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ARTICLE

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Full Length Research Paper

Exploring non-governmental organisations (NGOs) management in the authenticity of volunteer tourism: Evidence from the Northeastern Region of Thailand

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Volunteer tourism is viewed by most people as exploitation in the form of social assistance, and events are held to attract tourists' attention; because of this authentic experiences for tourists have been lost. The objective of this research is to study the context of Volunteer Tourism management by non-government organizations (NGOs) in the northeastern region of Thailand. This research, however, objects to these previous beliefs owing to the extent of involvement of the NGOs. They have operated closer to the communities and focused on the value that tourists obtain, rather than taking advantage of the benefits that can result from volunteer activities. Tourism management is based on authenticity. A volunteer tourism program - stemming from the communities' needs, builds up a relationships with them by providing tourists with real information therefore, tourists have a freedom to travel. These steps help make the work of NGOs easier, as "frontage creation" fades away gradually. New perceptions of tourism, seamlessly adding value to communities and meaningful experiences for tourists have thus been created.

Key words: Authenticity, tourism experience, NGOs management, volunteer tourism, community.

INTRODUCTION

Due to continuous social changes people seek nostalgic objects or familiar situations to increase their confidence or revive memories of an idyllic past in order to function happily in society (Culter and Carmichael, 2010). Authenticity has motivated tourists to travel to distance places (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010) in order to gain meaningful experiences.

Tourism is one way to search for authenticity because tourists have opportunities to engage in activities determined by themselves and to participate in tourist

based communities which is indicative of equality and to get recognition from a society which is different from their own (Kim et al., 2012). Also, 'authentic experience' is determined a key trend in the Tourism industry (Frochot and Batat, 2013). Volunteer tourism is crucially considered as one popular branch of tourism where tourists can experience authenticity.

Volunteer tourism is a type of alternative tourism, which encourages a relationship between communities and tourists in order to link "tourism" and "volunteer activities"

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(Isaac and Platenkamp, 2010; Tomazos and Butler, 2012). It is based on altruistic activities, creating a good relationship between tourists and communities as a medium for learning, providing unique experiences for tourists, and developing their own abilities that can improve societies (Palacios, 2010).

Currently, the volunteer tourism trend is continuously growing. Volunteer activities provide great opportunities to develop relationships between tourists and communities; moreover, these tourists can gain authentic experiences from becoming familiar with local culture and traditions through volunteer tourism programs (VTPs) which are operated by volunteer organizations, especially non-government organizations (NGOs). The operation of NGOs plays a vital role as an intermediary linking tourists and communities (Wearing et al., 2005); likewise, it becomes a tool to support sales promotion which is accessible to potential tourists (Conran, 2011).

Nevertheless, some NGOs have not created volunteer tourism activities that are able to actually respond to the communities' needs (Guttentag, 2009; Hindle, 2010). As a result of intense economic competition, different tour companies specifically try to build up tourism offerings in order to attract tourists. NGOs have changed their purposes, stressing the need to pursue more profits from tourism than on the survival of the society (Ackerberg and Prapasawudi, 2009).

Sometimes, these NGOs have neglected selecting the tourists who are appropriate for volunteer activities and, overlooked the real needs of communities, which has led to tourists not being impressed by their experience (Guttentag, 2009). Volunteer tourism is perceived as seeking benefits from tourism activities. A frontstage creation and inauthentic environment are provided to attract tourists; therefore, the experiences have virtually lost all meaning. According to Boyle (2003), tourists are interested in connecting with the consumption of tour objects and gaining experiences which are pure, real, genuine, and embedded in the destinations. In this case, tourists have searched for non-material, authentic, and deeper experiences that generate satisfactions with all stakeholders.

Guttentag (2009), Andriotis (2011) and Buchmann et al. (2010) pay attention to authenticity, and it is an important factor in managing the experiences of tourism. In addition, tourism products have been altered to be more about commercial benefits, the sectors involved have overlooked the importance of authenticity. Also, NGOs have created negative perceptions of Volunteer Tourism because the activities have not met the community's and tourists' needs; hence, the meaning of authentic experience has been lost. Cole (2007) indicated that authenticity and sustainable in tourism is always tied together when connected tourism products truly belongs to their destination communities.

More importantly, authenticity is a central component of the image of tourism destinations. It is necessary to do

further studies regarding the management of the organizations involved with Volunteer Tourism in order to manage the experiences of authenticity for tourists. The research objective is to investigate NGOs' management in the authenticity of Volunteer Tourism experiences to facilitate resource management and sustainable planning of Volunteer Tourism under the conditions of authenticity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Volunteer tourism management by non-governmental organizations

Research has started looking for organizations which can manage Volunteer Tourism. Thai NGO (2012) said that NGOs were organizations that promoted social development activities and focused on people development and people's participation. NGOs have played a role in the development of local communities because mass tourism affects many tourist attraction places. NGOs have recognized the importance of tourism; therefore, they came and have solved some of the tourism problems with various activities.

Volunteer tourism began in 1915, and has become extensively popular from 1970 to the present (Isaac and Platenkamp, 2010). In its activities tourists sacrifice time, money, and use physical strength to learn different cultures and environments, and they receive experiences which are valuable, particularly in tourist attraction places or distant communities (Wearing, 2001), in helping them to experience the local lifestyle by sincerely undertaking activities with the communities.

The NGOs' roles are very crucial in building up VTPs which can meet the real needs of society and create valuable experiences for tourists. Raymond (2008) placed importance on the activities which could meet the tourists' and communities' needs through VTPs. NGOs must be confident that the VTPs will produce value for all parties. Particularly volunteer activities in the areas where the communities are challenged and where there is a shortage of funds for management and specialized personnel for solving problems; because these lead to the most meaningful activities for tourists.

On the contrary, for some other activities, local people should not be employed to needlessly engage in unimportant activities (Holmes and Smith, 2009). Seeing that NGOs play an important role in tourists' satisfaction, they should be able to create a channel to directly contact tourists (Grimm and Needham, 2012). Uriely et al. (2003) stated that Volunteer Tourism should not only attend to communities but should also stress tourism activities which give tourists authentic experiences and make them feel a responsibility to each tourist attraction place.

NGOs have a role in the selection of potential tourists which are a reflection of the moral and ethical management of the organizations (Simpson, 2010). To

recruit tourists who have knowledge and ability and who are appropriate for volunteer activities, NGOs have to establish a good close-knit relationship with current communities (Holmes and Smith, 2009). In this way, NGOs have a role which involves organizing VTPs, arranging for tourist management, and building a relationship with communities in order to ensure tourists that the activities being held completely meet the communities' needs, beside creating valuable experiences for travelers.

Authenticity in the tourism experience

Tourism experiences are psychological processes that emerge in individuals through the condition of the minds' complexity (Culter and Carmichael, 2010) and are untouchable and unceasing (O'Dell, 2007). Seeing that tourism experiences consist of various and changeable components, experience management aims at understanding suitable-for-tourist behaviors by giving priority to the characteristic factors of individuals, stimulus factors from external environments tourism products, and noting the level of interaction with local people (Kim et al., 2012). All of which have indicated that authentic experiences in tourism are crucial because tourists' behaviors are changing.

Wang (1999) attempted to explain that the depth of object-related authenticity in terms of experiences with authenticity can be linked with the sense of tourism because authenticity is a continual changing and flowing of ideas of the tourists' feelings which are perceptive to tourism objects (Reisinger and Steiner, 2006). Not only is an authentic assessment of object appearances important (Cole, 2007) but also important is how tourists interpret differently according to their expectations, past experiences or feelings toward such an object, which is called constructive authenticity (Wang, 1999).

In addition, activity-related authenticity takes place in the temporary space of tourism which is distant from social pressure and lets tourists have freedom (Kim and Jamal, 2007). Consequently, a finding of both intra-personal authenticity and interpersonal authenticity, arising from the interaction with tourism environments and from their actual tourism experiences, is being performed in the tourism activities. In the context

of tourism, tourists' behaviors and the context of places can influence the interpretation of the authenticity. Tourists can negotiate meaning and perceive different contexts (Wang, 1999; Reisinger and Steiner, 2006).

According to Belhassen et al. (2008), places and beliefs were related to physical and social contexts, and they became the reason why pilgrims understood more of the real meaning of pilgrimage tourism activities. Andriotis (2011) investigated the authenticity of the cultural heritage from the landscape of pilgrimage and cited that authenticity of the pilgrimage in a specific

location was important for the perception of authenticity. According to Gilmore and Pine (2007), without area features, the search for authenticity is lost. Buchmann et al. (2010) examined the experiences gained from tourism through movies and brought the conceptual framework 'Theoplicity' as a guideline in the search for factors effecting perception of the true experiences of tourists. Similarly, area features and social relationships were determiners of the authenticity of experiences. Kolar and Zabkar (2010) studied the authentic pattern of cultural tourism, and specified the types of authenticity of tourism that had different motivations as follows:

1. The tourists who looked for object-related authenticity desired to take a trip to see original attraction places. They wanted to buy souvenirs and crafts locally; therefore, it was considered to be an opportunity to find original, pure, genuine experiences (Frochot and Batat, 2013), and
2. The tourists who searched for self-authenticity wanted to escape from everyday life or attraction places with many people. The result being to search for identities and truly know oneself, these groups of tourists gain experiences about the feelings of escape, fun, and self-understanding in exotic locations. The researcher has compiled authenticity indicators of tourism in order to develop a conceptual framework on the authenticity of Volunteer Tourism as shown in Table 1.

METHODOLOGY

Study site

This study investigated 10 NGOs that operate volunteer activities in the northeastern region of Thailand because this is the area where the government places importance on opening a volunteer tourism market (TAT, 2013). Unfortunately, NGOs have a negative image because of neglecting the needs of communities and the creation of inauthentic environments to attract tourists in order to achieve commercial purposes. In considering NGOs' locations, most NGOs are located in the area adjacent to the border of Laos, thus it is convenient for tourists to cross the border reciprocally and to arrange travel easily.

Research tools

An unstructured interview and an anecdotal record are useful tools to gain detailed information without any limitation (Chookampang, 2006). The research objective is to study the context of NGOs management. The questions were open-ended which enabled the informants to feel completely free in their answers regarding their managements as follows;

1. How do you plan VTPs?
2. How do you build a relationship between volunteer tourists and local communities?
3. How do you manage volunteer tourists' satisfaction in each program?

Table 1. Authenticity indicators of Volunteer Tourism.

NGOs management	Authenticity indicators	Reference
Planning VTPs	Referential Exceptional	Gilmore and Pine (2007), Andriotis (2011)
Relationship with communities	Interaction with local cultures	Sherraden et al. (2008), Lau (2010)
Tourist management	Number of tourists Degree of freedom	Kolar and Zabkar (2010) Andriotis (2011) Kim and Jamal (2007)

Data collection and analysis

This study is a qualitative research, and snowball sampling for sample selection is used. Data were collected by way of informal and in-depth interviews with individuals and groups from 10 NGOs. A total of 17 NGOs representatives comprising: twelve for the individual interviews and another five for group interviews. Research questions were prepared in advance in order to learn factual data from the contexts and gain direct observations on Volunteer Tourism. Participants' profiles were analysed by descriptive statistics; namely, frequency and percentage. Information recording apparatus, such as an MP3 audio recording tape and a camera, were also used. Indexing was performed and all data from each informant was studied; furthermore, keywords and indexing were used to add meaning to the case study (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

RESULTS

Most of the interviewees were male (68%). The participants' ages ranged from 23 to 45 years. On the duration of their NGOs operation, the highest percentage had managed Volunteer Tourism for 3 to 5 years which was (48%), followed by 1 to 3 years (34%) and over 5 years (18%), respectively. The qualitative quote from the interviews and anecdotal records were analysed by using 3 themes, 5 sub-themes, 8 meaning units, and 22 qualitative comments as shown in Table 2.

Planning VTPs

Referential

More informants have consistent opinions that an English-teaching activity can reflect the communities' needs most. Teaching English is a main volunteer activity because it reflects the image of Thais who are poor in communication in foreign languages. Tourists know and recognize the necessity and the needs of the communities. According to the reflection of one informant's feelings, conveyed by bright eyes and happy smiles, was *"teachers in the schools always asks me about volunteer teachers to help teach her students"*

(Interviewee 5). The Volunteer Tourism activity is valuable for communities and should be focused on tourism in contact with the reality (Uriely et al., 2003). In terms of real information arrangement, NGOs adjust the factual information on websites to be up-to-date. Real images displayed as activities and happy experiences with communities express the special relationship between NGOs and the tourists who are behind the success of community development. NGOs prepare useful information based on facts to the tourists via social media. An interviewee 2 said, *"Information in the social world makes real images, visualizes the actual truth."*

Exceptional

Volunteer activities are the ones which returned happiness to communities noted by, *"We bring happiness for all to be an indicator of volunteer work"* (Interviewee 1). Volunteer activities are full of happiness, tiredness, and smiles. It indicates that the feelings of authenticity in individuals occur because tourists have joined tourism activities with happiness, contentment, pleasure, freshness, and positive impressions (Steiner and Reisinger, 2006).

Moreover, NGOs own the ways for the preparedness of tourists by practicing activities in real situations. They first arrange orientation for tourists with a friendly atmosphere, recommend appropriate actions in Thai cultures, and instruct tourists to adjust to social conditions. NGOs believe that it is an effective way to excellently dispense learning to tourists, so that they can harmoniously spend time in different cultures. Relating to this, an interviewee 4 said, *"Learning from experiences will make volunteers understand Thai cultures and know more about the way of local people."*

In addition, NGOs have frequently urged tourists to talk, introduce, and share their expectations while regularly participating in activities. To know the expectations and satisfaction of tourists should be done in a flexible and informal manner. At the end of activities, NGOs offer an opportunity for tourists to express their feelings by

Table 2. Qualitative content analysis of the NGOs management for authenticity in the volunteer tourism experience.

Theme	Sub-theme	Meaning units	Qualitative comments	Frequency (N = 17) (%)
Planning VTPs	Reference	Appropriateness of the activities to the community needs	Teaching - English activities	16 (34.78)
			Teachers always ask NGOs to send volunteers to teach English	12 (26.09)
			Locals are happy to join the activities	10 (21.74)
			All volunteers are accepted	8 (17.39)
	Real information arrangement		Giving real information to tourists	17 (36.96)
			Update true data on website	16 (34.78)
			Factual data	13 (28.26)
	Distinction	Positive feelings	Impressed	15 (31.91)
			Happy	13 (27.66)
			Contented	11 (23.40)
Giving back to the community			8 (17.02)	
-	-	Attentiveness indicated	Orientation for tourists on the first day	17 (31.48)
			Arranging of tourists with real practice	15 (27.78)
			Need to know tourists' expectations	13 (24.07)
			Informal talking in a group of tourists	9 (16.67)
Relationship with communities	Interaction with local cultures	Volunteer tourism activities associated with local activities	Living together with local people	16 (30.77)
			Unique situations	14 (29.62)
			Practicing cooking Thai foods with hosts	12 (23.08)
			Desiring to attend the local festivals	10 (19.23)
	Practice in original local products		Like to make local souvenirs on their own	15 (39.47)
			Seeking local souvenir shops	13 (34.21)
Tourist management	Number of tourists	Not too many tourists	NGOs are not a travel agency	15 (31.25)
			Do not want too many tourists	13 (27.08)
			No more than 5 tourists at a time	12 (26.00)
			Impossible to accept many volunteers	8 (16.67)
	Freedom	Make own travel arrangements	After finishing the class, volunteers have free time to travel	17 (29.31)
			Free to arrange the tourism activities	16 (27.59)
			Flexible schedule	14 (24.14)
			NGOs prepare a tourist map	11 (18.97)

talking in a group of tourists with whom they are familiar and feel comfortable to reveal their true feelings. Disclosure of feelings before, during, and after participation has influenced changes and improvements in order for NGOs to manage tourists with clearer guidelines.

Relationship with communities

Interaction with local cultures

Volunteer tourism activities are related to the nature of

communities. These communities are not made up to show deception or to conserve the communities' resources as mentioned by interviewee 7 "*We do not show how to grow rice, but we really take tourists to grow rice, authentic local ways of life, not demonstration.*" Most participants who gave an opinion on tourism activities said that tourists are spending time with nature and northeastern cultures, living with local people, focusing on Buddhist activities, weaving silk, participating with the way of life, and making local souvenirs on their own. Wearing (2001) cited that communities are involved in Volunteer Tourism activities, which are valuable and

restore local cultures. An interviewee 8 said, *“the uniqueness of volunteer activities is living together with local people.*

Tourist management

Number of tourists

NGOs maintain a rather strict selection and recruitment process. The few tourists who will be chosen by their abilities adequate for activities in Volunteer Tourism must first demonstrate those specific skills (Holmes and Smith, 2009) combined with altruism, volunteer work, and respect for local cultures. It is not possible to accept many tourists to engage in the volunteer activities. Therefore, the number of tourists participating in each activity are often no more than 5 persons at a time. *“We do not get them a lot because we are not a travel agency”* (Interviewee 12).

Degree of Freedom

Apart from teaching English and participating in volunteer activities, tourists spend their time attending local events, such as natural, special, and cultural events in the communities. According to observations, after teaching, one tourist usually rode his bicycle into a village, walked to meet villagers who were getting ready for the Boon Pa Wade Festival and smiled at grandmothers who were preparing the tribute to pay homage to the Lord Buddha. Another popular tourism activity is taking a boat trip along the Mekong River in the evening. Moreover, tourists are free to manage their travel itineraries. If they require any travel information, NGOs just prepare it for them. Sometimes, the activity schedule is flexible and is dependent on the locals. This can provide more leisure time to enjoy travelling on their own.

DISCUSSION

An important role of the Volunteer Tourism management of NGOs is the creation of VTPs. Now that volunteer activities are major components which attract tourists to take part in activities and create benefits for communities, NGOs' operations are a significant factor for Volunteer Tourism management to be successful (Wearing et al., 2005).

VTPs management based on authenticity is consistent with not only tourism objectives but also tourism activities, which support one another and make NGOs seek first to create activities to meet the communities' needs. Volunteer activities that are held should reflect the destination communities' problems, and local people's needs which are explored with amicable talking or by walking together. Communities need NGOs to help

allocate volunteers who are native speakers to teach English communication skills, or a person who has good communication skills in English.

Therefore, it is not hard for NGOs to create activities to respond to the communities' needs as an English-teaching activity can reflect the needs of communities. At present, Thais are alert to AEC entry; for this reason, they need to strongly develop their use of English for communication. NGOs are operated to establish VTP to be responsive to the appreciative inquiry (Raymond, 2008) which presents an opportunity for communities to find, design, and create activities to work into a VTPs. NGOs, which manage VTPs successfully will fulfill the needs of communities (Palacios, 2010).

In addition, volunteers have learned and participated in the cultures and the ways of life of the local people; therefore, they have an opportunity to build a relationship with others in a special environment. Steiner and Reisinger (2006) explained that activity-related authenticity would occur in unique situations which made tourists show their own values, happiness, and having of fun on the trip.

Online social networks have been the venue among tourists for exchanging and requesting information and experiences on the satisfaction gained from doing activities. Authenticity occurs when NGOs and tourists communicate by exchanging real information. NGOs often try to adjust information on websites for tourists and provide information, activities' pictures of the communities' enjoyable activities. The facts are presented to the public because the characteristics of authenticity arise from real information for tourists, and such information is useful to be employed in activities. Lau (2010) stated that backstage is purity, and there is a real and sincere relationship bond.

Everything is part of the attention of NGOs, which desire to create valuable experiences for the tourists. NGOs plan and prepare in readiness for tourists by considering the real actions of community members. Positive experiences occur when tourists have confidence in their skills, recognize the benefit of volunteer activities and build trust in the community members. Their contentment has become the indicator of the success of NGOs' tourism management. Happiness and a positive impression of doing activities can be expressed through emotions; what's more, the community's and tourists' natural feelings are indicators of authenticity (Kim and Jamal, 2007).

As observed, one NGO's representative grasped the hands of a tourist's with children to play games around neighborhoods to help the tourist become more familiar with the people and surroundings. Andriotis (2011) stated that specialness gained was presented in the desire to take care of tourists producing authenticity and occurs while NGOs try to fulfill authentic expectations by talking openly, evenly, and informally. Talking within a specific group is the way in which NGOs discover accurate information and feelings from tourists who are close and

comfortable with one another. The authenticity of tourists' experiences appears when the tourist becomes familiar with the people and surroundings (Gilmore and Pine, 2007; Steiner and Reisinger, 2006).

Moreover, VTPs are activities which screen people who have volunteer attitudes and a willingness to help others. In addition, there are fewer volunteer tourists who choose to do activities in the northeastern region than any other region in Thailand. Thus, they can create good opportunities to easily share in authentic-experiences. If there are too many tourists, they are more likely to have unreal experiences (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010; Andriotis, 2011). The preferences of tourism activities provide freedom to tourists. Tourists are free to make their own travel itinerary after completing the volunteer activities which conform to their perception of activity-related authenticity. These situations can reduce the pressure of following someone else's ideas. They can therefore have the freedom to encounter their own feelings of authenticity (Kim and Jamal, 2007). They have that interpersonal authenticity, which they gain from community relationships, NGOs' representatives, or even a group of tourists.

In terms of the managerial implications of NGOs, they should aim at generating volunteer activities based on the communities' actual needs. NGOs should build a good relationship with the communities, listening to their feedback for planning activities, arranging VTPs to provide opportunities for tourists to find authenticity within tourism contexts. In addition, tourists should be free to spend their time in harmony with nature conservation efforts and local cultures. NGOs must not intervene in community areas but do activities that the community consents to and which it is ready to be a part of. This research's aim is to contribute to the development of NGOs management and performances which put emphasis on the perception of authentic experiences which generate effective VTPs. These could create new images for Volunteer Tourism thereby reducing the negative perception that previously existed. For future study, it can be considered to study a comparative on the level of perception and the importance of volunteer tourists' authenticity managed by NGOs, travel agencies, and involved organizations in order to develop marketing strategies for authenticity management in Volunteer Tourism.

Conclusions

NGOs play an important role in VTPs because NGOs are behind VTPs, which are major activities that satisfy tourists and communities. The problem in the overall image of Volunteer Tourism is that tourists are exploited and people in the communities are employed unconscientiously. The study finds that NGOs' operations have managed tourism authenticity in both nature and

communities. The authenticity characteristics of Natural Tourism lets us view the communities' needs. The fewer tourists there are participating in activities, the more freedom the tourists themselves have to choose activities and arrange a tour program. Tourism management based on authenticity becomes easier and brings about sustainability in the future. The research findings could contribute to managerial implications to experience authenticity for NGOs and all sectors involved in Volunteer Tourism.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests

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