

Knowledge, Attitude and Ecotourism Behavior of Thai Youths

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Currently, ecotourism has received much attention from many parties in Thailand including government, private sector and educational institutes. Many people are interested in doing research on ecotourism issues because they realize in its importance and contribution, especially the concept of ecotourism that can be regarded as one form of responsible tourism. In addition, ecotourism is also considered as a core foundation to the sustainable tourism development of the country. Though there have been extensive of ecotourism studies in Thailand, little information about Thai youths and their travel experience in ecotourism is still limited, and needed to be further explored.

This article is based on the research "Knowledge, Attitude and Ecotourism Behavior of Thai Youths" with the objectives to measure the knowledge level and attitudes towards ecotourism among Thai youths, and to survey their ecotourism travel experience.

What is ecotourism? Ecotourism is generally used to describe as travel to a natural place by emphasizing the natural, ecological and cultural aspects of the area. According to the International Ecotourism Society, USA (2002), ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people. It is nature-based tourism that focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature as well as providing economic benefits to local people. Currently, interest in ecotourism as a means to promote the conservation of biological resources and economic opportunities for the communities has risen considerably over the past few years in many countries including Thailand.

Why did the study focus on youths? One of the most important components for ecotourism development is "people" as they are regarded as one of the key factors for the

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success of ecotourism development (Walailak University, 1997). If people have knowledge and understanding in ecotourism and its importance, this would be good to encourage them to be conscious in preserving the country's tourism resources. To do so, however, it is important to provide them with sufficient knowledge and information as well as to create the awareness and understanding of the values of ecotourism. This is especially necessary for youths who, in the future, will play an important role as quality and responsible tourists. Youths are regarded as a potential consumer group for tourism (Korcharoen and Waropas, 2002). According to Kunarucks (2000), youths, between the ages of 20 to 24, are the largest and high potential group to buy tourism products. They will, in the future, be one of the most powerful markets for ecotourism (Korcharoen and Waropas, 2002).

Currently, the Tourism Authority of Thailand has promoted ecotourism and its activities among youths in many ways such as programs on television, advertisements in travel & youth magazines and even by organizing an ecotourism travel mart. Moreover, they also have launched many programs for youths to participate in such as summer camps, study tours and eco-trips to natural destinations. Youths' knowledge and understanding in ecotourism is important for the country's tourism development. Their awareness of how important ecotourism is would make them become responsible tourists helping to conserve the country's tourism resources. However, the information about their knowledge, attitude and travel experience in ecotourism is limited and needed to be further investigated. In order to promote ecotourism among Thai youths, it is important to know how much knowledge they know and understand about ecotourism. It is also important to know whether they think about it or they have any travelling experiences in ecotourism. The findings would be useful as guidelines for concerned parties to plan for ecotourism development for the youths. Moreover, it would provide an information foundation for concerned parties to effectively improve and develop their plans to create awareness in conserving tourism resources as well as to promote ecotourism activities among Thai youths.

Who was the target population? According to the Federation of International Youth Travel Organisations, Denmark (2002), 'youth' is defined as people aged between 11-25 years old. Thus, the target for this study was Thai youths, aged 11 to 25 who were attending high schools and universities, and living in Bangkok and the greater metropolitan areas (including 5 neighboring provinces around Bangkok, i.e. Nakhon Pathom, Nonthaburi, Pathum Thani, Samut Prakan and Samut Songkram). The total of 664,900 students were identified as a target group for this study (Ministry of Education 2001). As the number of the target was too large to be explored, the representatives (samples) were chosen by using a statistical method. In this study the 404 people were determined as appropriate number of representatives.

In order to explicitly measure and compare the knowledge level and attitudes towards ecotourism among Thai youths, stratified sampling was employed in this study. The target was divided into 3 different groups according to their educational levels. According to the Ministry of Education (2001), there were 307,763 students from junior high schools, 184,329 students from senior high schools and 172,808 students from universities. Based on these figures the 404 representatives were allocated by employing quota sampling. As a result, there were 187 representatives (samples) from junior high schools, 112 representatives from senior high schools and 105 representatives from universities.

What was the instrument to collect the data? A close-ended questionnaire was designed to collect the data for this study. It was divided into four parts. The first part was basic demographic and background data on the respondents. The second part contained 10 questions about ecotourism knowledge. The respondents were asked to mark each question – correct or incorrect. The questions were generally about ecotourism, e.g. the meaning, its importance or its value. The score of 1 and 0 were assigned to the correct and incorrect answers respectively. The third part consisted of 10 statements about attitudes towards ecotourism. The statements were incorporated into the three major components of attitude : cognitive, emotional and behavioral components. Each statement was rated using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree (5)" to "strongly disagree (1)". The fourth part was a survey of ecotourism behavior. They were asked about their ecotourism travelling experiences: for example, whether they had any travelling experience to an undisturbed or uncontaminated natural area with the specific goal of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery while conserving and not destroying the ecological system of the areas. The survey was conducted during June 2002 by using a convenience sampling method.

What were the discoveries from the study? The study found that most of the respondents had a moderate level of ecotourism knowledge (mean=7.8/10). They understood the meaning, objective and general characteristics of ecotourism better than its management, activities or facilities provided at the destination sites. The results were consistent with the findings of Padtrapornnan (1998), Wantamane (1998) and Kiatiwat (2000) indicating that most of Thai tourists and college students had a moderate level of ecotourism knowledge. They understood its meaning, goal and objective more than its principles or activity issues. This may be due to the fact that ecotourism is relatively new for Thai youths compared to other types of tourism. Its concept was adopted from western countries as one of the forms of alternative tourism. It can be regarded as special interest tourism for a particular group of tourists, who are interested in visiting natural destinations (Weiler, 1992). Youths may be considered as first time eco-tourists, consisting the majority of the nature-based tourists, they did not have much understanding about ecotourism in details (Anantasomboon, 2002).

They are young tourists who still need advice from experienced people. They, sometimes, may not really get involved directly or feel interested in tourism so much (TAT, 1998).

Based on educational levels, university respondents had the highest average scores on ecotourism knowledge and attitudes, followed by respondents in senior high schools and junior high schools respectively. This implies that education and ages had a direct impact on differences in ecotourism knowledge and attitudes. The result was similar to the studies of Padtrapornnan (1998) and Kannasombat (1999) arguing that ecotourism knowledge and attitudes of Thai tourists and tour guides were different according to their education and ages. Tourists and tour guides whose educational levels and ages were greater had more knowledge and stronger attitudes than the groups whose educational levels and ages were less. This may be due to the fact that older persons with higher education have more knowledge and capacity for learning than younger persons with lower education. They have learned more and been exposed to the surroundings and thus understand them better than those with lower education. Moreover, they may express their attitudes and make more rational judgements (Janaim, 1997).

Other findings, the study also revealed that the top three natural destinations the respondents usually visited were waterfalls, island/seasides and mountains respectively. The result was similar to the findings of Tonekaew (1998) and Kunarucks (2000) which was found that Thai tourists and college students usually chose to visit mountains, waterfalls, forests and caves as their first choice when visiting natural destinations. These destinations were perceived as places that were maintained and preserved for their beauty and pureness. In addition, the World Tourism Organization (cited by Kunarucks, 2000) forecasted that interest in visiting natural-based destinations would rise considerably in the 21st century. This is because tourist behavior has been changing considerably in the direction of visiting national destinations. They are, therefore, more concerned about the conservation of natural resources. This type of tourists are increasing every year.

Furthermore, the top three eco-activities among youths were visiting waterfalls, trekking/hiking and taking photographs of nature respectively. The finding was similar to what Chompusri (2001) had discovered, she found that the most favorite eco-activities among Thai tourists were visiting waterfalls/caves, trekking and visiting cultural and historic sites. This also corresponds to the study done by Thailand Institute of Scientific and Technological Research or TISTR (1997), which disclosed that the popular eco-activities among Thai and overseas tourists were trekking/hiking, nature education, visiting waterfalls/caves, snorkeling/scuba diving, tent camping and rafting. These eco-activities were related to a learning process in the ecosystem. It provides tourists with knowledge, experience and appreciation of the natural beauty with minimal environmental impact on the community (TISTR, 1997).

Recommendations : Based on the findings, it can be concluded that most of Thai youths had a moderate level knowledge of ecotourism. University youths had the highest average score on ecotourism knowledge and attitudes, followed by senior high school and junior high school youths, respectively. Most of them basically understood the meaning, objectives and general characteristics of ecotourism. Some did not understand ecotourism clearly and had little knowledge on some issues such as its activities, facilities in the destination sites and the economic benefits to local people. This suggests that concerned parties should concentrate on providing more information related to ecotourism concepts especially among junior high school youths as they appeared to have lower knowledge about ecotourism. Content should be provided together with its meaning, importance, activities, eco-destinations and code of conduct for eco-tourists (Ruampum and Kongkaluang 2002).

Three concerned parties have been identified to help promote ecotourism among Thai youths, namely government agencies, educational institutes, and private sector.

q Government agencies (i.e. Tourism Authority of Thailand, Ministry of Tourism and Sports and Ministry of Education) should also have an action plan for implementing and promoting ecotourism for youths consistently. These may include one of the following guidelines:

1) work cooperatively with travel businesses and support them to organize study tours or eco-trips to natural destinations which enhance youths' learning and participation. These include summer camps, training/seminar courses or organizing youth leadership camps in other parts of the country. These activities would provide them with ecotourism knowledge and real experiences. Their participation would enhance their experiences, create a good impression and build positive attitudes towards ecotourism. These events and activities should be planned in several major cities around the country. In addition, other programs could be combined with ecotourism to attract youths' interests and participation as well as increase the numbers of activities such as marine-ecotourism, agro-tourism, adventure-tourism and culture-tourism.

2) As most youths received information about ecotourism mainly through television, government agencies should develop and produce short documentaries related to ecotourism to be broadcasted through television. They may consider using popular young movie stars or singers to be presenters to attract youths' interests (Ruampum and Kongkaluang, 2002). Other forms of entertainment, sports and travelling stories could also be incorporated into the program to make it more interesting (Ruampum and Kongkaluang, 2002). This can enhance youths' learning and help create good attitudes towards ecotourism.

3) As media play an important role in creating ecotourism awareness among youths, government agencies may, in addition, consider organizing study tours or eco-trips and invite

media representatives (nationally and locally) to join them. This would make them understand ecotourism much more and they could be middlemen to publicize and introduce ecotourism to the public.

□ Educational institutes (i.e. schools, colleges and universities) also play an important role in educating and enhancing the youths' knowledge, attitudes and ecotourism behavior. They are directly involved with the youths and have much influence on them. Thus, it is recommended that they should enhance ecotourism education by disseminating information and creating ecotourism awareness both inside and outside the formal educational system. In colleges or universities, courses could be offered related to ecotourism or sustainable tourism. They should also organize ecotourism activities and exhibitions on campus (at least once a year) to educate and provide ecotourism information to students (such as an ecotourism week or ecotourism photo contest). Additionally, educational institutes should encourage and support the establishment of ecotourism clubs/organizations on campus. This could be another way to publicize ecotourism information to youths by making them participate in the activities.

It appeared that youths were interested in ecotourism. Approximately two-thirds had ecotourism travelling experiences. They accepted the ecotourism concept, which is regarded as one form of alternative tourism helping preserve the country's tourism resources. The study revealed that most of them preferred to visit waterfalls or island/seaside places to other destinations when visiting natural destinations. Therefore, concerned parties should take this into consideration when planning eco-trips and programs. Concerned parties should also develop a tour program that can suit and correspond to youths' needs and interests (Lim, 2000). To promote ecotourism and its activities, we should understand tourists' characteristics and behaviors (Anantasomboon, 2002). Concerned parties must realize the activities that youths are interested in: visiting waterfalls islands/seasides, trekking, nature photograph, nature education, camping and boat sightseeing. Kiatiwat (2000) suggested that environmental activities should be promoted to build ecotourism-mindedness as well. Appropriate time to organize the trips should be when they are available and free from their studies. This may include the period during the summer vacations (2nd semester break) from March to April, 1st semester break (October) or long weekends. The trips should take about 2-3 days and travelling expenses should not exceed 3,000 Baht per person per trip.

The results also revealed that youths usually travelled with their families. This implies that parents have an important role to establish ecotourism consciousness among youths. Most youths received information about tourism from their parents (Ruampum and Kongkaluang, 2003). Concerned parties should encourage families to participate in trips by organizing activities that both youths and their families can join together, such as an eco-rally trip, family camping, family biking contest or a boating/canoeing/kayaking contest at the destination sites.

□ Private sector : Another important concerned party that has a major role to play in providing ecotourism activities and experiences is the private sector (including travel businesses and non-profit organizations). They also have a role to play to help create awareness and promote ecotourism among youths. They may include youth group as one of their target markets for ecotourism and establish a marketing plan to meet youths' needs and interests. They should also work with government agencies to launch more ecotourism events and programs (Jaroenwanit and Putachote, 2000): for example, Youth Travel Mart or Thailand Grand Festival. These kinds of events are one of the major current events. They help enhance youths' participation and offer a variety of ecotourism programs corresponding to their needs. They should promote these events not only in Bangkok but also in other major cities around the country to raise ecotourism awareness among Thai youths.

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