

The Development of Cultural Tourism in the Communities Around Sukhothai Historical Park , Sukhothai Province

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Abstract

This research topic is the Participatory Development of Communities around Sukhothai Historical Park, Sukhothai province that is based on the Cultural Knowledge for Tourism and focuses on communities' cultural tourism development in Sukhothai province. The research team conducted a participatory action research work that consists of academic activities and the development of various data collection activities such as exploration and field data collection and seminar. This research focuses on data collection from twelve communities and related organizations that take parts in participatory tourism development, project evaluation before the operations of some activities and sub-activities, planning arrangement in tourism development project, tourists' satisfactory evaluation by using questionnaires and project evaluation, and meetings to disseminate research results to the public. To boost the effectiveness of the study, a new tourism principle was designed on the basis of community participatory which is composed of many cooperative meetings between Sukhothai Tourism Association and research team. Finally, every unit agreed to use identity cultural knowledge from community participation, such as legend, history, tradition, rituals, performance arts, arts and crafts, for developing communities around Sukhothai Historical Park as new tourism destinations. The use of cultural community identity in basic structural and systematic development such as lodgings, restaurants, souvenir and hand craft shops, and the publication of local products and festivals that reflect local nature and the characteristics of people in surrounding communities. In addition, it is also suggested that community guide development, security system, community approaching condition, tourism information and landmark, private and public transportation information, tourism facility and service information, as well as public relations media, such as website, publication, radio media, television media, poster and brochure, should also be paid attention to.

Keywords: Cultural Tourism Communities, Sukhothai Historical Park, Participatory Actions

Introduction

Sukhothai World's Heritages, especially Sukhothai Historical Park, are unique cultural hubs that reflect Thai civilization at its peak during the period of 18th – 20th Buddhist century (around 15th – 17th Christian century) when the political, governmental and economic foundations were established. Therefore, Sukhothai has become recognized as a world's cultural heritage since 1991. This recognition is in accordance to the criteria for the consideration of world's heritages, which are to reflect art identities or beauty, to be a masterpiece of human creative genius, to be the unique empirical evidence the identities of human cultures and traditions of civilizations that used to prevail or is still existing. Besides that, UNESCO has been undertaking the projects to preserve archaic sites in Sukhothai province by sending experts to Thailand to give advice concerning the making of Sukhothai Master Plan, giving financial supports, and holding international campaigns to preserve this cultural heritage site. Therefore, Sukhothai becomes internationally famous and recognized by many scholars around the world as an example site that gives information about world' heritage conservation in Asia-Pacific Region.

Concerning tourism in Sukhothai, it is reported that in 2010, there were around 700,000 tourists who stayed over and travel around the province. This means the number of tourists grew almost 3% from the year before, generating almost 1,300 million baht income from tourism. From the reported income, 879 million baht was from Thai tourists and the other 380 million was from foreign tourists. Sukhothai province has many historical tourist attractions and traditions that are globally known such as Loy Krathong (to float flower-shape lanterns on the river), and Phaothien-Lenfai (to light fireworks) traditions. The province also has many natural tourist attractions and festivals such as the KhaoLuang Mountain Climbing festival, the 'Chang Chon Chang' Orchid festival and the Songkran at World's Heritage City festival (Sukphalin, 2010, p. 21).

Few years before that, Thailand's tourism had declined for almost 20% due to the world's economic situations, plague outbreak and high fuel cost. However, in 2009, many situations had gotten better continuously and became positive due to the serious promotion by the Tourism Authority of Thailand under the 'Thailand Travel for Thailand's Economy' which was successful in urging Thai people to be aware of the importance of local tourism, which can affect Thailand's economy (Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), Sukhothai Office, 2010, Preface). In 2010, Tourism Authority of Thailand, Sukhithai Office, set the target that tourism in Sukhothai province would grow 4.90% and generate 1,322 million baht income because Sukhothai has tourism efficiency in all respects, especially the respects of arts and culture, which are the important highlights that Thai and foreign tourists pay attentions to (Sukphalin, 2010, p. 25).

The communities around Sukhothai Historical Park have many historical tourist attractions and traditions that are well-known worldwide, such as Loy Krathong (to float flower-shape lanterns on the river), and Phaothien-Lenfai (to light fireworks) traditions, and natural tourist attractions which can be presented as new tourism products. Also, there are many interesting festivals such as the KhaoLuang Mountain Climbing festival, the 'Chang Chon Chang' Orchid festival, the Songkran (water festival) in World's Heritage City festival, the Light and Sound Show at World's Heritage City, and the Throwback festival that encourage everyone to wear Thai silk costumes and Thai gold or silver jewels.

From the information discussed before, it can be assumed that the development of the cultural tourism route or destinations needs the improvements of communities around Sukhothai Historical Park which involves the preparations of people, places, information and policies by all the relevant agents. Such preparations benefit tourism because they make tourists become more interested in the province. Also, this development creates new tourism styles that combine tourism with local communities' decent way of life, products, arts, traditions and culture, and enables tourists to obtain knowledge about culture from local communities.

However, the fundamental study on the related information leads to the knowledge that tourism in Sukhothai province, especially Sukhothai Historical Park, still needs some improvements. The areas that need improvements include the booths to pay admission fee to the Park that are located in many spots which can confuse tourists, the cleanliness of restrooms and tourists attractions, the inconvenience of the transportations between the main tourist attractions to minor ones because of the lacking of public buses, and the insufficient banners that give information about tourist attractions. Also, the landscapes of the both sides of the main road to the Park should be improved so that they are clean, beautiful, unique and impressive for all visitors.

Research Objectives

To develop the communities around Sukhothai Historical Park for tourism by using knowledge about culture and participation

Research Methodology

The research project to develop the communities around Sukhothai Historical Park for tourism by using knowledge about culture and participation has the objective of developing the communities that situate around Sukhothai Historical Park. The communities included in the project are 12 communities in Mueng Kao municipality, Mueng Kao sub-district, Mueng district, Sukhothai province, which are Traphangthonglang community, Mae Ramphan community, Ban Tai community, SukhothaiNakhon 1 community, SukhothaiNakhon 3 community, Ban Nue community, Lithai community, BanmaiTraphangthong community, Ramyai community, Sichum community, WatPamamuang community, and Ramlek community.

Based on the knowledge about culture and participation, the development in this project incorporates 5 activities as follows:

1. To collect information about the communities before the research project begins, which can be divided into three groups, namely, the efficiency of the communities such as the communities' uniqueness and promptness for tourism, the competitiveness of the communities such as the abilities to serve tourists, and the markets such as numbers of tourists and incomes of community members;
2. To work with alliances to set the guidelines for tourism management for the communities that relies on the participation of all stakeholders; and
3. To develop cultural tourism for the communities, which incorporates the following developments:
 - 3.1. The development of the uniqueness of the income sources of the communities by using the knowledge about culture such as accommodations, restaurants, souvenir shops and shops that sell local products;
 - 3.2. The development of tour services and guides;
 - 3.3. The development of safety and security;
 - 3.4. The development of services such as facilities, accessibility and tourist attractions; and
 - 3.5. The development of tourism routes and destinations.

In order to accomplish all the aforementioned objectives, the research team carried out this participatory research project that incorporates many operations which are various academic and developmental activities such as field survey and data collection activities; seminars with representatives from all the 12 communities and other related agencies to create the collaboration in the participatory development of tourism; the assessment of (and before) the project and all subordinate activities, the making of the plan and project to develop tourism in the communities around the Park by the communities' alliances and all the related agencies in terms of 1) accommodations, restaurants, souvenir shops and shops that sell local products, 2) guides, 3) communities' special work units especially designated to assist tourists, 4) routes and accessibility to the communities, 5) tourism routes; the evaluation of (and after) the project and subordinate activities; and the meetings to publicize the findings from the research.

In addition, for activities directly related to the research, the research team holds the Participatory Public Interaction Conference to design and determine the elements of the communities' infrastructures that are necessary and important to the participatory management of cultural tourism, which are to create 12 banners of cultural information for communities around the Park, and to publish the manual of cultural identities of the communities around the Park.

Research Findings

Sukhothai Historical Park is nationally and internationally recognized as a tourist attraction that has beautiful arts and architectures, which accumulates various wisdom heritages in the forms of archaic constructions and objects. Therefore, not only is the cultural uniqueness of this tourist attraction merely historical park but it is also linked to fruits from wisdoms of ancestral Thai people in Sukhothai period, local people from communities around the Park and cultural routes that are related to tourism activities in 4 provinces, namely, Pitsanulok, Kamphangphet, Phetchabun and Sukhothai.

Since this research project on the participatory development of communities around Sukhothai Historical Park by using knowledge culture for tourism is a sequence from the study for investigating the knowledge concerning the culture of Sukhothai, which had been conducted from 2008 to 2009, it is based on the management of a great data system that is up-to-dated, agreeable to academic standards and tested for reliability and validity from many sectors.

Consequently, the results from the study in the first period play important roles in influencing the design and planning of the operations in this project, which is in the second period of the entire programme because it has been discovered that all the 12 communities around the Park are the communities the members of which have domestic wisdoms that can be used as the foundations for the development of the creative economy. For instance, it is discovered that people in the 12 communities have careers that are related, directly or indirectly, to tourism in Sukhothai Historical Park. Hence, if the linkage among these communities, which creates the participatory network among the communities, public sector or legislators, and private sectors that run different types of businesses, is missing, the planning and operations in the policy level by the administrative of the Park can hardly become successful.

In addition, it is found out that the established group or network should consist of volunteers with different occupations. The participation of communities that own knowledge and dominate the areas is the core success factor that leads to collaborations in using and conserving knowledge of culture such as the orally told folktales, performed arts, nature and the universe, and rituals, which is considerably important to the expansion of scopes and choices that concern tourism in the Park. The addition of communities to the tourism routes of the Park is therefore not an obstacle to the management of tourism in the Park. Rather, it adds more choices for tourists to choose. Thus, the communities gain more benefits from tourism; and there occurs the collaborative network of many alliances that have public concerns to develop their city to be a creative cultural tourism destination that does not ruin the wisdom heritages but makes tourism become more sustainable. Eventually, more incomes can be generated for Sukhothai province in the sustainable fashion.

Therefore, it can be said that the development of cultural tourism is closely related to the development of communities around tourist attraction which should happen simultaneously. In this research project, the research team chooses Sukhothai Historical Park as a pilot project to develop the process, form and direction of policy drives to be more substantial before expanding the framework.

The important dimensions of the development this research project are 1) the development of human resources, 2) the development of infrastructures such as banners, landmarks, clean restaurants, accommodations and healthy food restaurants, 3) the development of the information sources that lead to the attainment of effective public relations and communication systems such as the centers of community information, maps and tourist attraction layouts, 4) the development of the systems that facilitate the participatory management of cultural tourism such as security systems and guide services, and 5) the development of policies to encourage the participation of all the related sectors such as a plan to develop tourism in communities.

The findings from this research project also indicate that the aforementioned measures also create new forms of tourism that combine the tour in the Park and the tours to communities, as well as creating the chances for tourists to exchange the knowledge about ways of lives that are intangible matters such as beliefs, values and traditions, and tangible ones such as local products, inventions, arts, customs and rites, with community members and social actors who take parts or play important roles in the process of tourism management. These types of tourism build up the public responsibilities, sense of belongingness to the communities, unity, knowledge exchanges and learning, and cultural integrations that lead to the development of creative economy which can impress the visitors or tourists.

The aforementioned facts lead to the attainment of the new concept of tourism management that is based on participations in the forms of meetings between Sukhothai Tourism Association and the research team. Finally, the meeting attains the resolution that the communities should use the knowledge about culture that is generated from the study in the first period for setting the guidelines for the development of communities around the Park into tourist attractions. Knowledge about culture incorporates the knowledge about local legends, histories, customs, performed arts and handicrafts, all of which are the cultural identities of each community.

Such knowledge can be used for improving systems and infrastructures, such as accommodations, restaurants, souvenir shops and shops that sell local products, and for improving printed media to promote local products, festivals and traditions in order to reflect the identities of people from each area.

Besides that, the communities also suggest that there should be the development of community guide services and safety measures, community accessibility, construction of landmarks, standardized banners showing the locations of tourist attractions/ the importance of each community/ road numbers/ public transportation systems available in each area, and facilities such as gas and fuel stations/ restrooms/ resting areas and parking areas, and well-developed public transportation systems from the airport or the bus station to accommodations. Also, there should be the services about tourism information such as the information about leisure activities and events throughout a year, which is disseminated through various media such as websites, printed media, radio or television programmes, pictures, posters and/or flyers.

Discussion, Conclusion and Suggestion

The information about cultural tourism can be divided into 2 main categories. The first category is the awareness of the occurring changes in 16 dimensions, namely, communities' incomes, employments and career opportunities, inter-relations among members in communities, hosting by community members, service and public minds, retentions of communities' way of lives and traditions, adjustment by communities, decline of communities' traditions, life quality of community members, beauty of communities, appropriateness of the locations of the shops in the communities, communities' trash and garbage management, communities' promptness in terms of the management of environment and tourism resources, communities' promptness and competitiveness, and communities' knowledge about cultural tourism and numbers of tourists visiting the places.

The other category is the efficiency of communities, which includes 14 dimensions, namely, planning and setting of tourism strategies, abilities to support tourists, provision of clean and safe accommodations with high quality, waste and garbage management, improvement of communities' landscapes, natural resource and environment management, development of community members' life quality, development of information and public relations system, development of 8 infrastructures to facilitate tourism, namely, roads, electricity, telephone systems, information centers, clean drinking water, washrooms, banners showing directions and important places in the communities and transportation means, development of careers and souvenirs, communication and languages, safety of tourists and community members, and knowledge and comprehension in communities' histories.

Discussion

The analysis on the findings from this research project reveals that the participants' awareness occurs in 16 dimensions. Most of the participants deem that there are 5 dimensions of the development that do not change. These 5 unchanged dimensions are service and public minds, retentions of communities' way of lives and traditions, adjustment by communities, decline of communities' traditions and appropriateness of the locations of the shops in the communities. From all of these 5 dimensions, the participants deem that the changes are intangible but the dimension of the appropriateness of the locations of the shops in the communities is the only dimension that is related to an individual's profits.

Also, from the 14 dimensions of the communities' efficiency, 7 are found out to have low levels of efficiency, namely, 1) the provision of clean and safe accommodations with high quality, 2) the improvement of communities' landscapes, 3) the development of infrastructures to facilitate tourism, especially 4 sub-groups, namely, clean drinking water, washrooms, banners showing directions and important places in the communities and transportation means, 4) the development of careers and souvenirs, 5) the communication and languages, 6) the safety of tourists and community members, and 7) the knowledge and comprehension in communities' histories.

The other 7 dimensions of the communities' efficiency are found out to have moderate levels of efficiency. They are 1) the planning and setting of tourism strategies, 2) the abilities to support tourists, 3) the waste and garbage management, 4) the natural resource and environment management, 5) the development of community members' life quality, 6) the development of information and public relations system, and 7) the development of 5 infrastructures to facilitate tourism, namely, roads, electricity, telephone systems, information centers and restaurants.

It is noticeable that the dimension of the development of infrastructures to facilitate tourism is in the high level but its elements are in the low and moderate levels.

Suggestion

Based on the research findings discussed before, the research team holds up two projects to develop the efficiency of the communities around Sukhothai Historical Park, namely, the development of tour services and tour guides, and the safety training and the establishment of special agencies to assist tourists. There are more than 100 people from all the related agencies from public sector, private sector, communities and Local Administrative Organizations (LAOs) joining these two projects. This number is much greater than the expected one. However, there is the limitation of the communities' efficiency which has been mentioned before.

The research team discovers that there are many other activities and projects that must be undertaken in the hasty manner. These activities and projects can be divided into 3 periods. The first period is the Emergency Period which is for the projects that aim to improve the communities with low levels of efficiency. These projects are as follows:

1. The project to standardize the quality of accommodations for tourists to be clean and safe;
2. The project to improve the communities' landscapes; and
3. The project to improve 4 infrastructures, namely, clean drinking water, clean public washrooms, banners showing directions and important places and public transportations, for communities with low efficiency.

The projects in the second period are those with the aim of improving the communities with moderate efficiency, which are as follows:

1. The project to develop knowledge and comprehension of planning and strategic setting in tourism;
2. The project to improve the communities' abilities to supports tourists;
3. The project to improve the communities' efficiency in garbage management;
4. The project to improve the communities' efficiency in natural resource and environment management;
5. The project to improve the communities' efficiency in improving the life quality of community members;
6. The project to improve the communities' efficiency in developing the communities' information and public relations systems; and
7. The project to improve to improve 5 infrastructures, namely, roads, electricity, telephone systems, information centers and restaurants for communities with Imoderate efficiency.

Acknowledgment

The investigation on information of the culture and traditions of Sukhothai province was funded by the Thailand Research Fund (TRF) for the fiscal year of 2009.

The research team would like to take this opportunity to express its gratitude to Professor SujinJinayon, the President of Naresuan University, and Professor (Special) Dr. KanchanaNgao-rangsi, the Vice President in Academy and Research Department, Naresuan University, who is a high ranking official of the university. Also, I would like to give thanks to my intellectual friends such as Associate Professor Dr. Pheeradet Thong-amphai, the Vice Director of TRF and Assistant Professor Dr. SamerTha-noi, who is the Coordinator of the Office of Research and Development for Lower Northern Part of Thailand, TRF, as well as others whose names are not mentioned here, who have given useful suggestions for arranging materials and data and for improving the quality of this research project.

I would like to show my gratitude to Sukhothai Cultural Center, Municipality of Sukhothai Thani, Sukhothai Tourism Association, the Provincial Administrative Organization, Sub-District Administrative Organizations, Mr. DamronkwuthWiriyia-the Director of Sukhoathai Airport, and also all the field coordinators, the local wise men, academics, and experts, co-researchers and assistants, whose names are stated in the appendix, who have given assistances in studying the information, collected the information, designed the interview scripts and recorded all photos with patience and perseverance for the past 2 years.

The research team wishes that this research work, which emphasizes on the investigation on cultural information of Sukhothai province in the systematic and scientific manner for the ultimate aim of investigation of cultural information of Sukhothai province, would lead to the discovery of the new way to create plans and develop communities members and the society in the future.

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