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EXAMINING DESTINATION ATTRACTIVENESS THROUGH
TOURISTS' PERSPECTIVES AT PHU KRADUENG NATIONAL
PARK, THAILAND

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Abstract

This research aims to examine the attractiveness of a nature-based tourism destination in Thailand, known as Phu Kradueng National Park (PKNP) in Loei Province, through tourists' perspectives. Tourism destination assessment framework developed based on the Dickman's 5As concepts. It was included in the questionnaire with five-level of Likert scale as the tools in collecting data from 465 tourists visiting PKNP. The data were collected using a self-administered online survey and was analysed by using SPSS for descriptive analysis. The evaluation of PKNP as a tourism destination was perceived to be at a high level for all components, which include attraction, activity, accessibility and accommodation. However, the level was moderate for amenity component. The perception for attraction components was perceived the highest average mean score $M=4.65$, and its sub-components on natural beauty was valued the highest mean score with $M=4.86$. The results showed that the majority of tourists perceived the unique natural environment with a cold temperature, the richness and abundance of flora and fauna resources was the reason for them to visit PKNP. Thus, these findings are useful to the local authorities, practitioners and managers of the PKNP ensure its sustainability and popularity as a must-visit nature-based tourist destination in Thailand in the future.

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1. Introduction

National parks are the areas for nature conservation and protection (Kutin & Bhumpakphan, 2017). A global definition of the national park received finalisation and approval in 1969 at a General Assembly of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (Butler & Boyd, 2000). It is one of six protected areas categorised by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) (Dudley, 2008). National parks usually cover the large land areas where the natural environment is untouched and protected at the highest level. The areas are also used for different purposes, including biodiversity conservation, research and education and outdoor recreational and tourism activities (Butler & Boyd, 2000; Kutin & Bhumpakphan, 2017).

Particularly, in the tourism industry context, national parks play a vital role on the supply side of tourism and the natural attractions in the national park are the driving force behind tourism (Ariya, Wishitemi, & Sitati, 2017). The National park does not provide only the ecosystem services in the form of products such as food, fresh water, fuelwood, fibre, biochemical, and genetic resources but also non-material benefits such as aesthetic, educational, sense of place, and recreation and ecotourism (MEA, 2005). The beauty of nature and a variety of nature-based activities; for instance, hiking, trekking, swimming, and diving have become popular tourist attractions.

2. Problem Statement

In the past decades, it has been growing demand for nature-based tourism. This has brought positive impacts in a number of ways including the increase of employment rates, generating income, cross-cultural awareness, nature conservation and intrinsic values, protecting the environment, socio-economic advantages of local communities, increasing valuation of biodiversity and protected areas, reductions in hunting, and road network improvement (Honey & Gilpin, 2009; Stolton, 2009; Broadbent et al., 2012; Mao, Meng, & Wang, 2014). On the other hand, the growing demand in nature-based tourism has placed the pressure on the natural environment degradation include deforestation, land intensity, land function changing, forest harvesting, and pollution (Boori, Vozenilek, & Choudhary, 2015; Chaplin & Brabyn, 2013; Xi, Zhao, Ge, & Kong, 2014). Subsequently, introducing sustainable management for national park areas is useful approach to secure the natural environment that is conserved and protected for future generation and hence tourists' satisfaction in visiting natural parks (Plessis, 2010). In addition, tourism is an experience-based industry and tourists often base their satisfaction on the experience they have had at the destination. Thus, it is crucial to understand the tourists' expectations and experiences in visiting national parks. Then it can be used to provide a framework for developing effective sustainable management for the nature-based tourism at national park areas (Kafle, 2014).

To gain the understanding of the tourists' perception while visiting national parks, this study investigated national park facility management from a nature-based tourist perspective by using Dickman (1989)'s 5As for tourism destination assessment framework. Dickman's framework is commonly used to provide a guideline for the development plan for tourism destinations (Dickman, 1989; Morachat, 2003; Popichit, Anuwichanont, Chuanchom, Serirat, & Mechinda, 2013; Supada, 2014; Papadopoulou, 2016). Dickman (1989) suggested that each tourism destination should develop based on five 'A' to effectively

attract its tourists. These are Attractions, which refer to tourism resources including host culture, events and festivals, and the natural uniqueness at the destination. Attractions are often the reason for tourists making a visit at a particular destination and provide tourists' experience (Richards, 2002). Accessibility refers to the mode of travel that facilitates tourists to arrive and move around their destination (Rodrigues, 2017). Accommodations refer to places for tourists to stay while they are visiting the destination. Amenities refer to the tourists' facilities and services at the destination, including restaurants, public toilets, tourist information centres, and communication network facility. The final A is Activities which refer to recreational activities available for tourists to do at the destination; for example, town sight-seeing, shopping, car parking facilities and outdoor sport. He emphasised that these five A are the key success of tourism development. It was expected that the findings can be used for future nature-based tourism development of PKNP to ensure its natural environment values are sustained and serve its tourists effectively.

3. Research Questions

This study aims to examine the destination attractiveness through tourists' perception. The focus is on Phu Kradueng National park's tourists. The primary research question is "how do tourists' perceived while visiting Phu Kradueng National park.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate national park facility management from a nature-based tourist perspective by using Dickman (1989)'s 5As for the tourism destination assessment framework. The study seeks to identify the tourists' perceptions on visiting the Phu Kradueng National Park (PKNP).

5. Research Methods

5.1. Study area

Phu Kradueng National Park (PKNP) is located in north-eastern of Thailand. It was established in 1962 and was the second national park in Thailand (DNP, 2015). For Thailand, a national park is defined as land which is not private property or legally owned by a person. This land includes any mountains, creeks, swamps, canals, marshes, basins, waterways, lakes, islands and seashore which have been designated as national park areas. Such land serves three purposes: biodiversity conservation, research, and tourism (National Park Office, 2006). PKNP comprises a sandstone mountain which consists of many natural features including flora, fauna, cliffs, grassland, streams and waterfalls. Besides, Phu Kradueng Mountain is the head watershed of Lam Nam Phong River, which is one of the most important rivers in North-eastern Thailand (Figure 1). PKNP covers about 348.12 square kilometres with 60 square kilometres of a plateau on the top of the mountain. The highest peak is 1,316 metres above mean sea level (MSL). The plateau of Phu Kradueng is composed of pine forest and grassland (DNP, 2015). In addition, the weather on the mountaintop is cool all year round due to the higher elevation and climatic conditions, making it a significant attraction for tourists.

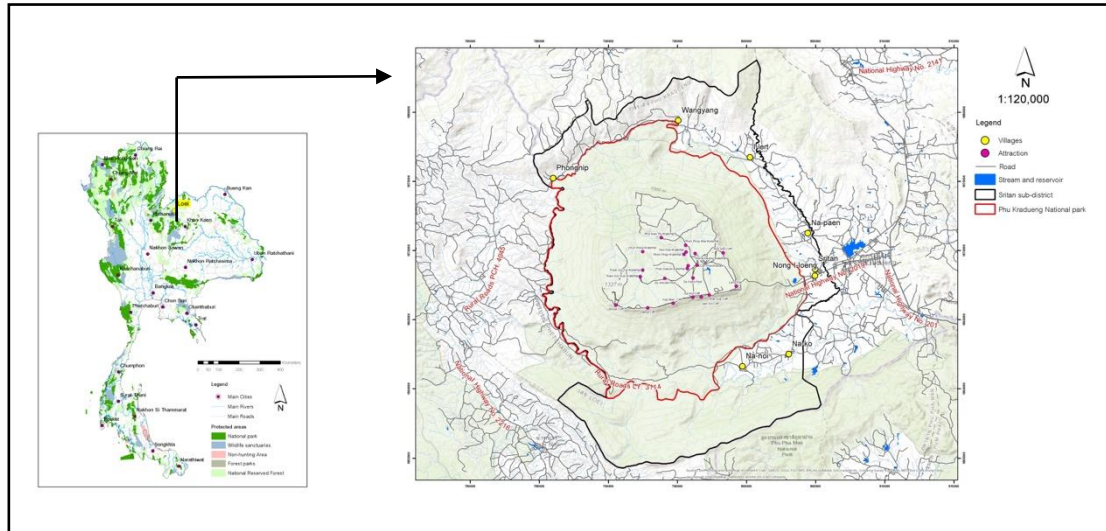


Figure 01. Map of the Phu Kradueng National Park.

Source: Royal Forest Department (RFD) (2000); Department of National park, Wildlife and Plant conservation (DNP) (2000)

5.2. Data Collection and Data Analysis

The current study used a self-administered online questionnaire survey via Google Docs to collect quantitative data from Phu Kradueng National Park (PKNP) tourists. The researcher recruited participants to complete the online questionnaires through Facebook and Twitter. For Facebook, the researcher posted information about the study project along with a web link. Anyone who read about the project and wanted to participate could go directly to the web link. For Twitter, the researcher browsed Twitter for the hashtag ‘#Phukradueng’ in order to find people who were associated with PKNP. Then, the researcher sent the study project details and asked participants to help complete the online questionnaires on the web link. The questionnaires were available on Google Docs for one month to collect quantitative data. A total of four hundred and sixty-five (465) were usable for the data analysis. The quantitative data were analysed by descriptive statistics, and the results were presented in frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, and level of perception.

6. Findings

6.1. Respondents’ characteristics

Table 01 presents the respondents' characteristics. It indicates that most respondents were female (57%). Further, the majority of respondents were aged between 31 – 40 years old (41%). Regarding the level of education, most of the respondents had a higher education degree (84.7%) and were government employees (34.1%) from the North-eastern region of Thailand (36.2%), where PKNP is located. There were nearly equal numbers of respondents who revisited and first-time visit (51.4% and 48.6%, respectively). Most of the respondents indicated that they went to PKNP for hiking (87.1%). The hiking trail is the only way to go up to Phu Kradueng mountaintop, which is about 5.5 kilometres in hiking distance. PKNP is a popular destination for groups of friends (65.2%) who seek adventurous experiences. Many often visit PKNP with a group of members between 3 – 5 persons (40.4%).

Table 01. Profile of respondents (n = 465)

Profile		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	200	43.0
	Female	265	57.0
Age	< 20	46	9.9
	21 – 30	142	30.5
	31 – 40	191	41.1
	41 – 50	51	11.0
	> 50	35	7.5
Education	High school	3	7.7
	Diploma	35	7.5
	Higher education degree	393	84.7
Occupation	Student	93	20.1
	Government employee	157	34.1
	Private company employee	111	24.1
	NGOs	4	0.9
	Business owner	55	12.0
	Casual worker	30	6.5
	Housewives	3	0.7
	Public enterprise officer	3	0.7
	Others	4	0.8
Origin	Bangkok	156	34.4
	Northeast	164	36.2
	Central	77	17.0
	East	18	4.0
	South	23	5.1
Visiting experience	First-time visit	226	48.6
	Revisit	239	51.4
Purpose for visiting PKNP	Hiking	405	87.1
	School excursion	27	5.8
	Business	7	1.5
	Visiting relatives	5	1.1
	PKNP as transit route	12	2.6
	Volunteer event	2	0.4
	Marathon	1	0.2
	Environmental camp	1	0.2
	Research	5	1.1
Accompany	Alone	14	3.0
	Family	72	15.5
	Friend	303	65.2
	Lover	61	13.1
	Colleagues	11	2.4
	Family and friend	4	0.9
Trip members	Alone	14	3.0
	2 persons	92	19.8
	3 – 5 persons	188	40.4
	6 – 8 persons	90	19.4
	More than 8 persons	81	17.4

6.2. Tourists' perceptions on visiting PKNP

Dickman's (1989) 5A's framework refers to Attractions, Activities, Accessibility, Accommodations, and Amenities. Table 02 presents tourists' perceptions of the 5A dimensions in visiting PKNP. It shows that tourist's overall perception level was high for all 5As (M=4.10, SD=0.67). However, the highest score was Attractions (A1) (M=4.65, SD=0.41), followed by Activities (A2) (M=4.10, SD=0.55), Accessibility (A3) (M=4.07, SD=0.59), Accommodations (A4) (M=3.99, SD=0.65), and Amenities (A5) (M=3.71, SD=1.14).

Table 02. Tourists' perception on visiting PKNP based on Dickman's 5A

Tourism destination components	Mean score	S.D.	Level
Attraction (A1)	4.65	0.41	High
• Natural beauty	4.86	0.37	High
• Cool climate	4.80	0.42	High
• Richness and abundance of forest resources in PKNP	4.68	0.55	High
• Richness and abundance of wildlife in PKNP	4.32	0.76	High
• The scenery of PKNP is good quality	4.71	0.52	High
Activities (A2)	4.10	0.55	High
• Variety of tourist activities	4.32	0.67	High
• PKNP activities are suitable for all ages	3.69	1.02	High
• PKNP activities are available all year round	3.52	1.02	Moderate
• PKNP activities give new life experiences	4.46	0.62	High
• Activities are exciting	4.30	0.68	High
• Activities are fun	4.45	0.61	High
• Activities are good for relaxation	4.44	0.66	High
Accessibility (A3)	4.07	0.59	High
• Walking trail is in good condition	3.98	0.82	High
• There are many rest areas on the walking trail routes provided by PKNP	4.21	0.73	High
• Walking trails are safe	3.91	0.81	High
• Porter service fee is appropriate	4.12	0.81	High
• Porter service frequency is appropriate	4.16	0.73	High
• Porter service is reliable	4.16	0.74	High
Accommodation (A4)	3.99	0.65	High
• Accommodations are appropriate	3.91	1.19	High
• Accommodations are adequate for tourists	3.66	1.28	Moderate
• Accommodations are in good condition	3.78	1.19	High
• Food and drink service is appropriate	3.68	1.21	High
• Accommodations are safe	3.76	1.18	High
• Emergency information is well notified	3.76	1.24	High
Amenities (A5)	3.71	1.14	High
• Visitor centres: Appropriate number	3.88	1.59	High
• Visitor centres: Good condition	3.74	1.65	High
• Restaurants: Appropriate number	3.72	1.65	High
• Restaurants: Good condition	3.65	1.60	Moderate
• Restroom – toilet: Appropriate number	3.46	1.53	Moderate
• Restroom – toilet: Good condition	3.48	1.49	Moderate
• Parking areas: Appropriate number	3.42	1.75	Moderate

Tourism destination components	Mean score	S.D.	Level
• Parking areas: Good condition	3.38	1.77	Low
• Tourist signage information: Appropriate number	3.78	1.57	Moderate
• Tourist signage information: Good condition	3.79	1.53	Moderate
• Rubbish bins: Appropriate number	3.66	1.48	Moderate
• Rubbish bins: Good condition	3.70	1.50	High
Average	4.10	0.67	High

Furthermore, the results are based on Dickman's 5A dimensions. For Attractions (A1), most tourists perceived the natural environment as the most important reason for visiting PKNP. They indicated that the natural beauty of PKNP was the most attractive feature, followed by the climate being cool all year round and the uniqueness of the pine forest and grassland of the mountain.

For Activities (A2), PKNP is famous among tourists who want to challenge their ability to hike up to the top of the mountain. This outdoor recreation activity is the most popular for middle-aged and younger age groups, which comprise the dominant ages of respondents. Furthermore, other activities tourists engage in at PKNP include sight-seeing, trekking, camping, picnicking, bicycling, swimming, bird-watching, and animal watching.

In terms of Accessibility (A3), the study asked about the experience of PKNP tourists on travelling mode to the park. Despite the mountain in PKNP having only one way of hiking up, most respondents perceived that it was a suitable mode of travel in PKNP's protected and fragile forest areas. Besides, respondents commented that the PKNP authorities should not build any construction to alter the mode of transportation in the forest. This is because construction would bring not only a negative impact on the natural areas but also promote negative experiences among visitors. The respondents, however, suggested that PKNP management should pay attention to the maintenance of the walking trail. It must always be in good condition and safe for travel. Moreover, PKNP should provide and support an appropriate workplace and competitive wages for the porters and their services.

For Accommodations (A4), most visitors stayed overnight in tents provided by PKNP on the mountain. The respondents mentioned that the type of accommodation was appropriate for tourists in national park areas. In addition, cleanliness and safety are essential to them.

The tourist amenities or facilities and services (A5) is the last component that tourists preferred. The perception among respondents visiting PKNP was that it is a natural tourist destination, so they were quite prepared for an uncomfortable trip.

7. Conclusion

This study investigated nature-based tourism from the tourists' perspective in the context of visiting PKNP in Thailand. The quantitative data was collected using a self-administered online survey with questionnaires filled out by PKNP tourists. The results were presented based on Dickman's 5As for managing tourism destinations. The results indicated that most tourists perceived the natural characteristics and resources of PKNP as the main reason for their visit. Outdoor recreation activities took place based on available natural resources. The favourite activities were trekking and hiking.

Despite the fact, the study suggested that many tourists perceived the environmental value of PKNP for nature-based tourism, future nature-based tourism development of PKNP should recognise their expectations on accommodations and other tourist facilities when visiting PKNP. This is to ensure its natural environment values are sustained and can better facilitate tourists' demands. In addition, PKNP management should allocate budgeting for the maintenance of the walking trail from the foothills to the top of the mountain since hiking and trekking are the most popular outdoor recreational activities for tourists. PKNP should provide a good quality experience for visitors while they travel in the national park.

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