

COMMUNITY-BASED ECOTOURISM OPERATION: HELP OR HINDRANCE OF THE EXTERNAL FORCES

Nantira Pookhao

Siam University

Abstract

Most community-based ecotourism (CBET) research omits the importance of external forces and disregards various tourism stakeholders by solely emphasising on the hosts. Establishing long-term empowerment and participation in CBET requires in-depth knowledge of ecotourism and operational management; CBET will be effective only when hosts are truly embedded with such knowledge and capability. Unlike in developed countries, local communities in Thailand typically lack the necessary operational knowledge. Collaboration with and assistance from external tourism stakeholders is, therefore, vital. Consequently, this paper seeks to understand the dependent relationship of a CBET village with external agencies in relation to the operation of CBET, and examines whether this relationship enhances the quality of life of the local people. The findings reveal that without reinforcement from local, national and international sectors, the CBET can not be instituted at a local level and to achieve quality of life via CBET operation, the conflict within the community needs to be solved, otherwise, any external support is meaningless or internally infuses greater conflict. Yet, the long-term involvement of these sectors tends to create tourism sustainability towards a better quality of life.

KEYWORDS : Community-based Ecotourism, Participation, Empowerment, CBET Stakeholders

บทคัดย่อ

โดยส่วนมากการวิจัยเรื่องการท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศโดยชุมชน จะมองข้ามความสำคัญของผู้มีส่วนได้ส่วนเสียจากภายนอก และมุ่งให้ความสำคัญกับชุมชนเท่านั้น การที่ชุมชนท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศมีอำนาจและมีส่วนร่วมในการดำเนินการด้านท่องเที่ยวที่นั่น ต้องมีความรู้ด้านการท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศและการจัดการในการดำเนินงานความรู้และความสามารถดังกล่าวจะทำให้การท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศโดยชุมชนมีประสิทธิภาพ ชุมชนในประเทศไทยต่างจากประเทศที่พัฒนาแล้ว เนื่องจากชุมชนในประเทศไทยส่วนมากขาดความรู้ในการดำเนินงาน ความร่วมมือและความช่วยเหลือจากหน่วยงานภายนอกนั้นสำคัญมาก ดังนั้นบทความนี้จะทำให้เข้าใจความสัมพันธ์ที่เน้นการพึ่งพาระหว่างชุมชนท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศกับหน่วยงานภายนอก และพิสูจน์ว่าความสัมพันธ์ดังกล่าว ก่อให้เกิดผลประโยชน์ต่อคุณภาพชีวิตของชุมชนท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศอย่างไร งานวิจัยค้นพบว่า หากขาดความช่วยเหลือจากหน่วยงานระดับท้องถิ่น ประเทศและนานาชาติ การท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศโดยชุมชนจะไม่สามารถเกิดขึ้นได้เลย อย่างไรก็ตามหากชุมชนท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศ มีความขัดแย้งภายใน ความช่วยเหลือและร่วมมือจากหน่วยงานภายนอกจะไม่เกิดประโยชน์

ซึ่งยังเพิ่มความขัดแย้งภายในชุมชน อย่างไรก็ตามความช่วยเหลือและร่วมมือของหน่วยงานภายนอกอย่างต่อเนื่อง จะช่วยให้ชุมชนท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศพัฒนาอย่างยั่งยืน นำไปสู่คุณภาพชีวิตที่ดีขึ้นของคนท้องถิ่น

คำสำคัญ : การท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศโดยชุมชนการมีส่วนร่วมการเพิ่มขีดความสามารถผู้มีส่วนได้ส่วนเสียจากภายนอก

INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism is an alternative form of tourism that is regarded as a development tool, which also promotes ecological conservation. In practice, scholars have shown that ecotourism does not genuinely produce greater sustainable outcome than mass tourism. Additionally, ecotourism does not focus on the well-being of local residents, but rather emphasises on the environmental mind-set. Community-based ecotourism (CBET) seeks to fill the gap in ecotourism by integrating the local community in the development and operational processes. Consequently, CBET seems to be a solution for local people seeking sustainability in a tourist destination.

The notion of CBET is particularly embedded in the notion of community control and involvement, and ensuring a significant proportion of the economic returns. It persistently reiterates the preservation of the ecological surroundings. Yet, most CBET research omits the importance of external forces by solely emphasising the hosts and disregarding various tourism stakeholder organisations, particularly environmental agencies. Therefore, it is interesting to explore the roles of such non-host stakeholders.

Unlike in developed countries, the local communities in Thailand are typically lacking in CBET-related knowledge for effective operations. Collaboration with and assistance from external tourism stakeholders is, therefore, vital. This paper seeks to understand the dependent relationship of a CBET village with external agencies in regards to the operation of CBET. This paper likewise examines whether the relationship created is sustainable in improving the quality of life (QoL) of the local people.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable Tourism Development and Quality of Life

‘Sustainable tourism development is a poorly-defined term’ (Buckley, 2009, p.5), lacking a universal agreement on its definition. More than 500 definitions since the 1980s have been provided by governments, academics, practitioners and Non-government Organisations (NGOs) (Carroll, 2002; Dale, 2001), leading to lots of criticism of the term and its application. Lew (2010) summarised the barriers to its sustainable development into the ambiguity aspect of the concept, the connection of the sustainability issue at different scales and industries, the question of how to balance the three pillars of sustainable development, and the time scale of the sustainable issue. Despite the diverse opinions on the

validity, ambiguity or the difficulty of the concept to put into practice, still, sustainable development has been extensively practiced and applied at international, national, local and grassroots levels.

Regardless of its problematic issues, sustainable tourism development should principally minimise negative impacts and elevate positive ones, while emphasising global development in light of local sustainability. To sustainably develop this at the local level, the local community requires monitoring, evaluation and participation in the tourism-development process and operation towards tourism sustainability. With the collaboration among local people and the larger public in place, a suitable tourism development toward sustainability that meets the requirement of the local people can be achieved, resulting in their well-being in the long term.

QoL depends on the individuals' objective dimension and subjective perspectives, which are hard to measure (Andereck, Valentine, Vogt & Knopf, 2007; Australian Centre on Quality of Life, Deakin University n.d.). Additionally, the fundamentals that are appraised as contributing to QoL differ from culture to culture and community to community.

Tourism has always been accounted as a tool to boost local incomes towards a better QoL. Andereck, Valentine, Vogt and Knopf (2007) maintained that tourism can contribute to community QoL by promoting an admirable living environment. Nevertheless, Andereck and Jurowski (2006) pointed out that increasing a county's GDP is not an indication of community well-being. The issues of social degradation, environmental carrying capacity and loss of cultural integrity, which indirectly influence the QoL, are normally disregarded. Therefore, since tourism impacts the QoL of local people in one way or another, a specific place-based tourism development towards sustainability should focus on to the particular place and people involved.

Ecotourism and Community-based Approach

Unlike other forms of tourism, ecotourism is nature-based, educational-based and sustainable-based, along with the infused responsibility or ethics in its operation (Blamey, 1997, 2001; Weaver, 2002). Ecotourism majorly operates in natural areas, such as forests, mountains or the seaside, without degrading the existing ecological and cultural surroundings, while enhancing the learning opportunities between hosts and guests (Walter & Reimer, 2011; Weaver, 2005). Due to the learning activities, the ecotourism participants are expected to transform in a more responsible perspective and gain a better understanding of the ecological and cultural surroundings.

Some scholars (e.g. Vivanco, 2001; Ryan, Hughes & Chirgwin, 2000; Mowforth & Munt, 1998) have questioned whether alternative tourism, such as ecotourism, is more harmful than well-planned mass tourism under the umbrella of sustainable development. The evidence from Canada and Australia has shown that only 1%-2% of tourism products authentically qualify as ecotourism (Mckercher, 1998). Paterson (2006 in Fennell, Moran-Cahusac & Nowaczek, 2007) affirmed that the concept of ecotourism is widely misunderstood, especially when it associates with its practice in relation to the linkage among

the three pillars: environment (resource conservation), society (community empowerment) and economy (ecotourism businesses). Most importantly, ecotourism, both in theory and practice, often overlooks the promotion of the interests of host communities (Campbell, 1999). Consequently, the community-based approach is introduced for the local people to minister their home.

Contrary to the people-oriented approach, CBET quests for greater safeguarding of the ecosystem of the tourist destination. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) International has defined CBET as: "...a form of ecotourism where the local community has substantial control over and involvement in, its development and management, and a major proportion of the benefits remain within the community."—WWF International (2002, p.2).

While ecotourism emphasises the environmental mindset, CBET seeks to fill the gap of the ecotourism standpoint by reiterating the preservation of the ecological surroundings and elevating local livelihood by balancing the poles of ecocentrism and anthropocentrism through the interrelation of a high-level community control and a significant proportion of economic returns. The community-based approach is considered as a bottom-up approach. A top-down approach contributes to the engagement of a large-scale scheme of development, employing centralised decision-making, whereas the bottom-up or grassroots development approach of ecotourism appears as a form of local participation and empowerment by enhancing the community's sense of belonging for cultural and ecological conservation, and meeting its needs and wants throughout the decision-making process. A large number of scholars (e.g. Nault & Stapleton, 2011; Garrod, 2003; Stem et al., 2003) affirmed that local participation is necessary for ecotourism planning and management, especially for the cross-scale conservational techniques in relation to the sharing of local traditional ecological knowledge of their everyday life. Therefore, the bottom-up approach of ecotourism development has been deemed to enforce an effective conservation based on the local socio-ecological connectedness, whereas the top-down development approach trends to enhance ecotourism through a basic tourism infrastructure.

Limitations to Authenticity of CBET

In relation to constraints of the CBET operation, most empirical and theoretical research on participation has discovered that social cohesion is not the only factor directing toward the sustainable and auspicious livelihood of the ecotourism operation incorporated with ecological conservation, but others provisions are likewise salient. The community-based approach deteriorates because of a lack of information (Stone & Stone, 2010), inadequate benefits (Stone & Stone, 2010), a lack of financial viability or reliance on external funding (Stone & Stone, 2010; Mitchell & Muckosy, 2008; Goodwin, 2006), the internal inequality of benefit distribution (Stone & Stone, 2010) or CBET-related obstacles to connect with the mainstream industry due to a lack of market viability and inability to connect with external private sectors (Goodwin, 2008, 2006). The community, therefore, is challenged by all of the operation aspects. Besides, there are many categories of failures related to ecotourism operations that the local people have

to cope with. For example, the high cost of recycling or garbage treatment (Weaver & Lawton, 2002), the lack of control over the number of tourists and low-level local participation (Kruger, 2005), and economic leakages result in a lower effectiveness of local environmental conservation (Leader-Williams, 2002), poor infrastructure and difficult accessibility (Ormsby & Mannle, 2006), inadequate long-term techniques for biodiversity conservation (Kiss, 2004), lack of ecotourism business experience, scarcity of educational and financial support from the government, a limited resource base (Silva & McDill, 2004), conflicts of interests among the local people and National Parks (Rutten, 2002), power relations, inequality or social change (Jones, 2005), an ecotourism bubble (Carrier & Macleod, 2005).

Underlining the CBET operation in developing countries, Tosun (2000) indicated that the problematic issues of limitations in community participation are operational constraints: centralisation of the public administration of tourism, lack of coordination and lack of information; structural constraints: attitudes of professionals, lack of expertise, elite domination, lack of appropriate legal system, lack of trained human resources, relatively high cost of community participation and lack of financial resources; cultural constraints: limited capacity of poor people and apathy, and a low level of awareness in the local community. According to Tosun (2000), CBET operation in developing countries acquires more reinforcement from outsiders than that in developed countries. Regarding this, Wang et al. (2010) suggested that ecological and tourism training is required for local communities. Considering the excessive involvement of NGOs (Gordillo, Hunt & Stronza, 2008; Adams and Hutton, 2007) and government organisations, Steenkamp and Grossman (2001) doubted whether the community experiences genuine empowerment. However, a community that acquires both control and participation might lack the CBET operational capability. CBET offers no formal steps towards success because each country illustrates diverse practices in relation to its social context, embedded political tradition, economic dependent situation and ecological atmosphere. For marginal countries, CBET, subsequently, does not connote solely control or the independent initiation of an ecotourism business. It rather proposes a mutual cooperation between insiders and tourism stakeholders ranging from the international, national and local level.

METHODOLOGY

This paper applied a case study undertaken in Ban Busai village in North-eastern Thailand, just a few steps away from the Dong Phrayayen-Khao Yai Forest Complex – a UNESCO World Heritage site. It was selected due to the present contentious issue surrounding ecotourism and the conflict between various tourism stakeholders and local villagers. The informants in this study represent various tourism stakeholders that promote either contributing factors or hindrances on the CBET operation in this village. The central government organisations and related NGOs participated in the in-depth interviews prior to the researcher's arrival at the village in June-July 2012. Ethnographic techniques were applied to explore

internal dimensions, while the external stakeholders related to the CBET operation were introduced to the researcher by the villagers and interviewed from December 2012-January 2013. Consequently, a number of key informants engaged in both personal communication and recorded interview were seven policy-makers, six local government officers, six NGOs, five academics, 29 villagers and 15 tourists.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND DISCUSSION

1. Thai Ecotourism and the Role of Thai Ecotourism Stakeholders

Although ecotourism was introduced into Thailand in 1974, both the government and its people have yet to embrace it. In the 1980s, alternative tourism (AT) was developed in Thailand, followed by 'Kanthongthiao Choeng Anurak' (conservation tourism) in 1994 and 'Kanthongthiao Choeng Nivet' (ecological tourism) in 1998 (Leksakundilok, 2004). As a consequence of the seventh National Economic and Social Development Plan (1992-1997), an ecotourism-related policy was launched in 1993 and was initially merged into the tourism policy of TAT in 1995. Its operation was energetic during the 1996-1997 period, and was officially proclaimed in 1998 by the support of the Thailand Institute of Scientific and Technological Research (TISTR). Consequently, the National Ecotourism Action Plan 2002-2006 was practically launched in 2001, with a budget of THB 66 million and generating 79 projects; however, it followed the top-down approach. Weaver (2002) further confirmed that the state of ecotourism in Thailand was far behind the alternative tourism ideal of the 80s since it represented conventional tourism with a large-scale operation.

The central state agency that directly is involved in ecotourism is the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (MOTS); Department of Tourism (DOT) and Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), while the Department of National Parks Wildlife and Plant Conservation (DNP) is thoroughly involved when the tourist destination is situated within its administered area. At the local level, the Sub-district (Tambon) Administrative Organisation (TAO or SAO), the District (Amphoe) Administrative Organisation (DAO) and the Provincial (Changwat) Administration Organisation (PAO) are in charge of tourism development. A tourism development plan generated by a village will be approved by the TAO, DAO and PAO. To promote a new tourist destination within a province, the MOTS is expected to discuss the matter with these local administrative organisations.

Apart from the government, NGOs are ecotourism and CBET key drivers. A well-known tourism NGO is the Community-Based Tourism Institute (CBT-I), previously known as the Responsible Ecological Social Tours Project (REST), which is under the Northern Thailand Research Fund (TRF). The CBT-I has facilitated local communities, mainly in the North and South, in adopting and managing CBT and building up CBT networks within Thailand. Not only do the tourism-related NGOs play a major role in CBET, but their environmental activists are also one of the key CBET drivers, particularly in the natural world heritage area. The Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism

Administration (Public Organization) or DASTA is an outstanding organisation that supports sustainable tourism practices within seven specific areas. Regardless of its limited administrative area, since its emergence in 2003, active projects have been commenced. The Community-Based Tourism (CBT) division of the DASTA has collaborated with CBT stakeholders, particularly CBT-I, in building up a CBT network within the designated areas. Besides, international environmental non-government organisations, such as IUCN or WWF, also contribute massive impacts to local CBET operation in Thailand.

Universities across the nation provide ecotourism research, education and training sessions to stakeholders at all levels. The Thailand Research Fund (TRF) and the National Research Council (NRC) are sources of grants to support the development of ecotourism and CBET projects. Srinakharinwirot University, Kasetsart University, Chiang Mai University, KhornKaen University, Silpakorn University, Mahidol University, and Prince of Songkla University are the key public universities that occasionally engage in ecotourism research, whereas local universities such as those of the Rajabhat chain also profoundly engage the local ecotourism communities.

To accredit the green label to ecotourism operators, the Green Leaf Foundation acts as an inspector in order to promote the green standardisation and certify the label for ecotourism operators, particularly hotels and travel agencies. The quality control and accreditation of tourism in communities in relation to homestay are monitored substantially by the DOT; yet, the preference of being accredited depends on the willingness of the community – it is not a compulsory issue. Apart from the standardised certification for homestays, certification as an ecotourism or CBET community is non-existent within the country. Nevertheless, various ecotourism or CBET community awards are provided by the MOTS and international tourism organisations.

2. CASE STUDY: BANBUSAI VILLAGE

As a result of the establishment of the Thab Lan National Park (NP) in 1981, a group of people living in the National Park were relocated in BanBusai village. They were allocated an equal piece of land and have been residing alongside the existing mixed group of people in the village; yet, they possess no ownership documents for the land they were given. Presently, 295 households with 888 villagers domicile in BanBusai (Thai Samakkhi SAO, 2013). The village is nestled by a rocky stream at the foot of the mountain that is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Abundant natural resources, such as evergreen forests, rainforests, mixed deciduous forests and grasslands, together with 800 species of mammals, birds and other wild animals, exist in the area (DNP, n.d.). Travelling from Bangkok to BanBusai village takes approximately three hours (210 kilometers), whereas driving from Nakhonratchasima takes around an hour (75 kilometers). Given the short driving distance from Bangkok, the majority of visitors are Bangkokians. The village is suitable for ecotourism, agricultural workshops or school camping; therefore, the government employees on learning trips and students constitute the core visitors.

The village outstandingly follows and enforces conservation activities in conjunction with a network with another four nearby villages to protect the source of the Moon River, a major stream of the Mekhong River, and the Bang Pakong River. Apart from the external collaboration with the Moon Watershed Conservation Group(MWCG), the villagers inherently maintain the community forest by exercising the beliefs of the myth of Nāga and ordaining trees. Customarily, BanBusai is prominent among the profit-oriented organisations in promoting corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects related to reforestation in forest-zone communities. The villagers prepare the seedlings and the planting area prior to the arrival of CSR groups.

In the past, the villagers were inflicted by poverty. They used to utilise pesticides and chemical substances for their cash crops and invested in expensive machinery. In 2000, the villagers were urged to change their practices with the contribution of Suranaree University of Technology and NakhornRatchasimaRajabhat University and funding from the Office of Higher Education. The academics developed a variety of seeds with local suitability and accompanied the inputs throughout their processes. Mushroom is one of the agricultural inputs derived from the project of Suranaree University of Technology. Mushroom products, such as mushroom paste and crispy mushrooms, became the One Tambol One Product(OTOP) program products of the village.

Since Thai Samakki sub-district has strategically promoted itself as ecotourism zone and Wang Nam Khiao district has been announced as ‘the top-7 purest air place in the world’ ,the villagers and academics took the opportunity to develop ecotourism as their second collaborative project. Consequently, CBET and homestay was accelerated in 2002 and 2003, respectively. Presently, the community provides homestay in between ten and eighteen households (the number is fluctuated due to the existing internal conflict) certified the standard by the DOT. A household, including its separated bungalows, can accommodate many guests. The huts are also suitable for those who prefer privacy. Yet, these huts have induced internal conflict since they lead to an unfair benefit distribution among the homestay group members. Overall, the carrying capacity of homestay in the village is up to 300 people.

The most notable conservation project in the area was the collaboration among the CSR project of the PTT Public Company Limited (PTT), the Wildlife Fund Thailand under the Patronage of H.M. the Queen, and other government organisations and the local people in Thai Samakkhi sub-district during the 1997-2000 period for the reforestation of 1 million rai (395,369 acres). Within 1 million rai, 10,000 rai (3,954 acres) were located in ThabLan NP area looked after by the villagers in BanBusai. The village received approximately BHT 100,000 for the reforestation project. In 2000, the PTT offered to initiate a village development project by bestowing the relevant budget and know-how, which led to the establishment of MWCG that, in turn, was the first step of the CBET development in the community. Presently, many CSR projects related to reforestation organized by the villagers account as one of the tourism activities.

Ecotourists can enjoy both long and short trekking. The available routes are KhaoKaeb, KhaoKwong and Khao Moon Long. However, Khao Moon Long is the most interesting route, which requires the accompaniment of an NP officer and a four-wheel-drive car. Overnight camping in the forest is likewise available upon request. Other accessible ecotourism activities are local music, traditional dance or performances and presentations of local history. The most popular activity is the workshop on the self-reliant organic and integrated agriculture. Apart from the ecotourism activities in BanBusai, the villagers offer tour packages for wild bull watching and attractions in the NP area or surrounding areas via the traditional vehicle, E-tan. All the ecotourism activities are directed by local code of conduct.

Ten percent of the ecotourism income is allocated to a central saving account dedicated to further development such as waste and garbage management. However, due to a conflict of interest among the leaders, political influence, uneven distribution of financial benefits and corruption, the CBET community is divided into three small groups. Despite the existing conflicts, the community has received the following results: the Best Practices of Sufficiency Economy Philosophy Village: Happy and Peaceful Environment (2007), Greening Village (2007), Quality Community Development Plan at the provincial level (2008), Provincial Community-based Learning Centre (2009), Homestay Standard (2004, 2006 and 2008), and Community Wisdom of the province (2009).

Ecotourism group, agricultural group, youth knowledge-transferring group, traditional music group, self-reliant knowledge-transferring group, housewife group and cultural group are examples of local participation. Government organisations have funding and providing know-how for the village-based career groups according to the provided central budget for a short period, and have ignored providing guidance into how to manage these groups sustainably.

Land ownership and authorisation are another problematic issue in BanBusai. The land is under the control of the Royal Forest Department (RFD), the Department of National Parks and Wildlife and Plant Conservation (DNP), and the Agricultural Land Reform Office (ALRO). Massive mismatches between the official land classification and the actual land use have occurred. The village is situated in an overlapping territorial claims area with no accredited land rights.

Since 1981, which corresponds with the announcement of ThabLan NP a part of Dong Phrayayen – a UNESCO World Heritage Park – the boundary of the NP has not been acknowledged on the ground, except as an indication of the territory on the map. Moreover, the government or organisations forced local people out of the Moon Sam Ngamin 1977-1988 to establish the NP; yet, they failed to allocate settlement land to some of them. After 34 years, the originally small community has grown and invaded some of the NP's territory. The aftermath is an intense and prolonged contention over the territory around the UNESCO World Heritage Park between government organisations and local communities. Because of the tourism boom in the area, local people, even though they lack legal land rights documents, have started selling the land to the tourism entrepreneurs resulting in ineligible owners. The collision intensely

exploded in the late 2011 when the NP alleged forest encroachment and took local people, particularly tourism entrepreneurs, to court, demolished the infrastructure and returned the land to the state. Due to these land disputes, the TAT cannot promote tourism in the specific area of this district, but generally promotes tourism in the district as a whole, whereas the villagers cannot promote tourism as a business, with the exception of operating a homestay following the CBET approach.

FINDINGS

The findings reveal that academics and NGOs are the most trusted actors by the local people. They are (1) the most important tourism initiators that inspire local people to engage in conservation activities and CBET operations, and (2) the most important actors that raise local awareness in relation to conservation. Additionally, profit-oriented entrepreneurs promote tourism and a conservational atmosphere at the village through their CSR projects, which might be considered as green washing projects. Although the projects are considered green washing, the local people still receive some benefit from them.

Apart from the relationship between the villagers and the academics, NGOs and outside entrepreneurs, the findings likewise explain the complex on going issues between government organisations and the local communities. The influence of national and local politics benefits, particularly the corruption enabling the gaining of land use within the UNESCO World Heritage Area, continually affects the CBET operation at the local level. Another concern is the intense degree of conflict among local people, the NP and the other government organisations in relation to the controversy over land ownership. This paper indicates that these issues profoundly and directly impact the local CBET operations, become a hindrance towards sustainability, and degrade the quality of life of the local people. The findings further reveal that conflict occurred within the community constrains the potential effective results of external collaboration and assistance. The greater degree of internal conflict, the more external stakeholders tend to boost the conflict at local level. In contrast, local harmony infuses the effective results of assistance derived from the external stakeholders.

Finally, this paper agreed with Butcher (2007) that local people operationally oblige the skills of ecotourism development. According to the support from many agencies, such as environmental NGOs or CSR project, the villagers gain benefit and begin to appreciate the value of their land, tradition, identity or conservation. Without cooperation among community and external stakeholders, CBET will not be sustained and environmental conservation activities will no longer be exercised because to illegally sell the land to outsiders seems to be valuable asset for them.

CONCLUSION

These findings confirmed that the CBET operation in Thailand, where the majority of the population is poorly-educated and does not authentically understand ecotourism, requires a greater drive towards sustainable tourism development. A tailored CBET operation is introduced by communities themselves and its operation varies with each community in accordance with their unique characteristics. The forms of empowerment and participation in such an approach are not solid due to divergence of the communities' historical, socio-cultural and socio-economic contexts. Using ecotourism to promote development and conserve the natural resources of the community sounds like a wonderful concept in principle. In practice, it is fraught with difficulties, and offers neither simple answers nor a single approach in terms of procedures to all CBET communities. Therefore, the Thai CBET might be divergent and serve to shift away the notion of CBET from the hegemony of the Western ideology to the Eastern dogma such as conservation approach related to N□ga or development approach based on existing constraints – corruption, land rights conflict or poorly-educated people. It is important to note that ecotourism emphasises learning or educational-based activities. Consequently, knowledge of the operation is not the only essential factor, knowledge of the ecological surroundings based on the local people's wisdom and scientific notion should also be developed with the support of the stakeholders. Furthermore, not only the knowledge related to the learning activities of ecotourism, but also the know-how of the CBET operation is required to be direct. However, the assistance from stakeholders needs to be long-term and characterized by a close relationship with the community.

This paper proposes that not only are community empowerment through local participation and equitable benefit distribution decisive factors to auspiciously operate CBET at a community level, but it also requires collaboration among international, domestic and local authorities. Yet, these external authorities and factors may become either a hindrance or reinforcement in the CBET operation based on the cohesion within the community. Finally, this paper suggests that a prospective study should identify other influences in relation to the CBET operation for blinding the present gaps in literature and directing tourism developers and practitioners towards sustainability, which will ultimately elevate the quality of life of the local people.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Western Sydney (UWS). This research was financed by Siam University and UWS and supplemented with funds from University of Melbourne, Faculty of Arts, Asia Institute, 2012 Thai Studies Research Grants. The study was possible by the kind support from Assoc Prof Robyn Bushell, Assoc Prof Mary Hawkins, Dr. Russell Staiff, Dr. Poll Theerapappisit, Assoc Prof. Chollada Mongkolvanich and Edmond Subashi the policy-makers, NGOs officers, local academics and villagers of Ban Busai.

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