

## **Elephant camps and their impacts to community: Case study in Keud Chang, Chiang Mai Province, Thailand**

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**ABSTRACT:** The objectives of this research were to describe the existing elephant camps in Thailand for developing tourism destination, and to analyze their impact for community based tourism. The data were gathered in Keud Chang Subdistrict, Maeteng District, Chiang Mai Province, Thailand. Chiang Mai is very famous for tourist attractions especially for natural and community based tourism, while in Maetang especially in Keud Chang a lot of elephants became the main attraction of tourism. The results showed that there were impact of the developing Elephant Camps both in negative and positive. The negative impacts were more in destruction of the forest area due to over of carrying capacity, natureless for the elephant life, and miss-usage for forest area since the land use not plan well by local community. While in positive impacts were growing faster for local economic and cultural exchange more dynamic between local communities and visitors. This study concluded that elephant camp proves to be one agent of socio-economic change, contribute to change in the community of Keud Chang. Environmental degradation and government policy are interconnected with tourism. Environmental degradation and government policy have made it more difficult for the villagers of Keud Chang to make a living in the traditional way. As a result of the development of tourism the villagers of Keud Chang have become more firmly integrated into the national market economy. Consequently, they are also becoming more integrated into the Thai nation state.

**Key words:** animal tourism, community based tourism, elephant camp

### **INTRODUCTION**

Elephants are an important part of Thai culture and the Thai way of life. They are a traditional symbol of royal power, an essential feature of Buddhist art and architecture, and a spiritual mentor for people of all walks of life. Elephants in Thailand have always been a symbol of both power and peace. They have always performed the most exacting physical tasks. And they have always been well loved. According to conservationists at the Elephant Nature Park in Chiang Mai, the Asian elephant is suffering at the hands of low animal welfare standards in Thailand. The Asian elephant is now officially listed as an endangered species by the World Wildlife Fund, with less than 4,000 elephants now living in Thailand, and only an estimated 1,500 of these existing in the wild. The numbers have dropped dramatically since the beginning of the 20th century, when over 100,000 elephants roamed free (Hulmes, 2010). Most of these are at various elephant camps around the country where they learn to work in the forests and mountains and to entertain the hundreds of thousands of people who go to see them each year, and where they live, play and reproduce in a setting that is as close to the wild as possible.

Northern Thailand is the most famous on elephants trekking and camp among the regions in Thailand. Especially Chiang Mai province where the area is mountaneous. Many elephant trekkings and camps existing in this area. Maeteng district is the most famous subdistrict among the trekking places. It has about eleven elephant camps and trekkings, and most of them occupy by communities an some of those by private company. There still have some problems in this area regarding development of elephant trekking and camps. Destruction the natural resources such as deforestation both by elephant and by local community. Over of carrying capacity also become the main cause. Therefore, this research aimed to identify the problems that faced by local community in Keud Chang and the positif and negative consequences of this kind of tourism destination sided from the local community and tourist.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was done by participant observation. The researchers as participant by joining as individual tourists. By joining daily life as mahouts and host, the researchers get more information from the mahouts and owners, tourists and untold information. Study was conducted in Elephant camps around in eight villages of Keud Chang subdistrict, such as Mueng Kued, Mae Taman, Sub Khae, Toon Kham, Huay namdang, Thoon Rahkhon, Pha Khaolam, and Pha Phujom. The communities of eight villages consisted of several hilltribes such as Lahu, Akha, Lisu, Karen, Hmong and Thai people. The data were analyzed by descriptive qualitative.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Keud Chang is one subdistricts in Maetang district, it has eight villages, and consisted of about 5000 people live in this subdistrict. Keud Chang is rich in natural resources. Several tourism activities attractions, namely, elephant riding and trekking, bamboo rafting along Maewang river, kanoo, homestays, scorpion tail boat, and the famous souvenir from local product. Aside from the natural resources, Keud Chang is consisted of multi-ethnic groups i.e. Lahu, Akha, Lisu, Karen, Hmong, and Thai themselves. Mr. Sathian is the head of *Oboto* (subdistrict/local government) said that even though they have own culture and habit but they live in harmony. They can join work together in tourism activities. Karen people are more in their skill as mahouts (elephant controller), while other minority groups sell the souvenir.

Elephant trekking tour where the tourists learn and enjoy a beautiful and unspoiled nature, and the various culture of tribal groups along the way by riding elephant. In addition, home stay is also another tourism activity where tourists get more experience and enjoyment in culture and the unique life styles of local people. The locals have stated that they were satisfied with all the tourism activities that have been operated by local community. Some community serve elephant trekking and riding as tourism product which is daily life of elephant mahouts as tourist attraction. The tourist stay in one day or a couple-day to experience as a elephant mahout, to maintain, feed and control the elephant. Learning by doing is one method how the tourists or visitors can feel and experience as a mahout. Sleep overnight in the provided homestay, feel like your home and do as a host is also interesting method that offered by the owner. One visitor from Denmark brought his family stayed within 3 months just wanted to learn how daily activity of mahout, while other tourists such as Japanese, Americans, and Australian just spent two or three days.

### *Social Economic Change and Tourism*

According to the Royal Forestry Department of Thailand, deforestation in the country has become a severe problem over the last thirty years. In 1961, more than 68 million acres of land were covered with forest, 53 per cent of the total area of Thailand. In 1989 this figure was only 35.6 million acres (28.03 percent). By 1989 the forested area had decreased to 27.95 per cent of the total national landscape. According to Leungaramsri and Rajesh (1992), this deforestation was caused mainly by excessive logging by wood processing industries. By 1989, the severe problem of deforestation and the popular movement against commercial logging forced the Thai government to implement a logging ban which amounted to a 'major restraint' on commercial logging. In addition to a restraint on commercial logging, the 1989 logging ban also prohibited swidden cultivation. Since the ban was implemented, the Karen villagers have not been allowed to clear and burn new fields for cultivation which resulted in shorter fallow periods for the existing swidden fields. As a consequence, the fields cannot recover sufficiently between crops and their fertility has declined. Furthermore, the deterioration of their swiddens forces the villagers to burn vegetation which is not yet fully grown and the consequent shorter duration of burning does not kill all small pests. These uncontrolled pests and the decline in land fertility have caused a decrease in the yields of crucial subsistence crops. Switching from shifting cultivation to paddy cultivation - a means of cultivation permitted by the government - is difficult for the villagers because nearly all land suitable for paddy fields is already owned and in use. Neither the government nor international agencies have managed to offer

alternative forms of agriculture to the villagers, for instance by introducing new crops or new agricultural techniques, in spite of the fact that such help has been offered in many other areas of Northern Thailand. Another factor in the increase in the scarcity of the resources needed for the villagers' subsistence is the disappearance of wildlife.

The only solution was to seek other sources of income, and this is precisely what has happened in Maetang. After the logging ban was implemented in 1989 and the prohibition on hunting wildlife was introduced the villagers started to venture further away from their village community to trade and to work as paid laborers for Thai farmers. Then came tourism, another alternative source of income in which many villagers took an interest.

### ***Elephant and Tourism Activities' Impact to Community***

Elephants, like people, place a high value on friendship. In any elephant group the elephants tend to pair up and stay very close together with their friends. They have their likes and dislikes, of course, but in a caravan or on a trek for example, the mahouts have to take special care in lining up the elephants before departure. They are placed one behind the other so that friends are together. If an elephant is placed apart from his friend, he will likely refuse to budge and the caravan will not move. Elephant friendship becomes most obvious when the female is about ready to give birth. She searches out her friend and solicits help in delivery. This the friend does willingly, and even helps separate the placenta from the newborn baby.

In the past, elephant has good mutual relationship with agricultural activities. Dung of elephant can be manage to be the organic fertilizer. In the forest activity, elephant become the main transportation to bring wood or other heavy equipment. But now, dung has become the pollution of the air, without well managed, dung just through away beside the house or even just put naturally in the land of forest, without any treatment. Recently, local community also seldom to have agriculture activity. All of them have already changed their activity to be tourism. Their income right now, rely on the tourism business. Eventhough, a lot of people from outside come to the area to make tourism. They provide bamboo rafting, making homestay, cottage, and provide bicycle for rent.

In turn, the mahouts, virtually all poor villagers, need to care for their families and thus the need for the elephants to do some work that generates money. One simple alternative to work often suggested would be to release all elephants back into the wild but the sad fact remains that while many domesticated elephants would probably survive quite well in nature, in Thailand (and throughout Asia) there is nowhere near enough safe, suitable habitat into which to release them (Lair, 2010).

Mahouts control elephants by three methods; commands given by voice, those given using an elephant prod, a stick ending in a blunt hook, and by applying pressure with the feet and legs. The prod might be to tap parts of the animal's body to indicate the angle of work, the desired direction to move indicated with the feet, and the action begun with a voice command.

Asked to assess whether such activities will contribute to the sustainability of their community, the respondents perceived a very positive impact of said activities to the sustainability of their community. From the economic and environmental conditions, the respondents felt that activities definitely contribute to higher productivity and income for the local people, provide them equitable access to resources and opportunities, and maintain the level of productivity of the community. This is in terms of the involvement of the local people in general, their continuing improvement through education, training and nutrition and even the carrying capacity of the community, and interestingly, the inclusion of women in decision-making process.

On the other hand, the tourism activities' sustaining the community from the natural environmental condition was perceived to be negative, considering that the tourism activities destroy the natural environmental condition of the community, create water poisoning, noise pollution, and degradation of soil bio-physical qualities, and bad air quality. This result supports Guntoro's study (Guntoro, 2005) that nature and physical condition of Ban Rummit, one of tourism destination of elephant camp in Chiang Rai province in Northern Thailand, have changed simultaneously with this increase number of tourists, number of elephants and tourism activities, etc.

### ***Negative Impacts***

Naturally, elephants live in the forest. One can be said that the elephant camp/trek has become the main cause of forest destroy, because the limitation of the area for feeding and space for elephants. It can be seen that forest that used for elephant trekking is faster to destroy than other forest that occupy by government. This is not just because of elephant's mistake, but the elephant owner can not control their elephant, cannot feed their elephant and cannot maintain their business to be the elephant trekking/camp area. Local government has already enforced the regulation to the owner of the elephants, some regulation always pronounce in every monthly meeting. If this happened continue without action, it is not doubt that Maeteng will be no longer become tourism destination. Since the natural resources and scenery become the main attraction to the tourists, no more scenery can be seen as beautiful as the past, and no more forest can be seen as conservative life.

As a Plog's Model, tourism destination will decrease number of tourist, since the area no longer interesting to the tourist. It cause by natural degradation, the destination no more appropriate with type of tourism, and visitor will leave without any recommendation to re-visit.

Actually, these problems have been felt by the local community, but business' feeling is stronger than only thinking for the future, business today is more important. Therefore, it become main concent to the tourism activist including tourist agencies and academic institutions to make local community especially to the owners of the tourist destination to be more aware toward environmental issues. This study supports Guntoro's study (2005) in Ban Ruammit. The local community perceived that trekking elephants could damage the plant and agricultural area. Elephants often ate plants around the trekking path when they were in hunger.

### ***Changing Social Status of the Mahout and Elephant Owner***

In the past, owner of the elephant also as a mahout. The owner also became the mahout to control their elephant to command work. But now, at least there are three persons regarding the elephant management. First, is the owner, secondly is the mahout, and thirdly is the worker who responsible to look for feed. Mahout and worker are paid by the owner.

### ***Power From The Outsider***

The trekking tour business in Northern Thailand is connected to the international tourist industry. The tourists who visit the hill tribes on trekking tours are mostly foreigners, the Thai themselves having little interest in going on trekking tours. The hotel chains, the airline companies and the large scale tour operators enjoy the strongest position in the tourist industry. These are owned by foreign transnational corporations, the Thai nobility, the Thai government and a handful of economically and politically powerful Thai families. They have the expertise and the capital to control the flow of tourists in Bangkok and other ports of entry, and to all major destinations within the country. Down at the provincial level, tourism in Chiang Mai is similarly structured: the tourist business in this city is mainly controlled by a group of 30 powerful families who have close kinship and business ties with each other (Bartsch, 1997). The next most powerful players in the tourist industry are the jungle tour operators and the guest house owners in Chiang Mai which offer trekking tours to visitors. These operators sell their tours as an exciting trip in the labyrinthine mountains inhabited by hospitable and colorfully costumed tribal people. The tour operators are dependent upon the larger companies described above and their business is directly affected when fewer tourists visit Chiang Mai. Not only the jungle tour operators, but also the hill tribe people involved in the trekking tour business will be affected by a reduction in the number of tourists visiting Chiang Mai. The hill tribes are the least powerful and least influential of all the players involved in the tourist industry. However this does not mean that they are passive players in the game. With the means they have, the hill tribes try to secure as good a position as possible in the trekking tour industry. The whole structure of the trekking tourist industry with the hill tribes as the weakest players in the business and the large national and multinational firms as the strongest, corresponds with, the findings of Michaud (1993).

### ***Dependency Model of Elephant Camp***

According to model developed by Stephen Britton, looked at the workings of international tourism and the relations of power and dependency between its various sectors, Britton argues that businesses in underdeveloped countries lack capital and expertise and therefore rely heavily on foreign capital. Privileged groups in underdeveloped countries can take advantage of tourism at the expense of less privileged people. According to Britton, large foreign and national companies use dominant mechanisms to protect their interests. These dominant mechanisms consist of control over technology, expertise, bargaining power and product pricing and design. All participants at all levels of the tourist industry profit to a certain degree. However because of the dominant mechanisms, the large foreign and national companies (i.e. those at the top of the hierarchy) are able to extract the economic surplus and to accumulate capital. Furthermore, Britton argues that the large corporations control the flow of tourists to the various destinations in the country. From these destinations or resort enclaves the tourists make short trips into the urban and rural subsistence sectors for sightseeing, entertainment and shopping (Britton 1991).

The jungle tour agencies and Thai middlemen in the elephant camp/trekking tour business are dependent on airline, train and bus companies, large tour operators and hotel chains. They regulate the flow of tourists to Thailand and to various destinations in the country, such as Chiang Mai. If the number of tourists visiting Chiang Mai was to decline, this would seriously affect the business of the jungle tour agencies, the Thai middlemen and the hill tribes active in tourism. A decline in the number of visiting tourists could occur for example occur if new tourist destinations were offered by the large companies to their clients. The supplementary activities on a trekking/camp tour, such as elephant riding and bamboo rafting, are organized in the main by Thai middlemen in the area around Keud Chang. A major part of the money spent by tourists on a trek flows to these middlemen. It is difficult for the villagers of Keud Chang to find employment in the activities controlled by the Thai middlemen, nor do they have the capability to establish their own tour agency in Chiang Mai or, indeed, anywhere else. The people of Keud Chang can only earn an income from the specific activities of accommodating tourists, porter work, or selling handcrafted goods. And even this is not guaranteed; the tour guide selects a family before the villagers can provide accommodation for tourists and thereby to earn income from the most profitable tourist activity in the village. This results in a flow of profit to jungle tour operators and to the Thai middlemen. Only a very small share of the money goes to the villagers of Keud Chang. Since environmental problems have become worse and the Thai government has forbidden the traditional alternatives such as hunting of wildlife and clearing of land for swidden cultivation, it has become increasingly difficult for the villagers in Keud Chang to make a living. Hence tourism is a very attractive alternative, although with unavoidable pitfalls.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Tourism in Keud Chang is supplementary to other household economic activities. It does not replace any other activity, and agriculture, is still regarded by the villagers as their most important economic activity. In Keud Chang only a few households earn a sizeable income from tourism. Nevertheless, it enables family members to earn the additional income they need in this time of scarcity.

In this study, trekking tourism proves to be one agent of socio-economic change, one whose importance is growing, yet still only one among others. Other factors contribute to change in the community of Keud Chang. Environmental degradation and government policy are interconnected with tourism. Environmental degradation and government policy have made it more difficult for the villagers of Keud Chang to make a living in the traditional way. To compensate, the villagers had to find alternative sources of income, of which elephant camp tourism proved to be one. Trekking tourism in turn contributes to changing the village community further. As a result of the development of tourism the villagers of Keud Chang have become more firmly integrated into the national market economy. Consequently, they are also becoming more integrated into the Thai nation state.

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