

## Small Island Tourism Development Plan Implementation: The Case of Koh Tao, Thailand

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### Abstract

This article examines the implementation of tourism development plans in Thailand, focusing on the island of Koh Tao as a case study. It examines the applicability of plan implementation theory and explores context-specific factors that affect the success of the tourism development planning process. The research describes the history of land use planning on Koh Tao, evaluates the success of plan implementation, and identifies factors affecting planning outcomes. A key finding of this research is that a more sophisticated understanding of local context could provide opportunities for improved planning outcomes in island communities facing rapid tourism-related development.

**Keywords:** *Koh Tao; tourism; plan implementation; Thailand*

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### 1. Introduction

The global boom in tourism over the past 50 years has produced dramatic changes in many island communities that have been characterized as “inevitable sites of tourism development” (Ioannides, 1995). Island communities not only experience benefits associated with rapid economic development, but also negative externalities such as environmental degradation and socio-cultural change associated with tourism industry (Jerome and McElroy, 2004). Tourism planning emerged in the early 1980’s as a distinct practice to address these issues, and gained popularity throughout Southeast Asia as the impact of “unplanned and spontaneous” early developments became apparent (Wong, 1998). While planning within the tourism industry has expanded rapidly in the period since Wong made these remarks, a lack of visible improvement on the ground has led some to question the efficacy of the tourism planning process as currently structured and implemented (Brody and Highfield, 2005; Fayos-Sola, 1996).

The tourism industry contributes about \$50.1 billion USD to the Thai economy or approximately 14.3% of GDP (WTTC, 2011), and it is even more important in tourism-dependent island communities such as Phuket, Koh Samui and Koh Chang. It has been suggested that island planning efforts in Thailand have been largely unsuccessful (Antaseeda, 2000); but problems with implementation can occur even with development plans that are detailed and well crafted (Laurien

*et al.*, 2004). Plan evaluation has historically focused on assessing alternatives during plan development, rather than investigating the ex-post success of final implementation (Talen, 1996). This unexplored space between process and result can produce what Calkins (1979) described as “new plan syndrome” with new plans being created without reference to implementation success of previous efforts. Possible reasons for implementation failure are extensive (Hood, 1976) and include: a unitary administrative system with a single authority; enforcement of uniform rules or objectives; a set of clear and authoritative objectives implementable on the basis of perfect obedience or perfect administrative control; absence of time pressure; unlimited material resources for tackling the problem and; unambiguous overall objectives and perfect political acceptability of the politics pursued. It is rare that any planning context can satisfy more than one or two of these preconditions (Younis, 1990); and the situation is further complicated by the potential impact of local factors (Mazmanian and Sabatier, 1989) and the interaction of different entities at different scales of implementation (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1984).

Organizational theory (Montjoy and O’Toole, 1979) can provide a basis for understanding plan implementation; and Mazmanian and Sabatier’s (1983) model is particularly helpful in that it addresses the interactions between what they termed the planning “center, periphery and target”. The center drafts the policy or the plan; the periphery represents “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky, 1980) charged with translating the

plan into action; and the target is the focus population or community affected by the plan. The relationship between the center, periphery and target involves tension and power bargaining between those that established the plan, groups responsible for putting it into practice, and the communities ultimately affected by the plan (Barret and Fudge, 1981). While each of these groups exhibits some level of agency within the implementation process, decision-making is largely bounded within an administrative, cultural, political and social context. The work of Wang and Lui (2013) and Krutwaysho and Bramwell (2010, 2006) provides recent examples of island-based tourism development planning occurring within the context of local economy, governance, politics and culture. Using the framework of implementation theory (Mazmanian and Sabatier's, 1983) this article examines the tourism development planning process on Koh Tao, Thailand; and attempts to identify context-specific factors affecting the implementation of completed plans.

## 2. The case study

### 2.1. Environmental and Socio-Economic context

Koh Tao is a small island community just 19km<sup>2</sup> in size, and is located in the western Gulf of Thailand (Fig. 1).

The island is dominated by granitic hills that rise up to 379 m above sea level and a coastline containing small bays and coves separated by rocky granitic headlands (TISTR, 1995). Due to its relative isolation in the Gulf of Thailand, Koh Tao was uninhabited until the early 1930's when the Thai government incarcerated political prisoners on the island. Use of the island as a prison was discontinued in 1944 and the first settlers arrived in 1947 when fisherman and farmers arrived from the nearby islands of Koh Phangan and Koh Samui. These early settlers and their descendants lived in relative isolation for forty years until the



Figure 1. Koh Tao study area

island emerged as a resort destination in the late 1980s, owing to unspoiled beaches and significant offshore coral reef resources.

Koh Tao is now known as one of the busiest scuba diving resorts in Southeast Asia with development centered on the original fishing villages of Sai Ri and Mae Had in the west, and Chalok Ban Kao in the south. The small adjacent islet of Koh Nang Yuan also contains a major resort. Approximately 120 hotel and bungalow operations containing 2500 rooms are registered on the island, and a large number of unregistered bungalow operations also exist along with 40 dive shops and 72 restaurants. A large number of unregistered food stalls, gift shops and other small commercial operations catering to the tourist industry are located within the main population centers and along roads connecting these areas. Only 30,462 tourists visited the island in 1993, but this increased to approximately 180,000 in 2004, and is projected to increase to over 250,000 by 2024 (Bennui, 2006). Annual tourism visitations dwarf the island's registered Thai population of approximately 1042 individuals, and 5000 temporary migrant workers largely drawn from nearby Myanmar who hold low wage positions in hotels and restaurants. Primary tourist source areas include Europe, North America, Japan and Korea, but domestic Thai tourists are also visiting in increasing numbers.

## 2.2. Governance on Koh Tao

Governance in Thailand is extremely centralized, but the central government has very little presence on Koh Tao aside from the island's small police force administered by the Ministry of Interior. Koh Tao is also part of Surat Thani province, which is headed by a governor, and is further divided into districts (Amphoe) led by Chief Officers (Nai Amphoe). The national government's Ministry of the Interior appoints all of these positions. Provincial administrative offices with responsibilities for Koh Tao are situated in the provincial capital of Surat Thani located on the mainland, and on the larger neighboring island of Koh Pha-ngan. The provincial government provides basic services such as water supply, telephone and electricity, and collects taxes including a value added tax (VAT) and a business tax based on net revenues. Central government agencies typically have regional staffs in provincial halls and even district offices, and provincial planning units generate plans and policies that are firmly in line with national objectives to maintain funding and resources (Nagai and Kagoya, 2008).

Until recently, local government in Thailand has played a relatively minor role in delivering public

services in comparison to the national government and its regional staff in provincial headquarters (*ibid.*). Central government control traditionally extended even to the local level in Thailand through the positions of *kamnan* (subdistrict headmen) and *phuyaiban* (village elders) that are appointed by the Ministry of the Interior (Arghiros, 2001). These positions formed a "channel of transmission" for provincial and national government policies (Rajchagool, 1999) with *kamnan* and *phuyaiban* having the dual responsibility of representing local interests and serving as implementation agents for central government policies and directives. Constitutional reforms in 1997 emphasized democratization and decentralization, and a new system of local governance referred to as the Tambon Administrative Organization (TAO) was created to shift funding and authority to the local level (Nagai *et al.*, 2008). Elected Tambon Councils that include a chief administrator and village councilors were created in sub-districts throughout Thailand, but this new autonomous form of local government did not entirely replace the traditional positions of *kamnan* and *phuyaiban*. Tambon Councils coordinate plans and projects designed by higher authorities and agencies, and provide designated local functions such as: public health, education, garbage collection, road maintenance and construction, fire prevention, and environmental protection. Funding transferred from the provincial government and local revenue such as taxes on advertising signs support the provision of these services.

## 2.3. Tourism planning

The initial development plan for Koh Tao was developed in the mid-1990s by the Thailand Institute for Scientific and Technical Research (TISTR, 1995) and funded by the national government (Fig. 2). This plan was created to guide development on the island and included the following zones: 1) tourism and Community Zone for tourism-related development, local resident housing and government offices; 2) a Coastal Conservation Zone used to maintain natural conditions and provide limited tourism-related infrastructure such as trails, bridges and signposts; 3) an Agricultural Conservation Zone that contained coconut and rubber plantations; and 4) a Forest Conservation Zone that included natural forests and watershed management areas. Satellite and air photo imagery was used to assess success of the 1995 plan (Fig. 3). This included two 25-meter resolution Landsat 5 Thematic Mapper scenes (23 September 1995 and 03 March 2007) that were spatially clipped to facilitate computation and analysis using ENVI 4.2 scene analysis software.

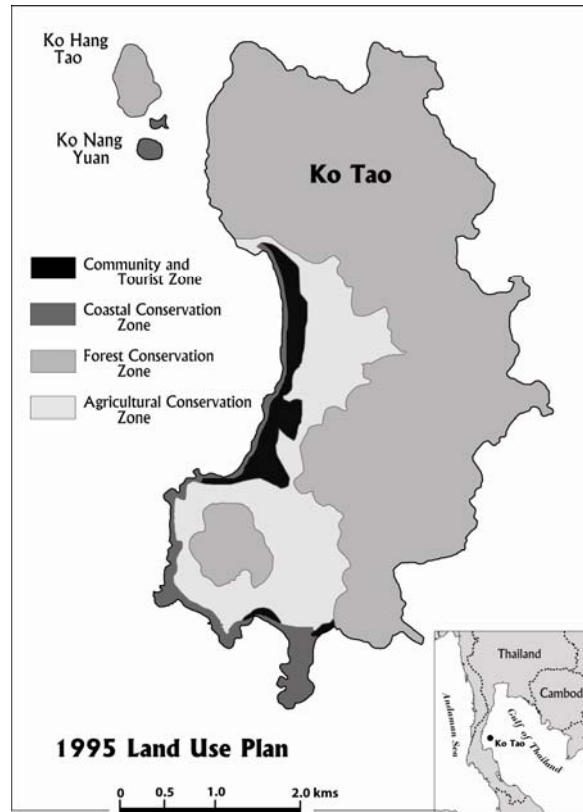


Figure 2. Koh Tao master land use plan

A supervised classification of remote sensing data (Fig. 3a and Fig. 3b) produced an overall accuracy of 87.94% (2007) and 98.02% (1995); and identified a significant increase in urban development and loss of conservation areas during the 1995-2007 period (Table 1). Only about 5% of all urban development on Koh Tao during the 1995-2007 evaluation period

was located within the tourism and community zone. In contrast, forest, agriculture and coastal conservation zones all suffered significant deforestation due to tourism development. This confirmed local opinion, anecdotal reports (Bangkok Post, 2004) and recent studies (Weterings, 2011) that suggest tourism development plan implementation on Koh Tao was not successful.

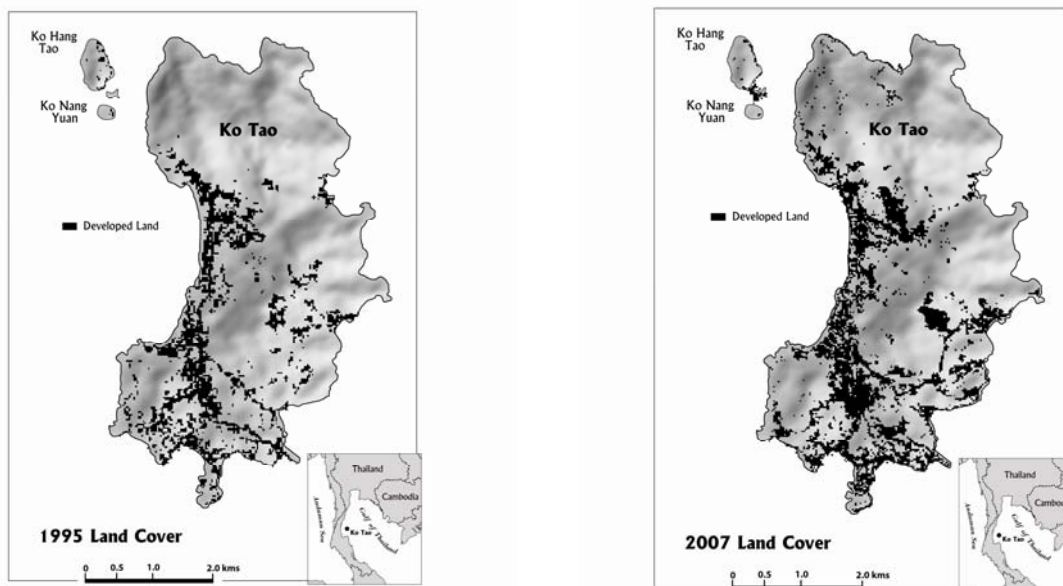


Figure 3. Koh Tao land cover analysis

Table 1. Urban development within master plan zones (1995-2007)

	Agriculture Conservation	Forest Conservation	Coastal Conservation	Community Development	Total
1995 (ha)	1056	1096	190	455	2797
2007 (ha)	1286	1580	301	496	3663
Change (ha)	230	484	111	41	866
Change (%)	21.8%	44.2%	58.4%	9.0%	31.0%

### 3. Plan implementation analysis methods

Given the complicated nature of governance and planning in Thailand, and the desire to reveal previously unknown factors affecting implementation failure, a purposive sampling approach that focused on key informants most knowledgeable of the issue under investigation was selected (Bernard, 2000). The list of interview subjects consisted of 15 key informants who were either responsible for tourism plan development and implementation on Koh Tao, or highly knowledgeable of planning on Koh Tao, and included the following individuals:

- Central government planning official
- Provincial government planning officials (3)
- Amphoe administration officials (2)
- Local Tambon government official
- Local resort owners/managers (3)
- Local business owner/manager
- Local environmental organization representative
- Professor, Prince of Songkla University
- Professors, Burapha University (2)

Key informants act as proxies for their organization or group (Pasons, 2008) and interview questions were designed with the intention of identifying the planning “center, periphery and target” on Koh Tao; describing how these entities interact; and shedding light on how these interactions influence the implementation process. In an effort to avoid limiting results to expected explanations, open-ended questions were also included to allow interview subjects to discuss additional issues or contextual factors they deemed important. All interviews were recorded and conducted in English with the assistance of a translator when necessary and notes were taken throughout. This approach ultimately identified several factors influencing plan implementation success, which were then categorized and rated in terms of importance. The process also confirmed initial interpretations of actors serving as the center, periphery and target within the planning context, and

problems associated with tourism planning on the island.

### 4. Results

The lack of plan implementation success on Koh Tao, highlighted by the expansion of tourism-related development outside of Tourism and Community Zones, was confirmed by interview subjects who consistently recognized that development plans have not met their overall goals or specific local objectives. As one local business owner on Koh Tao put it very bluntly, “there is no planning”. When asked to elaborate, this interview subject explained that while planning may exist in theory, it does not occur in practice on the island. Additionally, officials and academics familiar with planning and tourism development in Thailand generally reported similar conclusions regarding the effectiveness of local planning efforts.

Interview subjects identified a number of specific factors that explain this implementation failure. Listed in descending order these include: lack of enforcement (either periphery to target or center to periphery); lack of clear implementation strategies; lack of local contextual understanding; lack of appropriate planning measures; and a lack of funding (on various levels). Nearly every interview subject mentioned all of these factors, with a lack of enforcement standing out as the most commonly cited impediment to plan implementation. Interestingly, the factors identified by interview participants largely match the preconditions proposed by Hood (1976). Three additional local influences were also found to be of critical importance: 1) a disconnect between the center-periphery-target planning entities stemming from recent constitutional changes; 2) entity ambiguity; and 3) the influence of informal social structures.

#### 4.1. Center-periphery-core relationships

The center, periphery and target on Koh Tao were defined using the roles and responsibilities outlined by

Mazmanian and Sabatier's (1983; 1989). Our research suggests that the Thai national government plays the role of "center" within the planning hierarchy, which is unsurprising given the centralized and hierarchical nature of the Thai planning system. Local government has played a relatively minor role in delivering public services in comparison to the national government and its regional staff in provincial headquarters until recently (Nagai *et al.*, 2008). The SuratThani provincial government and its associated Amphoe administration should also be considered part of the "center" because of the close and strongly hierarchical relationship between these levels of governments (Krutwaysho and Bramwell, 2006).

We suggest that the Tambon Council on Koh Tao represents the "periphery" in Mazmanian and Sabatier's (1983) model. Interviewees questioned about the dynamic between the national, provincial government and local governments confirmed this interpretation. One provincial official stated that "the main policy is from the central government and we decide how to do that." Another provincial official added validity to this statement by discussing how the SuratThani office creates plans and rules based on national objectives, and then passes implementation responsibilities down to local officials on Koh Tao. These statements defined the local government as the peripheral entity that "turns ideas into behavior" (Majone and Wildavsky, 1979) and confirmed that the central and provincial governments act as the center.

Landowners, registered Thai residents, and the business community of Koh Tao represent the planning "target" in Mazmanian and Sabatier's implementation model. As outlined above, Koh Tao is unusual in that an overwhelming majority of individuals on the island at any one time are either temporary workers or tourists. It is estimated that temporary workers (largely from Myanmar) out-number registered Thai residents by a ratio of 5:1, and the total number of tourists visiting the island each year outnumbers residents by a ratio of almost 200:1. These groups, while sizable and important, can only be considered indirect targets of plan implementation based on their temporary presence and inability to participate in formal decision-making.

The national government continues to control planning on Koh Tao and its influence extends to the village level through the appointment of *kamnan* and *phuyaibaan* (Nagai *et al.*, 2008). Constitutional reforms that created the TAO have, however, added a new element to the planning system. Tambon Councils are increasingly influential and slowly gathering more planning resources over time (Mektrairat, 2008). An unanticipated consequence of decentralization has been a growing "disconnect" between local government

and elements of the planning system that are still very much dominated by the national government. The original *Study Guidelines for Establishing Tourism Development Control for Koh Tao and Koh Nang Yuanwas* clearly a product of the earlier centralized planning system, and the embryonic Tambon administration on Koh Tao did not possess either the human or fiscal resources to effectively implement this plan. This issue is compounded by the fact that Koh Tao is comparatively isolated as compared to other tourism destinations in Thailand such as Koh Samui or Phuket. Confirming the effect of distance on implementation, a local official on Koh Tao stated that "Koh Samui is more strict about where to build" because of the local presence of provincial government administration staff.

This disconnect between the center and the periphery on Koh Tao is critical to our understanding of plan implementation on Koh Tao because development is entirely subject to oversight by local officials, and a lack of local enforcement capacity was considered to be a key impediment to plan implementation by all interview subjects. When asked about the power of local enforcement agents on Koh Tao, one business owner stated that "people have always done what they wanted", and "they did this before regulation and planning and continue to do it now". In response to a similar question, a local government official stated, "there are many people building and not enough people here to watch". Implementation and enforcement capacity of local government has increased as the decentralization process gained momentum in Thailand, but in spite of this, it is questionable whether Tambon administrators on Koh Tao who represent the periphery would enthusiastically implement any development plan created without meaningful local input and support.

#### 4.2. Informal social structures

This research also builds upon previous studies that examined the effect of social structures situated outside of official planning and implementation processes. Brinkerhoff's (1996) study in Madagascar focused on the importance of non-official agents in planning, and found that individuals involved in implementation are also often members of various local networks. The work of Morton (1996) concluded that local politics and social norms have a significant impact on administrative systems that coordinate plan implementation. The Koh Tao case study provides additional evidence of the importance of these factors, but revealed a differential perception of the importance of social relationships. Interviews with central government staff rarely mentioned local or unofficial influences on

implementation, but interviews with local authorities and residents of Koh Tao focused heavily on the influence of the local socio-political context as described by both Brinkerhoff and Morton.

The influence of informal social structures was specifically stressed in discussions concerning enforcement and adherence to planning rules. Local interview participants admitted that a strong social dynamic between individuals enforcing and adhering to planning rules could prevent successful implementation regardless of the degree of external enforcement. For example, it was revealed that members of the periphery and target are sometimes closely related. In these cases, it is difficult to imagine the periphery being able to enforce planning measures that seriously infringe on a family business. One local business owner responded to a question on the enforcement of planning rules by saying “if you know the right people, it doesn’t make any difference”. The Koh Tao research supports previous studies highlighting the importance of informal social structures on tourism development planning (Krutwaysho and Bramwell, 2010; Yuksel and Yuksel, 2000); and highlights the potential of social relationships to affect planning outcomes in smaller, more isolated communities that exhibit greater continuity between the periphery and the target. Several interview subjects suggested that Koh Tao residents may be more likely to comply with enforcement orders from external authorities with whom they did not have a social or business relationship. The utilization of external enforcement personnel with limited direct ties to Koh Tao is one strategy that could potentially improve planning outcomes, but this would require additional provincial or central government staff to be located on the island to support local implementation efforts.

#### 4.3. *Entity ambiguity*

Implementation is often structured without a sufficient understanding of the coordination between planning entities (Brinkerhoff, 1996). The Koh Tao research supports this conclusion and highlights the importance of understanding relationships between implementation officials and the target community. In the case of Koh Tao, interview participants identified a very close relationship between implementation entities. A single individual can represent both the periphery (implementation agent) and target (focus of implementation), and this ambiguity can blur lines of responsibility. As an example, an official charged with enforcing a planning or zoning law may also be a resort owner whose economic interests could be negatively affected by the rule or law. In this situation, it is not surprising that rules are often unenforced and

plan implementation suffers, especially since there are few repercussions associated with rule avoidance. Commercial operators and land owners in communities that depend on tourism are generally reticent towards the implementation of policies that limit short term economic gains (Ioannides, 1995), and it is not uncommon for local government officials in Thailand to have a direct or indirect stake in resorts or tourism businesses within their areas of responsibility. In fact, one of the periphery officials interviewed in this study has a significant personal stake in tourism on Koh Tao as the owner of a resort. Entity ambiguity can be particularly detrimental to planning outcomes when it involves the target (focus of the plan) and periphery (primary implementation agents) since potential conflicts of interest can hamper enforcement and derail implementation.

### 5. Conclusions

This research confirms the utility of implementation theory in understanding small island tourism development, and highlights the influence of center-periphery-target relationships, unofficial social structures and entity ambiguity on planning outcomes. These understudied issues play an especially important role in the implementation of tourism development plans on small islands that possess a comparatively limited central government presence. The research provides evidence that while individual actors may theoretically possess a high level of agency in supporting plan implementation, this agency can be significantly influenced by local social, political and economic factors. Reed (1997) asserted that implementation lessons are highly situational-specific and cannot be successfully transferred to other destinations. Our findings do not entirely support this conclusion. While Koh Tao is certainly unique, this case study suggests that Sabatier and Mazmanian’s (1983) center-periphery-target theory may be broadly applicable to small island tourist destinations; and factors such as informal social structures and entity ambiguity are likely to influence implementation success. Local plan implementation lessons may indeed be transferrable. Not only did interviewees directly involved in plan implementation on Koh Tao state that social factors play a significant role in the success or failure of planning, observers of planning in Thailand more generally possessed similar opinions and identified this issue as the most obvious reason behind plan implementation failure. Acknowledging these influences and acting accordingly during the planning and implementation processes has, therefore, the potential to significantly improve the effectiveness

of planning in general and small island tourism development plan implementation in particular.

### Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the government officials, business owners and Koh Tao residents who agreed to participate in this research. Special thanks are also offered to Burapha University for their logistical assistance while in Thailand.

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*Received 29 April 2014*

*Accepted 6 June 2014*

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