

A Model of Ecotourism Management in Marine Parks in Thailand*

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Abstract

The objective of this qualitative research is to study the model of ecotourism management in marine parks in Thailand. The researcher employed the in-depth analysis and the focus group with marine parks' directors, heads, and officers from six marine parks along with their tourists. Moreover, the participatory and non-participatory observation was also employed along with the descriptive analysis.

The result of the study found that the marine parks have variety of the way in managing the ecotourism. However, the lack of effective management has limited the overall performance of the ecotourism management. The primary results of this study are as follow;

- 1) In terms of tourism policy, the policy and planning has to embed principles on promoting sustainability, balancing conservation and utilization, planning, strategizing, and making policy that supports the tourism attraction management.
- 2) In terms of the tourism resource management, the tourist attraction has to be unique and attractive, the eco-system has to be fertile and varied, and the scenery and the landscape of tourist attraction have to be preserved.
- 3) In terms of tourism activity management, the activities should meet the demand of tourists based upon the specialty of each marine park such as culture, history, and wildlife.
- 4) In terms of travel services, the management on facilities, service quality, safety and security, the readiness of the infrastructure, and tourism attraction accessibility has to be considered.
- 5) In terms of economic and social management, the becoming a part of the regional and national development by consuming the local products and services is essential.

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6) In terms of tourism alliance, the tourism linkage management between marine parks and local entrepreneurs has to be established.

7) In terms of tourism management, the consideration on the tourism size, the tourism layout, planning, and design based upon the uniqueness of the landscape is required in order to strengthen the tourism management including safety, local collaboration of private sector, and governmental tourism development agencies.

Keywords: Ecotourism management, Marine Parks, Sustainable tourism

The Background of the Study

The ecotourism is a type of tourism that has its objectives on preserving environmental resource and serving as a learning base on nature, relationship of lives, and connection of environment for tourists. This kind of tourism also aims to increase the understanding of tourists on nature and the consequence of human behavior that has impacts on the ecosystem through tourist activities offered in the tourism attraction (Sakanan Plathong, 2005).

As for Thailand, several ecotourism attractions are in and managed by the National Parks. Despite preserving the natural resource, the National Parks also have their objectives to be academic research sites on nature and ecosystem, and set their goal to create the tourism attraction. By doing so, the tourism activities are offered through the recreational activities that underlines the importance of the value of nature and local culture without any fixed type or pattern of activities. With small scale of development and the environmental-compiled design, the tourism activity that leads to the sustainable ecosystem preservation has to be introduced in order to increase the understanding and to plant the positive attitude towards the conservation. Furthermore, the tourism activities offered have to be joyous and can satisfy the tourists at the same time. In other words, the creation of tourism activities that can provide benefits for the economy, the environment, and the society all at the same time is required (Department of National parks wildlife and plant conservation, 2008).

Furthermore, tourism has another important role regarding the environment preservation. The arrangement of tourism activities in the protected areas or the national parks can help promote the positive attitude towards the environment conservation. This is because the protected area managers would have more opportunities to interact, communicate, and publicize with the society on the values of the areas (Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre, 2008).

As for the marine parks, the natural resources on both of the areas on the Thai Gulf and the Andaman Sea, where these areas are enriched with natural resources including mountains, mangrove forests, and islands. They are utilized through several activities such as marine fisheries and aquaculture. Moreover, they are also used the area as the natural wind defensive line, the shipping ports, and tourism attractions. At the present time, there are 23 marine parks and the other 3 more places that are on the process of declaration as one of them, namely Moo Koh Phra Thong National Park, Haad Khanom – Moo Koh Talaytai National Park, and Ao Manao – Kao Tanyong National Park. However, the utilization of the marine natural resource in the past lacks of the proper and effective management, which leads the natural resource to the state of decay. The over fishery, the exploitation of the marine creature habitats, the pollution from the community expansion, the leak of fuel oil or chemicals from the marine transportation, and the industry were the causes of the problem (Suvaluck Satumanatpan, et al, 2012).

Another opinion regarding the inefficient management of tourism was also raised. While the tourism management was inefficient and irresponsible which caused both direct and indirect impacts on tourism, along with the careless development, it is found that many national parks aims to welcome the mainstream tourists, especially in the coastal areas, beaches, islands, which destroyed and polluted the marine resources. Furthermore according to the study on the ecosystem management of the marine parks, it is found that there are problems and limitations that caused problems to the natural resources. Even though there were attempts to make plans for sustainable tourism, there are still the problems on the marine parks' capacity to receive tourists that are not well-balanced (Jittasak Putjorn, et al, 2012).

The researcher highly believes that tourism could be served as a tool in ecosystem preservation. Tourism can also implant positive attitude on tourists towards the preservation of nature and environment. As a consequence, the ecotourism management of the marine park can achieve its goals and objectives. Thus, the researcher also believes that the study on a model of ecotourism management in marine parks in Thailand would increase the effectiveness of the management, and leads to the well and balanced preservation, the utilization, and the better understanding of the ecosystem. Furthermore, it would be beneficial for the policymakers and implementers of the national parks in the future as well.

Objectives

To study on a model of ecotourism management in marine parks in Thailand

Study Processes

This research was conducted by employing the qualitative method to study on the marine parks along the Andaman Sea including Mu koh Surin National Park, Mu koh Similan National Park, Mu koh Tarutao National Park and Thai Gulf including Mu koh Chang National Park, Mu koh Chumphon National Park, Mu koh Angthong National Park. The study processes are as follows.

Stage 1: Preparation

1) Literature Review

The researcher studied on the ecotourism-related documents in terms of the status, the management, the marine park management, and the marine tourism management standards.

2) Research Design

As a result of the study on the related documents, the researcher had a better understanding and analyzed data which could be summarized and conceptualized the framework of the research. Also, the researcher had set up the research format and process, scoped the population, and designed research instruments.

3) Instrument Design

The researcher adapted and applied the related theories and ideas to design the research instruments that can answer the research questions.

Stage 2: Data Collection

1) The researcher employed the in-depth interview with the directors of the marine parks for data on the ecotourism management in Thailand's marine parks.

2) The researcher evaluated the potential of the 26 marine parks, ranked them, and chose the best 6 marine parks, three from the Thai Gulf and another three from the Andaman Sea.

3) The researcher employed the in-depth interview with the heads and assistants to the head of the 6 marine parks for the data on the marine park ecotourism management, and also coordinated for data from tourists in their respective marine parks.

- 1) The researcher arranged meetings with two groups of tourists who are focus groups from each marine park. Each group of tourists consists of 7 to 12 persons. The acquired information is the data on tourism activities and the needs of tourists.
- 2) The researcher observed tourists on both participatory and non-participatory basis to gain the data on the tourists' behavior.
- 3) The researcher observed the operation of marine parks' officers on the non-participatory basis.
- 4) The researcher collected, checked and verified the obtained data.
- 5) The researcher analyzed the collected data to extract a model of ecotourism management in marine parks at the present time.
- 6) The researcher arranged a meeting with the marine parks' directors, assistants to the director, and officers to cross-check and verified a model of ecotourism management in marine parks at the present time.

Data Collection Tools

1) In-depth Interview Questions

The researcher used the structured in-depth interview questions to collect data on the ecotourism management in marine parks with the parks' directors, heads, and assistants to the heads from 6 marine parks. The interview questions were designed to be non-deductive for the focus interview.

2) Focus Group Record

2.1 The record was used to collect data from tourists on the current ecotourism management in Thai marine parks, and tourists' needs for tourism activities.

2.2 The record was also used to collect data from the national parks' heads to cross-checked the validity of a model of ecotourism management in marine parks at the present time.

3) The Observing Record

The researcher used the observing record to acquire data from tourists regarding the tourism activities which is based upon bot participatory and non-participatory basis.

4) The Observing Form

The researcher recorded the data obtained from the observation on the marine parks' officers in terms of the tourism service providing in the designed form on the non-participatory basis.

5) The Evaluation Tool

The qualitative evaluation tool for ecotourism management performance was employed by the researcher. The tool was designed to evaluate the state of sustainability, quality, and management including factors, standards, and key performance indicators (Dachanee Emphandhu, 2006).

6) The Ecotourism Area Survey

The researcher used the ecotourism area survey to study the context of the marine parks including ecotourism resources, activities, related rules and agreements, communication, and facilities.

Data Analysis

The qualitative results from the study will be analyzed by the researcher by employing the descriptive analysis to systemize and synthesize acquired data to extract a model of ecotourism management in marine parks.

Study Results

A Model of Ecotourism Management in Marine Parks

There are 6 marine parks which have different ways of management. Thus, according to the researcher's study it is found as follows.

Tourism Policy and Planning

1. The ecotourism in marine parks is operated under the principles of the sustainability in terms of natural resource utilization and conservation. There are envisioned to protect the environment, wildlife, and plants. However, the operation of the ecotourism management in the marine parks does not go towards the vision. The lack of knowledge, mechanism and systemic thinking in natural and environmental preservation has limited the ecotourism management performance in terms of nature preservation.

2. Even though many marine parks has made operational plans, strategized the way for management, and formed the policies, they are still unable to manage the marine parks with the highest performance. The limitation was due to the ability and performance of the marine parks' heads. Some of the heads are inexperienced in terms of the marine park management. Therefore, they were unable to formulate the operational plans that can truly protect and conserve the environment in reality.

3. It is found that the lack in the marine park management system is also struggle the ecotourism management performance. Once the marine park would like to accommodate massive number of tourists, it also creates the unbalance between the natural resources, the capacity of the area, and the consumption of the resource. In addition, it is difficult to control the tourists' behavior as well.

4. The human resource management is also problematic. Even though there are sufficed in terms of manpower, many of the marine parks' officers were assigned to work on several non-related tasks. Basically, the main duty of the officers was to conserve and protect the nature and environment. However, they were assigned to provide tourism services instead, which caused negative impact on the overall management.

5. The management on scenery and landscape may also damage natural resources. Although the marine parks attempt to reserve the scenery and landscape sustainably, the establishment of facilities to serve numbers of tourists would cause unavoidable damage to natural resource.

6. The lack of the zoning and the capacity evaluation is another issue that needs to be addressed. Without the zoning of the tourism area and the protected area, and also without assessment on maximum capacity of each marine park, it also cause the overconsumption or exploitation of natural resources.

Tourism Activities

1. The tourism activities provided for tourists are based upon the ecotourism, the specialty and the uniqueness of each marine park. However, there is some misunderstanding as the tourist guides from tour agencies put more emphasis on the recreational activities instead of the ecotourism activities.

2. During the holidays, numbers of tourists flooded into the marine parks are beyond the capacity that each marine park can serve. The marine park became chaotic and polluted with noise. In addition, the marine parks' officers did not control the opening hours and the tourists' behavior, which is contradicted to the principles of ecotourism.

3. Each marine park provides appropriate variety of tourism activities that are related to the area. For example, there are forest trekking and wildlife seeing including birds, langurs, monkeys, crabs, and bats. Moreover, several species of plants are also found in the trekking trails. Some of the marine parks might be able to have the astronomical activity. However, the lack of officers' expertise in each marine park also limits the potential of the ecotourism management.

4. The tourist capacity management should be well managed. At the present time, the lack of quality in tourist capacity management has negative impact of environment.

5. The access to marine parks is another issue that should be mentioned. The general access to the marine park is usually through the boat. Some of the parks develop a more comfortable way to get into the area. However, tourists may need the service of tour agencies or hiring some boat to reach the marine parks by themselves.

6. The ecosystem and the environment were affected by the lack of control over tourism activities.

7. In terms of safety and security, even though there are operational plan and warning system in the case of emergency, the lack of practice and training may disrupt the operation in the real operation.

Communication and Tourism Services

1. The lack of communication and the decrease in the knowledge provision for tourists led to the degradation from ecotourism to passive experience.

2. Tourists had insufficient knowledge the importance of environment, resources, history, nature, and culture.

3. The lack or insufficiency of meaningful communication on verbal and non-verbal basis between the marine parks' officers and tourists leads to the misunderstanding on the purposes of ecotourism. This is because the insufficient numbers of tour guides, and the limited time of tourists' visit.

4. There is no marine parks' design and presentation on ecotourism that could enhance the tourists' experience and satisfaction, and help decrease the negative impact from the tourists at the same time.

5. The development in tourism service facilities are increasing as the plan designed by the Department of National Park, Wildlife and Plant Conservation. However, the increased facilities are not in the harmony with the ecosystem and environment. Additionally, even though the numbers of facilities are increasing, it is still not adequate to support numbers of tourists.

6. As a consequence of the lack of tourist capacity management, it leads to the insufficient manpower to take care of safety and security for tourists.

7. Even though the overall readiness of the infrastructure is in the good state, the water supply was still short in the dry season.

8. The accessibility and transportation service to some of the marine parks needs to be assigned and improved to enable tourists to get into the parks more comfortable.

Economic and Social Management

1. The marine parks in Thailand are full with natural resources that could attract tourists from around the world, which these parks could take a part and play an important role in economic development in the regional and global scale.

2. The ecotourism management of the marine parks could facilitate the economic and social management of the local communities including the employment. Additionally, it would be better if the marine parks can involve the people in the local community, and promote the local products for tourists.

3. There should be an involvement of the local community in the ecotourism management of the marine parks in terms of planning, decision making, being responsible for the ecotourism, and income distributing.

4. The marine parks could not utilize the profits gained from ecotourism to manage the natural resources because of the lack of the transparent income and benefit management system.

Tourism Alliance

1. The cooperation between national parks, governmental agencies, and entrepreneurs still lacks of the compilation. For the governmental agencies, the integration between the agencies including the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, Tourism Authority of Thailand, Department of Fisheries, and Department of Marine and Coastal Resources is not adequate enough. Moreover, the continuity of the policy implementation of the head from each marine park is also affected the operation, especially when working with local entrepreneurs. The change of the head of the management may result in the underperformance of the marine park.

2. The transfer of marine parks' head led to the difficulty in operating on the plan. Even though local entrepreneurs have agreed on investments with the heads of the marine parks, they decided to withdraw the investment as the head of the marine park was transferred.

3. The lack of continuity in cooperating between public sector, private sector, and volunteers is due to the change in management of the marine parks.

4. The coordination between the responsible units usually sets up on the important island in each marine park. Their duty is to coordinate and communicate through radio and mobile phone. They also have the speed boat as their vehicle.

Tourism Development

1. Even though there is a tourism development master plan created on the basis of the management on size and area, the planning, the designing, the uniqueness of the landscape, the implementation and the operation did not follow the plan in reality.

2. There is no tourism development plan for marine parks at the present. However, the existed development is from the idea of the head of each marine park.

3. Although there are tourism development policies for marine parks, it is still needed to put more emphasis upon the quality of the landscape and the environment, and the appropriateness of the area. It also has to focus on the problem solving and the development that is compiled with the tourism development master plan.

4. For the development on tourism services, some of the marine parks developed the facilities to serve tourists on short-term basis. Also, some of the parks developed the online accommodation reservation system. However, there are issues on the food provided in the marine parks including the monopoly of the food provider, and also overprice of the food. Furthermore, the inadequate of the equipment and numbers tourism activities, the limited variety of souvenirs, the meaningful communication, the safety and security, and the tourist capacity management are still problematic.

Summarization and Discussion

There are several dimensions regarding the marine parks management. Some of them are policy management and the tourism management that are based upon the sustainable principles, and the balance and utilization of the natural resources. However, the mechanism for systematic natural resource conservation including the strategic planning and policy formation is needed to be addressed. In reality, the course of actions and the implementation are based upon the judgement and the guidance of the marine parks' heads who have limited experience, knowledge, and understanding on the marine park management. Moreover, the marine parks' officers were not supported adequately to develop themselves. As a result, the management performance of the marine parks for ecotourism has not reached the highest potential.

In terms of scenery and landscape management, and the accessibility, even though much effort was put in the implementation based upon the principle of sustainability, it is still difficult to manage because the increasing in numbers of tourists has limited the accessibility to nature and knowledge within the marine parks.

Moreover for almost two decades, there have been policies that aim to preserve natural resources and environment, the policy implementation could be considered as a failure. The objective of the ecotourism and the operation of the marine parks to provide tourism activities and services that can preserve the environment at the same time have been forgotten, and the focal point of the marine parks turned to the profits obtained from tourism. As a consequence, it caused negative impact on ecosystem, environment, and income distribution for local community. According to Holden (2011), the development policy of tourism focuses on the each government's administration on economy. It creates both opportunities and threats for nature and society, which the administrators should take the opportunity to reduce the poverty gap, distribute income to local people nearby the protect areas, and solve the problem on the less competitive community. In addition, the promotion on the local participation of the community could also facilitate the problem solving in the long-run.

Werly (2010) also has the idea in the same direction as Holden that the ecotourism is operated with the small group of tourists in the beautiful tourist attraction in terms of scenery and environment. Moreover, Werly further explains that ecotourism has 4 important dimensions namely, the area, the management, the learning, and the participation that has to be emphasized.

Even though the tourism in marine parks is playing an important role in economic development on both regional and national, the benefits and profits did not fully go to the local community. The benefits for the local communities need to be distributed through the cooperation with the governmental agencies and local entrepreneurs, which in fact the lack of collaboration still leads to the suffering of local communities. Another reason of the problem is due to the change in marine parks' management as mentioned earlier. The lack of the management continuity also disrupts the collaboration between stakeholders. Suvaluck Satumanatpan, et al (2002) suggests that the marine park management needs the collaboration from all stakeholders from marine parks' directors to officers, administrators, communities, public sector, private sector, and tourists.

Another factor that has effect on the marine park tourism management is the skill and competency of the marine parks' heads. From the situation at the present, it is undeniable that the head of the marine park is playing an important part to the management. However, many marine parks' heads, in fact, have limited skilled and competency to manage the parks as they have no required experience and knowledge. As a result, it leads to and causes the damage on the natural resources of the marine parks. The failure to manage the tourist capacity on Tachai Island of the Surin Marine Park is a good example. Without a master plan for the island, it is down to the management of the marine parks' heads. However, the change of the heads has affected the direction and the continuity in management, and resulted as the natural resource exploitation.

As a consequence, the search for a solution for the problem is needed. Suvaluck Satumanatpan, et al (2002) provides a solution that should tackle the problem. She believes that all stakeholders have to employ both top-down and bottom-up approaches. It would provide an opportunity for the policy makers, local people in communities, marine parks' management, and local entrepreneurs to discuss and exchange the idea, and also increase the understanding of the context of the marine parks, the needs of local people. Furthermore, it would lead to the extraction of the right solution that could solve the problem of the ecotourism in the marine parks.

Recommendations

This research is a part of the study on a model of ecotourism management in marine parks in Thailand. The result of this study is the extraction of the management of 6 marine parks, and has been studying through the processes as mentioned earlier. Therefore, the researcher has some recommendation as follows.

1. The researcher should further analyze the result of this study applying more theories and studying more on related researches. Also, the researcher needs to consult with the experts who are working in this field of study in order to develop a better model of ecotourism management in marine parks in Thailand.
2. The result of the study on a model of ecotourism management in marine parks in Thailand should be proposed to the administrators of the related ministries as it would be beneficial at the policy level in the future.

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