Promising local initiatives already include a self-regulatory instrument at Ban Mae Klang Luang and associated networking among communities that have resulted in formation of a network committee to oversee local rules and regulations for tourism management and natural resource conservation that are seen as necessary in order to achieve viable and sustainable eco-tourism. These rules and regulations seek to control or prevent unacceptable negative environmental and socio-economic impacts from tourism and enhance local economic development.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

Mount Doi Inthanon is a well known and very ecologically diverse provider of environmental services that also has spiritual and historically symbolic significance in the Kingdom of Thailand. Thus, Doi Inthanon National Park (DINP) is a prominent feature of the very extensive reserved forest lands and still expanding protected area system that within the last 50 years has come to dominate land use in northern Thailand, and especially its Chiang Mai province. As its natural teak timber stocks have been logged to exhaustion, and opium revenues vanished after it was outlawed and eradicated, environmental services still retaining attention of national policymakers now include watershed functions, biodiversity, and scenic beauty that can attract tourism, with perhaps some as yet still unclear interest in carbon stocks. Thus, the state is seeking to rapidly expand Thailand’s protected area system (PAS) to have high ecological connectivity in its coverage of all upland and highland portions of river basin watersheds in especially the upper north region of the Kingdom.

The local people living in this area since long before the government established DINP have tried to assert their land use rights. But since they are nearly all members of mountain ethnic minorities, even their rights to citizenship – much less traditional rights to use land – were initially unrecognized. Yet rather than evict them completely, the state allowed them to remain in enclave villages where they were ‘induced’ to change their land use practices in directions led by Royally-initiated projects. Now that a new generation speaks Thai language and has obtained citizenship, and at least some forestry officials have begun to have some insights into various strong points of some minority cultures, there has begun to be some recognition that perhaps alliances can be built with local communities to more efficiently and effectively manage the national park. In some enclave villages small areas of land that have long been irrigated paddy fields have even been cut out of the park and returned to local ownership, but local rights to access and all other village areas and land and resource use still remain unrecognized and officially illegal, and some are subjected to intimidation by lowland groups.

Efforts under government-supported programs conducted by the Royal Project, the Thailand Research Fund (TRF), and academic institutions such as Chiang Mai University (CMU), Maejo University (MJU) and Kasetsart University (KU) have sought to help DINP enclave communities develop livelihood elements such as new cash crops, fruit trees, agricultural technology, household marketing, handicrafts, and environmental conservation. But all these efforts have faced serious constraints, and many enclave villagers claim park officials still do not understand their livelihoods and related problems. It is perhaps instructive that after many years these supporting institutions are now converging in recommending exploration of community-based eco-tourism as an important way forward. Moreover, potential development of tourism becomes even more attractive when considering the increasingly dramatic lack of alternative livelihood opportunities particularly for ethnic minorities in mountainous areas of especially the upper north region of the Kingdom. And DINP has responded by launching a pilot case study of community-based eco-tourism with both environmental and cultural dimensions.
In what initially appeared to be an indication of some willingness by the state to help compensate some of the costs being incurred by local communities as a result of establishment of Thailand’s protected area system (PAS), local sub-district governments (TAO) having constituencies that include villages within national park boundaries and buffer zone areas are authorized to receive annual supplements to their budgets from the central government that in the aggregate total no more than 5 percent of the revenue payments received from the specific national park in their area. It has become clear, however, that these payments are not PES-like in nature, in that they are paid to an entity that is not considered a provider of environmental services, there appears to be no conditionality or restrictions on how funds are used, and amounts actually received by TAO in the vicinity of DINP appear to total less than 2 percent of previous year park revenues. Moreover, many consider these as more like ‘guilt money’ or ‘bribe money’ payments that are quite political in nature.

Although DINP senior staff do not include national park revenue-sharing with local governments in their notion of PES-like mechanisms, they are seeking to portray many other lines of park activity and projects as fitting within a PES-like framework (Figure 6). Despite the various types of motivations underlying these efforts, it is encouraging to see national park staff and conservation agency officials seeking to develop and work with this type of conceptual framework. There are still considerable ambiguities, however, in their understanding of what should be considered as a reward and to whom and for what it should be made, as well as in relationships among various institutions and actors, especially in the context of government bureaucratic policies, processes and politics.

The most interesting and promising area for potential further exploration of PES-like mechanisms and activities at DINP clearly appears to be work related to further development of eco-tourism. It is particularly striking that our study found a clear convergence of interests and recommendations for future directions from DINP leadership and officials, from local communities and village leaders, and from supporting institutions that have been working with various lines of project activities within DINP for several to many years. Indeed, the DINP pilot case study has already begun under supportive park polices that have already been announced, and there seems to be substantial enthusiasm from all key actors. But given the current description and portrayal of their approach as indicated in Figure 8, there are still substantial ambiguities and issues that will need to be resolved.

Thus, findings of this study suggest that PES-like rewards for providing environmental services in Doi Inthanon National Park could benefit from further supporting studies that employ a more enterprise-oriented approach to conceptualization of the mechanism, as indicated above in section 4. This approach could help to clarify all the key elements and relationships of the PES-like mechanism and how it can meet the tests of being realistic, voluntary, conditional and pro-poor, and includes the essential components of a clearly identified PES market, workable PES processes and relationships, and a suitably supportive institutional environment.

Indeed, the basic nature of the approach here is to seek development of a real market-based mechanism to mediate relationships between the community-based service providers and the service buyers (tourists). Appropriate supporting and co-investment roles can then be identified for the park and other institutions, including initial infrastructure and human resource investments, as well as monitoring and assessment of the real impacts of the approach and mechanisms on both the environmental services provided by the park and the livelihoods of households and communities employed by the system. Given the bureaucratic and political context of Thailand at this time, this type of movement toward a more market-based approach that requires a minimum level of reliance on state processes appears to be the most promising and innovative option available.