

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND TOURISM IN THAILAND.

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ABSTRACT

Abstract—Since 2020, tourism in the region has almost come to a temporary standstill as a result of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. This temporary paralysis has not only hit Thai economies and employment hard, but also many local communities in Thailand. Before the pandemic, the Thai tourism and hotel industry had enjoyed strong growth for decades, which established the industry as a key driver of the Thai economy. However, structural, deeper, and possibly permanent, changes in global megatrends and travel habits will challenge the industry to transform to meet the demands of travelers from different age groups. This research focuses on two major concerns: the impact of Covid-19 on the environment and tourism in Thailand. The objectives are 1) to study the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the environment and tourism in Thailand. 2) To study the factors influencing travel decision of Thai tourists. In-depth Interview is used as a tool for collecting data from 30 samples who are key Informants by using purposive sampling.

The results show that Covid-19 has an environmental impact on the ecosystem in the environment, ecotourism and park region where there are both positive and negative consequences. With regards to tourism, it can be concluded that Covid-19 has both positive and negative effects on tourism in Thailand. By reducing the number of people that visit the park, the business owners of hotels, restaurants, automobiles, and boat excursions lost 90% of income. However, the tourist destination can restore itself, resulting in the natural beauty of the places. Also, since the number of people is fewer, there are fewer disruptions for the visitors and tourists. Thus, tourism development along with environmental protection is crucial. If the environment is damaged, it will affect tourism as well. The Covid-19 pandemic is therefore a significant lesson that can be brought to improve the environment and tourism in Thailand to be ready to serve as the international tourist destination.

Keywords—Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, environment, tourism, Eco-tourism

INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, a major outbreak of the Covid-19 has occurred around the world, becoming an international public health emergency that all sectors focus on and urgently resolve the issue. Since April 2020 onwards, tourism in Thailand has come to a temporary standstill as a result of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. However, countries and sub regions have been affected differently. The infection rates and victims illustrate this, keeping in mind that countries vary in their testing intensity. In terms of number of COVID-19 confirmed deaths per 100,000 populations, the 20 most affected countries in the world by mid-2021. Furthermore, in Thailand, the COVID-19 pandemic is occurring at a time when countries have already been hit by various economic and natural shocks. Tourism has been one of the fastest and hardest hit sectors of the economy. This temporary paralysis has not only hit Thai economies and employment hard, but also many local communities in Thailand. Before the pandemic, the Thai tourism and hotel industry had enjoyed strong growth for decades, which established the industry as a key driver of the Thai economy. However, structural, deeper, and possibly permanent, changes in global megatrends and travel habits will challenge the industry to transform to meet the demands of travelers from different age groups (Bilsland, Nagy & Smith, 2020).

According to the World Health Organization, August 2021, a total of about 219 million infected people and 4.55 million have died, affecting a wide world. Both economic and societies, including the environment in Thailand, has an outbreak of Covid-19, which is currently in August 2021(WHO, 2021). Consistent with the data from the Department of Disease Control, Ministry of Public Health identifies the total number of patients with a total of 1,204,729 cases. Furthermore, there are three waves of infections in Thailand. The first wave has spread

since December 2019, and the situation has gradually improved, with the number of cases reaching zero for a month. Tourism has begun again and expenditures are actively circulating in the country's currency. However, beginning in 2021, a new wave of outbreaks emerged again as a result, the recovering economy has stalled. Especially, on the side of tourism that is heavily sluggish and during April, a third outbreak of mutated species is found.

In addition, since the COVID-19 pandemic has started the start, governments around the world have moved swiftly to impose national lockdowns and curtailed international travel. This led to an unprecedented drop in international tourist arrivals. In the first 10 months of 2020, tourist arrivals worldwide crashed 72% YoY, though this less severe than for the Asia-Pacific region (-82% YoY). Today, the global situation remains critical with many countries, including Thailand, experiencing new waves of infections, and global cases continue to rise (Mulder, 2020). The tourism industry is the world's largest industry because it is an industry that plays a very important role in the economy, society, culture and environment. It is an industry that generates income for the country as the top priority because in addition to investment and buying goods in foreign currency, then the tourists' shopping goods and services has created a career that generate and distribute income economic circulation and create benefits for people in the country.

In 2019, Thailand has total tourism revenue 3.01 trillion baht, or 1.08 trillion baht in revenue. There are 166 million Thai travels within the country. There are 10.60 million Thai tourists traveling abroad, with foreign travel expenses 0.34 trillion baht (Issara News Agency, 2019). Since the lockdown is announced by the government to close the country and close different places any unnecessary including campaigning for people to stay home and maintain distance causing the tourism industry to be hit hard by from January to May. There are 6.70 million foreign tourists, 59.97% contraction from the same period last year. Throughout April to May, no foreign tourists travel to Thailand. As for the domestic tourism situation from January to May, only 25.05 million Thai tourists traveled domestically/time, 60.75 percent contraction compared to the same period last year (Division of Tourism and Sports Economy, 2020). Therefore, this research interests in studying how the Covid-19 outbreak will affect the environment and tourism.

Research objectives

1. To study the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the environment and tourism in Thailand.
2. To study the factors influencing travel decision of Thai tourists.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Covid-19, COVID-19 is a contagious disease caused by the most recently discovered coronavirus. The virus and emerging disease were unknown prior to an outbreak in Auhan, China in December 2019. The Covid-19 pandemic has now spread across many countries, affecting many countries around the world. In 2021 many countries have developed a vaccine against COVID-19, reducing the mortality and infection rates (World Health Organization, 2021). The total number of infected people worldwide, on August 31, 2021 is about 219 million, with 4.55 million deaths (Department of Disease Control, 2021).

The virus is caused probably the spread from an animal to humans. The first known case started on December 1, 2019 and has no link to the suspected market in Auhan, China. But many patients may have been there since mid-November or before. Environmental samples are taken in the market for testing and the virus is found. It is most common in wildlife and farm animal trade. The market could be the source of the virus or it could play a role in the spread of the early outbreak.

Covid-19 in Thailand, The Covid-19 pandemic in Thailand has started to spread in Thailand since January 13, 2020. From the screening, some cases are found in January which mostly comes from China. As for transmission in the provinces of the country, the first case is confirmed on January 31, 2020. The cases number is low throughout February 2020, with 40 confirmed cases at the end of February. But the number of cases increased greatly in the middle March 2020, which caused the infection from many groups. The largest group took place in a Thai boxing match at Lumpinee Stadium on March 6, 2020. More than 100 people are diagnosed in a single day, and the number continues to increase. As the number of infections in keep increasing then many preventive has been added until on March 26, 2020. Emergency Act is enforced that do not leave the house at night, has announced a ban order to temporarily suspend the sale of liquor, for people to delay traveling across the province

and temporarily close educational institutions. Tighter controls in the country and better handling of the disease have reduced the number of infected cases in the country, with the number of infections reaching zero for several days. But later, a new outbreak of the disease is found in Samut Sakhon province around mid-December 2020 due to the smuggling of foreign workers into the country, causing the number of infected people in the country to continue to increase.

Covid-19 has hit the country's economy hard, especially the tourism sector that is important to the country's main economy. The International Monetary Fund forecasts that Thailand's GDP will shrink by 6.7 percent in 2020, down from 2.5 percent previously. At present, the new wave of the Covid-19 epidemic continues to intensify because it is a mutated infection from the west. Moreover, the cluster of groups in many different areas and increased proactive monitoring in various risk areas, resulting in the number of infected people in Thailand in the hundreds continuously for several days.

Tourism and the Environment, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused major economic impacts on the global economy, including its tourist sector, as well as those related to restrictions and security measures. However, it has not changed the long-term priorities of the European Commission concerning the socio-economic development of the European Union. The EC long-term priorities still refer to the job market, innovation and climate policies. These goals have now been somewhat subdued by the current short-term overarching goal of defeating the pandemic and unblocking economies. However, the primary, if not the most important long-term priority is still the climate policy (European Energy Network, 2019). Data from the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the European Space Agency (ESA) have indicated that pollution due to the overall economic activity reduction in some COVID-19 epicenters such as Wuhan, Italy, Spain, USA, etc., has decreased by up to 30% (Muhammad et al., 2020). Tourism should not be considered as an isolated economic sector when it comes to environmental performance. According to them, the increase in the number of tourist arrivals boosts energy consumption and thus carbon dioxide emissions. At the same time, the study on the period between 1995–2011 conducted by Dogan and Aslan (2017) indicate that there is a long-lasting relationship between carbon emissions, real income, energy consumption and tourism. The amount of energy consumed has a positive effect on emissions, while real income and the tourism sector have a negative effect by moderating CO₂ emissions. The ecological impact of the accommodation sector or accommodation-related activities more broadly, is likely to go unnoticed due to difficulties with the carbon reporting mechanism of this economic activity (Abeydeera et al., 2019). Tourism accommodation is responsible for 21% of the CO₂ emissions delivered by the entire tourism industry, and the environmental impact is through greenhouse gas emissions, wastewater discharge and other. The literature indicates that the level of GHG emitted by accommodation facilities and tourists arriving at tourist accommodation establishments varies depending on the standard of the facility or hotel. It is also highlighted that the environmental impact of the accommodation sector can vary by country (Huang, 2015).

However, the fact that the development of this sector of the economy may affect the reduction of emissions is confirmed by the fact that the goal of the global hotel industry is to reduce GHG emissions per room per year by 66% by 2030 and by 90% by 2050 compared to 2010 levels (International Tourism Partnership, 2017). To sum up this relationship, the more services are provided, the more energy is consumed and thus greenhouse gases are emitted by the accommodation establishments. On the other hand, the faster the tourism sector develops, the more innovations are implemented (including eco-friendly innovations), the less energy is consumed, which results in a decrease in greenhouse gas emissions by the accommodation facilities. Hence, the environmental related impacts of COVID-19 from this economic activity are not so obvious.

Economic Impacts and Tourism, the aviation sector is highly effected in globally for this COVID-19 pandemic situation. Major international airline companies have been deferred their flight operation. All airlines depress the air travel in globally this uncertain situation. The transportation ways like road, rail and water also hampered in this COVID-19 emergency (Chakraborty et al., 2020). The travel ban has imposed millions of dollars loss in aviation and tourism industries in the related countries. This also created shortage of medicines, agriculture products, food supply, and other commodities in affected countries (Ali et al., 2020). As a result, the people related to tourism, aviation, transportation are suffering extreme difficulties. According to OECD Assessment, the COVID-19 affected countries are facing high inflation and unemployment problems due to expenditure for treatment and rehabilitation of people [28]. Again, the affected countries will be loss of 2% of their annual GDP growth in every month during this pandemics condition. The tourism sector will face decrease of output from 50% to 70% (Chakraborty et al., 2020). The outbreak control situation increase costs in health sector, decreases

productivity of employees and reduces economic activities at whole. Tourism activities are hampering in this situation due to maintain social distancing of people (OECD, 2020). Moreover, investment in tourism related amenities like recreation centers, restaurants, coffee shop, museums, fitness clubs, shopping malls, swimming pools and cultural centers also affected in this condition (Yezli & Khan, 2020). The outputs and labor productivity in tourism sector are lower for greater risk in health disaster during this pandemic situation. In the post-pandemic situation, subsidize tourism consumption and financial supports from other sector will be essential as recovery initiatives for tourism industry. The COVID-19 pandemic situation has created great impacts on tourism sector and overall economy of a country. The future tourism development will be based on the evaluation from the different stakeholders-local communities, tour operators, accommodation owners, food businessman, tour guides and transportation providers' perceptions and aspects on tourism impacts. Moreover, several macro level impacts such as impact of climate change on tourism, and effect on GDP, taxation, economic welfare, and employment in tourism also considered in near future. Again, post-pandemic situation will require sustainable tourism development based on tourists' behavior, destination choice, and tourism planning and strategies in new consequences (Dwyer et al., 2016).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative research by using the data to be analyzed and summarized as a descriptive research. Data collection methods were as follows:

- 1) Documentary reviews
- 2) In-depth interviews by collecting data from Key Informants using Purposive Sampling with 5 government officials, 10 tourists and 15 Entrepreneur that affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

RESULTS

While Thailand's response to COVID-19 has been quite effective in limiting the spread of the disease, it falls short at being able to address the multiple dimensions of the crisis, such as the economic and social impacts. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Reduction helps highlight how Thailand's approach to COVID-19 does not comprehensively address the issue of resilience—there are limited considerations given to building resilience against climate change or other epidemics. From the study it can be concluded that Covid-19 affects the natural environment has both positive and negative effects. In term of positive impact, natural resources have been restored and more abundance. In addition, because of the abundant nature, there are living things such as mackerel, sea bass, and jellyfish dishes, which can generate income for villagers in the area during the Covid-19 outbreak during the absence of tourists. For negative impacts such as waste from the masks used in general waste. In summary, from both the data collection and the interviews, it is concluded that the Covid-19 outbreak had a more positive impact on the environment than a negative one.

Covid-19 affects tourism; there are positive and negative impacts by causing fewer tourists to enter the country and domestic tourists. As a result, hotel, restaurant and car operators are affected, losing up to 90% of their revenues. Some even have to close their businesses or change their careers in order to survive. But for tourists who come to travel during the Covid-19 outbreak, there are many advantages such as beautiful nature. Few people do not have to compete for resources, restaurants and accommodation, but still lack activities and lack of convenience in tourism. All operators have created safety measures in tourism and build confidence in tourists by pushing for participation in the standard of cleanliness and safety (SHA) to build confidence in tourists to respond to the policy to raise the level safety zone.

Therefore, factors affecting Thai tourists' decision to travel in the country during the COVID-19 outbreak are: Safety from natural disasters, sanitation and epidemics.

Discussion

Safety factors related to natural disasters, sanitation and epidemics affect travel decisions of Thai tourists during the COVID-19 outbreak. The tourists focus on avoiding tourist attractions with news of the epidemic as much as possible. They also take into account cleanliness, safe and hygienic when choosing a tourist destination and avoiding tourist attractions or crowded activities to prevent epidemics. But tourists are least concerned about

natural disasters in planning their trips. Due to the current situation, there is still news about the epidemic of the Covid-19 epidemic. Both abroad and in Thailand Tourists are more careful about hygiene; make the behavior of choosing attractions need to be considered more accordingly. This is consistent with research by Chebli et al., (2020) found that the Covid-19 epidemic will affect the willingness of tourists in terms of safety, cost, confidence and attitudes. It is also consistent with a research by Noraset Khamasi (2017) that found that natural disaster factors have a significant influence on travel decisions among tourists in Chiang Mai in Thailand.

It can be noted that the Thai approach to COVID-19 response is not very holistic as little consideration has been given to enhancing the country's resilience to such pandemics as well as to 'build back better' in a more environmentally or socially sustainable way. The economic cost of border and business closures and strict restrictions in Thailand has been immense. Businesses in the service and tourism sector were hit the hardest. They are also the sector that employs a large portion of the workforce, who is now financially insecure: Before the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism accounts for 22% of the Thai GDP, and in 2018, one in six jobs in Thailand were in the tourism sector (Fitch Solutions, 2020). This sector is highly impacted, along with its link to other formal and informal sectors. The scale of the economic impact of the pandemic as a result of Thailand's reliance on its tourism sector also highlights the importance of a diversified economy for more resilience. The government's initial failure to effectively assist low-income and vulnerable populations during the pandemic suggests that they are not included or appropriately prioritized by the government's COVID-19 risk assessment and planning. However, this seems to have been improved overtime with better governance and decision-making. Although Thailand has been relatively successful at mitigating the public health risks of the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of the subsequent economic risks and the lack of consideration for building resilience in a broader sense may lead to further vulnerability in the future

Suggestion and further work

1. There should be a study to assess the potential of tourist attractions in each region in order to develop into an efficient and sustainable eco-tourism site.
2. There should be studies in other tourist attractions in different provinces because the results will be used to develop all tourist attractions to be effective tourist attractions.
3. This study did not address the tourism promotion policies implemented by the government, such as the We Travel Together program, etc. Therefore, the results of the study did not cover the variables that may cause important factors. Research studies are more accurate and comprehensive.

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