

Sustaining A Destination Through Cultural Heritage Tourism

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Abstract

The youth tourist market has expanded dramatically in recent decades. Among various types of tourism, cultural heritage tourism is one of the motives for youth travelers as young tourists seek to explore different cultures in their travel experiences. In a culturally rich country like Thailand, cultural heritage tourism is one of the most significant ingredients and a great marketing tool that has the power to influence all other forms of tourism. Therefore, cultural heritage tourism can support culture and enhances other forms of tourism. Among a great number of tourists who are interested in historical heritage, youth tourists play an important dynamic role as they are cultural and environmental awareness. The youth travel segment, however, is composed of hundreds of millions of individuals who explicitly seek to learn, to explore, to be involved, and to make impact. Cultural heritage tourism can be considered as a core foundation for the sustainable tourism development of a country. This is especially necessary for youth tourists who, in the future, could be role models for responsible tourists and help conserve tourism resources. If they have knowledge and understanding of cultural heritage tourism and its contribution, this will encourage them to be determined in preserving tourism resources of the destination while travelling.

Keywords : cultural heritage tourism, youth tourists

Introduction

Recently, youth travel segment is increasing with a high number comparing to the world tourist population. In 2011, the Youth Travel segment accounted for a huge 20 percent of world international arrivals. At current rates of growth and contribution, Youth Travel is estimated to reach a remarkable 200,000,000 (WYSE, 2012). This number reveals that youth tourist is an important dynamic in tourism industry. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) defines the youth market as people between 16 and 25 years old who take a trip lasts at least one night's stay. The Youth Tourism Consortium of Canada expands this variation to 30 years old (Youth Tourism Consortium of Canada, 2004). Under this scope, even people that are 30 years old can be considered youth people.

Although youth travel has been an important cornerstone of the international travel market for several decades, it is only the recent explosive growth of youth population that has pushed this market into the spotlight. The importance of the youth tourism as a field of interest for policymakers and researchers was first internationally emphasized in November 1991 with the first World Tourism Organization (WTO) conference on youth tourism in Delhi (Richard & Wilson, 2004). The conference indicates that even though the significance of the youth and student market has been identified, there is limited research and hence there are difficulties in the identification of the youth tourists' role in the overall market. Traditional ways of gathering data concerning the profile of visitors do not distinguish between youths and adults, therefore as Carr (2002) argues there is no information as to the real significance of the youth market to overall world travel. Since then, interest in this market has

increased rapidly.

Among various types of tourism, cultural tourism is one of the motives for youth travelers as young tourists seek to explore different cultures in their travel experiences (Moisa, 2007). Previously, it has been widely acknowledged that the culture, heritage, and historical tourism segment have expanded at a rate higher than the growth of tourism worldwide. It is estimated that around 20 percent of all tourist trips incorporate some form of cultural, heritage, or historical activity; consequently, the size of the market can be estimated as being over 160 million trips per annum (Cultural Tours, 2010). In a culturally rich country like Thailand, cultural heritage tourism or visit of historical attractions, which is part of cultural tourism, is one of the most significant ingredients and a great marketing tool that has the power to influence all other forms of tourism.

Recently, the importance of cultural heritage tourism is significant; it provides great economic and social impacts, revitalizes destinations that would otherwise be forgotten or abandoned through time, and increases the demand for visitation to heritage sites which provide the resources for the expansion of conservation activities (McKercher & du Cros, 2002). Moreover, cultural heritage tourism can support culture and enhances other forms of tourism. Among a great number of tourists who are interested in historical heritage, youth tourists play an important dynamic role as they have special characteristics in traveling behaviors and involve in this type of tourism in a high number (Richard & Wilson, 2003). For the youth travel, cultural and environmental awareness and appreciation comes implicitly through travel experiences chosen-locations, accommodation, tours, and transport

methods. The youth travel segment, however, is composed of hundreds of millions of individuals who explicitly seek to learn, to explore, to be involved, and to make impact. And, importantly, these are not travelers interested in simply dabbling in ways of improving the world, they are insisting on being a real part of them.

The definition of cultural heritage tourism

Eventually, the term "cultural heritage" is sometimes broad and difficult to define. Many researchers and educators have different ideas in explaining this term. The heritage could be claimed that it is something that belongs to the past and is inherited by future generations, it could encompass assets, facts, and evidence of previous generations (Boukas, 2008). Cultural heritage tourism is generally defined as type of tourism to experience the places and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present of the host communities. These include monuments, temples, palaces, and irreplaceable historical sites, architecture works which are of outstanding universal value from the historical aesthetic, ethnological, or anthropological point of view (UNESCO, 1972; National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2009; Cultural Tours, 2010). The scope of what is counted as cultural heritage also supported by Lowenthal (2005) who states that cultural heritage includes the buildings and engineering works, arts and crafts, languages and traditions, that humans themselves have created out of nature's raw material. However, the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICMS) has different way to define the definition of heritage since it includes tangible asset; buildings, temples, palaces, monuments, and intangible assets; belief,

way of life, language (McKercher & du Cros, 2002).

In short, cultural heritage refers to any kind of manmade constructions as well as people belief which can acknowledge the visitors regarding the civilization history and stories of the previous generations. However, the recent paper focuses on cultural heritage in the form of historical heritage sites only because in countries with rich cultural heritage resources like Thailand, cultural heritage tourism has always played an important role as one of the elements in tourism product of the country. In this sense, culture heritage is a dynamic resource that can be planned and promoted to attract tourists to a destination (Boukas, 2008).

The importance of cultural heritage tourism and youth tourists

However, there has been some progress in the area of young tourists' behavior and tourism in cultural destinations (McKercher & du Cros, 2002). Generally, there is a lack of data concerning actual youth tourists' perceptions in cultural heritage sites. Several people think that cultural heritage tourism is preserved only for older people (Fraser, 2001). According to previous studies, it should be noted that young people are also important consumers of culture, and greater research effort is required to understand youth culture consumption (Scottish Executive et al, 2001). Studies of young tourists are clearly important and should receive more attention because they are tomorrow's adult visitors. The travel experiences they have as young travelers will form their future perceptions towards cultural heritage sites, which is crucial in raising cultural importance awareness, that is one of the key factors in future tourism industry.

Since youth tourism and cultural heritage play an important role in the tourism industry as mentioned, many studies have been conducted in various areas. Tourism Australia (2008) studied the international youth market's perception of Australia and the various experiences on offer. The study revealed that nature, culture, and coastal lifestyle experiences appeal to youth travelers more than other forms of tourism. This finding is supported by Richards (2006) who studied and compared the attitudes of young people of different age towards the destination country and found that rich culture was rated as one of the top reasons to travel to exact countries. Richards & Wilson (2004) gathered information on the youth and student independent traveler market and pointed out that the most popular activities were visiting historical sites and monuments. Furthermore, several studies have compared international and American college students regarding their travel behavior (Field, 1999) and travel motivations (Kim & Jorganam, 2002). However, there is very few, if not at all, study that has investigated youth tourists' perceptions specifically towards cultural heritage tourism.

At present, heritage tourism is most commonly used and referred to as tourists' activities in heritage places without looking at the actual relationships between a site's attributes and the tourists (Swarbrooke, 1994). To date, youth tourists regard themselves as the mass visitors to the heritage destination (Simanjuntak & Said, 2010). Many culture related activities are preferred by youth and attract them to the destination. Visiting the heritage attractions as a mass tourism tends to bring a disruption and deterioration of the heritage sites and environment. Furthermore, as mass visitors, youth tend to aggravate the problem of carrying

capacity which adversely affects the sustainability of the cultural heritage of the destinations. It should be noted that encouraging young tourists to be aware of and responsible for the preservation of heritage tourism destination is important (Frey, 2008). By educating them about cultural heritage conservation in order to raise the level of youth's awareness towards responsible tourism, youth tourists are expected to play a great role in traveling responsibly and maintaining the heritage destinations.

Trends of cultural heritage tourism in Thailand

Like many countries in Asia, Thailand is well known for its unique and rich cultures, especially in terms of cultural heritage sites. Heritage areas are described as dynamic regional initiatives that build connections between people, their places of residence, and their history (Daly, 2003). Several places in Thailand have been awarded to be World Heritage by UNESCO such as Ayutthaya Historical Park and Suthothai Historical Park. Since then, heritage sites become the second tourism product of Thailand in the views of tourists other than beautiful natures; sea, sand, and sun (Siwasak, 2009). However, it is found that many Thai tourists, especially young tourists, do not understand the importance of these value ancient remains (Ayotthaya Technology Institute, 2011). As a result, some of those heritage sites were disregarded and overlooked without proper maintenance. Being left in poor state, these cultural heritage attractions lose its attractiveness and the number of tourists visiting these sites has decreased. In addition, this negative impact also affects the society since the history of these heritage sites will be forgotten and

the importance to acknowledge it will be ignored. Therefore, to urge youth tourists, especially Thai tourists, to understand and be aware of the importance of historical heritage sites is crucial as they will be the strong force to help preserve and pass on the pride of the nation to the next generations.

The Challenges of Heritage Tourism relating to Youth Tourism

In countries with rich cultural resources like Thailand, culture has always played an important role as one of the elements in tourism product of the country. Culture, either as a motivation or as an attraction, brings tourists to certain destinations. As discussed earlier, heritage tourism plays an important role in attracting tourists to a heritage destination. Therefore, it is possible that this type of tourism will become major challenges in many dimensions.

The economic challenge:

As youth tourism can create huge number of national revenues, a great number of people in various countries worldwide are working in this branch. It should also be noted that in many countries, tourism is the second source of income after agriculture. There are two other economic dimensions: the high costs of infrastructure and the difficulty of guaranteeing full-time jobs. In addition, to create jobs and revenues, tourism often increases the recreational opportunities in the community (Hood et.al, 2005). In this dimension, If the destination is able to provide the tourism facilities to meet the requirements of youth tourists who tend to travel more frequently, for longer periods, and spend more money (Richards & Wilson, 2003), it should be able

to increase the number of tourists stably in a long term. Moreover, it is clear that more job opportunities, especially in tourism segment such as hotel, restaurant, tour operator, souvenir shop etc., are also to be increasing. This will increase the total income of the community which leads to the higher standard of living in term of infrastructures and community services.

The social challenge:

Recently, due to the effects of globalization, it is found that modern world has somehow lessened the opportunity for travelers to experience attractions that are truly unique (Schumann, 2010). There has been a standardization of facilities that has enabled mass tourism by providing travelers with necessary familiarity, as expresses by Cohen (1972: p. 172)

"As a result, countries become interchangeable in the tourist's mind. Whether he is looking for good beaches, restful forests, or old cities, it becomes relatively unimportant to him where these happen to be found"

The statement above revealed that destination marketers often adopt a mass tourism orientation with a desire to maintain a steady flow of visitors over the years. However, visitors today are no longer interested in the generic characteristics emphasized by destination managers. It is increasingly evident that new-sophisticated consumers seek authentic and unique experiences (Buhalis, 2000). This is obviously a major challenge by giving a majority of young people access to holidays and travelling - for the good of the entire community.

The educational challenge:

Learning different cultures is very valuable. An essential aspect is the discovery of a new

environment, different culture and unknown places. It is recognized that mass tourism has never taken into account this dimension. It is time to urge the youths to become aware of the importance of these values and set up a good role model for the following generations. The strategies tourism planners and managers use to educate young tourists regarding the heritage tourism while travelling and their outcome must be analyzed whether they are effective and suitable or not. If it is effective, it may be used as a model for other areas and will raise awareness to preserve the heritage at the same time.

The marketing challenge:

Culture is one of the factors that attracts people to certain destinations. Therefore, marketing of cultural and heritage destinations is an important tool for global tourist industry. McKercher and du Cros (2002: 107) argue that *"The use of marketing approaches to asset management provides a number of benefits for cultural heritage managers, whereas the failure to do so presents a number of treats to the sustainability on the asset"*. Misiura (2006) indicates that the marketing of a heritage destination involves the identification of the needs and wants of the visitors, but under the constraint that the heritage destination or historic property must be protected. Misiura continues by arguing that the effective marketing strategy in heritage destination is a combination of stimulating and demand through meeting its needs and wants. Smith (2003) adds that many destinations have selective marketing strategies in order for the tourism development to be small-scale and appropriate. Furthermore, Smith indicates that marketing is also used for attracting a certain profile of people.

However, Smith concludes that the balance is very delicate because tourists who spend great money on holiday sometimes lack of cultural awareness. One should always bear in mind that culture is a significant resource of tourism which attracts millions of tourists from all over the world. Therefore, to make a decision about how to market and promote cultural destinations according to tourists' demand of culture attractions is considered to be very important as it can predict the sustainability and development of such heritage sites in the future.

Conclusions

Cultural heritage tourism can be considered as a core foundation for the sustainable tourism development of a country. This is especially necessary for youth tourists who, in the future, could be role models for responsible tourists and help conserve tourism resources. Although there have been extensive cultural heritage tourism studies in Thailand, information concerning youth tourists' attitudes, both international and domestic, and their tourism experiences are still limited. Consequently, there is a need for further exploration in this area; particularly as one of the most important elements for culture and heritage development is "people" either tourists or host locales as regarded as one of the key factors for the success of development (Walailak University, 1997). If they have knowledge and understanding of cultural heritage tourism and its contribution, this will encourage them to be determined in preserving tourism resources of the destination. To urge them to feel responsible, especially young tourists, it is essential to provide sufficient knowledge and information to create the required awareness and understanding of the values of cultural heritage.

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