Integrative Participatory Community-Based Ecotourism at Sangkhom District, Nong Khai Province, Thailand

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Abstract

The main objective of this study was to initiate integrative participatory community-based ecotourism development at a tourist destination. Therefore, Participatory Action Research (PAR) was applied to Sangkhom District, Nong Khai Province. Tools and techniques such as observation, in-depth interview, preliminary meetings, inter-group meetings and workshops were used to gain stakeholders’ participation. During the PAR process, community-based ecotourism plans were drafted and revised by stakeholders, which included public and private sectors at the destination. The implementations of the plans were well supported by stakeholders, especially local residents. Besides gaining local participation and enhancing stakeholders’ awareness in tourism environmental (natural, social and culture) conservation, the outcomes from the PAR process included enhancing tourist carrying capacity, empowering local residents in decision making towards community tourism issues, and some new local products with local branding. Thus, community-based ecotourism can be defined as a type of sustainable tourism because in this study, it was not only empowered local residents to make decision in tourism planning in their jurisdictions but also strengthen social and human capital at the destination which would forward to the next generation for continuing tourism development.

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1. Introduction

Since the promotion of Agenda 21 towards sustainable development in 1992, many forms of alternative tourism have been developed as the consequence of the sustainability trend. Community-based tourism or community-based ecotourism is also recognized as one of the alternative tourism that has been introduced to gain stakeholders’ participation, especially local’s participation, in sustainable tourism development.

Located in the northeast of Thailand along the Mekong River and bordered to the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, with its biodiversity and unique culture, Sangkhom District is appropriate to develop as a tourist destination. The main objective of this study was to initiate integrative participatory community-based ecotourism development in Sangkhom District, Nong Khai Province. It is recommended by many educators and researchers (Epstein, Alper, & Quill, 2004; Hatton, 1999-2002; Murphy, 1988; Reid, Mair, & George, 2004; Reid, Mair, & Taylor, 2000; Swaroop & Morenoff, 2006; Vincent & Thompson, 2002) that community’s participation in tourism is an essential precursor to sustainable development.

2. Methodology

A Community-Based Tourism Planning Process Model (Figure 1) suggests by Pinel (1998) was used as a guideline to tourism planning and development at Sangkhom District.

![Figure 1: A Community-Based Tourism Planning Process Model (Pinel, 1998)](image-url)
Pinel’s Model of community-based tourism planning process included 4 phases of community assessment and organization development, planning and preparation, delivery, and monitoring and evaluation. During the community-based tourism planning process, Participatory Action Research (PAR) was applied to Sangkhom District in order to achieve the main objective of this study. Tools and techniques such as observation, in-depth interview, preliminary meetings, inter-group meetings and workshops were used to gain stakeholders’ participation in the planning process.

3. Outcomes from the planning process

Outcomes from the PAR process were reported according to the 4 phases of Pinel’s Model.

**Phase 1 Assessment and organization development**

Sangkhom District consisted of 5 sub-districts (Tambon) which are Kaeng Kai, Pha Tang, Ban Muang, Na Ngio and Sangkhom. It was found that Sangkhom District had high potential in developing a community-based ecotourism because there are many tourists’ attractions such as natural (river sides, mountain and tropical forest), bio-diversity (flora and fauna), cultural (temples and Buddhist ritual events) in Sangkhom District. Additionally, local residents were interesting in developing tourism, 3 tourism pilot projects were found and supported by local governments such as the head of villages and Tambon Administration Organization Committees.

**Phase 2 Planning and preparation**

In phase 2, participants felt more interesting in tourism development and involved in the planning process. Workshops were held to gain stakeholders’ opinions concerning tourism development. During the planning process, participants were educated in tourism disciplines. Therefore, they recognized that only intrinsic destination resources alone cannot attract tourists. Tourist Destination Competitiveness and Attractiveness (TDCA) (Figure 2) proposed by Vengesayi (2003) was used as an example to develop destination’s competitiveness, attractiveness and uniqueness.

![Figure 2 The proposed conceptual model of Tourism Destination Competitiveness and Attractiveness (TDCA), modified from Vengesayi (2003)](image-url)
The community tourism plans were draft on the assumption that activities that put in the plans would help in creating the destination uniqueness. Three route trips were initiated and a pilot group was planned to visits destinations in the routes. During the route trips survey, fruits from a local plant “Elaeagnus Latifolia” (local name: Maklod) that grows all over in Sangkhom District were determined to produce a tasty and healthy fruit juice called Maklod-Berry Juice.

**Phase 3 Delivery**
During the implementation of the plan a community enterprise was established with community committees and 50 members to produce Maklod-Berry Juice with the community brand (Figure 3).

![Figure 3 Maklod-berry juices with community brand](image)

Rich in Vitamin A, C and Vitamin E, Maklod-berry juices was not only famous among tourists visiting Sangkhom but also a unique product produced only at Sangkhom District.

**Phase 4 Monitoring and evaluation**
Local communities were empowered in planning, implementation of the plans, and monitoring and evaluation. Indicators were initiated by participants to assess the outcomes. For example: carrying capacity of tourists visiting Sangkhom increased to 20 persons per day, Maklod-berry juices was well-known and the demand increased during the past 6 months, and the community enterprise profited from the product.

4. Conclusion
In conclusion the Integrative Participatory Community-based Ecotourism Development to Sangkhom District was successful in bringing together different stakeholders, and enhancing stakeholders’ participation in tourism planning process. In addition, the planning process could integrate the national tourism policies with the local interests to initiate the community-based ecotourism planning appropriate to Sangkhom District.

The implementations of the plans were well supported by stakeholders, especially local residents. Besides gaining local participation and enhancing stakeholders’ awareness in tourism environmental (natural, social and culture) conservation, the outcomes from the PAR process included enhancing tourist carrying capacity, empowering local residents in decision making towards community tourism issues, and some new local products with local branding.

Therefore, in this study, community-based ecotourism can be categorized as a sustainable tourism because it was not only empowered local residents to make decision in tourism planning in their jurisdictions but also strengthen
social and human capital at the destination which would forward to the next generation for continuing tourism development.

Reference


