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Societal values and local responses to ecotourism amongst villagers in Chiang Rai, Thailand

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Short author profile

Nicola Palmer has researched ecotourism development in a number of Asian and post-soviet contexts namely, the Kyrgyz republic, Mongolia and the Russian Federation. She is particularly interested in the politics of development, local voices and discourses.

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Abstract

This paper examines local responses to ecotourism within the broader context of societal values. It acknowledges a strong contextual dimension to understanding those responses, and supports that with in-depth research on three villages in Chiang Rai in northern Thailand. The paper finds that land ownership is a central issue: those without land are those who consider alternative livelihoods to agriculture. Tourism, rather than a development option denied to under-privileged or unconnected members of society, appears to be a key development option for those without land. An uncontested view was expressed that benefits from tourism should be individually received by those involved, rather by communities as a whole. Involvement in tourism decision making was low and only desired by those directly involved, as a means of potentially increasing their personal incomes. For those stakeholders, involvement is dependent on village leaders and the representation that local tourism entrepreneurs and workers have through those leaders (on the basis of shared ethnicity). These findings question an understanding within the tourism development literature that positions host communities as being empowered through tourism, and adds to increasing criticism of aspects of community based tourism.

Key words: Ecotourism; livelihoods; participation; decision-making; societal values; Thailand.

Introduction

Many studies of local responses to tourism have focused on the attitudes of individuals and used quantitative methods. They have not considered the responses of individuals, social groups and also of broad communities in a holistic way. It remains observable that qualitative research has been used (or at least published) less than quantitative in this context and there is an urgent need for more consideration of societal values - of collective mores - and their reciprocal connections with individuals' responses to tourism. Society as well as the individual is important because of society's collective political strengths, because of the inherited beliefs and ways of life of society, and because of the propensity for changes to be copied across society - via 'social diffusion'. Previous researchers have sought to identify generic or universal features or trends (for example, the influence of distance from tourism centres on individuals' attitudes to tourism, or consistent patterns of change in attitudes over the destination life cycle, the roles of women in tourism development programmes), and they have not focused on the broad influence of specific societal contexts in specific circumstances on the responses to tourism. There has also been more focus on people's attitudes rather than on people's active involvement or lack of involvement in tourism. Further, most studies have lacked a broad and integrative social theoretical perspective to help to explain local responses to tourism, except perhaps through the very specific perspective of social exchange theory.

This paper seeks to develop research on responses to tourism in all these alternative directions. More specifically, it looks at societal values and responses to ecotourism amongst villagers in Chiang Rai, Thailand, and it focuses on three specific clusters of societal values or collective social mores: 'views about appropriate livelihoods'; 'views about fairness in local society and in the use of scarce local resources'; and 'views about appropriate levels of involvement in decision making'.

Consideration is given to attitudes towards tourism and whether people are actively involved or lack involvement in ecotourism. The responses to ecotourism amongst individuals, social groups and the broad community are considered as well as the wider influence of specific societal contexts in specific circumstances on these responses to ecotourism. These are examined within a broad and integrative social theoretical perspective - political ecology, although this is a background issue for this paper.

Ecotourism and traditional societies

Ecotourism as a development option is attractive for developing countries, largely due to low capital input and the ability to outsource marketing activities to tour agencies and operators. It is especially appealing for more remote rural areas within these countries, because of the limited alternative development options that are on offer in such geographical locations. Furthermore, in these locations there often exists a traditional dependency on natural resources in the day-to-day living and subsistence of local communities, and these resources may be re-valorised for tourist consumption. Such ecotourism development has

the potential to be exploitative and focused on short-term gains, and more researchers and governments are now putting increased emphasis on the need to ensure that ecotourism promotes sustainable development (Fennell, 2008; Wearing and Neil, 1999; Weaver, 2006; Weaver, 2008).

One of the key arguments in favour of ecotourism development in traditional underdeveloped societies fundamentally rests on resource management - either an area is perceived to possess a wealth of natural and cultural under-developed or 'unspoilt' resources and/or it is perceived to be lacking in development options because of resource scarcity with respect to commoditisation options. As a means of optimising existing resources, ecotourism has received much academic and political attention.

There has, however, been considerable debate over the extent to which tourism development *per se* and ecotourism, in particular, reflects and reinforces western dominance, dependency and fits with modernisation theorists (Duffy, 2006; Mitchell and Reid, 2001; Mowforth and Munt, 1998; Scheyvens, 2002) and, thus, with this in mind, it is important to recognise that evaluations of ecotourism management require a better understanding of the contextual values of societies in which ecotourism development occurs (Cater, 2006). The attractiveness of ecotourism as a development option for geographical areas that are considered to be underdeveloped or lacking in modernisation has been well-commentated (Cater, 2003; Duffy, 2008; Fennell, 2008; Weaver, 1993). There are some fundamental issues relating to the consideration of and acceptance of ecotourism as a (tourism) development path by underdeveloped traditional societies. What alternative options might underdeveloped 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 underdeveloped traditional societies then, rather than arguing against imposition of Western thought and Euro-American development models, surely traditional societies should be able to pursue ecotourism? Together, all of these questions indicate a need to explore agency in relation to ecotourism development. To what extent are local people actively involved or not involved in tourism due to choice?

Agency in ecotourism development

The extent to which free choice and political will exists in traditional under-developed societies has generated discussion amongst development theorists (Hill, 2005; Hyden, 1997; Portes, 1973). In tourism, a much more simplistic discussion has emerged in relation to participation in tourism. At a basic level the existence of those who have involvement in tourism (often termed 'winners') versus those who are not involved in tourism (often termed 'losers') has been well-documented with respect to the tourism development process (Buhalis, 1999; Brohman, 1996; Collins, 1999; Smith and Eadington, 1992; Stonich *et al*, 1995; Tribe, 2008). There has been little attention paid to the reactions or feelings of those 'losers' (or of the 'winners'). Nor has there been a thorough examination of the social processes that shape or determine life chances and/or involvement in ecotourism as an economic activity.

It has also often been implicitly assumed that everyone in a given community will wish to be part of an ecotourism development process and to benefit from that process but it may be contended that this assumption fails to acknowledge the broader and deeper societal contexts within which development takes place. Some societies tend to be heavily role-based and hierarchical in structure and continue to function precisely because of an understanding and acceptance of shared contributions via clearly defined roles. The prescription of those roles and the desire for social mobility or fluidity and the ability for this to happen lies at the heart of critiques or challenges to the *status quo*, in whatever way the *status quo* may be challenged. Some people may, therefore, want to be involved in tourism and some may not - the issue is whether or not opportunities for involvement exist for those who do (and whether or not opportunities to resist involvement also exist for those that do not). In essence, the extent to which there exist active choices and opportunities to take part in ecotourism as a livelihood activity is open to question.

Ecotourism and inclusivity

Ashley (2000) is one of few tourism researchers to consider local residents' choices with respect to involvement and non-involvement in tourism, and the reasons behind their choices, using the context of Namibia. However, whilst Ashley's work contributes to an understanding of local concerns over tourism development, her analysis is heavily focused on tourism as a poverty reduction strategy and the notion of human agency and free will is perhaps compromised by this. Focusing on social capital in relation to ecotourism development (and positioning this within the context of wider structural power, inequality and exclusion) as many tourism researchers tend to do, frustrates reflections on actor responses and perhaps underplays the social negotiations that occur within development processes (Peters, 2004).

Some academics have argued that, rather than being a development option, ecotourism has been imposed on traditional underdeveloped societies and has favoured political elites and often reinforced their societal status and rewards. Carrier and Macleod (2005), for example, focus specifically on ecotourism as one aspect of sustainability 'celebrating and protecting' both the natural environment and local people. They draw attention to the way in which the perceived distinctiveness of certain cultural practices can 'exclude from view' the social relations and situations that bring specific local (environmental and cultural) resources into existence and to the attention of the ecotourist. Mbwaia (2005) has developed this idea in relation to the socio-cultural impacts of tourism development in the Okavango Delta, Botswana. In particular, he has identified access to natural resources for tourism purposes as an issue linked to social equity in sustainable development, a socio-cultural benefit and form of empowerment. The potentially divisive nature of ecotourism development whereby certain social groups are identified to be included and excluded has received much attention (Brennan and Allen, 2001; Gray, 2007; Robinson, 1999; Sproule, 1996). These ideas tend to focus on divisions and tensions that exist within (and – Mbwaia, 2005 – between) local communities rather than considering the ways in which defined roles exist which are often not only accepted by community members but also help communities to function.

Appropriate livelihoods and traditional societies

The idea of 'appropriateness' in relation to ways of making a living should be considered in relation to social mores. The idea of 'appropriate livelihoods' refers to ways of making a living that local people feel comfortable with and that are suited to their way of life (Tao and Wall, 2009; Dillen, 2000), helping to conserve aspects of traditional societies. Certain 'ways of life' or lifestyles may be deeply valued and, in this context, then there may be resistance to change - people may not want to leave behind a way of life that they have valued (Bernstein *et al.*, 1992). But, development implies change. Farrell (1999) highlights the sustainability trinity which aims at the smooth (but often conflicting) and transparent integration of economy, society and environment. This perspective on sustainability considers how locals have had to change from time-to-time through particular developments and have adjusted their ways of making a living accordingly. Tourism has been especially recognised to be one economic development response to de-industrialisation, excessive dependency on few traditional exports (Brohman, 1996), and a need to generate foreign exchange. Decisions to become involved in or increase involvement in tourism have been observed to reflect receptivity to change and alternative ways of thinking (Bramwell and Sharman, 1999), be driven by specific conditions or incentives (Stronza, 2001) or to be facilitated or constrained by structural inequalities (Blackstock, 2005).

De Haan and Zoomers (2005), researchers of development and change, argue how power is an important (and sometimes overlooked) explanatory variable in relation to livelihood opportunities. They argue that, '*access to livelihood opportunities is governed by social relations, institutions and organizations*' (De Haan and Zoomers, 2005: 27), implying the relevance of political ecology.

Power, fairness and use of scarce resources

In tourism, authors such as Walpole and Goodwin (2001) argue that traditional societies often have high expectations of 'what tourism could offer them' in terms of opportunities to participate in and benefit from tourism. In reality, it has been observed that expected participation rates and benefit opportunities often do not materialise or are limited to only small sections of society. The reasons for this have been noted to reflect both material circumstances (being 'extrinsic') and also cultural values (being 'intrinsic'). Cater (2003) for example, observes how many people are unable to afford to participate whereas Scheyvens (1999) and Wilkinson and Pratiwi (1995) have reported benefits from tourism to be different according to gender, with women tending to gain more than men, economically (usually due to traditional gender-marked divisions of labour).

When tourism is developed in a traditional society, issues of resource scarcity and struggles over resource access have been recognised to involve politics and power inequities. Most interpretations of what is or is not fair appear to have been made largely by western academics or 'outsiders' rather than having been expressed by local people. Indeed, Cater (2003:36) has noted how in response to this:

'Blaikie (2000:1037) questions the right of the author to represent the object of development rather than letting them 'represent themselves, tell their own authentic stories, and let them be heard above and over the master narrative of the author'

It cannot be assumed that actors in developing countries will hold similar notions of fairness to actors in the West, and instead these notions should be seen to be the complex consequences of ideological norms often developed and sustained by particular political regimes. A number of research papers in fact suggest that western horror of tourism by residents is just not there – communities are often willing to accept development that allows them to make personal gains (see for example, Lepp, 2007; Gadd, 2005; Sebele, 2010). In traditional societies which tend to be hierarchical and heavily role-based then it is easy for 'outsiders' to highlight inequalities that appear to frustrate the principles of distributive justice. In tourism, this has often happened, particularly in relation to poverty alleviation and Pro-poor Tourism (Carbone, 2005; Hummel and van der Duim, 2012). De Kadt (1992) has also highlighted distributive justice to be of relevance to achieve the Bruntland concept of sustainable development with respect to the well-being of future generations. However, there is a lack of research that considers non-western constructs of justice in relation to resource distribution in tourism. Outside of the field, then there are authors who have considered local responses to distributive justice, arguing its importance for social stability (Hochschild, 1981), a need to acknowledge the 'politics of scarcity' (Cook and Hegtvedt, 1983) and the issue of legitimacy with respect to resource distribution (Della Fave, 1980). However, research appears to have been applied predominantly in the context of western societies.

Appropriate levels of involvement in decision making

There are many studies of tourism development that advocate increased community involvement and participatory planning, seeking to widen inclusion in tourism decision-making. Blackstock (2005) argues that structural inequalities within communities influence local decision-making and that trying to redress low and exclusive levels of involvement in tourism decision-making requires more radical interventions (to tackle inequalities at a much wider societal level).

Involvement in tourism decision making is often assumed to be wanted by local people and discussions of sustainable tourism development and socially-appropriate tourism development have historically tended to focus on opportunities for local communities to gain involvement (Ashley and Roe, 1998; Cooke, 1982; Goodwin, 2002; Liu, 2003). Barriers and constraints to tourism involvement in tourism have often been identified based on assumptions that for local communities involvement in decision-making is desirable. The issue of appropriate participation in policy decision-making is complex and culturally-specific norms and societal values need to be taken into account. Only by gaining the perspectives of actors based within specific geographical case study areas can these issues be explored.

Where tourism involvement is desirable then it has been identified that there are issues of power. Cheong and Miller (2000), Hollinshead (1999), Reed (1997) all argue that power exists within a network of relations. It has been identified in a number of tourism studies that the existence of power elites and connections to the most powerful can affect the ability of local people to influence tourism decision-making. Power has also been linked to control in terms of agency. Cheong and Miller (2000:381) share Blackstock's (1995) observations of the relevance of wider structural inequalities in their observation that *'having the least control can translate into having the least involvement'*.

There is a dearth of research examining motivations for community involvement in tourism decision making. What do communities hope to gain from being involved? Does involvement itself result in empowerment (Scheyvens, 2002)? Joppe (1996) and Jamal and Getz (1995) suggest that involvement is sought in order to try to influence policies to benefit communities and to attempt to reduce actions that might 'harm' those communities, economically or socially. They might also be used to comply – in theory - with development agency requirements (Liu and Wall, 2006; Mitchell and Reid, 2001).

Thailand as a traditional underdeveloped society

Thailand has been chosen for the focus of this study because it is typical of other developing countries with traditional, multi-ethnic societies and it has been noted that the country has witnessed remarkable growth of its tourism industry in general, and of ecotourism in particular (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2005; Laverack and Thangphet, 2009; Ross and Wall, 1999).

During the 1980s, and in the 1990s before the 1997 Southeast Asia economic crisis, Thailand was viewed as a country with a rapidly growing economy, and it became known as a new 'Tiger' (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1995). The government attempted to develop the country through a New Industrialised Economy (NIE) system and, as a result, parts of the country were rapidly transformed with market-led integration, technical revolutions in production, and improved transportation and communication (Falkus, 1995). It, however, depends heavily on foreign economic aid (particularly from the USA, Japan and the International Money Fund), foreign military hardware and financial investment (Wicks, 2000). Under the impacts of these forces, Thailand is clearly divided between urban and rural societies, and by tensions derived from the country's traditional socio-cultural dimensions, including rising gaps between the two extremes in Thai society. Thai rural society implies low labour productivity and low income (Jumbala, 1992), whereas people in urban areas have higher incomes (Kulick and Wilson, 1993; Kuribayashi and Aoyagi-Usui, 1998). With increasing rural out-migration, there are problems of urban poverty, low paid unskilled labour, insufficient investment and dire infrastructure (Ruland and Ladavalya, 1993; Dixon, 1999). It has been observed that Thai society is becoming more divided, urbanised, industrialised and materialistic (Kitilrianglarp and Hewison, 2009), with less regard to traditions and religion (Karunaratne, 1998). Buddhist teachings are no longer pivotal, with Western materialist values becoming more prevalent. There appears to be a spatial dimension to these claims,

however, reflecting a geographically divided country. Rigg *et al.* (2008), for example, argue the presence of a 'moral economy' in rural lives in Central Thailand yet any existence of this has been challenged by Prayukvong (2005) in the context of the development of community enterprises in Southern Thailand.

Chiangrai province and ecotourism

Chiang Rai province, in Northern Thailand, was chosen as the geographical basis for the case study areas in this research because it combines strong agricultural and ecotourism sectors, both important for rural socio-economic development. The province marks the northernmost borders of Thailand, with natural walls of high mountains surrounding the province and separating it from Myanmar and Laos. The abundant and relatively unchanged mountains and forests are home to several ethnic minorities, such as Thai Yai, Karen, Yao, and other tribal groups. The province has many ecotourism resources, with 3 national parks, 9 forest parks, one arboretum and 31 designated forest areas (Chiangrai Provincial Office, 2006). Both domestic and international tourists are attracted by the ecotourism resources and activities in the province, such as the many forests, nature trips, and trekking trails. The national and provincial governments recognize the importance of ecotourism for the economy and there are many policies for growth in the sector and also for sustainable development. The province has become a second destination for tourism in northern Thailand after Chiang Mai province (Chiang Rai Provincial Office, 2006), and has a scenario plan to become the 'Gateway to Indochinese countries', capitalising on its boundaries with Chiang Mai, Myanmar, Laos PDR and inner China through Yunnan and Sichuan.

Research approach

Three rural case study areas in Chiang Rai province, Thailand (Figure 1), were selected: Rong Born village; Yang Kham Nu village; and Ruammit village. Each has differing management regimes: the first consists of a homogenous group of indigenous Northern Thai people that control their local community forest as a product for their ecotourism activities; the second is characterised by another homogenous group of tribal people (*Karen* tribe) that influence and control their local community forest and their diversified agriculture, as well as their local ways of life, as a basis for their ecotourism products; and the last is characterised by both a mixed group of tribal people and indigenous Northern Thai people, external tourism companies, and recently by increasing local government involvement, part of a new Thailand-wide attempt to strengthen local government.

Figure 1: Map of Thailand and Chiang Rai Province as the case study area



Source: The authors (2014)

The three areas are united in that their communities consist of indigenous Northern Thai and hill-tribes, but there are also differences between the three areas in terms of their tourism resources and cultural patterns or ways of life. The three different contexts allow for evaluations of the patterns and processes of ecotourism planning and management at work, creating greater confidence about the wider conclusions drawn from this piece of exploratory research.

The research examined local responses to ecotourism: views about appropriate livelihoods; views about fairness in local society and in the use of scarce local resources; and views about appropriate levels of involvement in decision making. Overall, the research sought to establish and understand the contextual dimension to responses to tourism development.

In-depth interviews were the main data collection method. Three intensive periods of fieldwork were undertaken spanning a three-year period. In total, 72 interviews were conducted in four locations, including the capital city of Thailand (Bangkok) and the three case study areas in Chiang Rai province. These field visits were prepared well before the interviews were made, with advance contacts by letter and telephone. A total of 4 national, 4 provincial, 4 non-governmental organizations (2 of them were non-governmental offices and other 2 were NGOs), 5 local governmental officials (2 were from 2 districts and 3 were from 3 Tambon Administration Organisations - TAOs), 3 tour operators and 50 local people from the three villages were targeted. A broad selection of respondents, including direct stakeholders and the general public in the villages, resulted in a holistic survey of all involved in or affected by ecotourism planning and management in the case study areas. Local interviewees from the villages included village leaders and representatives of: farmers, elderly and young people, village shop owners; accommodation service providers (home-stay service); religious leaders; and the housewives' club. The respondents were key informants and the sampling was purposive. The samples were identified partly in advance, based on the researcher's considerable local knowledge and on the themes of the research, with lists then adjusted and added to as appropriate. A snowball sampling technique was adopted (Denscombe, 2003): local people were found to be aware of the people most relevant to the issue and who might offer a distinctive response and unique insights. This is especially important since the study is focused on community definitions of appropriate development. The selected respondents were in different fields and had different roles in the local development of ecotourism. Some were selected specifically because they might not be concerned directly with ecotourism activity (such as farmers), but as villagers it was assumed that they would still hold views in relation to ecotourism activities and ecotourism planning and management within their village.

The resulting data was analysed using content analysis, a technique that provides new insights and increases researcher understanding of particular phenomena, especially relevant here in relation to examining local responses. Thematic analysis, where the coding scheme was based on categories designed to capture the dominant themes present in the text, was used (Franzosi, 2004: 550).

Views about appropriate livelihoods

Livelihoods were discussed primarily in terms of economic income rather than relating to more intrinsic benefits such as maintaining cultural traditions, following in the footsteps of family etc. In fact money emerged as a fundamental, constant theme throughout the responses in relation to livelihoods, supporting the ideas of Stronza (2001) in terms of local people being driven by specific conditions or incentives. Responses to ways

of making a living were also repeatedly expressed in relation to land ownership in all three case study villages. Control and power seem to be perceptually linked to land as a resource of which ownership meant control over livelihood options.

In relation to ways of making a living that local people feel comfortable with and that are perceived to be suited to their way of life (Tao and Wall, 2009; Dillen, 2000) then the dominance of farming as a livelihood was linked to the traditional subsistence economies of the three villages. One farmer in Yang Kham Nu commented that:

"...We are happy to work on our farms because we are farmers and we get benefits from the farm (money and meals)."

Another farmer in Ruammit stated, *"I work as a farmer because I eat rice...If there is no rice we have to buy some from others, but I do not want to do that."*

Although farming is a traditional social activity in all three villages studied, there did not appear to exist a sense of obligation to maintain farming livelihoods across generations (a classic response also observed amongst studies of Western farmers). Indeed, a farmer at Rong Born remarked:

"A farm job is a hard job...We [farmers] have to work in strong sunlight...very hot and humid...and the earnings after the harvest are less than people who work in the city centre, such as officers...I would prefer my children to get higher education in order to get a well-paid job in the city centre or some other big cities."

Similarly, those villagers not working in tourism did not indicate that there exists a strong impetus to maintain traditional livelihoods for any cultural reasons. A souvenir shop worker at Ruammit revealed, for example:

"I think working on a farm is a hard job compared to my job...My brother is studying Law at a university in Chiang Rai...I do not want him to work on a farm...I hope he will get a good job in the city or other big city...It provides more money than farming."

The extent to which farming was regarded as a livelihood choice rather than a traditional obligation within the three traditionally agrarian villages was difficult to fully ascertain. This is because livelihood choice was positioned very clearly in relation to land ownership. It is mainly landless villagers who work in tourism businesses in their own villages or in other areas outside as tourist guides, and in the hotels in Chiang Rai. The people who have no land were more likely to move into tourism because it provided them with a means of livelihood over which they had felt they had some control - in the sense of being entrepreneurs rather than being employed by others. In contrast, local people who had their own land commented that they preferred to work on their own farm rather than in tourism.

Thus, farming was identified as their favoured livelihood. In relation to this, some strong views were expressed that suggested tourism was not highly regarded as a livelihood activity. Some indigenous farmers in Ruammit village even stated that they would be ashamed to work in tourism businesses as this would show that they lacked land and that they had to serve tourists because they lacked ownership of land.

However, alternatively, some of the landless villagers were happy to work in tourism businesses in the villages, as expressed by a souvenir shop owner at Ruammit:

"We [the interviewee and his sister] had no land for farming at our hometown...My sister moved to work here and opened her small souvenir shop in this village [Ruammit]...We are happy to work here...I can get higher education...I am studying at a university in Chiangrai."

Here, tourism appears to be seen not as a vocation but as a 'means to an end' - a source of income to fund higher education to pursue a more lucrative career in the future. In fact, villagers appear to be largely indifferent to tourism livelihoods. Tourism appears to be simply viewed as one accessible livelihood option offering a source of income to these economically challenged societies. This seemingly opportunistic approach towards working in tourism is suggested by the following respondents:

"I have no land for farming. I work as a tourist guide...a trekking tour guide...I think I have enough money for my family...such as I can pay the educational fee at a university in the city for my daughter. I am satisfied with this job." (A tourist guide at Yang Kham Nu)

"My father has got land for farming...but we are a big family...and I am happy to work in a hotel in the city... Yes, I ride my motorcycle to work and return home because it is not that far from here [referring to his home]." (Youth at Ruammit)

"I had once worked in industry in another province...After years [7 years] I returned home here [at Ruammit] to settle down here...I opened a small food shop for both locals and visitors... It is not bad...and I can stay with my family...My parents are getting old and they need me to look after them." (A food shop owner at Ruammit)

The extent to which tourism was the livelihood of choice for villagers who did not own land must, therefore, be questioned. There were social differences within the villages because some villagers owned more land and some owned less land and the latter were dependent on working on other people's farms in the village or seeking alternative ways to making a living. These differences were ethnically-defined. Ethnic tribal people, for example, felt that it was very difficult to own their own land because they had migrated from place to place in the past. A few of them had owned land in villages previously, but they recounted that they had sold the land to other people, and had become landless again. This landless position

meant that they felt it was difficult to work in farming. Partly as a consequence, they regarded themselves as poorer than the indigenous, land-owning people, as exemplified by the comment made by one housewife at Yang Kham Nu:

"The indigenous people are richer than us...they have good facilities...perhaps, their ancestors had left them good land and things...or they had higher education compared to us... we are far away from the city."

At Ruammit village, the groups of tribal people said that they did not own land because their tribal status meant that they lacked some of the rights of people who had Thai national identity. For example, they could only buy land if they could show a Thai national identity card. In terms of how this has affected tourism it transpired that landless people, in particular some of the tribal groups in Ruammit village, had become very involved in tourism businesses in the village, especially selling souvenirs to tourists. It was found that the local tourism businesses in Ruammit village were almost all operated by tribal people from the village. In the past, these people had joined the village from outside and they paid shop rentals to the local people. They had become permanently established and were seen to be accepted as members of the village.

Essentially, social status was found to be attached to land ownership, tied to national identity and indigenous rights. But this does not mean that land cannot be bought and sold, albeit with restrictions and apparent social repercussions. In Yang Kham Nu, it was pertinent that the village leader recounted:

"There were some business people from outside who came to the village to buy land from the villagers...For example, my relative, she wanted to sell her land to the business man...I did not agree with her...I told her to compare the good and bad sides after selling the land and that she would become landless...Moreover, some tribal people around the sub-district had no Thai nationality card...so, it is difficult for them to buy land for themselves."

These social differences suggest that to be landless and to work in tourism is not desirable from the perspective of the indigenous population. However, the situation appears to be more complex than at first sight. It was apparently acceptable for farming to be supplemented with other business activities in response to the seasonal nature of rice farming. Similarly, ethnic non-landowners reported that they also combined tourism jobs with farming work (labouring for land-owning farmers). Thus, the status of tourism as a livelihood was not clear-cut and the influence of power as an explanatory variable in relation to livelihood opportunities (De Haan and Zoomers, 2005) requires further exploration.

Views about fairness in local society and in the use of scarce local resources

Once again, in discussions about fairness and local resource use, land ownership emerged as a fundamental issue. For the villagers, ownership of land appears to imply that one will farm and will have better economic prospects in terms of risk factors. In contrast, not owning land is perceived to restrict not only livelihood opportunities but also access to valued resources - land - and means that villagers have been forced to consider other ways of making a living as previously discussed. Where ecotourism has started to become profitable it is apparent that there exists envy amongst the 'landed' population who, because of economic necessity, rather than conservation or stewardship reasons, feel obliged to farm:

"A farm job is a hard job...I would prefer my children to get higher education in order to get a well-paid job in the city..." (Farmer at Rong Born).

Another thing about wealth and social position is the argument about the status of Thai versus other ethnic groups. Indigenous Thai citizens appeared to be noticeably more influential and powerful, having a higher social status than other ethnic groups. This is partly because indigenous people think that tribal people are minority groups and, consequently, that some of them do not have Thai national identity. Moreover, there is a history here that relates to resource access and resource (mis-)use. It was reported that some of the non-Thai ethnic groups were believed to have destroyed the forest for crops and logging purposes when they first arrived in the area, lacking farm land. There was a small amount of cutting down of the forest in Ruammit village and Rong Born village by these ethnic groups before the community forests were set up in the mid and late 1990s. This appeared to be prominent in the minds of some of the Thai villagers when they spoke about the use of scarce local resources:

"Tribal people destroyed the forest [pointed to a forest area]...because they were landless and they were poor...Like tribal people nearby our village, they had been moved out from a protected area and they asked to settle down on the side of Doi Luang National Park." (Farmer at Rong Born)

"In the past [12 years ago] we lacked water for farming...because our forest was destroyed...and there were forest fires many times...It was terrible...we think about how we could save and restore our good environment..." (Farmer at Rong Born)

However, the concerns over resource abuse appear to be motivated principally by economics and the threat to other livelihoods (namely, farming) rather than having environmental conservation concerns at heart. It has been argued that being tied to the land and nature strongly influences their lives and beliefs (Forsyth, and Walker, 2008; Ganjanapan, 2000). Natural resources, for example, are important in order to support their agricultural practices. It is not a surprise that many local people want their community to take care of their community forest resources. The people appear to be concerned about their natural resources such as forest and water sources because these resources support their local ways of life and affect their ability to make money.

The way in which livelihoods are to a large extent driven by land ownership affects the ability of all community members to participate in tourism and, as previously discussed, because land ownership is to an extent ethnically-determined issues of social status are revealed whereby indigenous villagers are perceived to be privileged. In terms of benefits accrued from tourism livelihoods then it was found that because farmers were primarily involved in farming issues, they were not especially concerned about how tourism operated and how they could benefit and distribute those benefits to the village. They reported that the people who work in tourism should be the people who get the benefit from tourist activities - in line with Della Fave's (1980) notion that the issue of legitimacy is important in resource distribution. One farmer at Ruammit, for instance, remarked:

"People who are involved in the tourism business should retain the benefits of their works... Like small local shops in the village, they have sold souvenirs or meals to tourists, then they should get the benefits [money] from the visitors."

This, of course, had implications for any expectations that tourism could and should be a community-based activity. The idea that rewards should go to those participating in tourism livelihoods was also explained further by those villagers who did not primarily work in tourism but would join in activities where they perceived they possessed relevant skills. An example would be the housewife and youth clubs, which have been involved in, for example, preparing food for tourists and guiding tourists on nature trails. There were some villagers who they were happy to join in tourism activities when relevant - tourism was generally regarded as a source of social pride in the sense that tourists were attracted by their village environments and culture. However, one of tourism's key meanings to the community collectively appeared to be economic as illustrated in terms of explanations surrounding the acceptance of tourism in the villages:

"I feel unhappy with the show of the villagers for tourists, such as the tying of holy thread around the visitors' wrist. It is our way to highly respect our own family. However, we also want to satisfy our tourists and we want more of them to come to the village...We will get more money from them." (Farmer at Yang Kham Nu)

A sense of injustice was expressed over the distribution of tourism benefits to local people when they joined in with tourism activities in their village and reported that they had often not received money in return. When they became involved in tourism activities, they expected to be rewarded because they had spent time helping with the tourism activities. A farmer at Rong Born complained about the lack of economic return:

"Think about yourself [the interviewer]. When you work almost a day in welcoming visitors activities...Take them to the trail [community forest]...But I got nothing...I have two children to get to school ...I have to pay for them for transportation, lunch and for a snack...If I work for the village...what about my family? They have to eat and want money to support their life."

Another issue in common with other researchers of community-based tourism was evident, the issue of commoditisation of labour. For example, one housewife at Rong Born argued:

"I and many of housewives love to provide services for visitors, but we cannot work for free...We have jobs to do to gain income for my family...This time if the village leader wants a cook for visitors, she has to pay for housewives ...she has now paid round 100 Baht a day...It is a good deal."

With respect to resources, local people believed that if they protected their community forest, then it would provide them with a good environment in order to maintain their livelihoods. One of the farmers at Rong Born commented:

"After the forest has been conserved since 1995 ...the water has grown much more than the time before the conservation began. We can grow rice twice a year...we get water from the forest and also from the irrigation system as well...We can say the conservation has been done in the right way for us."

Farmers in each of the three villages explained about the importance of looking after the community forest to irrigate their paddy fields, typified by the explanation:

"We normally start to plant the paddy field for wet rice from May to November yearly. After that it depends on water or good irrigation, so you can grow another time for the rice between January until April or May...In the last few years we have been able to make a second time for the rice field because we had good irrigation to support our fields."

Resource conservation ideas were expressed not only in terms of their own livelihoods, but also for the next generation. The idea of engaging young people in village conservation activities was discussed and representatives of youth at Rong Born explained about their community forest involvement:

"We were invited to join with the community forest activities, such as learning about what kind of trees there are in the forest and learning to know their importance to our living."

Views about appropriate levels of involvement in decision making

There were few locals who had been involved in local tourism development projects. They reported that they had been solely informed about what projects were going to be undertaken and merely played a passive role. They had only received information on what would be done in their villages and argued that they did not know about all of the processes involved in the projects. Furthermore, when local people were asked about their participatory involvement it was found that only those people who received direct benefits from tourism in the village wanted to be more fully involved in tourism participation. However,

these people said that they did not understand the participation role they should have undertaken. Specifically, they often wanted to know how they could get more benefits from tourism for their families. With respect to this, one souvenir shop owner at Ruammit said:

"Of course, we want to be part of tourism involvement here [at the Ruammit]...We have attended all the village meetings...I have never missed the meetings...I want to know about how tourism is going to be managed in a good way...If there are more tourists, I could get more income from these tourists."

An economic, individualistic view was once again illustrated. Rather than supporting Joppe's (1996) and Jamal's (1995) ideas that involvement in tourism is often sought in order to try to influence policies to benefit communities, in our research study it appeared that involvement was sought to try to influence policies to benefit the individual (Mbwaia, 2005).

There was a clear sense of frustration and resignation expressed in relation to a perceived lack of opportunity for villagers to participate in decision-making. At Rong Born village, these sentiments were recounted :

"Almost all of the projects within the community were planned by our leader and the leader team...We (as a villager) sometimes found it difficult to reject the projects...Because, we did not want to have any conflict with our leaders and the projects were done for us...no point to argue with."

It was only in the village of Yang Kham Nu that the villagers felt that they had become more involved in tourism activities and tourism management. Here, the villagers reported that they had joined meetings to welcome visitors and they could join in with the planning and management of the welcome and tourism activities, or they could withdraw when it was inconvenient to be involved. A key reason influence on villager participation appeared to be the village leader. It was found that the indigenous Thai and Karen people seemed to be more involved in tourism decision making than other ethnic groups because these groups were represented through the ethnicity of the three village leaders. Blackstock's (2005) argument that structural inequalities within communities influence local decision-making appears to hold relevance.

Conclusions and implications for further research

This study explored societal values and responses to ecotourism amongst villagers in Chiang Rai, Thailand. It recognised a need for more consideration of societal values and the broad influence of specific societal contexts in specific circumstances on responses to tourism. The focus was on three specific clusters of societal values or collective social mores: 'views about appropriate livelihoods'; 'views about fairness in local society and in the use of scarce local resources'; and 'views about appropriate levels of involvement in decision making'.

It was found that involvement in tourism did entail choice. However, choices were to some extent governed or constrained by wider social forces and structural inequalities that affected capacity for participation. Lack of land ownership emerged as a key driver of tourism involvement or non-involvement at the level of adopting tourism as a livelihood. Tourism was one of few livelihood options open to villagers without land and was primarily selected for its potential economic returns rather than its vocational relevance. Furthermore, the link between land ownership and ethnicity appeared to shape the perceived social status of tourism and affected the extent to which tourism livelihood opportunities existed through 'free choice'. It cannot be argued, in the context of Chiang Rai, that opportunities for tourism involvement exist for those who want to be involved in tourism (with such involvement presenting potential social stigma) and neither can it be argued that there truly exist opportunities to resist involvement for those who do not (with such involvement being economically-driven). There is a need for further consideration of the ways in which community involvement in tourism is affected by factors relating to both agency and structure.

Strong feelings were expressed that there should be legitimacy in relation to resource distribution and tourism benefits. Rather than those being involved in tourism being seen as 'winners' and those who were not involved in tourism being seen as 'losers', any winning or losing appeared to be perceived only in relation to economic wealth *per se* (not solely arising from the tourism sector but from any type of livelihood). Economic concerns appeared to underlie much of the discussions in relation to tourism involvement. These concerns should perhaps be recognised to be fundamental to meeting basic living standards rather than achieving material wealth in the context of traditional under-developed societies.

In terms of ecotourism and resource management then it was observed that responses to conservation in communities tended to be reactionary (where livelihood income was under threat from resource loss) rather than reflecting true environmental concerns or spiritual values linked to traditional societal belief systems. Further research is needed to investigate motivations for resource management and conservation from the perspective of communities. As Ellingson (2001) has previously argued in his discussion of 'the myth of the noble savage' then it cannot be assumed that local communities will always have altruistic motives for involvement in resource conservation and management. In ecotourism, where it is often assumed that local people are the most appropriate custodians or stewards of environmental and cultural resources, then motives need to be considered much more carefully (Fennell, 2008).

Although socially-shared values appeared to exist in relation to responses to tourism, it was repeatedly found that these values did not suggest the presence of collectivism but, instead, they often demonstrated individualistic concerns. This was clearly illustrated in respect to local involvement in tourism decision-making where only those involved in tourism wanted to be involved in tourism decision-making and they only wanted to be involved to try to influence policies to benefit their own livelihoods rather than for the greater good of the

community. Assumptions of community cohesion in studies of tourism development in traditional under-developed societies must be challenged and more research is needed to examine not solely the existence of altruism but also individualism in these societies. Societal values need to be contextualised and understood in terms of local responses articulated by local people so that researchers can better understand and anticipate the impacts of ecotourism development.

This closure brings us to Salazar and his collected criticisms of community-based tourism (2008; 2012). It also raises a question about Thailand – are its views 'traditional' any longer? Has the 'Tiger period' had wider longer-term societal impacts than commentators realise, and do the current economic divisions reflected in party politics mirror that? But equally in attempting to explore community-level tourism development issues in developing countries we would question the extent to which there any 'traditional' societies left, or is the notion a mere figment of western academic 'dreamland'?

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