Abstract

Apart from the obvious and visible effects on the economy and the physical environment, tourism can contribute to social and cultural changes in host societies. Many host communities put their hopes on tourism as an economic driver and development tool. However, it is still unclear whether tourism is more useful or harmful towards host destinations. It is obvious that international tourism would be a short pathway to make the transition from a traditional way of life to a modern form of society. Many studies show that destinations consider these changes positively in terms of modernisation and affluence. However, the interaction between two different cultures creates change processes over time, especially in an Eastern context where the modernisation process is Western in orientation.

Prior studies on residents' attitudes and perceptions toward socio-cultural impacts of tourism identify various relationships. However, much less analysis has focused on the influence of cultural factors. Additionally, most previous studies focus on residents' attitudes and perceptions towards tourism development through quantitative surveys with cluster or factor analysis based on a limited range of predetermined attributes. Few studies explore the changes from an indigenous culture perspective. The aim of this research is to develop a better understanding of the residents of a Thai beach resort's attitudes towards tourism, in particular their perceptions of the socio-cultural impacts of tourism development and the associated behavioural changes in their society. Koh Samui was chosen for this investigation as it is a self-contained model of a beach resort development where there are socio-cultural impacts.

A constructivist paradigm approach was adopted. Consideration is given in the literature review and the methodology chapters to issues related to conducting research in the Thai context. Choosing qualitative research serves as a bridge, which can link theory, practice and deeper findings. This research employed participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The background of the local residents and local context in Koh Samui were explored as well as local residents' behaviour patterns and the interaction between them and tourists on a day to day

basis. Following a period of immersion in the community, residents' and local authorities' perceptions and attitudes toward the socio-cultural impacts of tourism development in Koh Samui were investigated through semi-structured interviews.

Isan migrant workers emerged from the data analysis as a key issue due to the fact that local people believed these migrant workers were responsible for the majority of socio-cultural impacts in Koh Samui including demographic changes, rise in crime, drug abuse, prostitution and AIDS infection, demonstration effects, and increased poverty and slums. Consequently, local people were offended by and fearful of Isan migrant workers. In addition, the analysis suggests that Isan migrant workers had adapted to more readily to tourist culture. Acculturation and social identity theory are explored to explain this situation. Social identity suggests that Isan migrant workers were out-group of Koh Samui as well as sense of belongingness as a self-esteem was a key answer to this adaptation in Isan migrant workers.

Buddha's teaching and the Thai avoidance of confrontation are the main players in order to reflect on how Thai people cope with socio-cultural changes. The majority of local residents in Koh Samui are Buddhist and this has taught them to accept problems and learn how to live with them. A fundamental factor is an Eastern world view. In Koh Samui, it was necessary for local people to accept tourism and cope with socio-cultural changes in their community so as not to reject the apparent benefits of tourism. The findings illustrate many contexts in which local people are led by their cultural background to accept tourism. Following a crisis in local agriculture which was dependent on coconuts, tourism seemed to be the only way for local people to survive. It is, therefore, difficult for them to blame tourism as a cause of the main socio-cultural problems in their community. Therefore, they try to apportion blame elsewhere, in this case on the Isan migrants.

Buddhism is followed by ninety-five percent of Thai people. It is undoubted that Buddhism has a strong influence on everyday life of Thai people, their society and culture. The implications of Thai cultural conditions and responses in the everyday life that were emerged from the analysis are discussed including Thai loose social structure, cool heart behaviour, the concept of Choei, face-saving and avoidance of

confrontation, Boonkhun relationships, Kreng-jai value, Num-jai value, and brotherhood or helpful relationships. The importance of exploring an indigenous cultural perspective is discussed together with lessons that can be learned for tourism development and its socio-cultural impacts.