

Green tourist perception and motivation: a study of the domestic market in Thailand

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There are many definitions of green tourism such as sustainable tourism, eco-tourism, community based tourism. However, the many labels of green issues all summarise the same meanings: low-impact, environmentally-friendly tourism that appreciates, not destroys. In terms of Thailand, green tourism ideas and its practice has initiatively been implemented to promote Thailand with research of domestic consumer behavior study.

Hence, a comparative case study was carried out at Klong Klone, Samut Songkram and Surin Island and Koh Yao Noi, Phang-Nga Provinces to gather information on the perceptions and motivations of Thai tourists towards 'green tourism'. Samut Songkram and Phang-Nga Provinces are respectively located in the central and southern parts of Thailand. These communities are renowned for their sustainable tourism development, as well as for their green tourism products.

The study's aim was to collate and analyse the perceptions and motivations of Thai green tourists, and this comprised two primary objectives. Firstly, to document the existing green tourist activities and to evaluate the level of 'greenness' based on the Thai green tourists' experience. Secondly, to examine the factors associated with the decision-making process. A third, but secondary objective was to offer appropriate suggestions and recommendations in better promoting the Thai green tourist campaign for sustainable tourism development.

The study employed respondent-filled questionnaires as the survey instrument. 400 questionnaires were distributed at the two provinces, based on a diversity of landscapes, destination types, and accessibility. In addition, in-depth interviews with key respondents were also carried out in attempt to gather a better understanding on their perceptions of the domestic green tourism project.

The survey focused on the decision-making process of green tourists, comprising relevant elements such as aforementioned motivation, perception, determinant, and experience. The responses were then used to analyse the Thai green tourists' perceptions and motivation for being 'green', and the findings were summarised into the green tourist motivator typologies, and by the 'push and pull' factors that influenced their decision-making process.

Survey findings show that 41% of the respondents perceived green tourism as "environmentally responsible tourism". A significant finding was that almost four out of five Thai green tourists wish to improve their images by going green. In addition, findings show that Thai green tourists' decision-making is typically more influenced by external factors such as the media, friends and relatives, and the tour operators, particularly those that apparently complement their personal interests and desires. This is in contrast to findings of the Seers & Mair (2009), which showed that the 'push' factors are more significant than the 'pull' factors on the international green tourists' decision-making, therefore suggesting that external factors have little influence.

In their promotions and marketing, the Tourism Authority of Thailand has focused more on the international green tourist market rather than domestic Thai market. Nevertheless, findings also show that there exists a strong potential for developing the domestic green tourism market. To better develop green tourism for domestic market, the Tourism Authority of Thailand would need to focus on the five major motivators influencing Thai green tourists travel behavior. These include:

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their physical needs; opportunities for personal development; emotional, culture, and personal needs; and products complementary to the tourists' statuses.

Hence, it can be tentatively concluded that to understand the decision-making process of green tourists is not only to consider the development of green products, but it should also be concerned with the consumer perception and the channel of information for green tourism. The study shows that information provided by travel agencies, relatives, or friends would, more than other channels, strengthen the awareness and help build-up a sense of environmentally-friendly travel behaviour.

Hence, it is suggested that the Thai government should make green tourism products more tangible, such as by providing a clear definition of what is meant by green tourism products, a clear green product identity, and creating a recognizable green tourist image and personality. Moreover, the study showed that the lack of clarity in the green tourists' perception apparently resulted from the fact that green tourism does not appear tangible from the consumers' point of view. Thus, it is important to provide more information on green issues to assist in increasing the tourists' green awareness.

It is recommended that future studies should lay emphasis on the different 'shades' of green tourist behavior in relation to the different segments of green tourism. In addition, although this study has made some interesting findings, there are nevertheless limitations as the data was obtained from respondents at only two provinces, therefore it is not necessarily representative of tourists in other parts of Thailand.

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