ATTITUDES OF THAI HO STS TOWARDS FOREIGN VOLUNTEER TOURISTS

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Abstract- This study investigates the attitudes of Thai hosts towards Foreign volunteer tourists. Volunteer tourism programs offered by two host organizations in Thailand: The Elephant World in Kanchanaburi province, and the Little Friendly Farm Project in Rajchaburi province were selected as case studies. An interpretive paradigm utilizing qualitative data collection methods (semi-structure interviews and participant observations) was employed. The informants included 9 hosts at the Elephant World, and 4 hosts at the Little Friendly Farm Project, all of which were selected by purposive sampling and snowball sampling. The analysis of the data showed that all of the respondents portray favorable attitudes towards volunteer tourists. Their attitudes were mainly based on two key factors: the volunteer tourists' conduct and performance, and the benefits gained from the volunteer tourists.

Index Terms- volunteer tourism, attitudes, Thai hosts, foreign volunteer tourists

I. INTRODUCTION

Volunteer tourism, a relatively new form of tourism, is a growing trend in tourism industry. Its concept emerges from the combination of tourism and volunteerism [1], or in other words, it can be defined as a type of holiday that tourists spend parts of their time assisting people in needs in the community they visit. It is now one of the fastest-growing forms of alternative tourism. This form of tourism is generally viewed as mutually beneficial form of travel which not only the tourists, but the local residents are also able to benefit from tourism. It is argued to serve as a platform for the volunteer tourists to develop themselves. It also contributes to the social, natural, and economic environments of the host communities [2]. Although, volunteer tourism has caught the interest of many researchers and practitioners [3], this topic is still under-researched, especially in Thailand where the study of volunteer tourism is still limited. The study of volunteer tourism in Thailand is required because Thailand has been listed at one of the most popular destinations for volunteer tourism among foreign tourists [4]. Furthermore, this type of tourism seems to be an alternative tourism that can attract a number of foreign tourists. Upon addressing this, together with the aim to fill the gap in the literature on volunteer tourism, especially in the case of Thailand, this research studied the attitudes of Thai hosts towards foreign volunteer tourists.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Definitions of Volunteer Tourism

At the present time, the most quoted definition of volunteer tourism is that of Wearing (2001), who defines volunteer tourism as:

those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or the environment [3].

This definition highlights the practice of volunteer tourists who engage in voluntary activities that potentially provide benefits to the host community. What is reflected in this definition is that volunteer tourism is a form of holiday or tourism that has a component of volunteering at the community in the destination the tourists visit.

The component of volunteer activity in a holiday is also emphasized in the definition of volunteer tourism given by VolunTourism (2011), a website dedicated to providing resources relating to volunteer tourism. It states that volunteer tourism is:

The conscious, seamlessly integrated combination of voluntary service to a destination, along with the best, traditional elements of travel — arts, culture, geography, history and recreation — in that destination [5].

McGehee and Santos (2005) state that volunteer tourism refers to 'utilizing discretionary time and income to go out of the regular sphere of activity to assist others in need.' [6]

While Corti et al (2010). refer to it as:

a kind of tourism based on international, inter social and intercultural cooperation to maximize the common good trying to get a sustainable development. In order to make that possible, volunteers offer their

time, knowledge, skills or financial resources to benefit other people or causes that need it [7].

Both of the above-mentioned definitions are similar in that they highlight the practice of volunteer tourists performing goodwill activities for the benefit of others.

Brown's definition of volunteer tourism, which states that volunteer tourism is a 'type of tourism experience where a tour operator offers travelers an opportunity to participate in an optional excursion that has a volunteer component, as well as cultural exchanges with local people' [8] not only highlights the voluntary component of volunteer tourism, but also emphasizes the cultural exchanges between the volunteer tourists and the host community.

From the definitions of volunteer tourism above, it can be seen that although volunteer tourism has been defined differently, two main aspects are common among these definitions. Firstly, volunteer tourism is a type of tourism in which the tourists spend parts of the holiday doing volunteer activities at the destination they visit; and secondly, it involves goodwill practice of the volunteer tourists that potentially benefits other people.

In addition to these two aspects of volunteer tourism, there are others which may not be included in the definitions given by scholars and researchers, but which are often highlighted in relevant literature, as follows:

(i) volunteer tourism can potentially provide reciprocal benefits to both the volunteer tourists and the host community

(ii) it has a potential to promote cross-cultural exchange between the volunteer tourists and the host community and

(iii) it is generally the practice of Westerners going to assist people in developing countries

Volunteer tourism is argued to be a unique alternative form of tourism, which is different from traditional tourism and conventional volunteering [9]. A number of studies similarly report that the experiences sought by volunteer tourists and the fees they pay for their volunteer holidays seem be the obvious criteria that can be used to differentiate volunteer tourism from traditional tourism and conventional volunteering. Volunteer tourists generally seek experiences that are 'mutually beneficial' or that benefit not only themselves, but also the communities they visit. The nature of such experiences makes them different from other types of tourist [9].

Moreover, in terms of the payment for the volunteering experiences, volunteer tourists, especially those who take part in a short-term placement, often have to pay more than they would pay for a standard holiday in a similar destination [3]. This is different to conventional volunteering, which does not normally require volunteers to pay, or in some cases they might be charged with just a minimal amount [9].

Volunteer tourists are also argued to be different from other tourists in terms of their greater sense of environmental responsibility and their choice of destinations, which tend to be remote and untouched, or poverty-stricken [8]. In addition, volunteer tourists differ from other tourists in terms of the experience they are seeking [10]. Volunteer tourists tend to look for a higher level of interaction and engagement, as well as a physically and intellectually challenging experience. [10] Furthermore, that volunteer tourists are found to require accommodation, food and transport in a more sustainable form compared to conventional tourists. [11] It is evident from existing literature that the concept of volunteer tourists being different from other tourists is generally accepted.

B. The Emergence and the Growth of Volunteer Tourism

In the late 20th century, the phenomenal growth of mass tourism on the global scale, together with the power of the media, have resulted in the emergence of volunteer tourism [12]. These two factors have unveiled other cultures to people, especially those from developed or Western countries, [12] which has made them more aware of "the explicit divisions between the 'haves' and 'havenots' in the society. Environmentally- and socio-culturally- conscious travellers [13], as well as people who have become weary with standardised pre-package, traditional holidays have realized the opportunity to do something more worthwhile and meaningful by giving back to society through volunteer tourism [12].

The growth of volunteer tourism is reflected through a combination of factors including the growing number of volunteer tourists, volunteer tourism organisations and volunteer tourism programmes offered [14]. The study on volunteer tourism shows that, approximately 120,000 travellers from the United States of America and the United Kingdom take a volunteer trip abroad organised through an organisation annually [15]. However, this number is based only on tourists who take volunteering trips through volunteer organisations; therefore, the number of volunteer tourists could be much more than this estimation, because there is also a great number of people taking volunteer trips independently of volunteer organisations, representing a very large proportion of all volunteer tourists [15].

In terms of the number of volunteer tourism organisations, 'Volunteer Vacation, which is one of the longest published guides to these organisations by Bill McMillon et al., indicated in its first edition, published in 1987, that there were only 75 organisations [8]. In its newest edition, published in 2003, the number of the organisations was almost four

times higher than those in 1987, featuring up to 275 organisations [15].

In terms of the growth in the number of volunteer tourism programmes available, Callanan and Thomas (2005) explored the size of the volunteer tourism in 2003 by utilizing the Volunteer Abroad database and found that there were 698 volunteer tourism programmes available worldwide [12]. Tomazos and Butler (2009), who study the growth of volunteer tourism by building on the study of Callanan and Thomas using the same database, found that in 2007, the number of volunteer tourism programmes had risen dramatically to 2,446 programmes, which is around 3.5 times higher than in 2003 [14].

In Thailand, the researcher used the same database as Callanan and Thomas (2005), and Tomazos and Butler (2009) and found that in 2010, there were 102 volunteer organisations offering 305 volunteer tourism programmes. [4] Compared with the studies of Callanan and Thomas and Tamoza and Butler, it is found that the number of volunteer tourism programmes in Thailand experienced a considerable rise during the seven year period between 2003 and 2010.

It is argued that the phenomenal growth in the number of volunteer tourism programmes in Thailand came as result of the response to the Boxing Day tsunami in 2004, which affected all the countries in South and Southeast Asia, including the southern region of Thailand [14].

C. Host's Attitudes towards Volunteer Tourists

It is claimed that tourism can be developed and grow only when local people have positive attitudes towards it, and when they have their voice heard in the process of tourism development [16]. The hosts and their attitudes towards tourists also play an important role in the tourist experience as they tend to encourage the tourists to value the destinations [17] McIntosh and Zahra (2007)'s study indicates that local residents generally have positive attitudes towards volunteer tourism. These positive attitudes are primarily based on the performance and behaviour of previous groups of volunteer tourists who had visited, together with the trust they have established with the volunteering organisers [18].

McGehee and Andereck (2009)'s study suggests that the perceived personal benefits from volunteer tourism have a strong influence on people's attitudes towards tourism development and would predict their support for it. In other words, those who benefit the most personally from volunteer tourism are most likely to have positive attitudes towards it, and, in turn, are more supportive of volunteer tourism development in their communities. Conversely, those who do not benefit to the same extent are more likely to perceive its negative impacts. However, in the latter case, it is significant to note that a lack of perceived personal benefit does not appear to influence their support for volunteer tourism. One possible explanation for this may lie in the notion that residents who do not feel they benefit from volunteer tourism also feel that they will not be affected by its negative impacts, or it is possible that they are unaware of such negative consequences [11].

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The primary aims of this research are to gain a rich and in-depth understanding of the attitudes of Thai hosts towards foreign volunteer tourists. In order to achieve these aims, this study employed an interpretive paradigm utilizing the qualitative study approach. This study also employed a case study approach by using the volunteer tourism activities at the Elephants World and at the Little Friendly Farm Project as the cases. The context of the volunteer tourism activities offered by these two organizations are interesting in their own right. First, they are related to taking care of animals which is one of the most popular activities for foreign tourists in Thailand. Second, to participate in these activities, tourists are required to stay at the site which is an enclosed area. Through the use of a case study approach, the researcher was able to delve into the issues being studied in great detail.

Data were gathered from 9 staff members of the Elephant World, and 4 staff members of the Little Friendly Farm Project. These respondents were selected by the use of purposive sampling. The criteria for section included: (a) they must be Thai nationality, (b) must be 18 years or older for ethical reasons, (c) have been working at the Elephants World or at the Little Friendly Farm Project for at least 1 year, and (d) must have activities with volunteer tourists or have interactions with them. As a result, 13 staff members of the host organization were selected. This number was defined by the saturation point of the data, that is, when there was no new theme emerging from the data.

A combination of semi-structured interviews and participant observation was used to collect the data. This approach enabled the researcher to explore the "what", "how", and "why" questions of the topic being examined. Moreover, it was also used as a triangulation strategy. All interviews were video-recorded upon getting permission with a consent form from the respondents. All respondents were ensured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their information by use of pseudonyms.

The interview transcriptions and the field notes taken by the researcher were then analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes)

within data". [18] The six phases of thematic analysis, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), were followed, namely: (i) familiarizing oneself with the data; (ii) generating initial codes; (iii) searching for themes; (iv) reviewing themes; (v) defining and naming themes; and (vi) producing the report. This approach was chosen due to its accessibility and flexibility for qualitative data analysis because it is not attached to any particular theoretical or epistemological approaches, and so can be applied across different theoretical frameworks. [19]

IV. STUDY FINDING

This part presents the research findings gained from thematic analysis of the data. It presents the 'voice of the hosts' in the volunteer tourism's 'host-guest' relationship. The data analysis reveals that the staff members or the hosts generally have very positive attitudes towards the volunteer tourists and volunteers. However, a few hosts also expressed concerns about some aspects of the volunteer tourists' behaviour, which was not exactly a negative attitude because they thought that these issues of concerns could easily be prevented and/or improved (e.g. the way the volunteer tourists dress).

An evidence showing that the respondents did not have negative attitudes towards the volunteer tourists is the tone which they used when they talked about these concerns, which did not show any sign of anger, or other negative feeling. On the contrary, they spoke in a moderate tone and often found reasons to explain the volunteer tourists' behavior.

The respondents expressed a variety of feelings to show their positive attitudes towards the volunteer tourists, which included being impressed (e.g. by the volunteer tourists' conduct, performance and the benefits they had provided); being glad (e.g. to welcome the volunteer tourists to their community); being grateful (for the volunteer tourists' generosity, efforts and dedication); and being proud (of their own culture when the volunteer tourists showed an interest in it).

The analysis of the data revealed that all of the respondents portray favorable attitudes towards volunteer tourists which are primarily based on two primary factors: the volunteer tourists' conduct and performance, and the perceived personal benefits. The volunteer tourists' dedication to take care of elephants was found to be the most significant factor influencing the positive attitudes of the hosts working at the Elephant World, whereas, the dedication of the volunteer tourists to help improve the area was cited as the most significant factor influencing the positive attitudes of the hosts who worked at the Little Friendly Farm Project.

The volunteer tourists' conduct and performance include: (i) their courteous conduct; (ii) their dedication to help, (iii) their interest in, and respect for, local culture, and their on-going support. As for the perceived benefits gained from the volunteer tourists, these include: (i) donation; (ii) an opportunity to improve English language skills; and (iii) relief from their own responsibilities.

Moreover, all of the respondents viewed that the volunteer tourists were different from other tourists, especially mass tourists, in that they spent part of their holiday time giving something back to the place they visited. Some respondents viewed the volunteer tourists as being non-tourists, whereas some perceived them as a special type of tourist. The former group generally perceived the word 'tourists' as referring to mass tourists who visit the tourist attractions for only self-serving purposes, and do nothing to help the community; therefore, they felt reluctant to call them tourists when they had come to provide assistance to their community. The latter group of respondents was aware that these volunteer tourists also went to visit other places for leisure purposes like other tourists, but they were seen as being different to other tourists, especially mass tourists, in that they spent part of their free time helping the local people or giving back to the place where they visit.

Specifically, the volunteer tourists were viewed as being different to other tourists in five main aspects: (i) they spend part of the vacation helping/working for the place where they visit without seeking anything in return; (ii) they are more eager to learn about local culture and to have close interaction and involvement with local people; (iii) they require only basic accommodation and food; (iv) they normally spend less money; and (v) they generate a lot more benefits to the host community.

CONCLUSION AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES

In summary, the main finding of this study reveals that Thai hosts generally portrayed positive attitudes towards foreign volunteer tourists. Although some hosts had concerns about the way the volunteer tourists dress which seemed to be The outcome of this research is expected to contribute to a broadening of the understanding of the …. The findings of this research study can fill the gap in the literature on volunteer tourism. In addition, this study is expected to provide a valuable insight into volunteer tourism for all stakeholders to show how volunteer tourism can be developed, implemented and promoted in such a way that both the hosts and the volunteer tourists can gain reciprocal benefits and the

poor people in the community can truly enjoy the benefit from volunteer tourism. Finally, it will represent a useful starting point for future research on volunteer tourism in
Thailand and other developing countries.

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