Riverboat Cruise in Sukau: The Tourist Experiences and Service Experience Attributes

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This paper reports on selected methods and empirical evidence of a study, which sought to describe the experiences of tourists during their participation in riverboat cruises in Sukau, Sabah. The objectives of the paper are: a) to describe the tourists’ experience within the riverboat cruise context; and b) to identify service experience attributes of riverboat cruise experience based on the dimensions elicited from tourists’ experiences. Empirical data was collected from multi methods which consist of overt participation observation techniques and Profile Accumulation Technique (PAT). Findings show that tourist interactions with nature, the environment, other sources of stimulation (such as wildlife viewing, guides and group member interactions) are the major experiential elements of the riverboat cruises. These elements are also regarded as the service experience attributes that influenced the tourists’ evaluation of the riverboat cruises. Wildlife and pristine nature environment are perceived as two significant elements that contribute positively to riverboat cruise experiences. Tourist experiences in the riverboat cruise are influenced by both physical/environmental and human dimensions. The paper contributes to an understanding of tourists’ evaluation of the riverboat cruises and identification of service attributes for riverboat cruises in Sukau, an under-researched area. It provides managerial and practical implications for riverboat cruise management in terms of quality experience and tourist satisfaction. The use of multi methods provides a more reliable and ecological valid account of the tourists’ reactions and experiences in this context.

Key words: riverboat cruise, profile accumulation technique (PAT), service experience attributes, tourist experiences

Introduction

The Sandakan/Kinabatangan Region of Sabah, East Malaysia has been identified as one of the main nature tourism zones (The Sabah Tourism Masterplan, 1996). The Lower Kinabatangan River region, including Sukau, is designated as one of ten very special places for Malaysian ecotourism as outlined in National Ecotourism Plan 1996 (WWFN, 1996). This region is one of the popular tourist destinations promoted in Sabah for wildlife viewing. Within this region, riverboat cruises provided by ecolodge operators are viewed as significant ecotourism and leisure activities that contribute to tourists’ experiences. To experience cruising along the longest river in Sabah, it is promoted as a unique selling ‘icon’ for wildlife

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viewing. These images have been well promoted in tour brochures, newspapers and television advertisements. Although riverboat cruising is viewed as an important ecotourism and leisure activity in Sukau that contributes to tourists’ experience, there has been little attention given to it and understanding of tourists’ behavioural aspects in relation to “how” and to “what” they react during participation in riverboat cruises. Arguably, an understanding of tourists’ experiences is paramount for any ecotourism business to improve the tourists’ experiences and subsequently influences their satisfaction levels (Chan and Baum, 2005). Thus, this paper aims to bridge this gap by exploring tourists’ experiences of riverboat cruises in Sukau and in identifying the underlying elements that contribute to their experiences. The objectives of the paper are twofolds. First, it describes the tourist experiences with reference to physical and human dimensions within the riverboat cruise context. Second, it identifies service experience attributes of riverboat cruise experience based on the dimensions elicited from tourists’ experiences. Thus, the research questions are: a) What are the main elements contribute to tourist experiences during their participation of riverboat cruises? b) What are the service experience attributes that can be used to evaluate the riverboat cruise?

Riverboat Cruise as Experiential Consumption in Sukau, Lower Kinabatangan

The Lower Kinabatangan basin, located in eastern Sabah, is Malaysia’s largest river floodplain with natural forest and oxbow lakes. It is also one of the five ecotourism sites in the Partners for Wetlands Programme, funded by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) in 1999 to support conservation initiatives, and is the foremost wetland biodiversity area in Sabah. This area is claimed to be one of Malaysia’s richest wildlife areas, consisting of various rare and endangered species of proboscis monkeys, orang-utan, all eight species of Bornean hornbills, the oriental darter and diverse lowland freshwater fisheries (WWFNM, 1996). Thus, it is particularly suitable for ecotourism due to the variety of rare wildlife species, which can be viewed on riverboat cruises. Riverboat cruises provide easy access to wildlife viewing with less impact on the site. The state government of Sabah has established a wildlife sanctuary, which encompasses over 200 kilometres of the Kinabatangan River. Sukau is in a district of Lower Kinabatangan and offers superb eco-experiences. Its jungle environment offers a view of many birds, Proboscis monkeys, Orang-Utan and other kinds of wildlife, such as monitor lizards and butterflies. Thus, inbound tour operators and the lodge operators in the area are capitalising on the available natural attractions. There are three ecolodge units: Sukau River Lodge, Sukau Proboscis Lodge and Sukau Rainforest Lodge, located along the bank of the Lower Kinabatangan River. Riverboat cruises are a primary eco-activity provided to tourists who stay in the ecodges as part of the eco-experience in Sukau. It offers an alternative way of viewing wildlife in the natural environment via river, jungle or lake, which contributes to a unique experience. The morning and evening riverboat trips aim to provide the opportunity to view wildlife in the natural environment via the river, jungle, or lake, and the natural physical attractions (jungle and river) contribute to a unique experience and scenery in the morning and evening. The riverboat cruises operate in two separate time frames. The three hour daily evening riverboat cruise departs from the ecolodge at 3:30pm to view wildlife along Lower Kinabatangan River and Menanggul River – fresh water swamp forest to discover the proboscis monkeys, birds, reptiles and other wildlife. The three hour daily morning riverboat cruise departs from the ecolodge at 6:30am and cruises along Lower Kinabatangan River and a channel into the Kelananap Oxbow Lake from the Kinabatangan River – to experience freshwater lake scenery, freshwater fish, otters and a jungle trek through secondary forest for wildlife viewing.
Tourist Experiences

Experience has been long seen as central to the tourism product. Furthermore, in an experience economy, enhancing the customer experience is seen as the best way to add value and increase competitiveness of many types of businesses (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). In recent years, both tourism researchers and practitioners have recognized the importance of understanding the visitor experience in order to enhance visitor satisfaction and destination sustainability (Vitterso et al., 2000). It is noted that tourists’ experiences are a complex combination of factors that shape the feelings and attitude of the tourists towards their visit (Page and Dowling, 2002). In the ecotourism site context, tourist’s interaction with nature, the environment and other sources of stimulation (such as wildlife viewing) is an element of the very product or service that the tourist wishes to experience. Ecotourism site attractions can, thus, be seen as “experiential” products, facilitating feelings, emotions, and knowledge for tourists, which is similar to river trips that contribute to similar feelings (Arnould and Price, 1993). Arguably, making an effort to understand the dimensions that contribute to the ecotourists’ experiences is paramount to the quality of management as well as contributing to sustainable resource management (Chan and Baum, 2005).

Within the wider literature, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of tourists’ experience in various tourism sectors; and empirical research on tourists’ experience have been conducted in a variety of areas such as museums (Rowley, 1999), river rafting (Arnould and Price, 1993; Fluker and Turner, 2000), skydiving (Lipscombe, 1999), heritage parks (Prentice et al., 1998), heritage sites (Masberg and Silverman, 1996; McIntosh, 1999) and cruise vacation (Duman and Mattila, 2005). Indeed, tourists’ on-site experiences are influenced by both tangible and functional aspects such as amenities/facilities and services, and by intangible or expressive aspects, which are the emotional states that visitors bring with them. Both of these aspects have been researched in the area of consumer satisfaction but the approaches used have been questioned.

Research Method

This study is an exploratory qualitative research to explore the “how” and “what” questions associated with tourist behaviour. The use of this qualitative approach permits the researcher to capture the voice of tourists and their experiences, which are grounded in the realities that those tourists themselves describe (Bowen, 2002; Seaton, 2002; Chan and Baum, 2004). Chacko and Nebel (1990, p. 383) advocate: “qualitative research is a more appropriate methodology for hospitality researchers especially when the subject of the study is concerned with behavioural issues.” Overt participant observation techniques and Profile Accumulation Technique (PAT) are used in data collection to assess the tourist on-site behaviours and their service experiences via during the riverboat cruises. These two techniques are able to overcome some of the limitations imposed by qualitative research. A coherent justification is manifested in different sources of data and trustworthiness of qualitative findings is established. Similarly, it offers a more holistic perspective of understanding the tourist experiences which include tourist’s behavioural ad experiential aspects.

Data Collection

Overt Participant Observation Techniques

There are 3 stages of data collection. First stage data collection involved familiarization with the riverboat cruise context by experiencing the riverboat cruises from the ecotourist’s
perspective. The experiences gained and the reflections from this context were recorded and combined with the literature on service experience in hospitality, in order to construct an observation sheet that incorporated the following factors:

a) Physical setting of eco-sites visited - environment and activities, attractions and duration of the trips.
b) Ecotourists behaviour-verbal and non-verbal communication and positive and negative experiences encountered.
c) Group interactions and dynamics – among the members and with the guides.

Second stage of data collection focused on the observation data that were gathered during the riverboat cruise trips held in the mornings and evenings using observation sheets and a written diary. Two observation trips served as familiarization with the physical setting and were also used to operationalise the observation sheet before the actual data collection. A total of 10 observation sheets were completed and the data were subjected to thematic analysis, whereby recurring actions and reactions of tourists became the basis for the final interpretation of behaviour. The observation evidence was gathered from multiple observations at two different times (morning and evening) and under different weather conditions to achieve consistent reactions from the tourists. The verbal and non-verbal communication indicators were then categorized as either positive or negative experiences.

The researcher spent two weeks immersed in the field in order to gain full understanding of the eco-environment phenomenon. Observation involved systematically describing events, interactions among tourists, and their behavioural aspects during the riverboat cruises. This serves as the key way for the researcher to hear, see and begin to experience reality. Data collection was carried out from 23rd November 2003 to 27th January 2004. Observation data on Riverboat Cruise in Lower Kinabatangan were gathered based on two separate time frames: a) Three hour Evening River Cruise to view wildlife along Lower Kinabatangan River and Menanggul River – fresh water swamp forest to discover the proboscis monkeys, birds, reptiles and other wildlife; and b) Three Hour Morning Cruise along Lower Kinabatangan River and a channel into the Kelananap Oxbow Lake from the Kinabatangan River - freshwater lake to view, freshwater fish, otters and including a jungle trek through secondary forest for wildlife viewing.

The researcher adopted an overt observation participation technique, and the researcher’s presence was made known to the group being studied to minimize the problem of role pretending while attempting to establish a close relationship with members of the group. The major concerns relating to the use of observation techniques arise from the validity of the tourist’s quotes to confirm findings and issues of reliability including the opportunity of reoccurrences versus real behaviour. This study uses multiple observations and multi methods as well as a search for negative cases to increase validity. The repetition of observations in morning and evening trips across various conditions – both sunny and wet weather, and different times – was used to strengthen reliability.

Profile Accumulation Technique (PAT)

The third stage of data collection focused on the individual service experience during their participation of riverboat cruises in Sukau. PAT was a feasible and practical way to collect data, as there was good cooperation from the riverboat cruise operators and tourist guides. Sampling was based on purposive techniques; the selection of the informants was based on the arrival lists, and the availability and ease with which the researcher could access them when the research was being conducted. A replicated PAT survey form (Johns and Lee-Ross, 1997), a four-paged open-ended questionnaire format, was adopted to collect data. Sample size consisted of 53 tourists staying at two ecolodges in Sukau, Sabah, Malaysia from
November 2003 to February 2004. The PAT survey forms were given to the informants by the receptionists during check-in, to be completed and returned at checkout time. Respondents were asked: a) What are the things you like the most or satisfied with during the riverboat cruises in Sukau? b) The reasons why these things most satisfied you? c) What are the things that you most dislike or most dissatisfied? d) The reasons why these most dissatisfied you?

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1 below provides an overview of the data analysis for participant observation techniques and PAT data. The observational data, field notes and PAT data were processed into computerized form to secure the authenticity and richness of data. It enables the researcher to read and possibly “augment some missing content when it is remembered from the field” (Miles and Huberman 1994, p. 51). The sets of data were carefully read and re-read several times and the researcher was totally “immersed” in the data. Various codes were assigned according to their thematic meaning. Coding and analysis were conducted on the basis of forming the descriptive themes - verbal and non-verbal, and positive and negative experiences and its respective elements, where codes were developed from the data with reference to the research questions. Key themes and categories (positive and negative experiences) and dimensions emerged from the coding process. Subsequently, two sets of data (observation and PAT) were cross checked and referencing made for inter-reliability and consistency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of data collected</th>
<th>Research strategies for data analysis and interpretation</th>
<th>Data analysis method/process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ Participant Observation ▪ Transcript ▪ Field notes ▪ PAT Survey Responses</td>
<td>▪ Phenomenological approach − Significant statements − Meanings − Meaning themes − General description of the experience</td>
<td>▪ Qualitative method of analysis: General analytical procedure which involves: − Data managing, data coding and classifying, data interpreting and data display and presenting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Findings and Discussions

Tourists’ Responses on Riverboat Cruises in Sukau

The riverboat cruise is a primary eco-activity for wildlife viewing and experiencing the natural environment in Sukau. Specifically, the riverboat cruise trips are provided by the ecolodge operators for tourists as part of the eco-experience and activities in Sukau. The observational data and PAT data reveal that tourists generally reacted positively towards the riverboat cruises. It seems that riverboat cruises offer an opportunity to view varieties of wildlife in close proximity without any physical disruption. In the same manner, the tourists were able to cruise along the longest river in Sabah that offers rainforest scenery on both banks. Observational data reveals riverboat cruises offer a unique experience as expressed in the quote: “This (riverboat cruise) is an excellent way to view wildlife and unique experiences for us to cruise along the Kinabatangan River” (Observation Trips 2 and 3). Contributory
factors leading to tourists’ positive experiences related almost exclusively to the wildlife (variety, close contact, in wild environment) and the natural environment as emerged from the quotes: “That was great! I am glad that I have seen so many varieties of wildlife in close contact!” (Observation Trip 1); “It was a worthwhile cruise, we saw (wildlife) more than what we expected, which is a bonus!” (Observation Trip 2); “Well, I have seen wildlife in the wild and its variety is amusing!” (Observation Trip 7). The empirical findings show that riverboat cruises were regarded as a unique experience to gain close contact with wildlife in the natural environment. This echoes the work of Holden and Sparrowhawk (2002) who also stress the sense of closeness to nature.

**Tourist Experiences**

a) Positive Experiences and Its Elements Arising From Verbal and Non-Verbal Responses

The riverboat cruise operations encompass the elements of guide, boatman, wildlife, group interactions, and weather, and all of these elements affect the overall riverboat cruise experience. During the riverboat cruises, the verbal behaviour of the tourists was recorded in their own words via overt participant observation techniques. Some of these statements can be categorized as positive experiences gained that lead to happy moments.

Several elements contributed to positive experiences of the riverboat cruises that emerged from the quotes, including wildlife (varieties and proximity), natural environment and atmosphere, experienced and knowledgeable guide and boatman, as well as group member interactions. Likewise, empirical evidence from PAT data reveals the similar range of positive service attributes. These elements leading to positive experiences are presented in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Elements from Verbal and Non-Verbal Responses Contribute to Positive Experiences in Ascending Order**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Elements</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wildlife (proximity, varieties)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Natural environment and atmosphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Experienced and knowledgeable guides and boatman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Group member interactions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finding shows that tourists generally reacted positively and were happy to see and come into close contact with the varieties of wildlife during the observed riverboat cruise trips. They were amused and excited about the varieties of wildlife and wildlife performance they saw in the trees along the riverbank during these trips. This evidence is reflected in the quotes made during the observation trips; “What a beautiful performance! As the monkeys were jumping from one tree to another continuously” (Observation Trip 3); “I am thrilled, I never had any opportunity to see monkeys, snakes and varieties of birds in a natural setting, I am so contented!” (Observation Trip 10). In addition, the peaceful environment was expressed as one of the indicators of a positive reaction during the riverboat cruises: “Listening to the sounds of birds, I like it so much and the sound of jungle, see the river water flow, a peaceful environment to be in” (Observation Trip 4).

The observational data reveals that both the guide and boatman influence significantly the riverboat cruise experiences. Experienced and knowledgeable guides acted as good communicators to impart information. The guides play an important role in spotting wildlife,
explaining and directing the boatman to get closer to the spot for tourists to photograph wildlife or obtain a closer look. They were viewed as one of the most important dimensions that contribute to a positive experience and happy moments, and were also identified as one of the key service experience attributes. Several instances indicated that the interaction with the guides was crucial in contributing to a positive experience, as reported in several observation trips: “I am so happy now. At least I have the opportunity to see the orangutan...after the efforts by the guide to show me- moving the boat to the right angle and kept showing me till I got it! It is a marvellous experience for me! (Observation Trip 1); “Not a good day to view but we enjoyed it as well with the good guide who tried to show us the wildlife; it is something you can’t control – the weather and the appearance of wildlife, said the tourists” (Observation Trip 3).

On the other hand, the boatman coordinated with the guides in terms of the duration to stay in one particular spot and getting the right angle for tourists to photograph the wildlife. The guides also add to a positive atmosphere with some interesting jokes and attempting to catch tourists’ attention by pointing to the wildlife. The boatmen also played an important role in spotting wildlife due to their expertise and familiarity with the environment.

This suggest that guides and interpretation are an important part of tourists’ learning experience, which also concurs with previous empirical evidence; for example, high quality guides are crucial, with language skills and a wide knowledge of natural and cultural history, environmental interpretation, communication, and ethical principles (Henning 1993; Ballantyne et al., 2000). Weiler and Davis (1993) assert that guides play an important role in ensuring an environmentally responsible tourist experience. Page and Dowling (2002) stress the important principal characteristics of guides, including the education or knowledge on products and surroundings, which influenced the quality of tourist experiences. It is seen that guides enhance the quality of visitors’ experience and also one way to add value to the riverboat cruise experience. Hence, having experienced and skilful guides and boatmen will enhance the riverboat cruise experience significantly and will implicate the management of riverboat cruise.

Verbal responses also reveal that group interactions were an important element contributing to happy moments and positive experiences. Group members interacted well during the riverboat cruise trips. For example, members spoke to each other when seeing a nice butterfly: “Look! Here is a beautiful one to see” (Observation Trip 3). Positive interactions among the group members added an enjoyable moment and affected the ecotourists’ experiences.

b) Positive Experience Arising from Non-Verbal Responses

Likewise, the observational data that recorded non-verbal behaviour of the ecotourists indicated positive experiences gained during the riverboat cruises. Wildlife is the main element attributed to the positive experiences. These positive experiences were evidenced from the body movement of the tourists, such as hand gestures by pointing to the wildlife and taking photographs of the wildlife, which was observed on Observation Trips 1, 5 and 6. Good visual contacts with wildlife were noted on many observation trips. Many pleasant facial expressions were recorded on Observation Trips 1, 2, 3, 6 and 8 and there was also consistent viewing of the wildlife on all of the observational trips. Also, it was found that there were several instances where the boatman navigated the boat to an angle to enable tourists to see clearly and take photos of wildlife, thus enhancing the experience positively on all observation trips. In many instances, the boatman was an expert in snakes, and spotted them on several occasions, and the ecotourists were excited and subsequently showed happy facial expressions (Observation Trips: 1-5, 8, 9 and 10).
On several observation trips, group members assisted each other to view wildlife from a better angle, sharing information and knowledge about wildlife in Borneo and reference books. Social interaction became more obvious after the riverboat trip in the lounge and during dinner. The group members shared their previous eco-tour experiences and similar interests in the lounge and over drinks together after dinner, thus enhancing their overall experience.

c) Negative Experiences and Its Elements Arising from Both Verbal and Non-Verbal Responses

Both observation and PAT data reveal the evidence of elements leading to negative experiences during the riverboat cruises, which were recorded in both verbal (quotes) and non-verbal communications (body language: facial expressive, body movements, group interactions). Negative behaviour reactions occurred when the tourists could not see any wildlife, pollution in the eco-system, such as the noise and fumes caused by the boat engines, boat congestions and poorly maintained jetty as reported in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Elements from Verbal and Non-Verbal Responses Contribute to Negative Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wildlife (Unable to see /disappearance of wildlife)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Noise and fume pollution (boat engines)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Riverboat congestions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Unsafe boat jetty</td>
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</table>

One tourist expressed disappointment at not being able to spot any wildlife after half an hour cruising by saying: “No luck!” (Observation Trip 2), while another tourist stated that: “If I had not seen any orang-utan, I would be so disappointed” (Observation Trip 2). There were unhappy facial expressions shown by the ecotourists when there was no wildlife to see after half an hour of cruising on Observation Trips 1, 2, 3, 6 and 8, and the moments when wildlife disappeared into the jungle on Observation Trips 3 and 5. It seems that the tourists were not only interested in viewing wildlife and experiencing the eco-environment but they also showed concern for the eco-environment in relation to the particular issues of environmental pollution. These were related to noise pollution and fumes from the boat engines. One ecotourist was annoyed by the noise caused by the boat engines: “I hate to listen to those noises coming from the boats... can they not do something about it?” (Observation trip 1 and PAT 3, 4, 5). Noise from the boat engines was reported on Observation Trips 1, 9 and 10 and boat congestion during wildlife viewing happened on Observation Trips 2 and 8. Likewise, PAT data reveals there were many negative aspects of the riverboat cruise trip. These aspects include long waiting time with short duration of cruise, boat congestion on the river, diesel boat engines causing noise and fumes, strong sun, the poor condition of life jackets in the boat, and less wildlife seen. These aspects are controllable with the exception of wildlife seen.

The study seems to suggest that similar elements leading to positive and negative experiences of tourist during the riverboat cruises. Thus, wildlife and natural environment and atmosphere are deemed as primary elements that contribute significantly to tourist experiences in the riverboat cruise context. Guides, boatman, riverboat cruise operations are regarded as secondary elements.
Service Experience Attributes of Riverboat Cruises

Tourist interactions with nature, the environment, and other sources of stimulation (such as wildlife viewing, guides and group member interactions) are the elements of the riverboat cruises that they reacted upon or service experience attributes that influenced the tourists’ experience. The elements leading to positive and negative experiences from multi data sources (observational and PAT data) seem to suggest that both the riverboat cruise itself and wildlife viewing are regarded as important activities for the tourists in Sukau. Both wildlife and the natural environment (pristine and protected environment) are important components of riverboat cruises that contribute significantly to tourists’ experiences. The importance of wildlife and the natural environment are consistent with the findings on the tourists’ behaviour from previous studies. Meric and Hunt (1998) address this by observing that wildlife viewing is an important activity. Crossley and Lee (1994) indicate the importance of unspoiled nature and increased tourists’ knowledge of wildlife. Backman et al. (1994) asserts that the aim is to learn about nature and meet people with similar interests. This seems to confirm that the tourists’ experiences in the riverboat cruises are attributed to both human (guides/boatman, group members) and physical dimensions (destination attractions-wildlife and pristine environment). As Baum (1997, p. 92) stresses, “Experiences of the consumer are highly intense and intimate in the interaction...with those providing services”. These findings are congruent with some of the findings found in the literature; for example Page and Dowling (2002) also report the importance of the guides’ knowledge of both product and surroundings contributing to a significant degree to tourist experience.

Based on the above findings, one can reasonably conclude that elements contributing to positive and negative experiences can be termed as service experience attributes to determine the tourist experiences. In addition, these elements contributing to the tourists’ experiences during the riverboat cruises can be further classified into two categories: a) tangible elements – wildlife and natural attractions (jungles, river), and b) intangible elements – natural environment and atmospheres, riverboat cruises, guides and boatman services, and group member interactions (showing similar interests in wildlife viewing and social interaction).

Conclusions and Management Implications

The study concludes that significant elements contribute the tourist experiences during the riverboat cruises are: a) wildlife and pristine environment (physical dimensions); b) guides, boatman and group members (human dimensions); and c) natural environment and atmosphere (human dimensions/ personal experiential). Thus, tourist experiences in the riverboat cruise are influenced by both physical/environmental and human dimensions. The understanding of elements in tourists’ experiences and service experience attributes provide significant practical and managerial implications on riverboat cruises and tourist quality experiences for the operators. It suggests that riverboat cruise operators need to take control and prevent poor performance from elements leading to negative experiences, such as noise and fumes from boat engines, riverboat congestions and unsafe boat jetties. One suggestion is to replace with electric boat engines (replace 4- stroke boat engine for quieter and less polluting) to cope with emission of noise and fumes into the pristine environment. Also, provision of safe and well-maintained boat jetties is regarded as a basic requirement for a safe trip for tourists. Tourists in Sukau are very concerned with maintaining a pristine environment and having close contact with the wildlife without physical disruption. Although wildlife presence during the riverboat cruises are beyond the control of the
operators, it is suggested that both guides and boatman play a vital role in attempting to search for wildlife and influence substantially the experience sought in riverboat cruises. Page et al. (2001) state that a tourist experience can be influenced by individual, environmental, situational and personality related factors, as well as communication with other people. It is a complex amalgam of factors, which shapes the ecotourists’ feeling and attitudes towards their visit (Page, 1995). Since all of these factors are interrelated, it is impossible to predict tourist responses to individual situations. Thus, this study provides an alternative to determine tourists’ experiences by eliciting the tangible and intangible elements via their verbal and non-verbal responses, which shaped their experiences during their participation in the riverboat cruises.

Research Contributions and Limitations

This study, arguably, is a pioneering investigation into tourists’ experiences sought in a riverboat cruises context in Sukau. The paper contributes to an understanding of tourists’ evaluation of the riverboat cruises and identification of service attributes for riverboat cruises in Sukau, an under-researched area. More importantly, it provides managerial and practical implications for riverboat cruise management in terms of quality experience and tourist satisfaction. Also, the use of multi methods and multi data sources in this study provides a more reliable, holistic perspective and ecological valid account of the tourists’ reactions and experiences in this specific context. However, data collected is limited to one specific location and comparative work in similar context in different locations and countries would prove beneficial for the possible generalization of the findings.

References


