

การวิเคราะห์งานวิจัยด้านการท่องเที่ยว เชิงนิเวศของประเทศไทย

An Analysis of Ecotourism Studies in Thailand

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บทคัดย่อ

การท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศได้เกิดขึ้นเพื่อเป็นพื้นฐานของการท่องเที่ยวอย่างยั่งยืน ในช่วงหลายสิบปีที่ผ่านมา มีงานวิจัยด้านการท่องเที่ยวเพิ่มขึ้นอย่างมากมาย อย่างไรก็ตาม แนวทางและทิศทางในการวิจัยด้านการท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศของประเทศยังมีอยู่อย่างจำกัด งานวิจัยในครั้งนี้จึงมีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อสำรวจงานวิจัยด้านการท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศของประเทศไทยในช่วง 10 ปีที่ผ่านมา (2547-2557) เพื่อเป็นประโยชน์ต่อการค้นคว้าวิจัยและการส่งเสริมงานวิจัยด้านการท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศของประเทศไทยในอนาคต ผลการวิจัยพบว่า ในช่วงระยะเวลาดังกล่าวมีงานวิจัยด้านการท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศจำนวน 228 เรื่อง โดยประเด็นที่นิยมศึกษา เช่น การท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศกับการพัฒนาชุมชนท้องถิ่น การท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศในพื้นที่ธรรมชาติ และการอนุรักษ์ทรัพยากรทางธรรมชาติ/เชิงนิเวศ ทั้งนี้งานวิจัยในครั้งนี้ได้ให้ข้อเสนอแนะเพื่อเป็นแนวทางการทำวิจัยด้านการท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศของประเทศไทย โดยเฉพาะในหัวข้อที่ยังมีองค์ความรู้อย่างจำกัด และหัวข้อที่ยังไม่ได้มีการศึกษา

คำสำคัญ: การท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศ การท่องเที่ยวอย่างยั่งยืน ประเทศไทย

Abstract

Ecotourism has emerged as a key foundation of sustainable tourism development. During the past decades, the studies of ecotourism in Thailand have increased considerably. Yet, proper guidelines and research directions for ecotourism research in Thailand are still limited. The purpose of this study is to survey ecotourism studies in Thailand during the past decade (2004 - 2014) in order for further direction of ecotourism research in Thailand. The study examines 228 ecotourism-related studies. Most studies were undertaken in the areas of ecotourism and local development, ecotourism in natural areas, and ecotourism conservation. Suggestions are given for ecotourism research direction in Thailand, particularly in the area of limited knowledge and unexplored research areas.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Sustainable Tourism, Thailand

Introduction

Currently, ecotourism research has received much attention from many parties in Thailand including government agencies, private sector and educational institutes. Many people are interested in doing research on ecotourism related issues because they realize its importance and contribution to the sustainability of tourism industry. In particular, the concept of ecotourism is regarded as one form of responsible tourism (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996 cited in Scheyvens, 1999), and it is a core foundation to the sustainable tourism development (Ross & Wall, 1999; Luck 2002). According to the World Tourism Organization or UNWTO (2002), ecotourism refers to all nature-based tourism that minimizes negative impacts on the nature and socio-cultural environment, educates visitors about nature, provides economic and social benefits to local communities, and supports the protection and conservation of natural and cultural assets.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), the responsible government agency, pushed for research projects to determine appropriate tourism management in Thailand during 1987 – 1990. This could be considered as the starting point of ecotourism development in Thailand (Wangpaichitr, 1996). Thailand has adopted the concept of ecotourism from Western perspectives with the purposes to conserve ecosystems and the natural environment, and to generate socio-economic benefits to local people and their communities (TAT, 1997). From 1990 onwards, the prevailing situation of global sustainable development has aroused great awareness of ecotourism among the public to take actions to achieve appropriate ecotourism development in Thailand.

As ecotourism potentially provides a sustainable approach to tourism development (Ross & Wall, 1999; Luck 2002), ecotourism-related studies are expected to yield knowledge-based benefits to sustainable tourism development of the country. Concerned parties may use this information and knowledge base through research to develop and enhance sustainable ecotourism. During the past decade, the number of ecotourism studies in Thailand has significantly increased due to public awareness of sustainable tourism industry. Despite intensive ecotourism studies in Thailand, proper research directions and guidelines for conducting ecotourism research are still limited. Tourism scholars may conduct ecotourism research with little research guideline. To date, many scholars are not sure of how many ecotourism related-studies have been conducted so far in Thailand or what topics we should further explore. Several concerned questions have been raised recently, for example:

- Do the existing ecotourism studies widely cover the dimensions of ecotourism development in Thailand?

- How many ecotourism research papers do we have now and what topics/ areas should be further investigated?
- Are all studies really useful or do they contribute to the knowledge base of sustainable tourism development of the country?
- What should be future research directions regarding ecotourism in Thailand?

With these concerns, it appears that no one has given an appropriate answer to date. This may be the result of an unclear direction for ecotourism research and development in Thailand. This study, therefore, has an objective to preliminarily survey ecotourism studies in Thailand during the past decade (2004 – 2014). The study will overview the existing ecotourism research, and is expected to provide suggestions for future research direction, particularly in the field of limited knowledge or unexplored research areas. In addition, the finding will serve as a secondary data source for researchers and academics who wish to conduct research relating to ecotourism and sustainable tourism in Thailand.

Related Literature

Ecotourism definition and its core elements

In Thailand, the concept of ecotourism was originally from Western perspectives, however, the Tourism Authority of Thailand, in cooperation with relevant government agencies have adopted various definitions and incorporated them to the Thai tourism context. They defined ecotourism as “responsible travel in areas containing natural resources that possess endemic characteristics and cultural or historical resources that are integrated into the area’s ecological system” (TAT, 1997). Following this definition, the Tourism Authority of Thailand has developed an ecotourism strategy as a part of a sustainable tourism policy with the goals to conserve natural and ecological resources, and at the same time, to provide environmental education experience to travelers and contribute social benefits to the local communities (TAT, 1997).

To provide a basis for national policy, tourism planning and development, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (1997) has identified the four key elements of ecotourism development as the foundation to sustainable tourism of the country. They are 1) focusing the development on natural and ecological resources-based areas, 2) incorporating sustainable management principles into all activities, 3) promoting environmental and educational learning activities and 4) providing socio-economic

benefits to local people and enhancing community participation. Based on these elements, ecotourism development in Thailand can be summarized into four major areas: nature-based tourism, sustainable management, learning activities, and community participation. These four major areas, in general, are similar to the key components of ecotourism development in other developed countries such as Australia (see Ecotourism Australia), USA (see The International Ecotourism Society), and ecotourism guidelines developed by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).

Ecotourism in international contexts

As mentioned about the ecotourism development in Thailand, it may be worth overviewing the ecotourism development in international contexts to better understand worldwide ecotourism situation (what others have focused/concentrated). Over the last decade, ecotourism has become the focus of increasing attention among tourism scholars and industry practitioners because of its sustainability. Ecotourism is widely accepted as an alternative tourism leading to sustainable tourism development (Fennell & Eagles, 1990; Boo, 1991; Sangpikul, 2002; Higham & Carr, 2003). The growing awareness of ecotourism has resulted in ecotourism education and research in many parts of the world (e.g. North America, Europe, Asia and Australia). Today, scholars and industry practitioners have conducted ecotourism research in many related fields (e.g. tourism, environmental studies, community development, economic, business, etc.); thereby generating a body of knowledge to the international community. Despite, the multitude of ecotourism-related studies, a review of published international literature on the subject of ecotourism indicates that most published works have mainly relied on western perspectives focusing on the supply side of ecotourism, with various topics, including the economic and impacts of ecotourism in the environment, ecotourism venues (e.g. national parks, protected areas), ecotourism activities and ecotourism standards (Backman & Morais, 2001; Weaver, 2001). Other literature on ecotourism includes demand component of ecotourism including market segmentation, tourists' behaviors, attitudes and perceptions (Weaver, 2001). Countries like United States, Canada, and United Kingdom as well as Australia and New Zealand (developed nations) are major producers of ecotourism literature (Backman & Morais, 2001). According to the review, little is known from other parts of the world such as Asia and Africa.

In relation to the international ecotourism context, there seems to be a difference of ecotourism development in different countries. Higham and Carr (2003) reviewed international ecotourism literature and pointed out that there were considerable and important differences in the applicability of ecotourism criteria

as applied in New Zealand and elsewhere. For example, in the New Zealand ecotourism context, visitor education and community involvement are not placed as essential components of ecotourism criteria (Higham & Carr, 2003). In contrast, these two factors are considered as key elements of ecotourism development in the Thai tourism context (TAT, 1997). In New Zealand, much of the resource base for ecotourism focuses on marine environment and wildlife (Higham & Carr, 2003). While land natural parks and cultural components (e.g. hill tribe people, local way of life) appear to be major ecotourism attractions among local and international visitors in Thailand (TAT, 1997). In Malaysia, however, wildlife and rainforest is a major ecotourism appeal for international visitors (Chin, Moore, Wallington, & Dowling, 2000). For the world's leading ecotourism destination, Australia, natural parks, protected areas and marine environment are well-known ecotourism venues. In particular, the Great Barrier Reef is one of the famous ecotourism destinations in Australia, and no doubt, there are a number of Great Barrier Reef-related studies. With these examples, it seems that each country has different ecotourism venues and attractions, and this may influence ecotourism research focus. Higham and Carr (2003) noted that ecotourism takes place in many varied environmental, social, economic, cultural and political contexts, such that the primary focus of ecotourism development in each country could be different. As noted, most ecotourism literature is dominated by western studies. Overviewing the ecotourism research in Thailand may provide some useful insights to the existing ecotourism literature. The overview will also provide a better understanding and update ecotourism literature from the Asian perspective.

Methodology

The subjects in this study were ecotourism-related studies which included general research reports and graduates' theses/dissertations completed during 2004 – 2014, both in Thai and English versions. The study explored ecotourism studies through the Thai Library Integrated System (Thai-LIS). Thai-LIS is a university library network which provides a comprehensive electronic database for searching research in most disciplines in Thailand including tourism. Only ecotourism-related studies completed during 2004 to 2014 were reviewed. They were searched through the key words: "ecotourism", "eco-tourists", and "sustainable ecotourism". There were two research assistants for data collection. Descriptive statistics were mainly used to analyze the data in terms of frequency and percentage.

As a documentary research approach, this study developed a survey instrument based on similar topics (e.g. Jaipum, 2000; Nimsoomboon, 2002; Vongchomphu,

2005; Sangpikul, 2013). Following previous studies, the survey instrument for data collection (survey form) was developed. In order to test the quality of the survey form, it was reviewed by 2 academic professors and pre-tested to collect the required data with 20 research samples. Then, the survey form was modified and prepared for final data collection. It consisted of three parts as follows:

- Part 1 : general information: research title, name of researcher(s), organization, and year of research completion
- Part 2 : ecotourism-related issues (main area of studies) and location of studies (i.e. city and region)
- Part 3 : information pertaining to the elements of ecotourism development as identified by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (i.e. nature-based area, sustainable management, learning activities, and community participation). This part aimed to explore how many studies focused within this development or framework.

Findings and Discussions

Table 1 number of ecotourism studies based on year of completion

Year	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Number of studies (total 228)	15	27	25	34	22	24	35	20	13	8	5
Percentage (100%)	6.58%	11.84%	10.96%	14.91%	9.65%	10.53%	15.35%	8.77%	5.70%	3.52%	2.19%

Table 1 presents the number of ecotourism studies during the past eleven years with a total of 228 studies. In generally, it could argue that during the past decade there are approximately 15 – 35 ecotourism studies or on an average there are about 20 ecotourism studies produced each year. In fact, at the beginning stage of ecotourism development in Thailand (by 1995-1999), there were 5-10 studies each year because ecotourism did not receive much attention during that time (TAT, 1997). Later, from year 2000 afterwards, the concept of ecotourism has received significant attention from both government and private sectors due to the increase of global awareness of sustainable development through ecotourism. Since then, the number of ecotourism studies has significantly increased until today. However, in year 2013 and 2014 there were on only 8 and 5 ecotourism studies,

respectively. It should be noted that this survey was undertaken in January 2015. Some information may be not fully updated in the database; thereby showing a small number of studies in these years. In the future, it is expected that ecotourism studies still receive attention from scholars and related parties due to its importance to sustainable tourism of the country.

Table 2 number of ecotourism studies based on topic of investigation

Topic of investigation	Number of studies (percentage)
1. Ecotourism and local community development (e.g. planning, participation, management, polices, conservation, impact, people)	81 (35.53%)
2. Ecotourism development in nature-based areas/protected areas	31 (13.61%)
3. Ecotourism and natural/environmental conservation	22 (9.66%)
4. Tourist-related studies	19 (8.33%)
5. Ecotourism surveys on people's knowledge, attitudes and perceptions	17 (7.45%)
6. Ecotourism activity studies	15 (6.57%)
7. Ecotourism and tour guides	12 (5.26%)
8. Ecotourism marketing and related issues	10 (4.38%)
10. Ecotourism and environmental impacts	8 (3.51%)
11. Ecotourism regulations and laws	6 (2.63%)
12. Other topics	7 (3.07%)
Total	228 (100%)

According to Table 2, the existing ecotourism studies can be conceptualized or categorized into different research topics/areas as shown above. It's evident that approximately one-thirds of ecotourism studies in Thailand emphasized on local community development (35.53%), followed by ecotourism development in nature-based areas and protected areas (13.61%), and natural/environmental conservation topics (9.66%). The reason why the number of topics regarding ecotourism and local community development is greater than any other topic could be explained as follows. During the past decade the National Economic and Social Development Plans of Thailand or NESDP has concentrated on the local level to

enhance community development for sustainability. Major emphasis was placed on balancing the development of human, social, economic, and environmental resources (Sangpikul, 2013). The NESDP was targeted to build strong communities to serve as building-blocks for the nation's development through increased participation, planning and knowledge management. This implies that, in Thailand, the development at local community level is one of the priorities for tourism development policy. Another reason could be that, based on research findings, more than half of ecotourism studies were conducted by local researchers/academics who are based in regional universities/colleges. It could be possible that they (local scholars), may be more likely to be interested in conducting research in their own regions or local areas with the purposes to examine the current situation of ecotourism development in a community. Moreover, among 228 studies, approximately 30-40 studies were related to the research granted by the Thailand Research Funds (TRF). The TRF has the objectives to support research work that is significant to national development including basic, applied and action research. The emphasis is given to research projects that help develop local livings and strengthen community. Most projects are action and area-based research with the purpose to help solve local problems and serve the needs of community. It should be noted that the research projects granted by the TRF correspond to the principles of sustainable tourism development focusing on involvement and participation of local community for a better quality of life (Swarbrooke, 1999; Akpinar, 2003). Currently, the research supported by the TRF covers every region of the country (TRF, 2006). With these reasons, it is not surprising that the amount of research relating to ecotourism and community development is greater than any other topic. However, in recent years there have been more varied research topics such as ecotourism development in natural parks or other nature-based destinations, environmental conservation studies, tourist-related studies, ecotourism activities, tour operators and marketing. As noted, the research concern and focus in each country could be different. The result of this section may provide a useful insight to better understand of how ecotourism research in Thailand has been focused.

Table 3 number of ecotourism studies based on key elements of ecotourism development (as identified by TAT)

Key elements of ecotourism development	Number of studies (percentage)
1. Local community-related studies (e.g. planning, participation, community management, polices, culture conservation, local impact, people involvement, local economy)	87 (38.16%)
2. Area-based studies (e.g. area/destination development, ecosystem, nature-based tourism, area impact)	32 (14.03%)
3. Sustainable management-related studies (e.g. responsible travel, tourism/tourist impact, natural conservation/protection)	29 (12.72%)
4. Activity and learning process studies (e.g. natural learning, environmental education, tourist experience, tourist activities)	21 (9.21%)
5. Non-relevant studies (e.g. tourist behavior, people's perception/attitudes, homestay, tour operators, marketing, services)	59 (25.88%)
Total	228 (100%)

As the Tourism Authority of Thailand has identified the four core elements of ecotourism development in Thailand, it is interesting to learn how many studies have focused on these areas (Table 3). If well managed and properly utilized, the body of knowledge and applications of these research findings could provide important contributions to the development of ecotourism and sustainable tourism in Thailand. Following Table 3, as expected, it is found that approximately one-thirds of ecotourism studies are dominated by local community-related studies (38.16%) such as planning, participation, community management, polices, culture conservation, local impact, people involvement, and local economy). While 14.03% were related to area-based studies (e.g. area/destination development, ecosystem, nature-based tourism, and area impact), 12.72% were focused on sustainable management (e.g. responsible travel, tourism/tourist impact, natural conservation/protection), and 9.21% were involved with activity and learning process studies (e.g. natural learning, environmental education, tourist experience, tourist activities). However, it should be noted that around 25.88% were not relevant to the core principles of ecotourism development. Based on the finding, this suggests that the knowledge in other areas

of the core element of ecotourism development is still needed (e.g. studies relating to natural areas, sustainable management in local community and ecotourism learning activities).

Table 4 number of ecotourism studies based on region of investigation

Region	Number of studies (percentage)
1. Northern region	88 (38.60%)
2. Central region	51 (22.36%)
3. Southern region	43 (18.85%)
4. Northeastern region	35 (15.36%)
5. Eastern region	11 (4.83%)
Total	228 (100%)

Table 4 shows the number of ecotourism studies based on regions of investigation. The findings reveal that almost half (38.60%) of the research papers were conducted in the northern region, whereas 22.36% were explored in the central part, 18.85% in the southern area and 15.36% in the northeastern region. The eastern region, the smallest part of Thailand, accounted for 4.83% of the total studies. It appears that many tourism researchers have attempted to conduct ecotourism research in the northern part more than other regions. This may be because, firstly, the northern region is well-known for its beauty and richness of natural resources such as natural parks, protected areas, mountains, caves and waterfalls. With a total of 61 national parks, the northern region contains more natural parks than any other region (The National Park, Wildlife and Plant Conservation Department, 2014). In particular, Doi Inthanon National Park, one of the most famous and attractive tourist destinations, consists of high mountain areas including ‘Doi Inthanon’, which is the highest mountain in Thailand. This park seems to be the focus of researchers due to its importance as a major tourist attraction and a wide variety of natural resources (forestry, plants, and wild lives). Secondly, there are several major tourist destinations in the northern area (e.g. Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Tak, and Phitsanulok) as well as more than 15 local and regional universities/colleges (offering tourism programs) are located in this region (Commission of Higher Education, 2014). As previously discussed, many tourism researchers and scholars are more likely to conduct research in their own regions/areas to promote and develop local tourism industry. Based on these reasons, it could help explain why the amount of ecotourism research conducted in the northern region is greater than any other region.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study was conducted to provide tourism practitioners and researchers a summary and overview of existing ecotourism studies in Thailand during the past decade with an aim to provide future research directions for Thailand's ecotourism sector. Based on the findings, the four major research agenda for ecotourism research development in Thailand are proposed.

Local communities

Based on the finding, many ecotourism studies in Thailand focused on the local level. This seems to respond to the ecotourism objectives, in the Thai context, which aim at local development and improvement of locals' quality of life. However, when considering contributions of previous research, it is found that most researchers conducted their research on one dimension with simple and/or separate issues such as residents' knowledge, attitudes or perceptions of ecotourism, residents' participation in ecotourism, and type of ecotourism management in each region. Few studies have attempted to generate new knowledge or advance the knowledge in the field. Thai researchers should focus on community-based research that provides greater contributions to ecotourism development in Thailand, particularly multiple issues that usually exist in ecotourism situations (Stone & Wall, 2004). Research examining the relationships between ecotourism, community and tourism resource management should be encouraged. According to Stone & Wall (2004), more research is needed to examine between ecotourism's potential and actual contributions in rural areas. Moreover, few practical assessments of ecotourism's impacts at the local level have been made (Lee, 2000 cited in Stone & Wall, 2004). This research gap seems to exist in Thailand's tourism context as well. This suggests that research examining the actual benefits of ecotourism and local community should be enhanced. Research findings of these suggested themes should provide a better understanding of how ecotourism actually generates socio-economic impacts at the destination. Likewise, Weaver (2001) argued that the support of local communities is crucial for the long-term survival of ecotourism and concerned research is necessary to identify the positive and negative socio-cultural impacts of tourism in all types of destinations. He suggested that areas of investigation may include, for example, direct and indirect revenue and employment, the relationship between ecotourism, commodification, and demonstration effect (the imitation of tourists' behavior values, and culture).

Ecotourism destinations

According to the finding, most researchers seem to conduct research in major tourist destinations (i.e. famous/large natural parks, major natural-based tourist attractions). Other minor areas or less well-known destinations have not received significant attention. It appears that many national parks (land and marine parks) and nature-based destinations in many small cities are not well explored for their potentiality to be developed as ecotourism destinations or identified in any environmental-related issue. When well managed, ecotourism helps contribute to natural resource conservation and local community development (Diamantis, 2004). To develop and generate benefits to local communities in small cities, it is suggested that researchers should conduct research in the areas that are associated with their origin or home town. Being a local resident, he or she should know and better understand the problems or the needs of the community. A well-defined research project is expected to provide benefits to local community development as well as a reflection of actual problems associated with ecotourism in that area.

With regard to marine and coastal ecotourism, Thailand has a total of 26 marine natural parks, covering more than 5,810 square KM (Department of Natural Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation, 2014). There are four marine national parks (i.e. Tarutao, Surin, Similan, and Ao Phang Nga) that have the potential to be proposed as World Heritage Sites (Sethapun, 2013). However, there have been less than 10 studies regarding marine and coastal ecotourism. This indicates that ecotourism research in Thailand is primarily dominated by land-based research. Actually, both land and marine natural parks are major tourist destinations among local and foreign visitors. However, little attention has been paid to marine national park studies. Therefore, more research on marine-based ecotourism is required. Research focus may include, for example, an examination of visitor impact management on marine natural parks, determination of the carrying capacity of marine natural parks, identifying natural resource management problems in marine natural parks, and local community participation.

One of the principles to sustain ecotourism venues is to determine and implement carrying capacity (Diamantis, 2004). Unfortunately, few researchers have attempted to address this issue. Carrying capacity for tourism is the maximum level of visitor use an area can accommodate with high levels of satisfaction for visitors and few negative impacts on resources (McNeely & Thorsell, 1989). Research determining carrying capacity in natural parks or protected areas can be used as a tool for management planning, land-use planning, and other aspects of human activities including the avoidance of animal disturbance (Diamantis, 2004).

This suggests the necessity and benefits of carrying capacity related studies. In relation to carrying capacity, very little information exists regarding environmental (biophysical and social) impacts of ecotourism and visitor activities in the natural parks and protected areas in Thailand. Lindberg, Furze, Staff and Black (1998 cited in Chin et al., 2000) reported that this is true of the Asia Pacific region as a whole. Research on environmental impacts of ecotourism and visitor activities should help guide appropriate management actions and sustain natural resources (Chin et al., 2000).

Ecotourism business and tourist market

Although there are several ecotourism studies on business-related issues, however, some important issues like ecotourism standard and business practice for ecotourism providers (e.g. resorts and tour operators) have not received attention from concerned parties. Today, there are vast differences in the environmental programs adopted by tourism providers and it is difficult to determine an organization's philosophy and commitment to practices of ecotourism (Patterson, 2002). The lack of research-based knowledge to develop ecotourism standards for business ventures seems to be a major issue in many countries, particularly in developing countries (TAT, 1997). Due to the growth of the ecotourism industry, this highlights the need for relevant studies in this area. Ecotourism standards help establish measurable criteria for ecotourism development and operation (Patterson, 2002). Furthermore, research regarding ecotourism business sector is still limited. Knowledge to better understand ecotourism business is encouraged. For example, there is little knowledge regarding factors and barriers to ecotourism business success, motivations for ecotourism entrepreneurship or ecotourism marketing. Successful ecotourism businesses contribute to a strong ecotourism sector; helping host communities obtain greater benefits from ecotourism (Sirakaya, 1997). Another concern that needs to be addressed is research relating to the ecotourism market and tourist-related behavior. Little is known about the ecotourism market in Thailand from both local and international perspectives.

Ecotourism-related activities

One of the important principles of ecotourism development is to provide travelers with both environmental and educational learning experiences (Sangpikul, 2013; TAT, 1997). However, research in this area is still limited. Most researchers seem to focus on natural resources conservation. They are yet to explore and

determine appropriate environmental and educational learning activities that are suitable for tourists in various ecotourism destinations. Natural destinations such as natural parks and protected areas can be viewed as natural laboratories, living museums, retreats, havens, and outdoor schools, and provide unique, interactive opportunities for promoting environmental conservation for visitors (Ross & Wall, 1999). Researchers may conduct research to determine what types of activities can both promote environmental learning experience and at the same time generate satisfaction for tourists. The type of ecotourism activities could be different from one place to another depending on location, geographical structure and surroundings. There is a room for research investigations in most of the national parks in Thailand.

Limitations and Future Research Studies

This study has some limitations that need to be addressed. Some studies pertaining to ecotourism may not be identified since this study reviewed only the research papers that contained the key words like ecotourism, eco-tourists, and sustainable tourism. Some scholars may not use those words in their research titles. In addition, only one database was used (Thai-LIS) in this study. There might be some other ecotourism research in other databases. However, it is hoped that this study will provide a general picture of ecotourism studies and useful suggestions for future research in Thailand. It may be more interesting if other tourism topics (e.g. sustainable tourism, nature tourism, and cultural tourism) may be further explored to yield a better understanding on tourism research issues in Thailand. Furthermore, it may be worth comparing similarities and differences of ecotourism research in other countries, particularly from other developing countries. The results would yield a better understanding of ecotourism and its primary focus in those countries.

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