Ecotourism or Overtourism? Community and Outsider Influences on Yao Noi Island (Ko Yao Noi), Thailand.

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Abstract

Thailand's tourism growth has been a financial success story for the country, with nearly 40M visitors, annually, contributing to 18% of GDP. This growth has brought problems of overtourism. The study focusses on a case history of a small island in south Thailand, Ko Yao Noi, promoted as an ecotourism destination, and looks at the relationship between the local Muslim community, outside investors, tourist typography and the Thai government. Qualitative research consisted of semi-structured interviews with the local community, community projects, local businesses, outside investors and industry experts. The research adds to previous quantitative studies into sustainability on the island and asks how key players have shaped tourism development.

Keywords: Ecotourism, sustainable tourism development, island tourism, overtourism, carrying capacity, Ko Yao Noi, Thailand tourism, tourist typology.

1. Introduction

Thailand's tourism arrivals have grown from 9.5M in 2000 to 39M in 2019 (Fakfare et al., 2022). An increase in regional low-cost airlines following deregulation in 2003 (Law et al., 2022), improved domestic transportation infrastructure, growing accommodation options and visa-free travel (Immigration Bureau, 2024) for many nationalities have helped fuel this growth. Most tourists visit popular resort areas and cities, and smaller secondary destinations have seen increased numbers of visitors. The term 'overtourism' has become a common theme in the Thai media and tourism business circles (Hess, 2019). Researching the impact of

outsiders on tourism development on a small remote tropical island like Ko Yao Noi (KYN) is crucial to understanding and mitigating the negative consequences of potential overtourism.

Remote tropical islands are popular tourist destinations (Sharpley, 2012), with many experiencing the pressures of overtourism. (Butler and Dodds, 2022). This research examines the relationship between external influences and the growth of tourism in south Thailand using a case study of a small island, KYN in Phang Nga Bay, Gulf of Phuket, south Thailand. The role of outsiders, the local community and government in shaping the destination of these communities is studied. Previous studies of KYN and the surrounding area have mainly focussed on community-based tourism (CBT) (Jitpakdee and Thapa, 2012; Walter and Reimer, 2011; Untong and Phaokreung, 2021; Hunt and Thaveeseng, 2024). Ecotourism is a term that has been widely used and KYN is promoted as an island of ecotourism by the Thai Government (TAT, 2024). Most research has been carried out based on domestic tourism for the Thai market. Little research has been published relating to the role of outsiders in tourism development on the island. The research will address the question: what is the role of outsiders in island tourism development, and have they contributed to overtourism?

The purpose of the research is to understand the consequences of island tourism development in Thailand, the role of outsiders in tourism growth and the relationship with the local community. Outsiders are important to tourism and a key driver of investment and development, but this may come at a price. Tourism revenues are extremely important to local communities and maximising income is a priority. The study will examine potential strategies and policy recommendations for sustainable development of the island to maximise tourism revenues while maintaining cultural sensitivity.

2. Literature Review: Community-Based Tourism, Overtourism, and Outsiders

Since 'ecotourism' was first applied in 1983 (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996), Hussain (2022) suggests it has become commonly mis-used and over-used within the travel business. A meta-analysis of 25 years of 470 ecotourism research articles concluded that the term ecotourism was used mainly for marketing purposes. Furthermore, many ecotourism development projects reviewed were focused on western ideals, showing a lack of understanding of local contexts (Wondirad, 2019). Chandrel and Mishra (2016) reviewed 42 commonly cited

definitions from scholars and concluded that ecotourism should focus on several key points: (1) a quality nature-based experience, (2) educational interpretation when needed, to enhance the experience, (3) follow environmentally sustainable standards and practices, (4) conservation of the environment through contributions, (5) benefits to, and inclusion of the local community, (6) Respect to the local community, and (7) responsible marketing to consumers.

In 2000, the United Nations (UN) Commission on Sustainable Development mandated The UN World Tourism Organization (WTO) and The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to create activities for International Year of Ecotourism (Wood, 2002). Regionally, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) created standards around CBT (ASEAN, 2007). Thailand has led the way with the Thai CBT Institute (CBT-I) aiming to 'clarify and protect community rights' with self-certifying programmes (Novelli et al., 2016). A National Ecotourism Policy was initiated in 1996 by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) with the establishment of networks to disseminate information and coordinate activities (TAT, 1996). The TAT's main objectives for ecotourism were: "responsible travel in areas containing natural resources that possess endemic characteristics and cultural or historical resources that are integrated into the area's ecological system" (TAT, 1997). Key pillars of focus included nature-based tourism, sustainable management, learning, and participation of the local community (Sangpikul, 2010).

The Thailand Ecotourism and Adventure Travel Association (TEATA) was formed in 1997 to create standards for each industry sector. The policy was formulated by the Thailand Institute of Scientific and Technical Research (TISTR) and a National Ecotourism Plan (2002-6) was proclaimed (Trivedi et al., 2020). Thailand's ecotourism policy covers all the key points above including banning travel to environmentally sensitive areas; development of an ecotourism code of conduct for all sectors; and a budgeted ecotourism plan at the district, provincial and regional levels (Thavarasuka, 2002). The last point is most relevant to KYN. The local government sub-district (Tambon) incorporates the term 'ecotourism' into its slogan as seen on signs and on the front page of its website: "Island of Ecotourism, managed according to the principles of good governance. People being at the centre of development, leading to a strong community" (Ko Yao Noi Sub District, 2024).

The earliest tourists to KYN, in the late 1980s, were drifters (Cohen, 1973), people who ventured off the beaten track shunning conventional destinations. Lack of accommodation on the island was the limiting factor to tourism with the first bungalow 'Sabai Corner' geared towards international visitors opening in 1989, (SabaiCornerBungalows, 2024) which attracted backpackers and budget tourists. Adventurers (Kontogeorgopolus, 2023) in the 1990s, found their way to the island with specialist eco-tourism tours such as sailing, kayaking and camping in the Bay (Shepherd, 2002). Mass ecotourists (Pleumarom, 1993; Kontogeorgopoulus, 2003) stay at hotels on the island e.g. Six Senses, Paradise Ko Yao. Kontogeorgopoulus' (2003a) study of western tourists in south Thailand suggested that the quest for authenticity differentiated backpacker and adventure travellers from mass ecotourists. Adventurers staying at local villages in KYN were studied by Sangpikul (2020). Guests visited the local market and took part in cooking classes. Sangpikul noted that well trained tour guides with local knowledge and nature interpretation skills differentiated ecotours from conventional tours, resulting in higher customer satisfaction. Mass tourists taking package tours (Sezgin and Yolal, 2012) remains a very small part of tourism on KYN, confined to the hotels.

King and Cela (2023) defined International Retirement Migrants as relatively affluent westerners or those living on a pension talking advantage of lower living costs than the west. Marginals, described by Howard (2008) work on a small salary, e.g. teaching English, and more recently as Digital Nomads (Jiwasiddi et al., 2024). A third group of employed expats work in higher paid management jobs (Tsai, 2018), e.g., within the hospitality industry on KYN. The final group are entrepreneurs running their own businesses within the guidelines of the Alien Business Act (1999) that limits the type of work that foreigners can undertake (Pintusornsri, 2022). Chubchuwong et al. (2015) studied 156 foreign residents in Thailand, including property owners, suggesting that they had become stakeholders as they felt more responsibility towards environmental sustainability.

Demographically, 5.4% of Thailand's population is classified as Sunni Muslim with KYN at 99% (Thailand National Statistics Office, 2024). From the 14th century Islam, in the Malay states to the south, have influenced the growth of the religion (Gilquin, 2002). Popular stories relate to Muslims escaping the war with Burma (1765-7) and finding refuge on KYN. Prayatsub and Tae (2022) suggest that the island was previously an army base, colonised in the early

20th century by Muslims from Thalang (Phuket) and Trang provinces. More recent Muslim revival and traditional teachings stem from Palang Ae (Ismail Romin), an immigrant from Kelantan State, Malaysia (Prayatsup and Tae, 2022) and have formed the basis for the Sufi group of Muslims on the island. The smaller Salafi group stems from Saudi Arabian influence (Wahabism), in the 21st Century (Prayatsub and Tae, 2022a). Awang et al. (2016) noted that most of the Muslims in south Thailand had an open attitude towards other religious beliefs.

The Thai Volunteer Service Foundation initiated the first community-based tourism (CBT) project in 2002 (Hunt and Thaveeseng, 2024). Homestays for educational tourism were established, together with the Responsible Ecological Social Tours (REST) project in five locations nationwide, including KYN (Walter, 2009). In 1995, only 50 to 100 people visited the island every month, mainly Thais, staying in the half a dozen homestays on the island. By 2001, the island was seeing 5,000 visitors a year (Hunt and Thaveeseng, 2024). The KYN Ecotourism Club was established by residents and received a World Legacy Award from National Geographic Magazine for preserving the local environment and culture (National Geographic, 2024). In 2016, ASEAN granted a "Homestay Award" to five homestays in Thailand (ASEAN, 2016). Further awards from the TAT in 2002 and 2004 (Wichupankul, 2006) and Yahoo Travel Magazine listed KYN as one of the world's most beautiful unspoiled islands, which promoted KYN to more international visitors (Witchayakawin, 2016). The requirements for skills to help educate visitors in environment, culture and livelihood was tackled by CBET projects creating an ecotourism curriculum (Walter and Reimer, 2012). Untong and Phaokrueng (2021) studied returns on CBT projects on the island and suggested that financially, all activities had a positive return on investment.

Jitpakdee and Thapas (2012) noted that participation in decision-making in community programmes by locals was weak. This is likely because of the patron-client relationship between Thai leaders and followers, the Buddhist concept of *barami* or 'moral strength' which pervades in all religious groups, throughout Thai society (Persons, 2016). Wichupankul (2006) noted an unclear and undefined direction for the participation of the local community with an unwillingness to participate. Salman et al. (2024) reviewed 320 articles relating to multi-stakeholders in ecotourism and concluded that each destination had its own requirements and that there was often a lack of understanding of the requirements of the destination by all interested parties. They suggested that both government and private

sectors needed to invest in local capacity building and infrastructure facilities for ecotourism sites.

With respect to KYN, as more hotels, bungalows and homestays opened on the island, Walter (2009) claimed that the tourism boom was no longer in the control of the local community and that in many cases community members did not see the commercialisation and the growth of general tourism as negative, viewing ecotourism as a commodified experience. During the Covid pandemic, a limited number of tourists on the island visited the island and the activities, and revenues of the CBT groups diminished. As of 2024, their activities have been stagnated (Thaicharoen et al., 2023). To revitalise their activity, Hunt and Thaveeseng (2024) suggest more focus on domestic tourism and extended stay tourists such as digital nomads.

Tourism in Southeast Asia substantially supports the Sustainable Development Goals, notably poverty alleviation (UN, 2024; Trupp and Dolezal, 2020). Boonyasana and Chinnakum (2021) examined revenue flow in Thailand and concluded tourism contributes to poverty reduction and decreased inequality at aggregate levels; however, local-level research by Suriya (2011) revealed benefits are unevenly distributed, with the wealthiest households capturing most gains. The One Tambon One Product (OTOP) programme was introduced in 2001 to foster grassroots economic development by promoting local production and sales, especially among rural populations (FAO, 2022). While OTOP faced challenges in reaching its objectives initially, reinforced policy support and capacity-building measures in the 2010s enhanced rural incomes and economic inclusivity, as evidenced by increased earnings among participants, especially women, whose average additional income often surpassed the poverty line (Srisantisuk, 2015). The sustainability analysis of ecotourism on KYN carried out in 2009 showed that 75% of 178 families surveyed on KYN indirectly benefitted, with almost 50% earning direct income from ecotourism (Jitpakdee and Thapas, 2012).

Nevertheless, financial benefits are undermined by “leakage” - the loss of tourism-generated revenue to outside actors or foreign businesses. Tourism leakage occurs when funds are transferred or paid from the host country by businesses or individuals or directly paid out of country by tourists. Payments would be for goods, services, commissions or remittances made by tourism employees (Pérez-Ducy de Cuello, 2001). The first ecotours to arrive on KYN were overnight kayak trips from Phuket for adventurers organised by one of

the country's original ecotourism operators, SeaCanoe Thailand, based in Phuket. The company showed that locally marketed tourism retained revenues domestically (SeaCanoe, 1998), while international intermediaries substantially increase leakage, by 75% or more in some cases. This problem was exacerbated by the rise of online booking platforms and global hotel brands, which withhold a notable portion of revenues as commission or off-island remittance. Nationally, leakage across Thailand's tourism industry may reach 70%, especially when considering air travel. Sangpikul (2017) studied tours operated by members of the Thai Ecotourism and Adventure Travel Association, including SeaCanoe and showed that longer tours, with community visits, brought the most economic benefit to the local area.

SeaCanoe's day trips to the Bay, favoured by the *mass ecotourists* staying in Phuket, faced competition in the 1990s (Kontogeorgopolus, 2003; Shepherd, 2002). Overseas tour companies were selling a competitor's kayak day trip for 4,000 THB as a package to Taiwanese tourists, with 1000 THB per head retained in country (500 to the kayak operator, 500 to the local agent), a 75% leakage. SeaCanoe's day trips, sold locally, retained 100% of revenues in country (Shepherd, 1998). At an extreme level, Lindberg (1998) has cited examples of leakage such as Chinese zero-dollar tours as high as 90%.

The durability of ecotourism's benefits is contingent upon both the status of natural resources and the volume of visitors, yet many definitions overlook the implications of carrying capacity and overtourism (Jitpakdee and Thapas, 2012). While the Thai government has classified destinations as ecotourism hubs based on its biodiversity indices and a lack of mass tourism, is has been labelled as an ecotourism destination though Chettamart (2003 argues that how this is assessed by the Thai government may not strictly conform to internationally accepted ecological and social criteria. Butler (2020) notes that exceeding carrying capacity of ecologically sensitive environments such as KYN results from overtourism and from a socio-cultural perspective, residents may view tourism as intrusive to local culture. Examples include public consumption of alcohol and tourists wearing skimpy clothing and nude sunbathing (Jitpakdee and Thapas, 2010). This reflects models such as Doxey's irritation index that describes shifts among residents from initial enthusiasm to antagonism as tourism intensifies. Doxey (1975) noted the four stages of attitudes by local to tourism as being 1) *euphoria* as tourism opportunities arrive 2) *apathy* and 3) *annoyance* or irritation as tourism develops and finally 4) *antagonism* as tourism crowding increases. Hess (2019) considers

inappropriate behaviour in Thailand directly related to overtourism and that Thailand has already exceeded its tourism carrying capacity due to unacceptable tourist behaviour, environmental degradation, and overcrowding.

Overtourism has been tackled in south Thailand. In 2015, local environmentalists and residents of nearby PhiPhi islands petitioned the local government to close Maya Bay, a beach of natural beauty made popular by the film The Beach (Tzanelli, 2007). Maya Bay was visited by over 4,000 tourists a day, causing damage to the coral and marine ecosystem. The area was closed for four months in 2018 and has remained closed for two months a year to allow for rejuvenation. A quota system of 2,000 visitors a day with strict rules on no swimming and a ban on coral damaging sun creams. (Public Relations Department, 2023). The closure and quota system were possible because of the executive authority of the Department of National Parks (Koh and Fakfare, 2020). In 2024, The Federation of Thai Tourist Associations warned the government that 'overtourism is now at a crisis point' (Pattaya Mail, 2024). The Deputy Director of the TAT also acknowledged that the country "lacks a tourism carrying capacity blueprint" (Bangkok Post, 2024a) and announced a shift towards a focus on higher spending tourists for 2025 (Bangkok Post, 2024a).

Jitpakdee and Thapas (2012) questioned the role of outsiders investing in tourism projects and the effect on island culture. Between 2006 and 2009, 166 households sold land to outsiders i.e., non-island Thais or foreigners. Cohen (1983) researched development dynamics of bungalows on Ko Samui Island and reported conflicts between the local fishermen and Thai Chinese from the island's commercial centre over tourism development, as well as several killings of outsiders. Conflicts between outsiders and locals, especially within the tourism industry in south Thailand is well documented with SeaCanoe involved in a dispute over access to the sea caves in the Bay, resulting in an assassination attempt (Rome, 1999; Shepherd, 2002).

As tourism arrivals increased, foreign outsiders, individuals, and businesses with investment capital were attracted, often squeezing the locals out of business (Cohen, 1983). Thailand's foreign business act (Royal Thai Government, 1999) allows only a minority shareholding by foreigners in a business. However, Thailand's Board of Investment attracts direct foreign direct investment (FDI) into the tourism industry, allowing 100% foreign ownership for a range of activities, including hotels with over 100 rooms (Thailand Board of

Investment, 2023). FDI incentives have encouraged and legitimised the growth of foreign ownership in the tourism industry in Thailand and contribute to the increase in mass tourism (Solyu et al., 2023).

The Department of Tourism publishes standards for tourism that includes accommodation, business standards, tour guides, and all other activities relating to tourism. The TAT is responsible for issuing tourism operating licences, requiring a Thai majority owned company, an office location and a deposit of up to 100,000 Thai Baht or $US3,000 (Department of Tourism, 2024). Tour guide licences are restricted to Thai nationals and require a degree in tourism or participation in a three-month training course (Royal Thai Government, 2008). Hotels are governed by the Hotel Act and cover any paid accommodation for less than 30 days. (Royal Thai Government, 2004). Construction of a hotel is governed by the Building Control Act, 2522 (Royal Thai Government, 1979). There is effectively no limit on the number of hotels that can be constructed in any location. 'Non-hotel accommodations' include rental villas, hostels and homestays. In 2023, barriers to entry were lowered by doubling the number of rooms from 4 to 8 and increasing number of guests to from 20 to 30, but with more stringent safety standards (Royal Thai Government, 2023). The changes have been criticised by the Thai Hotel Association over questions of safety and potentially reduced tax revenue (Bangkok Post, 2023). Central government budgets are allocated according to the number of households registered in each Tambon. For KYN, with a high visitor to resident ratio, the budget for infrastructure, refuse collection and other services is insufficient to manage the burden of tourists (Churugsa et al., 2007). Furthermore, Musa (2022) stated a lack of understanding regarding tourism industry by officials in the sub-district or Tambon Administrative Organisation (TAO) as well as a lack of cooperation and enforcement of laws and standards on KYN.

Much of the literature studied relating to the island and Thailand is from Thai and Asian scholars and sources. Some of the papers researched from Thai scholars, especially those in the Thai language generally relate to the government's promotion of ecotourism and tend to discuss both tourism and ecotourism in similar contexts. Thailand has strict libel laws and the unwillingness to offend others within Thai society means that the papers written by Thai scholars will not be as openly critical of problems as that written by foreigners. A limitation of the literature, when looking at an international context, has been the focus of

study of Thai domestic tourists and their activities. Whilst domestic tourism is a very important part of the tourism industry, many aspirations and activities of Thai tourists will be different to the expectations of foreigners. Likewise, little literature was found that studied the role of outsiders in the Thailand tourism industry.

3. Methodology

Island tourism, following visiting historic cities, is the world's second largest category of tourism (Marin, 2000). Islands are closed, manageable systems and ideal locations for research (Sharpley, 2015). Thailand's southern Andaman Sea islands are popular destinations, renowned for their relaxed atmosphere. The majority of the country's Muslims are found in the south of the country with a lifestyle and culture that is quite different to the majority Buddhist population.

KYN was chosen because it is a small island, easy to travel around, and believed to be at a stage of tourism development that matches the research questions of this study. The island is situated in Phang Nga Bay (the Bay) in South Thailand. The climate is tropical monsoon with an average rainfall of 2,400mm (Ramsar, 2024). The Bay has over 100 limestone tower karsts that form a spectacular seascape (Jiang et al, 2020). Clements et al. (2006) describe Southeast Asian karst as "arks of biodiversity" many of which have elevated levels of endemism. The karst's caves are home to bats and swiftlets that produce nests harvested for bird nest soup (Price, 2011). Primates living on the karst include the dusky langur, macaques, gibbons, all on the IUCN Red List endangered species (IUCN, 2024). Phang Nga has the highest count of reptiles and amphibians in the country (Pauwels et al., 2002). The bay is home to 88 bird species (IUCN, 2024) including the white belly sea eagle and the oriental pied hornbill which has been adopted as a mascot for the island (Phuket Rajabhat University, 2024). The 40,000-ha wetland Phang Nga Bay Marine National Park includes the northern tip of the island and falls under the UNESCO Ramsar Convention (Ramsar, 2024). The National Park was made famous by the James Bond film *The Man with the Golden Gun* (The Man with the Golden Gun, 1974).

KYN is an administrative tambon of Ko Yao district in Phang Nga Province. The island is approximately 46 sq km with a registered population of 4,230 and a non-registered

population of approximately 3,000. The island has 2,131 ha of agricultural land, of which 160ha is rice, 83ha is coconut, and 1,700 is rubber tree. 570 households are involved in small scale fishing. The island has 3 primary and two secondary schools, one Buddhist temple, 7 mosques and 7 Muslim centres of learning (KYN Subdistrict, 2024). The island has 58 registered hotels and bungalows (KYN Subdistrict, 2024b) with 650 registered rooms (C9 Hotelworks, 2024). There are at least 60 homestay facilities on the island, many of which are not registered. The island has generally well-maintained two-lane roads, 10 service fishing and ferries. Fast Internet and mobile 5G service on the island are readily available.

No previous study has either applied qualitative methods exclusively to investigate sustainable tourism development or involved foreign participants on KYN, making this research the first study to do so. Semi-structured interviews allowed a deeper understanding of the participants' views which may not have been gleaned from questionnaires. The interviews allowed for flexibility and provided a contextual understanding of the issues, prompting further discussion of themes that had not been previously considered. Focus groups or questionnaires would not have been possible to organise in such a short timeframe with limited resources. Participant recruitment came from personal and business contacts, Facebook and other social media groups (English and Thai). Snowball sampling was used (Naderifar et al. 2017), taking care to ensure that recommended participants were not biased. Participants covered the whole tourism supply spectrum, from international hotel financiers to local boat owners. Participants were recruited using both English and Thai social media groups, particularly Facebook.

Semi-structured interviews, no longer than 40 minutes, were held face to face on the island with participants on the island over three, one-week periods between May and July 2024. All interviews with foreigners were in English and most of the interviews with locals were in Thai. Interviews with other parties were held virtually. Thai people are generally shy, the concept of *krengjai* (extreme consideration) pervades society and discourse (Chaidaroon, 2003). Libel laws are strict; public or published statements may be seen as bringing one party into disrepute, even if true. (Royal Thai Government, 1956). Garrett et al. (2003) consider semi-structured interviews to be obstructive, and this was taken into consideration when interviewing Thai people. Expats living on the island, tend to be much more outspoken than Thai people who will avoid public confrontation and criticism (Persons, 2016). All interviews

with the islanders were anonymised to avoid any confrontation and interview notes were taken by hand to avoid formality and suspicion. The socio-demographic characteristics of participants are identified in Table 1.

Table 1: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant Number	Organisation	Group	Gender	Ethnicity	Religion	Location
BM1	Bungalow Business	Outsider	Male	Western	None	KYN
CB1	Homestay Business	Local	Male	Thai	Muslim	KYN
EX1	Retiree	Expat	Female	Western	None	KYN
EX2	Retiree	Expat	Male	Western	None	KYN
EX3	Expat Worker	Expat	Female	Western	None	KYN
EX4	Retiree	Expat	Female	Western	None	KYN
EX5	Property Business	Expat	Female	Western	None	KYN
IV1	Travel Industry	Investor	Male	Western	None	Bangkok
LB1	Restaurant Business	Local	Female	Thai	Muslim	KYN
LB2	Restaurant Business	Local	Male	Thai	Buddhist	KYN
LB3	Restaurant Business	Local	Male	Thai	Buddhist	KYN
LB4	Bungalow Business	Local	Male	Thai	Muslim	KYN
LB5	Bungalow Business	Local	Female	Thai	Muslim	KYN
LB6	Bungalow Business	Local	Male	Thai	Muslim	KYN
LB7	Fisherman	Local	Male	Thai	Muslim	KYN
LB8	Taxi Driver	Local	Male	Thai	Muslim	KYN
LB9	Shopkeeper	Local	Female	Thai	Muslim	KYN
LB10	Bar Business	Outsider	Female	Thai	Buddhist	KYN
LE1	Employee	Local	Female	Thai	Muslim	KYN
LP1	Politician	Local	Female	Thai	Muslim	KYN
LR1	Retiree	Local	Female	Thai	Buddhist	KYN
ME1	Delivering Asia	Media	Male	Western	None	Bangkok

ME2	TravelFish	Media	Male	Western	None	Indonesia
OB1	Restaurant Business	Expat	Male	Western	None	KYN
OB2	Hotel Business	Outsider	Male	Thai	None	KYN
OB3	Hotel Business	Outsider	Male	Thai	None	KYN
ST1	Student	University	Male	Thai	Buddhist	Phuket
TA1	PATA	Trade Association	Male	Western	None	Indonesia
TA2	PHA	Trade Association	Female	Western	None	Phuket
TI1	YANNA Ventures	Travel Industry	Male	Western	None	Bangkok
TI2	Our Jungle House	Travel Industry	Male	Western	None	Bangkok

Thematic Analysis was used to analyse the transcripts from the interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Key bullet points of the responses to questions and statements were made. Participants responses were identified by relevant words, sentences or phrases that corresponded to the research, for example: 'buddhists', 'foreigners', 'farang' [western foreigner: Thai], 'people from …' all of which would describe 'outsiders'. Phrases were coded and grouped into patterns around different themes surrounding the research question. Initial coding of the relevant phrases and responses were classified using labels that captured the essence of the responses. Broader themes were developed from similar codes e.g. 'lack of language skills' and 'lack of access to training' were themed under 'potential barriers to employment'. Themes were reviewed against key topics studied in the literature review and those outlined by the authors.

4. Results

4.1. Typology of Visitors

Long-term resident expat participants noted the change in the type of tourist visiting over the years:

"Skimpy bikinis, in the market, in 7/11, topless women on Pasai beach" (EX1)

"The original visitors were more thoughtful – they made the effort to be here. Guests complained about the sounds of nature, the dawn chorus, tokay lizards, cicadas" (EX3),

"Adventure groups used to camp on the beaches and stay in local villages. Tourists do not throw trash and are positive about recycling" (EX4),

"Just one sign at the pier tells tourists to dress respectfully, not to wear bikinis in public. The locals are too shy to tell them to stop [dressing disrespectfully]" (LB4),

"Many do not really care... we're on holiday!" (LP1).

Thoughtful visitors would equate to the *Backpackers*. Despite negative connotations about this type of tourists (Larsen et al. 2011), comments were generally favourable, particularly about their spending with local businesses. The group tours were the *adventurers***,** and the mainstream tourists would be *mass ecotourists* as suggested by Kontogeorgopolus (2003a). No comments were made about *Mass tourists***,** (Sezgin and Yolal, 2012) who remain a small part of tourism on the island, mainly confined to hotels. Visitors' environmentally responsible behaviour, relating to garbage was also noted by Panwanitdumrong and Chen (2021) who studied tourist attitudes on a southern Thai island. Lack of cultural respect by some visitors remains a problem with few proactive measures taken to help prevent this. This is a problem that needs to be curtailed to ensure that the island's culture is not affected.

As with tourists, several of those interviewed commented on the change in the type of foreign expat resident to the island:

"It used to be a lifestyle choice to come and live here, it was not easy, no roads, no electricity and you had to learn to live and work with the locals" (EX5),

"The second phase of expats were more like snowbirds, who spent several months here a year. The current phase is far more casual, looking for a more luxurious holiday homes existence with little contact with the locals" (EX4).

The type of expat resident has changed over time. Thailand has modernised, transportation has improved, and a range of accommodation choices on the island with a selection of food options are available. The early expat visitor who arrived as a tourist, chose

lifestyle changes which matches Cohen's (1983) definition of early *drifters* and *foreign outsiders*. The second and third phase of expat equates to King and Cela's (2023) *International Retirement Migrants*. Latter day expats are evidently wealthier, likely spending more money locally, but have far less contact with the local community. This frames them more like long-term tourists than some of the expats who are more involved on the island.

4.2. Outsiders

The influence of outsiders and their involvement in the tourism business has had a big influence on tourism development not only the island, but over the whole of Thailand:

> "Outsider involvement in tourism is huge and is the major contributor to growth. There are good and bad actors with a few just in it for the money but most are very passionate about Thailand" (ME1),
>
> "It is not good to have foreign control, it pushes locals out of the service industry" (ST1),
>
> "We know the source market [better than the locals]" (TI1),
>
> "Some outsiders are just profit first" (TI2),

Outside investors, catering to, and attracting a market of foreign tourists is expected. Salleh et al. (2011) noted a direct linear relationship between tourism arrivals in Thailand and foreign direct investment (FDI). While some outsiders are responsible for overdevelopment and overtourism their involvement may be driven by demand. This may have negative effects if the outsiders are not good actors.

Hotels are the largest investments on the island. Three of the island's registered hotels are members of the non-profit Phuket Hotels Association (PHA) (Phuket Hotels Association, 2024). PHA provides scholarships and environmental initiatives such as Green Day beach cleanups and community work helping establish vegetable gardens in local schools. Six Senses Yao Noi, a PHA member, established in 2007 (Six Senses, 2024), now part of the IHG group (IHG, 2024) is a 56 private villa resort priced at least $US500/night. The resort uses natural construction materials and vernacular design. 50% of the resort's employees are from the island. Six Senses' sustainability efforts have won multiple travel industry awards with 0.5%

of all revenues funding sustainability projects off-resort, e.g., four clean drinking water projects on the island including the local hospital:

> "Our reservoir serves all water needs. Drinking water is purified here. Grey water is processed and used to water the gardens. Waste food goes our poultry farm, we compost vegetable waste for our vegetable gardens. Guests enjoy learning and taking part in sustainability projects. We have established a protected mangrove area next door" (OB2).

Paradise Ko Yao Resort (Paradise Ko Yao, 2024), another PHA member, is a low scale development at the northeast of the island with access by dirt road or boat. Of their 250 staff, 80% come from the island with 10 people working full-time recycling and composting. The Cape Kudu hotel, (Cape Kudu Hotel, 2024) not a PHA member, is a 56 room 100% Thai owned property, built in 2016. 94% of their staff come from the island:

> "We buy as much as possible from the island and have a scorecard to track this e.g. local rice and use local taxi services to bring guests to the hotel" (OB3).

Hotels are acting responsibly, taking part in many environmental programs such as Green Hotels (Green Hotel Thai, 2024). Participants acknowledged this, commenting on the low-scale, unobtrusiveness of most properties and their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) projects. Sangpikul and Sivapitak, (2023) found that guests of Thai hotels chose a beautiful hotel location/atmosphere/design over sustainability as a deciding factor when choosing their destination. Participants acknowledged the benefits of employment, but some were critical of hotels' sourcing policies and the level of employment opportunities:

> "Hotel staff are brought in from outside. Lower-level jobs are given to the locals" (LP1),
>
> "Some hotels employ more locals than others. I think that they just don't trust us" (LB4),
>
> "Operating costs to sustain this type of environment are easily 3 to 4 times higher than a traditional non-Eco resort" (IV1),
>
> "Some of these places are just profit first, greenwashing" (TI2).

Lack of English language skills is a problem in the Thailand hotel business, as noted by Sermsook et al., (2021) in their study of a resort in Phang Nga province. However, despite requiring similar language skills, there is disparity between one hotel employing 94% local

staff and another employing only 50%. At these lower levels of local employment, where evidence shows that a much higher percentage can actually be employed by competitors, this questions the concept of how much *ecotourism* is benefitting the local community (Chandel and Mishra, 2016). Either this is not ecotourism, or ecotourism's tenets are not being put into practice.

Jitpakdee and Thapa (2012) noted 14 establishments on KYN licensed to sell alcohol in 2010. By 2024, the number had increased, with to over 20 outlets surveyed on Pasai beach alone. Some locals and expats residents have been critical of outsiders selling alcohol on a Muslim island:

> **"**The bars are all owned by outsiders, Buddhists from other provinces or foreigners" (LB6),
>
> **"**This is not a party island, if you want to party, go to Phuket" (LB5),
>
> **"**The island needs to be zoned. Officially. Bars need to be kept in one area and other areas reserved for local and agricultural activities" (LP1),
>
> **"**Our bar is here for the tourists, foreigners, and the non-Muslim people on the island to enjoy. Local people who do not approve of the bars are also benefiting from tourism" (LB10).

Zoning on the island is voluntary, not mandatory. (LP1) Bars on the island are low-key compared to Phuket. Islanders seem to be at the *annoyance* or *irritation* level with bars (Doxey, 1975) but understand that their presence is a requirement for some tourists and visitors. Thawornpraphasawat (2019) in a presentation for the Thai Parliament claimed 'disturbing the locals' as one of the problems of overtourism. In some Muslim countries, e.g. The UAE, alcohol consumption is limited to hotels (Meethan, 2010). However, Thailand is not a Muslim country as such, and national laws and alcohol licencing is at odds with the culture of the island.

Locals traditionally eat at home and at small restaurants serving simple food. Most larger restaurants on the island are geared towards tourists with many set up by outsiders, both Thai and foreigners. Thai owned restaurants can employ staff from Myanmar whereas

foreigners need to employ Thai staff to comply with regulations (Royal Thai Government, 1999):

> "My sister works in a farang [Western] owned restaurant. The pay and benefits are better [than Thai owned restaurants]" (LE1),
>
> "We buy 99% of our food and supplies from Thailand and 80% from the island" (OB1),
>
> "Most of the local food on the island is not great for tourists" (BM1).

Thailand is well known as a food destination and the availability and variety of good restaurants is an enabler for attracting visitors. Safe and hygienic food is important for European visitors to Thailand as noted by Wongleedee (2013). Hipsher (2021) reported significantly higher levels of job satisfaction in foreign owned tourism businesses in Thailand which concurs with the comments of one of the participants. Outsider involvement in some cases, can help increase standards of food safety and employee job satisfaction.

Many other outsider-owned or managed tourism-related businesses on the island serve as attractions to visitors. The island boasts Thailand's only beachfront Muay Thai Gym (KYN Phoenix, 2024), a Yoga Retreat (Island Yoga, 2024) and a traditional healing institute (Shima Healing, 2024). These, and other foreign-owned businesses are generally viewed positively by other businesses on the island:

> "Tourists training at the Khai Muay [Muay Thai gym], and other places can stay here many weeks" (LB10),
>
> "We get regular, repeat business from the wellness visitors, they are good customers" (LB2).

Outsider-owned businesses provide activities and attract long-term visitors. Anantamongkolkul et al. (2019) suggest that long-stay health and wellness tourists are important, focusing more on tourism yields. The government has seen the benefits of health, wellness and medical tourism since Thailand's inception as a medical tourism hub in 2003 (Noree et al., 2016). In 2024, the Ministry of Public Health announced that Ko Yao District would be established as a 'wellness destination' (Bangkok Post, 2024b). However, skills and training for wellness and medical tourism on the island would likely require staff from other parts of the country.

4.3. Community-Based Tourism

The Chumchon Thong Thiaw [Village Tourism] Homestay group explained that their guests were nearly all Thai and guests came with study groups from local universities, tour groups or NGOs. (CB2, Peace Tourism, 2024). There had also been splits from the original homestay group and that there were now three community homestay groups on KYN. (LB4). Not all homestay owners are part of the CBT programmes and many act independently. Previous tourism industry experience and the ability to sell room inventory online via platforms such as booking.com have helped develop their business with their international guests:

> "Our community group does not have the skills or knowledge of the Internet" (CB1),
>
> "This homestay is not part of the community group. Our guests are European" (LB1),
>
> "We have to move away from telling them you how to organise their community, to be community lead" (TA1).

The CBT members come from fishing and agricultural communities who have little or no previous experience of tourism, English language skills or how to promote their business online. Despite having 52M Internet users (NBTC, 2024) out of a population of 66M (Thailand Board of Investment, 2024) digital skills compared to usage, are 74% substandard according to The National Economic and Social Development Council (The Nation, 2024). Promotion of CBT projects has been almost exclusively to the domestic tourist market (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2014). Goodwin and Santilli (2009) noted the importance of donor dependency for CBT projects which may require additional funding over time. Lack of follow-up with some projects was noted, e.g., many large roadside blue signs, advertising CBT projects in both English and Thai e.g. *Tha Khao Homestay Community Based Tourism***.** However, QR codes on the signs lead to dead links or unrelated websites. Lack of funding has stranded some of the CBT projects, leaving them without the resources that they need to benefit the community to its maximum potential.

Hotels organise activities such as beach clean-ups where guests and local community are encouraged to take part. Community groups and individuals also run recycling projects, beach and mangrove clean-up activities:

"People seem more interested in infrastructure than the environment" (EX2),

"We ran a trash collection programme - the locals had no idea about trash separation" (EX1),

"Our project collects plastic bottles twice a week from collection centres which we sell on the mainland. Proceeds go to help dialysis patients and support the local rescue service" (LR1),

"We see a lot of community projects, but many of them are one offs, just for show. Everyone gets a t-shirt, a hat, and a nice group photo and then everyone forgets about it, with little or no follow up" (LP1).

The TAO is unable to manage a complete refuse collection and recycling program due to its limited budget. Voluntary programs are organised by the public and private sector. While no study has been done on refuse collection and recycling on KYN, Leeabai *et al.*, (2021) claim the main problem is that the Thailand's lack of a comprehensive trash separation management programme.

4.4. Financial Benefits and Economic Leakage

Small businesses providing services and employees generally welcomed the growth of tourism on the island and the financial benefits:

"I can make a lot more taking out tourists than by fishing" (LB7),

"During the high season we can make good money" (LB8),

"I work at the hotel and live at home. It is better to stay here with my family, than work in Phuket" (LE1),

"Tourism is good for the island. A lot of families are wealthier now" (LB2),

"Tourists from the bungalows enjoy shopping and eating in our shops" (LB9).

Findings concur with Jitpakdee and Thapa's (2012) interviews with 178 households on the island who reported that tourism had provided 50% of those interviewed with employment opportunities. Participants preferred dealing with both smaller properties and certain types of tourists. This is evidence of direct benefits to islanders at a local scale. Several

participants were concerned about the overreliance on tourism for revenue and the opportunities for selling land for tourism development. *Land For Sale* signs can be seen, with asking prices between 1M and 30M Thai Baht ($30k - $900k) per rai (1 rai = 0.16ha) depending on location:

> "Selling your land is selling your culture. Farmers sell their land, build a house and buy a pickup truck then find they have no income anymore. Rent it, don't sell it" (LP1),
>
> "During Covid, we managed OK. We still had our farming, rice, and cows. We should not rely on tourism only" (LB4),
>
> "Sustainable living can be made through farming. Farming is a good opportunity, but we must learn new techniques from overseas" (LB3).

Participants were concerned about locals selling land losing the opportunity for future revenues. Forsyth (1995) showed that Thai farming communities who adopted tourism used revenues to increase agricultural yield by employing outside labour. Developing agriculture with new cash crops to supply to restaurants and hotels has potential to increase revenues, while retaining land in the ownership of the locals and providing a sustainable future.

Small tour operators are often found on east coast beaches and along main roads on the island. Most offer boat tours to islands in the bay. Tour operators and guides must be registered with the TAT but many could not show evidence of this (Royal Thai Government, 2008). Some participants were concerned about this:

> "Many are not licenced tour companies or guides, and few speak enough English. There is never any inspection of permits or licenses. It is too easy-going. It is not fair on those who are qualified or registered" (LB4),
>
> "People running tours need to understand the cultural stories. There is no nature interpretation. It is just 'here is an island', take some pictures to post on Instagram" (LB5),
>
> "It is difficult to explain some things to guests because I speak only a little bit of English" (LB7).

Unlicensed local operators benefit directly from tourism. However, this is illegal and at the expense of registered businesses and certified tour guides. Thailand's Revenue

Department will lose the income from tax revenue and safety standards may also be lacking in unlicenced operators. There has been a crackdown on illegal Chinese inbound tour operators in the country (Bangkok Post, 2024c) but not local small-scale operators. Having a registered company, with an office, making up to 100,000 Baht (US$3,000) security deposit is expensive for small operators and guide certification is prohibitive (Department of Tourism, 2024). Given that ecotourism should 'benefit and include the local community' (Chandel and Mishra, 2016), the Tourism Business and Tourist Guide Act of 2008 may inadvertently discriminate against the local community (Royal Thai Government, 2008). Central government policies and procedures may not be appropriate for some local, remote communities.

Additionally, unregistered bungalow complexes, purporting to be homestays exist. Some of the bungalow owners who have registered their properties and pay business taxes felt that this practice is unfair:

> "Some bungalows are owned by families. A brother owns two rooms, older sister owns two rooms, younger sister owns two. This gets around the rules regarding registration of bungalows. It is a collection of homestays. No one cares" (EX4),

> "Many of the accommodations claim to be homestay but the visitors do not have the experience of living with the family, it's basically a bungalow setup" (LB1).

Guest safety and security was a key deciding factor for tourists when choosing bungalows in south Thailand (Choosrichom, 2011). Ineffectiveness of tax collection and the practice of tax evasion in the country was also noted by Janbunchong (2009). While this practice benefits owners, it benefits neither the safety of guests nor local tax revenues. Holiday lettings advertise privately on platforms such as Airbnb which lists over 50 villas on the island. Airbnb is legal in Thailand but renting a property for less than 30 days requires a hotel licence and unregistered, short-term holiday lets may be deemed illegal (Pandee, 2018). Some islanders expressed concern about this grey market.

> "Some foreigners on this island, who do not live here all the time, rent out properties and profit from it. This is not the way it is meant to be" (EX4),

"We have buried our heads over Airbnb. 70% of tourism happens at the micro level so this kind of business looks good at face value, but it is getting completely out of hand" (TA1),

"Airbnb pushes up prices and foreign renters playing lease arbitrage forces locals out of the rental market and drives leakage" (ME2).

Airbnb rentals, driving up prices for locals, has been well documented in cities in Europe such as Lisbon (Cocola-Gant and Gago, 2021). Overseas based owners renting out either their own or leased properties and collecting rents out of Thailand is leakage, with legitimate operators and the Revenue Department suffering.

4.6 Overtourism

Participants were concerned about overtourism and were worried about uncontrolled development:

"They are building bungalows and small resorts everywhere, faster than demand. We are getting enquiries from Russian tourists. When they arrive and start buying up and starting businesses, that will be the tipping point. The cycle cannot change. I give it one or two more seasons" (BM1),

"One large hotel has built right on the main beach road. The architectural stye is completely out of place for a southern Thai island" (EX5),

"We need more government involvement; we need more regulations" (TI1).

Hotel regulations make no mention of the number of hotels that can be built in any one area (Royal Thai Government, 2004). Building permits are approved by the local authority (Royal Thai Government, 1975; Royal Thai Government, 1979). Whilst there are height limits and setbacks from roads are controlled, there are no regulations covering building design. Without control, this could result in construction of more buildings that look out of place on a small tropical island. Several participants were concerned about encroachment by tourism businesses, both large and small:

"If you approach the public beach by longtail boat or kayak, the hotel security guard will send you away" (LB7),

"Jetskis tried to come here but the Marine Police stopped them. This is a National Park" (LB4),

"Bars and restaurants under the trees on Pasai Beach. This is public land. It spoils the view; they pay no rent, and it is unfair competition to people who own or rent land" (LB5),

"They put a windy road in the middle of the rice paddy. It is not needed. Now there are coffee shops in the middle of the rice paddy discharging waste effluent underground - this will affect the soil quality of the paddy fields" (LB3),

"Nothing happens, because nobody complains" (EX1).

The problem of encroachment is common in Thailand with steps, walls and other constructions frequently built on beaches (Bangkok Post, 2024d). In the case of encroachment and illegal activity in National Park areas, the Forestry Department's rules under the National Parks Act (2019) are strict and regularly enforced. (Royal Thai Government, 2019). For non-national park land encroachment, the authorities are unlikely to act unless official complaints are made and police corruption in Thailand is extensive, (Trimek, 2014), making enforcement difficult.

Participants had mixed feelings over the future of the island. All were passionate about the island and most understood the potential problems of over development:

"This place is unique, I fear that it will end up like any other southern Thai island, it is sad. The taxi service is turning into a bit of a mafia and there are reports of drivers fighting over customers at Manoh Pier" (EX4),

"They are talking of charging an entry fee for the island. There are many disputes on the island over land" (EX5),

"The island will resist. This is a Muslim community" (LB1),

"We don't get any help from the authorities to promote tourism and develop our businesses the right way. There are so many government departments involved, but no coordination" (LB4),

"They need to stop building" (BM1),

"We need help at a provincial level, a CEO Governor" (LP1).

The concept of CEO Governor was introduced in 2001 (Pongpaicit and Baker, 2004) giving provincial Governors more executive power. In 2023, it was announced that the scheme would be extended to all provinces in 2024. (Bangkok Post, 2024e). There was clearly a desire to maintain the charm of the island and a fear by many that overdevelopment would turn the island into another ubiquitous resort destination described by Ritzer (2000) as the *rationalization of recreation*. Limiting further accommodation development and construction, could maintain current or increased revenues to the existing community. Charging an island entry fee and/or room taxes could help support community projects and those who do not benefit directly from tourism. Scarcity would drive room rates up which would support the government's aims of higher value tourism.

5. Concluding Discussion

It is unsurprising that the majority of KYN island residents perceive tourism growth as beneficial, particularly with increased revenue from accommodation, food, transportation, and tours being the drivers of growth. Yet, these economic advantages are accompanied by notable challenges. Specifically, economic leakage occurring at the micro-level, suggesting that the local community could be benefitting more directly from improved local procurement practices (Meyer, 2006). The existence of a grey market is attributed to inadequate control, inconsistent enforcement, and regulations that are misaligned with the realities of local contexts (Hampton, 2005). Tourist demographics have shifted substantially over time. Whereas earlier visitors, predominantly backpackers, were generally more considerate and respectful of local cultural norms, more recent tourists appear more interested in leisure-focused activities associated with a sun, sea, and hedonism model (Uriely *et al.*, 2002). This shift has created tensions across the island, which perceives some contemporary tourists as disrespectful of their community, which may foster feelings of apathy and irritation among residents towards tourists (Schönerr *et al.*, 2023).

Investment patterns further illustrate the external influences shaping the island's tourism sector. Investors, entrepreneurs, and foreign residents influence land ownership, cultural practices, and the direction of tourism development. Hotel developments are consistently funded by either outsider Thai investors or companies with foreign shareholders. Involvement of foreigners in tourism development is common in Thailand, reflecting a

broader national trend where foreign participation in tourism development is prevalent (Cohen, 1996). This engagement from outsiders has introduced new tourism activities that cater to the European tourists e.g., restaurants and bars. Though international standard hotels have contributed somewhat to the local economy through employment, the extent of local hiring varies widely among establishments with some employing a higher percentage of locals than others, that further exacerbates the distribution of economic benefits across the island (Scheyvens, 2002). The community on KYN plays a crucial role in shaping tourism activities. Community participation in CBT initiatives has generated positive economic outcomes and fostered cultural exchange. Nevertheless, CBT remains a minor aspect of KYN's tourism industry, primarily serving the domestic market. Meaningful involvement from local stakeholders and residents is essential for effective ecotourism; yet current regulatory frameworks tend to disadvantage micro-businesses and small entrepreneurs that limits broader community benefits (Goodwin and Santilli, 2009).

National policies and tourism promotion campaigns have been instrumental in increasing visitor numbers throughout Thailand. However, government efforts to develop ecotourism standards and decentralise tourism management have yielded mixed results due to persistent underfunding and inadequate implementation at the local level (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2005). Criticisms have also arisen regarding the TAT's liberal use of the term 'ecotourism', which is seen as diluting its meaning and efficacy (López-Guzmán et al., 2011). Additionally, enforcement of land use regulations and the management of grey market activities continue to pose significant challenges. Increases in tourist activity inevitably exerts pressure on local environmental resources, which future research should prioritise measuring and quantifying these impacts to inform mitigation and adaptation strategies (Gössling, 2002). The perceptions of tourists themselves were not incorporated into this research. Future research could incorporate quantitative and qualitative approaches and assessments of tourists' motivations and awareness of their environmental and socio-cultural impacts may present insights for future sustainable tourism planning (Pearce, 2005). Identifying reasons for tourists visiting KYN and their own perceived influence may alleviate cultural tensions by attracting visitors whose values align more closely with the values, expectations, and norms of KYN.

The sustainable development of tourism on KYN requires a nuanced understanding of both its economic and socio-cultural effects in addition to a comprehensive evaluation of environmental impacts. This, therefore, presents promising areas for future research in an ecologically sensitive yet economically and culturally important destination that is experiencing growth in its tourism market. Engaging all relevant stakeholders including religious leaders, tourists, and companies, is imperative for the successful management of the island's long-term sustainability prior to unsustainable practices taking hold.

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