

Techniques to Maximize Community Participation in Local Tourism: Findings from the King Cobra Village, Thailand

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Abstract

This paper sets out to identify a number of elements of good practice in incorporating the fundamental principles of local community participation into the processes by which community-based tourism schemes are planned and developed. It was also intended to identify what is actually being done or have been done in local tourism planning and development in the King Cobra Village, Thailand; the current level of public participation; local constraints and factors enabling or preventing community residents' participation in tourism planning and development; and, local residents' perception towards their community participation in tourism. Key-informant interviews included individuals mostly from public sector (e.g. community development workers, and the tourism authority), local residents, and community leaders (e.g. the Village Headman and Chief of a Group of Villages). This fieldwork covered face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions. The interview questions were designed to address issues related to community participation in tourism planning and development process and its limitation in community involvement. Fieldwork for this research took place from May to September 2007 in the King Cobra Village, Khon Kaen, Thailand. To do so, 35 local residents participated in interviews. The data was analysed through the categorisation of major themes and sub-themes. This study can provide an analysis of ways in which the concept of popular participation can be embodied in local development

goals and policy and the factors inhibiting the villagers' participation can be mitigated. More, specifically, it can examine the meaning, scope, benefits, obstacles and costs of popular participation as well as examples of present-day experience in designing popular participation strategies for other Thailand's village-based tourism destinations.

Keywords: community, participation, tourism planning and development, King Cobra Village, Khon Kaen, Thailand

1. Introduction

Popular Participation has been a focus of attention in English and American literature. The attention on popular participation, created by amendments of the 1997 Constitution, has generated an influential involvement in the local level planning initiatives in Thailand [1]. The movement from a top down representation of planning and decision-making has made officials and communities necessary to advance the roles allowing local communities to become an active part of the planning and development process. A study by Jamieson [1] also delivers the potential for fast economic growth, ecological, social and cultural aims that may be misdirected by unplanned tourism development schemes which eventually are detrimental to both communities and tourists. In a consequence, there is an increasing acknowledgement that public involvement is vital to ensure community-based tourism planning and development.

In the years since the publication of Murphy's *Tourism: A Community Approach* written in 1985, the concept of community involvement in tourism development has moved closer to the essence of the sustainability debate [2],[3] which covers the issue of how benefits to destinations can be optimized at the local level. Murphy's work [4] constitutes a basic reference point of an approach revitalized by the need to achieve greater social development in planning process [5]. Community-based tourism becomes the other popular alternative offered to traditional tourism development styles and it can be defined as tourism based on negotiation and participation with key stakeholders in the destination [6]. In community-based tourism, the host communities play a central role in determining the form and process of tourism development [7]. Hence, there is a need to comprehend the local residents' perceptions and views concerning their involvement in tourism planning and development, tourism operation and activities. As tourism grows, a great deal of work is required to coordinate the actions of a multitude of public and private sector organizations who are directly and indirectly involved in the travel and hospitality industry and also to integrate tourism with other economic sectors [8]. The degree of participation is associated with the public's attitude and behavior and the concept of the individual having an input in the decisions affecting this environment is a part of the foundation of a democratic system [8]. In addition, in community development projects, members need to share their ideas in order to come up with workable solutions to the challenges they face and work cooperatively to realise their common goals [9]. Community participation is based on the legacy of Western ideology [10] and the induced form of participation which is sponsored, mandated and officially endorsed is the most prevalent mode to be found in the developing countries [11]. Community involvement in the decision-making process is a new

concept in most of the developing countries and traditional practices that prevent grassroots participation are not easy to alter [12]. There are also some difficulties in involving local members in the planning process [13].

In Thailand, the concept of consensus building in decision-making is inherent in the culture, particularly in respect of the country's Buddhist influences. After all, like in many other countries, decision-making in development planning is often carried out from the top and dictated down to the beneficiaries at the bottom. This often leads to a failure to meet development objectives and the real needs of the local residents. As a result, it is both practical and challenging to examine the strong points and downsides of both the Western and Thai approach towards public participation in tourism planning and development, tourism operation and activities and which approach would be most beneficial if adjusted or applied to maximize community involvement in tourism among the residents and others involved.

2. Public Participation in the Tourism Development Process

Tosun [14] notes that community participation in the tourism development process is highly preferable; however there seems to be formidable operational, structural and cultural limitations to this tourism development approach in many developing countries. Tosun adds that the proponents of participatory tourism development have popularized it in the context of developed countries and made substantial contributions to the theoretical foundation of this proactive tourism development approach. The proponents of community participation have made a powerful and emotionally drawing case. Midgley[15] points out that participation is advocated not only because it facilitates social service delivery by lowering costs and smoothing implementation but because it fosters a sense of belonging and the integration of

communities. This leads to help for local residents to contribute positively to national development and natural resources effectively. Midgley also ascertains that it is not an easy or indeed a hardly feasible task to employ a concept of community participation that equates dwellers' involvement with a total and continuous commitment to activism as the literature of community participation is permeated with moral sentiments and it is related to ethical issues from theoretical and practical considerations. Moreover, White [16] is in doubt that community participation schemes will only contribute to social improvements in a small way.

Nonetheless, Timothy [13] observes that some difficulties exist in involving community members in the planning process in developing countries. He explains that tourism has relative newness in such destinations, little experience in the industry and knowledge of its dynamics have been obtained by officials, private groups, or community members at large. As Mitchell [12] states, community involvement in decision-making processes is a new concept in most of the developing world and traditional practices that prevent grassroots participation are not easy to alter. Consequently, if local inhabitants are to benefit from tourism, they must also be given opportunities to take part in, and gain financially from, tourism [13]. Implementation of participatory development approaches in developing countries is likely to experience barriers related to the operational procedures of the task [14]. Tosun explains that formulation and implementation of any kind of community participation approaches requires decentralization of the political, administrative and financial powers of central government at least to some extent. In many developing countries, planning is a highly centralized activity and the planning organization has been established at national level and is under the direct management of national political executive [17]. Thus, the consequence of this

is to restrict the impact of community-level groups on the planning process, and implementing plans. By these performances, centralization has frustrated citizenry participation in planning and simultaneously enhanced the 'vertical' distance between planners and the broad mass of the population [17].

Bramwell and Sharman [18] explain that there are several clear challenges towards problems impacting community participation in tourism planning. In line with the issue of representation, genuine community participation cannot be fulfilled if the scope of community participation is not sufficiently representative of the whole population. Moreover, an associated matter is whether or not sufficient numbers of citizenry representatives from diverse stakeholder parties are engaged in planning and policy making. Then, the extent is to which community participants are engaged in overt, meaningful conversation. The issue about how often destination stakeholders are included in conversation and council meetings has to be clarified. In addition, the extent of consensus among community members in the process should be apparently demonstrated even if it is not definitely crucial as there will almost always be some community members who do not desire tourism, or who put forth against its impacts.

The promulgation of a new Constitution in 1997 also forced the institutional and legal shifts towards more transparent public administration. Sections 76 to 79 mandate the state to strengthen local participation in both national and local government decision-making processes. Citizens have the right to be involved in developing public policies, making decisions on local issues, providing perspectives and information on economic, social, and political development plans, and inspecting the exercise of state power at all governmental levels [19]. This has laid the foundation for more accessible government administration.

3. The Tourism Background of the King Cobra Village, Khon Kaen

The King Cobra Village has become one of the main tourism destinations in the North-eastern Thailand. The residents of the King Cobra Village welcomed approximately 120,000 domestic tourists in 2006. The public and private sector's interventions in tourism planning and development of these two communities are different in degrees. By examining the villagers' perceptions towards, and readiness for, tourism in this village, this research also contributes to an understanding of the issues that promote and or hindrance community participation in its planning and development process, tourism operations and activities.

In 1985, a news reporter from the Dailynews visited the village to interview the Village Headman when he was, at that time, the Village Headman's Assistant. The news reporter asked him why the village members kept the snakes. The news reporter later made the story more exciting that the Khok Sa Nga villagers had their snakes as pets and the guards of the households. After the news was presented by the reporter throughout the nation, the Tourism Authority of Thailand in Khon Kaen visited Khok Sa Nga to inspect and study its story to prove its authenticity. The Tourism Authority staff learnt that the villagers keep snakes at home. In consequence, the Tourism Authority agreed to put the Khok Sa Nga Village on its tourism proposal and plans. They visited the village to do further study. To commence the tourism plan, they granted the village the first budget to build the snake cages. This is the early story of village tourism at Khok Sa Nga.

At the beginning, there were only male performers showing with the snakes. Then, a group of 30-40 year-old stay-at-home wives wanted to try to run the shows with snakes. There were hundreds of tourists visiting the village during the Thai New Year, the Buddhist Lent and the End of Buddhist Lent.

Some years, there were so many tourists that they had to stay overnight at the village primary school as there was no lodging accommodation or hotel in the village (Interview, 08/2007). The residents bought a plot of land with their own money derived from the donations from the visitors. This piece of land was paid by instalments of 50,000 Bahts [approximately US\$1,600] per year and money was also spent for the expansion of the stage shows and other facilities. There was no government budget to support us at all (Interview, 08/2007). The residents used the rice fields near the King Cobra Club as the visitors' parking lots. The income generated from the car park was approximately 10-20 Bahts [approximately US\$0.32-0.65] a parking space (Interview, 08/2007).

In the past, the villagers kept their snakes at home or under their elevated houses. When the tourists wanted to see the snakes, the owners would open the wooden boxes where the snakes were kept to let the tourists see. However, the snake owners are not allowed by the Village Headman to open the snake cages or do shows for the tourists at their homes. The snake performances are shown on the stage at the King Cobra Club only (Interview, 08/2007).

The Khok Sa Nga villagers who possessed the king cobras gradually clubbed together for the first time and named themselves the *Khok Sa Nga King Cobra Club*. When the villagers had their village's annual religious festival, they had the boxing shows with the king cobras for their own amusement and the activities had drawn an audience from other villages to the community. Then, the Tourism Authority of Thailand in Khon Kaen discovered that this activity was a potential tourism promotion and advertisement for the village's tourism. They provided the villagers a government budget to build a theatre at their village temple (Interview, 07/2007). However, the village temple abbot was reluctant to allow the Club to settle in the temple area for the tourism activity. So, the Village Headman's assistant who is now the

Village Headman, had a word with the temple abbot and explained to him the Club's goals and objectives and that the temple was a suitable location according to the convenience with basic infrastructure of the electricity [*during that time, the electricity service was not thoroughly expanded*]. This would facilitate the construction of the snake theatre. The village temple would also financially benefit from the village's tourism. Eventually, the temple abbot went along with this perspective and agreed with the construction plan. About a year after the construction was completed and the tourism activity began, the monk dean of the Nam Phong District [*the Lord Abbot of a Buddhist monastery*] expressed his disagreement with the idea of having tourism activity in the monastery. He reasoned that the temple should not be a place for the snake shows and the performances reflected animal cruelty. After this comment, a group of villagers moved out from the temple in 1995. The other group of villagers is still operating tourism activity at the temple. Therefore, there have been two groups of villagers ever since and the community conflict over its tourism operation and activities was initiated. The issue is obvious when the tourists are confused about its tourism management (Interview, 07/2007).

The conflict is caused by the tourism benefits. The two village groups contend with each other for tourists and this brings about irritation and annoyance. This impact and scenario have caused the splitting up of the villagers' groups (Interview, 07/2008). The two groups of the villagers have been separated since 1995 and there have been two King Cobra Clubs ever since then. One King Cobra Club has been set up in the village temple area. Meanwhile, the other Club has been established outside the temple. The Club outside the temple launched their first shows without any facilities; the platform, buildings. The snake shows were presented in the front yard of the Club. The visitors stood up to watch the shows

as there were no seats for them. The income from the snake shows were from the visitors' donation. The money we received from the tourists was used to buy a plot of land and build the building. Some villagers travelled to other provinces to open the shows and they did not receive any wage as they had mutual goal of buying a plot of land to build the snake theatre. Despite the small income, the villagers built the visitors' toilets and stage by themselves. In those days, the village tourism was still unknown (Interview, 08/2007). According to the goal of the Village Headman he wanted the two groups to become one, he discussed with the temple abbot and asked him not to allow the Club members to move back to the temple. However, the temple abbot finally allowed the Club members to operate snake shows in the temple again. The village Headman was very upset and disappointed with the abbot's behaviour and decision (Interview, 08/2007).

The Village Headman considers the separation between the two groups of villagers causing the community's problems and lack of harmony. The two groups of villagers have been disunited since 1995. At the beginning, there were about 30 households grouping together as the members of the King Cobra Club and later 60. Some moved to the temple to set up another King Cobra Club. That has become the cause of separation of the villagers (Interview, 08/2007). In consequence, the Village Headman assigned a committee team to work on the problem solution. The Province of Khon Kaen called the two groups for discussion as it was about the government budget allotment to develop the community's tourism. The committee also had discussion with the City Government of Khon Kaen and found out that there was a budget of 20 million Bahts [*approximately US\$645,000*] for the village's tourism development in Khok Sa Nga but this budget would be handed to the village with the condition that the two groups of villagers were to combine into one group first of all.

The King Cobra Village is currently under the development of the tourism plan. The village is well-known for the king cobras which the villagers keep at home. This large powerfully-built snake is fully capable of killing a human with a single bite. Nevertheless, the villagers have studied how they can live with them and breed them. At the same time, they want the tourists to experience their tourism uniqueness and help conserve the snakes together with the community (Interview, 07/2007).

4. Study Methods and Data Collection

This study was carried out in the King Cobra Village, Khon Kaen during May - September 2007. The specific objectives of the study were to identify what is actually being done or have been done in local tourism planning and development in the King Cobra Village; the current level of public participation; local constraints and factors enabling or preventing community residents' participation in tourism planning and development; and local residents' perception towards their community participation in tourism.

The criteria for selecting this village were considered on its tourism potential, capacity of operating village tourism development projects and plans which are primarily based on its community participation, unique case of village tourism, and accessibility for conducting research. The case study strategy employed in the study involved the use of varied research methods and types of data. As Pearce [20] explains, the application of multiple data sources promotes the range of material available for analysis and it facilitates the cross-checking of interpretations. The data collection instruments employed in this study combined both primary data (interview transcripts and observation data) and secondary data. The observational method enables the researcher to apprehend and record events as they occur, no matter how unpredictable they are. Observations can vary from highly structured to unstructured,

via semi-structured. The research problem and the researcher will determine which is the most appropriate for a particular study. According to Cohen et al. [21], 'observation methods are powerful tools for gaining insights into situations.' However, the questions of validity and reliability, even more than with other techniques, are crucial to the trustworthiness of the data collected and of the whole study. Additionally, it is needed to integrate observation with in-depth interviews [22].

The researcher set the aim for the observation before going into the field, which related to observing the nature of tourism planning and development process, tourism operation and activities, the results of the community involvement in tourism, and residents' non-verbal language during the interviews. Field notes were made during the fieldwork, including immediately after the interviews. The researcher also took photographs of the tourism operation and activities in order to comprehend the current atmosphere and the recent developments. These field notes and photographs were combined together with the interview transcripts and other data sources for the analysis.

5. Community Actions to Engage Residents in Tourism

During the interviews, the researcher asked the participants their thoughts on what kind of community's performance would get its residents involved in tourism planning and development process and other community affairs. The main findings are given below:

5.1 Through the Community's Future Tourism Planning and Development Schemes

At the time of the interviews, the Community had a plan to set up its local economic strategies which relate to establishing the village gas station, grocery and other shops. These projects would be managed similarly to the cooperatives' system that the profits would be distributed to the village members at the

end of the year (Interview, 08/2007). One resident said: ‘If these plans are fulfilled, the villagers would become more contented and the villagers would not need to travel to sell herbs outside the community (Interview, 08/2007).’ Also, another resident added: ‘If everything goes well with the plans, the income will automatically come to the village from the visitors, from selling the local souvenirs and donations thus enhancing the reputation for the Province of Khon Kaen as well (Interview, 07/2007).’

5.2 Through the Tourism Benefits of Becoming the King Cobra Club Members and the Wildlife Conservation Campaign

The villagers are encouraged by the Village Headman to take part in sharing the same role and community goals towards village tourism. The wildlife conservation scheme has been the subject of wildlife conservation discussion at the village meetings (Interview, 07/2007). On August 3rd, 2007, 80 king cobras in the village were micro-chipped for further research conducted by the Khon Kaen University. The details of the snake owners, and the snakes were also recorded.

Nevertheless, the tourists doubt how the village’s tourism can be carried on without charging any fees. One resident who is a narrator on the stage said that ‘The snake shows are free of charge for the visitors and the shows are related to the king cobra’s conservation without animal cruelty (Interview, 07/2007).’ The Village Headman persuades the residents to become part of the King Cobra Club. He reasoned: ‘The King Cobra Village will be the biggest attraction in Khon Kaen and more visitors will visit the village (Interview, 07/2007).’ The Village Headman encourages the villagers to communicate with the visitors with good manners and the community provides training and basic English classes for villagers who want to be local tour guides (Interview, 07/2007). Furthermore, the Village Headman encourages the primary school students to practise the snake

performances and this leads the village youths and children to show their talents and confidence. Initially, the children will play with harmless snakes, not with the king cobras. In the King Cobra Village, these days, the community allows the children, especially the pre-school children, both male and female, to do shows with tiny and harmless snakes (Interview, 08/2007). One resident explained:

‘We talk among ourselves that we have to carry on our village tourism activities and we have to stimulate our children to continue. If we cannot do it due to our retirement, our children will do it for us and for the village’s reputation (Interview, 07/2007).’

The income from tourism varies and depends on the number of visitors each year (Interview, 08/2007). The King Cobra Village has an inspiration in that its villagers appreciate the importance of their village tourism and hence, the community emphasizes the importance of the Career Groups and the King Cobra Club. Meanwhile, the Community Development Office uses the community development strategies to stimulate the villagers to make handicraft products for sale at the King Cobra Club as their secondary job for additional income outside the cultivating season (Interview, 08/2007).

5.3 Through the Village Meetings and the Public Hearing Procedures

The Village Committee members; the Village Headman and his assistants encourage the villagers to express their opinions at the village meeting (Interview, 08/2007). At the meetings, the villagers are informed about the community’s projects and asked for their participation to consider those projects for the community benefits (Interview, 07/2007). Furthermore, the villagers are asked by the community to voice their views about the village development direction and goals. The community also asks the residents to spread the purposes of community development and tourism to their families, friends and relatives so that

everyone can keep pace with the current actions. The community brings the residents' points of view for the public hearings for the final conclusion afterwards. The village members are aware of the significance of the village meetings for the future community development and well-being (Interview, 08/2007).

5.4 Through the Community's Infrastructure and Tourism Facility Improvement Projects Sponsored by the Government Sector

Based on the case of the Khon Kaen Provincial Administration Organization's proposals to build a standard village road from the main road to the village and from the village to the new construction site, the Sai Moon Sub-District and other government sector have been trying to get the villagers involved in developing the best solution and gaining prior agreement (Interview, 07/2007). The village members were told by the Village Headman that their opinions were the references for the village's future development plans and projects such as the transportation system, new road construction, standard tap water, and the expansion of electricity service (Interview, 08/2007).

5.5 Through the Educational Tours and Trainings

The King Cobra Village considers how budgets from the central government can be used. According to the community development goal, the Sub-District uses the budget to organize the training and educational tours for the villagers. The Village Headman said:

‘The observation trips to various locations will assist the villagers in effective tourism development and creating a sense of participation among themselves. The villagers can employ their experiences from educational tours to create more value to the tourism products, and operations (Interview, 07/2007).’

For example, the Sub-District provided the village members an educational tour to the Nong Nooch Zoo in Pattaya. The villagers learned about the zoo's operation and management system and found that

the zoo has successful management as a tourism provider. The villagers discussed with the Village Headman and the Sub-District staff after their return to the village, about the techniques they could use to manage the King Cobra Club and the village tourism more effectively (Interview, 08/2007).

The educational tour is another technique to bring the villagers to be a part of the tourism planning and development process. Regarding the training, the community provided training to the villagers under the theme of ‘*How to Be a Good Host*’ and how to treat the visitors to the correct standard (Interview, 07/2007).

5.6 Village Through the Trust and Respect towards the Headman and the King Cobra Club Manager

The Village Headman encourages the villagers to take part in the community's activities. He said: ‘Village members should help the community regarding its achievement towards the community's goals, pride and the community's unity (Interview, 08/2007).’ The Headman mentions how to make income sustainable in the village along with the development plan. The snake shows, the tourism products and souvenirs are to be reformed periodically with regard to standard and quality. The members are encouraged to brainstorm with a view to reforming the snake shows and increasing the entertainment value.

The villagers are told how the visitors are important to the village (Interview, 07/2007). The Village Headman stimulates the villagers to help improve the attractions. One resident said: ‘It is his continuous attempt to that aim (Interview, 07/2007).’ The Head of the King Cobra Club encourages the village members to try to speak or practise English to communicate with the foreign tourists (Interview, 08/2007). If any villager can speak a bit of English, he will be assigned to welcome the foreign tourists. Additionally, the Village Headman encourages the residents to provide full conveniences to the tourists without delay (Interview, 07/2007).

The Village Headman is the main person who always encourages the village members towards community participation. One resident expressed his feeling towards the Headman:

‘We believe in him and respect what he has done to our community. We will do anything that involves our community’s development. We stick to our respect of the Village Headman, his assistants, and the President of the Sub-District. We are impressed with their role as they bring other support and developmental projects to our community (Interview, 07/2007).’

5.7 Through the Strategies of the Creation of the New Local Tourism Products

The Community Development manager once stated that every sector needs to help the community organize more activities to get the villagers to take part in tourism planning and development process and one of the strategies is the creation of new local tourism products. The community offers only snake shows which are still not enough for the village tourism (Interview, 08/2007). Therefore, every sector needs to think about other options for the villagers to create the community tourism products which will help encourage them for more participation. During the interview in August 2007, the Nam Phong Community Development Office discussed with the King Cobra Village about establishing homestay activity in the village which would allow the visitors to stay with the villagers. The purpose of this project would help the visitors learn more about snakes and village life. However, the Community staff and the villagers still need to plan it carefully in terms of the visitors’ safety and security.

5.8 Through Community Meetings

The community meeting was widely discussed during the interviews as a method of community participation in the King Cobra Village. The village has, on average, six meetings a year (Interview, 07/2007) and the community does note taking and records

all the proceedings before conducting the final vote for conclusion from the villagers (Interview, 07/07). When the community receives the information from other sources, it is brought to the community meeting every month. During the interviews [July - September, 2007], the meeting subjects were about senior people, people with disability in the Sub-District and their monthly allowance and public utility.

6. Limitations in the Community Participation in the King Cobra Village

As there are two groups in the village, the community is trying to persuade both groups to gather into one. However, sometimes, when the community arranges village meetings, it turns out that there is only one Club joining in and the other does not, hence making the village meeting incomplete and also making other attendants feel disconcerted (Interview, 07/2007).

The construction plan of the new snake theatre was still on hold as the government budget had not been approved. Because of this delay, one Club decided to move back to the village temple to operate the snake shows (Interview, 07/2007). Even the government sector shared their senses of concern with the conflict and provided potential problem solutions, the government sector still could not help the community as much as they could. The village temple abbot stated:

‘The problems are caused by us [*the two groups of villagers*] and the problems are with us. We have to talk about them together among the villagers. That’s the best solution for us to get through this together (Interview, 08/2007).’

The village members waited for the news of the government budget to build a new snake theatre and zoo and at the same time, they anticipated the result of the two groups’ assembly (Interview, 08/2007). One resident said: ‘If the village members are in harmony, more support from other sectors will come. We do

not need to travel to sell herbal products away from our community (Interview, 07/2007).’

Several examples of interactions among the local members and the Village Headman on tourism planning and development, tourism operation and activities were illustrated. The Village Headman and his administrative team paid attention to all issues raised by the local members for further discussion and investigation and subsequently held the public hearings for the outcomes.

Based on the objectives, it was found that there was considerable continual community involvement in tourism planning and development, tourism operation and activities in the community. Also, community actions to get residents involved in tourism were witnessed. Information distribution both one and two-way together with village meetings and public hearings were regularly arranged at the village hall. There was periodic intervention in tourism planning and development, tourism operation and activities from public and private sector both in and outside the village. The study shows that the residents are most involved directly and indirectly in tourism at a local level. There is a strong emergence of the government sector and others from the local primary and high schools and the village temples. The appearance of the latter mirrored the change to a mixed-group democratic network of government, highlighting that, in the future; there must be additional new participants in the local community tourism. Even though the King Cobra Village has not gained considerable tourism decision-making powers from local government, the extent of decentralized decision-making in tourism within the village themselves is still perceivable.

The study of the King Cobra Village provides the broad picture of how participatory Thailand’s village tourism actually is. The analysis of the King Cobra Village focuses chiefly on ways in which the residents contribute to their own tourism planning and

development process, tourism operation and activities. On the one hand, it cannot be denied that community involvement in tourism provides a very significant contribution to maintaining it. Tourism in the village has motivated the public and other sectors towards a more collaborative approach to tourism planning and development, tourism operation and activities.

The findings of community involvement show that local residents benefit from and are given opportunities to participate actively - not only in tourism activity and management but also in the decision-making process involving initiation and implementation of government development projects. The focus of the study of the King Cobra Village is that the structures of trust and confidence in the Village Headman are vital variables in developing the empowerment of local members in tourism planning and development process, tourism operation and activities.

Still, this research strongly supports the idea that the communities should be engaged in tourism planning, operations and decision making for projects or tourism development schemes, in order to increase the possibility of achievement in the projects and to provide maximum opportunity for local residents to anticipate, adapt and acknowledge whatever potential there might be to form modified or innovative community participation strategies. Yet, in these two cases, the public consultation process associated with village-based tourism development typically do not commence until plans have been approved by local government. In addition, what constitutes ‘local participation’ is subject to considerable debate and the ‘type, amount, intensity and equability of community involvement’ are essential to achieve a higher level of community involvement [23].

For Thailand to employ tourism as a strategy for community participation, local government needs to develop a participatory approach by putting more

effort into formulating more opportunities and access to education for local members. Community participation in local-level tourism planning and development, tourism operation and activities needs to be assigned priority in the national political scheme and the role of local residents should be recognized towards the contribution to their tourism planning and development process, tourism operation and activities. Yet, the community participation in tourism has been formulated by the advocates writing on developed countries. Hence, their claims can be well-grounded in developed countries, but it may not necessarily be applicable to, and beneficial in developing nations as the community there may be confined by the fundamental need to only survive. From the overall key research findings and the analysis of data of these two cases, the contribution to knowledge suggests the concept of popular participation is Western dominated and needs to be adapted for a Thai audience and taken into account of non-Western countries.

7. Conclusion

When considering the Community Development Plans of the King Cobra Village, and local level policies, strategies are designed to be made up of local needs and they are fitted into the community according to its unique resources and environment. With regards to the community participation in tourism planning and development process, tourism operation and activities, wide participation and involvement can be experienced at a local scale. For the King Cobra Village, the construction of a new snake theatre and wildlife zoo is an evident collective public involvement in tourism planning.

As the government has been creating policies on all aspects of national life, including the development of tourism and development, Verbole [24] advocates that the development and implementation of government policies and alternatives for rural tour-

ism should not only include an evaluation of tourism assets but also an evaluation the various interests of the social workers, their organizing practices and strategies, the power relations, the different discourses and manifestations in the process of development and decision-making. In addition, the evaluation of tourism development and its political dimension should not be overlooked.

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