

Destination Management of Small Islands: The Case of Koh Mak

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Abstract: Koh Mak is a small island in the Gulf of Thailand that is usually visited by tourists as part of a multi-destination tour. It differentiates itself from its neighbours by being positioned as a quiet, family-based location that utilizes a low-carbon strategy. However, it is not currently clear how effective this strategy is. Islands tend to be successful in terms of destination management when they have a diversified economy and some genuine social capital or relations with which visitors can establish a relationship. This is not evidently true for Koh Mak but it might be true if the island can be considered part of a multi-island cluster. This paper uses qualitative research to explore the opinions of tourists and long-stay residents about their experiences on the island and then tests whether existing models of island tourism are borne out in this case. It is found that the current positioning is somewhat contradictory and inevitably limited in time because increasing numbers of tourists will serve to damage and then destroy those attributes which are being promoted.

Keywords: destination management; islands; Thailand; tourism

1. Introduction

This paper reports on research conducted into the issues relating to the promotion of Koh Mak as a tourism destination that is a low carbon destination. Koh Mak is one of a chain of islands in the Gulf of Thailand for which tourism is a significant actual or potential generator of income. In general, islands as tourist destinations go through a life cycle process that begins with tourists wishing to explore a new destination, followed by engagement with the island, exploitation of it and then its maturation. After this, the island's destination managers can take steps to reinvent itself through innovation or else watch the decline into failure. It might be noted that different sets of people can be involved at different stages of the island's development at the same time or different times. For example, it is evident that Russian tourists are now in a

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process of moving away from their previous destinations in Pattaya and Bangkok and now have spread in numbers to Koh Chang. Some have reached Koh Mak (anecdotally, because they have seen it from a cruise and decided to visit) but then have mostly felt disappointed because of the lack of tourist facility development that they found there. These Russian tourists are active at exactly the same time as Western European visitors to Koh Mak who find it – in various ways – enticing and magnetic irrespective of the level of facilities. These tourists can be fully engaged in tourism development on the island while the Russian tourists are at the exploration stage and might want to move directly to the exploitation phase.

This does not mean that there is anything different or unusual about Russian tourists. A decade ago, Chinese tourists to Thailand were characterized by the zero dollar tours concept and their comparative lack of sophistication (as, previously, had been the perception of Japanese and Korean tourists). Now, Chinese tourists are considered to be well on their way to sophistication that their neighbours had previously travelled (although new segments of the market are still being added who are at lower levels of sophistication). Within a few years, therefore, it is quite possible for a source of tourists to be changed significantly in terms of their demand for tourism services.

Koh Mak has is marketed as an unspoilt destination that reminds travellers of what Thailand was like two or more decades ago – as one respondent to this research project put it, “Koh Mak is the paradise I have been looking for in Thailand.” However, it has an additional characteristic which is potentially an important part of its marketing personality. It is a low carbon destination or, at least, it aspires to being a low carbon destination and currently has a number of demonstration projects those show business owners what can be achieved through a low carbon approach. There is some limited outreach of this approach to tourists at present but lack of resources mean that most tourists remain unaware of the concept at the destination. The low carbon approach is led by DASTA – Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration, which is a public service sector organization established in 2003 “...with the roles and responsibilities over sustainable tourism operation, through coordination for integrated administration of areas with valuable tourism resources, with more flexibility and promptness in operation than that of government agencies and state enterprises, as an important driving force in the administration of the country's tourism industry both in short and long terms (DASTA, 2013).” As part of its activities, DASTA has chosen Koh Mak to be a low carbon destination and, additionally, DASTA has designated certain other areas in Thailand to receive special treatment, including Pattaya, Sukhothai-Kampaengphet Historical Parks, Loei, Nan old city and U-Thong ancient city. It is involved with a range of product development and research projects aimed at helping develop or rediscover local wisdom or production that can act as genuine social capital and, hence, a focal point for the creative destination concept.

Tourism is one of the most important industries in Thailand. A total of 26.7 million visitors came to the Kingdom in 2013, which represented a nearly 20% increase on the previous year (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2014). Visitors welcome the opportunity to enjoy beaches, tropical weather and the food which has become increasingly familiar to people around the world as a result of the success of the restaurant export sector. However, it has long been known that the tourism industry has a tendency to produce low-skilled jobs in the service sector in which wages can be variable and seasonal (e.g. Choy, 1995). Further, there is always a danger that money generated within a tourism destination will not remain in that destination but will drain away to distant capital investors who own hotels in the destination or else overseas because of the consumption of imported food and beverages. This has been shown to happen in Luang Prabang in neighbouring Laos, for example (Southiseng and Walsh, 2011). As a result, the ability of the tourism industry to play a part in transforming Thailand's economy is limited. Thailand is currently struggling with the Middle Income Trap. It has achieved rapid economic growth in recent years partly through the use of the Factory Asia concept, which employs low labour cost competitiveness in manufacturing industries that aim at import-substitution and are export-oriented. The limits of growth provided by that approach have now been reached and there is a need to switch to a new paradigm of growth in order to reach the high income status. An example of how this might be achieved is provided by South Korea, which has used creativity and connectivity, alongside greater openness and trust in society, as the means of making process. The Pheu Thai government, elected in 2011, has responded to this challenge by such measures as increasing the minimum wage rate by 40% and unveiling ambitious and highly necessary infrastructure construction plans (currently being blocked by courts). Nevertheless, there remains a need to make the service sector, which includes tourism, also are capable of contributing more to the new paradigm of growth. Various approaches have been tried in this case and one of the more important efforts has focused on the creative space destination (e.g. Richards and Wilson, 2006). This idea is based on developing a wide range of tourism destinations, for both domestic and international customers, while seeking genuine social capital in each place that can be developed to provide a unique experience in each case. Previously, the One Tambon One Product (OTOP) campaign successfully enabled local communities to upgrade production of some local specialities which were then marketed and distributed at home and abroad with government assistance (Natsuda *et al.*, 2012).

Of course, just as not every item produced under OTOP has been successful, so too will there be relative failures under the creative space destination concept. It has been argued that success will be achieved with the presence of three factors: genuine social capital, stable allocation of resources and good connectivity (Walsh, 2013). It is necessary that the destinations also display hospitality, although this is a basic service offering and not necessary to include in the model previously described. Hospitality is regularly considered to be a defining feature of the Thai tourism

industry and an innate part of the essentialist Thai character. Indeed, there is an element of societal Thainess that is supposed to reflect the willingness of Thai people to defer to authority and to meet any encounter with a welcoming smile.

This report concerns research supported by DASTA into the nature of Koh Mak as a low carbon destination, its appeal to current and potential customers and suggestions for further development of the destination along the lines of sustainable development. The research used qualitative research methods to determine the attitudes of tourists on Koh Mak towards the island and their experience of it, as well as the opinions of longer-term residents who were foreigners (western European) and business-owners or other important stakeholders for the tourism industry on the island.

2. Issues in Island Tourism

2.1. Island Tourism Destinations

The marketing of tourism destinations has become increasingly intense and competitive as more destinations have entered the international market and the willingness of tourists to travel long distances and spend lots of money has been squeezed by the global banking and austerity crisis that began in 2008 and (perhaps to a lesser extent) the desire on the behalf of consumers – particularly but not exclusively consumers from western Europe – to reduce the carbon footprint resulting from their consumption decisions. Islands are different from other tourism destinations because of their geographical situation: that is, they are specific geographical areas that are bounded in space in a way that mainland areas are not. Islands – especially small islands (defined as having a population of less than one million people) must import some or all of their food and water and transportation costs (by sea or by air) are such that it is always more expensive to operate businesses and take holidays there. This is particularly true of very small islands (defined as having a population of less than one hundred thousand people) on which groundwater resources are very limited and rivers are too short (and may flow only on a seasonal basis) to provide regular supplies of fresh water. This means that water has to be imported from elsewhere which is, necessarily, an expensive undertaking and, further, likely to work in a counter-seasonal manner since tourists are more likely to arrive during periods of sunny rather than rainy weather.

2.2. Small Islands as Peripheral Areas

Since, as described above, small and very small islands are unable to sustain substantial populations because of lack of economic activities and resources, they have tended throughout history to be peripheral areas in terms of politics. Without adequate representation at the national or even the provincial level, small islands have often been left to fend for themselves and, consequently, their interests mostly disregarded. In other words, they have been on the periphery of larger political systems and, like most peripheral areas, they exist to be a source of resources to be extracted by the core. In other words, small islands have, through history, been places where resources have been provided for people from larger places to take away from it.

This effect also exists with regards to social and cultural elements. The cultural life of island people (insofar as it exists in an independent aspect to the dominant mainland culture) will have been considered subsidiary to the main form of cultural expression and treated as less important. The situation is similar to the treatment of ethnic minority cultures and societies. When these areas become incorporated into tourism destination systems, their specific cultures and societies are treated as subsidiary and secondary – in other words, they must conform to what is expected of them by tourists and tourism managers and their personal identity is treated as exotic, different and subject to examination and deconstruction. The experience of tourists on Thailand's island beaches has been described as 'marginal paradises' which are "touristic paradises marginal to both the life plan of the tourists and the ecology and economy of the native society. Contrary to a widespread idea, vacationing youth tourists seek mainly "recreational" experiences, resembling those sought by most mass tourists, and show marked narcissistic tendencies. They have few relations among themselves or with the natives (Cohen, 1982)." Insofar as this continues with present day tourists – and the research suggested that a similar holiday lifestyle persisted with many of the respondents, who spent most of their time in their chosen resort areas and had very limited interaction with any Thai people – this means most interactions that do take place are low-context interactions. That is, they take place in English with people who are used to receiving a comparatively limited amount of requests and know how to respond to them (e.g. 'what time is breakfast' or 'where can I buy medicine?'). As a result, there is little need to develop staff to a high degree, although that might have additional benefits in other ways.

2.3. Categories of Islands in the Context of Destination Management

As previously mentioned, much of the previous research into island tourism destination management has focused on the Caribbean, where the post-colonial element is very important, as it is also in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Bali and elsewhere. However, there are various different ways in which islands can be categorized and there are different marketing implications for each, as the following table indicates.

Table 1. Categorisation of Islands as Tourist Destinations

Category	Options	Implications
Openness to external influences	Open; semi-open; closed	Open islands actively seek out new tourists and have been internationalized or globalized (e.g. Mallorca). Semi-open islands accept tourists and adapt to a limited extent to internationalization (e.g. certain Greek islands in the Mediterranean). Closed islands deter tourists either because they are not wanted (e.g. privately-owned islands) or because they are very unattractive to tourists (e.g. Orkney islands).
Governance	Microstate; province or semi-autonomous province; district	Microstates (e.g. Caribbean islands) are able to make their own laws; provinces (e.g. Phuket) or semi-autonomous provinces (Hainan) can make regulations at a local government basis; districts (e.g. Koh Mak) have very little influence over the laws and regulations which govern them and may not have effective parliamentary representation.
Size	Small; medium; large	Large islands (e.g. Tasmania) may be self-sufficient in terms of food and water; medium islands (e.g. Phuket) may be self-sufficient in terms of food and water for part of the year; small islands (e.g. Koh Chang) are reliant on imports for food and water and other essential items.
Economic Development	From low to very high	Highly and very highly developed islands (e.g. Singapore) may have extensive internal resources to attract, accommodate and entertain visitors. Low economic development (e.g. many Indonesian islands) mean that there is no effective marketing campaign to attract tourists and, even if they still come, there are few if any resources to accommodate them.

Post-Colonial	Post-colonial, still colonial, not colonised ¹	Post-colonial islands (e.g. Jamaica) may have legal and cultural systems based on those imposed by the colonists; still colonized islands (e.g. Puerto Rico) have legal and cultural systems that are hegemonically controlled from outside; not colonized islands (e.g. Isle of Skye) have legal and cultural systems that have developed indigenously.
Status	Single; chain; archipelago	Single islands (e.g. Sicily) are likely to be tourist destinations in their own right (perhaps along with the mainland); an island in a chain (e.g. Koh Chang) might be part of a multiple destination visit; islands that are part of an archipelago (e.g. southern Philippines) will be likely to have some potential destinations and some undeveloped (semi-closed or closed) islands in a multiple destination visit.
Climate	Tropical; semi-tropical; temperate	Tropical (e.g. Singapore) and semi-tropical (e.g. Phuket) islands are likely to have an outdoor orientation for visitors with the need for air conditioned public spaces and accommodation. Temperate climate islands (e.g. Channel Islands) have different requirements dependent on the season or else a low season when few or no tourists visit.

Source: Author

On the basis of these categorisations, it is evident that Koh Mak is an open, district, small, medium level economic development, not colonial, chain, Semi-tropical Island. That it is open means that tourists are being sought (although there are some limitations on how many tourists and what kinds of tourists), while the not colonial status means it is organized according to Thai laws and systems at the district level, which further means that local leaders have little influence over amending or introducing laws or regulations. As a small island, Koh Mak is dependent on imports of food and water and other essential goods. As a member of a chain of islands, it can expect to be part of a multiple destination visit and, so, should expect to be involved in joint or group marketing efforts. As a semi-tropical island, it will focus largely on outdoor activities for tourists while ensuring air conditioned services for tourists when they no longer wish to be outside. Being located in the Monsoon region, Koh Mak also has some seasonality in its tourist campaigns and it is noticeable that at least some resorts and hotels have begun to differentiate their offerings for an international season (before Songkran) and a mostly Thai season (after Songkran).

¹ It is possible to argue that if one goes back far enough in time then every island has been colonized sooner or later.

2.4. Koh Mak

Koh Mak is an island in the eastern Gulf of Thailand, close to the neighbouring country of Cambodia. It has a circumference of approximately 27 kilometres and is said to have around 800 permanent Thai residents. It is located in a sub-tropical monsoon region, which means that there are considerable variation in weather conditions at different parts of the year. The island is considered to be a tambon (sub-district) attached to Koh Kut, within the confines of the province of Trat. Koh Mak is one of a number of islands within the eastern Gulf of Thailand and has been peripheral to the main trajectory of economic development in the countries nearby.

It is said that Koh Mak was first occupied officially during the reign of King Rama V Chulalongkorn, when an ethnic Chinese man known as Chao Sua Seng became known as the official Chinese resident there, subject to the Siamese throne. It is well-known that a large number of ethnic Chinese people had migrated to southern Thailand and northern Malaysia (then known as Malaya) as coolie labour, entrepreneurs, family members and in other capacities so as to become involved in tin mining, rubber plantations and other activities. Those individuals who were particularly successful were able to invest and re-invest their capital in a variety of activities and, in the case of Chao Sua Seng, could become landowners of areas which were not considered important by the central state. The owner is said to have established a coconut plantation and, at a later date, sold the land to the Taveetekul clan, whose descendants are said to own most of the land of the island until the current day (Kohmak.com, 2014). The adherence of family members to Buddhism has ensured that the island has belonged culturally to the mainland and a part of the Thai rather than the Khmer state.

For much of its subsequent history, Koh Mak has existed as a small-scale agricultural provider of goods for the mainland – including rubber, coconuts and alcoholic drinks (which were until the modern age produced under licence in specific locations). In return, rice and necessary foodstuffs were sent to the island, which indicates that the island was not then and presumably never has been self-sufficient. In the modern age, tourism has become increasingly important to the island and this has intensified the need to import essential goods such as food and water.

One of the principal agricultural activities on Koh Mak is the use of rubber plantations. These range in size but none of them seem to be very large to the extent that their owners could take much advantage of economies of scope and scale. Economies of scale would apply if the plantation were sufficiently large that it could provide a measure of supplier power; economies of scope would apply if plantation growers could use their existing plantation land to grow other crops simultaneously – in fact, some rubber growers do have some pineapples growing between the rubber trees but only to a limited amount.

Interviewees suggested that growing rubber was particularly suited to Koh Mak both because geological and climatic conditions favoured rapid growth of the trees and their early maturation but also because those conditions tended not to favour other types of agriculture. Despite there being an apparent market for locally produced foods, particularly vegetables and herbs, most people felt that the limited amount of land available and the particular conditions of a small island meant that these items could never be grown at a competitive rate compared to food imported from the mainland.

The rubber industry as a whole would not appear to be a very attractive market to try to enter. Rubber prices are very volatile, with potential slumps caused by over-supply and reliance on the global economy for demand for vehicles (for which rubber is used in the tyres). Natural rubber is also subject to competition from synthetic rubber, which is considered to be a superior product in all but specialized applications such as surgical gloves and condoms. Rubber futures in important regional markets recently fell to a five-year low (Bangkok Post, 2014).

On the face of it, tourism can never be a form of sustainable development if viewed at the level of the individual island. However, Koh Mak should be seen as part of a larger system that includes the various islands in the Gulf of Thailand and parent province Trat. When seen as a holistic whole, then tourism could be part of an industry that might provide sustainable development.

3. Methodology

For this part of the research project, a qualitative approach was used. This was because it was judged that the best way to obtain useful information on this subject was to ask people directly about their experiences and permit them to express their opinions depending on those experiences. A semi-structured questionnaire agenda was prepared so that approximately the same question areas were used for each respondent but the respondents were given the liberty to introduce new areas if they considered them to be important or relevant. This is a suitable approach to take when the researchers wish to discover new information based on what were expected to be varied individual experiences. Local hotel and resort managers had been contacted previously and agreed to help facilitate interviewing by recruiting potential respondents for a specified date. Some refreshments were provided at the several different locations used.

The face-to-face in-depth interviews were accompanied by a focus group of long-term foreign residents of Koh Mak. These people were selected based on being well-known as prominent foreign residents with an interest in the development of the island. Koh Mak has quite a small permanent population so it was not difficult to identify these major stakeholders.

The interviewers were recorded and accompanied by extensive note-taking. Transcripts of the interviews and the focus group were entered into a database and subsequently interrogated by a form of content analysis. This was at first exploratory in nature in that the intention was to find categories of information and opinion from the overall body of information gathered. The database was supplemented by the accounts of the researchers (through using the research diary method) and secondary sources as appropriate. Once introductory categories were identified, these were re-examined and refined through further examination of the existing data and then the quantitative research.

Interviews were conducted primarily in English, although there was some supplementary interviewing in Thai language. Most of the respondents had sufficient ability in English to be able to participate in the research and the research team had extensive experience of research in a multicultural setting so as to be aware of any issues arising from differences in languages. One limitation to the research is the lack of non-English speaking respondents. A second limitation relates to the necessarily constrained period of space and time available for fieldwork. Since the interviewing process aimed to obtain a variety of different types of respondents (thereby adhering to the principle of maximum diversity within a sample) and the focus group respondents confirmed that there were few if any other major stakeholders who should be interviewed, then it is believed that the possible problem of non-response bias has been avoided in this case.

3.1. Demographic Details

Since the majority of the respondents were recruited in part by hotel or resort managers and were happy to join the research project, it is evident that the respondents involved would be positive in their attitude. There were few respondents who were not confident in their use of English and those who did lack confidence were accompanied by group members who could assist them. In general, then, the respondents were well-educated and of a good level of income. Taking a holiday in Thailand itself is quite a significant investment but none of the respondents gave the impression that this was an once-in-a-lifetime experience or that they were constrained in their consumption choices by lack of money. Indeed, most respondents expected to return to Thailand or had already visited several times. It was common for a respondent to describe a progress through Thailand, beginning on previous trips with Bangkok and Chiang Mai, then moving on to Phuket and the Andaman Sea islands before moving on to the Gulf of Thailand islands.

Respondents came from a range of European countries, including Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, the UK and France, among others. Conversations with business and resort-owners indicated that these were the countries from which the majority of international tourists tended to come. It was noteworthy that they were

no or comparatively few tourists from North America or Australasia, and very few from East Asian countries. There is scope for further promotion in these markets. Respondents reported that some Russian tourists were starting to arrive but were not usually satisfied with the level of facilities available and tended not to stay long. Research on neighbouring Koh Chang indicated a substantial Russian presence there which might in due course spread to Koh Mak.

Most respondents were travelling as part of a family group, possibly with some friends as well. Children who were present tended to be very young and there were no teenagers in the sample obtained and few in evidence at other locations on the island. The range of ages for respondents was from mid-20s to mid-50s approximately. All respondents were Caucasian. Most had either high-paying jobs or else capital that meant they could travel extensively for lengthy periods during the year. Living in Europe offers the opportunity to save money if regular employment can be found: respondents spoke of friends and family members who would work long hours for six months or a year, spending little, with a view to taking a similar period off work which could be spent travelling. It is not necessary for a person to have a university degree to obtain a job that could help people achieve this goal. In Europe, there is a much lower correlation between wages, family status and educational level. All respondents seemed to be familiar with using the internet and comfortable online. However, respondents did not spend most of their waking lives playing with their smartphones or tablets in the way that Thai tourists continued to do. It may be that this is the result of lack of access to the internet but it seemed to be more of a lifestyle choice.

4. Findings

4.1. Opinions of Tourists

The tourists who were interviewed for this project were nearly always entirely positive about their experiences and held a very favourable impression of the island and its people. This issue is discussed in the following section about overall impressions. However, there were some less favourable impressions and these are joined together in the subsequent section, which concerns a variety of hygiene issues.

One issue that should be highlighted is the importance of the internet in alerting tourists to the existence of Koh Mak and its facilities. A large proportion of the tourists had used the internet to search for information or had consulted forum sites to find out what other people thought about it. Of course, it is not known what sources people who did not visit the island used. It suggests that it is important to have a strong and active web presence so that whenever a potential tourist enters the name 'Koh Mak' into a search engine, then the official site or sites are ranked on the first

page – research suggests that few customers will search beyond the first page of results.

4.1.1. Overall Impressions

As mentioned above, most respondents were happy with their experiences and particularly valued the peacefulness and tranquility of the island. A telling phrase was ‘this is the paradise I was looking for in Thailand.’ For many of these tourists, the idea of Thailand is a land of virgin beaches, sparkling seas and helpful, naïve local people. When they arrive in locations such as Phuket or Koh Chang, therefore, they feel that something is wrong – it is too loud, they are bothered too much by street vendors and the experience is not authentic based on their imagination. For people such as this, then, they visit Koh Mak in order to find something they had already imagined and are satisfied. Two decades ago, they could have found that vision in other places which have now become, according to the respondents, over-developed. In another few years, they might move on from Koh Mak if it starts to become too busy or lively. According to the life cycle concept presented previously, these tourists are at the explore/engage stage of involvement but if the destination moves towards the exploitation phase, then they will stay away as this is not something they desire.

It is the peaceful environment that is the dominant attractive feature and it leads the tourists into a very quiet lifestyle while on the island – it should be noted that Koh Mak was usually not the sole destination to be visited during the holiday. Tourists were happy to enjoy some peace and quiet on Koh Mak but often wanted to combine it with a livelier set of experiences, which were usually sought on Koh Chang. Diversity between the different islands, in other words, is important in appealing to tourists who are able to be mobile between them.

Since tourists wanted a peaceful time, they did not expect there to be any more night time entertainment than currently existed. There are plenty of restaurants and cafes where people can meet and enjoy each other’s company but no very loud night clubs or rows of beer bars. It was fairly clear that tourists did not want the loudness of such places and, in fact, the presence of night clubs and similar places would contribute to destroying the experience desired. The same is true of any other loud noises (e.g. banana boats or jet skis). Most tourists did not realize that these activities are not permitted on the island but appreciated the fact that they were not present.

Most tourists remained in their resorts for most of the time spent on the island and preferred to take all their meals there. There was general satisfaction with the food and beverages available and most respondents were familiar with Thai food already because of the success of the Thai restaurant export sector – Thai food is now known around the world and, even if the tourists do not often eat it at home (although some did eat Thai food regularly), they knew what it was like and it did not appear to be strange to them. Consequently, exotic food was not a barrier to the tourists on Koh

Mak, since they were more experienced. This appears to be different to the experience on Koh Chang, for example, where it appeared that many Russian¹ tourists wanted to find food more familiar to them and also to try street food that they could recognise (e.g. grilled chicken, fruit) and which would be cheaper than indoor alternatives.

It was found, then, that the respondents were happy with the food and beverages provided and thought the quality acceptable and the cost modest, especially since food costs in Europe are generally much higher. There was little interest in gourmet or five star dining experiences or the introduction of any new types of cuisine. Research indicated that there was a range of western styles of food available in certain restaurants (e.g. Italian, German) for those who wanted to try them, in addition to the Thai dishes sold in the same restaurants. There was no visible evidence of alternative Asian cuisines (e.g. Japanese or Korean) and, equally, few Asian tourists from those countries.

When it came to accommodation, the respondents were again quite satisfied with what they received. A small number would have been interested in a higher level of accommodation (e.g. four or five-star hotels) and would have been happy to pay more to receive that level of service. However, most respondents were satisfied with what they received already and were complimentary about the attitude and helpfulness of the staff. It might be noted that this happiness with service levels was somewhat contradictory to some of the experiences of the research team, since there was more than one instance of poor service in restaurants where it appeared that lack of training or incentive of staff represented a problem. This will be discussed further below in the section on governance.

When asked whether there were additional facilities or services that respondents would have liked to be able to receive, there were few responses and those that were received only from one or two people in each case. Some of these were for beach activities such as surfing, kite-surfing and wind-surfing which are not currently available but which would not make any loud noises or be too intrusive. Another issue was the quality of the internet reception available. In Western countries, it is becoming increasingly common for people to be able to enjoy what is effectively free (or very low-cost) broadband reception just about everywhere – at least in urban settings. As a result, people plan their leisure activities around possession of a tablet or smartphone on which they can watch streaming films, TV and so forth whenever they like. This means they can travel light without DVDs, books, magazines and other media. Some tourists will expect this service to be available to them on Koh Mak and will be disappointed if it does not meet their expectations. If provision of

¹ Some of the 'Russian' tourists may have been tourists from Eastern European countries speaking languages somewhat reminiscent of Russian but which the researcher could not differentiate. In any case, these tourists also had a general lack of experience with travelling and with Thailand.

internet coverage is problematic, then hotel and resort owners will need to be generous in providing alternative sources of entertainment people can enjoy on their own.

4.1.2. Hygiene Issues

A number of respondents were concerned about some hygiene issues concerning the environment, although others were quite happy with the level of cleanliness. There are several issues involved with this. First, there is the issue of the water. Some people felt that the level of cleanliness of the water and, hence, the beach, was sub-standard in some areas. Even those who were unhappy that there was some rubbish or jetsam on the beaches did not think that the whole island had a problem but only certain small parts of it. Most understood that flotsam became jetsam depending on the nature of the tides and currents and that this was not something that people could easily control. Consequently, respondents did not blame anyone for problems with hygiene but simply observed that it existed.

Second, there is the issue of the smell from the recycling centre. Recycling is a standard procedure in most of Western Europe so respondents are not surprised (or particularly impressed) to see some limited recycling taking place on the island. What is surprising is that so much rubbish is gathered together in a central location at which nobody seems to be working and that it gives off such a bad smell continuously.

The third issue relates to sandflies (which are bloodsucking, biting, flying Dipterans of various types). Some respondents have suffered from being bitten and one couple claimed that they would not have visited Koh Mak at all if they had known the size of the problem. Scanning the web forums (e.g. Lonely Planet, Travelfish, Thaivisa), this issue is becoming quite strongly associated with Koh Mak. The people who are likely to post on these forums are those younger people who have less money and so are likely to spend more time on the beaches. Lying with the skin in direct contact with the sand is a means of greatly increasing the risk of being bitten and, since the bites are not immediately obvious, it is possible to be bitten quite often in a short period of time. Some people have had to seek medical treatment as a result and this and the suffering caused by the bites has completely ruined their experience.

Respondents do note the precautions taken to protect people from the sandflies but also noted that most of these precautions were either not properly supported (e.g. the free vinegar supplies have not been replaced) or else that they did not really work. There is not much that can be done about this problem, apart from warning tourists not to touch the sand directly in the absence of a large-scale cleaning programme on every beach on a regular basis. Ironically, what would reduce the threat the most would also ruin the experience of the island: if there were a large number of people walking on the beach regularly, then that would be enough to damage the sandfly

eggs and, hence, solve the problem at the expense of ruining the solitude of the island.

A small number of respondents expressed concern about other environmental hazards, for example jellyfish. However, this was not considered to be a serious problem and most people realized that, in a sub-tropical country such as Thailand, it is necessary to be cautious when interacting with nature. This was the same situation with sea urchins, which can cause injury if stepped upon. Respondents felt that tourists generally should realize that spiky sea animals are likely to cause pain if stepped upon and so avoid them. In some swimming or diving activities, contact may be unavoidable but this is why safety clothing and equipment is provided.

One additional point that might be included here is the very high proportion of respondents who smoked during their holiday. The proportion of smokers appeared to be much higher than national averages, although this estimated is based on anecdotal evidence. In Europe, restrictions on smoking in public are now quite severe and this can make it quite difficult for people to be able to find relaxing opportunities to smoke with other people. By contrast, this was very possible in Thailand, where laws prevent smoking only in air conditioned public spaces. There were some respondents who observed that they have given up smoking in their home countries and only do so when on holiday in a country such as Thailand. Of course, not everybody is happy to be part of a smoky atmosphere.

4.1.3. Attitudes towards the Low Carbon Destination Concept

All or nearly all of the respondents were interested in the concept of the low carbon destination but did not realize that it was in operation at Koh Mak. No respondent had noticed any of the existing solar panels and thought recycling and other activities unimportant, because they are so familiar with them in their home countries. Most Western European countries have been educating schoolchildren in the need to adopt a more environmentally friendly lifestyle and implementing relevant policies for some decades and so tourists from those countries are quite used to following them and understand their importance. However, most respondents had not thought about low carbon use in a destination in Thailand and found that there was a contradiction between taking a long-haul flight for a holiday and still thinking about environmental sustainability. When respondents did start to hear about the concept, they were generally supportive but wondered why it was not taking place on a much larger scale. By contrast with, for example, Germany, where the available amount of sunlight is quite limited but the use of solar power and other renewable sources of energy is very extensive,¹ Thailand has very little use of solar power, especially at

¹ Germany produces more solar power than any other country, at 400 MW per million people, with Italy second on 267 MW per million people. In July of 2013, German solar panels produced 5.1 Terawatt hours of electricity in a single month (breaking the record of 5.0 Terawatt hours produced by wind turbines in January of the same year (Kroh, 2013). In Thailand, investment in solar power has

the household level. In Germany, it is possible for individuals and commercial companies who generate electricity from renewable sources to sell some or all of that electricity to the national grid. As much as 40% of renewable energy in the country is provided by individuals (McGrath, 2013).

In other words, tourists would not be surprised to see a very much more obvious use of solar power on Koh Mak as well as everywhere else in Thailand and would be supportive of its use. Incentives to householders and businesses to make more use of solar power cells, perhaps through subsidies, would be likely to be welcomed. There will be some people who object to use of renewable energy on aesthetic grounds – they argue, for example, that wind power generating turbines are noisy and ugly and that solar panels detract from the natural beauty of the architecture and so forth. This, from a destination management perspective, is a matter of the level of expectations and how they can be managed.

4.2. Opinions of Long-Term Residents

A focus group of long-term residents were drawn together for a focus group discussion of issues relating to tourism and the destination management of Koh Mak. The respondents were known to each other and familiar with each other's company, which meant the group took on the characteristics of an affinity group: affinity means people are more likely to be open with each other, be more willing to reveal their feelings and contradict each other without fear of causing conflict because of the sense of group cohesion imparted by the method (e.g. Keddie, 2004). These characteristics were evident in this group who had all been present on Koh Mak for a number of years and, as tenacious if not always wealthy business-managers or owners, had come to understand the way things work on the island and had quite extensive knowledge of Thailand more generally.

4.2.1. Overall Impressions of Koh Mak

Since the respondents had stayed on Koh Mak for a considerable period of time, although they might have interspersed this with periods of residence elsewhere, it is evident that they would have a generally positive attitude towards the island and the experience of living there. There are many reasons for foreigners to live in a location such as Koh Mak, some of which are more honourable than others. As a result, most respondents had a favourable response to the question why they were living on the island. Most spoke about the location, in various contexts, as well as the desire to make a life on it. Making a life on the island does not necessarily mean a permanent residency on Koh Mak but it does mean a serious commitment. In the contemporary

increased considerably when it was announced that the government would buy solar power from private sector providers at a good price and the country plans to increase its total capacity for solar power to 3,000 MW, by which time its total contribution to the overall power sector will have increased from 8% to 25% (Song, 2013).

world, entrepreneurs and business-owners prefer to keep their assets as liquid as they can and to be ready to move from one place to another in the event of negative external environment event. Foreigners who live in Thailand, therefore, do not always have a deep and unalloyed love of the country or the place where they live but they can enjoy the situation and compare it favourably with elsewhere.

4.2.2. Environmental Issues

Respondents were well-aware of the low carbon destination and generally approved of it, since most if not all people approve of attempts to reduce damaging the environment unnecessarily and taking some steps to mitigating global climate change. Awareness of these issues is, in general, much better developed in Europe, the home of the respondents, and Thailand and, further, information about it is provided to children at all levels of education. What may be new to the Thai residents of Koh Mak (and other DASTA-assisted areas), therefore, might be very familiar to the overseas residents. Indeed, they might feel – as several did express – that the public sector could be doing much more to encourage all residents to do more to protect the natural environment. They are aware that, as a small island relying upon the tourism industry, Koh Mak is in a very vulnerable situation and even current levels of development pose significant dangers to the sustainable development of the island.

Respondents pointed out a number of problems with the low carbon destination concept that arise from the fact that so many environment-damaging activities were going ahead at the same time. One principal issue was with the nature of the vehicles used on the island, which are thought generally to be at a low level of repair and to be needlessly damaging through emissions. These vehicles could be checked by police or other authorities (as happens in other countries) and repaired to ensure efficient use of fuel and reduction of emissions. Respondents presented other options: the use of electric vehicles (or hybrid vehicles) instead of petrol or diesel-powered cars. This would need some investment to ensure supplies of electric power were available and possibly a version of the ‘cash for clunkers’ policy introduced in the USA and elsewhere which provides some assistance for people wishing to buy a new car and trade in their old, inefficient one. Thailand’s government introduced a similar scheme to help people but their first car (thereby helping to sustain demand for automobiles at a time of global economic crisis) and so should be able to manage something similar in this case, especially as it would have a much more positive effect on the environment than the past policy.

It is also possible to use biofuels as an alternative to currently employed fuels but this is not popular in Europe, in general, since it is widely believed that the land used to grow biofuels would be better devoted to growing food and helping to keep prices low. Food is relatively much more expensive in Europe than it is in most of Asia and since a great deal of it is imported, awareness of prices is quite high. Respondents

tended to agree with this idea and did not support biofuels. Some did think that the use of cooking oil to power vehicles was a technology that could be used effectively on the island. One respondent gave the story of having bought a tuk tuk from Bangkok which uses an efficient cooking oil approach but reported that he had to have it disassembled and brought to the island piece by piece to escape from some regulations which prevent moving vehicles from province to province.

Respondents also discussed other types of vehicle, including the use of animals. Although there are roads to all parts of the island now, the rapid elevation of the island, together with the climate and soil type, mean that roads can often and rapidly become difficult to travel – this is of course, one of the reasons why people, both residents and tourists, prefer to rely on motor cycles rather than bicycles and powered vehicles rather animals. However, it was felt that there was some scope for use of animals for transportation and that this might at least offer some encouragement to others and to provide a good example.

The respondents were, in general, critical of the cleanliness of beaches. Since they were nearly all year-round residents, they were very aware that items could arrive on different beaches on a wide range of occasions and this was dependent on forces beyond the control of anyone on the island. However, their assessment of the problem was much more critical than that of the tourists. Respondents claimed to have seen all kinds of industrial or medical waste arriving at the island and some blamed unspecified individuals or organisations in Cambodia for doing this, in addition to that material that fell from or was disposed of by boats and ships in the area. Whether this is true or not, the respondents certainly felt there was a strong need to organize clean-up operations on all the beaches on a regular basis in order to reassure customers and all stakeholders that this is a subject that is being taken seriously. Respondents spoke about similar initiatives that are being taken on neighbouring islands (although not all the islands) and extolled the virtues of such initiatives. It was observed that Koh Mak business proprietors have access to low-cost Cambodian migrant workers and they could be used to do this work. Apparently, no special equipment is required (according to the respondents) and there are no serious health and safety issues to be considered. Such an activity would enhance the confidence of all stakeholders and would, as previously mentioned, help to reduce or eliminate the sandfly problem because the regular walking across the beach would damage or destroy the eggs which are lodged in the sand itself.

This cleanliness issue was considered to be of considerable importance to the respondents and they thought it would have a serious impact on whether the island could have a sustainable future. It might be repeated here that the respondents have lengthy experiences with Thailand and its development and have seen other destinations follow the same life cycle and move on (as seen elsewhere) to the exploitation and then decline phases as a result.

All respondents were concerned with the prospect of cable electricity arriving on the island. This had been long promised but long delayed and the promised arrival date (2015) might yet be postponed, it was felt. In general, this would be considered a good thing and would be very popular. However, it would have mixed environmental effects. The removal of diesel-driven generators would be a good thing but the probable impact of removing incentives to use solar power would be a bad thing. Incentives to householders to generate solar power which could be fed into the island grid was considered to be the way to solve this problem.

4.2.3. Facilities

The respondents generally felt that the facilities on the island may be limited but they were just about sufficient to the need of them. In terms of health facilities, there is a small clinic with three nurses attached, although no doctor and no registered pharmacist. It was thought that the nurses could deal with most routine injuries or illnesses and that, in the event of something more serious, an ambulance boat can be urgently despatched from Koh Chang and the patient transferred to the hospital there. The small pharmacies operate from the convenience stores and are quite basic. Since most tourists do not stay on Koh Chang very long, this is considered to be acceptable and, again, in the event of need people can travel to Koh Chang or the mainland daily to pick up vital prescriptions or other materials.

Koh Mak has neither 7-11 convenience stores nor ATMs (although credit cards are accepted). Most people seem to be able to manage this and the places where money can be changed were described as being lucrative and so those business-owners saw no need to introduce ATMs. There is the additional problem that providing an ATM would mean allocating additional resources to the island and this would not be cost-effective at present. A small post office exists to take care of basic needs. Since internet connections are relatively stable, most tourists can generally deal with urgent financial or administrative issues online.

A number of complaints were received about the educational facilities on the island but this is an issue beyond the scope of the current research.

4.2.4. Labour Market

As business-owners, the respondents were familiar with the problems involved with hiring and retaining staff. As is usually the case with business-owners, there was quite a lot of complaining about the quality of the workers, their lack of initiative and loyalty and so forth. Both local Thai workers and imported Cambodian workers were described in unfavourable ways. While respondents appreciated the additional value that well-motivated and well-trained staff could provide, they believed that there was little incentive for them to provide training because the workers treated any job as a short-term assignment which they would simply quit whenever they had achieved their objectives or found a better opportunity. To break this cycle, there

would appear to be scope to create partnerships neighbouring vocational schools or universities where students are training in tourism or the service sector more generally.

It was apparent that most of the businesses operating on Koh Mak belonged to or had been operated by people originating from outside the island. Much of the cost of staying on the island depends on paying for imported food and beverages and there is, in other words, a problem involved with keeping the money in the place where it was generated.

4.2.5. Governance and Power

There is a darker side to business management by foreigners in Koh Mak, just as there is in property management of all sorts. The problems are intensified when tourist destinations are involved because these can be highly competitive and offer cash transactions. In the early stages of development, which is similar to what is occurring now on Koh Mak, the foreign investors are more or less ignored as long as they do not threaten the existing architecture of power relations and abide by the patronage networks in place (Williamson, 1992). It is only when the investors threaten the existing system that problems can begin. The respondents preferred to speak about these issues privately rather than as part of a group. Since they mostly had long-term experience of Thailand, people could remember when it was more common for people to use violence against business opponents. This has not happened on Koh Mak, according to respondents, although there was a well-known story of one incoming investor who planned a leisure business that would have been contrary to the noise restrictions. Despite several warnings from some respondents and others, the investor continued to pour millions of baht into the house and business. When finally the day came for the business to open, it lasted for only one day before the owner was convinced it had to be abandoned forever.

No specific individuals or organizations were blamed for this and, indeed, the respondents took the view that the problem was caused by the investor himself who recklessly ignored the signals from the people involved and should have known better how things work. However, although there were some other incidents such as this, the respondents felt that the main issue was the concentrated nature of land ownership among a small number of families and that this represented a means of preventing change. Since the landowning families, it was thought, have more or less agreed among themselves to prevent any substantial changes, then the scope for market activities among the respondents was needlessly restraining their own business opportunities. At the same time, there was some concern about when change would come, perhaps from an inter-generational transfer of responsibility and what it would represent. An arrangement not to change the pattern of development might remain stable but could change very quickly if just one individual decides to change and sell out to move to Bangkok, for example.

Under these circumstances, there is a lack of transparency about the overall management of the destination at the local authority level. This is because it is difficult for outsiders to determine how power is exercised in the junction between the public and private sector and, also, how a sub-provincial unit is governed and the extent to which it can be managed differently from the remainder of the province.

Currently, there is no association of foreign business-owners (i.e. similar to the Chambers of Commerce elsewhere or the Chinese Business Associations) and so the respondents felt both that they had no way to give their opinions about the way the island is being managed and, also, to have a channel to receive information from the authorities on an official or unofficial basis. This would promote harmonious relationships and assist with planning for the future.

One example of the power of rival families in organizing the commercial activities on the island is that different families have, it was reported, created their own integrated resort areas with associated boat service and pier, with other facilities. There are, therefore, several different piers which facilitate what are, effectively, small-scale monopolies. Tourists who have not pre-booked their accommodation are quite likely to purchase a package including boat fare at Trat or another island. As ever, monopolies discourage innovation and provide few if any incentives to improve the quality of service.

5. Implications

Since, in general, island authorities are happy with the current level of tourists coming to the island but would like business-owners the opportunity to generate more income from them, then it is necessary to identify what new goods and services could be offered to tourists that they do not currently receive.

There was very little interest among respondents for a more varied and expensive food and beverage experience, little interest in bars or clubs and little interest in high-street shopping. Within the limitations on space and noise on the island, there is some scope for additional outdoor activities, which might be land-based as well as sea-based. There is also some scope for upgrading accommodation in some areas. Some respondents observed that they would be prepared to pay more for a higher level of accommodation and such a development would help attract new market segments, such as wealthy Russian or Chinese tourists on short visits. It would seem to be impractical to try to organize a large-scale high-end tourism development project such as a yacht marina and attendant complex within the current conditions on the island.

It is necessary, therefore, to identify areas in which local production may take place to supplement the existing marketing offerings. One obvious way to do this would be to grow some small, relatively high-value vegetable items on the island which

could be marketed to local providers or food and beverage, perhaps as part of a cooperative. There seemed to be little enthusiasm for this idea and there would be some practical problems to solve in terms of geography and climate. However, it should be possible to grow some fruits and vegetables in controlled environments (e.g. greenhouses or hydroponic systems) as well as some farming of fish and seafood. At the least, this would be worth some further market research to determine what could be done and when the payback time would be achieved.

In addition, there are some other tourism-related services which are available in other resorts (e.g. hair-plaiting, beach massages and so forth) which might be encouraged. In general, the level of service from some of the lower-paid staff members in different locations could be improved and they might be able to generate more income if they could be retained on a longer-term basis and encouraged to participate in some of these value-added service activities.

There is also the need to identify other forms of goods and services which can be generated internally as a means of contributing to social capital on the island. Successful tourism destination management depends to some extent on the stable allocation of resources, the provision of genuine social capital and a good level of connectivity. Since the island is governed to a considerable extent by a group of landowners who have settled on stability as a guiding principle, this is not a problem. In terms of connectivity, this is generally good and likely to become better as time continues and more marketization of the tourism industry takes place. It is already possible to move between the islands, to the mainland and on to Bangkok or else to Cambodia without too much difficulty. There is plenty of information about how to go from place to place and where to stay, which is supplemented by resort representatives meeting visitors arriving by boat. Internet connectivity is acceptable although will need to be improved nationwide in due course. As a result, the most pressing need is for additional social capital that will act as a new form of entertainment to attract visitors and which can, in due turn, be monetized.

The term 'social capital' refers to any form of activity involving people which is not market-based and which has existed for some time. The production of handicrafts falls into social capital since these were originally intended for domestic use or small-scale exchange. So, tourists are happy to buy such things. Other activities include organizing festivals, ritual dancing, meeting each other in a communal area such as a park or riverside bank (as happens in Phnom Penh and, to a lesser extent, Vientiane and is being created in Chiang Khan. To some extent, social capital can be invented but it takes some time for tourists to be willing to consider it to be an authentic activity. The naga fireball event on the River Mekong is only a few years old but is now accepted as a real life social capital event. The first step, then, is to identify areas of existing social capital, developing them so that they are accessible and well-known and then seeking ways to monetize them – through merchandising, paying to participate and so forth. Further development is required in this area.

In terms of the low carbon destination concept, it is evident that there is little scope in marketing it to international tourists, although there may be more scope for marketing it to Thai tourists who will be less aware of the issues and technology involved. More activities should take place on the supply side, with business-owners and general residents being encouraged to take on more solar panels and other forms of activity aimed at boosting renewable energy production. Additional steps to promote effective recycling and reducing waste will also be helpful.

6. Recommendations

In Thailand, a great deal of valuable and important research work is commissioned and conducted and the reports received and results noted. However, there is very often a problem that the results of the research are not followed-up through monitoring and evaluation processes. As a result, it can be very difficult for both research providers and the commissioners of research to determine which projects have produced usable and effective results and which have not. The first recommendation, therefore, is that there should be some mechanism instituted which follows-up the current research project to monitor changes and development and to evaluate what differences (according to a variety of perspectives) any subsequent changes have made.

Second, there are various additional research questions which should be investigated and, inevitably, one of the recommendations of a research project is that more research should be conducted.

One of the principal findings of this research project is that tourists, currently, have very limited awareness of the activities contributing to the low carbon destination concept but generally are supportive of them. The level of knowledge varies considerably between those tourists from Europe and those from Thailand (there are, of course, other tourists but these are the dominant cohorts). The European tourists are very familiar with the issues relating to global climate change and the role of renewable energy sources in seeking to combat it. They may not be active in this area but they (generally) do not oppose it. By contrast, Thai tourists know very little about the subject and, although they might be supportive, they do not really know enough to be able to make mature judgments. This means that, for European tourists, informing them of what has been done to make Koh Mak a low carbon destination will be a good thing but will not make much difference to their decision whether to visit there or not. Thai tourists are different in this regard: there is a new sector of Thai tourists who can be made to be interested in environmental issues who might use that as a criterion for visiting. The difficult part of this issue is that these would be tourists who would spend relatively little during a visit.

A second important finding is that the low carbon destination is a good idea and welcomed by important stakeholders but its effects are contradicted by other aspects of family life, such as the use of inefficient vehicles, imports of food and water and other aspects of life which challenge the concept of sustainable development under the current model. More efforts should be made to integrate the low carbon concept on Koh Mak into other forms of environmental protection so that a more combined approach can be promoted. When people become aware of the issues relating to island life, they are (according to the research results) generally understanding and supportive of the issues faced and (just as in other parts of the world) willing to make meaningful and practical changes to try to improve the situation. DASTA, as well as supporting stakeholders, can take bold steps to promote environmental awareness and willingness to change in the knowledge that such approaches are supported by all important stakeholders – in some countries, regions or provinces, promoting environmental awareness represents a challenge to existing political power structures but research suggests this is not the case for Koh Mak. Consequently, it can be expected that influential local people can be brought onside to support pro-environmental campaigns because these can be used to promote their own interests.

Thirdly, it seems that the good which is being done is being done in stealth – i.e. most international tourists are unaware of it and to make them aware of it would be very expensive and, possibly, so expensive that improving the situation would counteract the positive effects that the low carbon concept has so far achieved. As a result, it is recommended that low cost approaches to promoting the concept among important stakeholders be sought. This will focus mostly on the supply side of tourism services. Since it is the supply side that is involved, it would not be necessary for high quality products to be involved.

Finally, there is a great deal of knowledge and understanding in the foreign community on the island which is not currently being incorporated into thinking at the local authority level. A way might be found to tap into this knowledge and understanding without, necessarily, empowering the overseas community. Foreign investors have many energetic and interesting ideas but those are ideas which are not fully commensurate with the best interests of all members of the island community. A foreign business association with some input into island-level governance might be a useful aspiration.

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