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Abstract

The Sumatra-Andaman tsunami, which devastated countries bordering the Indian Ocean on December 26, 2004, resulted in an unprecedented loss of human life and property. In Thailand, the beach resort area of Khao Lak suffered the most severe damage. The period of recovery and rebuilding following this tragedy offers ample opportunities to develop more sustainable forms of tourism, such as ecotourism.

This study set out to gain an enhanced understanding of tourist markets and visitor experiences in Khao Lak one year after the tsunami. Two main tourist types, beach resort tourists and volunteer tourists, were identified after an initial period of familiarization with the site. The dominant presence of volunteer tourists in Khao Lak one year after the tsunami was a surprising finding. Motivations, trip characteristics, and demographics of tourists were collected through targeted surveys. The importance of ecotourism principles was explored in order to assess interest and potential demand for ecotourism experiences.

The results show that beach resort and volunteer tourists differ significantly in several respects. Volunteers are more likely to travel to Khao Lak alone and stay for longer

periods of time. Beach resort tourists tend to be older and less formally educated than volunteers.

Importance-Performance Analysis was conducted on travel motivations and satisfactions. Overall, respondents were very satisfied with push and pull reasons for visiting Khao Lak, and no immediate management action is warranted. Volunteers were motivated by a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Volunteers want to assist with post-tsunami recovery, but they also want to gain personal development rewards.

A factor analysis was performed on the importance of 12 ecotourism principles, drawn from supporting literature. The loadings of each sample produced a 3-factor solution labeled 1) nature 2) stewardship and 3) local culture. Segmentation analysis grouped respondents into ecotourists, semi-ecotourists, and non-ecotourists. Ecotourists are respondents that relate high importance to all 3 factors. Semi-ecotourists score high in 1 or 2 factors, and non-ecotourists attach low importance to all factors. The distribution of respondents in each tourist segment does not differ between the beach resort and volunteer sample.

Several motivations related to natural features and activities in the destination environment are more important to ecotourists than non-ecotourists. However, there are few differences in trip or demographic characteristics among segments. In the beach sample, non-ecotourists are less likely to have a university education than ecotourists. In the volunteer sample, ecotourists are more likely to be younger, under 35 years of age.

About one third of respondents in each sample are identified as ecotourists, and just over half are semi-ecotourists. This suggests that there is strong demand for ecotourism among international visitors to Khao Lak. Established protected areas such as nearby Khao Lak-Lum Ru National Park may offer venues for future ecotourism development.