

## Exploring Travel Motivation Within a South East Asian Ecotourism Context

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**Abstract:** This study focuses on ecotourist's travel motivations to Sabah a state in Borneo that is largely popular for ecotourism. It uses the 'push-pull theory' to understand why ecotourists travel. The methodology chosen for this study was on-site survey at selected ecotourism destinations in Sabah. Survey assistants approached potential respondents and assisted them to complete the questionnaires. The sample consisted of 254 of the targeted 599 respondents who completed the questionnaires. To determine the differences in travel motivation among participants according to their demographic background, independent sample t-test and one-way ANOVA were applied. Analysis showed one key finding, i.e., that the primary travel motivation for ecotourists to Sabah is not culture or nature as found for ecotourists in many previous studies but bonding, i.e., spending time with family and friends. Other important motivations include socialization, pleasure and species/wildlife sighting. The study ends with a discussion of both the theoretical and managerial implications of the findings.

**Key words:** Ecotourists, travel motivation, marketing, Asia, ANOVA

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### INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a Southeast Asian country that significantly depends on tourism as one of its primary economic income generator. It is a beautiful tropical country that consists of the peninsular (West Malaysia) and half of Borneo (East Malaysia). While West Malaysia is quite well developed and modernized, East Malaysia still has an abundance of forested and natural areas. This is particularly true in Sabah which is the context of this study, allowing the state to offer ecotourism as its primary tourist product.

Ecotourism is a form of responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well being of local people. It involves visits to destinations where animals, plants and cultural heritage are the main attractions (Ezebilo, 2014). The National Ecotourism Plan Malaysia Part 1 has defined ecotourism as a tourism product that promotes concern and conservation to natural areas has low impact and the tendency to improve the socio-economic of the local communities. This definition is now used as well by IUCN World Conservation Union, an organization in which Malaysia is a member. Eco-tourists (i.e., visitors to ecotourism sites) often have varied demographic characteristics, personal backgrounds, preferences and

motivations (Ezebilo, 2014; Pirani and Secondi, 2011). A good understanding of this heterogeneity could benefit an ecotourism destination particularly from the marketing point of view. This study reports an empirical investigation into the issue of ecotourist's travel motivations within the context of a popular ecotourism destination in Malaysia. Analysing the data from 254 completed responses, the study ascertained differences in travel motivations among ecotourists of Sabah.

**Literature review:** Tourist motivation is defined as a set of needs that form an impulse in an individual to participate in a tourism activity (Pizam *et al.*, 1979). Since, tourist motivation is the result of both internal and external forces that drive a potential tourist into action (MTC, 2011; Prebensen *et al.*, 2013), these motivations are often the first step in the traveller's buying decision-making process (Chi, 2011). Therefore, researchers agree that understanding why people travel to and why they chose, a specific destination to visit is crucial for tourism marketers (Prebensen *et al.*, 2013) particularly to tourism entrepreneurs that provide tourist products and services. Since, entrepreneurship is a major contributor towards a society's positive development, understanding of the market allows destination managers and marketers to better comprehend

what destination-specific factors could influence the selection of a specific destination (Lee and Hsu, 2013; Ezebilu, 2014; Bustam and Stein, 2010). Therefore, examination of traveller's motivations has been one of the most frequently studied topics in the field of hospitality and tourism.

One of the common theories to understand why people travel has been the push-pull theory (Gavcar and Gursoy, 2002). The push-pull theory examines travel motivations from a two-dimensional perspective and it assumes that people travel and choose specific destinations because of their desires or wants to satisfy a need and are pulled or attracted to a destination by its need-satisfying attributes (Prebensen *et al.*, 2013). Push factors refer to internal forces such as escaping from routine, entertainment or relax and pull motivators refer to specific characteristics of the destination such as the environment, landscape, monuments, etc., that may attract the potential tourist. Therefore, push motivations relate to tourist wishes while pull motivations relate to destination attributes that are likely to motivate or create a desire to travel. Most of the push factors are intangible needs of the individual travellers (Gavcar and Gursoy, 2002) such as need for escape, rest and relaxation, prestige, health and fitness, adventure and social interaction. Some of the push factors identified in the travel literature includes socio-psychological constructs of travellers, socioeconomic factors, demographic variables and Attitudes, Interests and Opinions (AIO) of travellers (Prebensen *et al.*, 2013). On the other hand, pull factors are destination-specific factors that are likely to influence the destination choice behaviour of travellers (Prebensen *et al.*, 2013). The pull factors of a destination are the destination attributes and can either be tangible resources or the perceptions and expectations of the traveller (Lee and Hsu, 2013). It is suggested that to attract or pull travellers to a destination, destination attributes must be able to connect to traveller's perceptions and values (Gavcar and Gursoy, 2002). Push and pull factors have also been identified within the context of ecotourism. Earlier studies (Fennell, 1990; Williacy and Eagles, 1990; Kretchman and Eagles, 1990; Eagles and Cascagnette, 1995) contend that ecotourist's push motivation revolves more around the environment and adventure, learning about culture and environment, nature photography and plenty of sightseeing activities (Eagles and Cascagnette, 1995). They are motivated by nature attraction and enjoy adventurous, active physical lifestyles. Other researchers (Woods and Moscardo, 1998) added pull motivations to the list by including non-crowded locations, remote wildlife area, community benefit, physical challenge and animal viewing as motivations.

This study looks at travel motivation of ecotourists which are classified as Push and Pull factors. Push factors include 'escape', 'rest and relaxation', 'prestige', 'health and fitness', 'adventure' and 'social interaction' whereas pull factor includes 'wilderness', 'serenity', 'natural beauty' and 'landscape's (Fishman, 1995). However, focus was just on the Push factors because understanding the intangible needs of travellers (Gavcar and Gursoy, 2002) could shed light on what factors they seek when choosing a destination in this case Sabah. This study is different from other studies on travel motivation because it looked at what drives ecotourists to visit a popular tropical ecotourism destination in Southeast Asia. Lack of research on international traveller's travel motivation within this context enhances its importance because factors influencing ecotourist's motivation have essentially been investigated primarily within non-Asian context. For example, Canadian ecotourists (Eagles and Cascagnette, 1995) travel to ecotourism destination to 'visit wilderness's. Meanwhile, Australian, Japan and Taiwan ecotourists share similar motivations, i.e., to visit aquatic environments such as lakes and rivers, to get involved in nature based activities at parks and ecological sites, to learn about nature (also identified as social needs), to engage in nature and wildlife photography, to be adventurous and physically active, to experience new lifestyle and to meet others who share their interests. There has also been attempt to study motivation of ecotourists based on the destination they visit. For example ecotourists in Peruvian Amazon desire to observe singular species, large terrestrial mammals or mega fauna (Naidoo and Adamowicz, 2005; Okello *et al.*, 2008, 2001). Ecotourists to Africa (Walpole and Leader-Williams, 2002) are motivated by the potential of sighting species particularly flagship species such as hippopotamus, giraffe and elephant due to their large, easy to spot size.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study used its own 5-point Likert scale instrument as opposed to adopting an already published instrument (Eagles and Cascagnette, 1995) for two reasons namely 1. The context of study is Asia and not North America or any other continents. Therefore adopting an instrument developed for Western or other contexts may affect content validity and 2. There was no opportunity to obtain any complete instrument from previous studies, as most journal articles do not convey their whole instrument. Therefore we did not have access to a complete instrument model. Development of the survey instrument for this study followed the procedures for developing a standardized survey instrument (Churchill, 1997; DeVellis, 1991). The initial task in

developing the instrument was to devise an item pool. Relevant literature, coupled with interviews with travellers and travel experts provided the required information to develop and identify the item pool. Content experts helped with the content validity of the items.

The experts commented on the content and clarity, edited and improved the items to enhance their comprehensiveness, readability as well as content validity. They helped identify any redundant scale items and offer suggestions for improving the proposed scale. After making sure that the survey instrument has content validity, it was pre-tested on a group of travellers to Malaysia. Based on the pre-test responses, the survey instrument was modified. The final version of the survey instrument was used to collect data from selected sample of ecotourists to Malaysian ecotourism destinations.

The survey took place at selected ecotourism sites in Sabah. The state of Sabah can be deemed as an ecotourism destination due to the many vibrant and diverse ecological tourist destinations available in this state. There are six protected national parks, three of which are terrestrial and three marines. The terrestrial parks include Mt. Kinabalu, Crocker Range and Tawau Hills while the marine parks are Turtle Island, Tunku Abdul Rahman and Pulau Tiga. All these parks are habitats for a huge biodiversity of species (see <http://greenglobaltravel.com/2014/10/19/sabah-borneo-ecotourism-attractions/>). Aside from the protected parks, there are also nature areas in Semporna and Sandakan that include diving paradise of Mabul Island, Mantabuan Island, Sibuan Island as well as Sepilok and Sukau Kinabatangan in Sandakan. For this reason, the sample will be drawn based on the total visitors to Sabah in 2013 which were 3,230,645 (<http://www.sabahtourism.com/sites/default/files/visitor-2014.pdf>). The population of international ecotourists visiting Sabah during January-April of 2013 averaged out to be about 269,220 (see [www.sabah.tourism.com](http://www.sabah.tourism.com)). The estimated target sample required (Confidence Level: 95%; Confidence Interval: +-4; see <http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm>) was 599. Participants were randomly approached on site and those willing to participate were personally assisted to ensure they understood and able to complete all the survey questions. At the end of the fieldwork duration, 254 completed questionnaires were found useful for the purpose of this analysis, giving the study a response rate of 42%.

## RESULTS

Descriptive statistics of the respondent's demographic characteristics showed that 72.8% of the 254

**Table 1: Reliability analysis of the variables**

Variables	N of items	Alpha
Relaxation	5	0.790
Excitement	6	0.708
Pleasure	7	0.796
Socialization	6	0.830
Bonding	6	0.837
Culture	6	0.788
Education/learning	6	0.790
Nature	6	0.835
Self-actualization	6	0.751
Species/wildlife sighting	6	0.795

were males. The active, adventurous and sometimes harsh nature of most ecotourism activities probably explains why there are more male participants in this study. Most of the participants in this survey were between 42-49 year old (80.3%). Single tourist constitute of 45.7% of the participants while 49.6 were married. The 36.6% of the respondents were businessmen, students (27.2%) and professionals (17.7%). The 35.4 % of the participants were from Asia. Most of the participants were travelling with friends (36.2%) and family (26.4%) and many have never done the same trip before (41.6%). Most of them stayed at hotels (57.6%) and for <3 days (48.8%). A majority of the participants plan to revisit the same destination, to volunteer in the next visit (54.3%) and to make donations (48.8%). The Cronbach's alpha values for each variable of this study are as follows (Table 1).

Next, respondents were asked on their perception towards travel motivation, measured using ten dimensions, i.e., relaxation, excitement, pleasure, socialization, bonding, culture, education/learning, nature, self-actualization and species/wildlife sighting. Their perceptions were measured using a five-point scale, ranging from 1=strongly disagree; to 5 = strongly agree. A descriptive analysis determined respondent's level of perception towards each variable and dimensions. To identify the perception level of these factors, the mean values were computed with the middle point to separate the level from low, moderate and high as mentioned by Healey (2005). Mean scores of the three levels are as follows:

- Low Importance = 1.00-2.25
- Moderate Importance = 2.26-3.75
- High Importance = 3.76-5.00

Mean values analysis indicated that the respondent's motivations to travel were for the opportunity to bond (mean = 4.10, sd = 0.41) especially to have quality time for family and friends, followed by for socialization (mean = 4.01, sd = 0.39) and pleasure (0.399, sd = 0.25). Respondents also indicated that they travelled for sighting of species/wildlife (mean = 3.96, sd = 0.31), nature (mean = 3.91, sd = 0.32),

self-actualization (mean = 3.90, sd = 0.26), excitement (mean = 3.88, sd = 0.26), education/learning (mean = 3.84, sd = 0.43) and relaxation (mean = 3.81, sd = 0.47). Travel motivation for culture appeared to be moderate (mean = 3.43, sd = 0.62) (Table 2).

**Travel motivation and demographic variables:** To determine the differences in motivation among participants according to their demographic background, independent sample t-test and one-way ANOVA were applied. It is found that there was no significant difference in all travelling motivation dimensions between male and female. The group's mean scores were almost similar leading to the conclusion that gender does not play a role in travel motivation in this study context.

However, there were significant differences in most of the travelling motivation dimensions among participants with different places of origin, particularly in relation to

the relaxation ( $F = 7.577, p < 0.01$ ), excitement ( $F = 5.757, p < 0.01$ ) and pleasure ( $F = 4.649, p < 0.01$ ) dimensions. Participants from North America scored the highest agreement compared to the participants from other region for these three dimensions. Participants also showed significant difference on their agreement towards travel motivation dimensions such as bonding ( $F = 3.861, p < 0.01$ ), culture ( $F = 8.721, p < 0.01$ ) and education/learning ( $F = 9.871, p < 0.01$ ). Participants from Asia scored the highest agreement towards these three travelling motivations. Lastly, there was also significant difference in travel motivations dimensions such as nature ( $F = 3.141, p < 0.01$ ) with participants from North America scoring the highest mean (mean = 4.08), followed by participants from South America (mean = 3.97) and Asia (mean = 3.94) (Table 3).

There were also significant differences among different categories of age. Specifically, participants aged between 18-25 and >50 year scored the highest mean on nature, culture, self-actualization and pleasure compared to participants from other age groups (Table 4).

In terms of occupation, significant difference was only found in relation to one motivational factor, i.e., excitement ( $F = 3.753, p < 0.05$ ) which is sought more by the professional group compared to other groups. There was no significant difference in participant's opinion on other travel motivation factors according to their occupation (Table 5).

Table 2: Ranking of travel motivation for international ecotourists to sabah

Variables/dimension	Mean	SD	Rank
Relaxation	3.81	0.47	9
Excitement	3.88	0.26	7
Pleasure	3.99	0.25	3
Socialization	4.01	0.39	2
Bonding	4.10	0.41	1
Culture	3.43	0.62	10
Education/learning	3.84	0.43	8
Nature	3.91	0.32	5
Self-actualization	3.90	0.26	6
Species/wildlife sighting	3.96	0.31	4

Table 3: Differences in travel motivation by region of origin of participants

Travel motivations	Region (mean)						F-values	Sig.
	Asia	Africa	Europe	North America	South America	Oceania		
Relaxation	4.00	3.54	3.65	4.03	3.79	3.70	7.577	0.000
Excitement	3.96	3.71	3.83	4.04	3.86	3.84	5.757	0.000
Pleasure	4.07	3.86	3.94	4.05	4.01	3.91	4.649	0.000
Socialization	4.10	3.85	4.00	4.08	3.88	3.99	2.215	0.053
Bonding	4.23	3.87	4.06	4.10	4.01	4.04	3.861	0.002
Culture	3.76	3.28	3.30	3.15	3.26	3.22	8.721	0.000
Education/learning	4.03	3.53	3.65	4.00	3.84	3.78	9.871	0.000
Nature	3.94	3.72	3.93	4.08	3.97	3.83	3.141	0.009
Self-actualization	3.93	3.92	3.86	4.04	3.88	3.88	1.354	0.242
Species/wildlife sighting	4.01	3.92	3.96	4.08	3.89	3.87	2.078	0.069

Table 4: Differences in travel motivation by age group of participants

Travel motivations	Age (mean)					F-values	Sig.
	18-25	26-33	34-41	42-49	>50		
Relaxation	4.52	4.04	3.69	3.81	3.64	4.0840	0.003
Excitement	4.27	3.73	3.69	3.91	3.87	10.010	0.000
Pleasure	4.40	4.17	3.83	3.99	4.40	13.334	0.000
Socialization	4.80	4.13	3.89	4.01	4.03	6.6580	0.000
Bonding	4.80	3.87	3.86	4.13	4.17	8.4140	0.000
Culture	5.00	4.20	3.70	3.34	3.20	15.825	0.000
Education/learning	4.87	4.33	3.84	3.80	3.63	10.721	0.000
Nature	4.70	3.57	3.58	3.95	4.17	27.686	0.000
Self-actualization	4.30	3.50	3.78	3.92	4.30	13.493	0.000
Species/wildlife sighting	4.60	4.07	3.73	3.98	4.03	12.257	0.000

Table 5: Differences in travel motivation by occupation of participants

Variables	Occupation (mean)				F-values	Sig.
	Students	Professional	Businessman	Others		
Relaxation	3.81	3.92	3.75	3.80	1.259	0.289
Excitement	3.87	3.98	3.88	3.81	3.753	0.012
Pleasure	3.97	4.02	3.98	3.99	0.378	0.769
Socialization	4.01	4.04	4.00	4.03	0.137	0.938
Bonding	4.08	4.00	4.13	4.17	1.524	0.209
Culture	3.44	3.51	3.38	3.46	0.526	0.665
Education/learning	3.86	3.93	3.77	3.84	1.424	0.236
Nature	3.86	3.98	3.92	3.89	1.379	0.250
Self-actualization	3.87	3.90	3.92	3.92	0.582	0.627
Species/wildlife sighting	3.92	3.97	3.98	3.96	0.445	0.721

### DISCUSSION

The data of this study shows that in the context of Sabah there were more male ecotourists compared to female ecotourists. The active and challenging nature of ecotourism activities probably explains the higher male participants at the time of the study. Age-wise the travellers were mostly in their 40's consisting of businessmen and professionals. Only one third of the respondents were students. Most of them preferred travelling in groups either with friends or family as opposed to travelling solo, a finding that supports the proposal that ecotourists prefer to travel in groups (Eagles and Cascagnette, 1995). The majority prefer to stay in hotels and would stay for the period of fewer than 3 days. Most of the participants planned to revisit the same destination that they have visited during the study. They also planned to volunteer in the next visit and to make donations to the ecotourism sites that they visit.

The above-mentioned profile of Sabah's ecotourists found in this study shows that the primary market for Sabah's ecotourism attractions is promising. They consist of working male adults with high spending capacity. In addition, since they travel in groups as opposed to travelling solo, this means that they are a potentially lucrative segment because of the high potential expenditure that might incur with this type of travel preference. In addition, the expressed willingness of the majority to do a repeat visit to Sabah and their willingness to donate while visiting further cemented their attractiveness as a potential target market.

Test for significant differences in travel motivations across socio-demographic profile showed that there were significant differences in most of the travelling motivation dimensions among respondents from different places of origin. In particular, they differed in terms of travelling to Sabah for 'relaxation', for 'excitement' and for 'pleasure', with ecotourists from North America scoring the highest. Respondents also significantly differed in terms of three other travel motivations, i.e., for 'bonding', for 'culture' and for 'learning'. Participants from Asia scored the

highest agreement towards these three travelling motivations. Lastly, respondents also differed in terms of visiting Sabah for 'nature' with the participant from North America scoring the highest followed by participants from South America and Asia.

Analysis on the mean scores showed that overall, 'culture' is not the main draw for ecotourists to Sabah. Instead, the highest mean score was for 'bonding' which implies that compared to other factors, ecotourists to Sabah visit primarily to enhance 'bonding' between them and their friends and families. The need for 'socialization' and 'pleasure' is also high as motivators for their visit. While the mean scores of other factors are also high which means that there are many factors that drive ecotourists to Sabah, the highest mean score on 'bonding' implies that the opportunity to be with friends and family is the biggest motivator for ecotourists to visit Sabah. These findings are different from findings of earlier studies on ecotourism motivations within other ecotourism settings which had found factors such as non-crowded locations; remote wilderness area; learning about wildlife; nature; community benefit; viewing plants and animals and physical challenge (Woods and Moscardo, 1998; Wight, 1996; Eagles and Cascagnette, 1995) to be the main driver. The fact that the majority of Sabah's ecotourists are from Asia could somehow be associated to the findings. Asians are known for their collectivism culture as opposed to individualistic culture often associated with members of the Western or European societies.

In terms of occupation, the segments differ in only one type of travel motivation i.e. excitement which is sought most by the professional group compared to others. A possible explanation is that the hectic and routine lifestyle of professionals at the workplace enhances their wish for something interesting and excitement when travelling. Sabah seems a promising place to fulfil this desire which in turn has motivated them to choose Sabah as their ecotourism destination.

As for the theoretical implication of the study, it can be proposed that perhaps the collectivistic lifestyle that

is still prevalent among Asian people has given rise to the need for social benefits even within an ecotourism setting such as Sabah. Collectivism is an overall living philosophy that prioritises interdependence among the people (Chadda and Deb, 2013). It focuses on social cohesion and group goals. In Asian collectivistic culture, values, self-concept and attitudes are different from those in Western countries because they are usually formed by family identity, sense of belonging, dependency on others, empathy towards others, reciprocity among group members.

The study findings also have managerial implications. Since, social motives are top on the list for choosing Sabah, development of attractive group packages is very important to attract ecotourists to Sabah. In addition, the itinerary of the packages would be more appealing if entertainment-based events (such as Music of the Rainforest) are included because such events would allow socialization and bonding. This is especially true for the Asian market, because bonding is an important travel motivation for them when choosing Sabah.

Secondly, Sabah seems to attract a very good segment of potentially high spending male professionals. This segment is typically 'in the prime of their lives' and could be a lucrative target market because at this stage of their life cycles, they are already earning a steady and most probably higher income than other demographic segments. In addition, they seem willing to revisit and donate to an ecotourism cause when they visit. Therefore it would be to the advantage of Sabah's destination marketers and managers to get connected with this segment through advertisements and tactical campaigns that could generate and/or enhance their desire to choose Sabah as their primary ecotourism destination.

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, understanding travel motivations of the market is very important to help destination managers and marketers design appropriate marketing mix. In Sabah, offering bountiful opportunities for bonding, socialization, pleasure and species/wildlife sighting will attract more ecotourists to Sabah. It would also contribute towards enhancing the probability of repeat visit and perhaps even the possibility of destination loyalty among Sabah visitors as well.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Future analysis on travel motivation for ecotourists will be more comprehensive if coupled with analysis on

the satisfaction level of the ecotourists. This would give researchers a more holistic picture on a destination's ability to attract and satisfy their market and critical for the management of tourism (Torres-Sovero *et al.*, 2012), particularly in nature tourism enterprises like ecotourism which contribute to biodiversity conservation and local community development. Thus, future researchers can engage in deeper analysis using Structural Equation Modelling or Importance-Performance Analysis on a specific ecotourism destination to get meaningful findings on the state of ecotourism offerings at the destination. Destination manager or marketer could later utilize such knowledge to develop good marketing plan for specific segments.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The project from which this study is drawn has been financially supported by the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (SO Code 12946), Ministry of Education, Malaysia.

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