

## Local Community Participation in the Conserve Candle Festival, a Case Study of Ubon Ratchathani Province, Thailand

Aree Naipinit<sup>1</sup>, Thirachaya Maneenetr<sup>1</sup>, Thongphon Promsaka Na Sakolnakorn<sup>2</sup>, Chidchanok Churngchow<sup>3</sup> & Patarapong Kroeksakul<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Management Science, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, Thailand

<sup>2</sup> Institute for Peace Studies, Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai Campus, Thailand

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Education, Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus, Thailand

<sup>4</sup> Faculty of Environmental Culture and Ecotourism, Srinakharinwirot University, Bangkok, Thailand

Correspondence: Aree Naipinit, Faculty of Management Science, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, 40002, Thailand. E-mail: arekul@kku.ac.th

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### Abstract

The objective of this study was to examine local community participation in the conserve candle festival for sustainability, and to study development guidelines for local community participation in the festival. We used quantitative and qualitative methods. For the qualitative method we provided 400 questionnaires and analyzed them using mean, standard deviation, and Chi-Square tests. For the qualitative approach, we used an invited focus group, including an academician, a businessman, government agencies, and a local philosopher, to discuss and identify development guidelines, and we performed data analysis using descriptive analysis. The results indicate that local community participation in the conserve candle festival for sustainability is important, since the conservation and restoration of the Ubon Ratchathani candle festival is a cultural tourism attraction. However, the local government invited residents to a candle festival meeting at a low level (S.D. = .828); participants in planning (S.D. = .785); had knowledge and understood history (S.D. = .794); community was subsidized from government (S.D. = .811), community acknowledged conservation and restoration (S.D. = .923); government emphasis on community participation in conservation and restoration (S.D. = 1.06); and community participation in the transfer of historical and traditional knowledge to the public (S.D. = .756). The guidelines for local community participation in the conserve candle festival for sustainability iterates six goals: 1) transfer knowledge of local culture to local youth; 2) encourage the museum to be the center of local cultural learning; 3) print pictures and descriptions of the candle festival in student notebooks; 4) transfer knowledge of the candle sculptors and carvers to youths; 5) the provincial government should support local philosophers in candle sculpture and transfer their skills and knowledge to local youth; 5) encourage the establishment of the temple as a candle festival learning center; and 6) encourage community enterprises to produce goods and products that communicate the candle festival

**Keywords:** community participation, conserve, candle festival, ubon ratchathani

### 1. Introduction

The development of cultural tourism as a generator of income and a recognized form of tourism has emerged as an objective of both heritage institutions and tourist operators across Thailand and around the world. Challenging economic times have compelled cultural and heritage sites to explore ways and means to increase attendance levels and self-generated revenues and to control operating expenditures. Cultural festivals in Thailand are famous around the world; for example, the Songkarn festival is the water festival and the Loy Krathong festival is a festival when candle-lit offerings are floated in the rivers. The candle festival at Ubon Ratchathani province in northeast of Thailand is one festival that is recognized by local and international tourists. The candle festival is the region's largest religious ceremony. It is celebrated yearly by the city on Asalha Bucha Day and Khao Phansa (Buddhist Lent) Day. The ceremony is held at Thung Si Muang and Chaturamuk Pavillion, a park in the middle of the city, which is decorated and then candles are exhibited in the evening. On the same evening, there are small processions with lighted candles at several temples (Naipinit & Maneenetr, 2013).

However, the candle festival in Ubon Ratchathani faces many problems, including a lack of financial support from the local provincial government; high production costs (approximately 13 000 USD per a big candle for one temple, while the government supported 1,600 USD per temple); and while candles are produced by sculptors and carvers, business agencies and the provincial government do not support them, so fewer people want to become carvers and there is a risk in losing local wisdom (ASTV Manager Online, 2006). In addition, Surapon Saipan (2013), Ubon Ratchathani's Governor, explained the threat to the candle festival, as the Tourism Authority of Thailand cut their budget from 340 000 USD last year to 10 000 USD for 2013. The provincial government cannot support the budget for the temple to produce a candle. Other problems include the lack of community participation to donate money for the festival's survival; and local sculptors and carvers have many, sometimes more lucrative jobs at candle festivals in other provinces, reducing their ability to contribute to the Ubon Ratchathani festival.

Ubon Ratchathani's candle festival has a long history of more than 100 years; however, under globalization, this festival faces many problems as we mention above. In this study, our research questions are: 1) What are the problems of local community participation in the conserve a candle festival for sustainability in Ubon Ratchathani? 2) What are the development guidelines for local community participation in the conserve candle festival for sustainability?

## 2. Objectives

- 1) To study the local community participation in the conserve candle festival for sustainability;
- 2) To study the development guidelines for local community participation in the conserve candle festival for sustainability.

## 3. Research Methodology

To meet the stated objectives, we employed a mixed-method approach.

### 3.1 To Study the Local Community Participation in the Conserve Candle Festival for Sustainability

For quantitative data collection, the participants were tourism business owners and local residents who live in Muang district, Ubon Ratchathani province. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: 1) demographic information, including sex, age, educational level, marital status, and income; and 2) opinions on local community participation in the conserve candle festival for sustainability. The questionnaire used a four-point Likert scale and offered four answers: strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. We interpreted the completed questionnaires by dividing the question scale into a 4-point scale, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Significance of points

Average scores	Level of Significance
1.00-1.49	Lowest
1.50-2.49	Low
2.50-3.49	High
3.50-4.00	Higher

To calculate the sampling size, Taro Yamane's formula (1973) was used, and a 95% confidence level was selected for the following formula:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2} \dots\dots\dots (1)$$

.....in which

.....n = sampling size

.....N = population size

.....e = level of precision of the confidence level of 95%

According to data from the Ubon Ratchathani Provincial Public Health Office (2010), the Muang district, Ubon Ratchathani province, has a population of 216 683. Using Yamane's (1973) formula, the researchers calculated

the sampling size as 400. The statistical analysis of data used the mean, standard deviation, and Chi-Square tests.

### *3.2 To Study the Development Guidelines for Local Community Participation in the Conserve Candle Festival for Sustainability*

To study the development guidelines for local community participation in the conserve candle festival for sustainability, the researchers used a qualitative approach. Ten experts, including an academician, a businessman, government agencies, and a local philosopher, were invited to a focus group to discuss appropriate guidelines. Data analysis was performed using descriptive analysis. In the study by Promsaka Na Sakolnakorn et al. (2013), the authors suggested that before formulating any guidelines or development plans, it is necessary to develop a local consensus and involve residents in every step of planning.

## **4. Area of Study**

Ubon Ratchathani is a province in northeast Thailand, 592 kilometers from Bangkok. It has an area of 16 112 square kilometers and a population of about 1.8 million people. Almost all who live in the province are Buddhists. The province shares borders with the Kingdom of Cambodia and The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Ubonratchathani province, 2013) as illustrated in Figure 1.

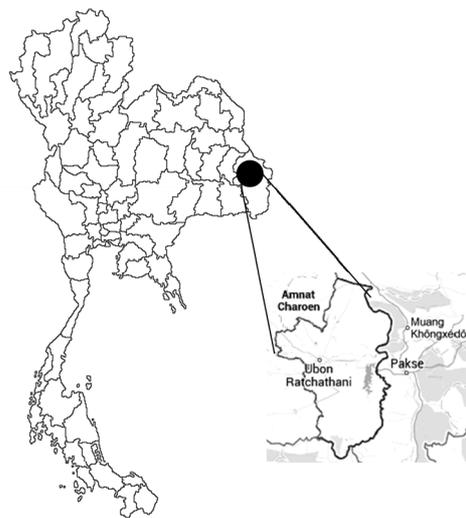


Figure 1. Study site

## **5. Literature Reviews**

### *5.1 History of the Ubon Ratchathani Candle Festival*

Budsaba et al. (2011) report that the history of the candle festival is related to monk activity. For three months during the rainy season, Thai monks are supposed to remain inside their temples. This period is called Pansa. The Lord Buddha commanded that monks should remain inside so that they did not step on the new rice shoots that were growing at this time. The period begins with Khao Pansa, which marks the beginning of the Buddhist lent. If monks are away on their pilgrimages during this time they must find shelter inside and may stay in a place other than their temple. According to traditional stories, Buddhist Lent Day began when villagers complained to the Lord Buddha about a group of monks who had walked through their young rice field. Most Thai holidays represent a significant date in the Buddhist calendar and, although ordained monks mostly practice the Buddhist lent, the start of the festival is recognized by all Thais on July 27<sup>th</sup>. Thai people are understanding of the monks' commitment to Buddhist Lent and commonly offer provisions such as towels, dry food, and blankets. This offering also includes candles, and therefore the origin of the candle festival can be seen. Candles were offered because, in the past there was no other form of light in the temples and the monks could not go outside for fresh supplies. There is also a secondary, figurative meaning of the candlelight as knowledge and as such, the modern candle festival symbolizes enlightenment.

The Ubon Ratchathani candle festival is the most elaborate, famous, and recognized example of the candle festival and is a major event for resident and tourists. Giant candles are taken through the town, with each candle representing a local temple, district, or other institution. Some candles are also accompanied by local artwork or

sculptures in wood or wax. The candle parade takes place on the morning of Khao Pansa. The people responsible for their creation drive the candles through the city on floats. Those accompanying the candle float are normally dancers or musicians in traditional dress. The festival also includes feasting and games.

### *5.2 Cultural Tourism*

Cultural tourism has become recognized as an important agent of economic and social change. As Richards and Munsters (2010) reported, cultural tourism is one of the oldest forms of travel and still continues to be a mainstay of the tourism industry in most part of the world. However, the tourism segment that most directly relates to the cultural routes is cultural tourism. Cultural tourism essentially involves visits to cultural attractions and events by culturally motivated people (Richards, 2011), and cultural tourism involves the movement of persons to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence, with the intention to gather new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs (Richards, 1996).

The European Association Historic Town & Region (2006) reported that cultural tourism is important to conserving and realizing the value of our heritage. It also enables cultural exchange and encourages cultural diversity to flourish. It is a route to individual personal fulfillment and a major creator of jobs and investment. Tourism, however, is a multi-faceted industry and one that has both local and global environmental implications - all of which bring challenges and opportunities. Reconciling the potential conflicts between promoting both tourism and sustainability is a major policy challenge for the EU, the Council of Europe, and for the leadership of historic towns and cities. However, the association produces a guideline to show how cultural tourism can be developed to realize its economic and social potential but in a more sustainable way.

### *5.3 Local Festivals and Tourism*

The global market is changing tourists' consumption behaviors and has broadly impacted two types of tourism. In the past, tourists visited natural attractions, such as seashores, waterfalls, mountains, and caves, to observe natural phenomena, and they also visited manmade sites, such as Buddhist temples, castles, palaces, and old buildings to appreciate their historic and aesthetic value. As people become wealthier and transportation improves, more tourists come to the sites visited by others in the past (Galvani, 2005). Today there are several types of alternative tourism (D'mello, 2008). The local festival is one instrument for tourism development that has increased in recent years, and Felsenstein and Fleischer (2003) reported that local festivals are increasingly being used to promote tourism and boost the regional economy. In some instances, time-honored existing local cultural or religious events have been revived or repackaged as tourism events; in other cases new festivals have been invented and promoted for the singular purpose of drawing new visitors to a city or region. Hunyadi et al. (2006) presented cultural events concentrated in a few days (or weeks) that have been known throughout the entire history of humankind. At the beginning, these events were almost exclusively of a religious, ritual nature. Somborness and solemnity characterized them (if passion plays are considered, for example), just as they characterize today's festivals. However, the large-scale events of our age unquestionably inherited much more than this from the ancient joyful celebrations of the end of winter or the end of a fast.

### *5.4 Perspectives on Community Participation in Tourism*

Feighery (2002) reported on the perspectives of community participation in tourism despite (or perhaps because of) the increasing economic, political and cultural impact of globalization. The literature on tourism planning and development and the report proposed a range of recommendations. Interested individuals and groups respond, and plans may be altered or modified in light of such local opinions. However, such strategies and responses are likely to exclude large sections of the local population who may not be able or willing to articulate their views regarding tourism development and relation to the problem. In addition, there is a need to discover what ordinary worldviews or social representations of tourism are held by individuals and how these may be socially shared among members of the communities. In attempting to investigate the problem, the following questions arise: 1) What social representations of tourism, if any, are articulated by members of the community? 2) What is the level and content of tourism knowledge contained within such representations? 3) How might such tourism knowledge influence the development of rural tourism in the future?

## **6. Results**

### *6.1 The Local Community Participation in the Conserve Candle Festival for Sustainability*

Table 2 shows the result of the local community participation in the conserve candle festival for sustainability.

Table 2. Participation of local communities in the conservation and restoration of ubon ratchathani candle festival to be a cultural tourism attraction (n = 400) by item

Item	Participation of local communities				Total (%)	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	Interpretation
	highest	high	low	lowest				
Local Government invited residents to a candle festival meeting.	6.7	38.3	39.2	15.8	100	2.36	.828	low
Participate in planning for conservation of the candle festival.	6.7	34.2	46.7	12.5	100	2.35	.785	low
Have knowledge and understand the history of the candle festival.	1.7	25.8	42.5	30.0	100	1.99	.794	low
Participate in community activities related to the candle festival.	15.0	51.7	26.7	6.7	100	2.75	.791	high
Local government has announced news about the candle festival.	25.0	39.2	30.8	5.0	100	2.84	.860	high
Your community has activities related to the candle festival.	28.3	60.0	10.8	0.8	100	3.16	.635	high
Local government provides opportunities to get involved with the candle festival in your community.	19.2	60.8	18.3	1.7	100	2.98	.667	high
People in your community go to see the candle festival.	14.2	54.2	23.3	8.3	100	2.74	.804	high
Community participation in knowledge transfer to the public in the history and tradition of the candle festival.	2.5	8.3	24.2	65.0	100	1.48	.756	lowest
Community was subsidized from the government for the candle festival.	5.0	7.5	25.8	61.7	100	1.54	.811	low
Community acknowledges the conservation and restoration of the candle festival for a long duration.	5.8	15.0	25.8	53.3	100	1.73	.923	low
Government emphasis on community participation in the conservation and restoration of the candle festival.	16.7	25.8	29.2	28.3	100	2.31	1.06	low
People in your community transfer their knowledge about the candle festival to youth.	40.0	43.3	10.0	6.7	100	3.17	.863	high
Youth in your community participate in the candle festival.	29.2	49.2	16.7	5.0	100	3.03	.814	high
Educational institutions have participated in the candle festival.	27.5	60.0	10.8	1.7	100	3.13	.660	high
<b>Total</b>						<b>2.50</b>	<b>.803</b>	<b>high</b>

Table 2 shows the participation of local communities in the conservation and restoration of the Ubon Ratchathani candle festival to be a cultural tourism attraction. Interpretation of the information from the highest level to the lowest level afterward as follows:

The community is related to the candle festival at a high level (average = 2.75, S.D. = .791). Local government has announced news about the candle festival at a high level (average = 2.84, S.D. = .860). The community has activities related to the candle festival at a high level (average = 3.16, S.D. = .635). Local government provides

opportunities to get involved with the candle festival at a high level (average = 2.98, S.D. = .667). People in the community go to see the candle festival at a high level (average = 2.74, S.D. = .804). People in the community transfer their knowledge about the candle festival to the youth at a high level (average = 3.17, S.D. = .863). Youth in the community participate in activities related to the candle festival at a high level (average = 3.03, S.D. = .814). Educational institutions participate in the candle festival at a high level (average = 3.13, S.D. = .660)

The local government invited residents to a candle festival meeting at a low level (average = 2.36, S.D. = .828), and participation in planning for conservation of the candle festival was at a low level (average = 2.35, S.D. = .785). Those who have knowledge and understand the history of the candle festival was at a low level (average = 1.99, S.D. = .794). The community received government subsidies for the candle festival was at a low level (average = 1.54, S.D. = .811). Community acknowledged conservation and restoration of the candle festival for long duration at a low level (average = 1.73, S.D. = .923). Government emphasis on community participation in conservation and restoration of the candle festival was at a low level (average = 2.31, S.D. = 1.06). Finally, community participation in the transfer of historical and traditional knowledge to the public was at the lowest level (average = 1.48, S.D. = .756).

## *6.2 Development Guidelines for Local Community Participation in the Conserve Candle Festival for Sustainability*

Researchers collected data from the focus group discussion. The researchers invited ten participants: an academician, a businessman, government agencies, and a local philosopher to discuss and identify such development guidelines.

### *6.2.1 Transfer Knowledge of Local Culture to Local Youth*

All local government administrations in Ubon Ratchathani should support academic institutions, such as primary schools, high schools, and local universities to teach about the local cultural festival of Ubon Ratchathani (including a history of the candle festival). In addition, family is also an important way to learn more about the candle festival history.

### *6.2.2 Encourage the Museum to Be the Center of Local Cultural Learning*

Government should give importance to the local museum and support an effort to set up a room devoted to the culture and history of the candle festival. In addition, it should set up a provincial policy to encourage students in primary schools, high schools, and universities to visit the museum (almost no academic institution in Thailand stresses the importance of bringing students to visit museums).

### *6.2.3 Print Pictures and Descriptions of the Candle Festival in Student Notebooks*

The Ubon Ratchathani Educational Service Area Office should set up policies to encourage schools in the local area to print pictures and descriptions of the candle festival in student notebooks.

### *6.2.4 Transfer Knowledge about the Candle Sculptors and Carvers to Youth*

The provincial government should support the sculptors in transferring their skill and knowledge to local youth in Ubon Ratchathani. In addition, the provincial administration and local organizations should provide financial support for the learning center.

### *6.2.5 Encourage the Establishment of the Temple as a Candle Festival Learning Center*

In Thailand, the temple is a center of mind. Many people go to the temple for prayers, donations, Buddhist activities, and to listen to doctrine from monks. So, local government should set up the temple to be a learning center that conveys knowledge about the history, activities, and value of the candle festival to the monks, who will, in turn, transfer this knowledge to Buddhist people.

### *6.2.6. Encourage Community Enterprises to Produce Goods and Products That Communicate the Candle Festival*

Local government should encourage community enterprises to produce goods and products that communicate the candle festival; for example, printed candle festival shirts, decorations from candle materials, and designed goods and products as symbols of the candle festival. In addition, local government should support community enterprises in marketing efforts, such as a marketing channel, selling places, and advertising.

## **7. Conclusion**

In this study we have researched the problems and outlined development guidelines to conserving the Ubon Ratchathani candle festival in northeast Thailand. We used a mixed method to study the festival site. The history of the festival is related to monk activity. We found that: 1) Most of the community felt related to the candle festival (average = 2.75, S.D. = .791), 2) the local government has announced a lot of news about the candle

festival (average = 2.84, S.D. = .860), 3) the community has many activities related to the festival (average = 3.16, S.D. = .635), 4) local government provides many opportunities to get involved with it (average = 2.98, S.D. = .667) 5) many people in the community go to see it (average = 2.74, S.D. = .804), 6) many of them tell younger community members about it (average = 3.17, S.D. = .863), 7) those younger members also often participate in it (average = 3.03, S.D. = .814) and 8) educational institutions often participate in it (average = 3.13, S.D. = .660). However, the local government invited few residents to conservation meetings (average = 2.36, S.D. = .828); locals rarely plan for conservation of the festival (average = 2.35, S.D. = .785); few know and understand its history (average = 1.99, S.D. = .794); the government offers few subsidies (average = 1.54, S.D. = .811); the community rarely acknowledges conservation (average = 1.73, S.D. = .923); the government rarely emphasizes conservation and restoration of (average = 2.31, S.D. = 1.06); and the community very rarely informs the public of the candle festival's history and traditions (average = 1.48, S.D. = .756). We had six recommendations to foster local participation in the conservation of the candle festival: 1) teach local youth about local culture, 2) encourage the museum to be the center of local cultural learning, 3) print pictures and descriptions of the candle festival in student notebooks, 4) teach local youth about candle sculptors and carvers, 5) encourage the establishment of the temple as a candle festival learning center and 6) encourage community enterprises to produce goods and products about the candle festival.

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