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# **ECOTOURISM AND LOCAL INVOLVEMENT: THE CASE STUDY OF HOUY KOR VILLAGE, SANG KOM DISTRICT, NONG KHAI PROVINCE, THAILAND**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study is aimed to 1. study the ecotourism potentiality of Houy Kor village. And 2. Study the local participation attitude toward ecotourism. This research reports on a qualitative approach that explored the perspective of villagers. Results found that 1. Tourism resources at Houy Kor village have high potential in attracting travelers to drop by for an overnight stay, as its activity started early morning to see the sun rising at the top of the mountains, then to see the local lives and cocoa growing, visit the temple and another boat cruising in the late afternoon. Trying Me- Kong fish dishes and homemade ingredients meal are finally completed full-day program trip. 2. Local readiness to take part in ecotourism is very little, most engaged people were local authorities and leaders of the village. It is suggested that this community has to be supported financially and academically by the government. By starting in some active groups and planning for future ecotourism. In other words, considering further tourism movement from all perspectives that can be taken in the community is very crucial. However, there is a limitation of the study, the research was collected during the Covid pandemic, therefore, some activities could not associate with a large group of people.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Conservation, Thailand Tourism, Local attitude

## **INTRODUCTION**

Ecotourism is not a new term for this era, especially in Thailand, where tourism was ranged the top revenue resource since 1987. Ecotourism has been widely renowned as a form of sustainable tourism, aiming for economic social, and environmental sustainability as a core (Diamantis, 199). Ecotourism is also provided local quality of life, and tourist experience while protecting local culture and maintaining the natural state of biodiversity and ecosystem services (Christ et al., 2003; ECA, 2011; Admasu, 2020) Thailand has responded to the global call for a “better tourism development form”. Since the development of community-based tourism (CBT), governments, development agencies and NGOs have placed significant emphasis on this development model as part of the strategies for the conservation of natural resources and development in Thailand (Nitikasetsoontorn, 2015). Ecotourism has its collapsed role in CBT development, using local natural resources and, local knowledge to educate and satisfy visitors, helping in developing village livelihood. Therefore, the “must-have” policy for rural quality of life development is to promote tourism in local villages in Thailand (soontorn, 2019). Nong Khai is a small province located along the Me Kong river, the international bordering river between Thai and Laos People’s

Democratic Republic. Lonely Planet describes the region as “occupying a narrow sweep along the banks of the Mekong [And] one of northeast Thailand’s most popular destinations”. As a result of the friendship bridge built in 1994 connecting Nong Khai and Vientiane, in the Laos People’s Democratic Republic, Nong Khai has steadily become a touristic city. Due to its connection to Laos. The bridge allows travelers to visit both Nong Khai and Vientiane, which are only 30 kilometers apart. Recently, the city is benefiting from Vientiane-Kunming high-speed train, which is officially inaugurated on 2nd December 2021. With this connecting route, the city has considerable potential for tourism booming after the Covid pandemic. Therefore, with the city’s strategic location and beauty along the Me Kong river which borders Laos (Vientiane) and Thailand (Nong Khai) many communities located by the Me Kong river are introduced into tourism by local government development policy. Houy Kor village is situated near domestic tourism camping village called Houy Moung, just only 20 kilometers away and on the same route to famously adorable Chiang Kan district, Loei province, and the similarity of tourism resources of these sites led to this research purposes. Concerning natural pureness and its high potentiality, most villagers are fishermen and growing crops. Their lives are dependent on their natural surroundings. However, it can’t be denied that this village will be soon entered to one of the touristic routes spontaneously. As a result, there are some tourist eco-camping sites between Houy Moung village and Houy Kor village. Ecotourism seemed to be an appropriate approach that helps driving local community conservation behavior and enhance the village quality of life. After the Covid-19 pandemic relieve transport between the Thai and Laos border are back to operation, and tourism

is going to play a vital role for the country economic factor. Thus, it is necessary to be tourism-ready for this small countryside. This research study is aimed for 1. To study the ecotourism potentiality of Houy Kor village and 2. To study the local participation attitude toward ecotourism in their village.

## ***LITERATURE REVIEW***

### **Ecotourism**

Ecotourism is an alternative tool and aimed to safeguard natural resources, especially biological diversity; promote the sustainable use of all resources; the creation of ecological experience and environmental awareness for tourists, and at the same time, protect and respect the natural and cultural heritage of destinations, benefit the local communities and put them at the center of development and planning processes (Bansal & Kumar, 2011; Fennell, 1999; Tewodros, 2010). Ecotourism requires the establishment of meaningful, sustainable, and rare relationships between indigenous people and tourists. (Mosammam, H. M et al., 2011). The importance of the ecotourism concept is the local involvement of the process of tourists visiting and learning from their place. As to enhance residents’ engagement, local conserving attitudes toward valuable resources has a direct relation to their pro-conservation behavior (Yoon, Gursoy, & Chen, 2001; Holladay and Ormsby, 2011).

### **Local participation**

Tourism is an economic development tool for local economies (Andereck & Vogt, 2000; Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004; Teye, Sonmez, & Sirakaya, 2002). Ecotourism has comparative advantage as a driver for rural development because it tends to occur in peripheral and non-industrialized or rural regions, where opportunities for

expanding the economy can be realized at a relatively low cost.(Boo (1990). This can be found in unsuccessful story. Therefore, understanding the knowledge and perceptions of the locals of ecotourism destinations is crucial for the success of ecotourism development and environmental management of the destination areas (Vodouhe et al., 2010; Holladay and Ormsby,2011).It is said that the residents' support for tourism development can be influenced by environmental impact perceptions (Yoon, Gursoy, & Chen, 2001). Moreover, locals' support for ecotourism is seen to be impressive, although they don't even have enough economic impact upon them (Angessa et al.,2022; Coria and Calfucura,2011). The implementation of many ecotourism projects has gained much criticism, as they failed to provide benefits for local people ( Monteros, 2002; Kruger, 2005) which could decrease level of participation. Liu et al., (2014) included their study that economic benefits have a direct impact on residents' pro-environmental behaviors. On the other hand, there some evidence indicating that ecotourism has failed to be sustainable as a result of economic stimulus used as a main driving reason for ecotourism development in the area (Mosammam H.M et al.,2016; Das and Chatterjee, 2015). Unsuccessful ecotourism development is described as a lack of collective action toward tourism development. Some studies found that there were different levels of participation of residents (Park et al., 2017; Hang et al.; 2011). Studied by Park et al., (2017) identified three different groups according to levels of engagement and responsibilities adopted, namely active participation, passive participation, and non-participation in the study. The distinctive participation of each group addressed the unequal action, high-level participation mostly related to community leaders and local government staff, whilet

the great majority of community members were in the passive participation. Presumably, this could lead to unequal benefits in the future and unsustainable benefit among residents. However, the level of local engagement to tourism cannot identify that all the ecotourism sites are unsustainable. According to all to Zhang and Lei (2012) explore factors contributing to residents' participation intention in ecotourism management, and they found residents' environmental knowledge positively affects attitudes towards ecotourism. Knowledge can relate to what the locals have already known, helping them to shape their tourism development mindset and freedom in decision making, how the benefit will be contributed and how they can participate in tourism. Exercising benefit-sharing is designated by the combined action of the locals, who are empowered by involving in tourism decision making process and all tourism process (Sebele,2009). Addressing collective engagement need appropriate management strategies and well environmental planning (Zhang and Lei, 2012) It is very crucial that ecotourism should be introduced with proper monitoring evaluation and management of ecotourism sites for reinforce long-term conservation (Das and Chatterjee, 2015). Additionally, there are many studied reported incidents where forms of ecotourism, which are not appropriately community-focused, are harming the environment, and where local/indigenous communities are not receiving sufficient benefit from the project (Coria and Calfucura ,2011;WWF, 2001, Angessa et al.,2022). And the problem of equal benefit sharing that doesn't meet their expectation (Ap, 1992; Anderect et al, 2005; Forje et al., 2020).

## ***METHODOLOGY***

The non-quantifiable information was analyzed by using qualitative descriptions.

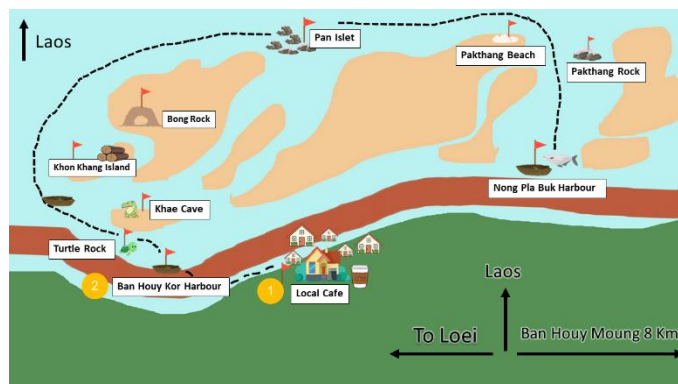
It is designed to understand the locals' attitudes and provided in-depth information regarding current local lives. By using field observations and document analysis. Semi-structured face-to-face and focus groups were chosen as the most appropriate approach to gathering primary information. These techniques are opened discussion of a topic. The survey approach included snowball sampling. The key informant was approached with reference from the previous project's academic researcher, whose team has visited the site. Data was collected where thematically analyzed, then was gained insight by group discussion with some local members.

Interview in the local and official dialect, lasting 30 to 45 minutes. These interviews were completed in 2021, of the 14 villagers contacted, 3 research assistants with tourism backgrounds. The interview was based on 12 questions about Ecotourism related principally to the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impact of tourism in the village. Qualitative thematic analyses are widely used in social science research, not only in tourism, and are appropriate for the current exercise, which is concerned with the personal reflections and thoughts of respondents.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Location and attractions

Houy Kor village is 100 kilometers away from the centre of Nong Khai city. The village is a small-scale destination with a total of 80 households who are engaged in farming, raising cattle and chickens, fishing, and collecting and selling banana leaves. Their revenues were about 400-1,000 baht per day (11.34-28.35 Dollars). The rest of their daily income is rubber tapping. They were introduced to the ecotourism project as part of the local government projection and as a result of the local location, it is very much possible to be soon one of the touristic attractions, with only 8 kilometers proximity from popular camping area known as Huoy Moug village. The ecotourism attractions nearby are Pu Nong Peak, Boat cruising along The Me Kong river featuring a number of the island during the summer season, Cocoa growing, local lives sightseeing. The local program can be made for full-day trip or half-day tour, including Me Kong river fish meal which is very special and rare in other parts of Thailand.



*Attractions in Houy Moug village, Sang Kom district, Nong Khai THAILAND*

### Tourism Attraction program

Field observation showed that natural resources at Houy Kor village has high potential in attracting travelers, especially, the Me Kong river and Pu Nong Peak. This area is mountainous and has plenty of scenic spots to be discovered further. The river is very beautiful and calm. The islands in the river can be seen during the summer season, where the views are different. The sunset is just in the middle of the river. The place is suitable to drop by for an overnight stay, as its activity started early morning to see the sun rising at the top of the mountains, called, Pu Nong Peak, then to visit the local morning lives and cocoa growing, visit a temple and another boat cruising in the late afternoon. Trying Me Kong fish dishes with homemade ingredients meal are finally completed the full-day program.



Cocoa growing



The numerous islands in the Me Kong river



Pu Nong Peak facility



Pu Nong scenic

### Local participation attitude

Local readiness to take part in ecotourism is very little, even though there are some groups of people willing to run the ecotourism. Residents' understanding about the contribution of Ecotourism is limited, they were asked whether their lives are somehow involving ecotourism. They couldn't link their lifestyle and tourism development, how it could help them in the working environment. It is important to understand their perception to assure the development step to be successful (Vodouhe et al., 2010; Holladay and Ormsby, 2011). Most key

informants cannot manage their daily work with tourism activity, although there was sometimes visitor to the village, locals found it complicated to deal the program in time. More importantly, their permanent jobs have consumed their time and they have been busy with family. Working as a service provider can cause their schedule, but they are happy to serve if there is an advanced notification about visitor program and an appropriated revenue. However, using economic stimulus for the main driving reason for ecotourism could be failed (Mosammam H.M et al., 2016; Das and Chatterjee, 2015). There should be an appropriate plan and a proper monitoring assessment and management of ecotourism for long-term conservation (Das and Chatterjee, 2015).

Lack of conservation attitude for managing ecotourism, conservation behavior is naturally exercising along with their daily practice. The locals see themselves as environmental protector, based on their daily skill, but they cannot tell how they are concerned about the impact of environment and how they agree to save the natural resources. Concern of global warming on environment affecting their lives is existent. However, they cannot see connection between the ecosystem and their normal activities. Using local knowledge and simple tools, such as fishing net and seasoning hunting, is a simple technique in protecting natural landscape. They don't see themselves disturbing natural habitats. Therefore, locals have not enough knowledge of conservation as they think they living in harmony with nature. This show understanding of ecotourism and conservation knowledge which is blurred and also is affecting to minimal villager participation (Zhang and Lei, 2012). Additionally, local willingness to participate in ecotourism is ambiguous, due to their role and responsibility in the community. Key informants have not yet seen the importance to be ready for

tourism service, though there are some arrangements, e.g. tourism provider group/committee, village transport group. Regarding the revenue contribution, they have not yet clearly defined. As some tourism activities have been held seasonally, there seem to be very individual advantage.

It is noted that key informants who take care of tourism development in the village are most likely the one who has leading role in the village e.g. village administrator, local governor, and religious staff. Tourism policy supported by the central government has placed responsibility and role to local agents. The tourism engagement doesn't come from the inside out, community engagement level is dependent on local authority and leadership roles. Ecotourism engagement in Houy Kor area may be classified as passive participation and non-participation as found by studied of Park et al., (2017). The locals don't initially build their new approach to protect and prepare for upcoming ecotourism development.

## CONCLUSION

It is suggested that this community has to be supported financially and academically by the government. By starting in some active groups and planning for future ecotourism. In other words, considering village engagement that can be taken from all member role and responsibility is very crucial. Thought, this study found out that there is uncertain and passive engagement from the people living in, Houy Kor village is still at the beginning of the ecotourism development, where people can be educated by the related responsible organization/ local authority. To ensure that ecotourism will be sustainable and benefit the community. However, there is a limitation of the study, the research was collected during the Covid pandemic, therefore, some

activities could not associate in a large group of people.

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