SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPACTS AND ECOTOURISM POLICY
IN THAILAND

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Abstract
Ecotourism is criticised as unclear and may not lead to sustainability. There is high tendency that ecotourism may be an early life-cycle stage that finally develop to mass tourism. Therefore, the development will affect directly on environmental and socio-cultural factors. The evaluation of ecotourism development begins basically with the host and guest relationship which leads to estimate the impacts on local communities. The measurement of impacts depends on government policies, the degree of local involvement, and the perceptions of hosts towards guests and towards ecotourism development. Ecotourism policies demand the local involvements follow the sustainability approach. In addition, Thai ecotourism development is in the beginning stage and is needed to focus more on local empowerment. This paper intends to explore the ecotourism policy in Thailand by focusing on socio-cultural perspective.

Key Words: Socio-cultural impacts / Tourism development / Ecotourism / Thai policy
Introduction

Ecotourism is known as an alternative form of tourism that follows the concept of sustainable development (Cater, 2006). Even though, ecotourism is viewed as a buzz word, there are many attempts to develop ecotourism plans in many countries. Basically, ecotourism is a better way to solve the negative impacts of natural degradation while preserve socio-cultural integrity of the host communities (Blamey, 2001). However, the adoption of ecotourism principles and practices are varies in many places where implemented. Controversially, ecotourism is questioned in its sustainability, environmental friendly, preservative and conservative (Buckley, 2005). Ecotourism can possibly become one form of mass tourism for short term economic benefits. It is necessary to understand the stage of ecotourism development in tourism destination; therefore, the governments and local communities will be able to apply new strategy to maintain the position of ecotourism in the right stage (Ospina, 2006).

Tourism became a phenomenon source of national income of Thailand. Thailand formally established ecotourism in 1997. The national ecotourism policies and plans aim to develop a sustainable tourism industry, to maintain a healthy natural and social environment and to foster self-reliance of local communities (Dowling, 2000). Nevertheless, ecotourism development may only successful in economic and marketing term because there are many critiques from Western scholars (Cooper et al., 2008; Diamantis, 1999; Donohoe and Needham, 2006; Hanna and Del, 2003; Leeja and Buchan, 2002; Mathieson and Wall, 2006; Page and Dowling, 2002; Page et al., 2009; Theobald, 2011; Urry, 2012; Wearing and Neil, 1999; Zeppel, 2006). Therefore, the balance between economic benefits and natural and socio-cultural conservations need to be compromised.

Ecotourism in Thailand impacts directly to local lives to experiment with small-scale, locally controlled and sustainable tourism (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2004a). The interaction between host and guest has increased. Socio-cultural impacts need to be taken into account. At the national level, ecotourism policies demand the local involvements follow the sustainability approach (Urry, 2012; Weaver, 2002). As the grass-roots levels, many communities despair to manage and lack of knowledge about ecotourism. At present position, Thai ecotourism development is needed to focus more on local empowerment (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2005). This paper intends to explore the ecotourism policy in Thailand by focusing on socio-cultural perspectives. It will help to point out the current situation and implementation problems of ecotourism development.

Ecotourism

Since the end of the Second World War, many countries have focused on economic growth. They motivated the free use of natural
resources which has finally let to exploitation (Sharpley, 2006). Tourism as an activity is the result of increasing amounts of leisure time combined with surplus income and motivation. Tourism industry has been used as a development tool to help with economic prosperity and development in many countries (Shepherd, 2002). Increasing infrastructures and superstructures have given rise to new environmental issues (Southgate, 2006). Tourism and environment are related as a symbiotic relationship (Page et al., 2009). This infers that tourism cannot process well if the environment is devastated. Alternatively, it may imply that environmental conservation could be in danger without tourism.

Tourism can cause environmental degradation by activities such as tourist related transportations and wastes (Beeton, 2000; Brandon, 1996; Buckley, 2004; Tisdell and Wilson, 2005). The impacts of tourism can be grouped in to three areas: economic, environmental and social-cultural impacts (Cater and Lowman, 1995; Cooper et al., 2008). Positively, it generates income and employment within local communities. However, negative impacts from tourism occur when the levels of visitor use is greater than the environment’s ability to cope with this use within the acceptable limits of change (Blangy and Mehta, 2006; Mathieson and Wall, 2006; Weaver, 2005). Uncontrolled conventional tourism poses potential threats to many natural areas around the world. It can put enormous pressure on an area and leads to impacts such as soil erosion; increased pollution; loss of natural habitat; increased pressure on endangered species; and heightened vulnerability to forest fires. It often puts a strain on water resources and can force local populations to compete for the use of critical resources (Page et al., 2009; Urry, 2012).

Many scholars (Cleaver and Muller, 2002; Lumsdon and Swift, 1998; Mathieson and Wall, 2006; Novelli et al., 2006; Price, 2003; Urry, 2012; Wight, 2001) conclude that very little tourist use leads to disproportionately large increases in impacts. The relationships between tourist use and impacts can be laid out as follows; impacts will appear whenever use is permitted – thus, degradation occurs and can be prevented only if no tourists are allowed; for areas with already high levels of visit, reductions in use would have to be particularly dramatic before impacts would be expected to be attenuated and finally once impacts are severe, amelioration may be difficult and time-consuming to achieve (Higham and Luck, 2002; Honey, 1999; Johnson, 2006). As a response to these negative effects of tourism, ‘sustainable’ approaches to tourism have arisen.

In order to meet the criteria for sustainable development, consumption of natural resources and industrial production should be controlled (Boo; 1999; Cater, 2006; Lumsdon and Swift, 1998). The ‘alternative’ forms of tourism have emerged as a new trend to solve the negative impacts of environmental degradation (Buckley,
One such ‘alternative’ form of tourism is ‘Ecotourism’ – the attributes of ecological and socio-cultural integrity, responsibility and sustainability are qualities which may, or unfortunately may not, pertain to ecotourism as a product (Cater, 2006). The concept of sustainable development means that tourism planning is managed to control the carrying capacity in host destinations. Mathieson and Wall (2006) state that sustainable carrying capacity is the maximum number of people who could use a site without unacceptable alteration in the physical environment and without an unacceptable decline in the quality of the experience gained by visitors. By means of mass tourism however volume is driven by the economic advantage of consumerism. Therefore, natural resources have been used freely with poor planning which is reflected by environmental degradation.

The question remains though that is ecotourism really environmental and socio-cultural friendly, preservative and protective? Additionally is it even sustainable? There is a possibility that ecotourism can transform into a kind of mass tourism to destroy environments culture and society and protect the economic advantages. Diamantis (1999) supports this theory and claims that although ecotourism generates a large volume of demand both from consumers and stakeholders; it was in fact a new form of mass tourism. Theobald (2011) also stated that zero environmental and socio-cultural impacts occur particularly in the very early stages of tourism development lifecycle in all centric and explorer typology. The focus now is on how governments will manage their natural and socio-cultural resources in a more effective manner in the long term by adopting the sustainability approach. This approach will help to minimise the negative impacts on the host community.

Even though ecotourism was introduced as an alternative form of tourism since the 1980s, there is no clear definition for it (Weaver, 2002). For some ecotourism is a kind of nature-based tourism; for others it is a ‘niche’ market which based on nature (Wearing and Neil, 1999; Wunder, 2000). Diamantis (1999) and Stewart and Sekartjakrarini (1994) believe that the definition of ecotourism is based on two approaches: (1) the activity-based perspective of ecotourism; and (2) the definition regarding ecotourism as an industry. The first focuses on activities that create less impact on the environment as well as socio-cultural resources - this can refer to niche market. The second involves conservation and local community’s participations in tourism. On the other hand, Cater (2006) critiques that ecotourism can be viewed as a market segment with ecological based tourism which is economically driven in order to sell the authentic ecological systems and cultural attractions to the international market. Many scholars (Wearing and Neil, 1999; Weaver, 2002; Wunder, ...
point out the term ecotourism was the ‘buzz word’ of the late 90’s and the terms eco-tour, eco-travel, eco-vacation, eco-adventures, eco-cruise, eco-safari and so on are merely environmental opportunism for sales. Furthermore, Diamantis (1999, p.93) states that “the definitional perspective of the concept is lacking both in terms of scope and criteria used, as well as in aspects of its planning and operationalisation”. Blamey (2001) and Weaver (2002) also mention that the core of ecotourism is nature-based ecosystem learning – focused on involving tourist and the natural tourism destinations. Cleaver and Muller (2002) and Honey (1999) add that ecotourism takes into account all the complexities of the natural, cultural and human capital of the destination, including financial rewards to support the host community and to further environmental conservation in the destination.

In principle, ecotourism is the interaction between tourist, nature, local community which are surrounded by government policy, economic activity and socio-cultural differences. The key characteristics of ecotourism given by The World Conservation Union (IUCN) are environmentally responsible travel and visit to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features – both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations (Brandon, 1996; Jones, 2005; Kiss, 2004; Scheyvens, 1999; Stem et al., 2003; Stone and Wall, 2005; Yaman and Mohd, 2004). In addition, UNEP (2001) has published a guideline for ecotourism. It indicates the general characteristics of ecotourism are as follows: (1) interested in observing and appreciating nature and traditional cultures in natural areas; (2) contributes to biodiversity conservation; (3) supports the well-being of local people; (4) involves responsible action by both tourists and local people to minimize negative environmental and socio-cultural impacts; (5) requires the lowest possible consumption of non-renewable resources; (6) stresses local ownership, as well as business opportunities for local (especially rural) people.

In a more practical way, the World Tourism Organisation (2001, p.19) indicates ecotourism as a form of special interests and adventure tourism – “It is a controlled form of nature tourism that involves tourist hiking or boating in natural areas, with local guides to explain about the flora, fauna and ecology. Ecotourism may also include visits to local villages and farms. This type of tourism is currently receiving much attention because of its emphasis on environmental conservation and learning about nature”. This definition implies that there is a need for significant local knowledge regarding ecology and conservation. However, the qualifications of the locals and tour operators are still below what is needed.
Stem et al. (2003) highlight that one problem of ecotourism is that tour operators are lack of the environmental and socio-cultural responsibility needed (Cusack and Dixon, 2006; Honey, 1999; Stem et al., 2003; Silva and McDill, 2004; Wight, 2001). They further separate ecotourism in to two types: deep and shallow ecotourism. Deep ecotourism emphasises nature’s intrinsic value, the importance of community self-determination and participation, and a preference for small-scale operations. Shallow ecotourism, on the other hand, involves management decisions based primarily on utilitarian values. However, only deep ecotourism offers possibilities for long-term sustainability (Stem et al., 2003). The conflict between short term profit and long term sustainability often happens in ecotourism. A focus on meeting demands of tourism and making profits can supersede the conservation of resources (Black and Crabtree, 2007; Dickey and Higham, 2005). Commercial operators often use ecotourism as a marketing ploy to enlarge their market share (Dickey and Higham, 2005; Weaver, 2002; Wight, 2001).

Impacts of Ecotourism

The environmental impacts of ecotourism have been published by a number of scholars (Butcher, 2005; Charnley, 2005; Chin et al., 2000; Dodds and Joppe, 2003; Fennell and Weaver, 2005; Li, 2004). Some have focused on tourism in natural areas (Buckley 2004; Chin et al, 2000; Edmonds and Leposky, 2000; Lindsey, 2003; Mathieson and Wall, 2006; Minca and Linda, 2000; Svoronou and Holden, 2005; Weaver, 2001), while others have taken a specifically ecotourism approach (Syntov, 2005; Twidale and Bourne, 2003; Zografos and Oglethorpe, 2004).

Chin et al. (2000) explain many benefits of ecotourism such as enhancing appreciation of natural environments. Ecotourists exhibit a higher level of interests and involvement in conservation than other tourist types (Cleaver and Muller, 2002; Hvenegaard and Deardon, 1998). Ecotourism is beneficially advantageous to the local economy whilst maintaining the ecological stability with its potentially non-consumptive nature and its financial promise (Stem et al., 2003; Theobald, 2011). It is also provides more financial returns than agricultural land uses (Stem et al., 2003; Urry, 2012). Stem et al. (2003) conclude that ecotourism serves as a spin-off for other businesses because it brings the opportunity to local market directly. Furthermore, it helps to distribute the budget to protected areas and constitutes the conservation ideology (Brandon, 1996; Stem et al, 2003). For example, the benefits of tourism on conservation in Thailand do not only happen to wild animals in ecosystem but also help some domesticated animals in trouble such as the elephants. The unemployed elephants from logging business can be used in tourism businesses to attract many tourists (Urry, 2012).
Stem et al. (2003, p.324) point out “successful ecotourism initiatives may draw increasing interests and a correspondingly higher number of tourists, thus increasing negative impacts such as solid waste generation, habitat disturbance and forest degradation resulting from trail erosion”. For instance, Galapagos has faced environmental degradation due to the overuse of tourism activities (Brandon, 1996; Stem et al, 2003). The increasing size of the ecotourism market is also stated by Diamantis (1999) as a new form of mass tourism. Economically, ecotourism fails to generate equal distribution to local community (Mathieson and Wall, 2006; Theobald, 2011; Urry, 2012). Many scholars question ecotourism’s contribution to local development, asserting that little or no ecotourism revenue reaches local people (Theobald, 2011; Stem et al, 2003). Moreover, ecotourism crates few jobs (Lai and Nepal, 2006; Stem et al, 2003) and the jobs give unstable income due to the limited in seasonal, economic and political changes (Medina, 2005; Stem et al, 2003). Socially, three negative impacts of ecotourism are: (1) the disintegration of local communities’ social and cultural structures (Stem et al, 2003); (2) the ‘commodification’ of culture (Brandon, 1996), wherein people and their cultures become marketable commodities; and (3) the bringing about of changes that erode community cohesion (Honey, 1999; Stem et al, 2003).

**Ecotourism Policy**

In developing nations, protected area systems account for a substantial share of the overall revenue accumulated from tourism (Medina, 2005; Morais et al., 2006; Weaver, 2001). Development of ecotourism in the region thus depends in part on the condition of national protected area systems. Where the public sector is too financially constrained to effectively manage protected areas, sustainable tourism can be a direct way to generate a revenue base that can financially support management of protected area systems (Fennell and Dowling, 2003). Stem et al (2003) states that many less developed countries (LCDs) have aimed at upmarket cliental to maximize their tourist incomes and minimised the environmental and socio-cultural effects. For instance Bhutan has policy called ‘disguised class prejudice’ (Duffy, 2006; Fennell and Dowling, 2003) which allow only expensive package tour into the country (Butcher, 2006; Fennell and Dowling, 2003).

As tourism is an important economic activity that increases national incomes to the country, the government has to plan and manage its limited resources effectively and usefully. Public policy is an instrument of the government to manage by preventing and protecting the use of its resources. Zeppel (2006) highlights that ecotourism requires planning or a managed approach which balances economic, social cultural and envi-

Environmental goals. Diamantis (1999) suggests that for ecotourism to reveal its benefits, it requires effective planning strategies, so that conservation of resources could address the sustainable management of such resources. However, he mentions that the benefits of ecotourism to the destination largely depend on the scale of tourism, the country size and the interconnected parts of their economies. In addition, benefits can be increased if visitors extend their vacation due to the natural aspects of the destination, thus the so-called ‘add-on’ feature to visitors through ecotourism could be applied (Diamantis, 1999).

A significant factor constraining policy development for the industry is the lack of agreement on how to define the concept and identify a process in which to classify eco-tourism product (Dowling, 2000). Diamantis (1999) suggests three levels of stakeholders’ involvement in order to preserve natural-based component of ecotourism including (1) at the ecotourism enterprises level, the emphasis is on the change of perceptions; (2) at the organisational field level, the focus is on collaboration; and (3) at the industry level, the emphasis is on management and marketing issues.

Socio-cultural Impacts

In the socio-cultural perspective, tourism can positively bring economic development and change the social structure of the destination. Sharpley (2006) points out the benefits of change are general, social-wide improvements in income, education, health care, employment opportunities and local infrastructure and services. On the other hand, unwelcome changes can happen such as the challenge of modernity to traditional social values, change in cultural practices to attract tourists or emergence of a new economically powerful group (Sharpley, 2006). Methieson and Wall (2006) has also stated the unique nature of tourism as an export industry in which the consumers travel to collect the goods. This situation creates the interaction between host and guest who have cultural differences; therefore, cultural exchange and cultural destruction can occur. Many scholars realise that the socio-cultural impacts can happen to both local community and visitors. Cooper et al. (2008) suggest that the differences between social and cultural impacts are hard to be distinguished. The true socio-cultural impacts of tourism are far reaching and encompass direct and indirect effects in a manner similar to the economic impact (Cooper et al, 2008). However, Sharpley (2006) clarifies that social impact has a more immediate effect on both tourists and host communities and their quality of life, whereas cultural impact will lead to a long term, gradual change in a society’s values, beliefs, and cultural practices (Sharpley, 2006; Theobald, 2011). Specifically, social impact involves health, moral behaviour, the structure
of family, gender roles, crime and religion whilst cultural impact involves behavioural and attitude changes such as dress, food and social relationship, changes in production of cultural practice and artefacts (Sharpley, 2006; Theobald, 2011).

Cooper et al (2008) explain that the sociological basis of tourism development can be sub-divide into the social phenomenon of tourism and the socio-economic basis underlying tourism development. The important factors include population growth; increasing urbanisation, and overwhelming pressures of urban life which create the desire to escape (push factor); growth in communications and information technology, creating awareness and stimulating interest; changes in mobility and accessibility, brought about largely by the growth of air transport and private motor car ownership; increased leisure time and longer periods of vacation, together with rising real incomes in the wake of sustained economic growth; and increases in world trade for business tourism (Cooper et al., 2008). The degree of socio-cultural impacts can be determined from these following factors (Sharpley, 2006; Urry, 2012):

■ Types/ numbers of tourists: Explorer-type independent traveller is small in number and more willing to experience and understand local culture. Therefore they have less impact than large number mass tourists who demand facilities and amenities. However, in some circumstances, an independent traveller who interacts directly to unexposed and isolated communities may cause more impact than the well organized mass tourists in specific areas.

■ Importance of tourism industry: The more destinations depend economically on tourism, the more socio-cultural impacts are likely to be.

■ Size and development of the tourism industry: The size and the stage of tourism development will determine the impacts. The big industry in a small local community will have a greater impact on local residents than in a larger community. An established resort will face less change than a newer destination.

■ The pace of tourism development: The rapid and uncontrolled tourism development will have a greater impact than a slow and controlled tourism development.

Ecotourism Policy in Thailand

Thailand has targeted thousands of villages for new ecotourism development projects which aim to help local communities recover from the crisis. This comprehensive community development programme, initiated by His Majesty the King in the midst of economic woes, aims to develop ecotourism along with other economic activities such as farm produce processing, medicinal herb planting and traditional Thai medicine – in 15,223 villages, involving more than 300,000 families and a population of more than 700,000 (Pleumaram,
However, Pleumarom has also questioned of the oversupplying as many case studies show that the economic benefits from ecotourism have been highly overrated, and there is simply not enough money for the conservation of natural and cultural heritage and the improvement of public services (Pleumarom, 1999; 2002).

Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) pronounces that the ecotourism development in Thailand has started from the guideline development project for ecotourism management in the South, North and Northeast of Thailand (1987-1990) (TAT, 2001). In 1999, the national ecotourism policy was created with a five years action plan (2002-2006). The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) allocated a budget of 66 million baht for the plan and also conducted the operational study project for ecotourism policy. There are many international ecotourism conferences, supported by TAT, that have been held in Thailand such as ecotourism conference in Bangkok in 1995 and 1996, and the New Zealand-Thailand ecotourism forum in 1997 (Dowling, 2000). Furthermore, TAT established an ecotourism network in Thailand to provide knowledge and service information for interested parties (TAT, 2001). TAT also plays a significant role in pushing ecotourism into action such as assisting with hotel design to minimise the environmental impact, electrifying Tuk-Tuks (Motorcycle Taxis) and installing water purification in Pattaya beaches (Dowling, 2000).

Ecotourism in Thailand is marketed in three distinct regions: mountains in the north, culture in the centre, and beaches in the south (Dowling, 2000; Sriphnomya, 2002).

After their study project, TAT (1997) came out with a definition and concept of ecotourism – “Ecotourism is responsible travel in areas containing natural resources that possess endemic characteristics and cultural or historical resources that are integrated into the area’s ecological system. Its purpose is to create awareness among all concerned parties of the need for and the measures used to conserve ecosystems and as such are oriented towards community participation as well as the provision of a joint learning experience in sustainable tourism and environmental management”. The main components of ecotourism are: (1) physical component: ecological resources; (2) Activity components: environmental, education activities; (3) Management: sustainable tourism management; and (4) Organization: local communities participate in local tourism administration (TAT, 1997).

In 1997, the National Ecotourism Council was established to create the goal, principles and policies of Thai ecotourism. It can be conclude that overall goals of ecotourism development are to develop a sustainable tourism industry – to maintain a healthy nature, society and environment; and to foster self-reliance of local communities. The specific goals of ecotourism development are (TAT, 2001):
Ensure that endemic natural resources and unique cultural resources and their surrounding ecological system have an appropriate management system that emphasises conservation, rehabilitation and ecosystem maintenance. Carrying capacity and instituting a proper zoning scheme should do this.

Promote people’s awareness of how tourism can contribute to ecological sustainability. This would foster the comprehensive conservation the natural and social environments.

Establish a management system that facilitates cooperation among all related sectors. This should include local participatory management in tourism development.

Establish tourism facilities and services that help protect the environment and are thus compatible with tourism resources. Environmental management should aim to maintain the natural and social characteristics of the areas and reassure the tourists’ feelings of security.

Attract quality foreign eco-tourists to visit Thailand. Attempts also be made to promote ecotourism to a broader market segment of Thai tourists, particularly Thai youth. Disperse of tourists from main tourist attractions to other tourism destinations throughout the country should be emphasised.

TAT (2001) indicated in the action plan that the top goal is sustainable development. That is to maintain the well being of natural resources and society. Local communities must be self-supporting. Due to the nature of tourism, social condition and seasonality are important factors which influence tourists’ demands. If local people can support themselves by tourism revenues, those factors will affect directly to their employments and incomes.

Socio-cultural Impacts and Ecotourism Policy in Thailand

The goals of Thai ecotourism are environmental protection, broadening the tourists’ markets and encouraging local participations in tourism management. The national ecotourism policies and plans correspond with the UNEP’s characteristics of ecotourism. The ecotourism management guideline from TAT reveals that a cultural issue has been addressed as much as environmental conservation, education, local participation and economic benefits. This can be of benefit to local communities in preventing the negative impacts on culture. According to Diamantis’s ecotourism definition critiques (1999), Thai ecotourism definition agrees with the majority of Diamantis’s examined definitions which are situated between a passive and more active stance, focus on the characteristics of the destination and trip, few concerns on motivations of participations. Three elements of ecotourism: natural based, educational, and sustainable management with economics and socio-cultural issues have been adopted in the action and management plans by TAT. In addition, Thai ecotourism is managed to be an initiate form of sustainable tourism than
can inspire the other forms of tourism such as agricultural tourism, cultural tourism etc. to take the sustainability approach to account. This agrees with Fennell and Dowling (2003) comments on sustainable tourism.

ASEAN has high potential for ecotourism (Li, 2004; Weaver, 2002). There is competition among the established ecotourism areas and the new potential ecotourism places that will be expanded. Thailand needs to improve its ability to compete with its neighbours especially Malaysia and Indonesia. To restructure and develop ecotourism in Thailand, the strengths and weaknesses need to be addressed. Natural resources and unique culture are the strengths of Thailand. There are nearly 320 units of natural parks and protected areas, 1060 historical and cultural sites, and a countless number of urban and rural tourist destinations across the country (Chettamart, 2003). It is also stated in TAT report (2001) that ecotourism in Thailand will represent not only the beauty of natural products but also the unique of Thai culture as well.

The weaknesses of ecotourism lie on the skills of management and local participation issue. Sriphnomya (2002) stated that the standard of ecotourism services is still low. The quality of ecotourism operators does not reach the standard and it is needed to be support by the government. Moreover, the main projects focus on adventure travel and nature appreciation rather than educational aspect of travel in natural and cultural based. Without the knowledge, local communities cannot control and manage their recourses, therefore; the government needs to direct and order from the top. The government solution is to send more specialists to train local people about ecotourism cooperating with the local governments and the national park officials. The next step is to encourage local people to participate in ecotourism development by pointing out the equal economic distribution.

Thai Constitution in 1997 has followed the principle in Agenda 21 of Rio summit 1992 about public participation in environmental protection and local wisdom. In section 79 of the constitution indicates that: “Every person shall have a duty to defend the country, serve in armed forces, pay taxes and duties, render assistance to the official service, receive education and training, protect and pass on to conserve and the national arts and culture and local knowledge and conserve natural resources and the environment, as provided by law”. The restructuring of government in 2002 has affected to the effectiveness of the tourism policies. As the establishment of the Ministry of Tourism and Sport, TAT has been distributed its authority in dealing with tourism and remain only responsibility on marketing. This leads to questioning about the effectiveness of the new official, the Department of Tourism under the Ministry of Tourism and Sport.
In addition, the management in the local administration levels is ineffective. This problem has been recognised not only in the ecotourism but also in overall sustainable tourism principle (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2004a; b). As the report on sustainable development stated that “Regular monitoring of tourism development and sustainability is undertaken by the regional offices of Tourism Authority of Thailand in the tourist attractions and the Regional Offices of Office of Environmental Policy and Planning on resource and environment conditions in their respective responsible areas. In addition, there are regular patrols of the conserved forests where many tourist attractions located; monitoring and management by the Provincial authority and local administration organisation; and local community participation in monitoring and management tourist attractions in their respective vicinities. Problems are encountered, however, due to lack of efficient coordination between the concerned agencies and lack of sufficient integration plans between interrelated resources and environment” (United Nation, 2000).

Local empowerment is a component of ecotourism initiatives. To achieve the sustainable tourism development, local community as a key actor needs to be empowered in 4 areas: economic empowerment, psychological empowerment, social empowerment and political empowerment (Scheyvens, 1999). Economic empowerment or disempowerment can refer to the local community’s access to productive resources in an area now targeted by ecotourism. In Thailand, ecotourism regulations in wildlife and natural preservation may reduce local community’s access to hunting and agricultural lands. For example, the elephant preservation rule has protected a wild elephant that destroyed the pineapple fields of locals in Petchaburi province in Thailand. In addition, tourism activities often disrupt other work in the village. When visitors arrive, farmers simply don’t have enough time to take care of their fields and orchards, and fisherfolks neglect their traditional activities and instead use their boats to take tourists out (Pleumarom 2002).
Psychological empowerment can derive from the traditional and cultural preservation of local communities. Ecotourism in a positive way can support and empower the cultural norms as a pride of local communities. On the other hand, ecotourism interferes with customs by relocating the local residents or changing locals way of life to depend more on selling their culture to tourists. The empowerment project that promoted by Thai government is raising the value of local wisdom. However, the discourse that presents the disempowerment has appeared in Hill tribe communities in the Mae Chan Watershed, Chiang Rai Province. The case study investigated by Leeja and Buchan (2002) indicate that the hill tribes become a show for tourists who come and leave without a true understanding of their lives.

Social empowerment is the most clearly result of ecotourism when the benefit from tourism activities is invested in local development projects. On the other hand, social disempowerment may occur if tourist activity results in crime, begging, perceptions of crowding, displacement from traditional lands, loss of authenticity or prostitution (Cooper et al., 2008; Mathieson and Wall, 2006; Scheyvens, 1999; Theobald, 2011; Urry, 2012). The economic disempowerment that happens from unequal distribution and ill-will can cause social disempowerment. For example, the disharmony in local organisations between Tambon Administration and the National Parks or the conflicts between local communities in the south of Thailand can harm community spirit.

Political empowerment refers to the situation that all interest groups in local communities have power in decision making process from the feasibility study until the implementation of ecotourism project. A Community-based ecotourism (CBET) has been critiqued by Pleumarom (2002, p.6) who monitors causes and benefits of the project that “...for a few community members, CBET provides successful avenues for income generation, while the majority of residents do not participate in projects, and, thus, barely benefit... CBET projects tend to cater to and create new elites. Even if the original plan was that all tourism activities be jointly run by the villagers to ensure an equal sharing of the revenue, experience shows that advantaged community members start to build private guesthouses and other facilities. There is also the observation that more and more community members and even local NGO workers are setting up their own tour companies and turn to consultants and marketing specialists from outside to sell their ecotourism products in an increasingly competitive market”.

Community-based ecotourism is introduced as an alternative choice to mass tourism in Thailand. Even though, there is an argument that the inequality in production and benefits of local ecotourism products (Jone, 2005; Kiss,
2004; Scheyvens, 1999), the local empowerment for ecotourism should be encouraged from the national government. The long term interests of local communities as cultural and natural conservation will help to empower local communities.

**Conclusion**

The socio-cultural impacts of government policies on ecotourism in Thailand were analysed by reviewing the research previously carried out in Thailand. Generally, ecotourism development in Thailand aims to develop a sustainable tourism industry, to maintain a healthy natural and social environment and to foster self-reliance. Sustainability should be achieved in the areas of natural conservation, local participation, education, and importantly in socio-cultural preservation. The social and cultural sustainability can be defined as ‘social sustainability refers to the ability of community, whether local or national, to absorb inputs, such as extra people, for short or long period of time, and to continue functioning either without the creation of social disharmony, as a results of these inputs or by adapting its functions and relationships so that the disharmony created, can be alleviated or migrated. Cultural sustainability refers to the ability of people or people to retain or adapt elements of their culture which distinguish them from other people’ (Cooper et al., 2008; Theobald, 2011).

The definition of ecotourism in Thailand is based mostly on the ‘activity-based perspective of ecotourism’ (Diamantis, 1999; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2004a). TAT targeted on the large tourists’ group with high spending power to boost the economical benefits. Conversely, the theoretical concept of ecotourism paid attention on limited number of tourists in the tourism destination to protect the environment and preserve socio-cultural components of the host society. It can be argue in this point that Thai ecotourism aims to achieve wealthy tourists with high quality and leave minimal damages to the host community. This is a controversial issue that needs to be concerned whether these types of tourists do exist or whether they posses cultural and social sustainability. Otherwise, the negative impacts may happen as Stem et al (2003) state on over limited tourist number from successful ecotourism initiatives may cause the negative impacts naturally and socio-culturally.

In addition, Thai ecotourism can be analysed by its strengths and weaknesses. The strengths and complexity of natural resource cooperate with the uniqueness of cultural resources. The weaknesses are found in the management skills and uncooperative actions between local communities and government agencies. Responsively, the national and local government agencies should find some solutions.
to the uncooperativeness that boosts the power of local communities in decision making and managing their local resources. The initiative has been written in the present constitution law of the Kingdom of Thailand which corresponds with sustainable principle and ecotourism policies and plans. In principle, Thai government needs to bring more environmental awareness and gives local communities the proper knowledge, understanding, and management skills on ecotourism as stated by UN.

The empowerment model of Scheyvens (1999) presents four areas of empowerment that Thais should overcome. Especially social empowerment is suggested to be a fundamental for community based ecotourism project. Apart from socio-cultural sustainability, the model of sustainability and the role envisaged for indicators can be the guide for public and government/business to achieve other sustainability such as economic welfare, quality of life, and environmental limits (Cooper et al., 2008). The case studies in Thailand present that the sustainable ecotourism development can not be achieved without local empowerment especially social empowerment. Thai ecotourism is an alternative from mass tourism for environmental conservation. Nevertheless, the socio-cultural impacts remain as a result in both forms of tourism development (Cooper et al., 2008; Theobald, 2011; Urry, 2012). The holistic views may help to reduce the impacts by developing ecotourism in cooperate with other sustainable policies such as education, empowerment, local wisdom etc.

According to Diamantis (1999), ecotourism needs effective planning strategies with consideration of the scale of tourism, the country size and the interconnected parts of their economies. Cooper et al. (2008) state the importance of stakeholders involvement in three levels: ecotourism enterprises, organisation, and industry level. In Thai case, the government does not limit tourism as the small scale due to the short term economic benefits. However, the local participation initiative can be the important force to drive the change to ecotourism. Thailand has a high potential in ecotourism resources but lacks the management skills. Thailand is now in a transition period which needs more time and money to improve its quality ecotourism product.

References


