REGENERATIVE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF CIRCUMSTANCES IN PHUKET

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Abstract: The concept of sustainable tourism has long been a focal point in tourism literature. However, the increasing complexity of global challenges, such as climate change and over-tourism, suggests that sustainability alone may no longer be sufficient. This is where regenerative tourism emerges, shifting the focus from merely minimizing harm to actively restoring and enhancing ecosystems, communities, and economies through tourism activities. This preliminary research aims to investigate the current state of regenerative tourism development in the context of Phuket, Thailand. A qualitative research approach was employed, utilizing semi-structured in-depth interviews with six key informants, including local community members, public and business representatives in tourism organizations, and local government officials. The iterative analysis of the interviews revealed several critical themes: waste management issues, insufficient enforcement of laws and regulations, the need for improved stakeholder collaboration, and growing environmental concerns. Additionally, the study highlighted various regenerative tourism practices currently being implemented. This preliminary study reveals four critical challenges in Phuket's regenerative tourism development: systemic waste management failures, insufficient law enforcement and regulations, lack of stakeholder collaboration, and escalating environmental concerns. The findings indicate that transitioning to regenerative tourism requires enhanced infrastructure and waste management systems, strengthened regulatory frameworks and enforcement mechanisms, improved stakeholder engagement processes, and comprehensive environmental monitoring systems. This research supports the need for a balanced approach to tourism development that considers environmental and social impacts alongside economic benefits. The implications of this research are significant, emphasizing the need for increased awareness and the optimization of collaboration among relevant tourism stakeholders to foster regenerative tourism in Phuket.

Keywords: Regenerative tourism, Tourism development, Stakeholders, Awareness, Collaboration

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1. Introduction

The tourism industry is a crucial sector in driving and developing the global economy, generating revenue that supports growth across all economic sectors. (World Bank Group, 2024) The tourism industry is a major source of revenue for countries, with lower capital costs compared to other industries. Tourism relies on key resources such as natural resources, culture, food, and the local way of life to attract visitors. A crucial aspect is the management and planning of the tourism industry to ensure continuous and inclusive development, making the most of existing resources (Nagamatsu, 2023). Key development plans include enhancing infrastructure, public utilities, and transportation by land, sea, and air along with incorporating modern technology and innovations in architecture, communication systems, and safety for tourists. Additionally, it involves fostering service awareness among all stakeholders involved in tourism services, and providing facilities that ensure a memorable experience for tourists in line with international standards (Nagamatsu, 2023).

Euromonitor International has ranked Phuket as the 11th top global tourist destination. Tourism has driven economic growth, innovation, and the emergence of new businesses in Phuket. Consequently, the trend suggests a higher influx of tourists to the province (Punpanich, 2023). The Phuket's tourism industry has been a significant driver of the local economy for over five decades. As one of Thailand's top tourist destinations, Phuket is renowned and desired by travelers from around the world. As a result, Phuket's society, economy, and environment have undergone changes, which have been highlighted in the news. These issues include the destruction of natural resources, deterioration of land conditions, pollution problems such as waste, wastewater, and air pollution, changes in lifestyles, migration, income inequality, illegal employment, monopolies, and competition between community businesses and large enterprises. This has led to collaboration among government, private sector, and the public to advance and develop tourism in the province according to the regional development plans, and to address and manage issues arising from the influx of tourists and business activities. However, despite these collaborative efforts, tangible resolutions to the fundamental problems have not been achieved (Kwan Na Phat Saracharn Talay. (2023). These issues have been accumulating in Phuket for a long time, and the current collaborative efforts are mostly limited to information dissemination, soliciting feedback, and allowing public participation in decision-making processes (Kwan Na Phatsorn Chana Talay,2023). Additionally, there are legal and regulatory constraints within government agencies, and public participation opportunities are often restricted to specific groups. This has led to an inequitable and unequal distribution of benefits (Chantalay, 2021).
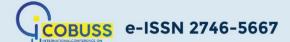
The concept of sustainable tourism has derived to address issues arising from mass tourism. The concept of sustainable tourism indeed emerged as a response to the negative impacts of mass tourism. Mass tourism often leads to environmental degradation, cultural erosion, and economic disparities in host communities. Sustainable tourism aims to mitigate these issues by promoting practices that are environmentally friendly, culturally respectful, and economically beneficial for local communities (Weaver, 2006). While sustainable tourism focuses on maintaining the status quo and minimizing harm, regenerative tourism goes a step further by aiming to improve and restore the natural, social, and economic environments of tourism destinations. Regenerative tourism is about leaving a place better than it was found, fostering a net positive impact (Simmons. 2023). As such, regenerative tourism involves active restoration, community empowerment, and holistic approach (Dredge, 2022; Sawu et al., 2024).

Given the importance of tourism industry to Phuket and new approach of regenerative tourism, the aim of this research is to investigate the current circumstances and challenges affecting tourism development in Phuket from key stakeholders' perspectives. It is also to identify the key barriers and opportunities in transitioning from conventional tourism to regenerative tourism practices in Phuket.

2. Literature Review

The review of literature in this study revolves around the recent concept of tourism management known as regenerative tourism. Regenerative tourism is a new approach that focuses on creating sustainability and restoration in both environmental and social dimensions. It integrates knowledge from Western science and Indigenous perspectives, developed in response to criticisms of sustainable tourism, which often prioritizes continuous economic growth at the expense of environmental degradation and social inequality.

The concept of regenerative tourism draws from fields such as agriculture, forestry, urban design, and architecture, with regenerative agriculture specifically referring to the management and enhancement of conditions for the ongoing renewal of life and living systems. While regeneration is associated with restoring resources, health, and ecological, economic, and social functions in various contexts, it is also understood to extend beyond mere restoration. This approach integrates principles of sustainability with a focus on creating positive outcomes for both the environment and local populations. Key concepts include a focus on restoration, community involvement, and a holistic approach. Unlike traditional tourism, which often aims to reduce harm, regenerative tourism actively seeks to restore natural and cultural environments (Hill & Gale, 2009).

Regenerative tourism and community participation are key components in promoting sustainable development, particularly in tourist areas like Phuket. This approach focuses on restoring ecological balance and enhancing the relationship between humans and nature. However, the concept is often misunderstood or oversimplified as merely "leaving a place better than it was found," which limits its transformative potential. Furthermore, the Western-centric emphasis on economic growth hinders the full adoption of regenerative practices (Bellato & Pollock, 2023). Integrating Indigenous and local knowledge is essential to achieving the broader goals of regenerative tourism, while community participation plays a critical role in sustainable urban development.

This new model is grounded in Indigenous knowledge and living systems theory, representing a paradigm shift that allows us to view tourism as a living ecosystem. It necessitates a creative economic model, such as social entrepreneurship, and systemic change in the operation and management of tourism. Local tourism solutions with thriving communities as a primary goal, along with increased collaboration within the tourism industry and across sectors, are essential (Major & Clarke, 2022).

Regenerative tourism involves diverse stakeholders and requires responsible efforts to achieve mutually agreeable goals and monitor outcomes over time (Sharma & Tham, 2023). Effective communication and leadership from community figures also play a significant role in increasing community involvement. Ultimately, regenerative tourism focuses on creating sustainability and restoration in both environmental and social dimensions, requiring a shift in thinking and management systems, community participation, protection of cultural and natural heritage, and the adoption of diverse economic concepts. (Bellato, L., Frantzeskaki, N., & Nygaard, C. A. 2023).

Research conducted in Phuket shows that trust in local authorities and awareness of the benefits of participation are vital factors in encouraging residents to engage in development activities. Although regenerative tourism is often framed as a new concept, regenerative approaches have increasingly been used in tourism contexts as a preferred alternative to less dynamic sustainability approaches. It is conceptualized around living systems theory, which views communities and businesses as part of a larger socio- ecological system. In this framework, tourism is viewed as a complex system with multiple interconnected forces that need to renew and thrive over the long term. Regenerative tourism is egocentric, viewing society and nature as inseparable and interconnected. From this perspective, the primary goal of tourism is to sustain and regenerate life by allowing ecological, economic, and social systems to thrive.

3. Method

The in-depth interview approach was utilised in this study. This technique was considered to be suitable for this study as it more easily allowed the researcher to approach key informants. The procedure of the data collection began with an interview guide development. To meet the qualitative validity, the peer debriefing technique was applied where the peers reviewed and asked the researcher about the questions that reflected the rationale of the current research. The pilot study was also conducted and enabled the researcher to become more confident and familiar with the interview procedure and allowed the researcher to improve the quality of the interview questions. The revised interview guide was applied to six key informants and the purposive sampling technique was utilised. Each interview took approximately 30 to 45 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees. After each interview, the recording was transcribed and we screened themes manually before proceeding to further interviews. This approach allowed the researcher to use initial insights to guide subsequent stages of data collection and to determine when saturation was reached.

Transcripts were interpreted systematically through a three-step thematic analysis to identify, categorize, and abstract patterns. In this coding process, concrete surface texts were open-coded in the first step, grouped into meaningful structural categories in the second step, and finally organized into major themes within the framework, which depicts the relationships among emergent themes. The analysis was performed by the first author, and a subset of the transcripts and codes generated from these transcripts was cross-checked by the co-author to reduce potential bias that might arise from analysis by a single researcher and to provide inter-analysis reliability. In addition, in subsequent iterations of analysis the research team reviewed and revised the entire codebook generated in the initial round of analysis.

Table 1 displays profiles of six key informants in this study. It was found that almost all of them were female with only one of them was female. All of them were older than 40 years old.

Table 1. Profiles of the key informants

No.	Gender	Experience in tourism industry	Type of organization (eg. Business/government/community)
1.	Male	20+	Government
2.	Male	20+	Business
3.	Male	30+	Business
4.	Male	25+	Government
5.	Male	10+	Community
6.	Female	20+	Government

4. Result and Discussion

Overall, most of the key informants have mentioned about over carrying capacity occurred in a destination like Phuket. As such, it was able to expect to hear the words of 'traffic', 'road problem', and 'waste' from the interviewers. Therefore, some 'less' sustainability issues were mentioned,

> The influx of tourists leads to resource consumption and creates economic and social inequalities. Every tourism activity generates waste, and it's not just the physical waste we can see. Economically, there's a divide where one group makes substantial income from tourism, while another earns very little. In these tourist

areas, the cost of living rises, and those with insufficient income struggle to find housing. Children and youth often receive an inadequate education, and there are health issues—both mental and physical. (Informant 1)

In addition, the iterative analysis of the interviews revealed several critical themes. Such themes refer to waste management issues, insufficient enforcement of laws and regulations, the need for improved stakeholder collaboration, and growing environmental concerns.

Waste Management

Similar to previous studies (e.g., Bhat et al., 2021), it was found that waste and waste management were highly spoken of during the interviews with the key informants. From the interview transcripts, the word "Kaya" meaning waste in Thai, was highly spoken. Many of the key informants mentioned about possible reasons of the waste generation. For instance, the informant 5 expressed the feeling that mass tourists, one way or another, while minor contribution to the community, they may produce more litters.

"[tourist] tour buses are everywhere. When we ask where they go and what the community gains from the daily buses, the answer often revolves around waste.",
"The arrival of tourists consumes resources and creates economic and social gaps. Every tourism activity produces waste or garbage. (Informant 1)".

The interviews highlighted the challenges of dealing with waste in public tourist areas including beaches where locals put efforts to manage waste fall short. The discussion also points out issues such as the lack of efficient waste separation systems and the community's responsibility in managing the waste. As mentioned by the Informant 6

We separate our waste at home, but when the garbage truck comes, it's the local administrative organization, right? The question is, does our community have separate waste collection trucks? There's only one green truck, correct? But we've already sorted it at home—plastic bags, bottles, and wet food scraps. However, when the garbage truck comes to collect, it all goes into one truck anyway. By the time it reaches the incinerator, there's no separation.

The iterative interview transcribing also indicated a problem with waste management. For instance the Informant 2 shared that

The current problem we clearly see is waste management. Our waste incinerator used to handle 1,600 tons, but now one machine is broken, reducing capacity to 700 tons. One machine can burn 900 tons, but if it breaks, we need a budget to repair it. The urgent solution is to find funding to fix the 900-ton incinerator. However, the budgeting system in Thailand takes 2-3 years for projects, so by then, the problem will worsen, and the 700-ton machine might also break down, this is why the foundation and associations are trying to raise awareness in society about reducing waste. It starts with us producing less waste.

As such, it emphasizes the need for personal responsibility in waste reduction, including shifts from plastic to reusable alternatives. For instance, the informant 6,

"The issue of .. the shift from using plastic and foam to personal glass or similar alternatives really needs to start with the people."

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In addition, this finding is consistent with Joseph (2006) who addressed that sustainable waste management requires cooperation from all stakeholders to effectively address health and environmental issues. Access to appropriate technology and the involvement of communities and various organizations are essential to enhance waste management efficiency and create a better environment.

Insufficient Enforcement of Laws and Regulations

Similar to the findings from Ed & Ym(2020), the interviewee emphasizes the lack of stringent laws or enforcement regarding tourist numbers, construction, and environmental protection. The expansion of tourism infrastructure including hotels, sometimes violating local regulations on construction height and ecological impact, exacerbates the environmental degradation in Phuket. The interviewee suggests that stricter regulations, especially on limiting tourism and hotel expansion, could help mitigate these issues.

Limited of regulation enforcement in key tourist areas was discussed. Key informant 6 shared that "At national tourist attractions, we encounter several problems…there are no measures in place to regulate the number of tourists entering these attractions." However, with some limitations including,

> The main responsibility lies with the local municipality, but we must understand their limitations as well. They may not have enough staff and their budget is restricted. Moreover, there are no measures in place to control the number of tourists allowed into these areas. If we consider a scenario where the municipality decides to limit access by setting a quota, would anyone be able to accept that? (informant 6)

The interview discusses how enforcement of laws should be further strengthen, such as those regarding environmental regulations, impacts the deterioration of tourist sites. This includes mentions of overloaded tourist spots like Laem Phromthep, a scenic sunset spot in Phuket, which lack the rules and regulations to support large numbers of visitors.

Regarding the number of tourists coming in without screening and enforcement of regulations, Informant 1 also mentioned that this affected the financial situation of the government, leading to unnecessary loss of revenue.

> Part of the problem is the enforcement of laws, such as the collection of entry fees, which could be used to address various issues. For example, when tourists get sick or have accidents and need treatment at the hospital, no one pays for the medical costs. The embassies cannot cover these expenses either, which results in hospitals having to cover nearly 20 million baht in expenses each year.
>
> In conclusion, "When it comes to degraded tourist sites, we need to have clear measures in place, including obvious penalties. It shouldn't be vague; everyone need to follow laws, then we won't face these problems. (Informant 6).

Previous research (e.g., Amin, 2023; Ed & Ym, 2020; Fang et al, 1994)has concluded that insufficient enforcement of laws and regulations is a problem encountered in many countries worldwide. Key factors contributing to the failure of law enforcement include a lack of political will, insufficient resources, low public awareness, inconsistencies in legislation, poor management, and a lack of inter-agency cooperation. Improving the enforcement of environmental laws requires an increase in political will, adequate resource allocation,

heightened public awareness, and the establishment of collaboration between agencies and society.

Need for Improved Stakeholder Collaboration
There are repeated references to the importance of collaboration between local governments, communities, and businesses in managing tourism. For example, the speaker emphasizes the need for cooperation in managing beach cleanliness, where local residents, operators, and government agencies need to work together. Collaboration between local governments, communities, and businesses is identified as crucial for effective tourism management, such as waste cleanup efforts on beaches and addressing the needs of over-visited locations. For example,

> The second point is the collaboration from the local community whether it's local organizations, local government, or business owners coming together to take care of the area. For example, during the monsoon season, Nai Yang Beach was completely covered in trash. I mean, the park's staff alone can't manage the cleanup when debris washes up on the beach during storms. If the local administrative body, the residents, or business owners don't step in to help clean up, or if there aren't any volunteers to pitch in, the beach will just be overflowing with trash. So, can the staff of the park handle it alone? Definitely not. Considering the distance and the limited number of people and machinery they have, it's just not enough to take care of such a large beach area. (Informant 6)

Collaboration between the government, local community, private sector, and tourists is considered essential. The interviewee points out that currently, decisions are made without genuine input from the local community. To ensure sustainable tourism, the interviewee advocates for serious involvement of communities in the decision-making process, emphasizing a need for policies that support local benefits and control mass tourism's negative impacts. "If a law is enacted, you need to consult the community, involve them, and engage in serious democratic processes. (informant 5).". In particular to tourism industry, it is not about one key tourism stakeholder, it is about collaboration across stakeholders.

> Tourism can't be driven by just the government or the private sector alone; it requires collaboration among stakeholders. Local communities need to have a stake and participate in the process. Whether it involves the public or private sectors, any initiative in tourism should involve discussions with all relevant stakeholders. It's not just about regenerative tourism; every action in the tourism sector needs input from everyone involved. (Informant 4)

> If we integrate everything together—government, private sector, communities, and tourists—and collaborate on what the people of Phuket want, I believe this is the way forward. If we come together to understand the needs of the locals, the government can then announce guidelines for tourists that specify what is required to visit Phuket. This approach will be more sustainable and reliable because it incorporates the needs and desires of all four stakeholders. In the past, it has often been the government making these decisions without truly knowing if their policies meet the needs or ensure sustainability. (Informant 5)

In order to address environmental challenges and advance sustainable development, it is imperative that stakeholders build teamwork. Environmental management is improved when stakeholders with different viewpoints are involved. The stability and sustainability of a certification system are enhanced by cooperative efforts during development. For resource management and urban development, recognizing and removing obstacles to cooperation is crucial to improving teamwork and achieving sustainability objectives. Collaboration between stakeholders—which include the public, corporate, and community sectors—is necessary for development. Coordination, action implementation, and the pursuit of methodical development all depend on this cooperation. Infrastructure management—more especially, how to encourage cooperation amongst stakeholders with different viewpoints in the construction, maintenance, and repair of infrastructure—is the primary problem faced (Okada et al, 2006). In order to address shared environmental challenges, many stakeholder types frequently lack the motivation to participate in collaborative negotiations and have conversations. Stakeholders occasionally work together only to further their individual agendas, demonstrating little interest in holding group discussions to address common issues. (Bodin, 2017).

Growing Environmental Concerns

In recent years, the growing concern about environmental issues has garnered increased attention. This is largely due to the impacts of human activities on the environment. Consequently, sustainable development has emerged as a critical topic that requires responsible management and awareness. Efforts to change environmentally destructive behaviors over the long term have been unsuccessful. Necessary conditions may include increasing environmental concern and awareness of the ongoing impacts of environmental degradation for future generations.(Fransson & Gärling,1999).

The research adds to the literature in this aspect. The interview illustrates how environmental degradation is affecting Phuket's tourism, including issues with overcrowded areas, waste management, and insufficient infrastructure. The interviews suggested possible reasons for environment issues, which referred to overtourism. This highlights the effect that tourist numbers have on the environment as

> As cities grow, stress and pressure from environmental and economic factors increase, leading to problems like pollution. We've seen a rise in cancer cases in Phuket, and there's an increase in youth suicide due to depression. The overflowing waste, ineffective wastewater treatment, and declining water quality are also concerns. Seagrass is dying off, and we've lost 1,000 acres of forest in just five years. (Informant 1)

Environmental quality is seen as a priority for improvement. Environmental concerns are highlighted as the most urgent issue facing tourism in Phuket. The interview also ties environmental degradation to broader social problems, such as crime, which degrade the quality of life for locals. As mentioned

> No. 1 is environmental issues, number two is social issues, and number three is economic issues. We can't say that Phuket isn't a place for generating long-term income. When tourism doesn't provide benefits or causes harm, ultimately, it's the quality of life for the local people that gets destroyed. We can see that this leads to increased crime rates and more theft problems. (Informant 6)

Environmental degradation is a major concern, as discussed by the interviewee. Unregulated tourism and unchecked hotel construction have led to issues such as deforestation, erosion, and water pollution. The interviewee calls for policies that protect the natural environment, noting how nature thrived during the COVID-19 tourism break, which saw natural regeneration. Some excerpt reflects on the positive environmental recovery during the COVID-19 pandemic when fewer tourists visited Phuket, leading to the regeneration of natural resources like coral reefs and seagrass, showing the strain tourism places on the environment. As mentioned by key informant 5 "During COVID, in the four or five years without tourists, everything recovered. The beauty of nature in the sea has returned; the coral is regenerating, and the seagrass looks beautiful. Everything is beautiful, the beaches are gorgeous. When there are fewer people, nature thrives." To maintain this recovery, a reduction in tourist numbers and stricter land-use regulations are proposed.

5. Conclusions

This preliminary study investigating the circumstances in Phuket reveals critical insights into the current tourism landscape and its implications for regenerative tourism development. The findings illuminate four interconnected challenges that must be addressed to transition from conventional tourism towards a more regenerative model that not only sustains but enhances the destination's environmental, social, and economic systems.

The first finding highlights systematic failures in waste management infrastructure. The research reveals operational issues from collection to disposal, with waste incinerators operating at less than half capacity due to technical problems. This situation is exacerbated by mass tourism generating substantial waste without proportionate community benefits. While individual waste separation efforts exist, systemic barriers prevent effective municipal-level waste management.

Second, insufficient law enforcement and regulations emerge as a critical barrier. The research particularly highlights weaknesses in controlling tourist numbers at popular attractions and enforcing tourism infrastructure construction regulations. This inadequate enforcement has led to significant government revenue losses, particularly in tourist entry fees that could fund essential services such as tourist healthcare. The findings indicate multiple contributing factors, including limited staff resources, restricted budgets, and unclear enforcement mechanisms.

Third, the necessity for stakeholder collaboration is paramount. The findings demonstrate that current tourism management often lacks genuine local community participation and fails to effectively integrate all stakeholders' perspectives. The research suggests that sustainable tourism development requires more inclusive decision-making processes involving government agencies, local communities, private sector entities, and tourists. Notably, no single stakeholder group can effectively drive tourism development alone; collaborative efforts are essential for sustainable outcomes.

Finally, growing environmental concerns extend beyond typical tourism impacts. The research reveals disturbing environmental degradation trends, including the loss of 1,000 acres of forest within five years, declining water quality, and deteriorating marine ecosystems. Significantly, the study documents environmental recovery during the COVID-19 pandemic when tourist numbers decreased substantially, demonstrating the direct relationship between tourism pressure and environmental degradation.

These findings contribute significantly to the emerging discourse on regenerative tourism development and have important implications for Phuket's tourism future. The research

indicates that transitioning to regenerative tourism requires:

Enhanced infrastructure capacity and waste management systems Strengthened regulatory frameworks and enforcement mechanisms Improved stakeholder engagement and collaboration processes Comprehensive environmental protection and monitoring systems

This research supports the need for a more balanced approach to tourism development that considers environmental and social impacts alongside economic benefits. Future research could focus on developing specific mechanisms for implementing these recommendations and measuring their effectiveness in promoting sustainable tourism practices. The findings suggest that while Phuket faces significant challenges, they also present opportunities for transformation towards a more regenerative tourism model.

Future research should include comparative studies of regenerative tourism development in Phuket against other successful destinations. This can help identify best practices and strategies that can be adapted to Phuket's context. Further research should investigate the social impacts of regenerative tourism on local communities, such as job creation and economic development, to understand the long- term benefits that may arise.

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