

A SWOT Analysis of Tourism Development in Khon Kaen, Thailand

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in tourism development in the city of Khon Kaen, Thailand. We performed in-depth interviews with 21 key participants, and we conducted a focus group by inviting eight participants to discuss the potential strengths and weaknesses in tourism development in Khon Kaen. We then performed a SWOT analysis and content analysis to analyze the data. As a result, we determined that problems and threats that affect tourism development in Khon Kaen require attention because tourism could generate a large amount of income. Because Khon Kaen has many opportunities and strengths that should attract tourists, local government agencies should position notice signs concerning conservation at tourism attractions and promote awareness of recycling among residents. Agencies need to provide education on the value of recycling and encourage reusing recyclable materials. In addition, this research will aid the local government in understanding how to develop a province-wide strategic plan and provide guidance to policymakers on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of tourism in cities that are similar Khon Kaen.

Keywords: SWOT analysis, tourism development, Khon Kaen

1. Introduction

Tourism involves traveling away from home for rest and satisfaction (Kelly, 1986). The tourism industry is now growing rapidly and is very important in improving a country's economic growth (Szivas, Riley & Airey, 2003). In fact, the tourism industry is boosting economic growth in many countries, as it helps countries by distributing income to residents, stimulating the manufacturing sector, and enabling the country's resources to provide the maximum amount of benefit (Suwan, 1996). Therefore, tourism planning and development are very important because strong tourism plans and policies lead to sustainability in tourism (Wanhill, 1994).

In Thailand, tourism activities are boosting economic growth and economic activities in many regions, and many local governments are using tourism policy to boost their economic growth and raise income for local people and local businesses (Sakolnakorn, 2013, p. 3). Tourism is essential to the country's revenue largely because it attracts more foreign income than other industry sectors (Ministry of Tourism and Sport, 2010). However, tourism is facing some complex issues. For example, the study of Nguangchaiyapoom, et al. (2012) suggested that the local management of tourism practices is an important government concern because the government is currently providing practice recommendations and knowledge only to a limited number of people.

Khon Kaen is a major city in northeastern Thailand that attracts many travelers who visit and sightsee. The city has the potential to serve as a center of tourism in the region. Khon Kaen's suitable location in the center of the region boosts its standing as the center of tourism and service. Many activities and businesses are related to the service sector, including shopping malls, hotels, restaurants, night markets, and MICE (Meetings, Incentive Travel, Conventions, Exhibitions) activities. However, Khon Kaen faces problems such as traffic jams, high cost of travel, and a lack of participation among stakeholders in tourism activities (Kantawateera et al., 2013).

In this paper, we have formulated the following research question: What are the strengths, weaknesses,

opportunities, and threats of tourism development in Khon Kaen? We hope that the results of this paper will provide guidelines for developing tourism in the city and a framework for academicians during the development of future research projects on tourism.

1.1 Objective

The objective of this study is to examine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of tourism development in Khon Kaen.

1.2 Literature Review

The tourism policy of Thailand includes cultural protection and community participation, thereby increasing the sustainability of tourism (Watanasawas, 2011), because the community history is the one factor or draw in the decision of tourists to visit; thus, it is related to community tourism (Tepsing & Sakolnakorn, 2011). Tourism plays an important role in the economic and social development of the country. Fyall, Garrod and Leask (2003) explained that an increase in the number of tourists is linked to the management of tourism facilities, services, and environmental management. Anwar (2006) explained that infrastructures like public transportation, communications systems, and water and electrical systems will provide comfort for visitors in a touristic region. Smith (2003) suggested that the management of tourism is very important in sustaining tourism and the environment.

Tourism in Thailand has many problems, including a lack of communication systems, a dual-standard pricing system for Thai people and foreigners, and poor English language skills (Walsh & Techavimol, 2006). Promsaka Na Sakolnakorn and Naipinit (2011) disclosed seven factors that affect sustainable tourism management in Phuket: 1) degradation of natural resources, 2) traffic jams, 3) tax policies, 4) travel costs, 5) labor issues, 6) waste management, and 7) crime. In addition, Promsaka Na Sakolnakorn et al. (2013) suggested that the policy guidelines for tourism development in Phuket should necessitate that government agencies involved in tourism policy focus on several aspects: 1) the necessities of daily life, 2) security and access, 3) cultural tourism management, 4) conservation of natural resources and the environment, 5) public services, 6) waste management, and 7) the public transportation systems. In addition, Page (2003, p. 276) suggested including in public policies immigration policies, tourist visa regulations, and all policies that support tourism activities and increase the number of tourists. The conceptual framework is shown in Figure 2.

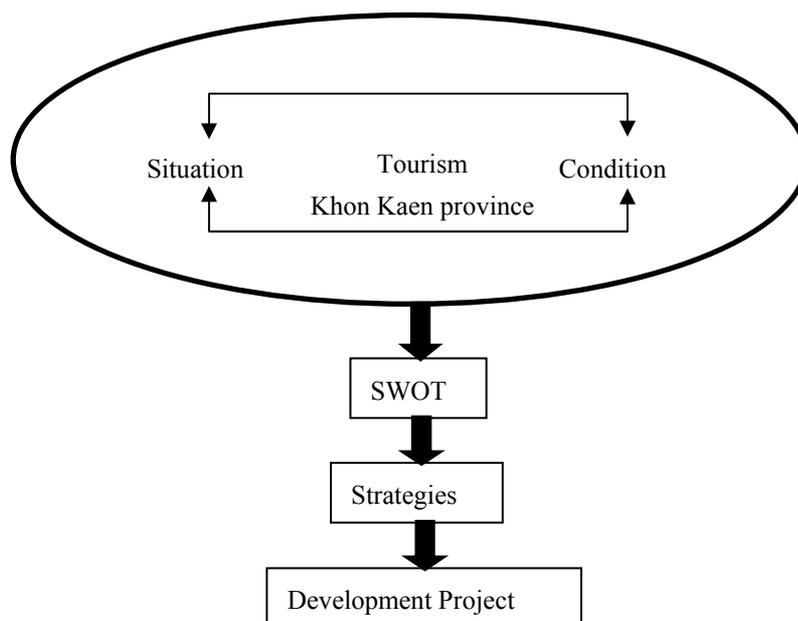


Figure 2. Conceptual framework

2. Method

This study was conducted between March and July of 2013. We held in-depth interviews with 21 key participants, including government agencies, business owners, and local people involved in tourism activities. In

addition, we led focus group discussions by inviting eight people, including two government agency employees, three local people, and three tourism business owners, to discuss the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of tourism development in Khon Kaen. We also performed a SWOT analysis and a content analysis to analyze the data.

2.1 Location of Study

Khon Kaen province, at latitudes 15°-17° north and longitudes 101°-103° east, is an area characterized by land that is at higher elevations than the central region, with altitudes of about 100-200 meters above sea level. The area consists of rolling topography and covers 10,885.99 square kilometers (1,088,599 hectares). It has a population of 1,766,066 residents and 534,715 households (Khon Kaen Government, 2013). Most residents of the province are Buddhist, and they speak the Isaan language. Isaan is the collective name for the dialects of the Lao language, which is spoken in Thailand. It is spoken by approximately 20 million people who live in and/or come from the northeastern region of Thailand (Kroeksakul et al., 2011). The location of the study is shown in Figure 1.

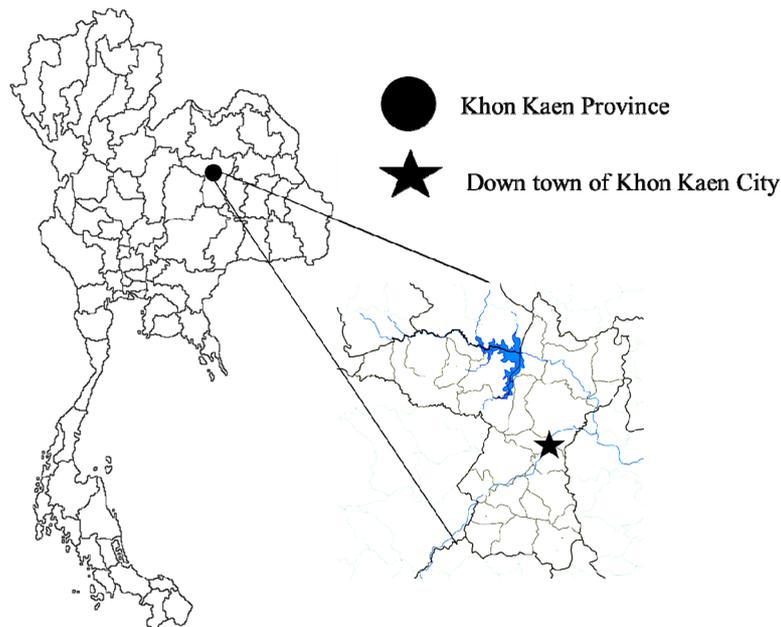


Figure 1. Location of study

3. Results

Many types of tourist activities in Khon Kaen can be strengthened, especially within the city and downtown, including activities in temples and religious places and shopping plazas and night life activities (pubs, restaurants, spas, Thai massage, etc.), all of which are attractions to tourists. Nevertheless, the city has potential to benefit from the MICE (Meeting, Incentives, Conferencing and Exhibition) industry because it is the center of the northeastern region. There are many opportunities in Khon Kaen. Khon Kaen is the central province in the northeastern region and has a super highway from Bangkok to Nong Khai and Lao PDR. In addition, a local government policy in Khon Kaen fosters business development. However, Khon Kaen also faces many problems and threats, such as traffic jams that make tourists and local residents unhappy. In addition, local and state policies conflict in the tourist region, which negatively affects tourism. For instance, the scramble between stakeholders over tourism management causes a lack of efficiency in public relations with regard to tourism activity. The SWOT analysis of tourism development in Khon Kaen that we performed is shown below in Table 1.

Table 1. SWOT analysis of tourism development in Khon Kaen

Strength	Weakness
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Khon Kaen province has many attractive tourist destinations, including natural, cultural, and religious attractions such as temples. 2. Night life is attractive to tourists in the downtown area. 3. There is a wide variety of accommodations and hotels for a wide range of prices. 4. Local people are welcoming and are service-minded. 5. Public transportation is convenient. 6. Khon Kaen is becoming a modern city. 7. Khon Kaen is a regional center for education, economics, and government. 8. There are many large markets and department stores. 9. Festivals and traditional events take place every month. 10. The city has a network of tourism companies and government organizations. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There are only a few airplane flights per day to Khon Kaen. 2. There is no integration between agencies related to tourist attractions. 3. The quality of restrooms is poor, which is important to visitors. 4. Funding for tourism comes solely from tourists and is not supported by the government. 5. There is a lack of tourism advertising. 6. There is a lack of infrastructure development, which does not keep pace with the rapid growth of the population. 7. Tourist sites are far apart. 8. Tourist staff have poor English communication skills. 9. There is no short-term or long-term citywide development plan for tourism. 10. There is a shortage of activities that attract tourists. 11. Tourists are likely to visit on their own and do not need business agencies to guide them. 12. The cost of living for tourists is high compared to few years ago.
Opportunities	Threats
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Khon Kaen has many religious attractions. 2. Khon Kaen has many accommodations that travelers may choose from in different price ranges (hotels, apartments). 3. Accommodations are sufficient to support tourists. 4. Khon Kaen is a city center for the northeastern region. 5. The highway passes through the city and connects to Laos and Vietnam. 6. Khon Kaen is a distribution center for traders, and the government is focusing on developing the Inland Container Depot (ICD) and multimodal terminal and logistics hub. 7. Khon Kaen is on track for the development of the rapid train from Bangkok past Khon Kaen to Nong Khai and Laos (Lao PDR). 8. Many foreigners have settled in Khon Kaen and in nearby regions, which boosts economic growth. 9. Khon Kaen has potential for growth in the mining industry (events, activities, conferences). 10. Tourists can travel in private vehicles and attend festivals all year. 11. There is a network of tourism associations operating within the province. 12. Transportation options are good. 13. There are many religious attractions. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Crime is rising. 2. There is no public transportation to tourist sites. 3. There are no activity programs that support tourism because of management challenges. 4. There is a lack of cooperation between various government agencies. 5. Traffic is heavy during commute hours and on the weekends. 6. The high cost of living compared to two years ago is a threat to local people. 7. Thailand's political issues have affected the confidence of travelers because they are afraid of protesters. 8. The decline in the world economy is affecting overseas travel. 9. There is a lack of collaboration between Khon Kaen and other regions or neighboring countries. 10. There are conflicts between state and local policies. 11. There is a lack of support for tourism in both the government and the private sectors. 12. There is a lack of sales promotions in tourism. 13. Very hot weather in the region affects tourism.

4. Conclusion

The objective of this study has been to examine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of tourism development in Khon Kaen, Thailand. We performed in-depth interviews with 21 key participants, and we led a focus group by inviting eight participants to discuss the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of tourism development in Khon Kaen. We identified 10 strengths and 12 weaknesses (10-12=-2). The results have led us to conclude that there is much to improve upon, including the tour routes, program tours that support the timing of tourist visits, and the infrastructure. However, the type of tourism in Khon Kaen is alternative tourism, such as cultural tourism, agro tourism, and ecotourism, so it is related to the livelihoods of the residents of Khon Kaen province. Furthermore, 13 opportunities and 13 threats (13-13=0) creates equilibrium for tourism in Khon Kaen, so government services should be improved and/or additional opportunities should be presented. However, in the research, we found gaps in the SWOT results: 1) Environmental side effects: When we focused on SWOT, interview participants said that a concentration in economics is a core point, but it contributes to a loss in terms of environmental issues, and therefore, it is important to tourism; and 2) The livelihood systems of the people in Khon Kaen province are a strong point, because it is a hybrid culture.

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