

The Socio-economic Impact of COVID-19 on Khunchaitong Elephant Community-based Tourism in Surin Province, Thailand

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Abstract

The paper investigates COVID-19's socio-economic impact on Khunchaitong elephant community-based tourism, and the responses to this crisis by its operating members. This community is located in Surin province, Thailand, where there is a long tradition of living with domesticated elephants in a natural setting. A qualitative study approach was employed in this study with semi-structured interviews of 12 key informants. The findings revealed that the presence of COVID-19 resulted in the government imposing lockdown and mobility restrictions on international tourists who were major customers of Khunchaitong elephant community-based tourism. As a result, it has caused an economic impact which includes income loss for households in the tourism industry, while the social impact from the crisis has resulted in changes to the participants' ways of life due to stress and anxiety. Only short-term actions were taken to respond to the impact, including household income diversification, following health advice from village health volunteers, and sharing life problems related to the crisis among members of the community. The findings have contributed ideas for policymakers to take necessary actions, particularly actions to transform the community in the long-term during the upcoming post-crisis phase.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic crisis, community-based tourism, elephant community-based tourism, Khunchaitong

Introduction

Recently, the world has faced an unexpected pandemic crisis in the form of SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19. Despite the fact that there have been many disease outbreaks recorded around the world, COVID-19 has been recognized as having a more significant impact on the world than any other pandemic in world history. It began as an epidemic in China, before rapidly and widely spreading around the world. COVID-19 has certain key features of a pandemic as explained by Qiu, Rutherford, Mao, and Chu (2017: 3), including a wide geographic extension, disease movement, novelty, severity, high attack rates and explosiveness, minimal population immunity, and high levels of infection/contagion. COVID-19 has been associated with enormous impacts not only on the population's health, but also plays a major role in the disruption of global economies, society, politics, and the security of national and communities (Qiu et al., 2017). Many countries have responded to this pandemic by implementing lockdowns among businesses and applying social distancing measures to prevent further outbreaks of this infectious disease.

The tourism sector has been particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic because people have not been allowed to travel overseas due to international travel restrictions. Countries with tourism-based economies, including Thailand, have certainly felt the harsh effects of COVID-19. In recent times, tourism has become an important driver of Thailand's growth, accounting for 12.3 percent of the GDP in 2018 (Bangkok Bank, 2019). The vast majority of visitors to Thailand are foreigners made up of a mix of tourists, businesspersons, or workers. Nevertheless, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of tourist arrivals in Thailand in the first 11 months of 2020 plunged 81.4 percent in comparison to the same period of 2019 (Lunkam and Leingchan, 2021). As a result, the tourism sector in Thailand is facing an unprecedented challenge to survive or go out of business, particularly for small businesses that rely heavily on international tourism as a major source of income.

Tourism in Thailand has long been recognized as a strategy for stimulating country-wide growth and development, as well as a tool that

leads to poverty relief and sustainable development in local communities (Charoensit and Emphandhu, 2018). Over the past year, community-based tourism (CBT) has been increasingly recognized as a crucial issue for sustainable tourism (Han et al., 2019). Thailand has paid specific attention to promoting CBT by establishing the Community Tourism Office responsible for CBT development. One example of a successful promotional program includes the One Tambon One Product (OTOP) Community Tourism initiative launched in 2017 with 3,183 communities engaged in this program (Community Development Department, 2017). Nevertheless, not all CBT programs have been successful in maintaining profitable tourism activities, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic began, creating more challenges for them to overcome.

This paper aims to investigate the COVID-19 crisis from the perspectives of the Khunchaitong elephant community-based tourism sector (ECBT) in Surin province, Thailand, where it has long operated tourism activities based on the local ways of living with domesticated elephants in a natural setting. This village is taken as a case study because it can represent an ECBT that relies on international tourists, and has been severely hit by COVID-19 since March 2019. A qualitative study approach was employed in this study with semi-structured interviewing of key informants who are members of the Khunchaitong ECBT sector and directly engage in community tourism activities. The paper aims to answer the following questions: 1) how has the COVID-19 crisis impacted the ECBT sector of Khunchaitong village; and 2) how have ECBT members of Khunchaitong village responded to the COVID-19 crisis? The paper also provides a review of the literature on the ECBT and the pandemic crisis and tourism, followed by the research methods employed and findings. The paper then presents a discussion followed by concluding remarks.

Literature Review

Elephant Community-based Tourism

The term Community Based Tourism (CBT) emerged in the mid-1990s, and is viewed as an interaction between visitor and host community

particularly suited to rural and regional areas (Asker et al., 2010: 2). This term CBT was first used in Thailand in 1994 by the Responsible Ecological Social Tours Project (REST), under the Thailand Volunteer Service (Suansri and Yeejaw-haw, 2013: 9). CBT in Thailand places an emphasis on the fundamental role of local ecosystems in developing their resources to become a tourist destination, participating in planning/administration, and determining the direction of tourism in the region (Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration, 2017). There are many types of tourism that can be regarded as CBT in Thailand, such as agricultural tourism, cultural tourism, ecotourism, and rural tourism. This research focuses on CBT that provides tourism activities involving the traditional way of living with domesticated elephants. Thailand has a long history of the domestication and deployment of elephants for transportation, combat, and work in the timber industry. There are an estimated 7,000 elephants in Thailand and more than half of them are domesticated (Frazier, 2019). Many of them have become roaming elephants and found their employment in the tourism industry because recent laws prohibit elephants from working in the timber industry due to deforestation and diminishing feeding grounds. The World Animal Protection's 2017 report indicated that there has been a higher demand for elephants in tourism, resulting in a 30 percent rise in the number of elephants at tourism venues in Thailand since 2010. In addition, there were about 2,700 domesticated elephants working in 250 tourist venues across the country in 2017, while 357 more elephants in the tourism sector are still living under poor welfare conditions (Bansiddhi et al., 2019).

In response to this concern, elephant tourism in Thailand has strived to provide an alternative type of attraction that focuses on elephant-friendly activities. Nowadays, there are 13 elephant sanctuaries located in rural villages in Thailand that provide tourists a natural way of living with and taking care of the elephants, including volunteer and local cultural activities (Amazing Thailand, n.d.). Many sanctuaries are ECBTs operated by community members with the aim of improving domesticated elephant welfare, mahout working conditions, community

participation, as well as the conservation of local culture, natural resources, and rural development. Community members and elephant keepers generally have positive attitudes toward tourism development in their elephant villages because it brings public utilities and work opportunities, and leads to better economic conditions (Clayvichien, Buraphansak, and Nakinchat, 2007). Most ECBTs in Thailand rely very much on international tourists and organize volunteer tourism, which includes living with protected elephants in a natural setting. Therefore, many ECBTs have been affected by the decreasing number of visiting tourists due to the sudden impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pandemic Crisis and Tourism

A crisis in tourism can be divided into two types, one that causes physical disruption and affects the system as a whole (Pauchant and Mitroff, 1992), or one where an enterprise [...] is confronted with a sudden and unpredictable catastrophic change over which it has little control (Scott and Laws, 2005: 151). Over the past decade, scholars have paid more attention to investigations of pandemic crises and their severe effects on the performance of tourism businesses. For instance, McAleer et al. (2009) found that SARS and the Avian Flu had a significant negative impact on international tourist arrivals in Asia and had to be controlled immediately. Walas and KrucZeK (2020) found that there was no formal crisis management planning employed by tourism businesses, particularly micro-entrepreneurs.

Tourism sectors have recently been facing an unexpected epidemic crisis. Since human mobility and travel create human interaction and cause the rapid spread of COVID-19, many countries have banned or limited the movement of people. Prior studies have investigated COVID-19 and its impact on tourism in various dimensions. For instance, Ratten (2020) pointed out that it has made it difficult for many businesses, particularly those in the service sectors to survive. Bakar and Rosbi (2020) found that COVID-19 has created a public panic that contributes to lower demand in the tourism industry, while Abiad et al. (2020) identified its direct impact on the tourism sector in

many countries, such as Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Cambodia. However, COVID-19 is a new crisis in the tourism industry that needs more research, specifically on tourist/resident behavior and the long-term/indirect effects of the crisis (Zenker and Kock, 2020). Stakeholders' lives and their perceived COVID-19 experiences which influence their attitudes and behaviors should also be studied further (Sigala, 2020). Research should also extend to the recovery actions of the tourism sector, particularly at the community level which is likely to be the most vulnerable since they often lack adequate resources to mitigate, change, or adjust to the new normal caused by this crisis.

This research focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the Khunchaitong ECBT which has experienced 'undertourism'. The concept of economic and social impact was adopted from the Socio-Economic Impact Assessment of COVID-19 in the Thailand Report. Economic impact includes the income and expenditures of individuals, while social impact comprises health and livelihood (United Nations in Thailand, 2020). The report reveals the serious impact of COVID-19 on informal workers in the tourism sector, who make up more than 50 percent of the total tourism workforce. They are the most vulnerable group affected by the sudden economic decline, due to unemployment and a decreasing income. These economic changes link to several social impacts on poverty, migration, education, and health/well-being, among others. For health and well-being in particular, the major negative impact has been mental health problems due to stress from lockdown measures and increasing poverty.

Research Methods

A qualitative research approach was adopted in this study following the suggestion of Patton (2002) that focuses on exploring and understanding social phenomena in a context-specific or real-world setting, without any manipulation from the researchers. A case study of the Khunchaitong ECBT was employed because it 'involves the detailed study of a few persons or items', and therefore provides 'an in-depth, detailed analysis'

(Casley and Curry, 1981). A list of key informants was identified and purposively selected to fulfill the criteria as being able to provide insightful information in accordance with the research objectives, had the best knowledge concerning the research topic, and expressed their willingness to participate in the interview. Table 1 presents the characteristics of 12 Khunchaitong ECBT key informants.

Table 1 Characteristics of Khunchaitong ECBT key informants.

Characteristics of key informants		Number of participants
Age (Years old)	35-44	3
	45-54	5
	55-64	4
Gender	Female	7
	Male	5
Business activities of participants	Provides homestays	5
	Provides homestays and work as a mahout	2
	Provides homestays and food	2
	Provides homestay, local transportation, and work as a mahout	1
	Provides homestays and production of hand-made products	1
	Provides homestays, food, and local transportation	1
Number of elephants	None	2
	1	1
	3	5
	4	4

This study used a semi-structured interview to collect data and the collection process followed the approach of Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). Participants were informed about the aims and procedures of the study, the anonymity of identifiable information, and the right to refuse to answer the questions or withdraw from the interviews. They

were also asked for permission to audio record and take notes on their responses. Each interview ranged between forty to sixty minutes. Field visits and interviews took place from June-October in 2020. On-site observation was applied during each visit to acquire knowledge of the village context and the participants' way of life (Merriam, 2009). Data were analyzed using coding and categorizing techniques, as well as to establish relationships conceptually by establishing a hierarchy of categories and subcategories (Harding and Whitehead, 2016), which emerged from the data. Triangulation techniques were employed using multiple data sources and data collection methods to enhance validity interview. Data analysis protocols and coding were used to establish reliability (Morse, 2015).

Research Findings and Discussions

Research Area

Surin province is the most densely populated area for domesticated elephants in Thailand. There are several villages in Surin that are home to domesticated elephants and mahouts, including Khunchaitong village which accommodates a large number of elephants working in the tourism entertainment business, along with street elephants that solicit money. The village covers an area of approximately 4,300 hectares, located in Chumpolburi district, Surin province. There are 143 households, of which 25 have elephants (17.5 percent). The village has a traditional occupation of rice farming, weaving silk to be used in the household and for sale, and catching wild elephants for sale and domestic use. At present, villagers work both in the agriculture and the non-agricultural sector. For those who own domesticated elephants, their way of raising elephants has been passed down from their ancestors. These traditions have been followed to create economic value, including elephant tourism activities during homestays, elephant-related products, and the Surin Elephant Fair. Nevertheless, many elephants left their original habitats to work in the tourism business, and some of them became street elephants begging for money because of unemployment, starvation,

the shortage of natural resources, and changes in the economic and social environment.

To rectify this situation, the Khunchaitong ECBT was set up in 2016 under the project “Elephants and Mahouts Return Home” supported by the Save Elephant Foundation in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The mahouts and their elephants were given opportunities to return to their villages. The ECBT has been used as a means to bring about economic benefits and sustain the life of domesticated elephants and mahouts in the community. The foundation provides support in tourism management, tour guides, marketing, booking, and veterinary care. The Khunchaitong ECBT provides tourism activities that are truly elephant friendly without the use of force, tools, or control, except in real emergencies. Tourists who visit Khunchaitong are designated as ‘volunteers’ and normally reside for a week at homestays in the village. Tourists are assigned to do activities related to rehabilitating the elephants together with their mahouts, volunteer activities, and experiencing local traditional culture.

The Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on the ECBT

The Khunchaitong ECBT has been operated by a homestay group that consists of 18 members who are also elephant owners or mahouts who have previously traveled the streets begging for money. The Khunchaitong ECBT has created businesses and jobs related to tourism for the community and nearby villages, ranging from homestays, cleaning and cooking services, drivers, guides, and local activity-based learning tours, among others. Some interviewees mentioned that before the COVID-19 crisis there were frequent visits of tourists to their village generating income for the community. Below is an excerpt:

We began the CBT in 2016 and have welcomed foreign tourists from many countries almost every month throughout the year. Tourists normally came three or four times a month. It was a good source of income for us to earn a living and look after our families (Pien [Pseudonym], 2020).

When asked about the economic impact of COVID-19 on the Khunchaitong ECBT, all participants agreed with the severe impact on community tourism resulting in a shrinkage of related income, which decreased by almost 100 percent compared to the same period in 2019. Although all existing COVID-19 lockdown measures were lifted in July 2020, the lack of tourism in the village has not yet improved because all visitors from abroad are still under restrictions to enter the country. Complaints from the interviewees include:

My homestay used to have guests visiting us from other countries very often - at least five or six guests monthly. But when COVID-19 occurred, there were no guests and no money (Karn [Pseudonym], 2020).

In the meantime, more than half of the participants pointed out that tourism-related expenses caused by the crisis have remained unchanged. The major expenses included mahout wages and the cost of food for the elephants. They also made comments concerning the unchanged day-to-day living expenses. The following are examples:

Elephant expenses remain unchanged. I still have to hire mahouts to take care of my elephants while there is no more income from tourists (Karn [Pseudonym], 2020).

My income has been reduced to a level that is almost impossible to live on. Let us say that that there is no income coming in at all, but expenses have been the same, including employee salaries, grass, and day-to-day living expenses (Lum [Pseudonym], 2020).

The findings of the COVID-19 impact on the Khunchaitong ECBT are in line with Blake, Blendon, and Viswanath (2010) who revealed that influenza pandemic crises have an economic impact on job security. Likewise, financial problems heavily affected the mental health of working adults in the United States during a pandemic. The findings have indicated that the economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis were fatal to the Khunchaitong ECBT. The interviewees believe

that government-imposed lockdown and mobility restrictions of international tourists lead to a loss of customers, and hence financial uncertainty amidst a reduction in tourism income. On the other hand, interview data also indicated the impact of COVID-19 on social life, due to distress and anxiety because of the economic situation. Respondents provided some examples of their uncertainty as follows:

I never thought this would happen so suddenly and unexpectedly. There was no warning for preparation and we did not know whether we could survive (Lum [Pseudonym], 2020).

Further, some participants expressed that they had anxiety because of concerns over the health of the community. If international tourists were allowed to come back to the village, there could be risks bringing the disease to the community from outside. In fact, they were unsure of the community's safety, whereas some participants were afraid that no tourists would come back to their ECBT causing a further loss of tourism income. Some participants provided examples that represent the overwhelming majority of answers about this issue.

No tourists, no income. But if tourists return, I'm concerned about safety. Afraid that they may bring the disease into the village (Peng [Pseudonym], 2020).

The results illustrate that COVID-19 has caused distress and anxiety among community members and has negatively affected their social life. This is in accordance with another study by Jitsuchon (2021) which showed that COVID-19 caused widespread anxiety and serious concern for the lives of Thai people. The impact has also widely expanded to all occupations and business sectors, especially for low-income earners, leading to severe anxiety for those who could not adapt to this crisis. In line with the World Health Organization (2020)'s research on SARS, it was found that the epidemic affected daily functions and led to immediate economic impact (lost jobs and reduced productivity), and psychological morbidities (depression and anxiety) in individuals who were directly or indirectly exposed to such

a life-threatening crisis. Gautret et al. (2012) also highlighted the issues for tourist destinations, because international tourists can spread infectious diseases to local residents and bring health threats to many different areas during a global pandemic. The interview results indicated that most participants lacked knowledge on how to receive tourists based on the standard of public health practices for preventing COVID-19. For example, only one respondent had prepared hand sanitizer for visitors.

Apart from that, the social impact of the COVID-19 crisis was apparent on the change of to Khunchaitong ECBT members' way of life. Before the COVID-19 crisis, daily life was tied to tourism, and activities were planned and scheduled every week. They worked as a team and were assigned tourism tasks by the head of the EBCT group. Since COVID-19, these routines have changed. One participant presents an example as follows:

Tourism activities have completely stopped. We now only inform the Chaingmai Foundation about the daily care of elephants. My routine work has also switched to taking care of the elephants by myself (Pai [Pseudonym], 2020).

With no tourists, villagers have no daily tourism work to do. Several of them have chosen not to do anything, while others have returned to former jobs that they did before becoming involved in the ECBT, such as rice farming, taking care of elephants by themselves instead of hiring mahouts, and growing vegetables and grass for elephants. The findings also reveal that discontinuation of community tourism has affected interaction among participants that used to occur through working together. They rarely got together now, and spend most of their time staying at their homes doing their own things, unless they are called upon by the head of the group. The activities they still do together are walking and feeding the elephants every morning. On the other hand, COVID-19 has not affected social relationships among participants' family members. All of them stated that they still live a traditional family life and take care of each other. Some of them even

mentioned that they had more free time to spend with their family members. The findings are in line with Prime, Wade, and Browne (2020) who reported that spending more time with family members after the spread of COVID-19 enhanced communication among them and strengthened their resilience.

The Response of ECBT to the COVID-19 Crisis

The interview data reveal that there have been two periods of the COVID-19 impact on the Khunchaitong ECBT that resulted in different responses. The first period was when the spread of COVID-19 first began and international travel restrictions were imposed in Thailand from March till June, 2020. The participants did not expect that the crisis could cause such a severe impact on tourism in the area and would occur in so short a period of time. Their responses followed the guidance of the foundation in Chiang Mai. However, they fully realized the significance of the impact after an ease of measures and restrictions. There were still no tourists coming back to the village. Participants responded to this problem by applying strategies to cope with the crisis in the short term, including finding other sources of income and reducing household expenses. Three respondents mentioned earning income from other sources by using their previous work to recoup their lost tourism income. One participant responded as follows:

There is no tourism job to do. I have to go back to my old job that was working on the farm to earn daily wages (Yai [Pseudonym], 2020).

These results are in line with Amanze et al. (2017) who stated that an increasing poverty level led to income diversification, i.e. the process of switching from low-income sources to higher-value activities. However, household motives for income diversification and the opportunities available to them, differ significantly across income groups and settings (Joshi et al., 2003). Two participants mentioned that most of the time they did not do anything because of the lack of financial resources to start new work. Other participants expressed that they didn't

know how to do other work or how to get started, and expressed their concerns as follows:

Many of us only know how to manage homestays and look after the elephants. We don't know how to start other jobs. It would be good for us if other organizations came to help us in doing other kinds of work (Pan [Pseudonym], 2020).

Furthermore, findings indicated that during the COVID-19 crisis, all participants had less income but the same expenses to pay, particularly expenditures on elephant care (mahout salaries and elephant food), in addition to family expenses. Their strategies to respond were to reduce expenses related to elephant care and household expenses. According to one participant:

I grow vegetables to eat in my own household, so I don't have to go to the market to buy food. I have stopped hiring mahouts and now take care of the elephants by myself. I plant grass for elephant food instead of buying it. I have also reduced daily expenses, such as decreasing my children's school allowance from 50 Baht to 20 Baht (Kit [Pseudonym], 2020).

The findings have further shown the adjustment participants have made, first performing tasks within their control, particularly in reducing the cost of tourism management and household expenses. This is in line with Phillipson et al. (2020) who found that small rural and cottage businesses have limited solvency and cash reserves, and are likely to be less prepared for disruption like COVID-19. They coped by reducing their household consumption, investment, and spending to compensate for reduced income from their business. Similarly, Mahmud and Riley (2021) addressed the trend of households responding by reducing food expenditures and increasing labor on their own farms.

Apart from that, participants addressed how they responded to the social impact of the crisis, particularly in terms of stress and health insecurities by following advice from village health volunteers to look after themselves and their families. According to some participants,

I have to take care of myself. Keep myself safe. Put on a mask. There was no need to do these things or be careful about disease before. But now I have to adjust myself to COVID-19 (Tan [Pseudonym], 2020).

Furthermore, most participants found that talking about and discussing the COVID-19 crisis by sharing their problems and feelings of uncertainty regarding the future with other ECBT members helped them to relieve their stress and anxiety. It also provided them with mental support helping them through changes to their way of life in this difficult time. Moreover, their daily activities and livelihood which used to involve the operation of tourism activities had almost completely shut down. This affected their attitude toward life, and they took it as a life lesson which taught them to carefully plan, spend and control their finances. Before COVID-19, they never had any financial planning, nor saved money. According to some participants:

COVID has given me a lesson in life. I have to spend money wisely and economically. I need to plan how to spend money. I also have to be careful to be safe from disease (Pan [Pseudonym], 2020).

More than half of them mentioned they have applied the sufficiency economy strategy to cope with the crisis by producing and consuming at a moderate level. Some of them also had positive thinking toward the situation by perceiving that the crisis gave them more time to spend with family, more free time for themselves to rest, and opportunities to learn new skills. Some participants explicitly described the positive impact of the COVID-19 crisis:

COVID has given me a break from hard work. I had to wake up early and prepare to service guests. Worked all day and finished late. I rarely had time to do other things. Now I have no work; I can stay home and spend time with my family. Family members have also come home and we can spend time together (Pai [Pseudonym], 2020).

Figure 1 illustrates a summary of COVID-19's impact and the responses of the Khunchaitong ECBT, highlighting the effects caused by the crisis. Income loss and remaining expenses are major economic effects, whereas stress, anxiety, and changes to the way of life are important social impacts caused by the crisis. This is in line with Pratomlek (2020) who states that the COVID-19 pandemic has created complicated issues and present a major challenge for the community to rebuild confidence and sustain tourism activities along while recovering their health and local economy. The Khunchaitong ECBT had a short-term response to this crisis at both individual and household levels in the initial period, and after the government's measures and restrictions were eased. They applied household income diversification by finding new sources of income from non-tourism sectors, as well as reducing individual and household expenses. Regarding the social impact, responses included following health advice from village health volunteers and mentally supporting each other by talking about and sharing life problems.

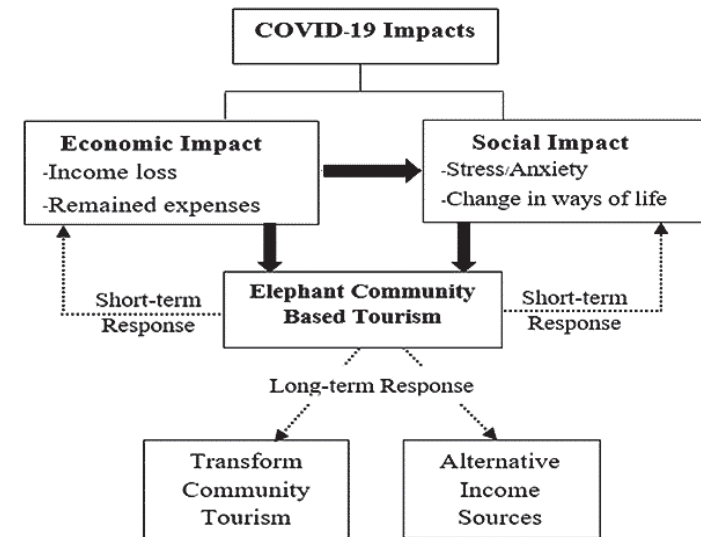


Figure 1 COVID-19 impact and responses of the Khunchaitong ECBT

Nevertheless, the Khunchaitong ECBT is still in a fragile state due to its over-reliance on international tourism and assistance from the foundation in Chiang Mai. It never prepared for external risks from COVID-19, let alone the new normal way of life resulting from the disruption. As Hall, Scott, and Gossling (2020) state: while COVID-19 continues its effects, there will be an uneven recovery as some markets will be aligned with the early period of restarting tourism. So far there has not been much government intervention focused on healing at the community level of tourism, especially since the ECBT relies mainly on international tourists. Ultimately, the transformation of tourism for the community will be necessary and may lead to answering how the ECBT can recover from this crisis in the long term. Furthermore, there will be some locations, individuals, businesses, and communities that seek to transform and change the way that tourism and hospitality are conducted in order to ensure resiliency for future crises (Nunn, 2020; Hall et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This study has attempted to explore the ECBT of Khunchaitong village in Surin province, highlighting the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 and the responses of ECBT members. This village is representative of ECBT communities throughout Thailand that mainly depend on international tourists and have faced extremely difficult challenges caused by the COVID-19 crisis. The findings indicate that ECBT vulnerability from socio-economic impacts includes income loss and remaining expenses of household and tourism-related activities, as well as stress and anxiety, and changes to their way of life. Only short-term actions were taken to respond to the crisis. The community has never been prepared for any external changes that could affect their tourism activities.

In addition, there has been limited practical assistance and policy support at the national level to help domesticated elephants and mahouts to survive through this crisis. At the provincial level, Surin

province has organized activities starting from December 2020 to help elephants and unemployed mahouts, including offering food to monks transported on elephants' backs every Saturday, allowing tourists to feed the elephants, and employing elephant taxis. However, such activities cannot attract many tourists. Other short-term help has come from the Raks Thai Foundation and the Thai Elephant Alliance Association, including donations of elephant food, providing grass seeds, and supporting the planting of grass. Therefore, it is crucial for policymakers to take quick and necessary action in order to assist the community during the crisis. Well designed and executed tourism crisis management plans under the stewardship of official agencies are vital to minimize risks and mitigate the damaging impact of the crisis (Ghaderi, Som, and Henderson, 2012: 83). The immediate focus should be on the economic impact, especially in the application of income livelihood diversification strategies, including the creation of jobs and alternative sources of income that incorporate local resources and community involvement. This crisis has provided an opportunity for the ECBT to redesign and transform tourism activities toward a more domestic market and agro-tourism. Furthermore, the COVID-19 crisis has resulted in a social impact on ECBT members in terms of their mental health, anxiety, stress, and changes to their way of life. Thus, government and local health services need to provide systematic support for addressing mental health problems, such as local mental health consultancy, alongside continuous monitoring of the social impact to prevent further mental health problems caused by the crisis. Moreover, it is necessary to bring together stakeholders in the ECBT, in order to carry out collaborations and plan for the reactivation of the ECBT during the post-COVID-19 phase.

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