ABSTRACT

This research investigated the processes and experience of local involvement in tourism planning and management in the context of national parks in Thailand. This investigation was undertaken in order to: 1) explore the crucial factors for the success and the failure of community participation in tourism planning and management; and 2) where necessary to suggest significant strategies for solving the problems, and to increase the degree of community participation in the processes of participatory tourism development to achieve sustainable development and mutual benefits for local communities, park management and the tourism industry.

One national park was selected as a main case study and three sub case studies were selected from principal tourist attractions in the park. Methods used for data collection of this research were document study, interviews, and participant observation. The research population included park officials and local people who were involved in the case and sub case studies.

The crucial factors according to the findings of this research involved: 1) the approaches of tourism development in national parks; 2) the roles of park officials and their relationship with local people; 3) local leaders and their leadership; 4) inter-perception between park officials, local leaders and local residents; 5) economic benefit distribution of tourism; 6) the processes of participatory tourism development; and 7) social conditions.

Based on the findings of this research and from literature review, ten significant strategies were developed and identified for improving the degree of community participation in tourism development. These strategies included: 1) promoting clear and long term policy and setting clear objectives toward participatory tourism development; 2) adapting or changing relevant regulations to facilitate community participation in the processes of tourism planning and management; 3) promoting the roles of park officials as supporters, advisors, facilitators and coordinators; 4) improving ability and collaborative working of park officials; 5) developing understanding, attitudes and relationships between park officials and local people; 6) improving capability of local leaders; 7) providing fair economic benefit of tourism to local people; 8) improving local capacity to get involved in and gain benefits from the tourism industry and tourism development; 9) setting clear and practical processes of participatory tourism development; and 10) enhancing social conditions to support strong cohesion and collaborative working within communities and between community members and park officials and other relevant stakeholders.

A contribution of this research is to increase knowledge about the crucial factors of and significant strategies for community participation in tourism planning and management. This understanding may bridge the gap between theory and practice and may be adapted and applied in many national parks in Thailand, including broader perspectives of sustainable tourism and participation.