

Hospitality Management Perspectives on Casino Tourism in Thailand

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Abstract

Apparently, gambling seems to be valued as a leisure activity and a form of entertainment in many parts of the world. Public attitudes toward gambling have shifted from viewing it as a vice to treating it as an opportunity to exploit (Eadington 1997, 2000). Relaxation of constraints on existing gaming activities and legislative change in authorising gambling has occurred extensively. The proliferation of casinos makes people perceive gambling as a legitimate activity and as an economic hope. According to Pizam and Pokela (1985), casino gambling however is a controversial tourism development strategy. Eadington (1986) also points out that legalised gambling causes economic and social changes in communities and changes their image. Thus, both the character and reputation of the community may be altered as a result of initiating casinos as a tourist attraction.

The legalisation of gambling has been a subject of considerable debates in Thailand for a decade and it has been brought into the cabinet's meeting from time to time. Some politicians and academic scholars suggest that casinos should be introduced as a tourism development strategy to combat the country's economic and financial crisis. Many people are attached to strong belief that gambling is a sinful activity. It is inherently immoral and contrary to accepted family and social values. It is a voluntary regressive tax in which its effects fall most heavily on lower-income groups. It is morally wrong, and can cause an addiction that is often linked to personal and family tragedies. It also attracts criminal activities and political corruption (Piriyarangsarn *et al.* 2003; Cornwel-Smith 2005). As social acceptance of casino gambling has globally increased, this research aims to gauge hospitality management perspectives on gambling and casino tourism. The focus of the paper is to investigate hospitality executives' attitudes towards relationship between Thai tourism and casino gambling; to explore their views on casino legalisation and regulation; as well as to examine their opinions about casino impacts, operation and management if casinos are legalised in Thailand.

Mail questionnaires were carried out during September 2003 — February 2004, resulting in 212 returns of respondents. Then, 18 semi-structured interviews with hotel and tour executives, politicians, policemen, government officials, directors of social service organisations and religious leaders were undertaken in May — July 2005 to acquire more insights into the issues. A combination of quantitative and qualitative data indicates that Thai people have mixed feelings about casino tourism. Although quantitative findings show hospitality group welcome the idea, but they do not want it in their own backyard. Qualitative results are more in opposition. Majority of interviewees hold the differing views. The study concludes that casinos gambling may function simply as a value added or an enhancement to a destination in Thailand, not a main tourism attraction. It is strongly suggested that casino gambling and Thai tourism industry should not be connected. Instead, 'Thai' hospitality and cultures should be promoted as a unique tourism product of Thailand.