

Community Based Tourism and Protected Areas: Overview of its Challenging issues

Dachanee Emphandhu¹ and Supawinee Songpornwanich^{1,2}

¹Faculty of Forestry, Kasetsart University, Bangkok 10900

²Corresponding Author E-mail: ffordne@ku.ac.th

Abstract

Community based tourism (CBT) is recognized as community development strategy, using tourism as a tool to strengthen the ability of rural community organizations that manage tourism resources with the local people participation and emphasize on learning process and sufficient economy. Many communities adjacent to protected areas not only use CBT as community development tool but also for biodiversity conservation. The relationship between protected areas and local communities reveals the conflict of interest mainly on illegal natural resource uses and encroachment of protected areas. CBT is then proposed as a strategy to reduce conflict by enhancing local livelihood through community development and tourism revenue generating to support biodiversity conservation. This paper reviews the CBT concept, investigates the conceptual relationship of CBT, protected areas, and local communities, and summarizes the challenging issues regarding CBT as a tool for community development and biodiversity conservation. There are 167 communities operating CBT; forty of them have some relation to protected areas either using protected area resources as tourism destination or forming collaboration and/or participate with the protected area authority in tourism management. Challenging issues when applying CBT as a tool for community development and protected areas' biodiversity conservation are: (1) Difficulty in enacting policy into action, (2) Human development and appropriate learning process to initiate interesting nature and cultural interpretation, conservation awareness and necessary skills in tourism management, (3) Tourism impacts, (4) Encouragement of local participation and benefiting sharing among stakeholders.

Keywords: Community Based Tourism, Protected Areas, Challenging Issues

Introduction

Even though national parks and wildlife sanctuaries in Thailand have long been established since 1962 which Khao Yai National Park was first declared, the national parks and wildlife sanctuaries still face continuously with conservation problems for instances: land encroachment illegal wildlife hunting and tree cutting (Department of National Park, Wildlife and Plant Conservation, 2012). The main mechanism to achieve the management goals are laws such as the National Park Act (B.E. 2504) and Wildlife Protection and Preservation Act (B.E.2535) for wildlife sanctuaries. Conflicts between the protected areas and local people also clearly become visible on resource utilization. Besides, the capitalism of economic investment on agriculture farming which concerns more on economic value than environmental or social aspects and lacking conservation awareness multiplies the seriousness of the problem on biodiversity conservation in national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. Therefore, the community development strategy which emphasizes on sufficient

economy and human capacity building towards biodiversity and environmental conservation awareness is highly suggested for local communities around protected areas.

Community Based Tourism (CBT) is a unique type of tourism focusing on the participatory management process and learning process done by local people organization. It is a tool for human and community development recognized by its expected outputs of uplifting better local livelihood, local economic and social development, conserving natural and cultural resources, and bringing prides to the community. Besides, CBT is a tool for cultural restoration in which culture is recorded, organized, and disseminated which subsequently creates exchange in learning process between host and guest. It clearly puts across the strong bonding of community and natural resources into visitor perception (Saunsri, 2011) .

Local communities around protected areas have employed CBT as natural resource conservation and community development tools (Jaima, 2002). There are 167 communities operates CBT and about 40 communities have some relation with protected areas. Some national parks such as Doi Inthanon and Phu Hin Rong Kla uses tourism as a mean to acquire collaboration from local communities on resource management. However, the investigation on the success of CBT in supporting biodiversity conservation in Thailand has been limited with small number of good practices or examples. Cases of good practices were found more in other countries such as Indonesia, Nepal, India, and Chille (Ross and Wall, 1999; Al-Sayed and Al-langawi, 2003; Institue for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES), 2003; Moore & Weiler, 2009).

The objective of this paper is to review the CBT concept and the challenging issues of CBT in relation to biodiversity conservation in protected areas. Then the research agenda reflecting the knowledge gaps in CBT and protected areas interaction is suggested.

Results and Discussion

CBT: Concept towards conservation and development

Saunsri (2003) mentioned the principle concept on the management process of CBT. It emphasizes on community ownership of the process, empowerment of local decision making on resource management and utilization, community participation on decision making and direction of tourism management, learning process and knowledge exchange among community members between community and visitors, and benefit sharing process towards transparency and equality among members as well as benefit sharing to community as a whole (Figure 1).

One of the fundamental reasons to consider CBT within the context of protected areas is the linkage with communities that either in the buffer zone or within the protected areas. Tourism development has, as principal objectives, the creation and maintenance of economic opportunity, enhancement of quality of life and protection of a cultural, historic and natural heritage. The fact that national parks attract visitors that support local economies is undoubted. In national parks, local communities can provide many of the needed goods and services to visitors, and can, if integrated with the management of the natural areas, protect the natural resources of protected areas (Moisey, 2002).

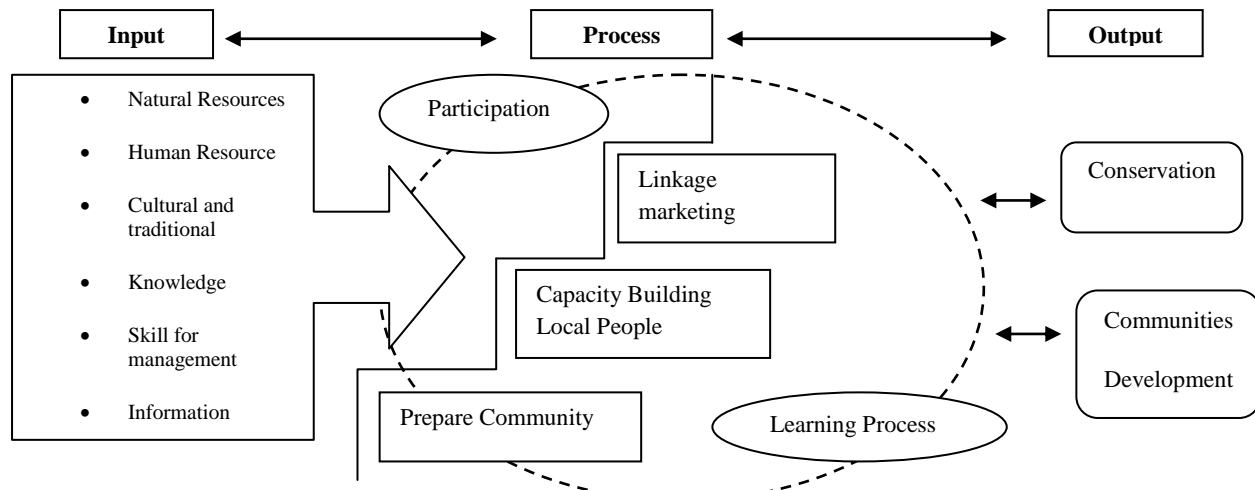


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of CBT system

Tourism in national parks and in the buffer zone of the wildlife sanctuary can play an important role for the enhancement of the local prosperity as it generates supplementary income and expands job opportunities as well as tool for the conservation of natural environment. Consequent the interaction of communities and protected areas can be improved by using CBT as a conservation tool for protected areas and community development strategy.

Challenging issues of the CBT in the context of protected areas

Although the concept of CBT as a conservation tool for protected areas is becoming acceptable, there is a considerable gap between the theoretical concept and good practices in reality. The challenging issues are summarized as the following:

1. Policy and implementation

In case of CBT and protected areas, The issue of bringing policies into action remains the weakest point. Most vital policies will be or will not be transformed into action depend significantly on the vision of high administrators and politics. If the policy on local people participation, human capacity building, and sufficient economy are neglected, the implement of CBT to support the protected area conservation can hardly be a success. The untrusted condition between local people and protected area authorities is also one among several reasons that obstacles the policy implementation.

2. Learning process and human capacity building

The learning process and human capacity building are keys to the success of CBT and community development which links to the success of biodiversity conservation of the protected areas. The knowledge gained will then be organized and communicate to visitors through interpretation and local guides to enhance visitor experiences. Through understanding and appreciation of the meaningful of the tourism resources, conservation awareness will soon be in place. Therefore, “human” should be cultivated in systematic and appropriate learning process to structure sustainable development foundation. The issue is how to build the appropriate learning process for local people and other stakeholders such as park authorities, tour operators and visitors.

3. Tourism impact management

Tourism development in protected areas and the surroundings always induces impacts onto natural and cultural resources. Management techniques including tourism carrying capacity determination, impact monitoring and mitigation control to counteract the problem are the existing issues in most tourism destinations of protected areas and surroundings. Fast tourism growth and popularity in national parks is another critical issue. It can bring big revenues but if not well managed and controlled, it can cause tourism resources degradation and biodiversity can be jeopardized.

4. Local involvement and benefit sharing

The challenging on this issue is on the truly provision of local people to be included in tourism opportunity in protected areas. Benefit sharing is another related issue that the use of revenue sharing from tourism to local communities must be ensured so that local people can see the importance of the protected areas as an economic opportunity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

CBT can improve the interaction between protected areas and local communities. CBT opens communication channels between protected area authority and local people during the collaboration in tourism management leading to more understanding of each other. CBT in relation to protected areas relies much on the use of natural resources for tourism activities. Thus, the concern is on tourism impacts in protected areas. The income generated from using protected area as community based tourism destination is seen as another output. It can bring appreciation of the importance of protected areas and resource conservation consciousness.

Challenging issues when applying CBT as tools for community development and protected areas' biodiversity conservation are: (1) difficulty in enacting policy into action, (2) human development and appropriate learning process to initiate interesting nature and cultural interpretation, conservation awareness and necessary skills in tourism management, (3) tourism impacts, and (4) encouragement of local participation and benefiting sharing.

Recommendations on research agenda emerged from the issues regarding protected areas and CBT relationship are: (1) the investigation of the obstacles on policy transformation into action, (2) research on knowledge based management and learning organization for a successful CBT management, (3) carrying capacity determination for the CBT and impact monitoring. (4) research on appropriate local participation in protected area management and benefit sharing from tourism as an economic instrument for supporting biodiversity conservation in protected areas.

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