

THE POTENTIAL IN DEVELOPING BO SAEN COMMUNITY-BASED ECOTOURISM: AN ANALYSIS USING THE SOAR MODEL

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Abstract: Community-based ecotourism (CBET) became a popular alternative tourism activity post COVID-19. There are a wide range of destinations and activities related to ecotourism in Thailand. This study aims to explore the potential of the Bo Saen subdistrict in Phang-nga, Thailand, as a CBET destination. SOAR analysis was adopted and the focus group approach was utilized. The key informants were comprised of seven heads from villages, or their representatives, and two locals who worked for the Bo Saen CEBT group. The iterative analyses based on SOAR suggests four key aspects: strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results. Nao, a unique local product, was found as a strength, and strong collaboration with local government was indicated as a key opportunity for the tourism development. In addition, the most compelling aspiration was to present their CBET destination to ASEAN. Successful local markets and the linking of tourism routes would be indicators of CBET success. The research results suggest Bo Saen subdistrict is capable of CBET development. The findings provide practical implications for local government.

Keywords: Community-Based Ecotourism, SOAR Model, Bo Saen Community

1. Introduction

Alternative tourism has become popular, especially after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic as individuals try to engage less with mass tourism activities. In general, alternative tourism provides an option to the standard philosophies and attitudes of mass tourism. The main objectives in these travels is to preserve the natural environment, the authentic atmosphere and cuisines, and the local traditions. Alternative forms of tourism combine products and services differently from mass tourism by means of the supplies, organizational methods, and human resource involved (Kaewsanga and Chamnongsri, 2012).

One example of alternative tourism includes eco-tourism. By definition, eco-tourism is the responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education (The International Ecotourism Society, 2016). That is, eco-tourism provides benefits to locals, the environment, and the economy. Eco-tourism is a type of tourism that brings sustainable benefits and invaluable spiritual values (Gio et al., 2021). Mountains, beaches, lakes, seas, valleys, and rivers are

potential sources of eco-tourism activities. Therefore, there is a wide range of activities related to eco-tourism in Thailand including wildlife and nature observation, mountain biking, bamboo rafting, and rock climbing. In addition, a large number of provinces are considered eco-tourism destinations in Thailand. These destinations include Chiang Mai, Satun, Krabi, and Phang Nga. Bo Saen is a subdistrict in Phang Nga, a province of the southern region of Thailand. Bo Saen is located in the Thap Put District with a population of approximately 7,000 from nearly 2,000 households. Natural resources are evident within the area. Mangrove forests and mountains are good examples of natural resources in the subdistrict. The majority of the area is flat with some areas consisting of hills and mountains. In addition to mountains, there is a number of canals, for example, Bo Saen canal, Bang Tung canal, and Bang Sai canal. The south side of the area connects to Phang Nga bay, a popular tourist attraction of Phang Nga city. The natural resources moved the local community to set a vision to develop the area as an eco-tourism destination (Bo Saen Subdistrict Administrative Organization, 2021). One of the key missions of the subdistrict is to create a strong community that is self-reliant. Tourism development has been used as one key strategy to achieve this aim. Therefore, the Bo Saen subdistrict municipality has regularly engaged with the Phang Nga province in tourism development related projects and activities. Thus, this study aims to explore the potential of the Bo Saen subdistrict as an eco-tourism destination. SOAR analysis is adopted in this study.

2. Literature Review

Ecotourism is one of the sectors that is fast growing and global, including Thailand. The government has developed its national parks and marine parks to be prime destinations for ecotourism. Ecotourism became an important element in generating income for the country due to its potential to offer opportunities to local people. It sustains the conservation of the environment and improves the welfare and socioeconomic status of local people. A number of research studies investigating CBET have been found in the existing literature—including CBET development (e.g., Chumnigumjorn & Marniati, 2018; Esichaikul et al., 2021; Mohd Noh et al., 2020; Srichanthawong et al., 2020; Suwanno et al., 2017) and local participation in CBET (e.g., Meemana & Yujun, 2019; Palmer & Chuamuangphan, 2018; Phangnaren, 2019). For example, a study from Phangnaren (2019) found that the overall participation of the local community in sustainable eco-tourism in Nakhon Pathom province was at a moderate level. This extant study found local people engaged in the planning stage of CBET development at a low level, while involved in receiving benefits at a high level.

A large group of CBET scholars worked on the development of CBET. For example, in the Malaysian context, Mohd Noh et al. (2020) found that ecotourism development depended on five factors: existing CBET development, past CBET development, local community participation in the planning stage of tourism, local participation in the implementation stage of tourism, and participation in nature conservation. In the case of Thailand, Suwanno et al. (2017) used the Koh-Mak Community, a well-known ecotourism destination in Phattalung Province, as the research context. This study assessed the potential of ecological resources within the Koh-Mak ecotourism destinations and provided practical guidelines for sustainable ecotourism practices. The findings from Suwanno et al. (2017) suggests that reliable collaboration management and equity benefit sharing among the related stakeholders and Koh Mak community members are required for CBET improvement. The previous studies suggest the importance of local participation in order to develop successful CBET. A study from Esichaikul et al. (2021) investigated guidelines for the development and online marketing promotion of CBET attractions in Nan province, Thailand. Esichaikul et al. (2021) provide guidelines for potential CBET development such as learning the historical background and identities of the village, the development of interpreting activities in CBET attractions, the

formulation of sustainable natural resource preservation plans, the determination of capacity for supporting tourists, the creation of tourist activities, the development of the village's infrastructure, the increasing of local agricultural product values, the motivation and promotion of a new generation of people to participate in planning and developing CBET attractions, and the collection of statistics on the number of tourists and their perceived channels of communication. The development of e-commerce for community products and services for tourists was also suggested by this study.

Other studies involved challenges in CBET development. For example, Wang et al. (2015) explore the development of ecotourism in a Taiwanese community after a major earthquake. In this community, the imposition of various political values lead to failures in inclusivity (particularly, in terms of goal setting), empowerment, leadership, organizational fragmentation, and benefit sharing—all of which are important principles of sustainability. Suwanno et al. (2017) share that the continuity of good governance is needed to develop existing CBET ventures towards sustainable development.

These existing studies show one common research context—mainly second-tier tourist destinations in Thailand, for example, Nan, Kalasin, and Satun (TAT, 2019). The Tourism Authority of Thailand (2019) has divided Thai tourism destinations into two main types: less visited places and main tourist destinations. Limited studies have focused on first-tier travel destinations involved in CBET. Phang Nga is a popular tourist destinations in Thailand. Tourists visit the destination mainly for its coastal resources. However, various natural resources can be seen in Phang Nga, including parks and mountain. The natural resources provide the local community with the opportunity to develop as an eco-tourism destination (Bo Saen Subdistrict Administrative Organization, 2021). Hence, the aim of this study is to explore the potential of Bo Sean, an ecological area in the province, as a CBET destination.

The literature review points to SOAR analysis as a popular strategic model for planning sustainable tourism development. The strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results (SOAR) framework enhances strategic planning and implementation of processes by using a positive guided approach. Some examples of extant tourism development literature that applied the SOAR model include Khavarian-Garmsir & Zare (2015), Saraei et al. (2018), and Roumiani et al. (2020). For instance, Saraei et al. (2018) found that the destination they studied provided many strengths and opportunities for sustainable tourism development. They also found that the development of a tourism industry can lead to the reduction of unemployment, an increase of services and catering centers, the reduction of tourists' cost of stay, and an increase in per capita recreation space. Recently, Roumiani et al. (2020) proposed to develop rural tourism destinations. The SOAR analysis technique was used to develop a strategy for explaining the strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and measurable results. The results of the study showed that the stakeholders' most important strategies were holding conferences and meetings, the development of investment in rural tourism, strengthening the physical infrastructure, and eliminating the problems associated with environmental barriers (topography, slope, and height) of tourism sites.

The current study follows previous research in the area of strategic tourism development (e.g., Khavarian-Garmsir & Zare, 2015; Saraei et al., 2018; Roumiani et al., 2020) by having the aim of providing a suitable framework for sustainable tourism development and using the SOAR framework as a strategic model that is compatible with the different aspects of sustainable development—including economic, social, cultural, and environmental factors. Finally, as the SOAR framework is compatible with tourism studies, the model can provide insights into these factors in every area of the framework (i.e. strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results).

3. Method

A focus group approach was utilized in this study. Although informants in a focus group have less speaking time than in interviews and some members can dominate the conversation, using a focus group is a cost-effective way to get information which provides time-saving opportunities (Babbie, 2013). This technique was considered to be suitable for this study as it more easily allowed the researcher to approach key informants in the Bo Saen community.

The procedure of data collection began with the development of an interview guide based on SOAR analysis. To achieve qualitative validity, a peer debriefing technique was applied where peers reviewed and questioned the researchers about the questions that reflected the rationale of the current research. An interview pretest was conducted with five staff members of Phuket Rajabhat University. The pretest enabled the researchers to become more confident and familiar with the focus group discussion procedure and allowed the researchers to improve the quality of the interview questions. The interview guide was then revised based on the pretest. The interview included questions about local identity, expectations, opportunities, success criteria, and inspiration.

The focus group was conducted with seven key informants from the Bo Saen community. The key informants were five heads of villages, or their representatives, and two locals who worked for the Bo Saen CBT group. This discussion took approximately 2.5 hours and was audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees. After the focus group session, the recording was transcribed.

The transcription was subjected to content analysis. The analysis was performed by the first author, and a subset of the transcripts and codes generated from these transcripts was cross-checked by the co-authors to reduce any potential bias that might arise from analysis by a single researcher and to provide inter-coder reliability. In addition, in subsequent iterations of analysis, the research team reviewed and revised the entire codebook generated in the initial round of analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

The profile of the key informants is discussed first. The key informants comprised seven representatives from the Bo Saen community. Four of them were male and three of them were female. They worked intensively for CBET in the village. For instance, three of them were foundation members for the CBT Bo Saen initial plan for CBT project. In terms of age, five of them were in their 50s, the rest was in their 30s, and 40s, respectively. In addition, due to the CBT initiative, four out of seven key informants in this exploration were from Moo 3. It should be noted that the Bo Saen village consists of seven areas: Moo 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. The Moo 3 area was the first area where CBT was initiated.

The focus group analysis explored key aspects of CBET for the Bo Saen community. The iterative analyses based on SOAR suggested four key aspects to use in evaluating the potential of the Bo Saen community as a CBET destination. The discussion is presented as follows.

Strengths

The focus group transcripts indicate the strengths from the point of view of the community representatives. The key informants suggested that a variety of natural resources is available for tourists visiting the Bo Saen community. Also, Nao, a unique product, is available only in this community and it is highly spoken of. Nao, its scientific name is *Arenga pinnata* Werr, is a fruit product, similar to sugar palm. "One of our uniqueness is this product [pointing to Nao]. We are famous for this Nao" (Informant 1). The local people in this area use this product as a source of income. There are several products made from this fruit. "The caramel here is made

from thick sugar and many other products are made from thickets. It has a unique aroma and flavor. Therefore, it is considered to be a strength of Bo Saen and there are also other products made from thick sugar, such as red sugar and brown sugar. Key chains are made from clay in the shape of a nautical tree” (Informant 5). Informant 2 added how he received his family living expenses from this product, “I run a café and Nao sugar ice coffee is the signature offering, both locals and tourists love to try it. Even the governor loves this drink.”

Nao is also used as a key element in tourism packages. Moo 3 of Bo Saen village has been a famous CBT destination since 2018 when the local government promoted its OTOP project and Nawat Withi. Nao is used as the signature ingredient for local cuisine, including a famous yellow curry and a traditional style shrimp paste. These local dishes are served to tourists.

Furthermore, the key informants described Bo Saen’s natural resources. Most of the mentioned resources in the transcripts indicate that this area has the potential to implement CBET. Informant 3 added that “Besides Nao, we have caves, waterfalls, and rubber plants where tourists love to enjoy activities.” “Tourists, especially the Chinese, who stayed in the hotel over there like to ride bikes along the rubber plantation. They enjoy the view which they can’t find in their hometown. I used to talk to them about this” (Informant 2). In addition, Moo 7 is rich in mangrove forests and the canal connecting to the Andaman coast. Kayaking is possible in this area.

Opportunities

The key informants mentioned several opportunities available to Bo Saen village as a CBET destination. For instance, almost all of them spoke of the “natural environment” and “trails.” In this regard, one key informant explained that Tourism in the Bo Saen community focuses on the way of life, the culture, and the environment of Bo Saen—allowing tourists to feel nature and learn thoroughly. Tourism activities at Bo Saen include trekking, spelunking, and visiting waterfalls. There are many other activities that the community has organized, such as making candy chrysanthemums using thick sugar, soap making, and tie-dyed cloth made from thickets. Most of the products here are made from nature. The bee community group provides education to tourists and another favorite and famous place for tourists is Ton Nao Market. These activities attract tourists and provide an opportunity to grow. If the promotion of Bo Saen is developed, there will be even more growth opportunities (Informant 3).

The key informants provided further details about how community members, collaborating with the local government, created an opportunity to promote their village and tourism services. The community launched a local market, called Talad [market]Ton Noa, before COVID-19. Since then, this local market has become popular and known to tourists, especially nearby domestic tourists. Based on this success, the members of the village have set up a plan to improve the market post COVID-19.

The community has plans to move towards the future by making the community more widely known, such as Mae Kampong or Kiriwong. There are plans to expand the market for foreign tourists who are interested in learning the way of life of the community (Informant 1). This evidence conforms to the previous findings from Suwanno et al. (2017) who suggested that reliable collaboration management and equity benefit sharing among related stakeholders and community members are required for CBET improvement.

Furthermore, informant 1 also suggested one of the key points the village should consider for future success. Language improvement is one of the keys. In order to experience success in the future, the community must be very strong in fields such as language, hospitality, and service. Friendliness, understanding tourist behavior, and preserving the way of life of the people in the community are considered necessary elements of successful community tourism (Informant 1).

Aspirations

The focus group interviews explored key areas of inspiration held by the Bo Saen community members. The informants often spoke of “ASEAN CBET.” Their most compelling aspiration is to promote their CBET destination to the ASEAN community. Becoming a CBET destination is their focus. “We aim to make Bo Saen known throughout ASEAN countries” (Informant 3). “We are now aiming to bring our community to other countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia. We should try to speak the same language” (Informant 2).

In this regard, they have planned strategic initiatives. Some of the key informants revealed that they have a plan to discuss with neighboring countries about Bo Saen’s local and unique products and services. The opportunity for a marketing operation exists. This finding extends the literature by Esichaikul et al. (2021) who found that the development of e-commerce for community products and services for tourists is an important channel of communication.

Results

Regarding the indicators of achievement, one of the few indicators mentioned was the success of local markets. The Ton Noa Market is a local market where people get together and sell vegetables, fruits, and unique products with an aim to attract tourists such as day-trippers. This market was developed with support from the local government of the Phang-nga province before COVID-19.

The Ton Noa Market needs to be used if we are to succeed. It was a very successful market prior to COVID-19. It generated a lot of community success because of the people who visited, they like it and asked to return when we open it. They want to come back and travel again, which is considered community success (Informant 1).

The second key indicator of success is the linking of tourism routes in all areas of the Bo Saen community. Each area (e.g., Moo 1 through 7) has its unique resources, including tourism resources. Therefore, if potential tourists are informed of the uniqueness of these resources, Bo Saen’s tourism potential should be greater as both a CBT and CBET destination. “We want to create a travel itinerary, it can be half day or full day trip. This trip should offer the opportunity for tourists to visit all of our areas [Moo 1 through Moo 7]” (Informant 2). “My idea is that not only Moo 3 should be visited, but other areas should offer tourism activities as well. I know that every area has its own products. Moo 7 is famous for its snack, Moo 4 has other things. So we will all collaborate, then we will be even more successful” (Informant 3).

The last indicator mentioned in the focus group discussion was the ASEAN CBET destination. The ultimate goal of the community members is to put the Bo Saen flag in front of the ASEAN CBET tourists. “We want to be known at the ASEAN level, so we will do whatever we have to in order to make it work” (Informant 6).

5. Conclusions

This research is among the first to apply SOAR analysis to explore the potential of eco-tourism sites in the Bo Saen community, Phang Nga province. Using the SOAR analysis model, this present research found that the Bo Saen community has abundant natural resources. Therefore, it is highly likely that activities related to ecotourism such as bamboo rafting, mountain climbing, animal watching, and mountain biking are possible. Developing Bo Saen as a CBET destination is well worth the effort. The results show that the Bo Saen community has unique products and diverse natural resources, thus giving the community the ability to create a workable plan. This plan includes stepping into the future to become more widely known by expanding its market to ASEAN. In terms of community success, it was found that local markets were created to attract tourists to the community. Additional successes can be obtained by connecting tourism routes throughout all areas of Bo Saen. Thus, providing opportunities

for tourists to study and learn. It was revealed that the community had the potential to accommodate more tourists. However, the community still lacks the promotion and marketing that is needed to make them better known. The findings from this research provide the Bo Saen community and other CBT destinations a greater understanding of their potential to become CBET destinations. For instance, tourism entrepreneurs in the area of the Bo Saen community should provide an eco-tourism route that uses Nao to highlight its tourism products. In addition, since the ultimate goal is to promote the area as an ASEAN CBET destination, local stakeholders should be educated regarding international languages and international tourism standards.

It should be noted that this research conducted the focus group with only seven key informants from one dominate area. Thus, further research should include a wider variety and number of interview participants to ensure the validity of the findings. In addition, this exploration is qualitative in nature. Future investigations may consider using a quantitative approach in order to generalize the findings.

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