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COMMUNITY-DRIVEN RURAL TOURISM: A MODEL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN UMPHANG, THAILAND

Rungtiwa THANAM¹ and Athip JANSURI^{2*}

¹ Kasem Bundit University, Thailand; rungtiwathanam@gmail.com

² King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang Prince of Chumphon Campus, Thailand; athip.ja@kmitl.ac.th (Corresponding Author)

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Professor Dr. Ismail Suardi WEKKE

Universitas Muhammadiyah Barru, Indonesia

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1) Associate Professor Dr. I Gede DARMAWIJAYA PPB, Indonesia

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Abstract

This research investigates the components of a rural tourism model developed through community participation in Umphang District, Tak Province, Thailand. Utilizing the Ethnographic Delphi Futures Research (EDFR) technique, experts from government, private, community, and academic sectors (n=19) were engaged in a two-round process of in-depth interviews and questionnaire assessments. Content analysis and descriptive statistics (median, mode, interquartile range) were employed to analyze the data. The study identified nine key components for the rural tourism model, named UMPHANG RT: Unique Community, Management, Participation, Human Capital, Activities, Nature, Guest & Tourist, Rural Life, and Tourism. This framework serves as a guideline for fostering community-led management of rural tourism, aiming to strengthen the community, enhance its capacity to host tourists, and preserve its distinct identity and traditional way of life. By emphasizing community involvement and local wisdom, this model contributes to the sustainable development of rural tourism, aligning with the principles of responsible and culturally sensitive tourism practices.

Keywords: Rural Tourism, Community Participation, Sustainable Development, Tourism Model, Thailand

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Introduction

Tourism provides significant opportunities for countries, emerging economies, and developing nations by generating employment and strengthening local economies. It contributes to infrastructure development and supports the conservation of natural environments as well as cultural and traditional heritage. Moreover, tourism plays a vital role in alleviating poverty and reducing social inequality. These outcomes can be truly realized only if local communities have access to and benefit from the income generated by tourism (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2024). Additionally, policies under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework emphasize inclusive collaboration across all sectors to foster a happy and equitable society, reduce social inequality, and eliminate poverty (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2022). This can be achieved by promoting tourism through the creation and development of products and services rooted in local wisdom, creativity, and cultural capital. Supporting the use of technological innovations in developing tourism businesses, marketing, and managing sites of historical, cultural, and lifestyle significance is important. Such efforts aim to ensure that Thai tourism offers unique and distinctive narratives (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2006). The Third National Tourism Development Plan (2023-2027) emphasizes the development of integrated transportation infrastructure and the enhancement of public utilities to ensure high-quality services along travel routes. It also focuses on the advancement of human capital in Thailand's tourism sector and the cultivation of high-value tourism societies and communities. Examples of development strategies include fostering collaboration between the government, private sector, local communities, and citizens. (National Tourism Policy Committee, 2023).

Rural tourism functions as a tool to strengthen local community organizations in managing natural resources and cultural heritage through a participatory process. This approach allows communities to actively participate in setting development directions and ensures that they benefit from tourism activities. To enable communities to carry out tourism, it is necessary to prepare and strengthen local communities in managing tourism (Klinkhajorn, 2018). This also generates employment opportunities and income for local residents while presenting local products to tourists. The process relies on the local social, cultural, and natural resources, which are utilized in accordance with the principles of sustainable development (Celotajs, 2020). This signifies a tourism situation in a spatial dimension, where tourism takes place within communities inhabited by local residents, with tourists acting as guests and community members as hosts. The interaction between guests and hosts plays a crucial role in this circumstance (Boonratana, 2010). The management of rural tourism aims to present the unique identity and way of life of the community through the conservation of its cultural environment, traditions, and practices, sharing these elements with guests. (Ketkosol, 2014). Rural tourism development should differ from typical tourist destinations that primarily focus on the needs of tourists. The main objective should be centered on preserving the values within the community, with a strong emphasis on genuine community participation (Yanan et al., 2024). Rural tourism has the capacity to improve the well-being of local residents, but it also carries the possibility of disrupting their means of making a living and cultural traditions, severing social ties within the village, and even necessitating the relocation of entire traditional villages (Su et al., 2019).

The outstanding feature in Umphang District is that it is home to Thi Lo Su Waterfall, a world-renowned natural attraction ranked as the sixth most beautiful waterfall in the world. Its pristine natural environment has made it a popular destination for a large number of tourists. Moreover, the preservation of local ways of life, traditional attire, language, cuisine, beliefs, and customs of the Karen Pga K'nyau ethnic group has drawn attention to the significance of conservation-based tourism among tourism operators. The group of tourism operators consequently formed

the Umphang Tourism Promotion and Conservation Club in order to regulate and oversee tourism activities, ensuring that operators comply with established rules, regulations, and legal frameworks. The club also supports and promotes conservation activities within the area. (Seub Nakhasathien Foundation, 2012). The collaboration among development partners at various levels, including government agencies, local residents, the private sector, academic institutions, and the general public, through an integrated approach in multiple dimensions, has led to a learning process aimed at self-reliance. This effort also focuses on increasing the income of local people by promoting tourism, developing One Tambon One Product (OTOP) products, establishing marketing channels, and stimulating the local economy to support trade and investment in the area (Tak Provincial Office, 2023).

Literature Review

Rural Tourism

Rural tourism is gaining global recognition as a preferred choice for travelers seeking unique and authentic experiences away from bustling cities. (Vikramaditya, 2023) Rural tourism, understood as community-based tourism (CBT), is characterised by being locally led and by its role in economic diversification. In this context, local agency becomes particularly relevant in the form of decisions to become involved in the tourism business or not. (Ruiz-Ballesteros & González-Portillo, 2024). Rural tourism has been widely recognized as a means of promoting the revival of traditional villages and has been supported by numerous researchers. It has the potential to provide significant social and economic advantages, making it a popular strategy for rural development in both developed and developing countries. (Yanan et al., 2024). Supporting rural tourism emphasizes the role of traditionality in local culture (Pahari, 2024). Rural tourism management aims to present the unique identity and way of life of local communities through the preservation of cultural environments, traditions, and customs, and by showcasing these elements to guests. Rather than focusing on constructing novel or unfamiliar attractions, which may diminish the value of local identity and traditional ways of life, the approach emphasizes authenticity. This practice demonstrates and reinforces the identity of the community. (Ketskosl, 2014). These components are essential for creating meaningful tourism experiences. The perceived authenticity and sociocultural and economic dimensions of perceived sustainability of a rural tourism destination significantly impact its perceived image, which in turn influences the intention to visit and recommend such destinations. (Fandos-Herrera et al., 2025)

Community Participation

Participation is a process that encourages interaction among stakeholders involved in any given activity. Such interaction facilitates the exchange of ideas and the development of shared understanding among participants (Bouneaw, 2007), particularly at the mental and emotional levels. This mental and emotional involvement of individuals within a group situation promotes engagement and stimulates action toward achieving the group's objectives, driven by a shared sense of responsibility (Davis, 1971). Local residents act as creators of activities within the development process, which results in their ability to play a creative and proactive role. Importantly, the outcomes of these activities must ultimately benefit the residents themselves, reflecting a cycle of mutual contribution and return (Kasperson & Breitbart, 1974). The nature of public participation can be considered through both activities and management, which must be studied in parallel. At the activity level, participation serves as a foundational mechanism that maximizes opportunities for local people to engage. At the management level, it depends on those in positions of authority to create channels through which people can express their opinions and demonstrate their involvement in various activities (Huntington & Nelson, 1976). Collaboration established between local communities and external organizations supporting tourism typically originates from community members who express the following sequential

behaviors: 1) Listening to public opinions and engaging in meetings, 2) Formally organizing members of the community, and 3) Submitting proposals (Hwang et al., 2012). Through various forms of community action, local residents are able to gain a clearer and more effective understanding of the overall community's uniqueness. (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). According to Cohen & Uphoff (1980), participation processes proposed by various scholars have been synthesized into a core conceptual framework, which classifies participation into the following stages: Stage 1: Participation in Decision Making, Stage 2: Participation in Implementation, Stage 3: Participation in Receiving Benefits, Stage 4: Participation in Evaluation.

Research Methodology

In this study, the Ethnographic Delphi Futures Research (EDFR) technique was utilized, with the research procedures outlined as follows.

Data Collection and Sampling

The research was conducted using the Ethnographic Delphi Futures Research (EDFR) methodology, which was carried out in two rounds. The first round involved collecting data through interviews with experts to identify and construct the main components of the rural tourism model using the community participation process in Umphang District, Tak Province. The second round involved the development of a questionnaire based on the data obtained from the first round. This questionnaire was then presented to the same group of experts to evaluate the appropriateness of the identified main and sub-components of the rural tourism model based on community participation in Umphang District, Tak Province.

The selection of informants was based on expert criteria, requiring individuals to possess knowledge, expertise, and experience related to rural tourism. The informants were divided into four groups. Firstly, the public sector included individuals responsible for tourism, those working in tourism-related fields, or those holding positions that influence the rural tourism model based on community participation in the Umphang District, Tak Province. A total of 5 experts were selected from this group. Secondary, private Sector, and stakeholders consisted of individuals involved in or supporting rural tourism, including tour operators, accommodation providers, tourism support businesses, and tourism associations. A total of 5 experts were selected. Thirdly, the community sector comprised community leaders or representatives from communities. A total of 5 experts were selected from this group. Fourthly, the academic sector included scholars or experts in rural tourism, community participation, and the specific context in the Umphang District, Tak Province. A total of 4 experts were selected. Altogether, 19 experts were obtained. The selection followed the expert sampling criterion proposed by Macmillan (1971), utilizing a purposive sampling method.

Measure of Constructs

In the first round of the EDFR, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with 19 experts using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview covered issues related to the rural tourism model based on the community participation process in Umphang District, Tak Province.

In the second round of the EDFR, the researcher analyzed the interview data from the first round to develop a questionnaire designed to reach a consensus among the experts. The questionnaire focused on the rural tourism model based on the community participation process in Umphang District, Tak Province, and was constructed in accordance with the EDFR format. It consisted of closed-ended questions using a 5-point Likert scale. The same 19 experts from the first round were asked to provide their opinions on the questionnaire. The research instruments were submitted for ethical review and approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Kasem Bundit University, with project approval number T007/67P.

Data Analysis

In the first round of the EDFR, content analysis was employed to examine various aspects, including an overview of rural tourism, the model of rural tourism, supporting factors for rural tourism development, needs and expectations regarding rural tourism, problems, obstacles, and recommendations, as well as environmental conditions affecting rural tourism. To verify the reliability of the data, the researcher used triangulation to confirm the credibility of the data collection method. (Potisita, 2005).

In the second round of the EDFR, data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including median, mode, and interquartile range. The interpretation of the median scores was as follows: A median score between 4.50 and 5.00 indicated that the statement showed the highest level of appropriateness and feasibility. A median score between 3.50 and 4.49 indicated that the statement showed a high level of appropriateness and feasibility. A median score between 2.50 and 3.49 indicated a moderate level of appropriateness and feasibility. A median score between 1.50 and 2.49 indicated low appropriateness and feasibility. A median score between 1.00 and 1.49 indicated the lowest level of appropriateness and feasibility. (Best & Kahn, 2006) The criteria for determining which statements were suitable for the rural tourism model using community participation in Umphang District, Tak Province, were as follows: statements with a median score higher than 3.50 and an interquartile range less than or equal to 1.50 were considered to have a high level of consensus among the experts. An interquartile range greater than 1.50 indicated that the experts' opinions on that particular statement were inconsistent.

Research Results

The results of the first-round in-depth interviews using the EDFR method concerned semi-structured interviews with four groups of participants, selected through purposive sampling, totaling 19 individuals. The findings are summarized as follows.

In terms of Component 1: Unique Community, experts consistently agreed that a community's uniqueness lies in its distinctive characteristics that reflect its identity, charm, and differentiation. These elements are shaped by the way of life, local wisdom, and community resources. While some communities may share similarities, each has its own unique features. Fostering local pride, strengthening unity, and forming a shared community identity are crucial, and these are achieved through participatory processes in tourism management. Furthermore, creating a memorable image of the community in the minds of tourists and aligning the community's identity with tourists' needs and behavioral trends, both current and future, are essential to sustainable development.

In terms of Component 2: Management, experts consistently agreed that rural tourism management must involve building community awareness and understanding of the importance of tourism. At the same time, the community must preserve its traditional culture and identity, ensuring it can be communicated and explained effectively to tourists. This includes explaining the community's character and uniqueness. Planning, control, and development processes should be established by the community based on its own identity.

In terms of Component 3: Participation, experts consistently agreed that, as hosts, community members must be involved in all stages of tourism management. This participation helps ensure tourism does not disrupt traditional ways of life and truly preserves local identity. Moreover, the income generated circulates within the community, contributing to improved quality of life. Community participation includes 1) Participation in decision-making, 2) Participation in operations, 3) Participation in benefit-sharing, and 4) Participation in evaluation.

In terms of Component 4: Human Capital, experts consistently agreed that the development of rural tourism must rely on human capital. Particularly, the way of life of community members plays a vital role in the growth of digital technology. Community development requires skill enhancement and knowledge building through training processes, skill development initiatives,

and capacity building at all levels involved in tourism. The primary goal is to enable everyone to deliver high-quality services that leave a lasting impression on tourists, embody the qualities of a good host, and adapt effectively to changes. Furthermore, it is essential to promote local knowledge so that residents can accurately and engagingly convey their culture, way of life, and wisdom to visitors.

In terms of Component 5: Tourism Activities, experts consistently agreed that most tourism activities in Umphang District are established in local ways of life, including livelihood practices, food, language, arts and crafts, and traditional attire. These activities offer tourists the opportunity to gain hands-on experience and learn about local lifestyles through immersive participation. By engaging in such activities, tourists can better understand the stories and intrinsic values they represent. The exchange of knowledge and experiences ultimately leads to distinctive and memorable experiences for visitors.

In terms of Component 6: Nature, experts consistently agreed that the natural resources in Umphang District are exceptionally rich and unique, especially its forests, mountains, water sources, and biodiversity. These characteristics have made Umphang one of Thailand's key conservation areas and an important destination for ecotourism. However, effective natural resource management requires conservation efforts, including controlling the number of tourists during specific seasons to minimize ecological impact, and establishing restricted zones, particularly in wildlife habitats and watershed areas. The utilization of natural resources for maximum benefit is essential while supporting tourism activities that do not harm the environment.

In terms of Component 7: Guest and Tourist, experts consistently agreed that proper management of tourists helps reduce the environmental and local community impact while enhancing the quality of the tourist experience. Tourists must strictly adhere to the rules and regulations of the community, especially in national park areas and community zones. The use of community-guided tours, with local residents serving as guides, for example, for trekking, rafting, or learning about Karen culture, is encouraged. A joint committee comprising the Subdistrict Administrative Organization, the national park, the local community, and tourism operators is established to collaboratively plan and designate travel routes and set seasonal openings and closures of tourist areas. This also involves connecting rural tourism across villages, with an emphasis on creating meaningful experiences that allow tourists to interact closely with nature.

In terms of Component 8: Rural Life, experts consistently agreed that Umphang possesses a uniquely distinguished rural way of life, particularly reflected in the preservation of traditional ethnic Karen identity, such as their houses, customs, beliefs, clothing, and cuisine. A key feature that remains well-preserved is the Karen-style weaving practice. However, managing rural life does not imply controlling or altering local lifestyles to conform to modern standards. Instead, it refers to preserving, adapting, and promoting traditional ways of life to coexist harmoniously with the present era. Furthermore, it is essential to integrate cooperation among the public sector, private sector, community, and academic institutions to ensure efficient and successful implementation.

In terms of Component 9: Tourism, experts consistently agreed that the tourism model in Umphang emphasizes travel to visit and learn about the distinctive lifestyles of ethnic groups. This is reflected in daily practices, language, clothing, local food, housing, handicrafts, traditions, and local wisdom. Besides the cultural aspects, the beauty of natural attractions also plays a significant role in drawing tourists, particularly the renowned Thi Lo Su Waterfall, considered one of the most beautiful waterfalls in Thailand.

The in-depth interviews aimed at drafting the components of a rural tourism model using the community participation process in Umphang District, Tak Province, obtained a set of main components. Initially, a total of nine main components were identified. These findings led to

the second round of the Ethnographic Delphi Futures Research (EDFR) process. After designing a questionnaire based on the interview data from the first round of EDFR, the researchers proceeded to conduct the second round by distributing the questionnaire to the key informants. The responses were then analyzed using statistics to determine the median and interquartile range. The results are presented as follows:

Table 1 Analysis of Round 2 EDFR Questionnaire Data for Main Components of the Rural Tourism Model Using Community Participation Process

Component	Median (Md) ≥ 3.5	Interquartile Range (Q3-Q1) ≤ 1.5	Propriety/Feasibility of the Component
Unique Community	3.95	0.97	High Level
Management	4.58	0.50	Highest Level
Participation	4.68	0.47	Highest Level
Human Capital	4.58	0.60	Highest Level
Activities	4.53	0.40	Highest Level
Nature	4.47	0.51	High Level
Guest and Tourist	4.46	0.51	High Level
Rural Life	4.57	0.49	Highest Level
Tourism	4.55	0.59	Highest Level

From Table 1, it was found that the experts agreed that the levels of propriety/feasibility of all main components were high and highest, with consistent agreement across all aspects. The median values ranged from 3.95 to 4.68, the mode ranged from 3 to 5, and the interquartile range (Q3-Q1) ranged from 0.40 to 0.97

Conclusion and Discussion

This research aimed to identify the key components of a successful rural tourism model driven by community participation in Umphang District, Tak Province, Thailand. Through the application of the Ethnographic Delphi Futures Research (EDFR) technique, the study engaged experts from diverse sectors to arrive at a comprehensive framework for sustainable tourism development. The findings indicate that a successful model rests on nine interconnected components, collectively represented by the acronym UMPHANG RT: Unique Community, Management, Participation, Human Capital, Activities, Nature, Guest & Tourist, Rural Life, and Tourism.

The identified components highlight the importance of preserving and promoting the unique characteristics of the community, as emphasized by Rosalina et al. (2023) regarding the harmonious integration of spirit, people, and nature in village tourism projects. This necessitates effective management that fosters community awareness and understanding of the importance of tourism while safeguarding their traditional identity and culture, aligning with Ariyani & Fauzi's (2023) call for strategic changes tailored to the local context and dynamics. Communities, as hosts, must be actively involved in every process, ensuring tourism management respects traditional lifestyles, as underscored by the World Economic Forum (2025), which champions community empowerment in shaping tourism models.



Figure 1 The UMPHANG RT Model: Components of Community-Driven Rural Tourism

Human capital development, particularly the preservation and transmission of local knowledge, also emerges as a critical factor, echoing Dydiv's (2023) findings regarding business activities within villages contributing to infrastructure and economic development. Tourism activities should be rooted in the local way of life, providing tourists with opportunities for authentic engagement, in line with the observations of Dickman (1996) and Pike (2008) on diverse and context-appropriate tourism activities. Effective natural resource management, as advocated by Bisht et al. (2025), and proper management of the interaction between guests and the community, as described by Dydiv (2023), are also essential for minimizing negative impacts and enhancing the overall tourism experience. Finally, the integration of unique cultural elements, as highlighted by Jansuri et al. (2021), and the beauty of natural attractions, as noted by Phenwansuk (2022), contribute to a holistic and appealing tourism offering.

The government plays a facilitative role by providing resources, knowledge, and opportunities to the community, while the community should remain open to learning and adapting, building resilience to navigate constant changes. Collaboration with universities and local institutions is vital for integrating modern knowledge with local wisdom through participatory research, enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of community development projects.

The resulting UMPHANG RT model provides a valuable framework for communities seeking to develop sustainable and community-driven rural tourism. By focusing on these interconnected components, communities can leverage tourism to enhance their economies, preserve their cultural heritage, and improve the well-being of their residents.

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