

## ABSTRACT

SCUBA dive tourism in coral reef environments has become a highly significant component of the international tourism market. The tourism industry can play an important and positive role in the socio-economic development of coastal areas as well as the conservation of species and natural habitats in destination countries. However, in the absence of proper controls and enforcement, unplanned tourism growth can cause environmental degradation and social and cultural conflicts which undermine the long-term sustainability of the dive tourism industry.

Given the significance of dive tourism in terms of its contribution to the global and local economies and its potential to create impacts on the coast around the world, the need to implement sustainable tourism practices has become important. There has been a growing body of research concentrating on physical impacts caused by dive tourism but there has been a lack of studies concerning the socio-economic factors related to dive tourism. In response to the research gaps, this study investigated the complexity of social interactions within dive tourism alongside the physical impacts in order to provide a holistic view of key issues confronting the management of reef-based SCUBA dive tourism. The study employed social survey techniques and selected a small and remote island of Koh Tao in Thailand as a case study. This is due to the unique characteristics of the island including the dominance of tourism over other land-based and marine-based activities, a lack of government control and the high dependence on imports and skilled expatriates. Importantly, Koh Tao accounts for the second highest number of annual dive certifications worldwide - only second to the Great Barrier Reef, Australia.

This study proposes a way forward for sustainable dive tourism based on management planning and governance frameworks drawn from the principles of integrated coastal management and sustainable tourism development. However, the study demonstrates that these two internationally accepted management frameworks are not always applicable to every dive tourism destination because each destination has its own uniqueness and limitations. The complexity of social interactions within the dive tourism industry is significant to the contribution to tourism impacts and practices, and therefore can facilitate or impede the sustainability. The study concludes that the management of dive tourism requires a greater focus on the social dimension, the collaboration of multi-stakeholders, the implementation of self-regulations, the enhancement of education and awareness, and good governance in order to achieve an effective incorporation of tourism as a component of coastal management.