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PALMER, Nicola <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7916-139X> and CHUAMUANGPHAN, Nipon

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Governance and local participation in Ecotourism: community-level ecotourism stakeholders in Chiang Rai province, Thailand

Nicola J. Palmer[i] and Nipon Chuamuangphan[ii]

[i] *Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK*
[ii]*Nakhon Pathom Rajabhat University, Thailand*

E-mail: n.palmer@shu.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper takes as its starting point the assertion that community-based ecotourism is an activity in which not all members of a community are able to be involved (through barriers or factors of exclusion) and/or wish to be involved (through personal choice). This has implications for discussions about community-level stakeholders, governance and tourism development. Firstly, the paper explores the actors' interactions as they relate to the use of resources and environment. Within this theme are seen more specific sets of social relations and sustainability elements. These elements highlight key factors, beginning with the actors, the resource uses, and continuing with the influence of different resource management regimes, of power and authority, of networks of social relations, of patterns of governance, and of internal and external relations that occur with actors both inside and outside the local villages. The geographical context is three villages in the northern Thai province of Chiang Rai, a key international ecotourism area. The study is underpinned by use of a range of qualitative methods and considers the views of 70 key informants. Participation in tourism by Thai villagers is argued to reflect both ability to be involved (centred on land ownership and its restriction of livelihood opportunities) and active choice of involvement (the extent to which tourism is individually considered as a potential livelihood option). Involvement in community based ecotourism in a traditional hierarchical society like Thailand appears to be linked to an individual's social standing or general position in society and to be far from a matter of free choice. Governance - in the sense of social order, social coordination, social practices (Bramwell and Lane, 2013) - is identified as having a key influence upon the ways in which participation in tourism occurs at a local level. Social status, legitimacy and power are highlighted as issues for further research in relation to further understanding the dynamics of community-based tourism development.

Key words: ecotourism; participation; discourses; community-level stakeholders; governance

Introduction

There are many academic and practitioner studies that have examined community-based ecotourism, both in the broader context of developing countries (e.g. see Scheyvens, 1999; Tosun, 2000; Scheyvens, 2002; Roe et al, 2004; Cater, 2006; Fennell, 2008;) and within the specific context of Thailand (e.g. see Laverack & Thangphet, 2009; Choibamroong *et al*, 2011; Novelli & Tisch-Rottensteiner, 2012). However, there is a dearth of material that presents the views or responses of community members towards working in tourism, participating in decision-making and having a voice within the development process once a decision to participate in tourism has actively been taken. Community-based ecotourism is often assumed to be a saviour of poor rural economies in the developing world (and to a lesser extent, the developed world). Recognition is lacking of the fact that not every member of a community is able to be involved or wishes to be involved in community based ecotourism or tourism *per se*.

It has been claimed that one of the key reasons why ecotourism and community-based tourism (CBT) are developed relates to an empowerment goal - the development of tourism as a livelihood option for communities where development options are limited and/or marginalised groups are being targeted in a society (Scheyvens, 2002; Roe *et al.*, 2004; Scheyvens, 2012). The development of CBT and ecotourism is often driven by international development funding aimed at achieving rural economic diversification, with tourism being identified as an alternative livelihood activity. It is apparent that the employment of community-based ecotourism (CBET) as an economic and business development tool is often encouraged or advocated in traditional, non-westernised cultures.

However, CBT approaches are necessarily dependent on contextual social structures and any type of tourism development therefore, must be considered on how it fits into existing institutional frameworks (comprised of a set of formal organisational structures, rules and informal norms). This suggests that generic models or approaches to CBT cannot be applied to achieve empowerment or address inequalities in communities (such as those directed at specific genders or ethnic groups), namely because CBT will be operating within a climate where issues of empowerment or inequality are engendered or embedded within local contexts. The influence of social structures, we argue, should not be dismissed in that involvement in tourism may be recognised to entail choices that are, at least, to some extent governed or constrained by wider social forces and structural inequalities that affect capacity for participation (Palmer and Chuamuangphan, 2017).

The contribution of CBT or ecotourism to economic and business development therefore cannot be considered without reference to the community and societal structures in which these developments occur (Tosun, 2000; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006; Kowal, 2008). In particular, the dominance, power and control of certain actors in economic activities and as business owners within a community need to be considered as do capacity issues around entry to the CBT and ecotourism sectors. At local levels, distinctions are often made between businesses from 'inside' or 'outside' of local communities. These divisions challenge stakeholder management approaches that conceptualise group communities as cohesive social entities (Dunham *et al*, 2006).

This paper is interested in developing a better understanding of the involvement in ecotourism by communities in relation to three themes: appropriate livelihoods and ecotourism; social and resource equity and ecotourism; and decision-making and ecotourism management. These themes are conceptualised to be related to debates surrounding CBT (and ecotourism as a community based tool), ecotourism as an economic and business development tool, and cultural change and sustainability.

There is a need to understand the cultural contexts in which sustainability occurs. Resource management is affected by community and social values towards resources. Debates around sustainability are relevant since ecotourism is often used as a sustainable tourism tool. Yet it cannot be assumed that members of communities in lesser developed nations will hold similar notions of fairness to members of communities in more developed countries and, instead, these notions should be seen to be complex consequences of ideological norms often developed and sustained by particular political regimes. In traditional societies, which are often hierarchical and heavily role-based, then it is easy for 'outsiders' to highlight inequalities that appear to frustrate the principles of distributive justice. In tourism, this has often happened, particularly in relation to poverty alleviation and Pro-poor Tourism (Carbone, 2005; Hummel and van der Duim, 2012). However, there is a lack of research that considers non-western constructs of justice (in the broader context of perceived 'fairness') in relation to resource distribution in tourism at a community level of analysis (Dorjsuren & Palmer, 2018). This aspect is important in relation to our broader intention (through this paper) of contributing to better understanding of the involvement in ecotourism by community-level stakeholders.

Community involvement in tourism decision-making

There are many studies of tourism development that advocate increased community involvement and participatory planning, seeking to widen inclusion in tourism decision-making. Blackstock (2005) argues that structural inequalities within communities influence local decision-making and that trying to redress low and exclusive levels of involvement in tourism decision-making requires more radical intervention. The issue of *appropriate* participation in policy decision-making is complex and culturally- specific norms and societal values need to be taken into account. Only by gaining the perspectives of actors based within specific geographical case study areas can these issues be explored. It has been identified in a number of tourism studies that the existence of power elites and connections to the most powerful can affect the ability of local people to influence tourism decision-making. Blackstock (2005) shares Cheong and Miller's (2000: 381) observations of the relevance of wider structural inequalities in her observation that *'having the least control can translate into having the least involvement'*.

Conceptual framework

Prior to data collection, a conceptual framework was developed, influenced by three key theoretical approaches: ecotourism planning and management; sustainable development; and political ecology. This theoretical underpinning was related to relevant topics (social relations, ideologies of sustainability and ecotourism planning and management) and also other sub-topics in the study's conceptual framework (Figure 1).

Three key concerns or topics relevant to ecotourism planning and management are highlighted within the framework: the patterns of social relations relevant to sustainable development; the values and discourses of different actors about sustainable development, and the policies and practices of ecotourism planning and management that may be relevant to sustainability. It should be emphasized that the framework is not intended to be a rigid, pre-determined analytical framework, but rather it is intended as a broad, and fairly loose integrative framework that links together social processes and environmental issues that affect sustainability.

Figure 1 shows that the first topics in the framework is social relations and sustainability, which explores the actors' interactions as they relate to the use of resources and environment, and to the local ecotourism products. Within this topic are seen more specific sets of social relations and sustainability elements. These elements highlight key factors, beginning with the actors, the resource uses, and continuing with the influence of different resource management regimes, of power and authority, of networks of social relations, of patterns of governance, and of internal and external relations that occur with actors both inside and outside the local villages. It is these factors that form the focus of this research paper.
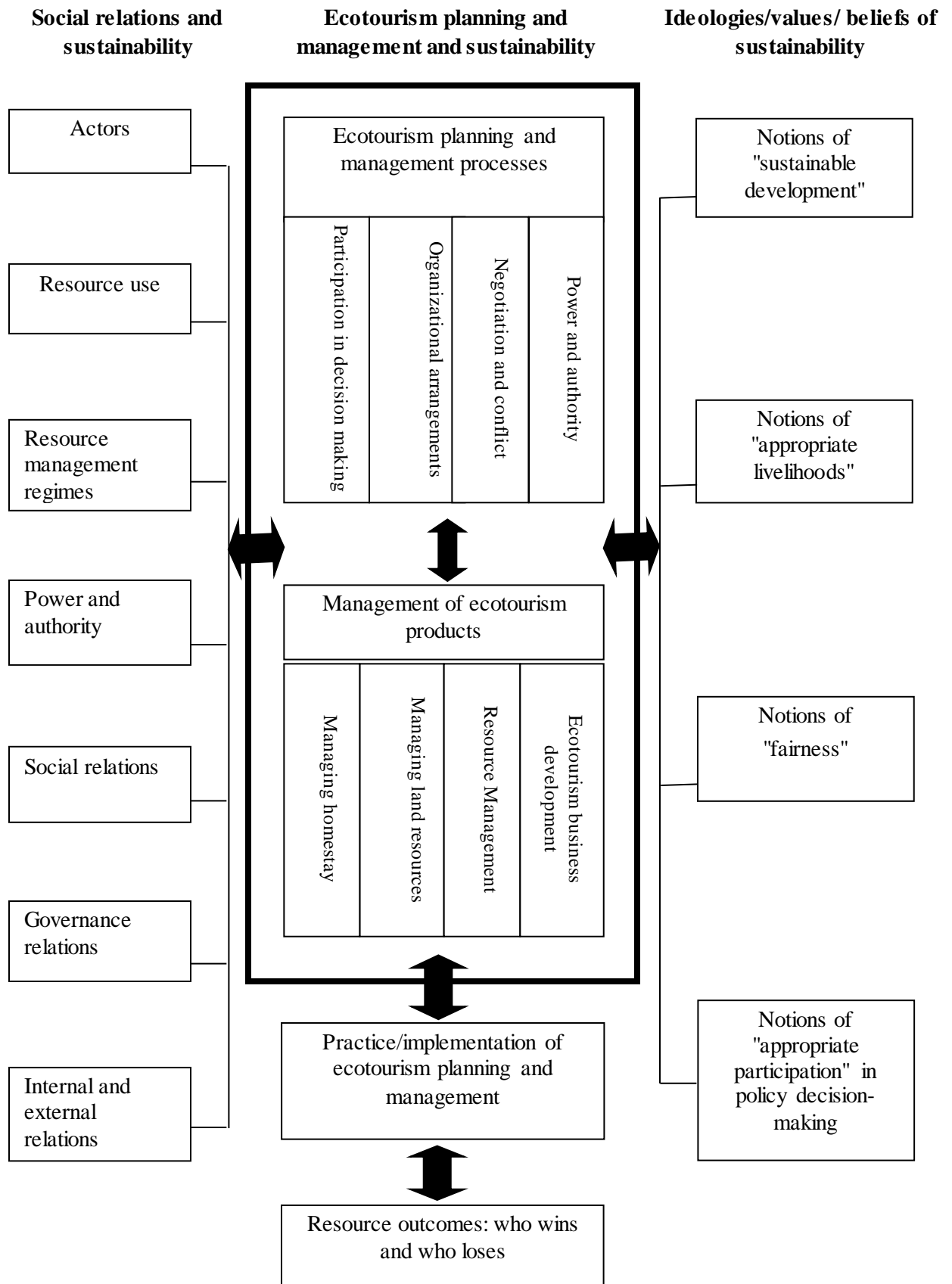
The arrows in Figure 1 highlight the ongoing dynamic and dialectical interplay between the three topics; it can be said that the interactions between social relations and sustainability, the ideologies, values or beliefs about sustainability and ecotourism planning and management are manifested in each other and are closely inter-connected. Ecotourism, as a tool for sustainable development in developing countries, requires examination of organizational issues concerning control of the development process. The practical issues of ecotourism planning and management and sustainability are intimately connected with the themes of social relations and sustainability, and of the ideologies of sustainability. Social relations and the ideologies of sustainability profoundly affect the development of ecotourism planning and management, and these feed back into those relations and values. Local ecotourism planning and management may be directly influenced by what are considered appropriate processes according to local community perspectives. It may also be affected by relations of influence and power in the community. Therefore, it is important to focus on issues such as power and

authority, negotiation and conflict, organizational arrangements, and participation in decision-making. This also facilitates consideration of who is able to wield the most power between the public sector, the private sector and the NGO sector.

The practice or implementation of ecotourism planning and management requires consideration of how strategies are converted into action around the development of land and other resources, around tourism business development, and around the organisation of homestays at a local level. Linked to this, there is the issue of local level strategies around employment and the sharing of benefits. These local level strategies must accommodate, or at least acknowledge, the local ideologies of sustainability as well as local social relations and sustainability. Ecotourism planning and management and sustainability needs to incorporate actor views on sustainability if ecotourism is to be able to truly promote sustainable development, as is often assumed by the governments of developing countries when ecotourism is selected as a development option. Thus the relevance of adopting an ethnomethodology was acknowledged in line with the study aim of examining actors' social relations and their responses to the role of ecotourism development within their local social context. Ethnomethodology, as an overall approach, encourages us to look at people's everyday ways of producing orderly social interaction. Using this constructivist strategy, the study places emphasis on human activities and experiences as based in the social relations, values and discourses surrounding ecotourism and sustainability.

Within the topic of social relations and sustainable development, there are three broad sub-topics. The first involves resource use, resource management, and the deliberations undertaken within communities concerning resources. The resources refer both to resources that support local ways of life and also to resources that more specifically support ecotourism in the area, such as community forests, local ways of life and indigenous culture, wildlife and national parks, and protected forest areas. The second sub-topic considers power and governance. It examines matters relating to the balance in power relations for communities, including issues around the power of local political leaders, as well as power in relation to external relations and actors. It also considers issues around socio-economic and political influence and control in the villages. The third sub-topic examines internal and external relations, notably the connections between village actors and the activities and actors involved from outside. This includes external investment in tourist facilities, the role of external tour operators, and internal and external involvement in the processes of ecotourism management and sustainability.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework to evaluate ecotourism planning and management and sustainable development

Social relations and sustainability	Ecotourism planning and management and sustainability	Ideologies/values/ beliefs of sustainability

Actors

Ecotourism planning and management processes

- Participation in decision making
- Organizational arrangements
- Negotiation and conflict
- Power and authority

Notions of "sustainable development"

Resource use

Resource management regimes

Power and authority

Management of ecotourism products

- Managing homestay
- Managing land resources
- Resource Management
- Ecotourism business development

Notions of "appropriate livelihoods"

Social relations

Notions of "fairness"

Governance relations

Practice/implementation of ecotourism planning and management

Notions of "appropriate participation" in policy decision-making

Internal and external relations

Resource outcomes: who wins and who loses

The framework presented in Figure 1 worked as a guide for the wider research study on which this paper is based, and it influenced the research methodology, and data analysis. It was intended to assist understanding and study of ecotourism planning and management and sustainability in a holistic, integrative manner which relates ecotourism to its socio-economic, political and environmental relations. It should be noted that the conceptual framework played a significant role in the design of the research methodology used in this study, it influencing the selection of research tools, the specification of the interview questions and the data interpretation.

Research case study and method

A case study approach allows for consideration of agency and structure and choices and constraints within the distinctive situation, of the complex multivariate conditions found in those situations, and of the multiple relevant sources of evidence (Yin, 2003). This study was intended to focus on the structural dimensions of the social relations within local communities, and between those communities and actors outside, in relation to ecotourism planning and management, and it also considered what the actors felt about those relations and their way of life. Thus, the value of examining specific geographical and community cases was noted.

Rural areas of Thailand are noted for the remarkable growth and significance of tourism, in general (Choibamroong *et al*, 2011), and ecotourism, in particular. As a geographical research case, the province of Chiang Rai in northern Thailand is a key international ecotourism area with a range of tourism development stages and community characteristics to examine. Three rural areas of Chiang Rai were used as case studies: Rong Born village; Yang Kham Nu village; and Ruammit village (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Chiang Rai Province, Thailand and the location of the three case study villages
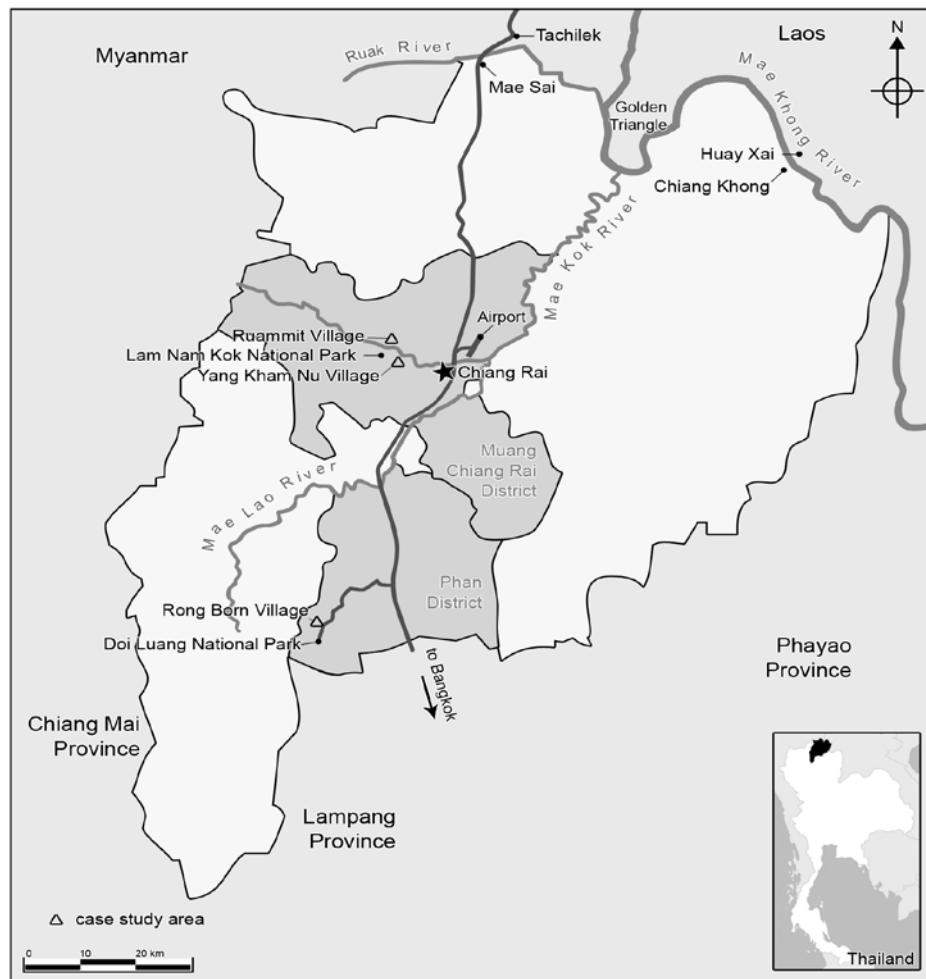
Source: The authors

The three case study villages are distinctive in that their communities are made up of indigenous hill-tribes, but they share a reliance on agriculture as the principal economic sector and livelihood activity. The patterns and processes of ecotourism planning and management in each of the three rural areas were examined prior to the fieldwork phases of this study with a strong focus on these differing local contexts.

Differing management regimes were in place: Rong Born involved territorialised state control through its national park status and through the powerful state forest service; Yang Kham Nu was characterised by greater local community influence and control; and Ruammit was characterised by both local and external tourism companies and by increasing local government involvement (as part of a Thailand-wide attempt to strengthen local government). All three of the villages shared the same structure of local governance. Village leaders were democratically elected by local communities and there were no gender and ethnic restrictions

on becoming a leader. Financial management of the villages was undertaken by these village leaders who played an administrative role. Village meetings, the official forum for village leaders to consult with their communities were found to vary in frequency - seldom held in Rong Born but held once a month in Yang Kham Nu and Ruammit.

There were also differences in terms of ecotourism development trajectories in the three villages. The most established tourist destination area was Ruammit village where trekking tours and elephant trips had been operating since 1975. Tourism activity in the local economy had been largely controlled by external travel agencies who brought tourists into the village and consequently, took a significant portion of the economic returns. However, a wide range of tourist services were also provided by villagers, in cooperation with travel agencies and also the Tourism Authority of Thailand (Chiang Rai office). In contrast to the other two villages, most tourists visiting Ruammit village were international tourists. In Rong Born, the local forest had been destroyed through over-use in the past and, with the intervention of the village leader and advice from an NGO and village elders, a community forest had been developed in 1992 which formed the basis of the village's ecotourism offer since 2001. Ecotourism was launched in Yang Kham Nu village at the beginning of the 1990s. At provincial level government Doi Hang Tambon Administration Organisation (TAO) planned and developed tourism, focusing on facilities and infrastructure for tourists, for example, developing road access to the sites and providing accommodation for visitors (p.c. Doi Hang TAO, 2007). The TAO directly received income from tourists and paid some local people to become staff at service places. In this village the TAO also promoted homestay accommodation.

Three intensive periods of fieldwork were undertaken in the villages spanning three consecutive years by Chuamuangphan, a Thai native speaker. A range of qualitative data collection methods were employed, including observation and non-participatory attendance of village meetings, 70 personal face-to-face semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Of the 70 key informants interviewed 50 represented local community members: 12 from Rong Born; 12 from Yang Kham Nu; and 26 from Ruammit. The remaining 20 represented national, provincial and district level actors, non-government officials, tour operators and representatives from non-governmental organisations involved with ecotourism planning and management. The 50 community members included village leaders, farmers, elderly and young people, tourism business owners, guides, and accommodation service providers (homestay service), religious leaders and housewives. Collectively, they may be recognised to all be representatives of 'community-level tourism stakeholders'. A snowball sampling technique (Denscombe, 2003) was used in their recruitment.

Figure 1 served as a tool to guide the themes for the interview schedules used in the study fieldwork. It provided a means of ensuring that the semi-structured interviews focused on issues that were relevant to the wider study aims and objectives. The framework also aided comparability between the actor interviews, which were adapted according to actor education levels and their degree of familiarity with conceptual language, to ensure that similar issues were examined by the different respondents. The data was collected by Chuamuangphan, a native Thai speaker, and was translated prior to transcription. Translation from Thai to English took place during the transcription process. This enabled Palmer to participate in the

process of confirmability in line with the pursuit of 'trustworthy' qualitative research (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). The collected data was analysed using content analysis, a technique that provides new insights and increases researcher understanding of particular phenomena. This was identified to be especially relevant here in relation to examining local responses. Thematic analysis was employed, where the coding scheme was based on categories designed to capture the dominant themes present in the text, (Franzosi, 2004: 550). This paper focuses on the discussion of three key themes: discourses around appropriate livelihoods and ecotourism; discourses around social and resource equity and ecotourism; and discourses around decision-making and ecotourism management.

Discourses around appropriate livelihoods and ecotourism

Land ownership was a key factor affecting livelihood decisions. It was found, in all three villages, that land ownership was a major influence on perceptions of appropriate livelihoods, particularly in relation to involvement in ecotourism. The people who were landless were more likely to move into tourism because it provided them with a means of livelihood over which they had control. This observation suggests that involvement in tourism was utilised in the Thai villages as a means of securing control or a perceived route to empowerment. It supports the ideas of Blackstock (2005) that structural inequalities within communities influence local decision-making; in this case it may be argued that marginalisation and inequality drove certain community members into the tourism industry.

A tourist guide in Yang Kham Nu said, *'I have no land for farming. I work as a trekking tour guide...I think I have enough money for my family...such as I can pay the educational fee at a university in the city for my daughter. I am satisfied with this job.'* A youth at Yang Kham Nu observed, *'My father has got land for farming...but we are a big family...and I am happy to work in a hotel in the city... Yes, I ride my motorcycle to work and return home because it is not that far from here [his home].'*

Additionally, a shop owner at Ruammit stated that:

> *'We* [the interviewee and his sister] *had no land for farming at our hometown...My sister moved to work here and opened her small souvenir shop in this village* [Ruammit]...*We are happy to work here...I can get higher education...I am studying at a university in Chiang Rai'* .

Thus, participation in tourism as a livelihood appeared to be viewed as 'a means to an end', an economic livelihood chosen, at least in part, as a means of financing or supplementing a standard of living. In terms of livelihood options, farming was continually positioned against tourism as a way of making a living, perhaps unsurprising given the heavy economic dependence on farming in each of the three villages.

However, control over this factor was perceived to be limited and legally-constrained. Tribal people felt that it was very difficult to own their own land because they had migrated from place to place in the past, pre-settlement in villages such as Ruammit and Yang Kham Nu. Partly as a consequence, they regarded themselves as poorer than the indigenous Thai land-owning, people. The groups of tribal people at Ruammit, for example, said that they did not

own land because, as tribal people, they lacked some of the rights of people who had Thai national identity. One of the village leaders explained some of the complexities of and implications of rules around land ownership:

> *'There were some business people from outside who came to the village to buy land from the villagers...For example, my relative, she wanted to sell her land to the business man...I did not agree with her...I told her to compare the good and bad sides after selling the land and that she would become landless...Moreover, some tribal people around the sub-district had no Thai nationality card...so, it is difficult for them to buy land for themselves'.*

Lack of land ownership did not however prevent tourism involvement but, rather, affected the nature of that involvement, prompting entrepreneurship and self-employment activities. Landless people, especially some of the tribal groups in Ruammit, had become very involved in tourism businesses in the village, especially selling souvenirs to tourists. The indigenous Thai people acknowledged that tourism businesses brought economic benefits to the owners of those businesses often indirectly linked to the tourist trade.

Tribal groups, such as the *Akha* and *Hmong* in Ruammit, did not have their own land and mostly rented a small parcel of land for running their souvenir shops. However, some of these community members worked simultaneously as shop owners in Ruammit and as agricultural workers in their previous village of main residence. They reported that they would go back to work on their farms in the rainy season (from May to July yearly) and they returned to Ruammit after harvesting their crop to re-open the shop again. Thus, their status and identification as community members was complex and split between two villages. Here, the idea of communities as being cohesive social entities was clearly challenged in line with the sentiments of (Dunham *et al*, 2006).

In contrast to Ruammit, in Rong Born and Yang Kham Nu the villagers tended to prefer working on farms rather than getting involved in tourism. One influential factor here might be the level of tourism maturity in their villages - tourism was newer (less established) in their villages in comparison to Ruammit. This meant that villagers had less experience of and fewer ideas about tourism as a livelihood compared to agricultural work. One farmer in Rong Born, for example, stated a preference for farming as a more secure livelihood than tourism:

> *'Yes, I have my own farm... I like to work on farms...I do not think we can do any tourism business in the village because there are only some people who come to the community forest once or twice a month'.*

Assessment of tourism in comparison to other livelihood options on the basis of personal capabilities was also apparent. One of the farmers in Ruammit, for example, stated, *'I like to work on a farm rather than working in a tourism job...I do not think I can do any tourism job...I am too shy to be a seller...It is hard for me to work in tourism'.*

Involvement and participation in tourism as a livelihood was found to be less linked to what tourism could offer them (Walpole and Goodwin, 2001) but was linked to national identity status and lack of resources to make alternative livelihood choices. Material circumstances and cultural values were identified as instrumental to the ability of local people to make alternative livelihood choices. In this context, the relationship between influence, control and participation was seen to be affected by capability and, in some cases, clearly reflected restrictions over opportunity to make other livelihood choices; the question arises as to the extent to which tourism in this context is a lesser-favoured or secondary livelihood option rather than an economic activity of choice?

Discourses around Social and resource equity and ecotourism

Notions of fairness around socially-distributed benefits from ecotourism and exploitation of resources for ecotourism vis-à-vis other community activities were found to be inextricably linked. In Rong Born and Yang Kham Nu there was a strong focus on environmental conservation in day-to-day village activities, and this conservation focus had subsequently attracted tourists to see their conservation practices and community forest work. In Rong Born, commercial ecotourism development had led to environmental degradation, and as a result of this, conservation concerns had been given more prominence. Thus, tourism was recognised to act as a tool for enhancing the value of environmental resources and, by virtue, providing wider benefits to the community as a whole. It also acted as a driver for environmental protection. This was one reason why although not all villagers worked in tourism nor received direct economic benefits from tourism, resentment was not commonly expressed towards those villagers who did.

However, amongst those who did work in tourism the distribution of benefits or outcomes for them was questioned. A housewife at Rong Born argued that:

> *'I and many of housewives love to provide services for visitors, but we cannot work for free...We have jobs to do to gain income for my family...This time if the village leader wants a cook for visitors, she has to pay for housewives ...she has now paid round 100 Baht a day...It is a good deal'*

In Rong Born, villagers had joined in with tourism activities in the village expecting to get a return from their participation. In fact, they got nothing and it involved an opportunity cost - they lost their benefits from farming or labouring at that time. One farmer at Rong Born bemoaned this situation:

> *'Think about yourself* [the interviewer]. *When you work almost a day in welcoming visitors activities...Take them to the trail [community forest]...But I got nothing...I have two children to get to school ...I have to pay for them for transportation, lunch and for a snack...If I work for the village...what about my family? They have to eat and want money to support their life'.*

The external actors in this context refer to tourist organisers or tour operators based outside of the villages and they were involved more explicitly in Ruammit where tourism was more established. These actors had brought tourists to the village, they had certain transactional and thus, institutionalised relationships with the villages, and, at times, the relations between the external actors and the local community led tourism in a positive or negative direction.

For example, individual commercial groups based outside the village led tourists to Ruammit for trekking, on half-day tours or for a few hours around the village:

> *'Tourists often came to the village via tour operators and they had just looked around the village without doing any shopping... They [tourists] just looked around the village for elephant riding, watching hand made products and seeing our [villagers] local ways... In the past, they [visitors] came for days, spent time with local people, stayed overnight with us...Yes, we got more money than now'* (Shop owner, Ruammit).

Thus, this change provided fewer benefits for local people when tourism was brought to the village by tourism organisers. A sense of injustice was expressed as exemplified by the view of one farmer at Ruammit:

> *'People who are involved in the tourism business should retain the benefits of their works... Like small local shops in the village, they have sold souvenirs or meals to tourists, then they should get the benefits [money] from the visitors'.*

This, of course, had implications for any expectations that tourism should be a community-based activity. There was tolerance for individualism, reflecting the significance of livelihood income at an individual household-level as well as at a community level.

When Yang Kham Nu provided a welcome event for tourists in the village based on a traditional indigenous Thai family-based tradition this provided only a limited range of benefits for community members and there was some local dissatisfaction with the exploitation of local 'private sphere' practices. One farmer at Yang Kham Nu stated:

> *'I feel unhappy with the show of the villagers for tourists, such as the tying of holy thread around the visitor's wrist. It is our way to highly respect our own family. However, we also want to satisfy our tourists and we want more of them to come to the village...We will get more money from them'.*

The social status of tribal groups emerged as a fundamental, underlying issue. Indigenous Thai groups appeared to be more influential and powerful, having a higher social status than other ethnic groups. This is partly because indigenous people believed that tribal people were minority groups lacking Thai national identity. Moreover, status, in relation to resource equity and fairness around access to resources, also emerged as an issue. Some of the tribal groups were believed to have destroyed the forest for crops and logging purposes when they first arrived in the area in response to lacking farm land ownership and in an attempt to find livelihoods through logging. There was a small amount of cutting down of the forest in Ruammit and Rong Born by these ethnic groups, for example, before community forests were set up in their villages. This had created some tensions between villagers:

> *'Tribal people destroyed the forest* [pointed to a forest area]...*because they were landless and they were poor...Like tribal people nearby our village, they had been moved out from a protected area and they asked to settle down on the side of Doi Luang National Park'* (Farmer, Rong Born)

> *'The indigenous people are richer than us...they have good facilities...perhaps, their ancestors had left them good land and things...or they had higher education compared to us... we are far away from the city'* (Housewife, Yang Kham Nu).

Resource management emerged as a key issue in relation to community views around social and resource equity and tourism. Politics and power inequities were evident in relation to access to natural resources, exploitation of resources for ecotourism purposes and subsequent distribution of benefits from resources in line with the findings of political ecology approaches to the study of tourism (Stonich, 1998; Gössling, 2003; Cole, 2012).

Discourses around decision-making and ecotourism management

The village leaders said that they welcomed all villagers to join in the tourism activities yet this was difficult because people who had never been concerned with tourism, such as farmers, did not want to be involved in tourism activities. Participation appeared to be affected by the exercising of choice, at least in terms of economic cost-benefit analysis in relation to livelihoods pursued by those owning land (the key to access to opportunity in the communities under study). In this respect, some level of power and control of community stakeholders to take part in ecotourism decision-making was evident. Opportunity to participate was observed to exist, however this appeared to be limited by community stakeholder understanding of the scope and value of their participation.

At the time of the fieldwork, the Thai government had been encouraging local people to become active participants in their own village planning under its "7th National Economic and Social Development Plan and Creative Economy (1992-1996)". This encouraged communities to engage in managing their local resources, most notably community forests (p.c. National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), 2008). However, the government had not focused on what participative role local people would play in terms of local empowerment and local resource management for community development. In the three villages, the village leaders and the external government actors had sought ways to encourage greater local participation in village planning. An administrative member of the National Park Department in Bangkok said, *'...Yes, we are doing and encouraging them to join in...But, sometimes the local people needed to be explained about the roles of local participation'*.

A key reason why they did not always know and understand their role in participation was the control exercised by their leaders and governors. Some local people felt that they had no opportunities to question or disagree with the planning for their villages regarding the decisions made by their local leaders. They did not feel like they had a voice in decision-making and a lack of trust was apparent. At Rong Born a housewife stated:

> *'Almost all of the projects within the community were planned by our leader and the leader team...We (as a villager) sometime found it difficult to reject the projects...Because, we did not want to have any conflict with our leaders and the projects were done for us...no point to argue with'*.

Similarly, in Ruammit a shop owner remarked:

> *'The* [village] *leader is lazy. He just does and runs projects for the village for himself...He has a restaurant there* [in the village] *and his sister is the elephant camp manager...I have not seen him do a good thing to bring tourism to the village...No, no I have never heard about tourism plans or there has not been a meeting about tourism plans or any project about tourism...I cannot argue like this to him directly...I do not want to get into conflict with them, and I am happy with this [situation]'.*

As a consequence, lack of community participation in tourism decision-making caused local people to be unclear about the ideas and concepts behind important developments for the villages and about the local benefits, such as the likely income from tourism for the village. In practice, plans for the villages were set up by leaders without participation from all villagers or involvement of all community members in local decision-making and tourism management. Village meetings were considered to be (and observed to be) focused on information dissemination rather than a means of facilitating consultation and active engagement. Community and societal structures were found to shape and constrain the contribution of community members to ecotourism, in turn, impacting on wider economic and business development decisions (Tosun, 2000; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006; Kowal, 2008).

Participation in tourism decision-making was also influenced by relations between the villages and external government actors. Changes in government policy were interpreted with respect to how the villagers and their welfare were valued by those with higher levels of authority. For example, a new regulation imposed by the National Park banned local people from entering local forests to collect any wild products from the protected area. The introduction of this policy coincided with a change in National Park leadership. Local people construed that they were not allowed to collect the wild products just because the new National Park leader did not want them to go in. The Rong Born villagers spoke at length about how both their personal relations and the changes of policy affected their relations with the Doi Luang National Park, at the edge of their village. The current leader was perceived to be 'unhelpful' and 'unfriendly' to the villagers. Thus, the influence of leadership on participation was apparent.

Local people felt that they had good relations with local and national government when they clearly received benefits from the government. These benefits were assessed not just for individuals but for the support of village development as a whole. Villagers in Ruammit, for example, respected and considered their local government TAO (Mae Yao Tambon Administration Organisation) positively because the TAO supported them with a local tourist guide training project and this had enabled the forging of good relations between the village and the TAO. This was cited by interviewees as an example of where they felt that local involvement in tourism had been encouraged.

One of the research methods used in the study of the three villages was non-participatory observation and this included attendance of village meetings. These meetings were officially positioned as a means of enabling local community participation in ecotourism decision-making around ecotourism management. People attended the meetings as social occasions and also because they did not want to be penalized if they missed meetings three times in a year (as was local policy). Also, if they missed the meeting, they felt that they would not get

any benefits from the village related to the projects or initiatives that were discussed in the meeting. The penalization issue was explained by an elder at Ruammit:

> *'...Before joining the meeting. It is for all members to know what will be happening in the village and all news and information are useful for them to know...Yes, the penalty has a good result to make members come for the meeting'.*

The long duration of the meetings (up to three and a half hours) meant that the villagers often felt that it was boring to stay to the end of the session. The locals often only wanted the very important issues to be discussed in the meetings, rather than having all issues covered. In fact the process often became one of just informing all the villagers about what was happening, rather than about making decisions.

Participation and involvement was often understood in relation to wanting to be involved to gain more benefits from the tourism promotion of the village. An example of this was provided by a shop owner at Ruammit:

> *'Of course, we want to be part of tourism involvement here* [at Ruammit]...*We have attended all the village meetings...I have never missed the meetings...I want to know about how tourism is going to be managed in a good way...If there are more tourists, I could get more income from these tourists'.*

Relations that connected the villages and external tourism organisations, (such as TAT), were not as good as they should be. For example, many tourists and external tourism organisations had not known that Rong Born had opened its community forest conservation project for tourism, while Rong Born villagers had not known that TAT could help them to promote their community, citing TAT's lack of awareness and support for their annual 'Elephant Day' as an example. In Ruammit, the Mae Yao TAO had prepared both one-year and five-year plans to develop and improve ecotourism management in the village and rural areas around the village. All of the plans were about infrastructure and tourism facility improvement but they neglected to address sustainability in ecotourism management. In addition, the planning process did not have local participation. Rather than having discussions with local people, only leaders of teams from both the village and the local government were involved. The local villagers said tourism planning and management came from their leaders and the TAO. One shop owner at Rong Born (2006) said *'All plans for the village came from the leader team...I do not want to argue with them...the plans they have done are not bad... nobody wanted to argue with the leader's team'*. Thus, the plans were not felt to be representative of all local people's ideas but rather perceived to be imposed by virtue of local governance structures.

There have been major changes in the government of Thailand over many years, and this has led to a questioning of the authority of government officials. Despite this, the local villagers generally continued to respect people with status, including government officials. People praised the government as admirable and effective because it was the government that had provided them with "One Million Baht for One Village" projects - low interest loan schemes intended to provide villages with a budget (£15,385 approximately) to enable local people to borrow money to improve their work. A religious leader at Ruammit (2006) commented:

> *'It is good if leaders or TAOs have good cooperation…in between villages and also in between a community...for example, Doi Hang TAO* [where Yang Kham Nu is) *and Mae Yao TAO* [where Ruammit is) *are planning to manage a new route for tourism between these TAOs...I think it must be a good programme...for visitors and for tourism'.*

The village leaders had a highly influential role and this risked negative repercussions for community involvement in ecotourism planning. The elected village leaders had considerable concentrated power, and they made their own decisions to select other people in the village to assist them in managing the village, creating a highly centralised form of paternal control over the village which was a way to keep administrative control over the village. For example, when they contacted the government, their leaders would act as intermediaries to help them negotiate with key people:

> *'I like having a short cut when contacting key people, especially government officers in the district. They carried a message from their leader and it helped to get faster service from the government officers...And I succeeded in what I intended to do...it is a short cut to be successful more easily'* (Shop owner, Rong Born)

In general, however, it was found that villagers often had limited understanding of their potential to participate in ecotourism decision-making.

There were mixed views around that extent to which villagers wished to be involved in tourism decision-making and who they felt should be most involved. Views were linked to ideas around notions of fairness in terms of social and resource equity in ecotourism. Local governance structures - namely, the role of the village leader and the effectiveness of village meetings as consultative mechanisms - appeared to be the main focus for structural inequalities (Leach *et al*, 1999; Blackstock, 2005) within the three villages. In theory, the village meetings and NGO initiatives provided opportunities for local communities to gain involvement (Ashley & Roe, 1998) but barriers and constraints were revealed in terms of power and influence (Cheong & Miller, 2000).

Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper provides community-level insights into local perspectives on ecotourism development in rural northern Thailand and this contextual contribution is important. The paper also holds relevance to three particular academic debates that extend beyond the specific geographical focus: the employment of ecotourism as an economic and business development tool; the importance of cultural change in sustainability; and appropriate levels of community involvement in tourism decision-making. It may be concluded that, in the three case study contexts, ecotourism was not a livelihood of choice but participation was governed by land ownership reflecting social status and citizenship, under legislative control. This challenges the ability of ecotourism to be developed as a community- based tool. It was believed that most benefits from tourism, mainly economic, should go directly to those working in tourism although the community as a whole should receive wider benefits in view of tourism's exploitation of community-owned resources, nature and culture in particular. This highlights 'legitimacy' as an important concept within the cultural context in which

sustainability occurs. Involvement in tourism decision-making was recognised to be governed by local power structures and local politics and local community members saw little ways of influencing or working beyond locally-determined hierarchical processes. Political power as wielded by village leaders may be recognised as a threat to attempts to widen inclusion in tourism decision-making. A need to consider local responses to the concept of distributive justice and fairness in relation to resource distribution was supported - particularly in terms of legitimacy (Della Fave, 1980). Novelli and Tisch-Rottsteiner's (2012) suggestion that those working in tourism - mainly hill tribes - should be acknowledged and rewarded for their contributions was also corroborated.

Collectively, the findings indicate that local participation in tourism needs to be recognised to reflect wider social structures, values and practices. Governance - a requirement for knowledge; thought; the application of power, resources and rules; and also coordination and cooperation among numerous actors (Bramwell, 2011) - may be identified to have a key influence upon the ways in which participation in tourism occurs at a local level. Ecotourism can only operate as a mirror of society and community. It does not bring inherent benefits or dis-benefits and the (local) impacts of ecotourism should not be viewed in isolation from (local) social structures, values and practices.

One limitation of this paper is that the study draws on research evidence dating from the past. There is a need to consider updated research evidence and examine the extent to which social changes have occurred in terms of community structures, values and practices and tourism development. According to the UNCHR (2015) little has altered since the timing of the fieldwork and ownership of land in Thailand remains legally restricted to Thai citizens or Thai companies which have Thai nationality (Cumminsky, 2010; UN Statistics Division, 2013; Chaninat & Leeds, 2018). The "Thailand Human Development Report, 2014" (UNDP, 2014: 81) draws attention to the observation that, in Thailand, *'Members of a village share a place'* and the impact of identities on community-level tourism stakeholders affects ways of seeing and ways of doing. These fundamentally underpin participation and involvement in ecotourism and add support for the adoption of interpretivist methodologies to enable community-level tourism stakeholders to represent themselves. "Welcome to Chiangmai and Chiangrai", (recognised as a credible source by Time Magazine Asia), reports that local village life in northern Thailand is changing slowly with technological advancement but draws attention to the persistence of social structures, community values and practice as found in this study (Welcome to Chiangmai and Chiangrai, 2014).

In the context of traditional communities challenged by issues of resource scarcity such as the three villages in Thailand (and it may be argued other communities in lesser developed nations) there is also a need for researchers to further investigate the complex inter-dependencies between social structures, values and practices, resources and livelihoods. This paper acknowledges the value of political ecology and wider governance approaches to further examine social status, legitimacy and power in relation to ecotourism development and to assist academic, practitioner and policy-maker understanding of ecotourism as a community development tool and to progress stakeholder analyses.

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