mental resilience to deal with emergencies (Gan, 2020). This strengthens visitor confidence and their satisfaction level with the overall tourism experience.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

Kinabalu Park is a popular sustainable tourism destination that has been accorded protected area status by UNESCO. The concept of sustainable tourism is associated with the empowerment and development of local communities, economic development and safeguarding of the natural environment in the course of tourism development. In accordance with UNESCO's protection status and guided by the sustainable tourism concept, Kinabalu Park has helped the development of the surrounding communities by providing them job and business opportunities. As a tourism destination that is world-renowned for its mountain climbing and nature activities, Kinabalu Park continues to attract millions of tourists. As such, its local guides play an important role in providing the best service quality and experience for visitors, which leads to high satisfactions levels.

In addition to employment opportunities, Sabah Parks also provide training for the local guides and local communities who are an important stakeholder and play a significant role in sustainable tourism through community development. The guides receive training on various aspects such as information about the park, as well as people management, diversity management, safety management and communication skills to build the confidence and trust of visitors. Additionally, the guides are also trained on diversity and inclusion, teamwork and collaboration to carry out their work well, especially with visitors from various backgrounds. The guides are also keep themselves updated with the latest information on weather and trail conditions to ensure the visitors' safety is always taken care of.

Based on the findings, it is suggested that Kinabalu Park should increase professional development programs for guides in terms of language competence, customer service, and emergency response training. Moreover, instituting periodic feedback mechanisms from visitors can also contribute to quality improvement. This study can be expanded into a longitudinal study to determine changes over time as well as other national parks in Malaysia to gain comparative data and insights. Additional qualitative studies on cultural contrasts and visitor expectations would also be useful in customising guiding services to cater to various tourist segments.

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