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Journal of Environmental Management and Tourism is an interdisciplinary research journal, aimed to publish articles and original research papers that should contribute to the development of both experimental and theoretical nature in the field of Environmental Management and Tourism Sciences.

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Examining the Development of Sustainable Tourism on Phuket Island: A Literature Review with Implications for Tourism Planning

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Abstract:

The conception of sustainable tourism is comparatively new and only started to emerge in the 1980s, whereas nowadays, it became a prevalent theme of discussion for researchers and tourism policymakers. Since then, sustainable tourism is often referred to as the holy grail and ultimate solution to achieve a balanced outcome that equally emphasizes environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development. These factors are said to ensure active participation and assist in the process to create consensus amongst stakeholders. The tropical island of Phuket depends heavily on international tourism and generates most of its income from tourism receipts. Phuket developed quickly into a mass-tourism destination with its set of associated challenges derived from mass tourism. At present, the literature lacks a comprehensive account of perspectives from the tourism stakeholders, including indigenous people, local communities, visitors, industry, and government. Therefore, this review aims to serve as an insightful reference for policymakers and stakeholders that wish to affect change in the tourism industry for Thailand in general and Phuket specifically.

Keywords: sustainability; tourism; tourism development; tourism planning; Thailand.

JEL Classification: L83; R11; Q01; Q56; Z32; Z38.

Introduction

Tourism in its purest form has the potential to contribute substantially toward economic development and the well-being of a nation. However, when the development is focused entirely on the exploitation of economic gains, it cannot sustain in the long term (Butler 1991, Buckley 2012, Higgins-Desbiolles 2020). Sustainable tourism is about reorienting the attention toward a balanced development of tourism while continuously adapting to changing conditions (Weaver 2007, Hall 2019). Sustainable development considers encompassing the economic, social, and environmental interests of all stakeholders, including indigenous people, communities, tourists, businesses, and authorities (Roxas, Rivera and Gutierrez 2020). While the effect of COVID-19 has been unparalleled on the Thai economy with a decline in annual GDP growth, the devastating impacts of the global pandemic also emphasized the urgency to rebuild the tourism sector in a more sustainable manner (Higgins-Desbiolles 2020).

In particular, taking responsibility to take care of the planet's ecosystem and its inhabitants are mentioned by the WTTC (2021) as the primary driver for rebuilding the world economy and the tourism sector specifically. The specific aim of this literature review is to create new knowledge about how sustainable tourism in Phuket, Thailand is being perceived by various stakeholders. The subsequent discussion will establish a post-COVID-19 baseline for future research by contributing to the literature about sustainable tourism development in Phuket, Thailand. Moreover, this review aims to serve as an insightful reference for policymakers and stakeholders that

effect change in the tourism industry for Thailand in general and Phuket specifically. Moreover, the results provide a much-needed baseline for legislators and business operators that seek ways to make local businesses (and Phuket as a destination) more sustainable.

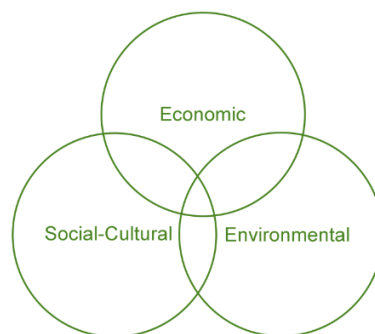
1. Conceptualization of Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism is often referred to as the holy grail and ultimate solution (Hunter 1997, Moscardo 2014) to achieve a balanced outcome that equally emphasizes on environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development. The UNWTO (2021) underlines that “a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee its long-term sustainability”. In particular, sustainable tourism intends to address three primary drivers of change (UNWTO 2021):

- Optimize environmental resources that are considered essential in the development of tourism by maintaining fundamental ecological processes and assisting to preserve natural heritage and biodiversity
- Support and respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities by conservation of their cultural heritage, values, and traditions through inter-cultural understanding and open-mindedness
- Maintain feasible economic long-term operations by offering socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders (host communities, visitors, businesses, employees, and agencies) to alleviate poverty

Consequently, the three drivers of change are often visualized as a three-pillar model or as a bubbling figure with intersecting circles as shown in Figure 1. To pursue sustainable tourism development, it is required to include all relevant stakeholders in addition to strong political leadership. These factors are said to ensure active participation and assist in the process to create consensus amongst stakeholders (Roxas, Rivera and Gutierrez 2020).

Figure 1. Conceptualization of sustainable tourism



Source: adopted from Roxas, Rivera and Gutierrez (2020)

In practice, these stakeholders offer their views “on how to manage tourism destinations that adhere to the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural objectives of sustainable tourism” (Roxas, Rivera and Gutierrez 2020, 4), as well as, “jointly address sustainability issues facing the sector” (Jamal and Stronza 2009). Jamal and Stronza (2009), Agyeiwaah, McKercher and Suntikul (2017), as well as Roxas *et al.* (2020), agree with the statement by the United Nations World Tourism Organization that achieving sustainable tourism is a continuous process that requires consistent monitoring of impacts and preventive or corrective measures whenever necessary. Furthermore, tourist satisfaction is mentioned as an additional factor that impacts the state of sustainable tourism development, wherein raising awareness about sustainability issues and promoting sustainable tourism practices are considered the key aspects (Jamal and Stronza 2009, Agyeiwaah *et al.* 2017, UNWTO 2021).

In related literature, Agyeiwaah *et al.* (2017) identified seven dimensions through a meta-analysis of 27 related studies, which relate to sustainable tourism development. Moreover, Agyeiwaah *et al.* (2017, 29) state that four of these dimensions are considered essential core themes when addressing and evaluating sustainable tourism practices. Namely, the identified core dimensions are (1) economic, (2) social, (3) environmental, and (4) cultural. Moreover, (5) political, (6) management/institutional, and (7) technology are considered peripheral dimensions. According to Hall (2019), sustainable tourism development is already a major focus for stakeholders in the tourism industry, however, the challenge is how to understand and live with it better and implement practices that lead to a positive impact on the three primary drivers of change.

2. Tourism Development in Phuket

Phuket is Thailand's largest island with a total land area of 543 km². In comparison, Phuket is somewhat smaller than the sovereign island city-state of Singapore (728.6 km²), and about half the size of Okinawa in Japan (1,199 km²). Phuket is located south of Phang Nga province and north of the Malacca Strait (Figure 2). The islands' location in the Andaman Sea is also often used to refer to Phuket as "The Pear of the Andaman Sea" (Duerrast 2011). Moreover, Phuket's geography is mountainous, with a mountain range running from the north to the south of the island. Overall, Phuket is Thailand's second-smallest province, but a substantial contributor to the national GDP (Madden, Rashid and Zainol 2017).

Figure 2. Conceptualization of sustainable tourism



Source: adopted from Roxas, Rivera & Gutierrez (2020)

Although it was never occupied by a European force, the island was formerly on one of the key commerce routes between India and China and was frequently referenced in the records of foreign ships bringing European traders (Baker 1997). Its wealth was once obtained from tin mine and rubber tree plantations, but tourism is now the key source of revenue (Tuntipisitkul *et al.* 2021, Fuchs 2021a). Since the late 1980s, the sandy beaches on the island's west coast have been developed as tourist destinations, with Patong, Karon, and Kata being the most popular (see Figure 3). Phuket is rapidly evolving, with several new hotels, condominiums, and villas under development. Tourism is Phuket's main source of revenue, and with the implementation of COVID-19, the island has experienced major economic consequences owing to a decline in international visitor arrivals, which has resulted in increasing unemployment and economic hardship (Tantrakarnapa, Bhopdhornangkul and Nakhaapakorn 2020).


















Figure 3. White sand beach in Patong, Phuket



Nowadays, Phuket depends heavily on international tourism (Henderson 2007, Tuntipisitkul *et al.* 2021) and generates most of its income from tourism receipts (Ichinosawa 2006, Fuchs 2021a). Although, Phuket's resilience toward disasters has not been tested for the first time. The 2004 tsunami has been the worst natural disaster in the Indian Ocean region's history. The tsunami struck six provinces in Thailand's southern area,

including Phang Nga, Krabi, Phuket, Ranong, Trang, and Satun on the Andaman coast. In these provinces, the aggregate death toll was 5,395 people, with 8,457 people wounded (Ichinosawa 2006). Tourism is without a doubt the most significant sector in the six tsunami-affected regions, particularly in Phuket (Henderson 2007). In the subsequent years, the international tourism receipts grew steadily, and Phuket recovered swiftly from its largest economic crisis at the time (Table 1). Between the tsunami in 2004 and the global pandemic in 2020, the only decrease in tourist arrivals was recorded in 2009 (-4.91%) as the result of the global financial crises 2007-2008.

Table 1. International passenger arrivals in Phuket between 2004-2020

Year	Passenger Arrivals	Change (in %)
2004	2,024,879	 35.32
2005	922,311	 -54.45
2006	1,677,723	 81.90
2007	2,190,399	 30.56
2008	2,409,305	 9.99
2009	2,290,906	 -4.91
2010	3,342,356	 45.90
2011	4,370,719	 30.77
2012	5,065,928	 15.91
2013	6,383,611	 26.01
2014	6,425,047	 0.65
2015	6,955,139	 8.25
2016	8,109,306	 16.59
2017	9,196,527	 13.41
2018	10,403,631	 13.13
2019	10,666,178	 2.52
2020	2,332,349	 -78.13

Source: summarized from AOT (2022)

Brown and Hall (2008) state that when there is accelerated economic growth that resulted from increasing tourism arrivals, the problems will grow exponentially if not managed properly. Similarly, Phuket developed quickly into a mass-tourism destination with its set of associated challenges (Božić *et al.* 2018, Fuchs 2021b). Mass tourism generates an overall volume of income that promotes economic growth (Garau-Vadell, Gutiérrez-Tao and Daz-Armas 2019), but its impact on the host economy is not without negative consequences. For example, 'leakage' is a term that describes the revenue flow, wherein it is not clearly understood how much the original tourist receipts actually benefit the host economy (Theng, Qiong and Tatar 2015).

3. Sustainable Tourism as a Global Movement

The concept of sustainable tourism is still relatively new and only started to emerge in the 1980s (Gössling 2000). Since then, it became a prevalent theme of discussion for researchers and tourism policymakers (Hunter 1997, Swarbrooke 1999, Weaver 2007, Liu 2003, Jamal and Stronza 2009, Hall 2019, Higgins-Desbiolles 2020). However, it is still often presumed that sustainable tourism concerns mostly with the protection of the environment, *i.e.*, referring to the environmental pillar, but neglecting the economic and socio-cultural pillars of sustainable tourism (Jovicic 2014). "Sustainable tourism is not just about protecting the environment; it is also concerned with the long-term economic viability and social justice" (Swarbrooke 1999, 43).

There is no agreement on one definition to describe sustainable tourism (Cernat & Gourdon 2012, Hall 2019), however, many researchers (Hunter 1997, Swarbrooke 1999, Weaver 2007, Liu 2003, Jamal and Stronza 2009, Hall 2019, Higgins-Desbiolles 2020) concur with the description used by the UNWTO (2021). It notes that "sustainable tourism development guidelines and management practices apply to all forms of tourism in all types of destinations, including mass tourism and the various niche tourism segments". Furthermore, "sustainability principles refer to the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee its long-term sustainability" (UNWTO 2021).

Based on the definition set forth by the United Nations World Tourism Organization, the following subchapters provide a critical review of the status quo concerning sustainable tourism development in Phuket. Starting from studying the historic tourism development in Phuket towards a holistic review of current studies related to sustainable tourism development in Phuket. Moreover, the chapter will provide a preliminary

assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on sustainable tourism development in Phuket, as well as provide an overview of challenges and opportunities as identified in other studies.

4. Sustainability Trends in Tourism

Klaus Toepfer, a German politician and former executive director of the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) once said in a speech that “putting tourism on a sustainable path is a major challenge, requiring partnership and cooperation within the tourism industry, and between the industry, governments and tourists themselves” (United Nations 2002). Sustainability, sustainable tourism, or sustainable development are contemporary and well-articulated terminology that is often investigated from a versatile perspective in different geographical or cultural settings (Hall 2019, Higgins-Desbiolles 2020, Roxas, Rivera and Gutierrez 2020). The terms are frequently used interchangeably, however, Liu (2003) suggested that there are nuances that differentiate these terms and set them apart.

Liu (2003, 460) attempts to suggest that sustainability focuses rather on the state, which describes “the condition of something over the long-term, whereas sustainable development is process-oriented and involves the management of something for the short and long-term”. Irrespective of its short-term or long-term viability, there is a relative agreement that tourism should be geared towards sustainable development to encourage positive growth for the development of countries, *i.e.*, providing socio-economic benefits for communities, protecting the environment and ecosystem, and conserving cultural heritage (Butler 1991, Liu 2003, Buckley 2012, Higgins-Desbiolles 2020).

Phuket is Thailand's largest tropical island, situated in the Andaman Sea in southern Thailand. Phuket is a proclaimed world-class holiday destination (Sinlapasate *et al.* 2020) that heavily depends on international tourism (Henderson 2007; Tuntipisitkul *et al.* 2021) and generates most of its income from tourism receipts (Ichinosawa 2006, Tuntipisitkul *et al.* 2021, Fuchs 2021b). It has been suggested, however, not statistically proven, that Phuket's maximum carrying capacity exceeded its current capabilities (Polnyotee and Thadaniti 2015). Furthermore, the continuously increasing international tourist arrivals led Phuket onto a path of overcrowding (Sinlapasate *et al.* 2020) making it harder to sustain its current tourism model (Polnyotee and Thadaniti 2014, 2015, Fuchs 2021b).

As stated by Weaver (2007), Toepfer (cited in United Nations, 2002), and Roxas *et al.* (2020), tourists (*i.e.*, visitors and travelers) are an integral part and key stakeholder on the path toward sustainable tourism. Tourists (unwillingly or unknowingly) contribute toward a successful implementation of sustainable tourism development (Roxas *et al.* 2020; UNWTO 2021), however, there is currently a gap in the literature, about how international tourists perceive the importance and development of sustainable tourism in their chosen destination. Seeking answers to close the identified gap will establish evidence that informs policymakers (government, agencies, NGO's and businesses) on how to direct sustainable tourism development more efficiently based on the presently neglected stakeholder: the tourists.

5. A Brief History of Tourism Development in Phuket

The interior of the island was comparatively unspoiled at the end of the nineteenth century. The ancient rainforest still covered a large portion of it. However, after the turn of the century, vast parts of the island were removed to make place for rubber plantations, irreversibly changing the island's landscape (The Thaiger 2012). The Sarasin Bridge was formally inaugurated in July 1967, providing a road link between Phuket Island and the mainland for the first time (The Thaiger 2012). However, it was not until the mid-1970s that the development of tourism in Phuket commenced with the first beach bungalows at Patong beach (The Thaiger 2012; Phuket.Net, n.d.). In the early days of Phuket's tourism development, it was considered a haven with idyllic tropical beaches and clear warm waters. However, at the time air travel was slowly emerging and the infrastructure of Phuket was severely underdeveloped, therefore, the primary inbound travelers were backpackers from around the world (Fangpong, personal communication, January 28, 2022).

Before the construction of Phuket International Airport, international visitors came on long-haul busses from Bangkok to Phuket (The Thaiger, 2012). Before the growth of tourism, its wealth was primarily from tin mining and rubber tree plantations. However, tourism is now the principal source of revenue (Tuntipisitkul *et al.* 2021; Fuchs 2021a). Since the late 1980s, the sandy beaches on the island's west coast have been developed as tourist sites, with numerous new hotels, condominiums, and villas being built regularly (Henderson and Smith 2009, Fuchs 2021a). Phuket derives its name from the Malay word 'bukit', which means hill and refers to the mountainous topography of the island (Phuket.Net, n.d.) and Phuket's transformation from a tin mining hub to a world-class holiday destination took five decades. Nowadays, tourism is by far the island's biggest industry with

over 10 million international passenger arrivals visiting the island before COVID-19 annually (Table 1). Phuket is considered one of the most popular travel destinations in South-East Asia (Tuntipisitkul *et al.* 2021) and internationally (Sinlapasate *et al.* 2020).

6. Tourism Development in Phuket: The Resident Perspective

To get a better understanding of current research related to tourism development in general and sustainable tourism in particular, it is important to analyze the status quo. As a means to provide an accurate and comprehensive account of the current situation, it is important to examine related studies from the perspective of different stakeholders (Tuohino and Konu 2014). This subsection will review previous studies that relate to the perspective of the host community, *i.e.* the perspective of the residents.

Tuntipisitkul *et al.* (2021) conducted a systematic survey questionnaire of 450 individuals to investigate "residents' attitudes regarding the changes in environmental, sociocultural, and economic conditions associated with tourism development in Phuket, Thailand". Their study (Tuntipisitkul *et al.* 2021) revealed that residents were rather critical and perceived unfavorable changes in a variety of conditions such as "increased levels of pollution, road accidents, traffic congestion, and costs of living" (Tuntipisitkul *et al.* 2021). Nevertheless, the majority of residents recognized the importance of tourism development's long-term economic benefit. While the authors discovered a variety of factors that negatively impact the perception of residents towards tourism development, it should be noted that the sampling method of the study was non-randomized. As a result, the sample may not be a true reflection of the entire resident population.

Similar to Tuntipisitkul *et al.* (2021), a recent survey study conducted by Wu, Lai, and Tang (2021) aimed to "identify a set of sustainability issues that negatively affect residents' attitudes toward tourism development". The authors surveyed 430 residents in Macau using an importance-performance analysis methodology. The study revealed that residents expect the government to moderate economic (inflation, urban service charge, housing prices) and environmental (noise pollution, destruction of natural landscapes) issues. Wu *et al.* (2021) critically attempt to analyze Macau residents' attitudes toward tourism development. Nevertheless, the authors (Wu *et al.* 2021, Tuntipisitkul *et al.* 2021) were unable to explain why and how these sustainability issues affect residents' life. An important consideration for this dissertation is to consider the 'why' and 'how' in addition to the 'what' as it offers a more comprehensive understanding of understanding international tourists' perception of sustainable tourism development.

Another critical attempt to gain a closer understanding of the perspective of residents towards the economic impacts of tourism development in Phuket was made by Marzuki (2012). Although the empirical findings of the study date back to 2012, the results of the study offer valuable insights and highlight those residents in 2012 had generally a more positive outlook on tourism development compared to a more recent study (Tuntipisitkul *et al.* 2021). Based on 393 questionnaires, Marzuki (2012) reported that the majority of Phuket locals, even those who do not work in tourism, have profited from tourist development and have good impressions of tourism benefits. He also claimed that tourism expansion in Phuket has delivered more advantages to people than expenses, which contradicts more recent trends (Tuntipisitkul *et al.* 2021).

There is a relative agreement in the literature that "future research should focus on how to encourage stakeholders' participation in tourism development" (Marzuki 2012, Polnyotee & Thadaniti 2015, Tuntipisitkul *et al.* 2021, Wu *et al.* 2021). While Polnyotee and Thadaniti (2015, 96-97) attempt to provide recommendations and propose a strategy for sustainable tourism development in Phuket that centers on community-based tourism, they neglect to address "stakeholders' participation" requires multi-party participation. Byrd (2007, 8) noted that stakeholder participation should not only include the needs of all stakeholders (communities, government, businesses, visitors) but should actively take into consideration the needs, requirements, and perspectives of present and future visitors.

7. Tourism Development in Phuket: The Business Perspective

There is scarce evidence in the literature to provide a holistic perspective on sustainable tourism development in Phuket from the viewpoint of the employee or business owner. However, a few studies (Hareebin 2020, Fuchs 2022a) attempt to examine the business owners' perspectives on sustainable tourism and how they perceive the recent development. Fuchs (2022a), for example, gathered qualitative data through 21 semi-structured interviews with small company owners in the tourism and hospitality industry. The study's goal was to uncover shortcomings that would allow stakeholders to better manage tourism development in the aftermath of COVID-19. Fuchs (2022a) states that the small local business owner community showed a high level of resilience, but also revealed

that Phuket continues “to depend strongly on international tourism to manage its local economy sustainably” (p. 258).

Hareebin (2020) conducted a mixed-methods case study that employed interview data (with twenty tour operators) as well as survey data from 360 administrators among tour operators. The research setting was not explicit to Phuket only, but included neighboring provinces (*i.e.* Phang Nga and Krabi), but it offered relevant and applicable insights into recent developments in sustainable tourism in Phuket. Hareebin (2020) states that a lack of ‘knowledge transfer’ between businesses and agencies could be one of the obstacles to a more sustainable tourism path. The author further suggests “to exchange knowledge and resources between the public and private sectors” (p. 133) to build a better mutual understanding, which is currently lacking (Hareebin 2020). Similar to Fuchs (2022, 133), Hareebin (2020) agrees that “good governance principles” should be considered the top priority in managing sustainable tourism development more effectively.

There is an indication in the literature that suggests businesses share a lot of sympathy with the general principles of sustainability (Sobaih *et al.* 2021, Fuchs 2022a), however, there is ambiguity and general confusion around the term “sustainable tourism” as it is often perceived as an environmental concern (Horobin and Long 1996 Fuchs, *in press*). Larger businesses often consider Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as their contribution toward sustainable tourism development (Moral, Alles and Franco 2018), whereas smaller businesses often lack concrete actions on how to contribute toward sustainable tourism (Waligo, Clarke and Hawkins 2013). Nevertheless, and irrespective of the size of business (*i.e.* including small businesses and large corporations), there is a relative agreement that lack of information (Ertac and Cankan 2021) and incoherent communication (Sobaih *et al.* 2021) is something that needs to be addressed by the various public agencies.

Conclusion

The importance of reassessing the current state of sustainable tourism at destinations can be demonstrated by an exemplary claim made by Hall, Scott, and Gössling (2020, 577) who identified that “the effects of COVID-19 and the measures to contain it may lead to a reorientation of tourism”. Thailand’s economy and its famous Andaman Sea is a major area for global tourism that is heavily affected by the impact of COVID-19. Similarly, Higgins-Desbiolles (2020, 552) states that “Major crises such as COVID-19 may reveal dynamics that have gone largely unremarked and thereby spark both moments of reflection and movements for change”.

Correspondingly, Stephenson and Dobson (2020, 149-150) state that “intensified tourism demand has led to significant socio-cultural and economic impacts” for Phuket. The authors recommend looking at the adaptation of smart technology, which in turn, bears the opportunity to monitor over-tourism and ensure that the destination can “grow smartly and sustainably”. As stated in the introduction, the concept of sustainable tourism is still relatively new and only started to emerge over the previous four decades (Gössling 2000).

Similarly, the evidence in the body of knowledge concerning sustainable tourism in Phuket is still limited. However, there has been increased interest over the last four to five years, which fostered a rising amount of case studies that sought to investigate sustainable tourism practices and development in Phuket, Thailand. Many of the studies focused on the resident perspective (Marzuki 2012, Polnyotee and Thadaniti 2015, Tuntipisitkul *et al.* 2021) or business perspective (Hareebin 2020, Fuchs 2022a) neglecting a primary stakeholder for Phuket: the international tourists. To sum up, the review of the studies revealed that there is a lot of sympathy towards the general principles of sustainable tourism.

However, ambiguity concerning the scope of sustainable tourism (*i.e.*, it is often mistaken for perseveration of the environment), incoherent and inconsistent information, and clearly actionable activities are often described as the primary obstacles perceived by the tourism stakeholders. Therefore, creating new knowledge about how international tourists traveling to Phuket, Thailand perceives the importance and current development of sustainable tourism in their chosen destination will be another important step towards establishing more empirical evidence on this important, yet emerging topic.

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