

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM IN A NEW WELLNESS-BASED ACTIVITY: AN ANALYSIS FROM SUPPLY AND DEMAND PERSPECTIVES

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is regarded as an effective strategy for alleviating poverty in some traditional communities (Dias et al., 2021; Yanes et al., 2019) because it provides alternative employment opportunities to traditional livelihoods (World Tourism Organisation, 2023) and opportunities to sell local products (Boonchai et al., 2021). Community-based tourism (CBT) has been widely recognized for its capacity to boost local economies, and it has been implemented in numerous nations (e.g. Juma & Khademi-Vidra, 2019; Setokoe, 2021). Consequently, the development of CBT increases the number of recreational and cultural attractions, which improves the quality of life for residents and respects their culture (Lee & Jan, 2019).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, travel restrictions have been a considerable blow for Thailand as they have made it impossible for foreign visitors to arrive. This has affected tourism activities on all levels, including CBT and rural tourism. In addition, new reasons for traveling after COVID-19 are becoming challenging for the communities to understand. While CBT has played an important role in generating local economies, wellness tourism is also one of ten key sectors of the larger tourism economy, which comprises industries that exist to empower people to incorporate wellness behaviors, activities, and life habits into their lives (GWI,

2018). This growth of the wellness tourism market has brought a research question, “How to strengthen CBT with a wellness-based activity to enhance the competitiveness of communities in rural areas.”

Without proper CBT studies and Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), negative effects on the environment and society may increase, such as unequal distribution of tourism revenue (Giampiccoli, 2020), low-skilled and low-paying employment (Tristanti et al., 2022), natural and cultural resource degradation (Musavengane & Kloppers, 2020), and low levels of empowerment (Dolezal & Novelli, 2022). Moreover, without a comprehension of demand, the negative impact factors may have contributed to a lack of profitability, inadequate contributions to community development, and insufficient marketing and distribution of destinations (Beaumont & Dredge, 2010).

Thus, the objectives of this research were to enhance CBT's competitiveness by adopting the CBPR approach to strengthening wellness-based activities and to generate an opportunity for community growth by strengthening insubstantial individual community operations. The research took place in three rural communities in Maha Sarakham Province: Baan Nong Pan, Baan Go Tha, and Baan Dong Noi, in Thailand's Northeast. These villages are approximately 70 kilometers from Maha Sarakham City and 440 kilometers from Bangkok.

Two of the three villages, Baan Nong Pan and Baan Go Tha, are well-known for various herbal products and large-scale herb farms, whilst Baan Dong Noi is notable for CBT.

METHOD

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were integrated into the Community-Based Participatory Research method. From August 2021 to February 2022, data were collected in two studies (Figure 1): in Study 1, community-based wellness tourists' characteristics and motivations were identified from previous research, then the group discussions between researchers were conducted to match communities' products and services with

tourist demand. Then, 60 residents from three communities, including community leaders, local entrepreneurs, local authorities, villagers, and stakeholders, participated in a group discussion. Community-based wellness tourists' characteristics and motivations were identified from previous research, then the group discussions between researchers were conducted to match communities' products and services with tourist demand.

In Study 2, trail wellness tourism tour programs were established. In the meantime, questionnaires and interviews were distributed to 30 volunteer visitors to evaluate the wellness tourism program developed and administered by local communities. Then, all feedback was given back to the communities.

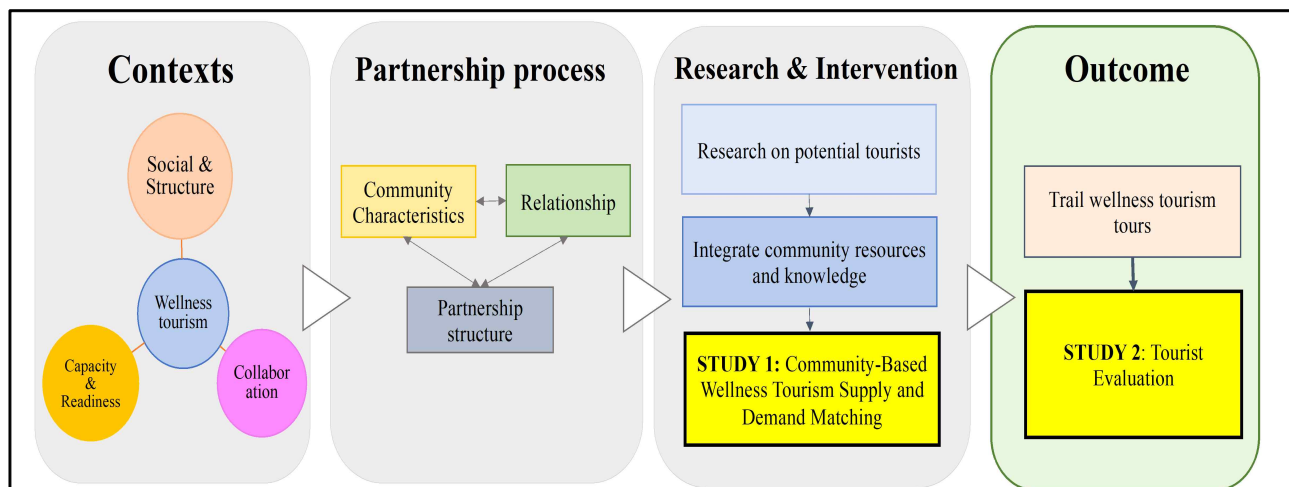


Figure 1: Research Framework

FINDINGS

Regarding Study One, the process of group discussions in the communities assisted stakeholders in determining and defining the primary attributes, products, and services in their areas that would be amalgamated into wellness tourism products and tourist experiences (Figure 2). The results showed that stakeholders from three villages viewed CBT and wellness tourism as an opportunity to address communities' socioeconomic challenges and stimulate communities' benefits. Then, each community assembled an inventory of its potential resources, including botanicals, herbal products, culture, cuisines, and tourism products that may be commercialized as wellness tourism goods and

services. Intriguingly, the findings additionally indicated that CBT expansion with wellness tourism encountered obstacles, such as a lack of tourist skills, management knowledge, and community awareness, as well as inadequate continuous support. Hence, the various elements of each community became the focus of subsequent conversations about the identification of solutions during group operations. In the meantime, the approach enabled the local community to recognize that CBT is the process of creating tourism, which was also emphasized.

In addition, the purpose of the first study was to match tourist demand and tourism supply. As the literature review, the highest score for the potential tourist motivation to visit a community-based

wellness destination after COVID-19 was a passion for seeking new tourism experiences, followed by self-rehabilitation and restoring one's life balance meanwhile, another motivation for a person to travel was to visit and worship sacred items. After

determining the demand, the researchers utilized these data to assist towns in matching their tourism resources and services to the needs of visitors (Table 1).

Table 1: Community-based Wellness Tourism Supply and Demand Matching

Tourist motivation (Demand)	Communities' resources/ services offering (Supply)
Seeking new tourism experiences	- Strengthening community-based tourism by adding wellness tourism activities and using native botanicals into new products/services.
Self-rehabilitation	- offering local gastronomic experiences and drinks prepared from native herbal ingredients in order to self-rehabilitate after catching COVID-19 - Watching a show from local communities
Restoring equilibrium in one's life	- Creating a new wellness program titled "Three seasonal balance and harmony wellness programs: Hemant (winter), Wasan (rainy), and Kimhun (summer)" to balance personal well-being throughout the year. - Providing an authentic Thai massage and foot bath with blue trumpet vine botanicals
Visiting and worshipping sacred items	- Paying respect to and visiting Phrathat Na Dun (the Buddha's relics) - Adoration at an ancestor's rural shrine



Figure 2: A process of a group discussion in the initial stage



Figure 3: The wellness tourism program operated by three local communities

In Study Two, tour programs for wellness tourism were devised and operated by three communities. When the tourists participated in the one-day wellness tourism program excursion, the activity was evaluated (Figure 3). The results indicated that the overall satisfaction rating was 4.43, which is a high degree of satisfaction. The most impressive program was a traditional Thai massage and foot bath with blue trumpet vine herbs ($x = 4.70$), followed by Local herbal Savoury leaf wraps ($x = 4.67$) and Hemant (Winter) lunch set menu; local foods made from local herbs and ingredients that are suitable for the Winter season ($x = 4.67$), respectively. This can be considered a high degree of satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

In the context of community-based tourism, this research examines communities' and tourists' perspectives on the development of new wellness activities by adopting Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). This project also constructed a CBT and designed wellness activities that match tourist demands to seek opportunities to boost their competitiveness. The establishment of a collaborative network among three villages presents the opportunity to address the issues of sharing tourism resources and information, training, promotion, and marketing to their respective communities. In addition, this study has significant implications for the perspectives of community-based wellness tourism programs held by tourists. The present study was one of a small number of studies that combined a trial tourism program with the development of a community-based wellness tourism product or service based on the sustainable tourism notion.

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