

Repositioning strategy in the ecotourism industry: a case of Bario

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Introduction

One of the major challenges faced by a rural tourism destination such as Bario, in the state of Sarawak, Malaysia, is to understand customers' perceptions and expectations of tourism in Bario. This is an important issue due to customers' demands and the ability to recognise and make comparisons between products offered by various tourism destinations. It is imperative for Bario's tourism industry players to understand and be aware of what their customers require in order to remain competitive in the marketplace, as customer satisfaction is one of the important determiners in the quality management of organisations.

Service quality is considered to be one of the critical measures of performance and satisfaction and it has received extensive attention from researchers in recent years. Past researchers such as Grönroos (1984) and Parasuraman *et al.* (1985, 1991), opined that the traditional approach to defining service quality emphasises that service quality perception is a comparison of consumer expectations and actual performance. Furthermore, Chia *et al.* (2002) simplified the definition of service quality as a comparison between consumers' expectations and their perception of the service they actually receive. Service quality is also applicable in other industries, and the tourism industry is no different. The tourism industry needs to be more alert to service quality changes and the demands and expectations for better quality services to ensure the sustainability of the tourism industry.

We could not find prior studies that have examined empirically the dimensions of service quality of customers' satisfaction by examining the tourists' actual service performance in a remote area. Past studies (e.g. Lewis *et al.*, 1994) have posited that perceived service quality is a global judgment or attitude relating to service, and hence, if there is a shortfall, a service quality gap will exist and the providers will have to find ways to mend it. Thus, service quality is a measure of how well the service level matches up to customers' expectations (Lewis, 1989).

This study covers a rural destination of Bario, a remote rural community located on the island of Borneo, close to the Malaysia-Indonesia border between Sarawak, Malaysia and Kalimantan, Indonesia. The only practical way to get to Bario is a one-hour flight on a 19-seater Twin Otter aircraft. There is no road leading into Bario, and a land journey would require a two-day boat ride and a 14-day-long trek across forested mountains. Bario is home to about 1,500 people who are generally farmers, growing the famous fragrant Bario rice. In addition, it has no basic infrastructure, such as no 24-hour electricity supply, and water is only available through a gravity-fed system.

Recently, the state government of Sarawak gave the green light for a pioneering plant in Bario to generate electricity from sunlight and wind. The project, the first of its kind in the state, will use a combination of solar and wind energy to generate power.

With this new plant, the livelihood of the local people is likely to increase for the better. As there will be enough power supplied to Bario, there is an opportunity for an increase in the