

The Satisfaction of Tourists and Policy Guidelines for Tourism Development in Khon Kaen, Thailand

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Abstract

The objectives of this research were to study the policy guidelines for tourism development in the city of Khon Kaen and the satisfaction of tourists who travel there. We have utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods for our study. Quantitatively, we provided 400 questionnaires to travelers and analyzed the subsequent data through mean and standard deviations. Qualitatively, we conducted focus groups and analyzed the data via descriptive analysis. The results of this study indicate that Khon Kaen lacks public transportation and thereby experiences numerous traffic jams. The results also show that the Khon Kaen museum is old and largely undeveloped and tourism-related activities are effectively nonexistent in the city. Local government is the main factor in the development of tourism in Khon Kaen, and it can work to renovate the museum with cooperation from the central government, set up Khon Kaen as a center for MICE (meetings, incentives, conventions, and exhibitions) business, and renovate the landscape, the city park, and the environment of the city. In addition, casinos and legal gaming need to be developed. However, it is very difficult to discuss this possibility because many people debate the need for such measures, and more time is required to resolve this issue.

Keywords: satisfaction, policy, tourism, Khon Kaen city

1. Introduction

Khon Kaen is the commercial regional government office and political center of northeastern Thailand. The province is well known for the high-quality silk produced there. Khon Kaen is located in the heart of the northeastern region of Thailand, close to Lao PDR, and is one of the fastest-growing areas in Thailand. The Thai government nominated Khon Kaen as the export center for trade throughout the Indo-China Region, and both Laos and Vietnam have consulates in Khon Kaen to process visa applications (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2013). Most travelers to Khon Kaen come from neighboring cities and other cities in the northeastern region, including 1.5% from Bangkok and the central region and 3.8% from overseas (Department of Tourism, 2011).

Data from the Tourism Authority of Thailand (2013) shed some light on the tourism situation in Khon Kaen province. The data indicate that tourism in Khon Kaen has increased at the rate of 11.38% per year. Additionally, the travel of foreigners through the province increased 60.30% in 2012 compared with 2011. Thai travelers increased 10.37% in 2012 compared with 2011, and revenue from tourism in 2012 totaled approximately 160 million U.S. dollars. However, Kantawateera, Naipinit, and Promsaka Na Sakolnakorn (2013) found several problems with tourism management in Khon Kaen province, including 1) the economic perspective that investments from outsiders affect the local economy and people, 2) the social perspective that the problem revolves around a poor relationship between stakeholders, including conflicts between government agencies and private sector enterprises, which subsequently affects tourism management, 3) globalization and the advent of overseas tourism, which is changing local cultures and behavior, and 4) policy conflicts between local government and the central government.

This study proposes that Khon Kaen has considerable potential for further tourism-related development. However, this city lacks research on its current situation. Currently, many foreigners come to visit the city, so research to determine a proper guideline for tourism development is highly important. In this study, we have

sought to answer two research questions: 1) what, in particular, about Khon Kaen is satisfactory or unsatisfactory for tourists? 2) what should the policy guidelines for the city's tourism development be? The results of this study have produced information that can be used to generate a set of guidelines for tourism development for tourism policymakers.

2. Objectives

The objectives are to study the satisfaction of tourists who travel to Khon Kaen, as well as the current policy guidelines for tourism development in Khon Kaen.

3. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Edwards, Griffin, and Hayllar (2008) suggested criteria that influence how tourists use cities for tourism. These include the influence of transport on tourist access and the benefits of urban tourism that tourists receive. Criteria for successful urban tourism development include carrying capacity, tourist dispersal, and tourist benchmarking to other cities. In addition, the presence of casinos and legal gaming is one factor that boosts tourism activities. A study by Israeli and Mehrez (2000) suggested that gambling is a significant tourist attraction and provides a significant source for development to the region and the state as well as income for organizations in the tourism industry. In addition, casino gaming is often considered a catalyst for the development of a tourism industry, providing new revenues, employment, and visitors.

Maitland (2006) suggested that the capacity of tourism managers is important for tourism, for the policy process, and for the maintenance of attractions such as museums, colleges, and others. Attractions are also important because they are the places that tourists visit. Finally Maitland stated that an effective regime is crucial if government policies are to be successfully applied to the management of tourism in an historic city.

A study by Kantawateera, et al. (2013) found weaknesses in Khon Kaen's tourism industry. For example, there is no integration of agencies related to tourist attractions; the quality of restrooms is poor, which is important to visitors; there is a lack of infrastructure development, which has not kept pace with the rapid growth of the population; there is a shortage of activities that attract tourists; and there is no public transportation to tourist sites. However, some of the strengths of tourism in Khon Kaen are, for example, that the nightlife is attractive to tourists in the downtown area; local people are welcoming and are service-minded; there are many large markets and department stores; and festivals and traditional events take place every month.

Festivals and activities related to tourism are very important. For example, the King Narai festival in the province of Lopburi in Central Thailand is an important annual festival that includes lighting techniques, color, dance, drama, and sound to present historical stories about King Narai in actual historical locations. This is a well-known festival in Thailand. Many foreigners from western countries visit the festival and archaeological sites and activities related to the festival. The festival and the city are a tourist destination, thus making city a tourism city (Naimokem, Chansuwan, & Chantamala, 2013).

The tourist's experience is very important because it can positively or negatively affect tourism (Minnaert, Maitland, & Miller, 2009). In addition, tourist behavior and satisfaction are important areas of study with regard to the setting up satisfactory policy guidelines (Frew & Shaw, 1999). In our study, we used a conceptual framework referencing the study of Promsaka Na Sakolnakhon, et al. (2013). Government policy is a critical factor that influences successful tourism planning (Muangasame & Khunon, 2013). Components of the policy guidelines for tourism are also related to environmental issues and economic infrastructures that support visitors. Naipinit et al. (2013) suggested promoting socialization in the community as people in the community directly and indirectly affect tourism activity. Our article has evaluated the satisfaction of people traveling in the province of Khon Kaen with touring programs and has considered satisfaction, infrastructure issues, and environmental, social, and economic concerns to allow for an analysis of policy guidelines with regard to tourism in Khon Kaen province.

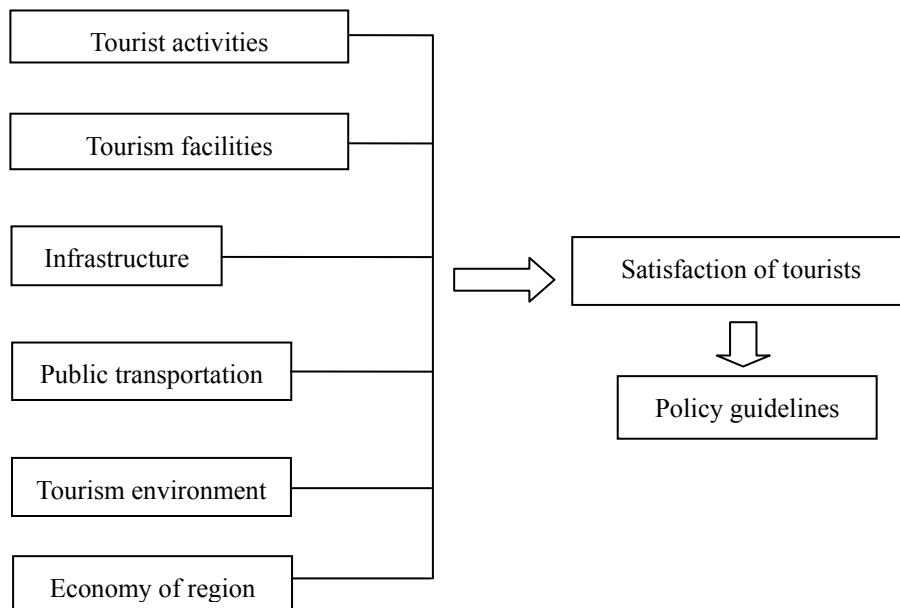


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

4. Methodology

In this study, the researchers used an integrated method between quantitative and qualitative techniques for studying stratification and the establishment of guidelines on tourism policy for Khon Kaen.

4.1 Time Period

The data was collected from May, 2013 to October, 2013.

4.2 Quantitative Method

For the study on tourists' satisfaction with Khon Kaen, we provided 400 questionnaires to tourists traveling throughout the city. We also provided these questionnaires to tourism business owners, community leaders, local residents, and government officials and analyzed the results using mean and standard deviations. The questionnaire used the Likert scale and offered four answers: strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. The closed questionnaire was interpreted 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	Highest

4.3 Qualitative Method

In addition, we created a focus group by inviting 12 experts, including a local administrative official, a local politician, government agency employees, academicians, and a tourist businessman, for a discussion on policy guidelines for tourism development. We analyzed the results with a descriptive analysis.

4.4 Study Site

The study will take place in Khon Kaen, located in northeastern Thailand, as depicted in Figure 2.

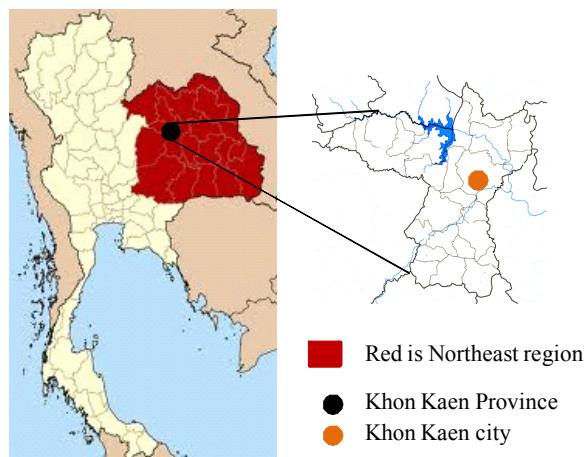


Figure 2. Location of Northeast Region

5. Results and Discussion

Most tourist participants in the study were satisfied with Khon Kaen. It was noted that the city has a good environment, is safe and largely free of crime, has standard accommodations, has a low cost of living for travelers, and so on. However, the participants were unhappy that Khon Kaen does not offer many activities related to tourism: it is difficult to find the tourist service center, and Khon Kaen does not have many creative activities for tourists. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The satisfaction of tourists in Khon Kaen

The satisfaction of tourists in Khon Kaen	Satisfaction level		
	\bar{x}	S.D.	Level
Most tourist places are beautiful to look at.	3.85	0.70	High
Tourist environments have many trees and are shady.	3.9	0.72	High
Tourist locations have plenty of activities to choose from.	2.16	1.04	Low
The community and the local people are welcoming and provide good service to tourists.	3.78	0.76	High
The roads are convenient for traveling to tourist locations.	3.68	0.71	High
There are many public transportation choices, including trains, busses and aircraft.	3.72	0.79	High
There are street signs with the names of tourist attractions and directions to tourist locations.	2.14	1.19	Low
Tourist service centers and tourist service points are set up in many locations and are easy to find.	3.14	1.06	Medium
The city has good public services such as electrical and water systems.	3.64	0.71	High
The police do their job well.	3.58	0.76	High
Tourist areas are safe and without criminals.	3.63	0.77	High
There are tourist guides to explain the different locations.	2.42	0.81	Low
Tourism locations in Khon Kaen are advertised on the Internet, on billboards, in magazines, and so on.	3.51	0.75	High
Accommodations in Khon Kaen are convenient.	3.79	0.79	High
The accommodations provide excellent service to tourists.	3.70	0.77	High
Hotels, guesthouses, and other accommodations are standardized.	3.57	0.84	High
Accommodation rates are discounted to motivate tourists.	3.47	0.83	High
Accommodation staff displays a service-oriented mindset.	3.62	0.81	High

The satisfaction of tourists in Khon Kaen	Satisfaction level		
	\bar{x}	S.D.	Level
The price of food and beverages and the cost of living are attractive to tourists.	3.67	1.72	High
Many tourist activities attract tourists.	3.17	1.10	Medium
Khon Kaen has creative activities for tourists.	2.54	1.04	Low
Khon Kaen has many leisure and sport activities related to tourism.	2.64	1.04	Medium
Local administrative organizations give Khon Kaen tourism information to tourists and utilize advertising.	3.48	0.80	High
At tourist attractions, there are billboards explaining history and other important information.	3.36	0.97	Medium
Local administrative organizations promote tourism in Khon Kaen.	2.97	1.02	Medium
Both public and private agencies campaign for tourism and environmental protection.	3.04	0.96	Medium
Both public and private agencies have a management plan for local natural resources related to tourism.	2.78	1.03	Medium
Tourism management in Khon Kaen is efficient.	3.25	1.03	Medium
Tourists are satisfied with the price of tickets to various attractions.	3.68	0.80	High

Our focus group, composed of 12 experts, was invited to discuss policy guidelines for the tourism development of Khon Kaen city. The guidelines are as follows.

- 1) Government agencies who are involved in tourism should build and create billboards and tourist guideposts set up in many locations in Khon Kaen. Guideposts must have useful information such as directions to tourist attractions, bus routes, phone numbers for taxis, and the contact number of the tourism information office. It is important to ensure the safety of all visitors (Mtembu, 2009) as all tourist experiences inevitably involve a degree of risk (Clift & Page, 1996; Bentley et al., 2001).
- 2) The local government should set up an electric bus run and pick up passengers and tourists around Khon Kaen. The bus should operate on an exact time schedule, and new bus stops should be built and existing ones renovated. Public transportation is very important to visitor service (Sorupia, 2005), and the transportation system of a tourist destination has an impact on the tourism experience, which explains how people travel and why they choose different destinations (Page & Lumsdon, 2004). A well-run transportation system is pleasurable to tourists; it is a factor in convincing tourists to visit again (Michael et al., 2009). These types of improvements could help tourists manage or set their schedules more easily (Mika, 2010).
- 3) Khon Kaen should become a MICE business city (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions) and establish new activities to support MICE business. The municipality of Khon Kaen (2013) should promote and support information for visitors and agencies regarding area activities, hotels, and so on.
- 4) The city should create cultural value by printing local, cultural pictures or pictures of tourist locations on souvenir products and build a souvenir shop downtown to promote Khon Kaen tourism. This is important because cultural tourism is one of the oldest forms of travel and still continues to be a mainstay of the tourism industry in most parts of the world (Richards & Munsters, 2010). Cultural tourism involves the movement of persons to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence (Richards, 1996).
- 5) The Thai government and the local administrative organization in Khon Kaen should participate in renovating the Khon Kaen museum, and the area around the museum ought to become a public park.
- 6) Tourist activities are reflected in behavior and motivation (Currie, 1997; Leiper, 1990). Khon Kaen lacks activities related to tourism, so public and private sectors should create new activities such as fishing activities, water skiing, water bicycle exercise, and so forth in Kaen Nakorn Lake. Additionally, the landscape around Kaen Nakorn Lake should be renovated.
- 7) To strengthen night tourism in Khon Kaen, the local administrative office should develop the night tourism landscape, for example, by using decorative lighting and good lighting design in buildings, parks, and tourist areas around the city. The study by Qin, et al. (2011) suggested that nightscape lighting projects can promote night tourism activities such as night sightseeing, enjoying folklore, dining, entertaining, and shopping.

8) Casinos and legal gaming need to be developed, and if Khon Kaen is the first city in Thailand to set up the legal casinos, the new industry will boost the economy, and many activities related to tourism will be drawn to the town. In addition, local government taxes on casino revenue can be used for the development of the infrastructure of the city. However, there have never been legal gaming and casinos in Thailand because many people are involved in the debate over whether gaming can or should become a part of the tourism industry. Some factions in this debate offer many excuses for not allowing gambling in Thailand. For example, they maintain that Thailand is a Buddhist land, and therefore, how people can consider casinos and legal gaming is questionable. However, in real life, Thai people spend a great deal of money on illegal gaming such as the illegal lottery and betting on the English premier soccer league at illegal casino shops, of which there are many.

9) The city should repair the sidewalks, rebuild steps, and install wheelchair access to tourist sites because many tourists and local people are elderly, and some have disabilities. However, after the focus group met in October of 2013, Khon Kaen held a flower festival in December of 2013, and more than 400,000 flowers were grown on a 26-acre parcel of land including marigolds, tulips, petunias, lilies, carnations and so forth from around the world. This festival was attended by approximately 30,000 tourists from neighboring cities over the course of the weekend (researchers called to ask a member of the parliament of the municipality of Khon Kaen for the number of tourists). This festival is therefore an example of how the number of tourists can be increased who come to visit, relax, and spend money. Festival activities can generate more income for the city. In addition, this festival is a good model for other cities because festivals require building facilities that support tourists including toilets, walkways for the elderly and people with disabilities, and wheelchair access at the gates.

In addition, traffic jams in Khon Kaen are an obstacle to both local residents and tourists. This issue requires the participation of all stakeholders. Renovating the landscape and expanding roads is not enough to solve this problem; good public transportation is very important and can allow people to eschew private motor vehicles and choose public transportation. However, over the last 30 years, researchers have noted that they have never seen good public transportation; it is still largely undeveloped, and undeveloped public transportation will cause most people to buy and use a car.

6. Conclusion

Khon Kaen is the commercial, regional, governmental, and political center of Northeastern Thailand. To understand the satisfaction of tourists and what policy guidelines for tourism development in Khon Kaen are required, one must concentrate on environmental issues, economic issues, infrastructure that supports visitors, and socialization. In this study, nine main guidelines have been proposed to develop tourism in the city. First, the safety of visitors must be assured, and signs should be provided with directions to tourist attractions, bus routes, and a phone number for a taxi service. Second, public transportation to various tourist attractions, perhaps via electric bus, is an important manner in which tourism could be improved. Third, Khon Kaen should become a MICE business city. Fourth, both central and local governments should present and promote culture. Fifth, the Thai government and the local administrative organization in Khon Kaen should participate in renovating the Khon Kaen museum. Sixth, local administrative organizations in Khon Kaen should work to renovate the Khon Kaen museum. Seventh, the night tourism landscape should be developed. Eighth, casinos and legal gaming should be developed if possible in the future. Finally, access for the elderly and people with disabilities should be installed. With these alterations, Khon Kaen may become a hub of new tourism activity. At the same time, every development should also seek to concentrate on environmental and social sustainability. Finally, tourism development in Khon Kaen requires attention, including spending and investing more budgeting funds and development through the use of real data that will provide a real-world understanding of tourism and the relevant economics to all stakeholders. Tourism can bring a lot of income into the local area. However, in order to develop a creative and sustainable city, stakeholders should collaborate by teaching tourism management and innovation to personnel in the tourism industry including the creativity of tourism, creating an awareness of tourism, and so forth. These approaches will develop Khon Kaen into a creative and sustainable city.

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