

ROLE OF ECOTOURISM AND WELLNESS TOURISM IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THAILAND

Sirinya Siriyannun*, Thanapat Patchim, Wallop Piriyaawatthana*****

**Security Innovation Management, College of Innovation and Management
Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Bangkok, Thailand,*

***School of Law and Politics, Suan Dusit University, Bangkok, Thailand,*

****College of Politics and Government, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University,
Bangkok, Thailand*

*E-Mail: *sirinya.si@ssur.ac.th, ** thanapat_pat@dusit.ac.th, ***wallop.pi@ssru.ac.th*

ABSTRACT

Ecotourism and wellness tourism are popular nowadays, especially in tourist attractions that are outstanding in terms of natural resources. Ecotourism and wellness tourism have played a huge role in the economic and social development of Thailand. However, when humans benefit from resource utilization through health tourism, it is essential to protect the environment. Ecotourism focuses on preserving the environment while integrating tourism into the local population, and exists in a variety of forms. The government therefore wants to achieve sustainable development of ecotourism and wellness tourism. The government ecotourism project focuses on research from around the world that pertains the positive and negative impacts of ecotourism and wellness tourism on various economic sectors. It starts with an ecotourism and wellness tourism assessment, and continues training and project implementation, and additional implementation of suitable management policies.

Keyword: Ecotourism, Wellness Tourism, Sustainable, Development

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry is important to the development of Thailand, as the tourism industry is the main industry to promote the Thai economy both nationally and internationally. In addition, tourism also encourages development and income distribution to communities and society (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2020). However, it is often found that the growth of the tourism industry directly and indirectly affects the environment and tourism resources. Therefore, the public and private sectors should encourage communities to participate in managing these resources for sustainable development. Nowadays, it is found that the context of tourism looks different from before. One area that has changed is number of elderly people engaged in travel, which has led to an increase in the popularity of ecotourism and wellness tourism. Ecotourism and wellness tourism are forms of travel that support the wellbeing of both travelers and service providers. Emphasis is placed on presenting the image and potential of the community in developing health services from local natural resources as well as local wisdom. Thailand has established a strategy to develop the country into an international health center within 10 years (2016-2025) (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2016).

The growth and promotion of ecotourism and wellness tourism emphasizes Thailand's potential as a hub for health care that encourages longevity through good health, happiness, and a sense of balance in life. According to the aforementioned strategies and plans for tourism development, ecotourism and wellness tourism are particularly popular with both domestic and international tourists. This is because travelers can visit beautiful tourist attractions in natural places and learn about culture and way of life. In addition to recreation, tourists can participate

activities that promote their health and recovery. In general, wellness tourism brings people to natural places, and uses natural energy to heal and to promote physical and mental health. In developing the potential of tourism, various sectors are involved, including government agencies and the private sectors. Stakeholders include local tourism and academic departments, educational institutions, and NGOs. The development direction is varied according to the mission or guidelines of each agency. Therefore, various sectors, especially the people's sectors, need to cooperate in thinking, planning, acting, and taking responsibility, so that they will jointly receive benefits. This will create a direction for tourism development that will benefit the local community to the maximum so that all parties can jointly drive the strategic plan because all parties have participated from the beginning. When there is a benefit or a disadvantage, all parties will be jointly responsible and receive long-term benefits together (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2019).

THEORY & LITERATURE

Concept of Ecotourism

Hector Ceballos Lascurain (1983) coined the term "ecotourism" in 1983 to describe the nature-based travel to relatively undisturbed areas with an emphasis on education. Ecotourism is a form of tourism that prioritizes the sustainable development of the country in which the tourism is taking place. According to the Universal Declaration of Sustainable Environmental Development, ecotourism gives importance to education or learning and focuses on conservation rather than management, and on reducing or eliminating impacts rather than satisfying tourists. Ecotourism must be responsible tourism in natural attractions, must prioritize environmental management, and must consistently provide education to tourists (Boonlert Jittangwatana, 1999).

The Tourism Authority of Thailand (2011) defines ecotourism as a unique form of tourism to cultural and ecological sites, which prioritizes collaborative learning, environmental management, and involvement of the local population. The goal is to create awareness of the preservation of the ecosystem. Ecotourism is a tool to promote conservation of the environment, natural resources, and local culture, and to improve the quality of life of local people with emphasis on economic, social, and environmental equality.

Ecotourism destinations can be divided into 3 categories:

1. Natural Attractions
2. Man-made attractions (Manufactured Attractions)
3. Cultural and lifestyle attractions

Ecotourism is therefore a tourism activity that promotes nature education and environmental conservation. Promoting ecotourism will help generate income, which will in turn be used for environmental conservation projects. It also creates jobs for local people to increase income. When local people earn more from tourism activities, it reduces their dependency on natural resources. In short, ecotourism promotes economic development at multiple levels. Ecotourism is therefore a form of sustainable development. At the same time ecotourism is one of the preferred tools for conservation and community development in many rural areas. Its effectiveness depends in its potential to provide local economic benefits by maintaining ecological resource integrity through low-impact and non-consumptive use of local resources (Stem CJ, 2003)

Concept of Wellness tourism

The Tourism Authority of Thailand (2008) defined wellness tourism as travel in which the destination includes both natural and cultural attractions that involve learning how to live and relax. This also includes travel for health promotion and health rehabilitation activities (Aran

Boonchai and Jinta Tansarawiput, 2003). Nowadays, most wellness tourism occurs in health centers. The main principle of the health center is that the place should have beautiful natural conditions, should be shady, clean, and free of pollution, and should have facilities and experts for sanitation, physical health, and mental health (Wanna Wongvanich, 2003). Wellness tourism involves traveling from one's country of residence to other countries for the use of health care and medical services (Kesar and Rimal, 2011). Travel is tailored to individual needs with services often included in the program such as health checks, dentistry, and cosmetic surgery, with recreational activities before or after treatment. This is consistent with a study by Warintra Sirisuttikul (2013), which states that wellness tourists spend part of their time using health services.

Wellness Tourism of Thailand

As of 2018, 61 medical facilities, consisting of 14 clinics, across the country had received the international standard certification of the Joint Commission International (JCI). According to the ranking of International Healthcare Research Center (IHRC), the wellness tourism industry in Thailand is ranked 6th in the world because of its two main strengths, namely personnel and services, when compared to the standards of other countries. The cost of service is not high compared to the quality, and Thailand has diverse natural and cultural tourist attractions. Tourism expenses are not high, and airlines are fast and convenient (Economic and Business Research Center (EBC)).

Concepts and theories of sustainable tourism development

The concept of sustainability first appeared in a report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission) in 1987. Sustainable development holds high potential for any community within economic, social, cultural, ecologic, and physical constraints (Bhuiyan et al., 2012). The Tourism Authority of Thailand (2001) said that sustainable tourism is part of sustainable development and has experienced increased interest as a form of tourism that is not destructive of the natural environment and local culture. There are many definitions of sustainable tourism, but they generally include the following important characteristics:

1. It can consist of tourism to any type of attraction.
2. It is value-oriented and emphasizes the uniqueness of each attraction.
3. It emphasizes responsibility towards natural resources and the environment.
4. It allows tourists to gain knowledge and experience about nature and culture.
5. It both rewards entrepreneurs and benefits local communities.

Tourism development leading to sustainable development should adhere to three main principles in order to connect and determine the direction of development (Pharadej Payakwichien, 2004) as follows:

1. Economic development: tourism management should develop a better economy for community and should contribute to raising the local standard of living.

2. Social development: tourism management should aim to develop society and create better relationships between people, society, culture, traditions, and ways of life.

3. Development of natural resources and the environment: tourism management should be implemented without causing any impact on natural resources and the local environment and should adhere to fair allocation and utilization of resources.

In addition, Boonlert Jittangwatana (2007) mentioned the components of sustainable tourism development

divided into 6 aspects as follows:

1. Development of tourism resources to accommodate tourists by providing various tourism service facilities. Use of tourism activities that conserve tourism resources and the environment as well as providing information about attractions.

2. Environmental development in tourist attractions to conserve the environment and maintain its original condition or to cause minimal impact and prevent negative impacts from tourism. For this there must be a plan for continuous monitoring and evaluation.

3. Development of tourism business: Development of service facilities to meet the needs of tourists. They must also be responsible for the conservation of tourism resources and the environment.

4. Development of tourism marketing: Development of marketing to attract tourists from a high-quality target audience in order to benefit conservation of natural resources and promote learning.

5. The development of participation of local communities: Creating opportunities for local communities to participate in tourism activities. Empowering local communities to be able to manage tourism by themselves and receive benefits from tourism.

6. The development of tourism awareness: Development of conservation awareness and environment resources for all tourism related parties by providing knowledge and media.

Sustainable tourism development therefore must take into account various impacts and desired outcomes. It must aim for sustainable development of the local community, economy, natural resources, and environment. The ultimate objective must be a positive impact on local development.

RELATED & DISCUSSION

Ecotourism and Wellness tourism in global and national scenario

The concept of sustainable development considers the impact of development on future generations. Sustainable development must also respond to the needs of present generations without depriving future generations of opportunities to meet their needs. To accomplish this, sustainable development centers environmental issues, and aims to develop or create economic value while maintaining the natural environment. The international community has conveyed the ideas and goals of sustainable development into various economic sectors. In the case of the tourism sector, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) define sustainable tourism development as development that prioritizes current and future economic, social and environmental impacts with a focus on the tourist, industrial, and environmental needs of the local community or area owners. This covers all types of tourism, not only ecotourism and wellness tourism, but also mainstream and alternative tourism. In order to drive sustainable tourism development, it is important to focus on types of tourism that are in line with sustainable tourism development guidelines and goals, such as community-based tourism, ecotourism and wellness tourism.

Global tourist arrivals increased from just 25 million in 1950 to 528 million in 1995, and UNWTO (2011) estimates that the number of international tourists will reach 1.8 billion in 2030. In addition to the changing scope of tourism, the global tourism sector is also undergoing a restructuring with UNWTO forecasting in its 2030 report that global tourist growth averaged 3.3 percent per year over 2010-2030 with the Asia-Pacific region accounting for the highest growth rate of 4.9 percent per year. The tourism sector is increasingly important in terms of employment and in generating income for various countries and the world. The tourism sector accounts for about 9 percent of the gross domestic product of the world and employs 9 percent of the population (WTTC, 2012) in Thailand. The value of the tourism sector in Thailand is over 1,292 billion baht, and it is expected that the tourism sector will become more important to the Thai economy in the future. The value of the Thai tourism sector is projected to expand

by 6.7 percent between 2017 and 2027 bringing the value added to 2027 representing 14.3 percent of the gross domestic product (WTTC, 2017). In terms of tourism and sustainable development, WEF (2017) found a correlation between tourism receipts and environmental quality indicators. It was found that there was a positive correlation. This means that countries with good environmental quality and tourism revenue tend to go in the same direction. Sustainable development is an issue that is important to all sectors of the economy including tourism.

The results of the survey of tourist behavior in many countries found that although the cost of various expenses is a significant factor in tourist decision-making, the quality and convenience of attractions is also very important. These results add to growing evidence that environmental awareness and sustainability are even more important both in terms of the environment of tourist attractions and in terms of the experience of the tourists themselves, who tend to expect clean water, safety, and no pollution. Tourists who want to explore nature and culture that is diverse, and exotic tend to care about the impact of their own tourism and are willing to pay more for environmentally friendly products and services (UNEP and UNWTO, 2005)

Ecotourism and Wellness Tourism in Thailand

There are currently several important factors motivating Thailand to focus on ecotourism and wellness tourism. The main driving factor is the rapid growth of foreign tourists. The increase of tourists to areas and attractions that are not ready to accommodate them may result in congestion of tourist sites as well as the deterioration of nature and tourism resources. The transition of the tourist structure to tourists from emerging economies such as China, India and Russia leads to a higher growth rate from those countries than among other groups of tourists. This is another challenge towards the preservation of the environment, because the population of emerging economies often has a lower standard of environmental accountability than the population of developed countries. In addition, natural changes such as global warming led to increased pollution and climate fluctuations, and countries and the world community have given importance to reducing the environmental impact of various economic activities.

However, in addition to the aforementioned factors, the new environment of Thailand's future tourism industry is an important attraction for the development of ecotourism and wellness tourism. Thailand needs to raise the level of care and friendliness of environment in the tourism sector. New groups of tourists with higher incomes and tour operators from developed countries are paying more attention to environmental impact and management standards. This group of tourists can also access information on both negative and positive aspects of destination environmental management from the internet and social networks. As for the community sector, they are alert and attentive to impact on the environment in their area. These factors indicate that Thailand's tourist sector needs to pay close attention to sustainability.

Considering indicators, it was found that Thailand is a highly competitive tourist destination. It is ranked 7th in the world in terms of natural resources, 16th in terms of tourist service infrastructure and 18th in terms of price competitiveness. However, there are many dimensions. Thailand still has a low ranking in several areas. It is ranked 122nd in the world for environmental sustainability, and 118th in the world for safety and security. In short, Thailand has an advantage in terms of price, service, and natural resources, but lags in terms of safety and quality environmental management. Paying attention to these issues will serve to elevate Thai tourism, and ecotourism offers a way to address these issues while preserving natural resources and environmental quality.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher used a qualitative method by studying documents, textbooks, concepts, theories, and related research. The researcher also conducted a focus group discussion focusing on the development of ecotourism and wellness tourism. Data was analyzed to be a guideline for the development of ecotourism and wellness tourism. The researcher conducted the research in accordance with the following steps and details:

Research methods

The researcher started by studying and researching information from relevant documents (Documentary Research) and systematically compiling them into a literature review. This was used to explain and draw conclusions about the issues studied. The researcher reviewed concepts, theories, thesis, academic papers, official documents and policies from the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, then organized, classified, and described them in both figurative and synthetic ways to build on knowledge gained from documentary research. This allowed the researcher to see a clearer picture in creating a set of questions for the interview. The researcher conducted a focus group discussion with key informants. The researcher then selected a sample covering a wide range (Maximum Variation Sampling) according to the research objectives, totaling 30 people, to participate in the group discussion. The researcher considered the selection of qualitative research samples according to guidelines of Mile and Huberman, 1994, focusing on data saturation and data sufficiency. Finally, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with key informants at various tourist sites in Thailand. The focus group discussion and interviews focused on four key areas: utilization of tourist attractions, tourist service management, management of tourism activities, and monitoring and assessment of changes due to tourism.

After obtaining the information, the aforementioned information was analyzed for content analysis in order to meet the research objectives that have been set and synthesized a discussion and summary of the new knowledge gained.

RESULTS

Tourism management potential

Part 1 Assessment of ecotourism management potential from 3 types of tourist attractions

- Natural attractions
- Manufactured attractions
- Cultural attractions

Part 2 Assessment of the management potential of wellness tourism. It is classified into 2 types: Health promotion and Health healing tourism

The criteria for evaluating potential management in all 4 aspects are the Utilization of the tourist attraction, Tourist service management, Management of tourism activities, and monitoring and assessment of changes due to tourism.

Based on results from 3 tourist attractions, the utilization of tourist attractions is effective, but can still be developed in certain instances. However, tourist service management and management of tourist activities are excellent at the attractions surveyed. There is a full range of services and a variety of activities considered as a highlight. However, the survey found insufficient evidence for monitoring and assessment of changes due to tourism. Therefore, there is no sustainable tourism development.

The result of research assessing the management potential of both types of health tourism, namely Health promotion and Health healing tourism, found that Thailand can take advantage

of the tourist attractions with excellent resources for promoting and treating health. There is sufficient management of tourist services. Healthful and diverse tourism activities are managed including managing the monitoring and assessment of changes in the area due to tourism because health tourism places importance on the balance between people and nature. Areas that are utilized for medical tourism are therefore continually maintained.

Impact of tourism and Wellness tourism

From the documentary research and group discussion, the researcher found ecotourism and wellness tourism have both positive and negative impacts. There are 3 overall effects; the environmental, economic, and social aspects are as follows.

Environment impact

Government officials as well as academics are increasingly prioritizing development of environmental conservation due to the huge impacts from the past tourism. There are new concepts and patterns that allow people to live in harmony with the environment along with economic development, which is the concept of sustainable development. For the negative impacts on the environment, the environment is damaged by tourism, from both environmental pollution and increase of waste. There are more environmental trespasses than ever before which is consistent with research of Worapak LeSittisake (2004). It was found that the overall factors affecting the environment the most were garbage and occupation, which is in line with the research of Supawan Phonak (2002), which found that tourism caused waste problems, wastewater from tourists, and more problems.

Social impact

The positive social impact is that the lifestyle of people in the community has changed. Tourism promotes the preservation of local traditions and culture, and better public utilities. The living conditions of people in the community improved and the community became known to outsiders. People in the community became more generous to help each other and receive news and information from outside, in line with the research of Rapeepan Thonghor (2002). It was found that tourism caused social change. For the negative impacts, ecotourism and wellness tourism affected the community and created community conflicts. There is an increase in crime and drug problems. The structure of the population has changed and has the potential to cause insecurity.

Economic impact

People in the community have more career choices especially service careers consistent with Amara Jamroonsiri (2003), who found that tourism creates new, higher-paying careers. Technology is being used to increase productivity, develop production techniques, and form tourism related businesses which can increase income for community. The result is a better quality of life. Roads and transport routes have also been developed. For the negative impact, it causes prices of consumer goods to become more expensive, affecting livelihoods related to Kasama Prajong's research which found that tourism causes uncertain income problems. It also has the potential to cause rising cost of living, land trading and land price speculation from foreign capitalists. Ecotourism and wellness tourism widened the gap between the rich and the poor in the community, consistent with Yanee Jitkulsamphan (2001), who found that the impact of tourism business resulted in a change in economic and social impact on the Khao San Road Community.

Cooperation of communities

Although the tourism industry brings many benefits, it also has had unintended effects on the way of life and culture of local communities. This includes usage of natural resources and the environment, arising from the pursuit of income from tourism operators and those involved causing the problem of degradation of natural resources and the environment in that tourist attraction (Jariyaporn Charoensheep, 2017). The researcher found that the cause of such problems was the lack of good planning, standards, and quality, as well as a lack of knowledge and understanding, and most importantly, a lack of community participation between the public and private sectors in managing local resources. Although there have been some actions in the past, not enough has been done, and this lack of continuity has resulted in community participation not being as effective as it should have been. The researcher has an opinion that if people in the community are encouraged to participate in the development of tourist attractions, including maintaining and managing natural resources and the environment, that cooperation will be more effective and sustainable development more viable. This is consistent with the work of Pimlapat Pongsakornrangsilp (2017)

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

The researcher found that the ecotourism and health tourism in Thailand have the potential to improve on existing utilization of tourist attractions, tourist service management, management of tourism activities, and monitoring and assessment of changes due to tourism. It was found that the public and private sectors were still able to develop ecotourism and health tourism to accommodate future changes and accommodate the growing demand of tourists, because at present, technology is used to benefit tourism. The researchers also found that ecotourism and health tourism have both direct and indirect impacts on the environment, society, and economy, both positively and negatively. If Thailand wants to develop tourism for sustainability, all sectors should be encouraged to take part in solving the tourism problem caused by such impacts. The root cause of such problems is the lack of community participation between the public and private sectors in managing local resources. Although there have been some actions in the past, not enough has been done and they lack continuity. As a result, community participation is not as effective as it should be. Therefore, people in the community should be encouraged to participate in the development of tourist attractions, including maintaining and managing natural resources and the environment.

Sustainable Tourism Management Guidelines

Preparation of tourism management is an important factor that determines the success or failure of ecotourism and wellness tourism management. The community enterprise should start with an analysis potential of community enterprises, then plan, execute, and evaluate various project activities to achieve the main goal of tourism management from research studies. The researcher has developed the potential for ecotourism and wellness tourism management. The details are as follows:

A preliminary feasibility study from the survey or assessment of the management potential of ecotourism and wellness tourism considers (1) the issue of community access; (2) tourism routes linking within the community and surrounding areas of the community; and (3) the prominence of tourism resources that are local identities. This must include an exploration of the physical features of the area and its transportation routes. Following the concept of Dickman (1996), sustainable tourism must consider the following 5 elements to any tourist site: attraction, accessibility, tourism activities, accommodation, and facilities. Following the preliminary evaluation, the next step should be creation of a network of participation.

Tourism management and information is the first step of participation in tourism management and as such, the project must study the potential of the community and the possibility of local tourism management and must provide opportunities for all sectors to participate. During this phase, information should be collected by field visits, hearsays, and observations. It should be analyzed for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. With the involvement of the local community, guidelines should be developed for improving factors determined to be weaknesses and obstacles. Guidelines should then be established for developing tourism resources. Tourism integrity should be made a priority, and vision, objectives, policies and management rules should be established.

Medium and long term goals should be established, and a centralized community-run organization for tourism management should be set up. The goal of this organization should be facilitation and coordination between tourists and group members who manage tourism. There should be a program, route, and tourism activities within the community, presenting a tourism activity program that is unique to their own locality. Activities in which tourists can participate in exchange for knowledge should be prioritized. Other tourist programs should be based on conservation and rehabilitation of natural resources, preservation of cultural traditions, community, and history including being environmentally friendly and ecological. An important step is to experiment and evaluate programs, routes, and activities. The development of the entire system to prepare for the official launch of the service should involve developing human resources in various services in the community, building a tourism network and organizing promotional programs for marketing and interpreting tourism. However, continuous monitoring and evaluation must always be performed to improve the quality of tourism services.

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