

The Rethinking Kho Yao Noi Community-Based Tourism from Crisis to Sustainability

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Abstract

Community-based tourism in Koh Yao Noi has been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, as CBT plays a major role in supporting the local economy, creating community development, job creation, and environmental protection. This research aims to identify the economic and non-economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on residents of Koh Yao Noi and develop a model for adaptation to community-based tourism (CBT) for Koh Yao Noi. Qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and focus groups have been adopted. The data obtained was analysed using thematic analysis to categorize the emergent key themes and sub themes. The findings of the research show that lack of income, migration and changes in local people's way of life are the impacts that the local people are facing during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the adaptation strategy that this research recommended are rethinking the community-based tourism (CBT) plan to be more sustainable and inclusive. The rethinking plan includes community waste bank project and life skill development for local people, encourage local tourism enterprise, focus on domestic tourists, and an alternative form of international tourists like 'nomadic workers'.

Keywords: Koh Yao Noi; community-based Tourism; Crisis to Sustainability

Introduction

Tourism is one of the hardest-hit sectors affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is especially true in developing countries like Thailand, as tourism plays a major role in supporting the economy. In Thailand, tourism has been recognized as an important economic sector which helps to foster economic development, job creation, and environmental protection. Furthermore, it also brings cultural benefits and helps to alleviate poverty (UNWTO, 2017). The pandemic started in China in December 2019 and the virus subsequently spread all over the world by March 2020 with devastating implications for Thai businesses, especially in the tourism industry as they are hugely reliant upon international tourists. After the Thai government locked down the country in April 2020 and began to restrict domestic and international travelers, many companies, especially those in tourism and related industries, went out of business. Hotels, restaurants, and logistic companies were the first to be affected by these restrictions, and this has caused huge implications on employment in Thailand. A report from the Bank of Thailand (BOT) stated that at least 8.4 million people were at risk of being made redundant in the first quarter of 2020, out of which 2.5 million were in the tourism and hospitality sector, and this number is likely to grow further (Open Development Thailand, 2020). In 1995, villages in Koh Yao Noi, an island in the province of Phang Nga, decided to develop themselves and the island into a tourist destination to generate

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income while preserving local culture, exquisite costumes, and traditions. According to the economic development plan of Phang Nga (2018-2021), the main economic sector of Koh Yao Noi is designated to be a service sector. The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges to the tourism industry, forcing destinations like Koh Yao Noi. The number of tourists, both domestic and international, dropped to virtually zero between March to May of 2020. Although the Thai government implemented the Rao Tiew Duay Kan campaign to promote domestic tourism in June 2020, tourist destinations like Koh Yao Noi did not attract many Thai tourists under the scheme as it is mainly a place for international tourists. Koh Yao Noi's CBT needs to reevaluate their strategies and adapt to ensure long-term sustainability. This research paper presents Koh Yao Noi's community-based tourism during the pandemic and, more importantly, how the CBT members are rethinking and transferring CBT towards sustainability.

Research Objective

The objective of this research is to identify the economic and non-economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on residents of Koh Yao Noi and develop a model for adaptation to community-based tourism (CBT) for Koh Yao Noi to recover and move to sustainability.

Literature Review

1. Community-Based Tourism (CBT)

CBT is an alternative method to foster economic development that is based upon a bottom-up paradigm of development. The negative side-effects of tourism have affected local communities, whereby residents received unequal benefits. (Smith & Duffy, 2003). Thus, a new form of tourism has been called for, aiming at environmental sustainability, whereby residents receive both direct or indirect benefits from the development of tourism within their community. Alternative forms of tourism include “responsible tourism, eco-tourism, sustainable tourism, and community-based tourism” (Telfer & Sharpley, 2008). CBT puts residents at the center, and the main idea is to empower local communities to control how tourism is planned and managed within their communities (Goodwin & Satilli, 2009). Boonratana (2010) points out that CBT spreads the benefits of tourism wider across a community because it involves active participation from the members of the community in planning, implementing, and managing tourism. Furthermore, aspects of CBT include sustainability, cooperation, participation, and distribution of power (Telfer & Sharpley, 2008). Many studies on CBT have pointed toward a variety of benefits from CBT; for example, Novelli and Genhardt (2007) said that CBT can be used to initiate long-term community ventures and Renaud (2010) pointed out that participation of members within a community helps to foster environmental sustainability and cultural protection, strengthen relationships between the community, public organizations, and tourism entrepreneurs, and widen the

community network. Most importantly, CBT can help communities as it empowers residents by giving them control over their communities (Goodwin and Satilli, 2009).

2. Community-Based Tourism (CBT) on Koh Yao Noi

Koh Yao Noi is one of many famous tourist destinations in Thailand. It is an Andaman island in Phang Nga province. With beautiful natural resources and unique ways of local living, the community of Koh Yao Noi converted itself into a tourism destination in 1995 to generate more income, while preserving its local culture, exquisite costumes, and traditions. (Witchayakawn, 2016). Most residents in Koh Yao Noi are Thai and 98 percent of them are Muslim. The main occupations of residents are in agriculture, fishing, and tourism. While there are numerous tourist attractions in Koh Yao Noi, the island is famous for its peacefulness and the beauty of its natural resources. Furthermore, it occupies a great strategic location, allowing tourists of Koh Yao Noi to easily travel to nearby famous tourist destinations, such as Phuket and Krabi.

CBT on Koh Yao Noi was initiated in 1995 when the Thai Volunteer Service (TVS) Foundation spotted the opportunity in the community with its readiness to utilize its resources for tourism. As a result, Koh Yao Noi was selected as a pilot project in the southern part of Thailand for CBT to be implemented. The development began with the establishment of homestays for educational tourism whereby tourists stayed with residents. This project was supported in terms of marketing by the Responsible Ecological Social Tours Project (REST), which has turned Koh Yao Noi into a famous destination for international tourists. Initially, the average number of tourists who arrived at Koh Yao Noi, mostly foreigners, was only 50–100 persons per month, as there were only five to six homestays available. However, the number of tourists grew rapidly from approximately 3,000 persons per year in 2000 to 5,000 persons in 2001. This prompted residents of Koh Yao Noi to establish “Koh Yao Noi Ecotourism Club” or “Koh Yao Noi CBT Club” (Koh Yao Noi Community-Based Tourism Club) to publicize news and information about Koh Yao Noi, aiming to promote tourism as a source of extra income for residents who participated in the management of the tourism businesses of the community. In 2002, Koh Yao Noi Ecotourism Club was awarded the World Legacy Award in the category of tourism that was able to preserve the local environment and culture. The award was presented by National Geographic Traveler, a US-based magazine.

When the tsunami hit in 2004, the number of tourists visiting Koh Yao Noi decreased as international tourists were worried about their safety. Thus, most people coming to the island turned out to be volunteers helping to revive the community. However, tourists have returned to Koh Yao Noi since 2005. Currently, there are 30 homestays available that can accommodate 60 – 80 tourists per night. Members of the Koh Yao Noi CBT Club must strictly comply with the rules and regulations of the club. Regarding income from tourism, according to a study entitled “Strategic Plan for Community-Based Tourism Development of Koh Yao Noi”, most members of the club earned an average income of THB 20,000 per year and most agreed that the CBT could provide residents with extra income. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has hit the CBT of Koh Yao Noi hard as most tourists are foreigners.

Currently, international travel is being restricted and few Thais are interested in visiting the community.

3. Adaptation Theory in Tourism

The concept of adaptability originated from the natural sciences, especially from the field of evolutionary ecology. In 1955, Steward applied the concept of adaptability to human systems and utilized the idea of “culture adaptability” to explain how “cultural cores” (regional societies) adjust their behaviours according to the natural environment (Steward, 1972). In 2006, Smit and Wandel defined adaptability as a process, a kind of action, or a result of systems of different scales (such as the scale of family, community, region, or nation) and, in the face of climate change with stress, disaster, and risk/opportunity, systems can be better at coping, managing, or adjusting (Zhao, 2018).

Currently, research regarding adaptability in the tourism sector is mostly related to environmental and climate change. The travel and tourism industry are particularly vulnerable to climate change, which can result in an increase in global temperatures, a rise in sea-level, and an increase in the frequency of turbulences and storms. These are likely to cast significant implications to bio-physical and socio-economic conditions of tourist destinations causing a deterioration of the attractiveness of these destinations. Fortunately, adaptation may reduce the vulnerabilities of tourist destinations to climate change by increasing the ability of communities to cope with potentially adverse effects. Scott (2006) mentioned three broad types of adaptation, which include technical adaptation, business management adaptation, and behavioural adaptation.

Research Methodology

1. Research methodology

This research is conducted under the umbrella of an interpretative paradigm utilizing qualitative research techniques since it is deemed the most suitable methodology for the research agenda.

2. Research aims.

This research aims to identify the economic and non-economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on residents of Koh Yao Noi and develop a model for adapting community-based tourism (CBT) to Koh Yao Noi.

3. Population and Sampling

This research applied non-probabilistic sampling techniques including snowball sampling and purposive sampling techniques to sample respondents from three main groups which are as follow

3.1 Local residents of Koh Yao Noi, who are also members of the Koh Yao Noi community Here, the networking sampling technique will be applied as the researcher believes that networking or snowball sampling will help the researcher to identify and classify

respondents as it allows the first group of residents that researcher meets to introduce others that meet the researcher's requirements.

3.2 The second group encompasses stakeholders from both private and public sector. This entails government organizations and non-government organizations in the area, tourism development planning agencies, and tour operators. Here, purposive sampling will be utilized as it will help the researcher to make decisions about the unit of study involved. Prior knowledge of the researcher will be used to identify the most appropriate unit of study. The government organizations allow the researcher to gain access to useful documents.

3.3 The third group is tourists of Koh Yao Noi, including both international and domestic tourists.

4. Data Collection

Eighteen participants came from three different groups: residents of Koh Yao Noi, stakeholders from both the private and public sectors and international tourists. Two focused-group interviews were conducted. The research also adopted 'participatory observation' that took place around the island and its public areas.

5. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using adapted thematic analysis following the six phases of thematic analysis data processing as suggested by Braun and Clack (2006). While doing the research, the team kept updating the researcher's reflexivity. The researcher's reflexivity starts with explaining the researcher's background, her beliefs and experience, as well as how she interpreted the data. The researcher employed the triangulation strategy technique to address the completeness of the research findings. To clarify, the study did not seek data collection from different methods to achieve a single convergent justification of the phenomenon being studied. Rather, the researcher aimed to deploy the triangulation strategy to reflect and explain the discrepancies and diversities of the data obtained from multiple data collection approaches.

Research Framework

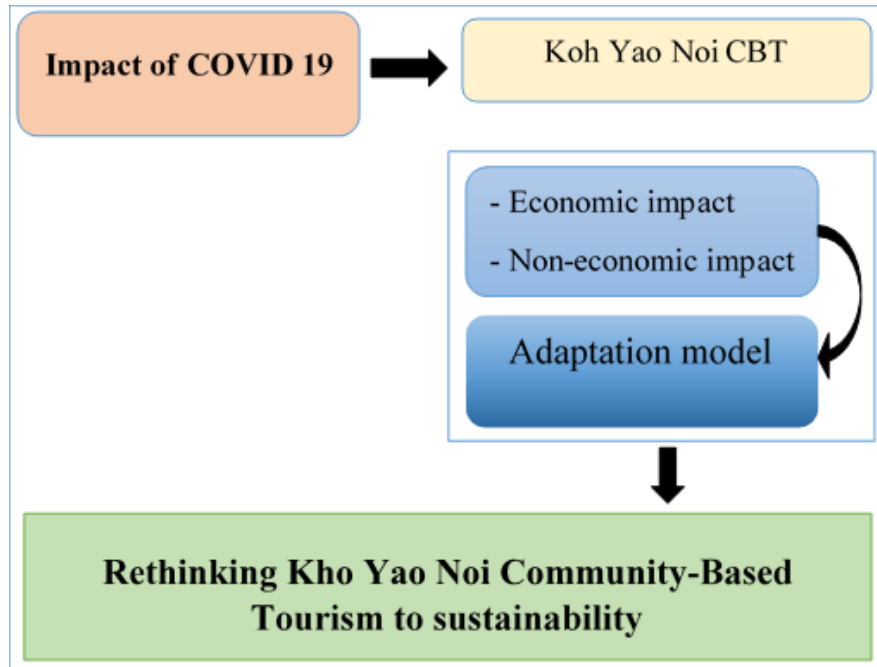


Figure 1. Research Framework

Results

1. Economic and Non-Economic Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic

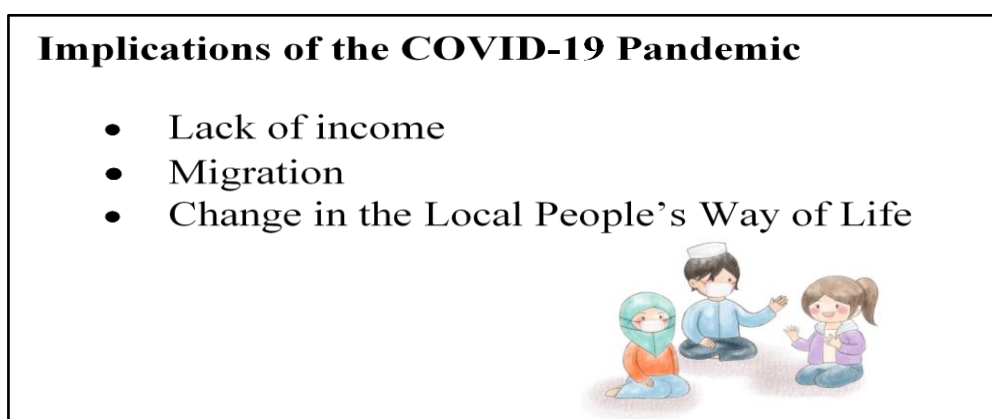


Figure 2. Economic and Non-Economic Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic

By asking ‘what is the main impact of COVID-19 on you? Lack of income was the main theme that emerged from the data as this was mentioned frequently. This shows that the interviewees conceptualized that if there are no tourism activities on the island it will adversely affect their livelihoods in terms of economic benefits.

“I am scared of COVID-19 but I am more scared if I do not have enough money to feed my kids.” (Participant 5)

“People are afraid of COVID-19 and with the government regulations there is not many Farang (foreigners) here like before. I used to make 1000 thb per day for running a longtail boat but now I am lucky if I make 500 thb per day, which is very difficult under the current conditions. I also have the same expenses as before COVID-19 but now, with less income, my real time living standard has dropped.” (Participant 7).

The researcher questioned them further after the above was mentioned to find out if they were afraid that if more tourists came that it would increase their chances of getting COVID-19.

“I am afraid if I don’t have money to feed my family or I won’t be able to send my child to school, this will have more impact on my family than the infection.” (Participant 5)

“It has been nearly 2 years since we have no tourists and now I have had two vaccines with the third on the way, so I think I will be safe now, but if we close the island then I don’t think I will have enough income to maintain my family.” (Participant 7)

Most CBT members were concerned about the loss of income which impacts their ability to be able to look after their family. Currently, an estimated ninety percent of CBT members have been vaccinated, including the third dose of the vaccine. In addition to a high vaccination rate, the local health authority has conducted training for CBT members on COVID-19 prevention methods, such as cleaning surfaces, temperature monitors, face masks, social distancing, and COVID-19 testing (ATK).

1.1 Migration

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected all tourist destinations across Thailand, including Koh Yao Noi. The reduced number of tourists caused local people and workers to lose income and livelihoods, which disrupted and shutdown areas of the local economy. The occupations of people in Koh Yao Noi are mostly related to the tourism industry, especially for CBT members. Therefore, the employment of people on Koh Yao Noi Island has been terminated or reduced. The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social wellbeing of people on Koh Yao Noi is extremely high as people had to migrate to other areas to find work and money for their families. This leads to a big social impact because those who leave for work tend to be aged between twenty and fifty years old, which creates social imbalances because those left behind are the elderly and the very young. This also risks causing serious long-term damage to the social wellbeing of the Island because those who left might never return, which also might mean some unique skills might be lost.

“Since the break out of Covid 19, there are no tourists, and also the announcement to close the island has made tourism completely stop. Some workers have been laid off, some have had to find another job on the shore such as working in the factory, and this is mostly the young people on the Island.” (Participant 3)

“The children went to find a job on the shore because there are no jobs during the pandemic. Tourist attractions, hotels, and shops are all now closed.” (Participant 2)

1.2 Change in the Local People’s Way of Life

The migration from this island, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, has resulted in a social change in the island’s population resulting in people’s lifestyles changing to a new normal, which may become permanent. It is noted from the interviews that the new normal has impacted the people’s way of life on the island causing drastic shifts in the quality of life and social well-being of the Islanders since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

“It is very difficult to travel from place to place. The activities we used do such as our morning tea chat after we finished fishing or joining our friends in traditional ceremonies, have now all been altered to be compliant with the COVID-19 pandemic rules.” (Interview 7)

A psychological impact can occur on people when they consume information via television, radio, and social media channels as they can cause fear among CBT members. This can be seen in the replies from those interviewed:

“I felt very scared about the spreading of the disease and how to cope with it if I got infected. I was afraid of being unemployed, having no money, no tourists, no food, and feared being vaccinated. I admit that at first, I was so stressed and afraid.” (Participant 10)

COVID-19 has hurt the tourism industry of Koh Yao Noi, especially for CBT members of Koh Yao Noi as it has been a tourist attraction for tourists around the world. In addition to the Island being a habitat of daily life, it is also a source of employment and social security for the local people, which helps foster a strong community. When reviewing the history of the pandemic and looking back to find any positives from the impact caused by COVID-19, it was found that the island’s ecosystem has recovered its fertility, and some aquatic animals have also returned due to better climate conditions because of reductions in carbon dioxide emissions. Also, there has been a reduction in oil leaks from longtail boats, which has also helped improve the wildlife around the island. Furthermore, as people in the community have learned about the new COVID-19 measures, they have started to pay more attention to hygiene, also adding to a better environment for both animals and humans. It is forecast that the positive impact on environmental standards will continue to be adopted as tourism returns to Koh Yao Noi community. There is value in keeping this improved standard since better animal life is also a tourist attraction.

2. Adaptation Model for CBT Koh Yao Noi

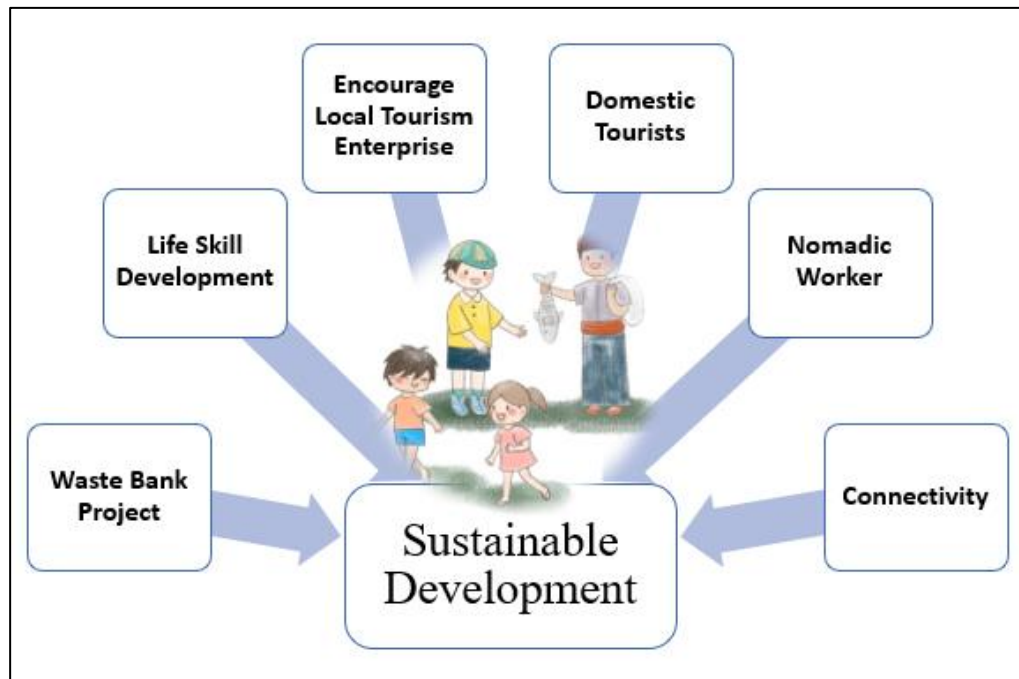


Figure 3. Adaptation Model for CBT Koh Yao Noi

The declining number of international tourists has had a devastating impact on Koh Yao Noi. CBT in Koh Yao Noi need to work on planning for destination development to reshape their CBT and become more sustainable. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declare the COVID- 19 outbreak a pandemic (WHO, 2020). In July 2022 Thailand remove all travel restrictions for international tourists to welcome tourists back. Koh Yao Noi has started welcoming both international and domestic tourists.

“Currently as you can see we have Farang (International tourists) back now, but our group (CBT) cannot go back to where we were we have to work together come up with plan where everyone agree.” (Participant 1)

CBT members agreed that they need to rethink the development plan for the destination to be more sustainable. However, the work on planning needs to be coordinated with the national level planning and implemented in local planning to be effective. Sub-national planning that resulted from the meeting of CBT and Focus groups are as follows:

2.1 Bring Back Waste Bank Project

The waste bank project was started in 2005 to encourage local people to manage their household waste within categories and help to reduce waste on the island. The ideas for the project are households and homestays can bring rubbish to be sold or exchanged for something else; for example, cooking oil, fish sauce, and sugar at the waste bank. However, households and homestays did not put much effort into the program. Another problem was

there is insufficient space for collecting the rubbish and lack of management. It is also making little profit for the community.

The rethinking on the waste bank project is being developed with the Phang Nga Government and Prince of Songkla University to ensure its sustainability.

“Currently we have board member for our group and it is from each village, we also have agreement with every household and homestay that if they did not categories their rubbish we will not collect the rubbish from their house.” (Participant 2).

According to a community meeting, people in Koh Yao Noi need to follow the agreement sort household rubbish into categories. They all agreed that island rubbish requires everyone’s attention.

“I put sign in the room that we join the waste bank project to make the guest know some of them are impress.” (Participant 2)

“My hotel go green by we try to reduce plastic used, so in the room we even we still use plastic water bottle but we told our customer that we will recycle that bottle.” (Participant 8)

After the pandemic, there are an increasing number of households and homestays that have joined the waste bank project and the project is making more profit.

2.2 Life Skill Development

One result from the focus group was that the islanders need training in life skills.

“We received training for tourism and that is good but I think we need life skill training as well so one day if the pandemic back we have life skill to work.” (Participant 2)

The literature review suggests that human resources are the life blood of the industry and training and education are therefore very important. The need to improve life skills training development is evident from this research to meet current and future market demand. Opportunities should be provided to people to get free access to training. Currently, Prince of Songkhla University is working closely with CBT to provide training courses both onsite on the island and online.

2.3 Encourage Local Tourism Enterprise

Local tourism enterprises should be encouraged to create sustainable solutions. Encouraging local people to start a small-scale business would allow local people to have more involvement tourism, whereas they normally benefit via intermediaries. Moreover, the research found out that encouraging local tourism enterprises gives opportunities to local women to run their own business without affecting social Muslim culture and empowers women.

Fishermen mentioned that boat taxis and renting boats to tourists were an income opportunity. Some locals adapted their boats to support tourism. During the tourist season, the fisherman fish during the night and bring the boats to the beach to rent to tourists for day trips.

2.4 Domestic Tourists

The declining number of international tourists has had a devastating impact on Koh Yao Noi Island. Therefore, villagers in Koh Yao Noi communities need to adjust their target audience towards domestic Thai tourists. CBT members of Koh Yao Noi will have to focus more on local family groups, single-day trip groups, and cultural learning school trips.

“Nowadays, the community has given more importance to welcoming local Thai tourists, especially family group tours. It is easier to take care of smaller groups and deliver a better level of service, which helps to impress the local tourists as we can deliver a high level of focus.” (Interview 1)

“Since the start of the pandemic, I feel that we have gone back to the old times when the Island was not crowded. It reminded me that the values of showing the history of Koh Yao Noi community must be brought more into focus within the service model. We will focus on the local way of life, presenting it to tourists who travel in a small group, especially family groups, to make them feel like we have taken them to visit a relative’s house. The activities we provide will help them feel part of the Island community. At the same time, we have local products that are produced from the community to sell to tourists as souvenirs”. (Interview 4).

The Koh Yao Noi tourism community has attempted to adapt to the difficult conditions created due to the pandemic by welcoming more tourist family groups to the island. They have done this by creating new activities focused on everyday life in Koh Yao Noi. The government’s policy to encourage Thai people to travel within Thailand will help to stimulate the economy on the island.

The government’s project called “Travel Together” has received a lot of response from tourists as the project has offered promotions by giving discounts on accommodation, food, and airplane tickets for Thai travelers. From interviews with entrepreneurs in the community, this research found that many shops and restaurants on the island have applied to join the “Travel Together” project. The government created another project called “Fifty-Fifty co-payment” where it covered up to fifty percent of the cost for Thai tourists at participating companies.

Koh Yao Noi tourism community has adapted to welcoming family groups to increase tourism. Social media content created by tourists has also had a positive impact by advertising the destination. Tourism is also promoted by famous people and celebrities.

2.5 An Alternative form of International Tourist; “Nomadic Workers”

A new form of international tourism has been proposed to help support CBT in Koh Yao Noi after being badly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. With the loss of conventional tourism due to travel restrictions pushing out normal tourists, there is a need to look at alternative forms of tourism to supplement this industry and offer longer-term protection against such future events. The pandemic, which caused many workers to work from home, has shown that if you are a digital worker, you can work from any location if it has internet. These workers have become known as digital nomads moving to work in countries with warm climates that offer a better lifestyle than that in their home countries. CBT members are now looking to adapt to attract these nomads. Attracting a growing group of digital nomads who are highly skilled with a good disposable income will offer CBT members longer stay tourists. These tourists will be less impacted by travel restrictions since they stay for longer periods.

Digital nomads can offer greater stability to CBT in Koh Yao Noi because of their extended stays year round, which helps provide a consistent stable income for local communities.

These types of tourists can also offer benefits beyond the CBT members as they tend to want to integrate more into local life, often volunteering in schools and universities, and offering up their skills to help wider communities.

However, this is currently hindered by a lack of Thai Government support as there is a need for a clear government position on the legal status of these types of workers. Currently, Thailand is planning to introduce a new visa to attract wealthy and nomadic workers to the country. The policy needs to be implemented more quickly as there are many other countries in the Asia region competing for these long stay workers and Thailand has the chance to lead the way if it acts now.

2.6 Connectivity

Matching tourism product to the right market could improve the success of CBT and provide the greatest opportunities for locals. What was evident from the focus group was that CBT members feel that there is a lack of effective marketing and communication about their tourism product. Therefore, they also agreed that nowadays they live in an environment where technology is getting increasingly integrated into our lives. CBT product needs to be promoted through social media platforms and adapt technology in their business.

Discussion

After the pandemic, most tourism and hospitality businesses have changed the way they operate, including community-based tourism. Resilience in the tourism and hospitality industry is another successful method that helps the business from the crisis and leads to sustainability (Abel et al., 2020). The research from Brown et al. 2017 which focuses on the hotel sector, mentions that it explored various forms of resilience, including community, economic, organizational, and systemic, all of which hold significant relevance for the hospitality industry, particularly hotels. Brown et al. (2017) emphasized the importance of placing a priority on disaster resilience within hotels. They described it as a dynamic state indicating the ability of the organization and its stakeholders to adjust, create new solutions, evaluate, and ultimately surmount potential disruptions. Therefore, cultivating adaptive capacity and flexibility and nurturing a culture that fosters innovation and self-assurance are pivotal aspects of enhancing organizational resilience (Brown et al., 2017).

Recommendations

CBT in Koh Yao Noi is facing difficult times due to the impact of COVID-19 in terms of economic and non-economic conditions. Migration of local members, especially young people, is a social non-economic issue that is causing long-term damage to the community and affecting the local way of life, potentially impacting the island's prospects. For them to survive, this research suggests that the CBT model on the island needs to be adapted to reinforce the waste bank project, encourage life skills development, encourage local tourism enterprise, focus on domestic tourists and nomadic workers, and improve connectivity.

In summary, the key weakness of the current tourism model, which was hit badly by the pandemic, is its heavy dependence on short-term stay international tourists. This highlights a need to focus on a wider range of tourists to protect communities from these types of shocks. Any event which leads to travelling from outside of Thailand being restricted, such as

pandemics, volcano eruptions, or wars, will have a similar impact as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Therefore, it is recommended that the CBT members focus on increasing domestic tourism and look to invest in the future of nomadic workers to future-proof their tourism model. More research should be conducted on the benefits of digital nomads and their implications for Thailand, as they could offer long-stay tourists with large disposable incomes and the chance to leverage their unique skills.

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