

Community Readiness for Ecotourism Management in a Royal Project Development Site, Northern Thailand

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ABSTRACT

The objectives of the research were to investigate the need and readiness of community in managing community-based ecotourism; and to gather and assemble local knowledge to develop guideline for community-based ecotourism management. The Hmong and Karen stakeholders from 14 villages of Mae Wang and Mae Chaem district, Chiang Mai Province, within responsible area of the Mae Hae Royal Project Development Station, were involved in this study. The participatory community-based ecotourism concept, qualitative research method and participatory action research were conducted. The data were collected by observation, in-depth interview, focus group technique and a formal questionnaire. The tourism program was developed and trialed with volunteer tourists to evaluate their satisfaction. The results were presented to and analyzed together with the stakeholders to develop community-based ecotourism management guideline. It was found that community was willing to have ecotourism and would like to promote their culture and tradition, and way of life including highland agricultural practice to tourists. They thought that the ecotourism could generate supplemental income and culture expression. However, the possible impact on environment, culture and social were concerned, and should be carefully considered and well planned. Most of the stakeholders expressed that the communities were ready for ecotourism, and there should be representatives from the communities participating in the ecotourism management process. Some disagreed concerning with communication problem, hospitality, facilities and road condition. Local knowledge was gathered and integrated into an ecotourism program which was implemented with volunteer tourists. The evaluation of pilot ecotourism program revealed that the tourists were satisfied with and interested in the tour program. They would like to discover folklore. In addition, the folklorists who guided and accompanied the tour could create value added to the program and good impression for tourists. It was suggested that, to develop such ecotourism, the tourism committees be established altogether with agreeable tasks and responsibilities.

Key words: ecotourism, participatory, royal project

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยการเตรียมความพร้อมของชุมชนในการจัดการท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศในพื้นที่ศูนย์พัฒนาโครงการหลวงในพื้นที่ทางตอนเหนือของประเทศไทยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาความต้องการและความพร้อมในการมีส่วนร่วมของชุมชนต่อการจัดการท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศ รวบรวมองค์ความรู้และวัฒนธรรมของท้องถิ่น และหาแนวทางพัฒนาการจัดการท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศแบบมีส่วนร่วมของชุมชน โดยใช้แนวคิดการท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศแบบชุมชนมีส่วนร่วม ใช้เทคนิควิธีวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพเน้นกระบวนการวิจัยเชิงปฏิบัติการแบบมีส่วนร่วม เก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลจากการสังเกต สัมภาษณ์เชิงลึก สันทนาากลุ่มและแบบสอบถามจากผู้มีส่วนได้ส่วนเสียในพื้นที่ศึกษาจำนวน 14 หมู่บ้าน ของชนเผ่าม้งและปกากะญอภายในพื้นที่ศูนย์พัฒนาโครงการหลวงแม่แฮครอบคลุมเขตอำเภอแม่แจ่มและแม่วาง จังหวัดเชียงใหม่ โดยมีการจัดทำโปรแกรมและเส้นทางกรท่องเที่ยว และทดลองโปรแกรมท่องเที่ยวโดยชุมชนมีส่วนร่วมปฏิบัติตลอดจนประเมินผลความพึงพอใจจากนักท่องเที่ยวอาสาสมัคร ผลของการวิจัยพบว่าชุมชนมีความต้องการด้านการท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศ ต้องการให้นักท่องเที่ยวมาศึกษาเรียนรู้วัฒนธรรมชนเผ่า วิถีชีวิต และการเกษตร โดยเห็นว่าการท่องเที่ยวจะช่วยสร้างรายได้เสริมให้ชุมชน เผยแพร่วัฒนธรรม แต่ชุมชนยังตระหนักถึงผลกระทบทางลบที่อาจเกิดตามมาต่อสิ่งแวดล้อม วัฒนธรรม สังคม และเห็นว่าควรมีการวางแผนการท่องเที่ยวก่อน ชุมชนส่วนใหญ่เห็นว่าจะมีความพร้อมหากจัดให้มีการท่องเที่ยวขึ้น และควรมีตัวแทนชุมชนเข้ามามีบทบาทและมีส่วนร่วมในการจัดการท่องเที่ยว แต่ชุมชนบางส่วนเห็นว่ายังไม่มีความพร้อมในเรื่องของการสื่อสาร การต้อนรับ และสภาพถนนที่ไม่ดีในบางจุด สำหรับองค์ความรู้ที่เก็บรวบรวม ได้นำมาเป็นฐานข้อมูลเพื่อใช้ในการจัดการท่องเที่ยว จากการทดลองจัดโปรแกรมท่องเที่ยว โดย

ภาพรวมนักท่องเที่ยวมีความพึงพอใจอยู่ในระดับมาก และมีความต้องการมาเรียนรู้วัฒนธรรม วิถีชีวิตชนเผ่าศึกษาธรรมชาติ โดยเฉพาะการเล่าเรื่องและนำเสนอรายละเอียดผ่านมัคคุเทศก์ท้องถิ่นจะช่วยสร้างมูลค่าของการท่องเที่ยวและสร้างความประทับใจให้นักท่องเที่ยวได้มากขึ้นซึ่งสอดคล้องกับความเห็นของผู้ประกอบการแนวทางในการพัฒนาการจัดการท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศนั้น ควรมีการจัดตั้งคณะกรรมการท่องเที่ยวและมีการกำหนดภาระหน้าที่ให้ชัดเจน

คำสำคัญ: การท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศ, การมีส่วนร่วม, มุลนิธิโครงการหลวง

INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism, also known as ecological tourism, is a form of tourism that appeals to ecologically and socially conscious individuals. It typically involves travel to destinations where flora, fauna, and cultural heritage are the primary attractions. Responsible ecotourism includes programs that minimize the negative aspects of conventional tourism on the environment and enhance the cultural integrity of local people (Wikipedia, 2007). Therefore, in addition to evaluating environmental and cultural factors, an integral part of ecotourism is the promotion of recycling, energy efficiency, water conservation, and the creation of economic opportunities for the local communities.

Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) initialized the national ecotourism policy in 1996 involving related organizations and supporting budget to push forward ecotourism nationwide such as tourism area-based development, research, public relations, setting up networks for transferring knowledge and coordinating tourism activities, and tour guides (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 1987). The Thai government expects that the Community Based Ecotourism (CBT) will have a potential to encourage natural resource conservation, generate income and also ensure cultural conservation for the community (Sarobon, 2004).

The Royal Project Foundation (RPF) recognized that most of its development stations were located in mountainous areas with diversification and abundance of natural resources as well as cultural attractions, which have potential to promote the ecotourism. Thus, the RPF has responded to the CBT policy in 2002 by launching the tourism development pilot project in ten development sites. The Mae Hae Royal Project Development Station in Mae Chaem district, Chiang Mai province was one of the ten pilot tourism development projects that has been implementing the CBT project since then, however, the tourism in the area had been unstructured and disorganized until 2007.

In order to prepare the community readiness for improving the ecotourism, the local stakeholders participated through a “learning by doing” study approach. This research focused on the obstacles and constraints and supporting factors needed for improving community-based ecotourism management. Community knowledge including attitudes toward the readiness for participating in tourism management is a crucial key that was explored. Local knowledge that includes folk-tales describing the site as well as landscape attractiveness are important areas to be developed.

OBJECTIVES

- 1) To investigate the need and readiness of community in managing community-based ecotourism.
- 2) To gather and assemble local knowledge.
- 3) To develop guidelines for community-based ecotourism management.

SCOPE, FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Scope of the study

The study area of Mae Hae lies within 900-1,600 meters above sea level in the highland areas of northern Thailand (Highland Research and Development Institute, 2005). It consists of 14

villages which are part of Mae Chaem and Mae Wang district, Chiang Mai province (Figure 1). There are two major ethnic groups, Hmong and Karen that practice agriculture under supervision of the Mae Hae Royal Project Development Station (MHRPDS). This research was conducted during May 2007 - May 2008.

The research framework

CBT can be effectively managed only through community participation in all development processes. Researchers and local institutes should facilitate community to increase their knowledge and skill on tourism management. Indigenous knowledge should be gathered to develop community tale for visitors and the local tour guides. Learning by doing process enhances local community to gain better understanding of the tourism management process, allows community to identify problems and solutions. The results could be used for guiding further community-based ecotourism management in the area.

Thus, the participatory community-based ecotourism concept, qualitative research method and participatory action research were used in this study. The data were collected by using observation, interview, focus group and a formal questionnaire. A tourism program was developed and trialed with volunteer tourists to evaluate their satisfaction. The study results were presented to and analyzed together with the stakeholders to develop community-based ecotourism management guidelines (Figure 2).

Research methodology

Research approach

This research applied community-based ecotourism concept using participatory action research (PAR) that cooperated among research, action and participatory to bring better understanding through PDCA (Plan, Do, Check, Act) learning process. Participation among researchers and stakeholders within the community are useful for identifying the problems and requirements of the community and alternative solutions for problems (Karnchanarungsrinont, 2005) (Figure 3).



Figure 1 The study area covers 14 villages in MHRPDS

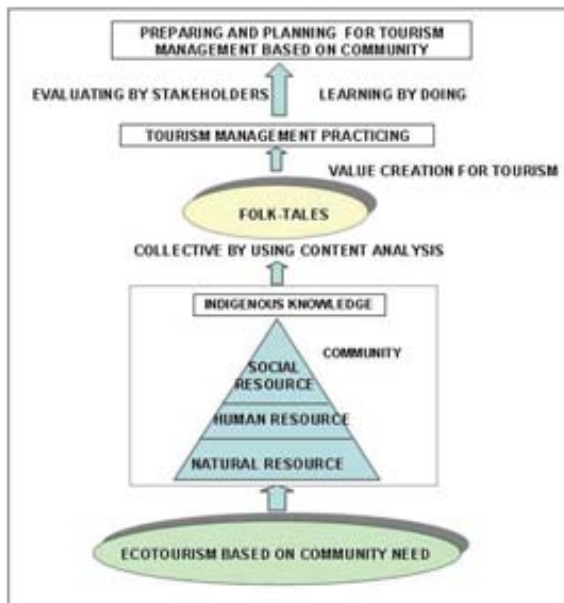


Figure 2 The research framework



Figure 3 The Participatory Action Research Approach

Data collection

1) To investigate the need and readiness of community in managing community-based ecotourism, the executive MHRPDS and Royal Project tourism policymakers were in-depth interviewed to provide more details on how they operated the activities to launch tourism in the area, including previous problems and obstacles. Focus groups were conducted with village leaders in 14 villages. The Royal Project officers and forestry officers were invited at the MHRPDS meeting room in the initial stage of this research to examine the leaderships' attitude towards tourism and local key informants lists. How they participated in the tourism program in the past and mapped the annual farming and traditional activities and so on. Moreover, 100 Hmong and Karen household samples in 14 villages were collected using a questionnaire to find out the memberships' attitude towards tourism and their readiness

2) To gather and assemble local knowledge:

- Local knowledge was collected by observation, in-depth interview and focus group from key informants

- The existing secondary data were collected from related published research

- The qualitative data from in-depth interviews, focus groups and observation such as tradition, history, belief, culture, social context, etc. were analyzed by content analysis.

3) To develop guidelines for community-based ecotourism management:

- To survey attractive routes and arrange tour programs for nature and culture attractions

- To plan and prepare for the experimental itinerary tour programs such as arranging meetings with stakeholders, recruitment of volunteer tourists through related tourism websites and brochures.

- To prepare a guide book and develop a questionnaire for volunteer tourists to evaluate the tour program (using 5 rating likert scale, rate 1= very dissatisfied through 5 = very satisfied)

- To conduct focus groups with stakeholders, i.e. 14 village leaders, the Royal Project officers, local school teachers, local forestry officers to

discuss and evaluate the tour program management and invite the ecotourism entrepreneur for sharing the experience with the community

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The need and readiness of community in managing community-based ecotourism

The results showed that a high percentage of the village leaders and villagers had positive attitude toward tourism because it could generate additional income, promote their culture, and improve infrastructure. However, they did not have ideas and knowledge on how to establish (initialize) tourism management. They wanted tourists to come and learn about the local knowledge, their culture, tradition, way of life, and cultivation practice. At the same time, they would like tourists to respect the community regulations and their traditions. The community needed representatives to run the tourism management, and to develop and organize the tour management plan to be ready for tourists to visit. They needed researchers or institutes to help them continuously develop the tourism management.

Sixty percent of the questionnaire sample showed that the community had the readiness in community-based management; the rest thought that attraction lists for tourists and access infrastructure, needed to be developed and improved. In addition, the native language can be an obstacle for tourist communication, as well as the sanitation of the community.

It was found that communities were not well prepared to provide proper hospitality for tourists, such as food that foreigners can take. Besides, some leaders and villagers had anxiety about consequences that might affect environmental quality, culture and social context. Some effects might be an increase of garbage, inappropriate dressing, and imitation of tourist behavior on local customs as well as corruption among villagers in the case of higher income-generating activities.

Five years after the Royal Project initiated the tourism development program, the tourism in the

area is unstructured and disorganized because of inadequate cooperation among communities and the Royal Project tourism policymakers, lack of community-based management tourism, unmanaged community knowledge management and discontinuous monitoring from the policymakers. The community leaders said “the community seems like a battery that needs re-charging continuously. If the researcher would like to do the research, please do it continually”.

The assembled local knowledge

Communities at MHRPDS still adhere to nature conservation and possess a variety of interesting indigenous cultural traditions, which should be attractive for tourists. There are two Hmong subgroups, namely black Hmong and white Hmong, and a Karen subgroup, known as the Skaw. The Karen people migrated from Burma about 200 years ago, and the Hmong people migrated from China about 70 years ago. MHRPDS was established in 1978 in accordance with royal support from the King, in order to promote cash crops to suppress and substitute opium plantations. Prior to the Royal Project intervention, that area was considered one of the largest opium plantation areas in Thailand.

The local knowledge from both implicit knowledge (primary data from interviewing and observation) and explicit knowledge (secondary data from previous research) was combined and revised among researchers and key informants in the community. The information was used to develop folk-tales to be narrated by local guides to tourists as a method to create value-added tourism in the Mae Hae. The assembled local knowledge includes the following information;

- History of the community and socio-economic status
- Settlement of the villages and architecture
- Knowledge of the local customs: beliefs in nature spirits
- Animism ceremony and traditions such as the Hmong and Karen New Year traditions, L.C. spirit calling ceremony, etc.

- Hilltribe handicraft, Karen hand-woven cloth, Hmong handmade silverware
- Performance of tribal arts such as sword dance, pike dance, Hmong organ blowing, playing native Karen music etc.
- Knowledge of the local beliefs on birth, death, bad luck fortune etc.
- The influence and integration on the indigenous belief system by the introduction to Buddhism and Christianity
- Legends regarding the sacred Mon Ya mountain
- Traditional way of life

The guidelines for further community-based ecotourism management in the area

The area survey

The evaluation of three tourism factors was investigated including 1) attraction 2) accommodation and 3) accessibility.

1) Attraction

MHRPDS has nature conservation and culture varieties that can be attractive for ecotourism in terms of:

- Scenic and nature attraction; especially the forest within Mae Sa-Nga watershed management division which is fertile with bio-diversity
- Culture attraction; MHRPDS still has original traditional culture and diversity among indigenous Hmong and Karen
- Agro-ecotourism attraction; HRPDS has the largest persimmon plantation as well as the best quality of persimmon in comparison with other 36 Royal Project stations. MHRPDS also has the largest strawberry plantation area. The Royal Project would like to arrange tourist trails among the Royal Project Development areas. Recently, the Hilltribe communities have generated more income by planting cash crops and now they have a higher quality of life as compared with the past.

2) Accommodation

There are a number of accommodations located near the Mae Hae Royal Project Station. Mae Hae Neor seems to be the center for tourist

accommodation for the 14 villages. The main accommodations include:

- The tourist guesthouses owned by the Royal Project (RP) which are located inside the Royal Project station and available for 20-30 tourists with service charge
- A public health clinic in Mae Hae Neor village
- Two gas stations operated by the villagers
- Two garages in Mae Hae Neor village
- Two food shops in Mae Hae Neor village
- Grocery stores are available in most of the 14 villages
- Electricity supply is available in most of the 14 villages
- Mobile phone could be connected in some areas of the 14 villages and so on

3) Accessibility

Tourists can travel to the MHRPDS area either by private vehicle (4 wheel drives are recommended) or by public transportation. During the dry season mini vans can access the area. The distance from Chiang Mai city to the study area is approx. 80 kilometers or 2-2.5 hours.

Two main roads, Chiang Mai - Hang Dong route and Chiang Mai - Mae Rim route, are accessible to travel to the MHRPDS area. The first route passes through Mae Rim-San Patong district (Road No.108 and 1013) to Mae Wang district and the second route passes through (Mae Rim - Mae Wang district (Road No.107 and 1096) to Mae Wang district. But this route has a higher altitude and more sharp curves, yet it has beautiful natural attraction along the road as compared with the first route. The public transportation, "Songtaew" starts at Chiang

Mai Gate in the downtown area of Chiang Mai and drives to Ban Kad Market in Mae Wang district. At Ban Kad Market, passengers must connect to another Songtaew that will go to the MHRPDS area.

The pilot tour program itinerary

The study arranged a two-day and one-night pilot program tour that was held on 22-23 December 2006, during the Hmong traditional New Year. The participants on this tour stayed at MHRPDS guesthouse. The itinerary included:

- Participating in the Hmong New Year traditional celebrations and learning the Hmong's way of life
- Observing Hmong handicraft demonstration such as silverware and hand-woven hemp
- Enjoying camping and hill tribe performances
- Trekking to Mon Ya mountain to see the beautiful sunrise
- Learning the Karen's way of life
- Trekking from Mae Hae Noi, Karen village to Mae Sa-Nga watershed forest and having lunch prepared by the Karen housewives
- Tasting the food at MHRPDS, which is mostly the vegetables produced in the area, allows the tourists to experience a native meal made from food grown by the local people.

There were seven volunteer tourists who offered to participate in the pilot tour program. Five volunteers had experiences in traveling to other ecotourism locations. (Table 1)

All the volunteer tourists felt that the tour was worthwhile. They were not quite satisfied with

Table 1 General information of volunteer tourists

Items	No.
No. of tourists	-7 volunteer tourists
Where are tourists from?	-Chiang Mai province (n = 5) -Bangkok capital city (n = 2)
Average age	32 years
Prior experience in other ecotourism places	-5 volunteer tourists

the road conditions and the bathrooms in the guesthouses. The other factors were rated as moderate and highly satisfied (Table 2).

The volunteer tourists showed their desire to learn culture, local knowledge, the way of living with nature, forest minor product utilization, and way of indigenous life. In addition, they would like to see the collaboration among all local institutes and the community in the area, and they expected that the information from the local guide will correspond with the opinion of the entrepreneur. The “folk-tales” told to the tourists will be an important factor to create the value added for tourism in this area. If the narrator has meticulousness in the narration, by giving the details to the audience in an informed creative method, it will be helpful to enhance tourist’s impression and they will remember their trip throughout their life.

In addition, volunteer tourists commented that they would like to visit MHRPDS again and also

observe the other seasons, especially persimmon harvesting period. The most interesting attraction in the area are the abundant natural resources, culture and the traditional life that is still practiced.

The guidelines for community-based ecotourism management

Information obtained from the brainstorming activity suggested that the tourism committee be established for specific duties that included training for committee such as cooking, greeting, arranging field trips to observe other best practice in ecotourism, and preparing home-stay in Karen and Hmong villages. The school should participate in culture conservation by using local mentors to transfer their knowledge to the youth in school. Improvements should be planned for the facilities that were not satisfactory for the tourists such as bathrooms in the guesthouse and the poor road conditions.

Table 2 Tourists evaluation result

Items	Mean score	Satisfaction level
Tour Program and interesting program	3.86	B
Period of time and the smoothness of organizing activities of the program	4.29	A
Participation among the community	4.29	A
Royal Project Officer information service	4.57	A
Accessibility	3.62	B
Road condition within the tourist attraction place	3.14	C
The residence/guesthouse condition and accommodation	4.57	A
Bathroom in guesthouse	3.29	C
Food prepared by MHRPDS: taste, quality and cleanliness	4.52	A
Native/local food prepared by community and food shop in the village	3.97	B
Attractiveness of natural places	4.00	B
Attraction of culture and way of life	4.09	B
Hospitality of community	5.00	A
Accommodations	4.57	A
Folklore	4.29	A
Climate, nature and safety	4.57	A
Worthwhile tour program	4.71	A

Note : A = very satisfied (4.21-5.00), B = satisfied (3.41-4.20), C = neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (2.61-3.40), D = dissatisfied (1.81-2.60), E = very dissatisfied (1.00-1.80). Calculated mean score from 7 volunteer tourists.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The community has the requirement and positive attitude on tourism but they lack the knowledge in ecotourism management and do not have the knowledge or skills to initiate tourism in their village. This research could help the community to increase their understanding on tourism management by participating in the PAR learning process that also corresponds to the Royal Project tourism development policy. The above suggestion will aid to generate supplement income and conserve local culture and natural resources. This study also supported tourism activities by collecting indigenous knowledge, tradition and history in order to create tourism value in the area. In addition, this research encourages the community to conserve their culture awareness and participate in the stakeholder workshops to brainstorm additional ecotourism management guidelines for this area.

Nevertheless, this research could generate knowledge for community-based tourism. In the researchers' opinions, it is felt that the community still needs more assistance and experience to be able to manage tourism by itself without depending on outside influences. The suggestions of this study are as follows:

- To encourage related organizations to support and mentor extended development that was initiated from this study
- To arrange a monthly tourism meeting to encourage and continuously monitor the project
- To arrange additional training for the tourism committee such as cooking, greeting etc.
- To arrange home-stay in the Karen and Hmong village
- To implement a field trip to observe the "best practices" of ecotourism in other areas
- To develop handicraft for producing souvenirs for tourists
- To arrange the appropriate tour program in summer and rainy season and to evaluate the program
- To set up regulations for tourists that correspond to local traditions

- To survey more attractive places and gather the information to produce stories
- To create a tourist information center/souvenir shop in the village
- To promote the tourist attraction, the Royal Project or related organization should help the community develop website, brochures, etc.

However, communities are supposed to show readiness for tourism management and sharing expenses to rehabilitate natural resources in order to further tourism sustainability in the community. In addition, there are some limitations in this study including limited number of participants. The results of this research however could be used as a guideline or pilot study for further research.

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