Potential and Readiness of Tourism Supply of Second- tier Destinations in Thailand Under the LINK Project

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Abstract

The study aimed at evaluating the potentiality and readiness of tourist sites under The LINK project. Criteria of qualitative assessment for the potentiality and readiness of local experience destinations were developed through document research and content analysis from three different routes. Subsequently, two pilot tests were taken to evaluate the accuracy of the assessment criteria. The study found that the potentiality and readiness of tourist sites were reflected on the levels of destinations' ability to create local experience and of tourism management.

Keywords: Tourism Supply, Destination Potential, Local Experience, The LINK Project

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วัตถุประสงค์ เพื่อประเมินศักยภาพและความพร้อมของแหล่งท่องเที่ยวภายใต้โครงการ The LINK พัฒนาเกณฑ์การประเมินศักยภาพและความพร้อมเชิงคุณภาพของแหล่งท่องเที่ยวประสบการณ์ท้องถิ่น โดยการวิจัยเอกสารและจากการลงพื้นที่ภาคสนาม 3 เส้นทาง และทดสอบความตรงของเกณฑ์การประเมิน 2 เส้นทาง ผลการศึกษาพบว่า ศักยภาพและความพร้อมของแหล่งท่องเที่ยวสามารถแสดงจากระดับของความสามารถในการสร้างประสบการณ์ท้องถิ่น และความสามารถในการจัดการการท่องเที่ยว

คำสำคัญ :   1. อุปทานทางการท่องเที่ยว   2. ศักยภาพแหล่งท่องเที่ยว   3. ประสบการณ์ท้องถิ่น

4. โครงการ The LINK

Introduction

The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has formed the concept of "LINK: Local Experience" as a selling point to develop Thailand as a "Quality Leisure Destination". As a consequence, 8 offices of Tourism Authority of Thailand in Europe and 2 offices in the United States are paired with 10 local TAT offices. They have been working closely as well with other organizations (N: Networking) to bring in new innovations to attract tourists from the European, Middle East and American markets and travel is a tool to treat tourists (K: Keep Characters) and get more involvement with local communities. Tourism Authority of Thailand work collaboratively with other departments of Tourism Authority of Thailand (N: Networking) (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2016), as detailed in the table below.

Table 1: Pairing the 2 continents with 10 second tier provinces under The LINK Project

No.	TAT Foreign Offices	TAT Thai Offices
1	London	Mae Hong Son
2	Paris	Loei
3	Frankfurt	Phang Nga
4	Rome	Sukhothai
5	Stockholm	Nakhon Si Thammarat
6	Dubai	Samut Songkhram
7	Prague	Trang
8	Moscow	Phetchaburi
9	Los Angeles	Chumphon
10	New York	Trat

Source: Tourism Authority of Thailand (2016)

For assessing the potentiality and readiness of tourist destinations, the criteria were varied and aimed to be applicable to different practices. In addition, the criteria for assessing the potentiality and readiness of local tourist attractions have not been instigated. The existing of current criteria, such as the standardized assessment handbook for cultural tourism sites, the standardized assessment handbook for eco-tourism sites, and Tourism Management Standard, are found to assess differently in terms of the potentiality and readiness of tourist attractions.

This research article aimed to study the potentiality and readiness of Tourism supply as local experience product: A case study of destinations in second tier provinces under The LINK project by developing assessment criteria of the potentiality and readiness of quality tourist destinations.

Literature Review

Local experience (L)

Local experience consists of two words: local and experience. While the word "local" refers to a specific area (Oxford Dictionary, 2018), "travel experience" is a process that deals with feelings, planning, impressions, and memories related to places, events, and events including interactions between tourists and destinations. Each tourist gains experiences and learns from traveling, which differs from daily life experiences (Stamboulis and Skayannis, 2003). Accordingly, "local experience" refers to the experience that tourists acquire while traveling in local areas. The local experiences discussed here include the holistic atmosphere of the tourists, tourist sites, tourism activities and interactions between tourists and hosts (service providers in community attractions) with emphasis on various activities.

Level of Experience

Pine and Gilmore (1999) postulates 'The Tourism Experience Realms Theory' by using the criteria of passive and active participations of travelers, absorption and immersion experiences. This theory proposes four classifications as shown below:

- Entertainment: activities which involve passive participation by absorption. For example: watching performances, listening to music, reading books, etc.

- Educational: activities which involve active participation by absorption. For example: joining skiing class, etc.

- Escaptist: activities which involve active participation by immersion.

  For example: the performances, diving, etc.

- Esthetic: activities which involve passive participation by immersion.

  For example, indulge in scenery, visit and enjoy in art gallery.

Cultural Identity

A cultural identity refers to the sense of belonging to a social or cultural group that shares ideas related to culture, language, way of life, and tradition. These factors visibly differentiate one culture from others (Aristova, 2016). Uniqueness and identity are often used interchangeably to address the distinct features of culture that reflect the cultural identity of each social group. Nonetheless, numerous tourist attractions often begin to maintain their identities only when the tourism industry has increased and that is the primary reason for the decreasing number of tourists at destinations such as Amphawa floating market and Chieng Kan District in Thailand (Manassanan Chanpeng and Panayu Chairatananonda, 2015).

Behavior of local experience tourists

The study of foreign tourist trends and behavior of Niche Market: local Experience conducted by Brand Matrix Research (2017) using cluster analysis methods resulted in the segmentation of local experience tourists. As the results, four segments of tourists by level of involvement/participation and level of relationship/feeling of tourists toward traveling are introduced and include 1) Entertainment segment – tourists who passively observe and are engaged in local activities/architecture, 2) Education segment – tourists who actively participate in activities and are eager to enhance their knowledge, 3) Esthetics – tourists who passively appreciate and prefer unique environment/setting, and 4) Escapism – tourists who have passion for different atmosphere and actively participate in activities.

Capacity and readiness of tourist attractions

The potentiality of tourism is the readiness of tourist attractions to facilitate development, improvement or changes that include the adequate local interests to attract tourists. Findings of studies suggest there have been proposals of the conceptions of potentiality and readiness of tourist attractions. According to Wiwatchai Boonyapak (1986: 40-42); Thammasak Roodjanasunton (1999: 43-44) and Boonlert Jittangwattana (2005: 30), there

are seven factors in the analysis of the potentiality and availability of tourist attractions that can be divided as follows:

1. The value of the tourist attraction or the main incentive factors of tourism, such as the beauty in itself, historic cults and religions, atmosphere, natural landscape, and way of life

2. Factors such as the current reputation, life and property safety, economic and social conditions, natural disasters and politics

3. The convenient access to tourist attractions, such as the condition of the route, mode of transport, length of the time from downtown to tourist attractions, transport accessibility such as road condition, availability of public transport, networks of transport, and travel time

4. Infrastructure such as electricity, water supply, and telecommunications

5. Facilities such as accommodation and food, interpreters, information, news release, and souvenir shops

6. Limitations of support for tourists and tourism impact management such as space limitations, limitations on utility services, and safety of tourists

7. Participation of relevant parties in aspects such as tourist attractions and development of tourism activities

Meanwhile, Department of Tourism, Ministry of Tourism and Sports in 2014 created the handbook of cultural tourism standard assessment (Department of Tourism, 2014). The handbook includes assessment components of cultural values, physical potential and tourist activities, potential for developing basic infrastructure, potential for tourism development influenced by external factors, conservation management of cultural sites, and tourism management.

In addition, many research studies offer frameworks for assessing the potentiality of tourism attractions. The criteria or indexes used to assess the potentiality of tourist destinations varied and were designed for different applications. Kanlaya Swangkong and Prasopchai Pasunon (2016) applied the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) which proposes the Index for potential tourism destinations. In their case study of the waterfall in Saraburi province, six aspects were reported. They are 1) Accessibility, 2) Convenience, 3) Tourism value and attractiveness, 4) Environment of the tourist attraction, 5) Governance and 6) Participation of local people.

Kanyawee Lumsun et al. (2014) suggests the natural tourism potentiality of Tha Kham Island in the BangPakong River estuary, Chachoengsao province. The study applied the draft of tourism attraction assessment of Department of Conservation, Faculty of Forestry, Kasetsart and used the opinions of tourism experts in developing indicators. There are three areas of tourism potentiality of the site, that were: 1) Natural resources and environment divided into tourism resources, potential of space for future development, space access system, water supply and its connotation with other recreational resources, 2) Management – Management Plan, facilities, safety, interpretation, and environmental impact prevention, and 3) Social and economic – social and economic benefits to the community.

In another study, Nongluk Jantapakun and Narin Sangruksa (2013) investigated the potentiality of cultural attractions of Ban Huakhocheen Community, Ratchaburi. Their results reveal four areas of community-based capacity measurement: area, activity, management, and organization.

In addition, Suwipa Jampawan et al. (2008) present indicators of community potential for historical and cultural attractions of Ban Ruen district, Pa Sang sub district, Lamphun Province. These indicators cover five areas including 1) Location and accessibility, 2) Importance of history and culture, 3) Importance of architecture, 4) Importance to the community such as the center of mind and faith of the community places to remember events, and 5) Services such as shops, restaurants, signs.

Materials and Methods

In this study, the researchers developed criteria for assessing the potentiality and readiness of local tourist attractions in order to enhance the flexibility of assessment in relation to other tourism supply and avoid duplication of data interpretation. The criteria were aimed to qualitatively assess the potentiality and readiness of tourist destinations as local experience products.

The criteria were developed by applying the conceptual framework of local tourism attraction assessment of the Department of Tourism, Ministry of Tourism and Sports, which reflects the readiness and potentiality of tourism supply linked to opportunities for local experiences for visitors by focusing on foreign tourists as the target market and the importance of sustainability management of tourism resources, economics, society and administration including the participation of stakeholders in the area. Content Analysis was then conducted by using data from travel memos, observations, and interviews by 5 researchers en route to

the 3 routes under The LINK project: Mae Hong Son, Phang Nga, and Sukhothai. Then, pilot tests were taken in 2 routes of Phetchaburi and Chumphon, to evaluate the accuracy of the assessment criteria.

Assessment Criteria for local experience attractions

There were two main criteria for assessing the potentiality and readiness of local tourist attractions employed in this study, which were 1) Ability to create local experience and 2) Ability of tourism management

1) Ability to create local experience

Two criteria to classify levels of ability to creating local experience were:

1. Finding of cultural resources and/or tourist activities representing the localism or local lifestyle

2. Levels of experience gained by tourist activities

The study found three levels of ability to create local experience, which were:

1. High level of ability to create local experience: Finding of cultural resources and/or tourist activities representing the localism or local lifestyle and active participation in tourist activities such as learning of cooking, making a local hats, and joining local performances.

2. Medium level of ability to create local experience: Finding of cultural resources and/or tourist activities representing the localism or local lifestyle and passive participation by absorption in tourist activities such as sightseeing by listening to the interpreter, having local food, and watching local performances.

3. Low level of ability to create local experience: Finding of cultural resources and/or tourist activities representing the localism or local lifestyle and passive participation by immersion in tourist activities such as sightseeing and reading the information within tourist destination.

2) Ability of tourism management

According to data collection, with regard to the issues of marketing and tourist information – English interpretation, most of destinations in second-tier provinces under the LINK project were found to be lack of readiness to apply marketing strategies and to provide English translation of tourist information. Due to the limitations of the qualitative criteria assessment, then the factors could not be suitable to be the criteria for level classification. Later, those will be outlined in the discussion part of the study. This study used three criteria to classify levels of ability of tourist destination management.

1. Readiness and attractiveness of tourist activities management and interpretation of tourist activities

2. Staffs & management team and learning & improvement on service quality.

3. Approaches and actions on enhancing positive tourist impacts and reduce negative tourism impacts by focusing on 1) Rules and obligation of rules in tourist destination, 2) Maintaining local identity, 3) Maximizing income distribution within groups and local community, and 4) Co-operation and networking with the external organization of local community.

The study presented three levels of ability of tourist destination management which were:

1. High level of ability of tourism management (A tourist destination must represent all three components)

- High level of readiness and attractiveness of tourist activities management and interpretation of tourist activities, which impress tourists.

- Strong ties between staff members and management team and regular improvement on service quality of the destination.

- Applicable approaches and actions on managing tourism impacts focusing on 1) Setting rules and efficient obligation of rules in tourist destination, 2) approaches on maintaining local identity, 3) action on maximizing income distribution within groups and local community, and 4) co-operation and networking with the external organization of local community.

2. Medium level of ability of tourism management (A tourist destination must posses all three components)

- Readiness and attractiveness of tourist activity management and interpretation of tourist activities which are attractive for tourists

- There are staff members and management team, but there is seldom improvement on service quality of the destination.

- There are approaches on managing tourism impacts focusing on 1) efficient obligation of rules in tourist destination, and/ or 2) some approaches on maintaining local identity, 3) some obstacles on maximizing income distribution within groups and local community, and/ or 4) co-operation and networking with the external organization of local community, but unsuccessful in some actions.

3. Low level of ability of tourism management (A tourist destination possesses only one component from these criteria)

- There are hardly found readiness and attractiveness of tourist activity management and interpretation of tourist activities.

- There are no staff and management team or inefficient management team resulting in direct impacts on service quality.

- There are hardly found approaches on managing the tourism impacts focusing on 1) rules and obligation of rules in tourist destination 2) Maintaining local identity 3) Maximizing income distribution within groups and local community 4) Co-operation and networking with the external organization of local community.

The population and sampling of the study were all tourist attractions in the ten routes of eleven provinces within the LINK project. However, this research involved only 23 destinations in five provinces. The data collection method included observations at the tourist attraction and interviews with the stakeholders of the tourist attractions by 5 researchers based on the developed assessment criteria. Then, the researchers made notes in the form of travel memos. The data were analyzed using Content Analysis of those travel memos and the potentiality and readiness of tourist attractions jusdged based on the assessment criteria.

Results

        The results demonstrated levels of ability to create local experience and ability of tourism management of 23 local experience attractions within the 5 routes of the LINK project: Phang Nga-Ranong, Loei, Trang, Trat and Nakhon Si Thammarat as shown in picture below.

Figure 1: The levels of ability to create local experience and ability of tourism management of attractions within the five provinces of the LINK project

Ability to create local experience

High	-Takuapa Ancient District (Phang Nga)	-Ban Talaenok Community (Ranong) -Ban Nam Chiao Community (Trat) -Koh Sukorn Island (Trang) -Nabanat Community (Loei) -Saori Hand Weaving Center (Phang Nga) -Yan Sue Community (Trang)	-Ban Nam Rap Community (Trang) -Ban Salak Khok Community (Trat) -Suchart Supsin Shadow Puppet Museum (Nakhon Si Thammarat)
Medium	-Prince Ratsadanupradit Mahison Museum (Trang)	-Chiang Khan District (Loei) -Kantang Railway Station (Trang) -Koh Kood Island (Trat) -Khao Wang Thong Cave, Krung Ching Waterfall Hiking Trail, Leam Prathap's dolphin watching tour, Phi Takhon Museum, Wat Phramahathat Temple (Nakhon Si Thammarat)	- Srisongrak Temple (Loei)
Low		-Ao Thong Yi Beach (Nakhon Si Thammarat) -Neramit Wipatsana Temple (Loei)	
	Low	Medium	High

Ability of tourism management

Within the five routes of the LINK project, there were three attractions performing high level of ability on both creating local experience and tourism management, which were Ban Nam Rap Community, Ban Salak Khok Community and Suchart Supsin Shadow Puppet Museum. Tourist activities in those three attractions represented the identity of the local way of life with both passive and active activities. For example, in Ban Nam Rap community, tourists could experience the natural scenery with local food in a local house boat cruising in the river and learn to cook Thai coconut pudding using a Thai local pan. While at Suchart Supsin Shadow, tourists could experience the exhibition, workshop, and performance of the shadow puppet. In terms of ability of tourism management, the three attractions employed excellent storytelling methods, attractive activities, sequencing of the tourist activities, safety equipments for tourists activities and effective tourist management. There were rules and efficient obligations to maintain local identity by presenting local stories and materials within the activities. Also, the policy of denying the building of homestay or accommodation within local community was obviously applied by Salak Khok Community. There were strong ties of management team and effective approaches to share and maximize income within groups and local community. Also, co-operation and networking with external organization such as government, community groups, and academic organizations helped those three attractions to continuously improve their service quality.

Meanwhile, there were attractions with high level of ability to create local experience but medium level of ability of tourism management, i.e. Ban Talaenok Community, Ban Nam Chiao Community, Koh Sukorn Island, Nabanat Community, Saori Hand Weaving Center and Yan Sue Community. These attractions represented local way of life through tourist activities effectively. Nevertheless, there were several issues in these attractions. For example, there was a case of inefficiency of obligation of rules on littering garbage into the river by tourists in Ban Talaenok Community, Koh Sukorn Island, Nabanat Community. There were lacking of approaches to maintaining the local identity of homestay in Ban Nam Chiao Community while tourism activity management of Saori Hand Weaving Center and Yan Sue Community were dominated and coordinated by tour operators instead of a team from the tourist attractions.

Attractions with medium and low level of ability to create local experience included temples, museums, districts and natural sites. Temples, museums and districts falling into this category included Srisongrak Temple, Wat Phramahathat Temple, Neramit Wipatsana Temple,

Phi Takhon Museum, Prince Ratsadanupradit Mahison Museum, Chiang Khan District, Kantang Railway Station. Consequenrly, it was recommended that there should be active participation activities for tourists before, during, or after visiting these attractions, e.g. workshop on preparing the sacrificial offering made from banana leaf and flower, Thai temple painting partition class, and local cooking class. In addition, there should be trainings for tour guides on their storytelling skills to be able to explain the way of life and cultural resources of the attractions more effectively and meaningfully. In terms of natural attractions, there were Koh Kood Island, Khao Wang Thong Cave, Krung Ching Waterfall Hiking Trail, Leam Prathap's dolphin watching tour, and Ao Thong Yi Beach. To improve the quality of these attractions, the recommendations included enhancing local experience by allowing tourists to join in nature reserved activities and applying storytelling techniques to describe the nature-based way of life of people in the past and current time.

Among the tourist attractions within the project, there were two attractions with low level of ability of tourism management. The first attraction was Takuapa Ancient District, which was found to be lack of tourist activity management and interpretation of tourist activities. Most tourists visited Takuapa Ancient District for only sight-seeing. The second was the Prince Ratsadanupradit Mahison Museum in Trang province, which needed fund and management teams to run the museum.

Conclusion/ Discussion

Tourist attractions with high level of ability to create local experience can represent local experience and be suitable for adopting 'local experience as the theme of tourism marketing'. While tourist attractions with medium and low level of ability to creating local experience can use the term of 'local experience product', it is nevertheless necessary to increase the levels of local experience.

Tourist attractions with medium level of ability to create local experience ought to provide tourists with additional activities such as learning or doing that allow them to get involved in the local way of life. Meanwhile, tourist attractions with low level of ability to create local experience need to at least provide interpreters who can convey direct information to tourists so they are able to gain experiences and reach the localism of the attractions, e.g. tour guides, interpreters or local activities. Nonetheless, tourist attractions with 'low level of ability of tourism management' suffered at least one of three following three causes: 1) lack of readiness and attractiveness of tourist activities management and

interpretation of tourist activities, 2) unavailable staff and management team or inefficient management team, and 3) lack of approaches to managing the tourism impacts. Thus, this study suggests that tourism management is a time consuming process and it is necessary for the destinations to consider managing their destinations well enough to be able to offer authentic local experiences which allow them to reach higher levels of the tourism management ability.

In relation to the study of foreign tourist trends and behavior of Niche Market: local Experience by Brand Matrix Research (2017), the attractions with high level of ability to create local experience would be suitable for Education segment and Escapism segment, where tourists are keen on actively participating in local activities and learning the local way of life. In contrast, the cultural attractions with medium and low level of ability to create local experience would be appropriate for entertainment segment, where tourists passively observe and engage in local activity/architecture.

According to the limitation of qualitative criteria assessment, this study did not cover the issues of marketing, tourist information, and English interpretation as in the criteria of level classification of tourist attractions. It is then that further quantitative studies of criteria assessment for local experience products would be examined. In addition, enhancing the value of local experiences of tourist for tourism value chain would be beneficial.

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