

Sustainable Development through Ecotourism: A Comparison between Nan City of Thailand and Hanno City of Japan¹

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Abstract

Thailand is considered one of the world's most popular tourist destinations. Amid the rise of middle income population and advanced aviation technology, Thailand receives a significant number of tourists every year. The country needs to find a sustainable way to manage its tourism resources to prevent its resources from being harmed. This brings in the concept of sustainable tourism, of which a popular and fast growing form is ecotourism. Thailand introduced a sustainable tourism policy in 2008 called the "Seven Greens" concept. However, the Seven Greens concept leans heavily towards environmental aspects and not so much on the culture and the people. On the other hand, Hanno City, designated by the ministry of environment of Japan as a model city for the management of tourism based on nature, community and culture, realizes the importance of all three. The city promotes creative tourism, human capabilities, and community participation as its solution to social well-being in the society and sustainability in its ecotourism industry.

This article compares the situation in Nan City with that of Hanno City in Japan and suggests how tourism in Nan City can be more sustainable through active community participation and creative tourism promotion.

Keywords: sustainable tourism, ecotourism in Thailand and Japan, Nan City, Hanno City, community participation in the management of ecotourism, Seven Greens concept

Background

Tourism has become one of the fastest growing economic activities worldwide (UNEP). Tourism is a major contributor to the global economy as its total GDP contribution accounted for 9.5% of global GDP in 2013 and its total employment contribution was 8.9% of total employment globally (WTTC). As tourism is increasingly important to communities around the world, it is becoming important to develop tourism sustainably (Hall and Richards). Tourism is often regarded as a tool for development as it can help improve the economy, create jobs and impact social customs and lifestyles. Tourism in a sustainable form can have a longer-lasting effect, which could potentially lead to sustainable development.

An in-depth study on ecotourism started in 1993 (Naresuan University). At that time, ecotourism was believed to be the only solution towards sustainable tourism. As a form of sustainable tourism, ecotourism has been growing in Thailand as a means to reduce pressure on natural and cultural resources, as well as on the livelihood of local communities. As the Thai government has been increasingly aware of the adverse impact of conventional tourism, the “Thai Tourism against Global Warming” Environment Conservation Declaration was launched by Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) in 2008 to alert the relevant parties more closely to environmental issues, under which, the Seven Greens concept has been determined as a guideline around tourism elements, calling for a conservation effort and greenhouse gas reduction from all relevant parties.

In general, the declaration calls for alternative tourism that is more benign than conventional mass tourism,³ and seeks participation from tourism-related governmental bodies, the private sector, including

associations and media, environmental institutions and educational institutions, as well as visitors, in the following aspects:

- 1) Green Heart
- 2) Green Logistics
- 3) Green Attractions/Destinations
- 4) Green Communities
- 5) Green Activities
- 6) Green Service
- 7) Green Plus

This research focused on two case studies of ecotourism: Nan City in Thailand, which is one of TAT's pilot areas, and Hanno City in Japan, one of the Japanese Government's designated model cities for ecotourism management. The research examined tourist and community behavior in Nan and compared how the situation to that of Hanno City in Japan, with an aim to come up with the most effective way to achieve sustainable development in the context of tourism for both cities.

Supporting this research, apart from data from international publications and official reports, primary data was collected by questionnaires from 401 tourists, 97 local residents and 66 tourism enterprises in Thailand. Interviews with local people and government officers in Hanno City, Saitama Prefecture, Japan was also conducted and included.

Overview of Nan City

Nan City is the capital district of Nan province, which is situated in the Nan River valley and was once a separate, autonomous state (Krayewski and Fritschy), but eventually became part of Siam, now known as Thailand. It is an old city rich in natural and cultural resources, located in the north of Thailand. Nan, originally known as "Nanthaburi", an ancient country state believed to be more than 800 years old (*Nan: Amazing Thailand*), is a valley city surrounded by mountains, forests and rivers. There is growing interest in Nan as it is regarded as an ancient, but a living city (under its motto "Nan, Living Old City") and is rich in natural, cultural and historical resources. As

Nan people are known to be kind, whose lifestyles are simple, the city is considered a very safe tourist destination and is very well suited as a tourist site for visitors from all places. Based on an interview with Nan Tourist Police in August 2012, the tourist police had not reported any crime cases against tourists since their operations in Nan since 2004.



Fig. 1. Nan Province Map from: *Khomun thuapai lae sathanakan thongthiao changwat Nan [The General Information and Status of Tourism in Nan]*. Tourism Authority of Thailand, Phrae, 2014.

Nan City covers an area of 813.1 square kilometres, situated in the center of Nan Province. Nan is located 668 kilometres from the capital city of Bangkok. It takes approximately 10 hours by bus from Bangkok or approximately 1.5 hours by plane.⁴ Nan City's population is 99,196 people (*Population Report*). There is an abundance and mixture of cultures from the high mountain to the plains. The mountain ranges are 600-1,200 meters above sea level and cover up

to approximately 40% of Nan province (*The General Information*). The forests take up approximately 47.18% of the province, leaving agricultural areas and residential areas with 12.22% and 0.6%, respectively (*The General Information*). The northern and eastern boundaries are shared with Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Nan has a small population and has a strong family and relative system (Thadaniti and Phrajuabmor). Local people help one another like they are relatives. In addition, there is a high level of unity in ethnics, religion, language and culture. This strong sense of unity has led to a strong and moral community. The local people of Lainan, a sub-district in Nan province, for instance, are cooperative with the local authorities in helping solve any communal issues and in developing their community (Thadaniti and Phrajuabmor). Given this nature of helping one another and the sense of unity, people-centered development through community participation can be promoted and implemented easily in Nan.⁵

There are approximately 150 hotels (including hotels, guesthouses, resorts, apartments, home-stays and national park accommodations) and 23 registered tour operators in Nan. There are approximately 1,737 food operators that have been certified according to the standard “clean food good taste” by the ministry of health (*The General Information*).

Overview of Hanno City

Hanno City, covering an area of 193.18 square kilometres (*Hanno City: The Demographic*), is situated in the hilly, southern part of Saitama Prefecture. It is a commercial town active in the lumber, furniture and textile industries. The Naguri River, originating in the Chichibu mountain chain further northwest, flows through Hanno, lending a special beauty to the city. The Naguri River becomes the Iruma River after passing through Hanno (JTB, 1991).

The topography is distributed between mountainous districts, hills and plateaus. The northwestern part is the mountainous district and the forest occupies approximately 76% of the city. In the southeastern part, city area develops on plateaus between north Korai hill and south Kaji hill. Furthermore, the Iruma River, the first-grade

The population, as of 1 January 2012, was 82,422, consisting of 33,099 households (*Hanno City: The Demographic*). The population is on a decline for the third year in a row. Hanno, like many other cities in Japan, is becoming an aging city, with the ratio of people over 65 years old on the rise since 1985. If the population continues to decline at this rate, it is estimated that the population in 2015 would be approximately 81,400. To prevent the city from depopulation, Hanno City is promoting the city based on the principles to revitalize the city (*Introduction of Hanno City*), which are:

- i. Conservation and utilization of the natural environment,
- ii. Creation of charm and vitality of the city,
- iii. Promotion of citizen participation and collaboration,
- iv. Development of the city through independence.

As part of the city's efforts to conserve nature, revitalize the city, promote the people's participation and enhance self-reliance for the city, ecotourism is seen as a suitable tool to achieve all these purposes. This is because ecotourism is a form of tourism that aims to conserve and utilize the natural environment in a responsible way and through tourism; the city can become more energetic as people from outside the city come in and as it engages the local people to be part of the tourism activities.

Findings: Tourist Behavior in Nan City and Hanno City

Between March 2011 and March 2013, the researcher, examining the effectiveness of the Seven Greens policy for Nan City of Thailand, found that ecotourism in Nan City was not sustainable in the sense that Nan still experiences extreme fluctuations in the number of tourists throughout the year and the message of the "Seven Greens", the government's tourism promotion and advisories, were not conveyed as effectively without the full impact as could have been the case.

With regards to the knowledge and awareness that individuals have towards the Seven Greens concept, 61.1% of the 401 tourists who responded to the survey said they had not heard of the Seven Greens concept, while 6.7% were not sure what it was. On the other hand,

62.1% of 66 local tourism service providers said they had heard of the Seven Greens concept, but they said their activities had not been assessed or followed up on. Two restaurant owners said they felt that the project had already been stopped. This implies that regular assessment measuring the effectiveness and feasibility of the launched initiative may not have been performed.

Table 1: *Percentage of Contribution to Each Seven Greens Element, distributed by type of respondents, taken from 66 tourism service providers, 401 tourists, and 97 local people*

7 Green Elements	Tourism Service Providers	Locals	Visitors
Green Heart	51.5	52.6	37.7
Green Logistics	25.8	12.4	12.7
Green Attraction	18.2	N/A	N/A
Green Activity	31.8	16.5	22.4
Green Community	33.3	29.9	N/A
Green Service	51.5	N/A	N/A
Green Plus	10.6	26.8	14.7

Source: Field Survey, 2012.

The researcher asked the respondents to evaluate their contribution to the Seven Greens. The results, shown in *Table 1*, indicate the least successful Green element for visitors was Green Logistics and Green Plus. The lack of public transport between tourist attractions in Nan and no circumstances that encouraged the act of personal contribution can be the reasons for the deficiency of Green Logistics and Green Plus. The least contributed Green elements for the local people were Green Logistics and Green Activity. This is due to the lack of public transport, as well as the lack of opportunity for the local people to participate in green activities. Some local residents pointed out that apart from annual festivals, such green activities are

usually not available. On the other hand, the tourism service providers found it difficult to meet the expectations of the Green Logistics, Green Attraction and Green Plus initiatives. In addition to the issues around public transport, tourism service providers felt that their supply of attractions were not eco-friendly enough to meet the Seven Greens standard. Tourism service providers also felt that they did not contribute much personally as there were no opportunities to do so.

It can be observed that the number of tourists is generally low in non-winter seasons and very high in the winter season, which indicates that the city is reliant on seasonality and efforts to promote tourism during the off peak seasons are still not in place. There was originally only one commonly recommended route for tourists traveling in Nan when the Seven Greens project was first launched. Many other tourist attractions not included in the recommended route are independently shown on tourism websites for tourists to handpick and to tailor their own trip. Tourists then travel by car or hire a van to those tourist attractions, enjoy the scenery and leave the site. All of this is done without obtaining sufficient guidance from local people, or contributing much to the areas they visit. These can be construed as a result of the lack of community participation.

Additionally, the author found inadequate training of human resources to be another area with room for improvement in the process towards sustainable tourism in Nan. According to an interview with a Nan City government officer, local guide training courses were held only when there was a budget and not every year. Also, training budgets are mostly for English language. There are currently no incentive plans to encourage the local community to take part more actively.

To address these issues, this research compared Thailand's Seven Greens project with a similar effort in Japan. The research evaluated the current status of eco-tourism as a function for sustainable development in Hanno City of Saitama Prefecture. In 2004, Hanno City was designated by the Ministry of Environment of Japan as one of the five model cities for management of tourism based on nature, community and culture. Hanno City has developed its own ecotourism project, which is a result of careful management of natural, cultural

and people and active social participation of local residents. In 2008, Hanno City was awarded the “Ecotourism Grand Prize” from the Ministry of Environment of Japan for being Japan’s top class ecotourism city, delivering an excellent system to maintain the quality of eco-tours, local guide training and the overall promotion of regional ecotourism (Ecotourism Promotion Office, Hanno City).

An important point of Hanno’s ecotourism promotion program is that the program is collaboratively designed and promoted by the local government and the local people. The local government of Hanno City has a dedicated division called Ecotourism Promotion Office that works on designing tour programs, marketing and attracting visitors, training local tour guides, encouraging local residents to take part in operating a tour and funding them to facilitate their tour operations.

General Characteristics of Nan City and Hanno City

Table 2 presents a comparison of the general characteristics between Nan City and Hanno City. The similarities are that both cities share similar geographic characteristics, being situated at the foot of the mountains and have almost the same scale of population. Both cities are also facing depopulation issues. However, a difference between these two cities is that the objective of each city’s ecotourism promotion is different. Nan aims to preserve the environment in order to sustain tourism, while Hanno looks to revitalize the city through the promotion of ecotourism. Another difference is that the location of Nan from the capital city is 668 kilometres whereas Hanno is approximately 50 kilometres from the capital. From the location point of view, Hanno is more convenient to access than Nan.

Table 2: *Comparison between Nan City and Hanno City on General Characteristics*

Comparison	Nan City	Hanno City
Purpose of the city's ecotourism promotion	To preserve the environment in order to sustain tourism	To preserve regional resources, revitalize the city and promote the region
Social issues	Depopulation, Aging Society	Depopulation, Aging Society
Geographic Type	Pilot city promoted by Thailand Tourism Authority	Satoyama area, Model city promoted by Ministry of Environment
Population	99,196 (<i>Population Report</i>)	82,422 (<i>Hanno City: The Demographic</i>)
Type of tourists	Female in 30s	Female in 50s
Access	10 hours by bus from Bangkok 1.5 hrs by plane from Bangkok	50 minutes by train from Ikebukuro
Tourism community groups	Elderly groups (5 groups in major temples)	Citizen groups (at least 25 groups around Hanno)

Source: Compiled by author, Field Survey, 2012 and 2013.

The number of tourism community groups in each city are also different. While Nan does not have a clear tourism community group, it does have elderly groups who usually gather at five major temples of the city. They become involved in providing information to tourists when there are needs. In Hanno, the tourism community groups consist of citizens who have formed groups and applied to the

local government to become local tour leaders and conduct tours for tourists. Looking at the number of tourism community groups, it can be said that Hanno is more active in terms of community participation. The same goes in practice. *Table 3* compares the community behavior in Nan City and Hanno City. Resulting from active participation of the community, Hanno City has managed to promote as many as 65 travel plans and routes as compared to four routes for Nan solely designed by the Tourism Authority of Thailand. Support from the municipal level and the community level is stronger in Hanno, as opposed to Nan, where support can be seen coming mainly from the central authority. For a more effective development, Nan City does not have to completely rely on the support of the central authority to execute the sustainable tourism plans, but can initiate its own sustainable tourism promotion plans to be able to handle the intensifying tourism activities that is happening now.

Table 3: *Comparison between Nan City and Hanno City on Community Behavior*

Comparison	Nan City's Tourism Development Situation	Hanno City's Tourism Development Situation	Examples of Hanno's Implementation
Human Capital	Focus on human capital development is not visibly evident. (Training is held only when a budget is available, and mainly on English language.)	Human capital is referred to as a "treasure" for the tourism development of the city.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Local guide Open College• Step up course• Demae programs• Lectures for students, government officers outside Hanno

Community Participation	Passive Community Participation: Community groups limited to temples to give information to visitors of that temple. (Approx. 5 community groups, one in each of the 5 major temples.)	Active Community Participation: More active and dispersed throughout the city and in different tourist attractions (Approx. 25 community groups throughout the city)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocates start-up budget for each group • Community groups create more than 65 tour plans and routes • Community groups created all-year-round events calendar (not sensitive to seasonality)
Community-tourist interaction	Interaction with the community is limited. Tourists come mainly for sightseeing and enjoying scenery only.	Creative Tourism stressing authenticity, everyday life, folkways and human interaction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tour programs feature local nature, daily lifestyles, interaction with local people • Mutually beneficial tours
Policy focus on:	TAT's Seven Greens policy focuses mainly on environment preservation	Local government policy focuses on development based on nature, culture and people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hanno's basic principles state that its regional development is based on the linkage between nature, culture, and people.

Source: compiled by author, Field Survey, 2012 and 2013.

Table 3 also shows that the focus on people training is not as evident in Nan as it is in Hanno. A Nan City officer said at the end of 2013 there was training for local guides, but this does not happen every year. Also, there is English language training when the budget is available. In Hanno, tourism professional training is held more regularly. Furthermore, the interaction between the community and tourists is limited in Nan because of the nature of the tourist activities that do not allow sufficient interaction with local people. As there are limited numbers of local tour guides, and they are not volunteers, tourists find it easier to travel by themselves, leading to a speed tour and little knowledge of the places they visit, which then leads to little appreciation of those places and usually end up with no repeat visitors. For Hanno, not only do they encourage interaction, but they also encourage activities that are beneficial to both the host community and the visitors, creating contentment on both sides.

In terms of creative tourism, Hanno City motivates and encourages its local residents to establish a relationship with tourists by offering what they can do best. Residents offer tour programs that only they can offer. For example, in one of the tour programs, a local resident will introduce a part of the city behind his house that is not on the map. Another local resident can take tourists to a pine forest that he owns to explain about the city's lumber industry. A group of housewives teach tourists how to cook a local dish and dessert. This strategy helps optimize every small part of the city, making every place a tourist attraction, regardless of the presence of a landmark. It also develops a sense of pride for the local residents, making them realize that the city and the environment that they grew up in, and have always taken for granted, are valuable assets from the perspective of visitors and are worth protecting. Tourists also benefit from this as they receive first-hand guidance and information from local guides so the place becomes more appreciated and memorable.

Hanno City has tour programs that are not only unique and informative for the tourists, but also contribute to the city. The tour programs have tourists participate in such activities as fishing for "black bass", which are said to harm the ecosystem of the lake in the city, helping locals collect Yuzu fruits, which are excessively abundant

in a fruitful year, and helping locals restore paddy fields that have been abandoned. The tour programs create a win-win situation for the local residents, the tourists and the environment. Tourists feel good to be taking part in socially and environmentally beneficial activities, while local residents, who are mostly retirees, get to spend time outdoors and interact with new people. As a bonus, the program creates a lively community out of the aging city.

As a result of strong and active community participation, Hanno City has different tour programs running throughout the year, offering diverse activities and itineraries in spring, summer, autumn and winter. Each tour is managed by a group of local residents, the city office, or a combination of both. Each tour is always accompanied by a group of local residents who is the owner of the tour, and at least one local government officer, who would hand out questionnaires at the end of the tour to receive feedback and comments from tourists.

To sustain tourism in the city economically, Hanno City tries to attract more environmentally friendly tourists by capturing four main groups of visitors: repeaters, young generation, corporate visitors and event joiners. Additionally, the city is trying to introduce late night programs and early morning ones, such as deer watching and night hiking, to increase hotel usage.

Last, but equally important, Hanno puts extra effort in training its people for its tourism industry. Hanno City regularly holds a local guide training course called “Hanno City Eco-tourism Open College”. This is a three-day course, equipping any local person that is interested in becoming a local guide with necessary knowledge, communication skills, techniques and the attractiveness of their own hometown, to deepen their understanding and prepare them to be good local guides. Apart from this are the “Hanno City Guide Step-up Course”, a one-day course aimed at advancing the tour guide’s guidance ability, and the “Eco-tourism Demae Course”, where the government officials reach out to groups of local people, associations or to the local governments, villages and universities in other cities of Japan and abroad, to give lectures and presentations about its current activities.

With regards to policy, the researcher sees that the Seven Greens project in Nan focuses heavily on environmental sustainability, of

which the importance cannot be argued, but more attention to the people and the cultural aspects would be beneficial to the sustainable development of ecotourism in Nan. In Hanno, the city focuses on development based on nature, culture and people.

Sustainable tourism development requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, as well as strong municipal and local leadership to ensure wide participation and consensus building. Apart from the more nature-based and greener tourism, it is also equally important to encourage local villages and communities to take pride in their authentic way of life and create a strong sense of awareness in the communities to minimize the environmental, socio-cultural and economic impact on their own region. It is important to create an understanding of sustainability in the people in the communities and also in the people who are traveling, to develop capabilities in them for sustainable development in tourism.

What is more, although visitors and the tourism industry are becoming increasingly responsive to sustainability issues, the government at the municipal level, at the minimum, has a critical role in promoting and stimulating actions to ensure sustainable tourism. Tourism policies that address the dimensions of people, culture and environmental issues that are developed with a comprehensive awareness can help lead tourism to a positive and sustainable direction.

The challenge for Thai people is to identify their own capabilities and competencies required to deliver a sustainable tourism strategy, as well as to cope with changing competitive circumstances. Success will be subject to identifying the most effective means of crafting and identifying those capabilities, whether through formal training programs, mentoring, peer-to-peer learning or involvement in community activities.

Most importantly, achieving sustainable development is a continuous process and requires constant monitoring of the impacts, introducing the necessary preventive and/or corrective measures whenever necessary.

From this research, four significant implications can be concluded. Firstly, the objective of Thailand's Seven Greens policy should be clearly redefined and shifted from "focusing on reducing

greenhouse gases and the impact of global warming” to “focusing on the overall sustainable development through the people’s development.” Rather than focusing on reducing greenhouse gases and adverse impact on the environment, there are other resources associated with culture, society, history and the happiness and well-being of the community that are equally important and could help lead to a more effective mechanism to protect the environment in the long run. Secondly, creative tourism should be implemented to motivate the community’s creativity and to look after the environment and the culture actively, as well as maintain the flow of tourists. Thirdly, active involvement and participation at the community and municipal level are found to be more effective than that at the central government level. Nan City should not completely rely on the support of the central government to execute the ecotourism plans, but should initiate its own ecotourism promotion plans to be able to handle intensifying tourism activities in time. Last, and most importantly, the factor that can best sustain and develop tourism has proven to be “the people” rather than nature or culture solely. Thailand should take into account this new trend arising in Japan and prepare its people for that purpose. It is envisioned from this research that for tourism to be an activity that contributes to sustainable development of Thailand, motivation for community participation, careful management of human capital, maximization of their capabilities and effective training of local people to become ambassadors of positive experiences, will be required.

To achieve sustainable development in tourism, the investment on human capabilities development in the communities is essential. Not only will this improve the quality of living and working conditions for the local people, but will also create awareness for conservation of the natural and cultural heritage of their towns, and eventually will lead to revitalization of their communities. The key to sustainable development lies in the community’s value and the “personal contribution” of the people. Communities are a basic reason for tourists to travel and to experience the way of life and they also are like natural landscapes that tourists consume. It can be said that communities are also the source of tourism (Hall and Richards). Therefore, the need to strengthen human capabilities is essential for the road to a sustainable community and a sustainable city.

Notes

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³ Mass tourism is a notion commonly used to refer to participation of large numbers of people in tourism and/or in a standardized holiday.

⁴ The Bangkok-Nan route is operated daily by Nok Air airlines, the low-cost subsidiary of national carrier Thai Airways International Co., Ltd, 64 and 33 seats. The Chiangmai-Nan route is operated by Kan Air one flight per week on Thursday, 12 seats.

⁵ Community participation, also known as "people participation" or "community involvement", is a process where the people raise their awareness regarding a situation or a problem that they are facing, recognize the root cause of that problem, and action together to change that situation or problem. This encourages local people to act together towards a common goal that helps improve their own quality of life.

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