Impacts of Religious Tourism in Thailand.

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Abstract
Tourism is an increasingly important component of the economies of many countries. For some countries including Thailand, it is a major source of income and overseas investment. Tourism expansion creates both positive and negative impacts on the destination area and the host country. It is a major source of revenue for Thailand and important to the Thai economy (TAT 1998). The purpose of this study is to understand the resident attitudes’ to the economic, sociocultural and physical impacts of tourism development in Buddhist temples and the cities in which they are located. Temple of the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok, The Ayutthaya temple, The Phra That Doi Suthep Temple in Chiang Mai and The Luang Paw Sothorn Temple in Chachoensao were chosen for this study. They are famous religious shrines that have continued to attract both pilgrims and tourists.

A survey was conducted during October - November 1999 in Bangkok, Ayutthaya, Chiang Mai and Chachoensao. Among a random sample of residents from those cities, 296 questionnaires were collected with a response rate of 92.5%. The results show that respondents strongly agree with the idea that tourism provides many economic and sociocultural benefits, but the residents are ambivalent about its costs. It was found that residents’ attitudes toward tourism are not related to the degree of tourism development within the host community. Moreover, respondents agree that all types of religious shrines have received similar tourism impacts. It was found that residents tend to recognise tourism benefits and are less interested or concerned with its costs.

This study recommends that since local residents express a high degree of positive feeling about tourism impacts, study on negative impacts is necessary. Residents’ concern for the negative impacts perhaps lack, priority against the need for employment and economic benefits. People in developing countries tolerate the negative impacts. Education would encourage a greater understanding of tourism development and therefore would create a better understanding of tourists and tourism issues. Also, sustainable tourism, which aims to overcome the impacts and satisfy the needs of both tourists and the host community, is seen to be a good direction for Thai tourism. The government and TAT should not ignore the attitudes of the Thai people toward tourism. The findings from this research are valuable in helping to develop strategic management plans and make developmental decisions regarding the future of tourism management planning in Thailand.