

## **The Role Volunteer Tourism Plays in Conservation: A Case Study of the Elephant Nature Park in Chiang Mai, Thailand**

### **Introduction**

Since the 1980's a new form of tourism began to take more prominence in the travel sector. This tourism was dubbed as "alternative tourism" as it encompassed activities that were centred on providing more opportunities for local people as well as the preservation of the natural environment (Weaver, 1998; Mowforth & Munt, 1998). Ecotourism, wildlife tourism, and volunteer tourism are all emerging forms of alternative tourism that have gained popularity in the last twenty years (Newsome, Dowling & Moore, 2005; Fennell, 2002; Wearing, 2001; Wearing & Neil, 1999; Honey, 1999). These sustainable forms of tourism have now become more of a priority for many countries due to the realization that unregulated mass tourism has damaging effects on the environment and local communities (Spenceley, 2005). Preserving the environment and local culture helps to maintain this tourism product and can be achieved by monitoring the number of visitors in a region (Roe et al., 1997).

The shift from mass tourism activities to alternate tourism activities has been due to the increase of a more environmentally conscious traveller. Ecotourism attractions consist of tourist activities that are centred on providing some form of benefits for the local community and more specifically for the environment (Peattie & Moutinho, 2000). Wildlife tourism has led to sustainable economic benefits for many countries while ensuring the conservation of many endangered species (Shackley, 1996; Fennell & Weaver, 1997). Volunteer tourism involves travellers contributing their time and income to a project that could fall under the umbrella of wildlife tourism and ecotourism. Many travellers are now actively seeking out vacations in which they can spend some, or all, of their time volunteering at their destination. The increase in the numbers of volunteer tourism organizations and activities worldwide suggests that this tourism sector is growing (Brown & Morrison, 2003).

This paper will discuss my proposed research plans for exploring the role that volunteer tourism plays in conservation. The purpose of this study will be to reveal the role that volunteer tourism plays in the conservation of elephants, using a case study on the Elephant Nature Park (ENP), in Chiang Mai Thailand. The main goal of this study is to find out how volunteer tourism

affects and is affected by the Elephant Nature Park. This study will specifically look at how volunteer tourism and the park impacts on: (1) non-volunteer travellers, (2) the regional elephant population, (3) the local economy, and (4) government policy.

### **Volunteer Tourism**

The volunteer tourism industry has escalated significantly since the 1970's (Wearing, 2004). Determining the size and growth rate of this market has proven to be complicated; however, the marked increase in volunteer tourism organizations and activities suggests that this tourism sector is growing (Brown & Morrison, 2003). Volunteer tourism is considered to be a form of alternative tourism, and when environmental conservation is involved, ecotourism. The emergence of the "conscious" traveller has increased the number of people who are partaking in volunteer tourism related activities. These individuals seek out destinations that are focused more on the wellbeing of their host communities rather than the generating of tourism dollars (Weaver, 1998). Many tourists now feel more accountable for their actions at the places they visit and seek to improve, rather than play a part in, the environmental and cultural problems that are traditionally synonymous with mass tourism (Butcher, 2003). Today, it is more common for individuals to travel to a destination for relaxation as well as to volunteer their time and services to a local project (Gray & Campbell, 2007; Harlow & Pomfret, 2007; Campbell & Smith, 2006; Wearing, 2001). These projects range from local community service to conservation of the natural environment and wildlife. Volunteer tourism has begun to play an integral role in the sustainability and conservation of wildlife in many tourism destinations (Wearing, 2001).

### **Volunteer Tourists**

Volunteer tourism applies to "those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society and environment" (Wearing, 2001, p. 1). Scheyvens (2002) identifies volunteer tourism as a form of "justice tourism" as it "may involve individuals from Western countries paying to come to the Third World to assist with development or conservation work, as they desire to achieve something more meaningful than a pleasure filled, self-indulgent holiday" (p. 202).

Volunteering provides emotional and psychological benefits for the individuals involved. It promotes personal discovery and stimulates an individual's sense of self (Wearing, 2001). Stebbins & Graham (2004) discuss that volunteering gives an individual a sense of purpose and generates personal fulfillment, promotes concern for others, incites serious thought, and provides the opportunity to further an interest. Stebbins (1992) identifies that the benefits individuals gain from volunteering are: self-actualization, self enrichment, recreation or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self image, social interaction and belongingness. All of these factors play an important role in understanding why an individual participates in volunteer tourism.

Brown's (2001) study on the motivations of volunteer vacationers identifies that cultural immersion, giving back and making a difference to those less privileged, gaining friendships with individuals who hold the same interests, and seeking educational and bonding opportunities for children were the main motivators for tourists to volunteer on vacation. This study shows that the motivations of volunteer tourists are not mainly altruistic and tend to overlap with the motivations of the general traveller (Brown, 2001). Broad's (2003) study had similar findings in which it was shown that under two thirds of the participants who volunteered did so with an altruistic motive. Broad's (2003) study did, however, show that when exposed to a different culture these individuals had a changed perspective of the world, became more open-minded, more relaxed and content with themselves, and were less selfish during the course of their volunteering.

Thoits and Hewitt's (2001) discuss the affect that volunteering has on wellbeing. Their empirical study identified that there are six dimensions of wellbeing that evolve from volunteering. These dimensions are: levels of happiness, self-esteem, physical health, depression, sense of control over life and life satisfaction. Their study shows that volunteers tend to be happier and experience better physical and mental health. It provides evidence that the better a person's health is the more likely they will volunteer (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001)

Brown & Morrison (2003) suggest that the type of volunteer tourism an individual participates in is based on their mindset. Tourists who participate in volunteer situations are either volunteer minded or vacation minded. Volunteer minded tourists devote most or all of their vacation time on volunteer activities, such as missionary work. Vacation minded tourists

mainly spend time on ‘vacation’ and only devote a small amount of their time on a volunteer endeavour. Travel agents target these individuals by providing optional volunteer vacation packages, varying from three days to one week, which the tourist can participate in during their holiday (Brown & Morrison, 2003).

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Although volunteer tourism is an important emerging concept in tourism, the literature on volunteer tourism is fairly limited and is mainly focused on the volunteer tourist and their motives, values, behaviours, and personal development (Brown, 2005; Campbell & Smith, 2005; Stoddart & Roggerson, 2004; Halpenny & Cassie, 2003; Wearing, 2001). Although minimal, there are also a few studies that determine the impact that volunteer tourism has on local communities (McIntosh & Zahra, 2007), the nature of volunteering in developing countries (Simpson, 2004; Broad, 2003) and perceptions of various stakeholders towards volunteer tourism (Gray & Campbell, 2007). All the above research that has been conducted is important in understanding the various aspects of volunteer tourism. There is, however, a gap in the literature in terms of the holistic contribution that volunteer tourism has in the conservation of a species, the role it plays in policy development, the influence it has on non-volunteer tourists, and the economic and social impacts it has on a local community.

### **Background on Research Site**

The Elephant Nature Park (ENP) in Chiang Mai, Thailand is located 60 kilometres north of the city of Chiang Mai in the Mae Tang Valley, and spans over 75 acres of land, which is surrounded by forest and hills. It was created in 1995, with one elephant, and today is a shelter for 35 domestic elephants, 40 dogs, 13 cats and 3 cows.

The Elephant Nature Park is an organization which revolves around volunteer tourism to maintain its daily activities. The purpose of this park is to provide a haven for domestic Asian elephants that have been injured and abused (Elephant Nature Park, 2008). The park is privately run and does not receive any government funding. It sustains its operations through the revenue it receives from tourism and donations. Tourism at the park comes in the form of non-volunteer tourists, who visit from a period of 1-3 days, and volunteer tourists, who stay at the park for a

week or more to help in the daily upkeep of the park and caretaking of the elephants, as well as help in the promotion of elephant conservation in the region. Volunteer tourism plays an important role in the daily operations and survival of the park (Elephant Nature Foundation, 2008).

The Elephant Nature Park is the only park in Thailand whose elephants are not required to perform or give rides to tourists. It is also actively involved in promoting elephant conservation and animal rights in the country. Thailand has the largest population of domestic Asian elephants in Southeast Asia (Lair, 1999), approximately 1800 elephants, yet there are no conservation laws in place for their protection. Domestic elephants fall under the category of livestock and are therefore considered to be private property (Draught Animal Act, 1939). The elephant population in Thailand is declining and in the absence of any domestic elephant conservation law their numbers will continue to decrease (Lair, 1999).

## **Methods**

The research strategy that will be used for this study is an exploratory case study approach. This approach is a valuable method for researchers who wish to understand something completely and want to observe all the interactions between the variables involved (Dooley, 2002). Case studies allow for a more meaningful and in depth understanding of events and experiences. They do not follow any specific school of inquiry and findings can be based on both quantitative and qualitative research methods (Yin, 1994). It is an approach that has been used in several disciplines, such as recreation and leisure, psychology, sociology, social work, political science and business (Gilgun, 1994; Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2002).

Previous research on volunteer tourism has utilized various qualitative and quantitative methods. Campbell & Smith's (2006) research on the values of volunteer tourists who conserve sea turtles utilized semi-structured interviews to identify the values that volunteers had. In their case studies on the environmental tourism experiences of volunteer tourists Harlow & Pomfret (2007) also employed the qualitative methodology of interviewing participants to collect data. Halpenny & Cassie's (2003) study on volunteer experience, attitudes and values of conservation also utilized face to face semi-structured interviews to collect data. Lyons (2003) utilized case

study methodology while also collecting data through semi-structured interviews in his research on the experiences that participants of a cultural exchange program involving volunteer tourism. Gray & Campbell's (2007) case study on the aesthetic, economic, and ethical values for volunteer tourism in Costa Rica utilized in-depth interviews to determine the perceptions of various stakeholders (government, NGO, staff, etc.). Broad (2003) used an ethnographic case study to explore the relationship between volunteers, the volunteer experiences and the outcomes they eventuated. Brown & Morrison's (2003) exploratory study of organizations that provided volunteer vacations in the USA and the demand for the mini mission concept utilized surveys to determine the characteristics and wants of individuals participating in this type of tourism. Cousin's (2007) study on tourism operations in the UK that provided outbound volunteer opportunities used the quantitative methods of document analysis and telephone interviews to gather data. Lee & Moscardo's (2005) and McGhee's (2002) studies on pre and post-trip individual experiences of volunteer tourists utilized structured questionnaires

Due to the exploratory nature of the subject area, the majority of studies on volunteer tourism have utilized qualitative methods for inquiry. However, to answer my research questions I feel that a mixed methods approach will be more appropriate due to the variety of data that I wish to collect and time constraints that I will have. Creswell (2003) argues that many researchers believe that the limitations inherent in both methods will be neutralized when combined. He further discusses that "quantitative scores on an instrument provide strengths to offset the weaknesses of qualitative documents. Alternatively, qualitative in-depth observation offers strength to quantitative data that does not adequately provide information about the setting" (Creswell, 2002; p. 565). The difficulty in using this method lies in the translation of results from the two different forms of data collection and comparing them with the each other (Creswell, 2002). This study will use both quantitative and qualitative methods concurrently to answer the various research questions (Creswell, 2003, 2002).

### ***Research Questions***

There are four questions that have stemmed from the overall research goals:

- 1) How does volunteer tourism at the Elephant Nature Park affect non-volunteer travellers' awareness of the conservation issues surrounding the elephants of the region?
- 2) How has the Elephant Nature Park contributed to the conservation of elephants in the region?
- 3) How does volunteer tourism in the region have an economic and social impact on the local community?
- 4) What influence has the Elephant Nature Park had on government policy relating to the well being of elephants in the region?

### ***Data Collection***

The mixed method approach will be applied to this study through the use of self-administered questionnaires as well as semi-structured interviews. The self-administered questionnaires all contain demographic questions as well close ended statements that utilize a Likert scale. This scale ranges from 1 *Strongly Disagree* to 5 *Strongly Agree*. The semi-structured interview questions will all be open ended and will touch on a variety of topics ranging from government policy to their definition of volunteer tourism. For ease of understanding, the following section will be broken down by the research question and how it will be answered.

#### ***Research Question 1:***

- 1) *How does volunteer tourism at the Elephant Nature Park affect non-volunteer travellers' awareness of the conservation issues surrounding the elephants of the region?*

To answer this research question two self-administered questionnaires were created, in English, to measure awareness: Pre and Post visitor surveys. These surveys will be administered on the bus, to and from the park, to 100 non-volunteer tourists visiting the park. An example of the types of questions that will be asked can be found below:

Question		Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
12	I would like to learn more about the Asian elephant	1	2	3	4	5
17	I am aware of the conservation issues surrounding elephants in Thailand.	1	2	3	4	5
18	I am aware of the laws, regulations, and policies that govern elephant rights in Thailand.	1	2	3	4	5
21	Volunteer tourism is an important aspect of conservation	1	2	3	4	5
22	I would like to volunteer at the Elephant Nature Park.	1	2	3	4	5

*Research Question 2 and Research Question 4:*

- 2) *How has the Elephant Nature Park contributed to the conservation of elephants in the region?*
- 4) *What influence has the Elephant Nature Park had on government policy relating to the well being of elephants in the region?*

To answer these research questions, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with 12 individuals from the various sectors of the industry (NGO's, Tourism Authority of Thailand, Government Officials, and Academics). An example of the type of questions that will be asked can be seen below:

Do you believe that the Elephant Nature Park contributed to the conservation of elephants in the province of Chiang Mai? Can you discuss how it has or hasn't contributed?

*Research Question 3:*

3) *How does volunteer tourism in the region have an economic and social impact on the local community?*

To answer this research question a self-administered questionnaire was created to determine if there was any social or economic impact on the community. This questionnaire will be administered to 50 people from the local community in the Mae Tang Valley. It is expected that the majority of community members that will be surveyed will not be able to speak English fluently and therefore the survey will be translated into Thai. An example of types of questions that will be asked can be found below:

Question		Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
8	I feel that having tourism in this region is a good thing	1	2	3	4	5
14	I am aware of the current legislation regarding elephants in Thailand	1	2	3	4	5
17	I am aware of the work that the Elephant Nature Park does	1	2	3	4	5
18	The Elephant Nature Park has helped with community projects	1	2	3	4	5
22	I feel that the Elephant Nature Park is a good place	1	2	3	4	5

**Conclusion**

From this study it is expected that valuable insights will be gained on the impacts that volunteer tourism can have on conservation. Understanding the role and influence that volunteer tourists have on non-volunteer tourists is important when looking at the maintenance of the Elephant Nature Park as well as the creation of awareness of elephant conservation issues in

Thailand. It is hypothesized that volunteer tourists have an influence on non-volunteer tourists and that they will be more likely to extend their stay at the park, come back to volunteer their time, opt for participating in elephant activities that are not harmful to the animals, and become more aware of the issues relating to elephant conservation.

Determining what impact the Elephant Nature Park has on elephant conservation and government policy is important in understanding how effective the parks conservation efforts have been. It is hypothesized that the park does have an effect on conservation and policy. However, how measurable and recognizable this impact is can only be determined after interviewing experts from various industry sectors.

Understanding economic and social impacts of volunteer tourism in the region is important in determining how the park is perceived by the local community, as well as how aware community members are of the current plight of elephants in Thailand. It is hypothesized that the majority of people will not be aware of issues relating to elephant conservation and that they may not be aware of the park or its activities.

This study is significant as there is currently no literature on using volunteer tourism as a tool for domestic elephant conservation. Furthermore, it will also contribute to the literature on volunteer tourism as it is currently in its infancy. It is hoped that the findings in this study will provide significant information on volunteer tourism and how it can be used as a tool for conservation.

### *References*

- Broad, S. (2003). Living the Thai life – A case study of volunteer tourism at the Gibbon Rehabilitation Project, Thailand. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 28: 63-72.
- Brown, S. (2005). Travelling with a Purpose: Understanding the Motives and Benefits of Volunteer Vacationers. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 8(6): 479-496.
- Brown, S. & Morrison, A.M (2003). Expanding volunteer vacation participation: An exploratory study of the mini-mission concept. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 28: 73-82.
- Butcher, J (2003). *The Moralisation of Tourism: Sun, Sand...and saving the World?* New York: Routledge.
- Campbell, L.M. and Smith, C. (2006). What Makes Them Pay? Values of Volunteer Tourists Working for Sea Turtle Conservation. *Environmental Management*, 38(1): 84-98.
- Cousins, J.A. (2007). The UK based conservation tourism operators. *Tourism Management*, 28: 1020-1030.
- Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J.W. (2002). *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*. New Jersey: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Dooley, L. (2002). Case Study Research and Theory Building. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 14(3).
- Elephant Nature Foundation (2008). *Information on Park*. Retrieved on August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2008 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.elephantnaturefoundation.org/go/foundation>
- Fennell, D.A. (2002). The Canadian ecotourist in Costa Rica: ten years down the road. *International Journal of Sustainable Development*, 5(3), 282–299.
- Fennell, D.A. and Weaver, D.B. (1997). Vacation Farms and ecotourism in Saskatchewan, Canada. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 13(4): 467-475.
- Ghauri, P., & Gronhaug, K. (2002). *Research methods in business studies: A practical guide*. England: Pearson Education.

- Gilgun, J.F. (1994). As case for case studies in social work research. *Social Work, 39*.
- Gray, N.J. & Campbell, L.M. (2007). A Decommodified Experience? Exploring Aesthetic, Economic and Ethical Values for Volunteer Ecotourism in Costa Rica. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 15*(5): 463-482.
- Halpenny, E. and Cassie, L. (2003). Volunteering on nature conservation projects: Volunteer experience, attitudes and values. *Tourism Recreation Research, 28*: 25-33.
- Harlow, S. & Pomfret, G. (2007). Evolving Environmental Tourism Experience in Zambia. *Journal of Ecotourism, 6*(3): 184-209.
- Honey, M. (1999). *Ecotourism and sustainable development: Who owns paradise?* USA: Island Press.
- Lair, R. (1999). *Gone Astray – The Care and Management of the Asian Elephant in Domesticity (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed)*. Forest and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Bangkok: Dharmasarn Co., Ltd. Retrieved on August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2008 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/005/AC774E/ac774e00.HTM>
- Lee, W.H. and Moscardo, G. (2005). Understanding the impact of ecotourism resort experiences on tourist's environmental attitudes and behavioural intentions. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 13*(6): 546-565.
- Lyons, K.D. (2003). Ambiguities in Volunteer Tourism: A Case Study of Australians Participating in a J-1 Visitor Exchange Program. *Tourism Recreation Research, 28*(3): 5-13.
- McGhee (2002). Alternative tourism and social movements. *Annals of Tourism Research, 29*(1): 124-143.
- McIntosh, A.J. and Zahra, A. (2007). A Cultural Encounter through Volunteer Tourism: Towards the Ideals of Sustainable Tourism. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 15*(5): 541-556.
- Mowforth, M. & Munt, I. (1998). *Tourism and Sustainability: New Tourism in the Third World*. London: Routledge.
- Newsome, D., Dowling R.K, & Moore, SA (2005). *Wildlife Tourism*. USA: Channel View Publications.
- Peattie, K. and Moutinho, L. (2000). The marketing environment for travel and tourism. In Moutinho, L. (ed.) *Strategic Management in Tourism*. UK: CABI Publishing.

- Roe, D., Leader-Williams, N. and Dalal-Clayton, B. (1997). Take only photographs, leave only footprints. *IIED Wildlife and Development Series* 10 (October).
- Scheyvens, R. (2002). *Tourism for Development: Empowering communities*. Essex: Prentice Hall.
- Shackley, M. (1996). *Wildlife Tourism*. Boston: International Thompson Business Press.
- Simpson, K. (2004). Doing Development: The Gap Year Volunteer Tourists and a Popular Practice of Development. *Journal of International Development*, 16: 681-692.
- Spenceley, A. (2005). Nature-based Tourism and Environmental Sustainability in South Africa. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 13 (2): 135-170.
- Stebbins, R.A. (1992). *Amateurs, Professionals, and Serious Leisure*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press.
- Stebbins, R.A. and Graham, M. (eds) (2004). *Volunteer as Leisure, Leisure as Volunteering – An International Assessment*. Oxon: CABI Publishing.
- Stoddart, H. and Rogerson, C. (2004). Volunteer tourism: The case of habitat for humanity in South Africa. *Geojournal*, 60: 311-318.
- Thoits, P.A. & Hewitt, L.N. (2001). Volunteer work and well-being. *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour*, 42(2): 115- 131.
- Wearing, S. (2004). Examining best practice in volunteer tourism. In R. Steibbins and M. Graham *Volunteering as Leisure/Leisure as Volunteering*. Cambridge: CABI Publishing.
- Wearing, S. (2001). *Volunteer Tourism: Experiences that make a Difference*. UK: CABI Publishing
- Wearing, S. and Neil, J. (1999). *Ecotourism: Impacts, Potentials and Possibilities*. Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Weaver, D.B. (1999). Magnitude of Ecotourism in Costa Rica and Kenya. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 26(4), 792-816.
- Weaver, D.B. (1998). *Ecotourism in Less Developed World*. New York: CABI Publishing.
- Yin, R. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods* (2nd ed.). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publishing.