

Ecotourism or Overtourism?
Community and Outsider Influences on Ko Yao Noi, Thailand

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Title

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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.

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1.Introduction

1.1 Research Problem

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, Ko Yao Noi (KYN, the island) in Phang Nga Bay (the Bay), Gulf of Phuket, south Thailand. The role of outsiders, the local community and government in shaping the destination of these communities is studied.

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, a growing accommodation options and visa free travel (Immigration Bureau, 2024) for many countries 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 is crucial to understanding and mitigating the negative consequences of potential overtourism.

1.2 Research Question

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, 2020; 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?

1.3 Purpose of Study

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

2.1 Introduction

The literature review examines the relationship between tourism, ecotourism, outsiders and community involvement and development on KYN, Thailand. The study looks at the definition of ecotourism internationally and, within Thailand, its practical application within the island's context, and highlights the challenges of balancing economic growth with environmental preservation and cultural authenticity. The review examines the island's unique characteristics, its Muslim population, and assesses the impact of different tourist typologies and outside influences and investment on the local community. Furthermore, the review critically analyses the role of government policies, tourism infrastructure, and the challenges created by overtourism and leakage.

2.2 Defining Ecotourism

Since the term 'ecotourism' was first used 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 of the ecotourism development projects reviewed were focused on western ideals, in many cases 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).

In 1997, the Thailand Ecotourism and Adventure Travel Association (TEATA) was formed 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.
- 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.*" (KYN Sub District, 2024).

2.3 Ecotourism Standards and Certification

ASEAN Green Hotel Standards certify hotels to be certified that have met standards covering waste, water, energy, and air quality. (ASEAN, 2016). The Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) defines standards and gives awards for sustainability and social responsibility that cover climate change initiatives, CBT and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (PATA, 2024).

Thailand's Department of Tourism publishes standards for tourism covering accommodation, business standards, tour guide, and other activities including transportation, wellness and food standards. (Department of Tourism, 2024). The Department of Climate Change and Environment of Thailand's (DCCE) Green Hotel Plus program has been recognised by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) (Sustainable Hotel News, 2024).

2.4 Typology of Visitors

2.4.1 Tourists

The earliest tourists to the island, 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, (Sabai Corner, 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; Kontogeorgopolus, 2003) stay at hotels on the island e.g. Six Senses, Paradise Ko Yao. Kontogeorgopoulus' (2003) 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.

2.4.2 Foreign Residents - Expats

King and Cela (2023) defined International Retirement Migrants as relatively affluent westerners or those living on a pension taking 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.

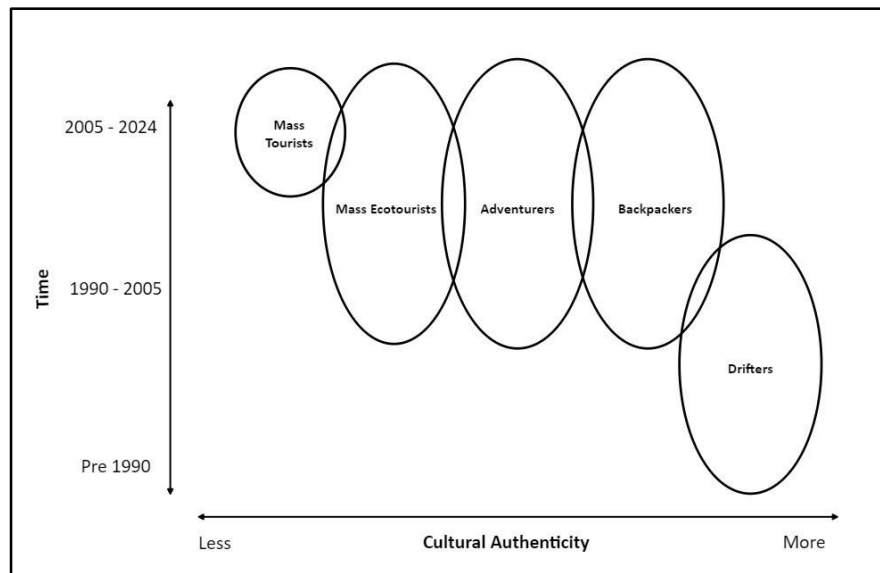


Fig. 1 Continuum of Tourist Typology on KYN over Time

Adapted from Cohen (1973), Hess (2019) Kontogeorgopolus (2003c) and Pleumarom (1993).

2.5 The Island Community

5.4% of Thailand's population is classified as Sunni Muslim with KYN at 99%. (Thailand National Statistics Office, 2024). In the 9th Century, Muslim traders from Arabia and India arrived in Thailand and set up trading posts. 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, T 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, 2022b). Awang et al. (2016) noted that most of the Muslims in south Thailand had an open attitude towards other religious beliefs.

2.6 Community Based Tourism (CBT)

The Thai Volunteer Service Foundation initiated the first 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 – 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, 2016b). 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 suggest that financially, all the activities had a positive return on investment.

Jitpakdee and Thapas (2012) noted that participation in decision making in community programs 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. Salmanet 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 the government and private sectors needed to invest in local capacity building and infrastructure facilities for ecotourism sites.

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, because of the limited number of tourists on the island, visiting under the ‘Phuket Sandbox’ scheme, a two-week quarantine program (Thaicharoen et al., 2023), the activities, and revenues of the CBT groups diminished and, as of 2024, their activities have been stagnated. To revitalise their activity, Hunt and Thaveeseng (2024) suggest more focus on domestic tourism and extended stay tourists such as digital nomads.

2.7 Financial Benefits and Leakage

Invisible exports from tourism in SE Asia are believed to make substantial contributions to Sustainable Development Goals, particularly No Poverty (UN, 2024; Trupp and Dolezal, 2020). Boonyasana and Chinnakum (2021) examined revenue flow in Thailand and concluded that tourism did alleviate poverty and reduce inequality. However, at the village level, Suriya (2011) studied 116 households in the north of Thailand and concluded that community-based tourism was not in fact pro-poor, with the richest quintile benefitting from income growth, with tourism playing a minor role in poverty reduction. The Thailand Government's OTOP - One Tambon One Product (FAO, 2022) program, started in 2001, was designed to promote local 'products with local wisdom'. Poverty has been shown to reduce where OTOP products, such as handicrafts and souvenirs are sold to tourists visiting villages. (Srisantisuk, 2011). 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).

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. Guests camped on an isolated beach and staff bought food from the island and from fishermen in the bay. SeaCanoe employed its guides and support staff from KYN and one of the partners in the business was an islander (SeaCanoe, 1998). 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.

Benefits should also be viewed in the light of leakage. 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 for goods, services, commissions or remittances made by tourism employees (Pérez-Ducy de Cuello, 2001). 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%.

Bungalows and homestays use online booking services e.g. booking.com (booking.com, 2024) which lists over 75 KYN properties taking a commission of up to 20% of sales (Booking.com, 2024). With the arrival of major hotels on the island, with some head offices receiving payments off-island and in some cases out of country, imported food, foreign staff, the opportunity for leakage has increased. No study has been found of leakage on KYN, but a UNEP report estimated up to 70% of leakage occurs for tourism revenues for Thailand, note that this figure includes air travel (UNEP, 2016; Kariyapol and Agarwal, 2020).

2.8 Overtourism

Jitpakdee and Thapas (2012) questioned ‘*how long ecotourism will last*’ and considered that benefits provided depend on the status of natural resources and the environment without considering the volume of visitors. However, the researchers made no differentiation between *tourism* and *ecotourism* suggesting that the island is an *ecotourism destination*, as promoted by the Thai government, because it is both rich in natural diversity and not affected by mass tourism. In short, it is an *ecotourism destination* because it is classified as such by the government (Chettamart, 2003) but may not adhere to all the definitions as discussed above.

Furthermore, no reference to *carrying capacity* or *overtourism* was mentioned. Saptutyningsih (2010) defines carrying capacity as “*the maximum number of people that can be contained in a particular area*” and the actual capacity is based on how many visitors are wanted, rather than how many can be attracted. Butler (2020) notes that exceeding carrying capacity may lead to overtourism and concludes that the traditional view of carrying capacity based on environmental destruction alone has been superseded by the wishes of the local population and residents, who may see tourism as intrusive to local culture. Jitpakdee and Thapas (2010) touch on this point, referring to public consumption of alcohol and tourists wearing skimpy clothing and nude sunbathing.

Hess (2019) considers inappropriate behaviour in Thailand directly related to overtourism and believes that Thailand has already exceeded its tourism carrying capacity due to unacceptable tourist behaviour, environmental degradation and overcrowding. Jordan et al. (2018) argue that tourism driven inequality among locals, is a cause of overtourism. 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.

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). Not put off by the 400 Baht National Park entry fee (TAT, 2024c), 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, 2024d) and announced a shift towards a focus on higher spending tourists for 2025 (Bangkok Post, 2024f).

2.8.1 Visitor Arrivals and Numbers

Most visitors to the area arrive at Phuket or Krabi International Airports. Since 2005, there has been a 7-fold increase in passenger traffic to the area as shown in Figure 1. From 3.2M arrivals in 2005 to pre-covid 22M in 2019. (AOT, 2024). Post Covid tourism recovery is expected to reach 2019 figures in 2024 (C9 Hotelworks, 2024, Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2024).

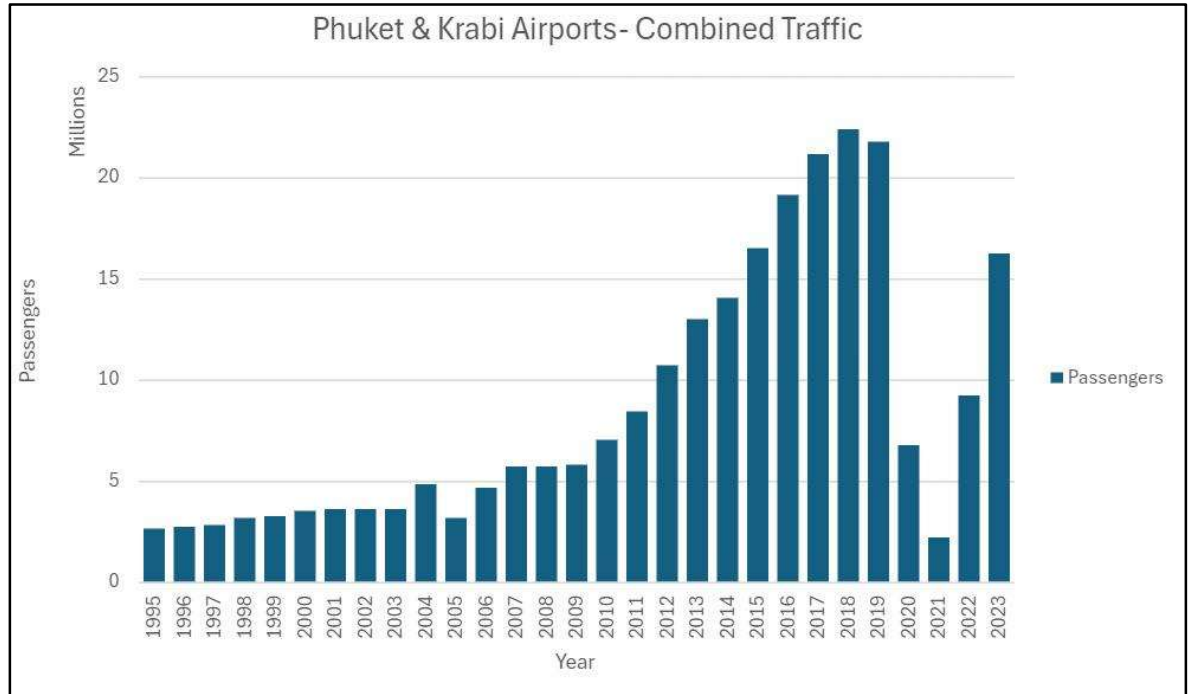


Fig. 2 Passenger Arrivals by Air, Greater Phuket Region.

Source: AOT, 2024

The growth of regional budget airlines has been a major contributor to the increase in arrivals with major player Air Asia proclaiming that “Now Everyone Can Fly” (AirAsia, 2024).

In the 1990s, one public longtail boat left Phuket for the island every morning. Disembarking at the old barnacle covered wooden Manoh pier was dangerous and relied on tide levels. The opening of a new concrete pier in 2000 allowed the service of regular modern and comfortable multi-seat speedboats, operating at all tide levels, taking only 30 minutes (Manoh Pier, 2024, Phuket Ferry, 2024).

2.8.2 The Role of Outsiders

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. In 1979, Cohen 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. (Cohen, 1983). 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).

Cohen noted that as tourism grew, 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).

2.9 The Role of the Thai Government

2.9.1 Tourism Policy and Promotion

The Tourism Organization of Thailand (now known as the TAT) was set up in 1959 as a marketing organization and to promote safety and development of tourism infrastructure. (TAT, 2024b). Major marketing campaigns over the years including 'Visit Thailand, 1989', 'Amazing Thailand, 1999' (Popescu and Corboş, 2014) have helped grow arrivals from 40,000 in 1959 to almost 40m in 2019. (Hess, 2019). The Ministry of Tourism and Sports was established in 2003 with the TAT and the newly established Ministry of Tourism managing tourism infrastructure and regulation. (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2024b).

The TAT has been criticised for its liberal use of the term ecotourism in its marketing with Kontogeorgopolus (1999) describing the TAT's use of the term ecotourism as 'rhetoric'. The TAT's 'Seven Greens' policy, piloted on the island of Ko Samui in 2012 (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2012) proposed engaging all sectors of the industry. Despite winning the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) Grand Award in the Environmental Category, the project was implemented with mixed results due to lack of commitment and alignment at a local stakeholder level with central government policies. As such consensus expressed the policy as *greenwashing* (Muangasame and McKercher, 2015).

The government promoted the first Low Carbon Destination on the island of Ko Mak in the Gulf of Thailand (TAT, 2022). 78% of island Thai tourists interviewed in 2021 stated a preference to low-carbon, pro-environmental destinations. (Fakrare & Wattanacharoensil, 2024). The demographic of those surveyed included higher earning educated travellers. Domestic tourists will leave a far lower carbon footprint than long haul international travellers. Visitors to KYN are mostly Europeans and the emission trajectories of long-haul tourism remain uncertain (Gossling et al, 2013). Pleumarom and Ling (2016) argue that despite ecotourism helping eradicate poverty and promoting development, the cost of potential climate change due to long haul travel emissions, biodiversity and cultural loss conflicts with the benefits.

In 2019, tourism in Thailand was 18.2% of GDP, almost double the global average of 10.4%. (Manakitsomboon, 2021), providing 18% of employment in the country. (Fakfare et al, 2022).

2.9.2 Tourism Standards and Licences

The Department of Tourism publishes standards for tourism that includes accommodation, business standards, tour guides, and all other activities relating to tourism. (Department of Tourism, 2024).

2.9.2.1 Businesses and Guides

The TAT is responsible for issuing tourism operating licences, requiring a majority owned Thai company, an office location and a deposit of up to 100,000 Thai Baht (\$US3,000). 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).

2.9.2.2 Hotels

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.

2.9.2.3 Non-Hotel Accommodation

‘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).

2.9.3 Local Government

Since 1994, decentralization of Thailand’s public administration created the third level, elected Tambon (Sub-district) Administrative Organizations (TAO) under the Provincial and District Organisations. (Royal Thai Government, 1994). 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 TAO as well as a lack of cooperation and enforcement of laws and standards on KYN.

2.10 Conclusion

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 the same context. Thailand has strict label 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, there was little literature found that studied the role of outsiders in the Thailand tourism industry.

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Following visiting historic cities, island tourism is the world's second largest category of tourism (Marin, 2000). Islands are closed and manageable systems and are ideal locations for research (Sharpley, 2015). Thailand's southern Andaman Sea islands are popular destinations, known 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.

3.2 Research Strategy and Justification

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for the study. It is understood that this is the first research on sustainable tourism development on KYN that has used qualitative methods exclusively. Semi-structured interviews allowed a deeper understanding of the participants' views which may not have been gleaned from questionnaires. The interviews also allowed flexibility and provided a contextual understanding of the issues, prompting further discussion of themes that had not been previously considered. Focus groups or quantitative analysis would not have been possible to organise in such a short time frame with limited resources.

Research for potential participants 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 spectrum, from international hotel financiers to local boat owners.

Code	Who	Organisation	Group	Generation	Gender	Ethnicity	Religion	Location	Format
BM1	Bungalow Manager	Business - Bungalow	Outsider	M	M	Western	n/a	KYN	In person
CB1	CBT	CBT	Local	X	F	Thai	Muslim	KYN	In person
CB2	CBT	Business - Homestay	Local	X	M	Thai	Muslim	KYN	In person
EX1	Anonymous	Retiree	Expat	B	F	Western	n/a	KYN	Virtual
EX2	Anonymous	Retiree	Expat	B	M	Western	n/a	KYN	In person
EX3	Anonymous	Expat worker	Expat	X	F	Western	n/a	KYN	In person
EX4	Anonymous	Retiree	Expat	B	F	Western	n/a	KYN	In person
EX5	Anonymous	Property	Expat	B	F	Western	n/a	KYN	In person
IV1	Charles Blocker	Travel Industry	Investor	B	M	Western	n/a	Bangkok	In person
LB1	Anonymous	Business - Homestay	Local	M	F	Thai	Muslim	KYN	In person
LB10	Anonymous	Business - Bar	Outsider	M	F	Thai	Buddhist	KYN	In person
LB2	Anonymous	Business - Restaurant	Local	X	M	Thai	Buddhist	KYN	In person
LB3	Anonymous	Business - Restaurant	Local	M	M	Thai	Buddhist	KYN	In person
LB4	Anonymous	Business - Bungalow	Local	X	M	Thai	Muslim	KYN	In person
LB5	Anonymous	Business - Bungalow	Local	X	F	Thai	Muslim	KYN	In person
LB6	Anonymous	Business - Bungalow	Local	X	M	Thai	Muslim	KYN	In person
LB7	Anonymous	Business - Fisherman	Local	X	M	Thai	Muslim	KYN	In person
LB8	Anonymous	Business - Taxi Driver	Local	M	M	Thai	Muslim	KYN	In person
LB9	Anonymous	Business - Shopkeeper	Local	M	F	Thai	Muslim	KYN	In person
LE1	Anonymous	Employee	Local	M	F	Thai	Muslim	KYN	In person
LP1	Anonymous	Politician	Local	M	F	Thai	Muslim	KYN	In person
LR1	Anonymous	Retiree	Local	X	F	Thai	Buddhist	KYN	In person
ME1	David Johnson	Delivering Asia	Media	X	M	Western	n/a	Bangkok	Virtual
ME2	Stuart McDonald	TravelFish	Media	X	M	Western	n/a	Indonesia	Virtual
OB1	Anonymous	Business - Restaurant	Expat	X	M	Western	n/a	KYN	In person
OB2	Paridise Ko Yao	Business - Hotel	Outsider		M		n/a	KYN	In person
OB3	Ko Yao Six Senses	Business - Hotel	Outsider		M		n/a	KYN	In person
OB4	Cape Kudu	Business - Hotel	Outsider		M		n/a	KYN	In person
ST1	Anonymous	University	Student	Z		Thai	Buddhist	Phuket	Virtual
TA1	Peter Semone	PATA	Trade Association	X	M	Western	n/a	Indonesia	Virtual
TA2	Jayne McDougal	PHA	Trade Association	X	F	Western	n/a	Phuket	Virtual
TI1	Willem Niemeijer	YANNA Ventures	Travel Industry	B	M	Western	n/a	Bangkok	Virtual
TI2	Richard Sandler	Our Jungle House	Travel Industry	B	M	Western	n/a	Bangkok	In Person

Table 1. Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants
Generation: B=Boomer, X=Generation X, M=Millennial, Z=Gen Z

3.3 Site Selection

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.

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, 2021). 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).



Fig. 3 KYN and Phang Nga Bay Marine National Park.
Source: Thailand National Parks (2024)

Provisioning ecosystem services include fishing as important source of revenue, but the average household income from fishing communities was reported as below the national average (Sanchai et al., 2006). Regulating ecosystem services includes the mangrove swamp on the west coast of the island that acts as protection against coastal erosion. (Seenprachawong, 2016). ASEAN's Pakse Declaration of 2016 classified *ecotourism as an ecosystem service* (Abas et. Al, 2021). Thousands of mass ecotourists visit the Bay daily from Phuket and Krabi provinces. Ecotourism on the island itself includes visits to the bay, caves, remote island beaches, jungle trekking, kayaking, cycling, SCUBA diving and visits to local agricultural projects.

KYN is an administrative sub-district 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 2131 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 centers 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. Fiber optic Internet and mobile 5G service on the island are readily available.

3.4 Designing and Conducting Interviews

Semi-structured reflective 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 seen as 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). Participants were advised of the interviewer's background and knowledge of the island. All interviews with the islanders were anonymised to avoid any confrontation and interview notes were taken by hand to avoid formality and suspicion.

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis (TA) (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the notes from the interviews. 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.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Typology of Visitors

4.1.1 Tourists

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

- *"The original visitors were more thoughtful – they made the effort to be here."* (EX3)
- *"Adventure groups used to camp on the beaches and stay in local villages."* (EX4)
- *"Guests complained about the sounds of nature, the dawn chorus, tokay lizards, cicadas."* (EX3)
- *"Skimpy bikinis, in the market, in 7/11, topless women on Pasai beach."* (EX1)
- *"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 (2003c). 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.

4.1.2 Expatriate Residents

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."* (EX4)
- *"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.

4.2.1 Hotels

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. (TA2)

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."* (OB3)

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. 10 people work full-time recycling and composting.

- *“English language and hospitality industry experience is essential for front facing jobs.”* (OB2)

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.”* (OB4)

Hotels are acting responsibly, taking part in many environmental programs such as Green Hotels (Greenhotelthai, 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 (Chandrel and Mishra, 2016). This is either not ecotourism, or ecotourism’s tenets are not being put into practice.

4.2.2 Bars and Alcohol

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.

4.2.3 Restaurants

Locals traditionally eat at home with 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.

4.2.4 Other Businesses

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 providing activities, 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 would be established as a ‘wellness destination’ (Bangkok Post, 2024). 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 Projects

4.3.1 Community Based Tourism (CBT)

A women's project produces batik in Tha Khao village (DASTA, 2024; Batik Thai Khao, 2024) under the auspices of OTOP (One Tambon One Product). The project is visited by walk-in tourists and customers on island tours or other activities. Batik is not traditional to the island and the technique was taught to the villagers after their kitchen was washed away by the 2004 tsunami (CB1).

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. (LB1, LB4)

- *“Our community group does not have the skills or knowledge of the Internet.”* (CB2)
- *“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 with little or no previous experience of tourism, English language 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 follow up or funding has stranded some of the CBT projects, leaving them without the resources that they need to benefit the community to its maximum potential.

4.3.2 Other Community Projects

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, the problem that the country lags in trash separation refuse management has been reported by Leeabai et al. (2021).

4.3.3. Locally Run Tourism Activities

Many businesses run by locals are reserved for Thais under the Foreign Business Act (1999) including traditional Thai massage, farm visits, fishing and crab catching. Cooking classes, bicycle tours and SCUBA diving, bicycles and motorbike rentals are also available on the island.

4.4 Financial benefits

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 per rai (1 rai = 0.16ha) depending on location (EX5)

- *“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.

4.5 Leakage

4.5.1 Micro Level – Buying Locally?

Some business owners expressed concern that hotels and restaurants bring in food and agricultural products from Phuket and the mainland.

- *“99% of what we buy comes from Thailand and 80% comes from the island. A lot of food is brought in when it could be produced here on the island.”* (OB1)
- *“Local people understand a cash economy. It is easier for the locals just to sell in the market.”* (LB5)
- *“Hotels claiming sustainability should be supporting local farmers, not wholesale food distributors on Phuket.”* (LB3)

Compliance with tax laws is difficult for some of the local community who are used to dealing in a cash economy. Comments concur with a study in northern Thailand which showed that rural communities have less knowledge about dealing with larger businesses (Lacher and Nepal, 2010). Hotels and restaurants have a clear responsibility to their guests with respect to food safety and publicise their hygiene standards, which is important to visitors.

- *“If we buy from a local farmer, we do not know if they have used pesticides or chemicals.”* (OB1)
- *“We must stick to food safety standards. We would like to buy more from local farmers, but they need to be developed.”* (OB2)

Hotels felt that there was a desire to buy locally and support the community, but food safety was a priority. This supports a study of European tourists in Thailand which found that they trusted hotels for food safety (Wongleedee, 2013). There is an opportunity for more locally produced agricultural

products to be grown and sold to tourism businesses, but this requires the understanding and adherence to standards as well as training and development of local farmers.

4.5.2 The Grey Tourism Market

4.5.2.1 Tours

Small tour operators can be 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 unlicensed operators. There has been a crackdown on illegal Chinese inbound tour operators in the country (Bangkok Post, 2024b) but not local small-scale operators. Having a registered company, with an office, making up to 100,000 Baht (\$US3,000) 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’ (Chandrel and Mishra, 2016), the Tourism Business and Tourist Guide Act of 2008 may discriminate against the local community (Royal Thai Government, 2008). Central government policies and procedures may not be appropriate for some local, remote communities.

4.5.2.2. Homestay or Bungalow?

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.

4.5.2.3 Holiday Lettings

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

4.6.1 Overdevelopment

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 style is completely out of place for a southern Thai island."* (EX5)
- *"We need more government involvement; we need more regulations."* (T11)

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, 1979; Royal Thai Government, 1975). While 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.

4.6.2 Encroachment

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, 2024). 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.

4.6.3 The future?

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."* (EX4)
- *"They are talking of charging an entry fee for the island."* (EX5)
- *"The island will resist. This is a Muslim community."* (LB1)
- *"There are many disputes on the island over land."* (EX5)
- *"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 need to stop building."* (BM1)
- *"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)
- *"We need help at a provincial level, a CEO Governor."* (LP1)

The concept of CEO Governor was introduced in 2001 (Phongpaicit 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 as 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. Conclusions

5.1 Key Findings

5.1.1 Tourism Benefits

Most island participants expressed that their families had benefitted from the growth in tourism with revenues from accommodation, food, transportation and tours. Financial benefits, however, bring problems. Leakage is a problem at a micro level, where the island community could be benefitting more from both local procurements. The grey market exists because of a lack of control, enforcement and rules that are inappropriate at a local level.

5.1.2 The Role of Outsiders

Investors, entrepreneurs, and foreign residents influence land ownership, cultural practices, and the direction of tourism development. All hotel developments have been funded by either Thai investors or companies with foreign shareholders. Involvement of foreigners in tourism development is common in Thailand. Outsiders have brought specific activities to the island that appeal to visitors e.g. restaurants and bars which cater to the expectations of European tourists. While international standard hotels have brought employment to the island, some employ a much higher percentage of locals.

5.1.3 Overtourism

There has been a shift in the type of tourists that visit the island from the original backpackers to latter day tourists, with different expectations. Earlier visitors were more considerate and respectful of the island culture. Latter day visitors tend towards sun, sea and hedonism and this has created problems within the community who see some tourists as being disrespectful of their community.

5.1.4 Community Projects

The community on KYN plays a crucial role in shaping tourism activities. Their participation in CBT projects has generated economic benefits and cultural exchange but it remains a small part of the island tourism focussing mainly on the domestic market. Involvement of the local population is key to ecotourism. However, the rules surrounding tour businesses discriminate against micro-businesses.

5.1.5 The Role of Government

National policies and marketing campaigns have significantly increased tourist arrivals in Thailand. The government's approach to ecotourism standards and decentralisation has mixed results, with concerns regarding under-funding and lack of local implementation. The TAT's liberal uses of the

term 'ecotourism' has come under criticism for this. Enforcement by authorities of encroachment and the grey market remain a problem.

5.2 Limitations of the Study

No study into the effects of biodiversity, pollution, garbage, water and sewage on the island created by tourism was made. Increased tourism activity puts pressure on the local environment and the net effect of tourism activity could be measured and quantified to propose measures to both mitigate and adapt to these pressures.

Tourists were not included in the research and further research, either quantitative or qualitative would have been useful to gain their perspective. The reasons for tourists visiting KYN and their insights into the island, the community and their own effect on the environment as visitors would help gain an understanding into how to manage future sustainable development. Attracting the right typography of visitors may alleviate some of the cultural pressures that were noted.

Several of the participants were practicing religious Muslims but no participation was sought from Muslim religious leaders for the study. This might have given further useful insights, especially if compared to other destinations either in Muslim countries or those with a high Muslim population.

6. Recommendations

6.1 Future Research

Future research into the grey market would be useful. An understanding of the losses to registered tour operators, to hotels and registered bungalows and homestays as well as the Revenue Department would help to quantify the problem. A comparison of types and values of leakage with mass tourism destinations, e.g., a resort island like Phuket, compared to small island like KYN may give valuable insights into the scale of the problem. It would be useful to compare the percentage of leakage in two different environments. Such information could help the government tackle the problem and promote tourism activities that avoid leakage to increase tourism revenues overall.

The research did not study financial benefits of tourism. Jitpakdee and Thapa (2012) researched actual financial benefits to families in 2009/10 and it would be useful to compare this to figures 15 years later. There has been an increase in the wealth of the islanders due to increased tourism activities and a study into how these revenues have filtered back into the community would help assess the overall net value of tourism for the island. While some of the businesses purchase locally on the island, a study into how much local revenues could increase and benefit the community, if that spend was increased.

6.2 Policy Recommendations

Enforcement of rules and regulations is essential to create a sustainable destination. Encroachment is illegal and needs to be stopped. A more proactive approach to policing would be helpful.

Zoning has been proposed but is voluntary. The community should consider legal ways of zoning the island so that tourist areas and establishments such as bars do not interfere with the local community.

The Hotel Act should be reviewed in the light of the government's sustainability policies. A limit to the density of hotels and the total number of rooms available should be considered.

The centralised process for tour guide and company registration favours educated citizens and those with funds to pay for training and deposits. Localisation of these company rules should be considered to allow the community to run tours legally, while also protecting guests' safety.

6.3 Practical Applications

6.3.1 Outsiders and Investors

CSR projects could focus on long term sustainability rather than short term successes. Hotels that require English language skills could set up a language school on the island to train potential future employees.

6.3.2 Visitors

Tourists could be made more aware of cultural sensitivity when visiting the island. Brochures explaining dos and don'ts could be handed out when boarding ferry boats. Such a brochure could be sponsored by local businesses and include a map, QR codes and advertising of sponsors' businesses.

6.3.3 The Community

Local community projects could have a more international focus rather than just concentrating on the Thai market. This would result in both higher occupancy of homestays and revenues for participating community groups.

By addressing these challenges and fostering collaboration between all stakeholders, KYN can navigate a path towards a sustainable tourism model that benefits both the local community, the visitors and the environment.

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