Visitor Management for Ecotourism Development at Khao Yai National Park, Thailand

Executive summary
This research describes about visitor management at Khao Yai National Park (KYNP), a World Heritage Site (WHS) and ASEAN Heritage Park (AHP) that receive progressive and fluctuate visitors. The research focus on how KYNP provides quality service to improve visitors’ experience while maintaining management objectives of the park. The research also covers level of visitor satisfaction towards information and service provided, and stakeholder roles to conserve values of the park and how they contribute to visitor management process. The research presents results of observation, interviews to stakeholders and visitors, together with questionnaires that have been conducted inside the park. The data of 210 questionnaires collected from international and domestic visitors at KYNP showed that interpretation regarding all aspects of the park should be improved. Information can effectively increase the awareness of visitors towards wildlife, important environment aspects of the park, and possibly help the park authorities to manage visitor behavior in KYNP. Interesting founding showed that generally known the visit to WHS is generated by its status is not the case of most visitors in KYNP. Most visitors are satisfied with the service provided but other special case of dissatisfaction also found in this research. The research also presents the discussion and strategies towards visitor management at KYNP.

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Background and rationale

Ecotourism has been introduced as part of alternative tourism to respond the negative impact of mass tourism. Inskeep (1991) mentioned that forms of alternative tourism relate to facilities and activities that allow visitors to directly experience and respect the host culture and environment. This alternative tourism, including ecotourism offers the various ways to travel differently than the conventional one such as nature interpretation to educate visitors and active experience for visitors.

Current visitors are becoming more concern on the local people's welfare, environmental damage, social change and contribution to the place they visit as the impact of their visits. They put more emphasis to reduce negative impact of their visit to the sites and people. Therefore, demand for service and quality of experience is highly concerned by the visitors, and values in the tourism destinations are required to meet visitor's needs.

Ecotourism, which was introduced in the 1990s, has defined by The International Ecotourism Society (1993), as responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people. Ecotourism is expected to encourage more responsible behavior and social responsibility towards environment and local people.

As part of encouragement effort for tourism, ecotourism has been promoted and introduced for tourism development in Thailand protected areas, including national park (Emphandhu, 2002 in Emphandhu and Chettamart, 2004). A series of National Ecotourism Action Plan 2002 - 2006, management guideline and the Thailand National Ecotourism Policy has been produced by Tourism Authority Thailand (TAT). It has been launched as a framework of ecotourism focusing on conservation and benefits to local communities to support the ecotourism campaign and activities in the country. As part of actively promoting ecotourism and green tourism, in 2011 TAT highlights on strategic plan for promoting more ecotourism products. The initial initiative start from signing agreement of "Declaration of Environment Protection for Sustainable Tourism" among government and private agencies from five provinces: Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Nakhon Ratchasima, Chon Buri, and Surat Thani. TAT also provides awareness and promotion materials regarding ecotourism (W. Churugsa, 2010, personal communication).

Ecotourism euphoria has generated a visit to protected areas, particularly to the national park has been growing rapidly as many tour operators in Thailand also promote tour packages to visit national parks. National parks have become primary destinations for nature tourism activities and promotion efforts.

As one component of broader destination management process, tourism destinations should apply an effective visitor management to achieve better service quality, experience and values. McArthur (1993) in Van der Donk (2000) defined visitor management as the
management of visitors in a manner which maximizes the quality of visitor experience while assisting the achievement of the site’s overall management objectives.

Visitor management is a means to minimize the impact of visitors in a tourism destination (Mason, 2006). World Tourism Organization (1997) underlined that visitor management is designed to control the numbers and flow of visitors as well as their activities. Visitor flow works by restriction to certain areas, establish pathway through areas, and controlling the time of visits. The important of visitor management also noted by London Development Agency (2009) that highlights effective visitor management will: contribute to the visitor’s understanding and appreciation of the destination; reduce damage to sensitive sites and localities; tackle issues that may be affecting the quality of the visitor experience and the quality of life for local people; attract and disperse visitors within the destination to spread the economic benefits more widely. Visitor management tools such as interpretation to educate visitors (Mason, 2003 in Mason 2006), facilities and promotion are needed to control the visitor behavior in a destination, meanwhile provide service and improve visitor’s experience. Therefore, understanding and implementing an effective visitor management is crucial for ecotourism in conservation area such as national park.

This research examined the visitor management at Khao Yai National Park (KYNP) that receive progressive and fluctuate visitors. KYNP has been visited by 821,793 visitors in 2009, intensively increased over 64% since 2006 (KYNP Research Division, 2010). The research focus on how KYNP provides quality service to improve the experience of visitors while maintaining management objectives of the park in conservation. The component of research also covers level of visitor satisfaction towards information and service provided, and stakeholder roles to conserve values of the park as contribution for visitor management process. The research presents results of observation and survey series carried out at KYNP, interviews to key stakeholders and visitors, together with questionnaires that have been conducted inside the park. This is followed by a discussion and strategies.

Objective of research

The objective of this study is to understand how visitor management developed in KYNP, how park authorities deal with visitor management issues and develop visitor management strategies to improve service and experience of visitors, and how stakeholders play their roles to conserve park’s values.

Research methodology

This study employed three methods, including observation, interviews, and questionnaires. Surveys for observation was conducted to achieve outputs 1 and 3, interview to stakeholders