

The Construction of a Disaster Destination: Rebuilding Koh Phi Phi, Thailand

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Abstract

The popular tourist destination island of Koh Phi Phi Don, Thailand was heavily affected by the Indian Ocean Tsunami in December 2004, which resulted in a destroyed tourism infrastructure and complete downturn of tourism. Extensive recovery and rebuilding work by emerging community groups, returned locals, international volunteers and Thai government units provided an efficient but hasty reconstruction of the destination. Ethnographic research conducted in the community provided insights into the complex stakeholder interactions and their roles and influences on the reconstruction of the community.

The community's level of vulnerability on Koh Phi Phi Don was influenced by social processes and interactions during the destination's recovery process as the various stakeholders (e.g. government vs. locals) had differing perceptions of the island's economic, environmental and social vulnerability. These disputes are grounded in different social time processes, particularly illustrated through land law disputes among locals, landowners and the government. Other factors which influenced the reconstruction of Koh Phi Phi as a tourist destination were pre-tsunami conditions (past overdevelopment), the empowerment of the community, the reconstructed place identity, various anniversary celebrations and the early warning system.

A model is suggested to illustrate and discuss Koh Phi Phi Don as a disaster destination, which provides insights into the dynamics which govern a destination's post-disaster recovery period. Thus, it illustrates how stakeholder interaction is influenced by distinct understandings of the multiple notions of vulnerability. Furthermore, this study establishes essential links between disaster and tourism theories and suggests an extended tourism disaster management framework, which calls for an inclusion of post-recovery processes.