

To what extent are local people actively involved in ecotourism development through choice? Exploring societal values and ecotourism sustainability in Chiang Rai

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To what extent are local people actively involved in ecotourism development through choice? Exploring societal values and ecotourism sustainability in Chiang Rai

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Our focus

- **We adopted a neo-empiricist approach**
 - as researchers we took an objective position to collate and interpret subjective local views on responses to ecotourism within the broader context of societal values and sustainability
- **We began with research propositions**
 - acceptance of ecotourism as a (tourism) development path by under-developed traditional societies is related to the contextual values of societies in which ecotourism development occurs (Cater, 2006):
 - *What alternative options might under-developed traditional societies pursue?*
 - *How else might sustainability (as understood from the perspective of the developed world) be achieved?*
 - *If modernisation is a societal goal of under-developed traditional societies then, rather than arguing against imposition of Western thought and Euro-American development models, surely traditional societies should be able to pursue tourism?*
- **We identified a need to explore agency in relation to ecotourism**
 - 'To what extent are local people actively involved or not in ecotourism due to choice?'

Literature review: key themes

- **Agency in ecotourism development**

- development theorists - '**free choice and political will**' (Hill, 2005; Hyden, 1997; Portes, 1973)
- tourism scholars - '**winners and losers**' (Tribe, 2008; Buhalis, 1999; Collins, 1999; Brohman, 1996; Stonich et al, 1995; Smith & Eadington, 1992)

- **Ecotourism and inclusivity**

- '**involvement and non-involvement in tourism**' (Ashley, 2000);
- '**imposed tourism, the favouring of political elites and social equity**' (Carrier and Macleod, 2005; Mbwaia, 2005)
- '**divisions and tensions that exist within local communities**' (Gray, 2007; Brennan & Allen, 2001; Sproule, 1996; Robinson, 1999)

- **Appropriate livelihoods and traditional societies**

- '**decisions to become involved in or increase involvement in tourism**' (Blackstock, 2005; Stronza, 2001; Bramwell & Sharman, 1999)

- **Power, fairness and use of scarce resources**

- '**material circumstances and cultural values**' (Sebele, 2010; Lepp, 2007; Gadd, 2005; Cater, 2003; Scheyvens, 1999; Wilkinson & Pratiwi, 1995)

- **Appropriate levels of involvement in decision-making**

- '**opportunities for local communities to gain involvement**' (Liu, 2003; Goodwin, 2002, Ashley & Roe, 1998; Cooke, 1982)

Conceptualising 'societal values' in the context of our research

- We identified 3 discourses of sustainability that we wished to explore relating to our focus after reviewing the literature:
 - *'Views about appropriate livelihoods';*
 - *'Views about fairness in local society and in the use of scarce local resources';*
 - *'Views about appropriate levels of involvement in decision-making'.*
- These were examined within a broad and integrative social theoretical perspective - 'political ecology' - as part of our wider research study
 - **Our conceptual framework - 'discourses of sustainability'**

Conceptual framework of the research (as part of a wider study)

The focus in
this
presentation

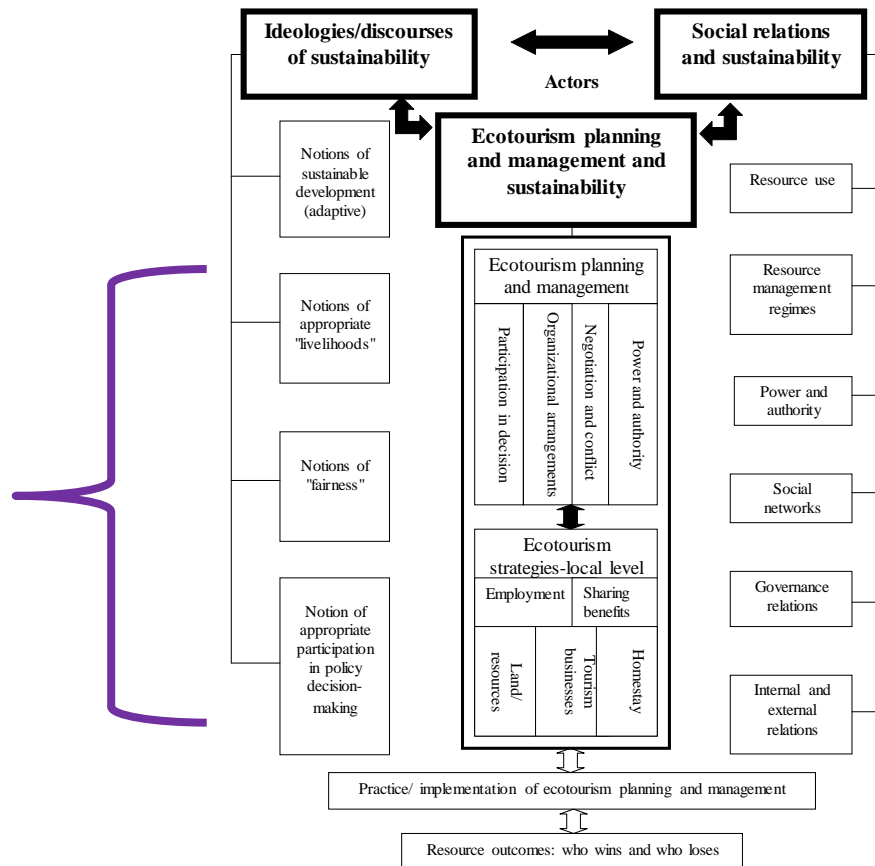
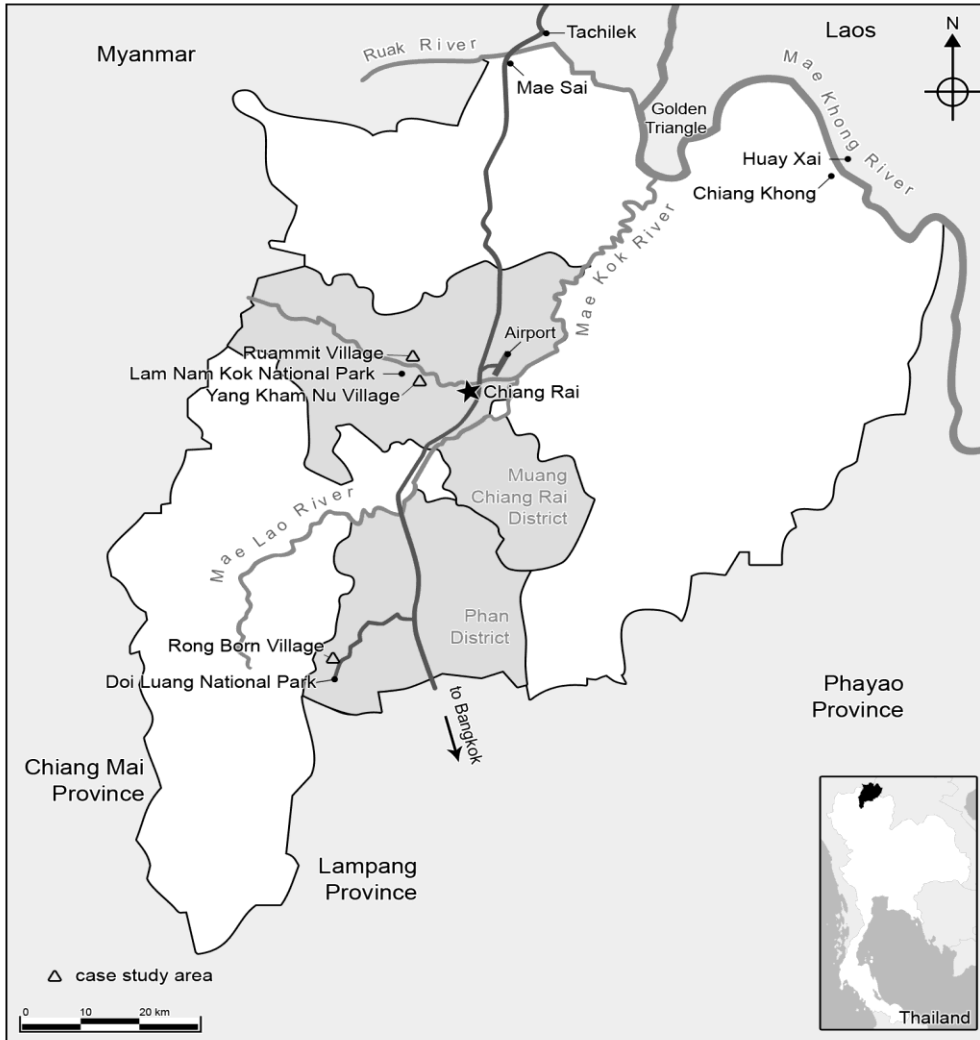


Figure 1: Conceptual framework to evaluate ecotourism planning and management and sustainable development in three case study areas in Chiangrai province, Thailand.

Geographical context of our research



Map of Thailand and Chiang Rai Province as the case study area

- Rong Born
- Yang Kham Nu
- Ruammit

Source: hand-drawn by the authors.

Methodology

- In-depth interviews (3 intensive periods of fieldwork over 6 months in total) - 72 interviews with:
 - 52 local people from across the 3 villages of Rong Born, Yang Kham Nu and Ruammit village
 - 3 tour operators
 - 12 non-governmental organization representatives
 - 5 local government officials
- Snowball sampling was employed
- Non-participant observation (village meetings, field notes, photographs)
- Thematic analysis was employed (Franzosi, 2004)

Key findings - salient themes (1)

- **'Views about appropriate livelihoods'**
 - discussed primarily in terms of economic income rather than maintenance of cultural traditions.
 - repeatedly expressed in relation to land ownership - control and power were perceptually linked to land as a resource of which ownership meant control over livelihood options.
 - tourism (and ecotourism) emerged as a livelihood option for the landless (ethnic groups with no Thai nationality card).

Key findings - salient themes (2)

- **'Views about fairness in local society and in the use of scarce local resources'**
 - land ownership again emerged as a fundamental issue - not owning land was perceived to not only restrict livelihood opportunities but also access to valued resources - land
 - profitable ecotourism had generated envy amongst 'landed' population who felt obliged to farm because of economic necessity rather than for reasons of stewardship and conservation

Key findings - salient themes (3)

- **'Views about appropriate levels of involvement in decision-making'**
 - few local people had been involved in decision-making. They had solely been informed about what development projects were going to be undertaken and had played a passive role.
 - a key influence on villager participation appeared to be the village leader and the representation that local tourism entrepreneurs and workers have through those leaders, often on the basis of shared ethnicity (there was some variance across the 3 villages).
 - Only those involved in tourism wanted to be involved in decision-making and their desired involvement was to try to influence policies to benefit their own individual livelihoods rather than for the greater good of the community.

Conclusions: *To what extent are local people actively involved in ecotourism development through choice?*

- **Involvement in ecotourism** - found to be to a large extent determined by structural forces (legislation around citizenship and laws around land ownership) - **challenging assumptions about ability of ecotourism development to empower if there exists a lack of choice and free will and restricted agency**
- **Involvement in ecotourism decision-making** - only those involved in tourism wanted to be involved and their desired involvement was to try to influence policies to benefit their own livelihoods rather than for the greater good of the community - **challenging assumptions of community cohesion in studies of tourism in traditional under-developed societies and highlighting the existence of 'individualism'**
- **Implications for further research**
 - There is a need to contextualise societal values and to understand local responses within studies of (community-based) ecotourism development and to consider the extent to which (eco)tourism development activities mirror or reflect wider societal values if ecotourism development sustainability is to be achieved

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