

Community-Based Ecotourism Development in Northern Thailand

Wang Jian Ping

Introduction

Based on its amazing increase and inarguable contribution to economy and society as well as its important role in environment conservation, the tourism industry has been regarded as an efficient development strategy that keeps a balance between improving the living standards of people and maintaining the sustainable use of resources for the future. The key to assessing tourism's potential for improving environmental conservation and community well-being is the direct involvement of the local communities and the promotion of linkage between conservation and enterprise development.

It is also widely acknowledged that local participation in tourism is critical and is hardly implemented in reality, although often advocated in principle. Tourism, for example, is supposed to involve the process of consultation, decision-making, or program implementation (Mam Kosal, 1996). It has been observed that the indigenous people are just involved in labor-based tasks or providing services in most destinations. It is a common knowledge that tour operators receive most of the benefits from tourism and leave the local resources exploited, and the local people poor. Such a financial "leakage" gives little incentive for the locals to maintain their environment on which tourism depends.

On the other hand, as tourism is growing around the world, environmental and social impacts are immediate concerns. Negative impacts such as environmental pollution and enormous waste management problems, the violation of human rights, commodification of cultures, etc., have affected many indigenous peoples around the world.

Given their knowledge, local wisdom, and sense of ownership, the local people immediately become the best protectors of the resources on which the industry relies. As ecotourism is being implemented around the world, there is a growing international agreement that it should be community-based. In other words, the key to assessing tourism's potential for improving environmental conservation and community well-being is the direct involvement of the local communities and the promotion of linkage between conservation and enterprise development.

Thailand is an excellent place to study the development of ecotourism for a number of reasons. Presently, 6% of Thailand GDP is derived from tourism and

almost 30% of the population is employed in tourism and related industries (TAT 2002). Clearly, mainstream tourism is becoming one of the most important economic engines of Thailand's economic growth. The provinces of northern Thailand such as Chiang Mai, Chaing Rai, and Mai Hong Sorn have become highly popular destinations for adventure-seekers and eco-tourists for their abundant resources and natural beauty.

However, as tourism becomes increasingly important, several areas that were once pristine are now facing resource degradation and cultural decadence. Although the economic benefits from tourism have been claimed, outside investors reap the biggest benefits at the expense of the local community. This situation led the Thai government and other organizations to consider eco-tourism as a means of protecting the local resources while developing this sector of the economy.

However, the term "eco-tourism" has been applied to a wide range of travel options even without a true understanding of what it means. Eco-tourism is merely used as a buzzword for marketing and now, the inflationary use of the term has overshadowed the innovative and alternative direction of eco-tourism (Jim Motavalli, 2002). An expanding group of tourism companies now label their products variously as "eco-tourism," even as they strive for profit and the lack of a generally accepted set of guidelines. Some scholars surprisingly argued that the so-called eco-tourism has been responsible for damaging natural resources and habitats. Some critics even accuse eco-tourism as "the activities that destroy ecosystem." It is not surprising that mainstream eco-tourism, originally born of low-impact intentions, is now faced with similar problems and is being criticized as much as mass tourism.

There are two contrary views on the impacts of eco-tourism. Somebody believes that compared to mass tourism, eco-tourism is a kind of imperialism that can overpower traditional institutions and destroy local culture (Bruner 1987; Mansperger 1995; Nuñez 1989; Rossel 1988). Yet, other scholars suggest that commodification can help protect or even revive traditional practices and beliefs that would otherwise be lost (Cohen 1988; Van den Berghe 1994). Some suggest that tourism may even encourage local hosts to develop new and empowering forms of expression and self-representation (Bendix 1989; Evans-Pritchard 1989; Lanfant et. al., 1995).

The neutral point of view is that eco-tourism is perhaps a tool to encourage the cross-cultural interaction and communication between tourists and the local people. However, the idea of a "primitivism" or "exoticism" of culture, an idea that smacks of inauthenticity, must also be abandoned. Increasingly, more tourists are interested in the genuine culture and way of life. They do not just appreciate anything superficial, or a "showcase." As long as "traditional" culture is desired, it should be staged or performed in good faith, with the knowledge of all (Jeff Petry 2002). It is not just to wrap it up with an old coat and sold for money.

Another argument against eco-tourism is whether or not it is an appropriate activity in all places. The negative impact on the vulnerable environment is immeasurable and irreversible. Some critics of eco-tourism believe that it is better to convince tourists to spend their holiday in an existing resort and not to encourage them to rush to the pristine villages and the protected areas. This could lead to an undesired impact rather than solve the existing problems.

The CBET approach is a response to the rising criticism of the negative impact of mass tourism and the abuse of the term “eco-tourism.” It tries to describe a sustainable way of tourism in natural reserves while providing a source of community-building or development for local people without destroying their natural habitats and cultural systems. It is different from the other types of tourism because it focuses on community development and the participation of the marginalized sectors rather than on regional or national development. It was developed to empower the local communities and make them self-reliant and raise their collective self-esteem about their indigenous culture. This was done by using a group process for local decision-making, working together with stakeholders, and solving community problems together.

Aimed at learning from the experiences, success, and problems of the CBET implemented in Thailand for the last decade, I conducted this project with the following objectives:

- To identify both positive and negative results of CBET development in terms of ecological, social, and economic aspects
- To identify and analyze the success factors that influence the development and implementation of community-based ecotourism in order to maximize positive results
- To analyze the existing CBET development process in two field sites and explore the feasibility of the process for its application in Yunnan
- To enhance cooperation with Thai development agencies in this field, including exchange and sharing of CBET development approaches and experiences

Through two case studies and in-depth interviews with Thai CBET experts, NGOs, government and local people, I identified several problems in implementing CBET in Northern Thailand and made recommendations. Some important facts that affect the success of CBET were listed; likewise, a specific analysis and solution as to how to deal with those facts for CBET practices were given. The empowerment of indigenous people, the supporting policy, the incentive environment as well as the efficient marketing strategy are emphasized and the critical needs considered.

Background of Case study

Background of study site

The northernmost area of Thailand covers approximately 65,900 sq. km., and is one-fifth of the country. It is a mountainous region comprising natural forests, ridges and deep, narrow, and alluvial valleys. I chose Northern Thailand as the study area because Northern Thailand and Southwest China share many similar preconditions and foundations for CBET implementation:

- Both of them are situated in remote and mountainous areas. The characteristics of their natural environment and natural resources are similar.
- Both of them are minority areas. Some of the ethnic groups such as the Lisu, Lahu and Shan, etc. have the same cultural heritage.
- Most of the local communities in the two areas belong to the marginal groups and have different self-identities from the dominant culture of their country.
- Both face the issue of how to balance conservation and development under the background of globalization and modernization.
- Both have low authority on land use and resource management. In the past, both have been blamed by outsiders for spoiling the environment.
- Both of them are rich in tourism assets in terms of high biodiversity and high ethnic culture diversity.
- As the main members of GMS (Great Mekong Sub-region), they face similar challenges and opportunities.

Compared to the other areas, the north is still a poor area in Thailand. However, inevitably, it also has to face the challenges of globalization and modernization like many other areas. The current challenges include the following:

- **Increasing centralization of state control over natural resources and the penetration of market economies.** The resultant higher demands on resource usage augment conflict and competition over natural resources. (Yos santasombat 2003).

- **High rates of population increase** can be seen extensively in most of the highland villages. The pressure on the land is such that shifting agriculture is no longer feasible in many parts of the highlands.

- **Intensifying agricultural production** encouraged by the Thai government

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has led to increasing poverty and landlessness, resulting in massive rural-urban migration and unsustainable exploitation of natural resources (Yos santasombat 2003).

● Encouraged to integrate with the general Thai culture, the Hill tribes are in danger of **losing their heritage and self-identity**. The local people are encouraged to speak Thai and less and less young people in the community can read or write in their own languages.

● Because of **over-visitation**, many road-accessible hill tribe villages have become commercialized.

At the same time, still a large number of remote villages are struggling with the increasing population pressure and limitation of resource usage. They could not benefit from tourism.

Therefore, it is time to consider how to reduce the negative impact of mass tourism and involve more local people to ensure the sustainable development of eco-tourism in Northern Thailand. A group of international organizations and local NGOs, in cooperation with the local government, have started their journey with CBET, a new option.

The CBET development in Northern Thailand

There is yet no national policy or regulation related directly to CBET. However, the practice of eco-tourism, including other alternative forms of tourism, had been organized by both the government and the private organizations for nearly 10 years. A number of NGOs and research institutes such as REST, TRF, HADF and RECOFTC are facilitating the CBET initiative in Northern Thailand. Nevertheless, no strong effective movement was found in the private sector to distribute tourism opportunities and wealth to the local people or develop eco-tourism service standards.

Different modes of CBET in Northern Thailand

The CBET modes existing in Northern Thailand vary with the project objectives and the character of facilitator organizations. At the enterprise level, the main types of CBET enterprises have been identified in Northern Thailand. (Wesche and Drumm 1998). The purest model suggests that the community owns and manages the

enterprise. All community members are employed by the project using a rotation system, and profits are allocated for the community projects. The second type of CBET enterprise involves family or group initiatives within the communities. This is based on voluntary participation. The third type of CBET is a joint venture between a community or family and an outside business partner.

One popular mode is that private sector or NGO partners provide financial, training and marketing assistance while the indigenous communities provide land, labor, and local knowledge of the environment. After they have been working together for a pre-determined time period, there is a gradual and planned transfer of skills, rights, and responsibilities from the private partner to the community. Normally, this third mode has no difficulty with marketing due to the strong linkage between the tour Company and market, and it has been proven to be the most practicable mode in current use. But in some cases, the degree of participation of the local community is low and the community cannot be empowered through tourism. In some villages applying this mode, some villagers complained that they receive fewer benefits from tourism but suffer more from the interruption of tourists.

Two CBET villages

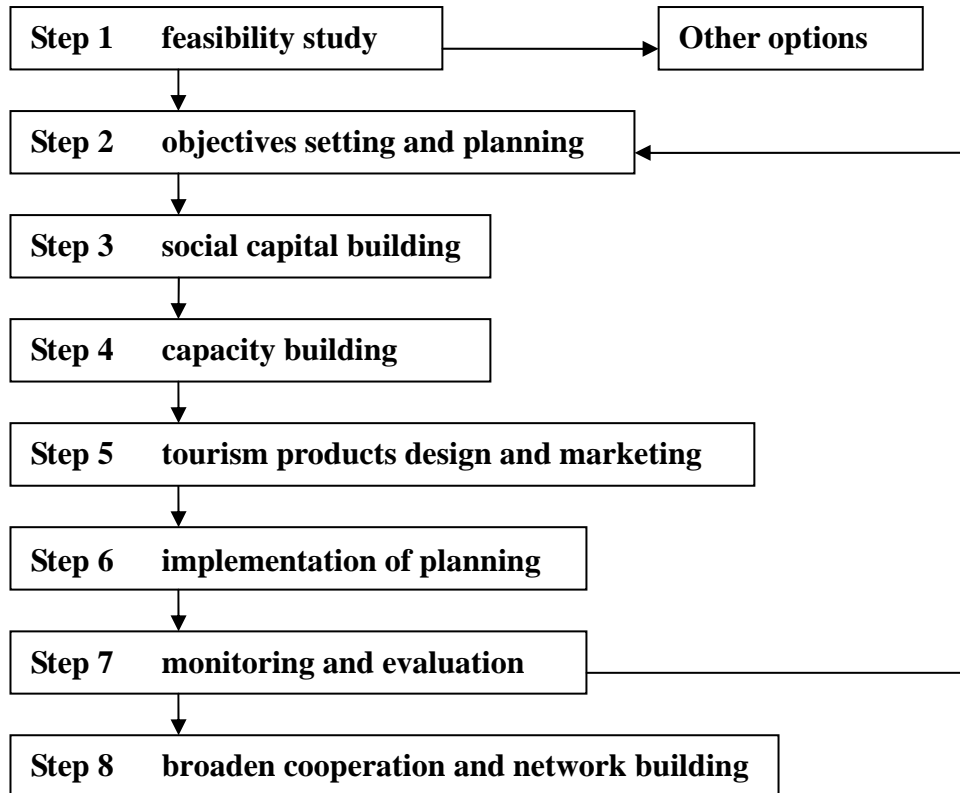
Two hill-tribe villages were chosen from Mai Hong Son Province, Northern Thailand. Mae Huay Hee village has been involved in CBET for more than 5 years and the degree of participation in tourism is high. In Mae Lana, approximately 80 km away from Mae Huay Hee, the CBET initiative just started one year ago, although the locals have been involved in tourism for almost 10 years. A comparative study between these two villages that are currently receiving different degrees of tourist activity and experiencing different levels of participation was conducted to judge the impact caused by CBET. An evaluation applied by a wide variety of interest groups, including women, senior people, and the elites of the community was used to check whether or not some plans needs to be adjusted in accordance with the project objectives.

Implemental process of CBET in two sites

There is no blueprint that can be simply applied everywhere. Adaptation must be made according to local contexts.

Comparing the modes utilized in Northern Thailand, we can propose eight steps to construct a framework of a typical CBET project:

Figure 1: The process of CBET in Northern Thailand



The Impact of CBET

The positive impact of CBET can be attributed to the low number of tourists and the controllable activity. All in all, the positive impact seems to be more emphasized. Sometimes it is hard to draw the line between the impacts caused by tourism activity and social or economic progress. Perhaps a useful approach is to fix the analysis within the specific period of CBET initiative and just focus on what had happened since the CBET project started.

Current critical challenge of CBET in Northern Thailand

We found three main barriers to the CBET development in these areas:

- **Lack of rights and authority of local community in resource management**

The existing resource management mode in Thailand is still using the top-down approach. Normally, the community members lack the power to manage and develop their community by themselves. As a kind of community-level project, it is hard for CBET to get sustained support from the government. The government

administrative agencies and departments are unwilling to cooperate with the community unless a direct order or financial aid is given by the country's leaders. In some cases, once the income from tourism has become visible, it is easier for a government agency to take advantage of this due to the priority given to resource usage.

● **Ineffective marketing and random market**

Because of the lack of ability to access the market, most CBET communities have to seek the cooperation of private companies to conduct the marketing. However, a common phenomenon in Northern Thailand is the lack of law/regulation enforcement. The tour agency takes advantage of CBET by not defraying the costs of conserving the environment. Some irresponsible business operators who want to minimize their costs bring in very large groups of tourists who may threaten the ecology and culture of the villages. There is a lack of a certification system of CBET enterprises. It is also hard for CBET communities to compete with the other non-CBET communities or private enterprises.

● **Lack of human resources**

Although there are various training courses organized by universities or NGOs, the number of persons with specific skills such as the nature-based guide, planning facilitation, financing, negotiation, etc., is still insufficient. In particular, both local authorities and local communities do not have experienced staff in tourism management and development. The assistance from NGOs on capacity-building is hard to come by because of their limited budget and inadequate experience. In some cases, the manpower problem has led to the failure of CBET.

Factors affecting CBET development and implementation

With reference to the two case studies and other additional surveys on CBET conducted in Northern Thailand, we can elicit some key factors affecting CBET development and implementation. Those important factors and solutions are listed and analyzed in detail:

- Social-capital building and the administrative system;
- Genuine collaboration of stakeholders;
- Active participation of the local people;
- Efficient marketing;
- Sustainable capacity building;
- Practicable monitoring and evaluation system; and
- Holistic support for environment and network.

Among those factors, the follow-up efforts on capacity building, the effective marketing strategy and the incentive environment are most critical in CBET implementation.

Conclusion: The development of Sustainable CBET

Within the background of globalization and modernization, it is crucial that communities become empowered for self-determined development and sustainable resource management. Being a new option, CBET is not a panacea, since there are three main weak points that are hard to ignore:

- **The contradiction between economic self-reliance and the objective of minimizing the negative impact**

It is hard for CBET to keep a balance between sustainable economic self-reliance and mass tourism. The efforts to control the number of visitors to minimize the cultural intrusion and environmental impact is likely to be overlooked by the local people who want to increase their income. It is very easy for CBET to be distorted for an economic purpose rather than be followed closely using the original eco-tourism objectives.

- **An incentive to function since the competitive mechanism hinders equal participation.**

One important characteristic of CBET is to draw people from every community sector to be involved in tourism as well as to receive the benefits generated from it. Moreover, it can be observed that most CBETs have made a great effort to establish a fair and conflict-free community that can make good decisions for decisions (Lash 1998) as well as to ensure equal distribution of benefits to these members (Banskota 1998a; Bezruchka 1998). It is impossible for every member of the community to participate and provide the same quality of service in CBET. That degree of service varies according to several factors. Different hosts should be assessed and improved with a fair-incentive mechanism. Those who are good should be recognized while those who are not should be encouraged to improve. Lacking a fair-incentive mechanism will, to some degree, affect service quality and the enthusiasm of the community to participate. Once an indigenous family cannot get encouragement from the innovation or a good practice, they will just follow the routine and lose enthusiasm.

- **The dividing line between the community-oriented approach and the top-down institution.**

Successful development of CBETs can only be achieved by giving the community a dominant role in resource management. As necessary is a truly collaborative effort among local community groups, government agencies, NGOs and policymakers. However, despite ongoing improvements in this area over recent years, we also know that we still have a long way to go in achieving this aim due to the stubborn government centered or top-down approaches.

According to Anucha (2002), one of the major barriers preventing local people from having a say regarding natural resources is that most natural resources are publicly owned and located in the protected areas. In most cases, local people living inside or nearby the park are not allowed to take substantial part in tourism management and to receive benefits. At the same time, there is little agreement among the RFD, TAT, and other related agencies on how to control and manage national parks, or how to coordinate with local communities in eco-tourism activities.

There is also a big gap in current regulations concerning the participation of local communities, which significantly restricts CBET development. If the local people are given the authority in resource management and tourism development, they can monitor and control the negative impacts of tourism by themselves. Thus, more effort should be exerted to strengthen the genuine cooperation between the local communities and government agencies.

As an alternative development option, the CBET brings forth a new view of sustainable development. Based on its weak points and strong points, the effort of sustainable development of CBET should involve healthy institutions, full-scale local participation, effective marketing, comprehensive cooperation of stakeholders, self-determined community, timely monitoring and evaluation and a supportive environment.

Besides the above-mentioned, the following significant standpoints will contribute to the sustainable development of CBET:

- **Regard CBET as a long-term project**

CBET projects hardly succeed immediately and yield immediate profits in comparison with other projects. Even one successful project may need a lot of time to adapt to a new situation. Repeated experiences have proven that increased success in CBET projects leads to increased pressure to tilt the fragile balance between development and conservation. It needs a long-term effort on capacity-building and following up on monitoring and evaluation, as well as sustaining marketing, to ensure that the CBET moves forward.

- **Developing CBET at the regional level**

Until now, most CBET is developed at the community level. However, it would be easier to reach a proper institutional framework and financial support if this is moved to the regional level. Developing CBET at a regional or national level will strengthen community networks and mobilize them to act on public policies. Those small communities are motivated to work together and deal with their common problems such as weak marketing or low authority. There is a trend that shows regional and international efforts can enter into partnerships with the communities.

There is a need to distinguish this kind of alliance at regional levels from the top-down regional development strategy that is more bureaucratic and less community-oriented.

- **Network**

The CBET modes contain some reasonable elements and successful experience. Establishing a network exchanging knowledge will contribute to the sharing of these successful facts. It will show the development of the different communities and promote good practices as well. The members of a network can join together in marketing or addressing rules such as policies or laws that will have an impact on the community.

- **Setting a practicable certification system**

Setting a certification system may help build an equally competitive environment. It can focus on issues like capacity-building, transparency, monitoring and follow-up as well as allowing for “good practice” methods implemented through yearly reviewed targets and goals.

However, it is difficult to push for a unitary certification system for all the communities from the start. Some communities cannot satisfy the uniform standard due to their small size and disadvantageous living conditions as well as the lack of human resources. There is also no universally accepted certification program that suits all communities.

Furthermore, the community must participate in developing these standards, and should have the final say on their determination without being overpowered by outsiders. Therefore, a regional certification system that adapts to the local circumstances and is agreed-upon by the communities is more practical at this point.

- **Regarding CBET as a mechanism of Environment Services Payments—ESP**

Proponents of eco-tourism propose that putting a price value on natural resources is a strategy to protect them. Tourism is a product of biodiversity that can be ‘harvested’ in a sustainable or unsustainable way. Putting it another way, biodiversity protection is also an investment in a sustainable tourism industry, i.e., not merely in sustaining income but also in sustaining the environment and society. When eco-tourism is not participatory, it will probably make people better off economically, but it might not lead to a long-term capacity to manage the resources sustainably.

If we do so, we will find that CBET is an excellent mode since the cost is lower and output is higher than other types of tourism. This view that looks at CBET

as a kind of Payment for Environment Services Mechanism will form a kind of supporting atmosphere for CBET development. It will also make it easy to convince people about its price component.

- **Integrating CBET into a broader community economy**

CBET is an alternative venture that should not be the sole source of livelihood for communities. CBET is a niche market. Its relatively small size and the lower impact on community are characteristics of the CBET. When there is conflict between the efforts to keep low the number of visitors to minimize cultural and environmental intrusion and the local people's desire to increase their income, alternative forms of livelihood should be encouraged. In sum, CBET should not be seen as an enterprise that will solve all problems. Thus, it is necessary for CBET communities to integrate CBET with other alternative productive options to reduce the expectations on one activity alone, and to reduce the tensions that arise from unmet expectations. It is not an isolated industry that exists apart from other economic activities. It is instead a "complex productive and cultural/social system" (Barkin, 2000). A multiplex economic structure will lead to the stability of the economy at the national, regional, or community levels.

The significance of CBET is based not only on its economic potential and its intention to protect resources and culture, but also in its efforts to make the indigenous people think about themselves, learn to empower themselves through the capacity-building process, and sustain their resources. CBET can transform people in positive ways by increasing their power, confidence, and environmental awareness, more than just making them richer or giving them jobs.

Furthermore, active involvement and control of eco-tourism products and services by indigenous communities will benefit the indigenous peoples themselves. The richness and diversity of indigenous cultures and traditional knowledge is an invaluable treasure for all human beings.

People will always travel. They will have the desire to go and see the wildlife in pristine areas worldwide. In doing so, they will learn from the cultural and biological diversity of places but would also be involved in measures to protect them. At the same time, many local communities that have an abundance of unique natural and cultural features and beauty are struggling with poverty and the impact of modernization. CBET, as a new option, may well be one answer to keep the balance between sustainable development and conservation.

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