

Ecotourism Impacts on the Economy, Society and Environment of Thailand

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Abstract: During the past decade, there have been a number of ecotourism studies in various disciplines to provide a knowledge foundation for sustainable tourism development. However, most prior studies have examined the contributions of the ecotourism destinations in the economic and/or environmental dimensions. Little research has investigated the contributions of the ecotourism businesses in terms of business practices and their products to the three dimensions of sustainable development. This paper examines how ecotourism tour operators and their guided tours contribute to the development of economic, social and environmental dimensions at ecotourism sites and local communities. Data were collected from ecotourism tour operators through the interview and observation methods, and the contents were analyzed in accordance with ecotourism concepts and principles. The paper reveals that the practices of tour operators and their guided tours contributed economic, social, and environmental benefits to the ecotourism destinations and local communities. Interestingly, this paper finds that the length (duration) and types of guided tours had different contributions and impacts on the three dimensions of sustainability. In particular, guided tours with a local visit contribute greater economic and social benefits to the local areas than tours without a local visit. Recommendations are provided to promote responsible ecotourism business.

Keywords: Ecotourism impacts, Tour operators, Economic, Social, and Environmental Benefits.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism is generally argued to be a responsible travel to the undisturbed natural areas that promotes natural learning, and cares about the quality of the environment and well-being of the local communities (Blamey, 2001; Donohoe and Needham, 2008). It is viewed to be a form of sustainable tourism and low-impact travel. Ecotourism, therefore, is an important sector of the tourism industry. The increased demand to experience pure nature or undisturbed natural areas supports the growth of ecotourism. Today, ecotourism has gained wide popularity among tourists and business sectors in many countries, including Thailand.

Currently, there are many tour operators offering a wide range of ecotourism products through various marketing channels (travel magazines, brochures, Internet, and Facebook). Conceptually, ecotourism businesses and their products are expected to contribute to all dimensions of sustainability in the places visited (for example, providing opportunities for nature learning, fostering cultural appreciation and promoting local economy) (Donohoe and Needham, 2008; Kerstetter, Hou, and Lin, 2004; Weaver, 2001).

However, several issues may be raised among the public. For example, it may be doubtful if tour operators really conduct their tours corresponding to ecotourism

principles, and contribute any economic, social, and environmental benefits to the local areas. Also, it is unconfirmed if the ecotourism businesses in Thailand are only the marketing efforts to lure tourists to buy merely nature-based tours without any ecotourism practices. These issues are worth further investigation, particularly for developing countries in the South East Asian region.

Due to the growing importance of ecotourism, there is an abundance of ecotourism studies in various aspects to yield new knowledge for ecotourism development and sustainability (for example, ecotourism destination development, roles of nature guides, tourist opinions/attitudes, environmental impacts, natural resources conservation, and local communities). However, little effort has been paid to examine the contributions of ecotourism tour operators and their guided tours in relation to the economic, social and environmental dimensions of the ecotourism destinations, particularly less research on social dimension generated by ecotourism. Moreover, it may be questionable if different ecotourism guided tours would generate different contributions to the ecotourism sites and local community.

Generally, it can be argued that ecotourism guided tours may vary from country to country, depending on the level of tourism development, natural resources availability, area characteristics, and business responsibilities (Harrison and Schipani, 2007; Rigatti, 2016). Therefore, learning how the ecotourism tour operators and their guided tours contribute to

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sustainability dimensions in Thailand is worth further investigation to fulfill such knowledge gaps and expand the ecotourism literature.

This paper examines how ecotourism tour operators and their guided tours contribute to economic, social and environmental benefits at ecotourism sites and local communities. The paper also compares how different ecotourism guided tours (half day, full day, and overnight trip) contribute to the three dimensions of sustainability. The results of the paper are expected to yield a better understanding of how ecotourism tour operators and their guided tours contribute to sustainable tourism development in a developing country like Thailand.

In particular, the findings may help related parties (government and tourism sectors) to plan and support the ecotourism business sector for sustainable tourism development of the country. Importantly, the authentic ecotourism experience may be regarded as quality products that can be marketed as a value-added product, targeting various tourist groups who appreciate uncontaminated natural and local experience, thereby bringing greater income to the local economy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Generally, ecotourism is argued to be a foundation for sustainable tourism as it contributes benefits to economic, social and environmental development of the local areas. In terms of economic benefits, it is widely accepted that ecotourism is a form of nature tourism, and uses natural resources as the major component. Travel experience of ecotourism is mainly connected to the undisturbed/uncontaminated natural areas, such as national parks, protected areas, wetlands, coastal and marine areas, wildlife reserves, and other areas of protected flora, fauna, and habitats (Cheung and Fok, 2014; Fennell, 2003; Sangpikul, 2011). When visiting these areas, there are a great number of nature-based activities that relate to ecotourism experience, such as seeing wildlife, bird watching, hiking, climbing, trekking, nature education/walk, canoeing, sea kayaking, scuba or snorkel diving, and cave exploring.

These activities are regarded as attractive ecotourism products, providing tourists with a unique travel experience. As such, a number of tour operators are attempting to sell the ecotourism experience to potential travelers, thereby generating revenues for the

business sector. These natural resources, therefore, are regarded as an important factor generating the economic benefits to the business sector and local communities through tourist activities and expenditures. In order to run the ecotourism business, the business sector has to recruit local employees to work with them, such as office staff, activity staff, guides, cooks, drivers and resort staff; generating the economic multipliers in the local economy (Hunt, Durham, Driscoll, and Honey, 2014; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2004). Given the economic benefits of ecotourism, the tour operators should comply with the rules, regulations, and laws to prevent the over-exploiting natural resources or natural resources deterioration.

In relation to social benefits, it is not necessary that ecotourism will always generate social benefits. In the case of individual visits to the natural parks or undisturbed areas, the social benefits may be less due to the lack of opportunities to interact with local people (local learning) and the limited contribution to social well-being. In contrast, the guided tour associated with a local visit or an overnight trip with the community may generate greater social benefits through visitor and host interactions, such as home stay, local food experience, practicing local language and learning new culture, as well as social assistance (for example, donation for conservation, schools and local project development) (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2004; Sangpikul, 2011).

Social benefits may also be enhanced through the intercultural appreciation and understanding between the host community and visitors (Hunt *et al.*, 2014; McNeely, Thorsell, and Ceballos-Lascurain, 1991 cited in Ross and Wall, 1999). For instance, when tourists visit a village, they may have a chance to meet and interact with locals. Learning a local language may be an example of social learning. In visiting local villages, foreign tourists may have a chance to speak a local language through greetings simple communication. Tourists may also learn something from the locals (for example, culture, ways of life, local food), and even buy souvenirs.

In another aspect, the social dimension may vary depending on the duration of the guided tours. Tourists may spend one hour, a few hours, or an overnight stay in the local village. The overnight tour, for instance, may generate greater social benefits than a visit of a few hours. With the overnight stay, tour operators may arrange social or cultural interaction events, so that

both visitors and hosts may interact with each other (for instance, cooking demonstration, cultural/local performance, local tours). In particular, the local performance presented to tourists may be regarded as the way of local cultural preservation since it is presented and preserved from one generation to another (Rigatti, 2016). The longer tourists stay at the local community, the more likely they are exposed to the local experience. Therefore, the duration of the guided tour may be related to the social experience of tourists. However, limited studies have explored and compared how different types of ecotourism guided tours generate different social benefits.

With regard to environmental benefits, ecotourism is argued to be a special tourism that contributes to the conservation of natural resources. According to Matysek and Kriwoken (2003), ecotourism is different from nature tourism in that ecotourism focuses on the quality of the natural environment, such as well-preserved or protected natural areas and wildlife habitat. When concerned with the quality of ecotourism destinations, there is no doubt that it should be directly involved with the conservation of those resources (Matysek and Kriwoken, 2003; Wall, 1994, cited in Diamantis, 1999). This is because conservation will help maintain, protect and enhance the quality of the ecotourism destinations from misconduct and inappropriate behavior of related stakeholders (travelers, tourism operators, and local people).

Ecotourism may also help promote environmental benefits. For example, Zambrano, Almeyda, Broadbent, and Durham (2010) found that the rate of reforestation around the adjacent communities to ecotourism activities was greater than compared to communities distant from such activities, due to natural awareness and conservation of the local residents. Gopal (2014) also argued that tour operators (as intermediaries between tourists and tourism providers) can make an important contribution to protect environmental and cultural resources as they can influence the choices of consumers, the practices of suppliers and the development patterns of destinations.

However, in the actual setting, ecotourism tour operators use or consume natural resources by taking groups of tourists to enjoy and experience the nature. Any trip or activity occurring at the ecotourism destinations might have certain impacts from tourists, tourism activities or vehicles (Sangpikul, 2011). With this concern, it may be doubtful if ecotourism tour operators take the responsibility of what they do at the

ecotourism destinations by restoring, improving or maintaining the ecosystem of the areas they operate.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The sample surveys are based on members of the Thai Ecotourism and Adventure Travel Association (TEATA). This association is a leading and well-known ecotourism related organization in Thailand, having the aims of promoting ecotourism and conservative tourism with responsible practices. In order to reflect the sustainability contributions of the genuine ecotourism business and to meet the research objectives, this paper uses a purposive sampling method to select a particular tour operator with environmental awards. These awards are related to environmental education, conservation, and local orientation. Given such awards, it may imply that the awarding business may be associated with responsible conducts or good practices, and are worth further investigation.

Several studies have used such criteria to examine ecotourism businesses (Kontogeorgopolos, 2004; Walker and Moscardo, 2014). With these criteria, only two tour operators are identified from the TEATA, and were labeled as companies A and B. In order to determine research answers, there were two research methods to collect data for this study, which were: 1) interviewing tour operators about their business practices, and 2) observing the practices of their ecotourism guided tours. These two methods were expected to yield in-depth information regarding how the ecotourism tour operators and their guided tours contributed to economic, social, and environmental benefits in the local areas and ecotourism sites. Data were collected in May 2015.

With regard to the interview method, the interviewees (key informants) were recommended by company staff (salespersons). They were in positions relating to business management and tour operations, for instance, general manager, operations manager and tour guides (4-5 interviewees for each company). The interviews were conducted at the company's office before the trips by making an appointment, and ranged from 30-40 minutes for each interview. Most interview issues were based on the three dimensions of sustainability. For example, what is a company policy to recruit employees? How does a company promote local learning or experience in a tour program? In which ways does a company reduce tour impacts on the environment?

Before conducting an interview with each company, a formal letter from the researcher's university was posted to ask their permission, and the researcher followed up by telephone communication. For the observation method, this paper used a participant observation to observe the practices of the guided tours. Most observation issues were related to the ecotourism code of conduct as indicated in the literature (Ormsby and Mannle, 2006; Sangpikul, 2015; Tourism Quebec, 2010), as well as the three dimensions of sustainability.

As it was assumed that the contributions of different guided tours might vary from one to another, the researcher selected different tour programs based on various durations (half day, full day, and overnight tours) for comparison. If there was more than one tour in each category, a simple random sample was made to select only one tour. Overall, there were a total of six tours to be observed (three tours for each company). The two research instruments were reviewed by two academics to check appropriateness and completion, and later were discussed with two ecotourism tour operators in Bangkok to consider applicability in the real setting. Minor revision was made in relation to content and scope relevant to ecotourism tour operators' practices.

Data from the interview and observation methods were transcribed and analyzed through a content analysis, following the ecotourism concepts and principles to describe a phenomenon (business policies and tour practices). In particular, ecotourism principles support the contributions to sustainability (Walker and Moscardo, 2014). Also, content analysis is a common method to analyze data in terms of observation and interview methods in social science research (Donohoe and Needham, 2008; Ross and Wall, 1999).

4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The empirical findings are based on interviews and observations, as discussed previously. These are summarized in Tables 1 and 2 below.

4.1. Interview Outcomes

The outcomes of the interviews are presented in Table 1 below.

4.2. Observations

The observations based on the outcomes are evaluated in Table 2 below.

5. DISCUSSION

According to the interview results, both companies aim to be responsible tour operators with the concerns on natural environment. The business practices of both companies seem to correspond to ecotourism concepts and principles, with the aim of contributing economic, social and environment benefits to the local areas and ecotourism sites. In terms of economic contributions, both companies have policies to hire local people to work with them in various positions (for example, tour guides, assistant guides, driver, and office staff). Being tour operators, both companies also distribute incomes to other service providers (accommodation, food suppliers, and transport). In addition, their guided tours with community visits helped contribute to the local economy through hiring local residents and promoting tourist expenditures in various activities. In particular, most tours (except tours A2 and B1) had community visits.

When tourists were at the communities, they might be interested in other activities, such as sailing, cycling, massage, visiting markets, and were likely to buy local products (food, fruit, souvenirs). Tours A1, A3, B2 and B3 were good examples of local economic contributions through ecotourism guided tours. In particular, tour A3 with the overnight trip seemed to generate greater economic benefits to the local areas than the non-overnight trip due to longer stay and more tourist activities.

According to informal talks with local residents, they indicated that companies A and B hire them in relation to tourist services (for example, food preparation, accommodation, cultural performance/show). During the trips, the economic contributions (tourist expenditures) were well observed. Both companies (by tour guides) also encouraged tourists to patronize local products and services. For example, tourists joining tours A1, A3, B2, and B3 (all with community visits) had opportunities to buy local products (high chance for spending money) when compared with tours A2 and B1 (without community visits).

This suggests that guided tours with community visits could generate greater economic benefits than those without community visits. Based on this finding, ecotourism guided tours of companies A and B with community visits are in accordance with ecotourism principles aimed at improving the well-being of the local community and to help distribute incomes to the local economy through tourist expenditures and activities

Table 1: Interview Summaries of Companies A and B

Three dimensions of sustainability	Company A	Company B
Economic dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Main products are canoeing, kayaking, nature trekking, and camping. - Offer half day tours, full day tours and overnight tours (e.g. 2-3 days). - Have a policy to promote ecotourism in Phuket and aims to be a responsible tour operator. - Support local employment, especially for those who base in Phuket and nearby islands. - Generate local economy through employment, company expenses for vehicle/boat rentals, food suppliers for touring, overnight accommodation and tourist activities. - Concern local opportunity by offering some tours with a community visit or an overnight trip as well as promote tourist expenditures at local areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Main products are nature tours, nature walk/trekking, elephant conservation projects, local visits (village life), and cultural presentation. - Offer half day tours and full day tours, no overnight tour. - Have an aim to run a responsible nature-based business that cares the environment, local people and animals. - Support local employment and hire people from poor areas (e.g. northern, northeastern provinces). - Generate local economy through employment, food preparation for tours, community visits, tourist activities, local production (i.e. souvenirs, agro-products), and tourist expenditures at local areas.
Social dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Educate employees about natural resources, wildlife, and ecosystem of tour sites through internal and external trainings as well as marine ecosystem training. - Educate local residents at ecotourism sites (where tours are conducted) regarding environmental awareness and natural conservation. - Promote local residents to get involved with some tour activities (food preparation, selling souvenirs, renting bicycle, long-tailed boat rental, cultural performance, and homestay). - Promote cultural exchange and learning between tourists and visitors in an overnight trip. - Arrange student or voluntary groups to visit local villages for community services/activities (school facility maintenance, school lunch funding, toilet repairing). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Educate employees about natural resources, tourist attractions, and elephant conservation projects through internal training. - Educate local residents at tour sites regarding environmental awareness, elephant conservation projects, and local production. - Support local residents in various tourist activities such as guide assistants, cultural performers, rubber plantation demonstrators, and Thai cooking demonstrators. - Promote cultural learning for tourists in relation to local culture, Thai lifestyle and elephant conservation camps. - Establish elephant camps for animal conservation projects in several southern provinces of Thailand.
Environmental dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have codes of conduct for tour activities in order to avoid the degradation of the environment. - Consider the ecological carrying capacity of the destination by arranging tour programs in different time from others. - Establish several natural conservation projects at ecotourism sites with local residents (e.g. mangrove, rainforest planting) - Donate money to local communities for natural conservation projects and national parks to support reforestation of the ecotourism areas where tours are operated. - Advise tourists regarding proper behavior while touring and educate tourists regarding natural ecosystem. - Arrange an activity with local residents and state agencies to clean up pier and ecotourism sites. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have codes of conduct for tour activities in order to avoid the degradation of the environment. - Establish elephant conservation projects to help protect endangered elephants in Thailand due to high risk of extinction. - Donate money for elephant conservation projects. - Advise tourists regarding proper behavior while touring. - Educate tourists regarding natural environment and elephant conservation projects.

(Fennell, 2008; Hunt *et al.*, 2015; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2004).

With regard to social dimension, like the economic dimension, guided tours with community visits generated greater social benefits than a tour without it. Tours A1, A3, B2, and B3 (all with community visits) were good examples of social dimension. For instance, tour A3 (overnight trip) contributed a greater social dimension than any other tour due to its longer stay at

the local village and having activities between hosts and visitors (visiting markets, food cooking, cycling and cultural learning). Arranging tours with a community visit relates to ecotourism principles in terms of local understanding and cultural appreciation (Fennell, 2003; Weaver 2001). Company A had supported this concept through arranging the overnight trip with the local community. While staying at the village, tourists had a chance to experience and being exposed to Thai living and local culture as well as to interact with local

Table 2: Summaries of Tour Observation of Companies A and B

Tour program	Company A	Company B
Tour 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tour A1: a half day tour with bicycle trip in northern part of Phuket (8 tourists). - Tour guide briefly informed tourists about routing, cycling disciplines, road safety and areas visited. - Short information was given at some interesting places, such as forestry areas, rubber plantation, agricultural areas, religion places, local markets and villages. - Tourists were encouraged to buy local products if they wished, and some of them bought local products. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tour B1: a half day tour with nature trekking in jungle area (14 tourists) in Phuket province. - Tour guide briefly informed tourists about the place, tour program, and elephant conservation project. - Tour guide gave little introduction about the activity and surrounding area. - Nature interpretation was rarely implemented, and most information was about flora. - After nature trekking, tour guides took tourists to the open courtyard to watch elephant activities. The company arranged a few elephant related activities for tourists such as elephant greeting, painting and feeding. - No particular involvement with local residents or community.
Tour 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tour A2: a full day tour with islands visits in Phang Nga Bay National Park (Phang Nga province) by a two-storey boat (15 tourists). - There was an introduction of the areas being visited, a presentation of map and folder providing knowledge on marine ecosystem, and a brief of tourists' proper behavior (what could and could not do). - While canoeing, tour guide often reminded tourists of what could not do in the fragile environment. Food and drink (including any plastic items) were not allowed while canoeing. Tour guide stopped at some interesting points (e.g. sea cave or lagoon) to briefly gave some information of the areas. - Information/explanation was not consistently given (some guides did and some did not). Most messages were short and too general. - Natural interpretation was rarely executed, and little effort was made to promote nature appreciation. - On boat, garbage was well collected and put into a plastic bag, and then disposed on mainland. - It was observed that tour guides had environmental minds by collecting some garbage floating on the sea, and took them back to boat. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tour B2: a full day tour visiting an elephant camp with Thai life style and cultural presentation in the central area of Phuket (19 tourists). - Tour guide briefed tourists about the area, activities, and elephant conservation projects. Tourists learned about the elephant projects through written materials and photos. - There was sale of local products to donate for elephant projects (e.g. t-shirts, souvenirs, handicraft products). - During the morning tour, tour practices were similar to tour B1. The additional program in the afternoon was presentation of Thai ways of living and cultural shows (local culture demonstration). - In afternoon, tour guide took tourists to cultural-built village. More information was given about each cultural activity. There were various types of Thai ways of living and local cultural demonstration (i.e. rubber plantation, Thai cooking, coconut oil production, elephant shows). - Tourists had a chance to interact with local people and participate in various activities. They were encouraged to buy local products.
Tour 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tour A3: an overnight trip (two-day trip) by visiting Yao Noi Island (Phuket province) by a two-storey boat (18 tourists). - Most practices were similar to tour A2 except the additional program was an overnight trip (staying at local village). - Before arriving at Yao Noi Island, tour guides briefly informed tourists about the local culture and the village. - At the island (village), tourists were encouraged to do various activities with local residents (visiting market, hiring long-tailed boat, cycling rental, buying local products, food preparation/cooking). - Tourists had a chance to learn local life and culture such as local language and Thai cooking from local people. - In the evening, tourists and locals helped prepare food. Tour guide also arranged a Thai boxing show for tourists to learn Thai culture. Local residents taught tourists how to do boxing, and interacted with each other (teaching and practicing). - Local residents informed researcher that the company has donated some money for the conservation projects on the island (bird & money conservation and mangrove forest conservation) as well as educated them about the conservation of the natural resources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tour B3: a full day trip visiting a forestry area in Surat Thani province by bus (14 tourists). The area visited was a reserved forest near the national park. - Tour guide briefed tourists about the area, tour program and activities (i.e. nature trekking and river canoeing). However, little information about the surrounding area was given. - Tour guide maintained a small group of travelers by dividing them into two groups to do two activities at the same time. The first group did nature trekking while the second group did canoeing along the river. - For nature trekking, tour guide quickly briefed about the place and gave little information about flora and fauna. Tourists were advised to keep minimum impact to the environment (e.g. do not leave bottles of water, plastic bags or picking up flora). For canoeing activity, local people participated in canoeing activity and took tourists to experience the nature along the river. Yet, little information about nature and ecosystem was given. - During lunch time, food and fruit were prepared and served by local people. Tour guide briefly informed tourists about local food and way of life. - In late afternoon (returned trip), bus stopped at local market for relaxation. Tourists had a chance to experience local way of life and bought local products.

residents by joint-activities, such as Thai cooking, eating local food, and learning cultural performance.

These activities help promote a better mutual or cross-cultural understanding between hosts and visitors, as indicated in the literature (Fennell, 2003; Patterson, 2002; Rigatti, 2016; Weaver 2001). Company B (tour B2), also implemented the social dimension. At the elephant camp, tourists not only learned about nature and elephant conservation projects, but also learned about the local way of life and Thai culture (rice production, coconut oil production, rubber plantation, and Thai cooking demonstration).

With this type of tour, tourists had interacted with local people in various activities, and also bought local products produced by local residents. For another social benefit, local residents (through local talks) indicated that company A has frequently arranged student or voluntary groups to visit the village with the purpose of assisting local schools, such as repairing or building school facilities or toilets. This is another social contribution to the local areas which relate to business operations. Based on the findings, tour operators play an essential role in generating social benefits of ecotourism features as they are intermediaries in providing the ecotourism experience (local experience) between locals and visitors.

In terms of the environmental dimension, tour observations reflect how the tour operators are concerned about this dimension. The quality of the environment is an important element of ecotourism destinations that distinguish ecotourism from other types of tourism (Matysek and Kriwoken, 2003; Sangpikul, 2015; Weaver, 2001; Zambrano *et al.*, 2010). According to observations, companies A and B implemented several pro-environmental practices during their trips, particular company A. For instance, at the beginning of tours A2 and A3, the tour guide briefed tourists of what they could and could not do in the fragile natural areas (for example, sea caves, lagoon). During the trips, the tour guide also reminded them not to throw any garbage into the sea but to put them in plastic bags that were available on the boat.

Tourists were also advised not to bring any food or bottles of water while canoeing to prevent sea garbage, but to leave them on the boat. When canoeing through sea caves, tourists were advised not to touch them (to prevent deterioration). With regard to company B, the pro-environmental practices were evident in tour B3.

Before nature trekking, the tour guide informed tourists to have a minimum impact, such as not to throw away bottles of water, food or plastic bags, and to not pick the flora. In addition, it was observed that tour guides informed tourists in all tours (companies A and B) regarding the places being visited, surrounding areas and tour programs. In particular, company A was observed to be more concerned on the environmental issue (impact from tourists) by reminding tourists' proper behavior when canoeing and visiting sea caves due to the fragility of the areas.

Based on these findings, the tour practices of two companies correspond to the ecotourism code of conduct in order to reduce negative impacts on the natural environment and prevent natural resources deterioration (Ecotourism Norway; 2009; Tourism Quebec, 2010). On the issue of elephant tourism of company B, it should be noted that the ecotourism products of each country may be different from one another, depending on natural resources, surrounding communities, and related activities. Elephant tourism of company B (elephant show) is one of the animal/wildlife conservation projects initiated by the company due to the threat to Thai elephants. The project may be related to ecotourism principles in terms of natural/wildlife resources conservation (Matysek and Kriwoken, 2003; Kontogeorgopolos, 2004).

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how ecotourism tour operators and their guided tours contributed economic, social and environmental benefits to the local communities and ecotourism sites. Through interviews and tour observations, the results of the paper yield in-depth information and a better understanding of the ecotourism business practices and their different guided tours in relation to the three dimensions of sustainability. Based on the two methods, the paper disclosed that the tour operators being investigated employed some of the ecotourism principles to their businesses and guided tours. Both companies implemented ecotourism practices, or at least soft ecotourism. In terms of the economic contributions, the ecotourism tour operators generated economic benefits to the local areas (for communities and provinces) through local employment, tourism activities, tourist expenditure, and expenses for service providers.

In relation to the guided tours, ecotourism tour operators helped promote social benefits between hosts and visitors through various activities.

Importantly, with the guided tours, tourists were educated about nature, environment, and proper behavior while touring. In this study, tour operators (led by tour guides) played an essential role in fostering tourists' natural awareness and appreciation through various tourism activities. The length (duration) of the guided tour was also found to be associated with the contributions of economic, social and environmental benefits to the local areas (half day tour and overnight trip). Especially, the tours associated with local visits generated the greater benefits on the three dimensions than the tours without local visits, particularly the contributions of economic and social benefits. Based on the current results, the paper has contributed to the body of knowledge on ecotourism business literature to better understand how Thai ecotourism tour operators help contribute economic, social, and environmental benefits (to some extent) to local areas through empirical evidence.

In this paper, ecotourism tour operators played an important role to contribute economic benefits to tourism areas and remote areas (islands in this case), promoted social benefits through activities and learning between hosts and visitors, fostered nature appreciation, and reduced tourism impacts. Ecotourism tour operators, therefore, are an essential tourism business in the Thai tourism industry which needs more sustainable development from various sectors of the industry.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Given such research findings, there are several important recommendations to be addressed to promote economic, social and environmental benefits to the local areas.

7.1. Local Economy

In terms of economic contributions, it was evident from the findings that not all ecotourism guided tours generate local economy (tours A2 and B1) except those with community visits (tours A1, A3, B2, and B3). This suggests that a tour with a community visit is more likely to contribute economic benefits to local areas rather than a tour without a local visit. The current findings provide important implications for ecotourism operators to design and offer their guided tours in order to help stimulate the local economy in the local/remote areas. Educating and involving local residents in various tourist activities (for example, being service providers, selling local products) may be

another approach to help generate income for local residents.

Related parties (for example, government and tourism sectors) may work together to find out in which ways to help stimulate the local economy when tourists are on sites. In addition, it was observed that the length or duration of the tour programs (half day, full day, and overnight trip) had different economic contributions to the local areas. For example, tourists in tour A3 (overnight trip) were more likely to spend more money at the local area than any other tour. Likewise, tourists joining tours B2 and B3 (full days) tended to spend more money than tour A1 (half day). These findings provide another important implication for related parties on the economic dimension. Since the longer tour programs at local communities are more likely to contribute economic benefits, tour operators may consider designing appropriate tour programs to suit their customer needs and generate more income for companies (for example, offering extra activities, optional tours, or value-added activity).

In terms of marketing, ecotourism guided tours may be marketed and promoted as an alternative tourism for a specific group of tourists who appreciate pure, uncontaminated natural and local experience. It is a strategic thought of the tour operators to design and market ecotourism products as a value-added product, premium product, or quality product for a niche market (for example, seniors, honeymooners, high-spending tourists, and environment-concerning tourists). The strengths of ecotourism guided tours may include trip quality, personalized service, quality of tour guides, pure nature experience, local experience, environment concern, and low-impact activity. These strengths may help tour operators position and differentiate themselves from mass-market tour operators, and penetrate the right markets.

7.2. Society

In relation to social contributions, like the economic contributions, guided tours with community visits generated greater social benefits than a tour without it. In particular, the overnight tour (tour A3) induced greater social benefits than any other tour, due to longer stays and greater interaction (activities) with local residents. This finding also gives implications for tour operators. Tour A1 (cycling tour) could be an appropriate example of a short trip (half day tour) that could generate social benefits by visiting the local community, agricultural areas, religion places, and local

markets. Despite a short duration (visit), tourists had a chance to experience or learn about the local culture. Tour B3 (full day tour) also helped contribute a social dimension through activities and interactions between hosts and visitors. Tour A3 (overnight trip) is a good example of an ecotourism trip that promotes the social dimension (for example, local culture learning and experience, host and visitor interactions).

Based on these findings, regardless of the length (duration) of the tour program, social dimensions can be promoted. It is the planning job of ecotourism tour operators to design or consider tour programs or activities that enhance the social dimension through various creative activities. In fact, the social dimension relates mostly to the local way of life and cultural experience. This dimension may be viewed as adding a value to a product (valued-added product) for ecotourism guided tours. Thailand is well known for its charming culture and local hospitality (friendly people). Combining a local/cultural tour with a nature-based trip could produce a greater ecotourism experience for international tourists (two experiences in one trip). This valued-added product could be charged slightly a higher price than the ordinary tour (only nature-based trip), thereby bringing more revenue to the company and providing social opportunities between visitors and hosts. In addition, following interviews with company A and local residents, company A has given other social benefits, such as educating local residents about natural resources conservation, cleaning tour sites, and funding local schools. Following company A's practices, ecotourism tour operator should enhance social benefits in the places visited (where tours are conducted) by keeping in mind what they have taken and what they should give back to the local areas/ecotourism site.

7.3. Environment

With regard to environmental contributions, during the observations it was observed that tour guides played an essential role in promoting environmental awareness and proper tourist behavior. Tour guides gave tourists information of what they could or could not do at the beginning of the trips, and reminded them again when undertaking activities. Prior studies have shown that tour guides have a significant influence over tourists (Skanavis and Giannoulis, 2010), and are regarded as the key person who implements responsible practices and environmental friendly behavior during trips (Sangpikul, 2011). Tour guides, therefore, are the essential element of the ecotourism

experience in providing tourists with natural learning, local understanding and proper tourist behavior (Randall & Rollins, 2009; Sangpikul, 2011; Skanavis and Giannoulis, 2010).

In this regard, ecotourism tour operators should pay attention to the training of their tour guides in order to run a responsible tourism business. Investment in training ecotourism tour guides will contribute to the strength of the business (competitive edge) over the competitors in the longer term. During trips, tour guides should communicate clearly to tourists the company's policy and practices so that tourists may behave properly while undertaking tourism activities.

Another important issue relates to nature interpretation. It was observed that this practice was implemented less during the trips for both companies. Tour guides of both companies merely informed tourists about the general information of the natural environment rather than communicating and interpreting the significance of the nature and environment. According to the literature, nature interpretation is an educational activity that promotes learning and understanding between the natural environment and visitors by delivering messages or explanation (Armstrong and Weiler, 2002). It is expected that effective interpretation (performed by tour guide) will enhance the tourist experience, manage appropriate behavior of visitors, and encourage positive conservation attitudes (Armstrong and Weiler, 2002; Skanavis and Giannoulis, 2010; Walker and Moscardo, 2014; Weaver, 2001).

Nature interpretation is, therefore, regarded as an important activity that helps distinguish ecotourism from other forms of nature tourism (Skanavis and Giannoulis, 2010), as well as differentiates real ecotourism tour operators from unreal operators (Sangpikul, 2011). In order to promote nature interpretation, tour guides should give accurate and appropriate interpretations of the sites or the resources in a way that enhances travelers' understanding and appreciation of ecotourism destinations (Armstrong and Weiler, 2002; Weaver, 2001).

Interpretation may be performed by tour guides in several ways (depending on type of tours, areas visited, and the way of communication). Communication may be made through verbal, use of references (for example, pictures, brochure, body language), or comparisons that are meaningful to visitors. With regard to elephant tourism, nature

interpretation could help educate tourists about the elephant conservation projects of company B. This is because the important role of nature interpretation is to educate tourists to better understand the complex natural resources issues (Skanavis and Giannoulis, 2010). It is suggested that nature interpretation about elephant tourism should be delivered before starting the activities to encourage positive attitudes of tourists toward elephant shows, for example.

7.4. Limitations

In terms of research limitations, this paper specifically examined tour operators with environmental awards (purposive sampling). Despite the small samples, these two tour operators are regarded as responsible ecotourism tour operators whose business and guided tours are in accordance with ecotourism concepts and principles. A combination of interview and observation methods provided meaningful data to understand how the ecotourism tour operators contribute economic, social and environment benefits to the local communities and ecotourism sites.

Future research may investigate other general ecotourism tour operators, and provide a comparative study with the award winners to reveal ecotourism contributions of the two groups. In relation to the area of investigation, the paper focused in one particular area (southern Thailand), so future studies should examine ecotourism tour operators in other contexts, such as in Thailand and other countries, to share knowledge on ecotourism businesses and expand the existing literature.

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