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Cover Page Footnote

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Spiritual Tourism As A Tool For Sustainability: A Case Study of Nakhon Phanom Province, Thailand

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In the past decade, the number of spiritual tourists in Asia and across the world has rapidly increased, impacting the environment and community lifestyles. This study aimed to develop a practical process of participative education and sustainable tourism activities in the form of spiritual tourism. This involved deploying the concepts of environmental education, community participation, and Buddhist Dharma in an integrated manner. The objectives of the study were: (1) to study the potential for spiritual tourism of destinations in Nakhon Phanom province, (2) to synthesise a spiritual tourism pilot tour project, and (3) to evaluate the effectiveness of the pilot tour project in terms of key environmental education objectives. The results of the project demonstrated that participants gained new knowledge, awareness, attitudes, and participation regarding environmental concerns.

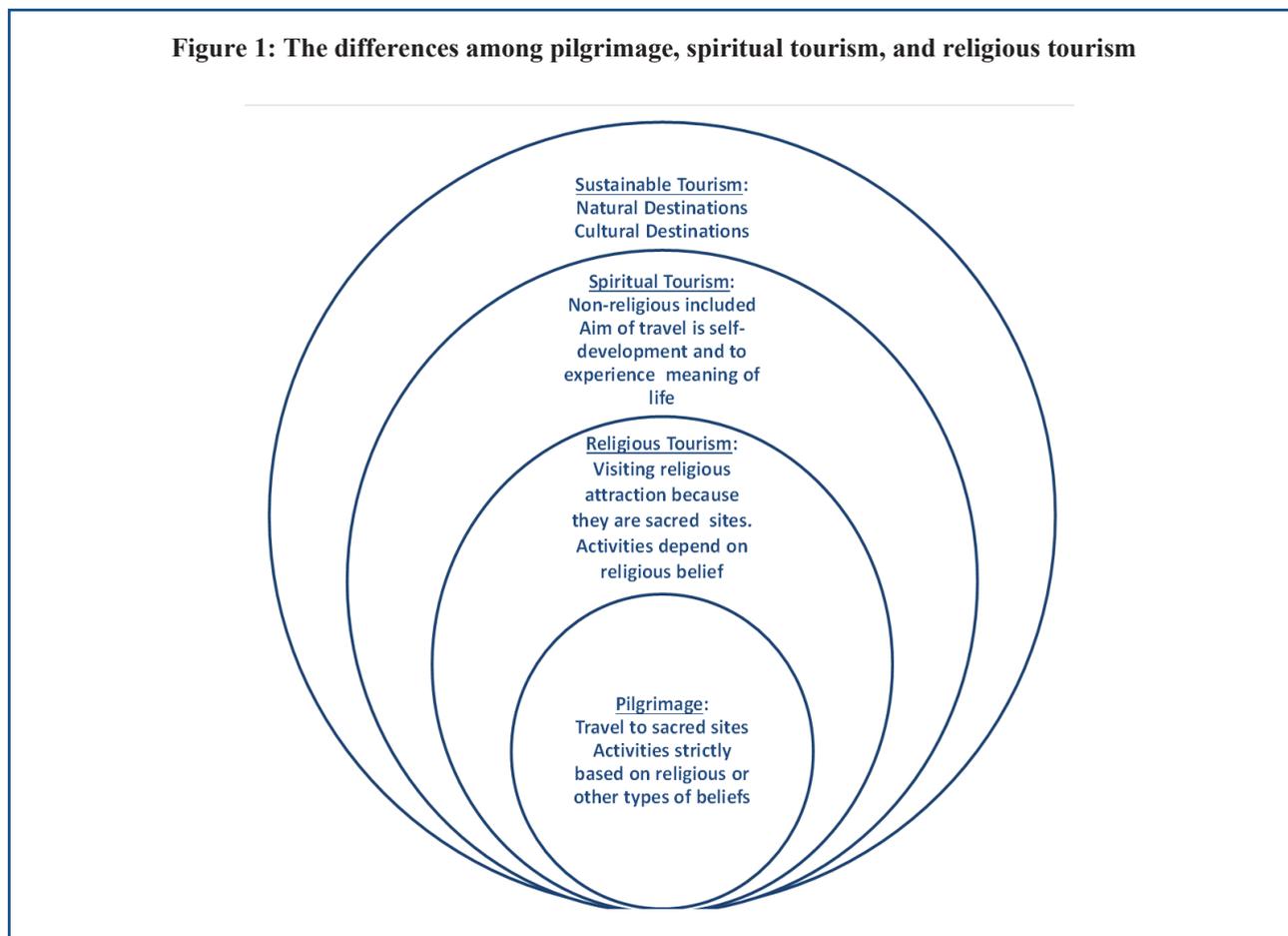
Key Words: spiritual tourism, environmental education, community participation, Buddhist Dharma, sustainable development goals

Introduction

In recent decades, tourism has become a major economic activity across Thailand. Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) statistics show a dramatic increase in the number of tourists visiting Nakhon Phanom Province (NPM), from 636,475 in 2005 to 982,620 in 2015 (+ 54%). Tourism revenues have risen from 734 million baht to 1,556 million baht (+112%) in the same period. Further, 98% of the visiting tourists were Buddhist. The direct and indirect impacts of this growth have resulted in an excessive focus of tourism stakeholders on economic activities. Through the resulting tourist behaviour, tourism entrepreneurs and other related stakeholders became major factors in the deterioration of the environment and historical tourist sites. A report on environmental quality by the Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning (2017) showed the negative impact of increasing numbers of tourists on the environment and community lifestyles in Thailand, including in NPM. The provincial development plan of Nakhon Phanom (2018-2021) reports that the most urgent environmental problem of the province is waste and waste water management, a consequence of the expansion of NPM town including a rise in tourism-related constructions activities. These activities have resulted in an increased risk of flooding which damages agricultural areas and communities during the rainy season with the situation getting worse every year. Furthermore, tourism-related constructions such as hotels and restaurants along the Mekong River have obscured the scenery around

important cultural and historical sites. This study aims to develop a practical environmental education (EE) tool to achieve its objectives i.e., the development of tourism stakeholders' knowledge, awareness, attitudes, and participation regarding environmental concerns and the creation of a sustainable form of tourism that can mitigate the environmental impact of provincial tourism. It also seeks to combine a process of participative education into the development of this EE tool as it involves tourism stakeholders at every stage in the process of developing this spiritual tourism project. The study focused on seven major tourism communities of NPM residing around seven Buddhist temples and relics, as part of a Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) campaign. The study's participative development effort included tourism stakeholders in thinking, planning, responding to, and evaluating their own tourism activities by applying Buddhist Dharma as a knowledge element in the development of the project.

Finally, the study also considers the success of the project in terms of the related United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which focus on **people** (healthy environment), **planet** (sustainable consumption and production), **prosperity** (fulfilling human technology in harmony with nature), **peace** (no sustainable development without peace), and **partnership** (with the participation of all countries, stakeholders and people) (UNWTO, 2016).

Figure 1: The differences among pilgrimage, spiritual tourism, and religious tourism

What is Spiritual Tourism?

Spiritual tourism, as defined by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), is one of the pillars of sustainable tourism development (UNWTO, 2015). Practically, in Thailand, religious tourism, spiritual tourism, and pilgrimage share tourism resources such as temples, sacred places, and religious festivals. Nevertheless, a knowledge gap regarding spiritual tourism exists nationally in Thailand. Norman (2012) states that spiritual tourism is a type of tourism in which the motive for travel arises from faith or religious belief and involves a search for individual self and a greater truth. Life events such as the activities encapsulated in this study can have a strong influence on how individuals (tourism stakeholders) give meaning to their lives (Willson, 2016), especially in terms of caring for other human beings and their way of life, as well as for the environment around them. In fact, the divisions between pilgrimage, religious tourism and spiritual tourism are difficult to discern as various kind of travellers are motivated by the desire to visit sites and experience moments during their journey that will add meaning to their lives (Collins-Kreiner, 2018).

Religious tourism and pilgrimage focuses on activities at sacred sites, religion and belief. The religious tourist and the pilgrim exhibit loyalty to the cultural destinations that they are visiting (UNWTO, 2017). Religious tourists are motivated for religious reasons but often a journey may have several motivations, such as aspect of holiday or cultural pursuits (Rinschede, 1992). While some spiritual tourists or travellers may undertake their journeys with similar religious beliefs, spiritual tourism can also include non-religious travellers, depending on their experiential intentions (Griffin and Raj, 2017). Spiritual tourism comprises a wider concept of a tourist's desire for change and relief from their daily lives. Thus, different individuals experience similar activities in different ways (Xin and Yang, 2017). The current study focuses on the spiritual tourist's activities as their broader scope make them more suited as EE tools for sustainable tourism.

In Buddhism, the word 'spiritual' refers to one of the three main component levels of human experience: the physical, mental, and spiritual. Buddhist teachings suggest that everybody lives with a spiritual malaise (Dukkha or suffering or pain). This malaise can be treated with mental force through Dharma, because Dharma enhances human wisdom and correct

understanding, as well as mental strength (Buddhadasa, 1971). On the other hand, the word ‘spiritual’ is defined by scholars as a complex and multidimensional human experience consisting of experience, intellect, philosophy, and behaviour (Norman, 2012; Cohen, 2006). Each person expresses the concept differently, depending on their specific beliefs (Anandarajah and Hight, 2001). As mentioned earlier, this study aimed to transform tourism stakeholders’ behaviour in line with EE objectives. It was expected that such shifts in behaviour would occur based on the target group’s understanding of the truth of nature. The truth of nature refers to the logical truth that birth as a human being requires making an effort to bring about a decent life, beginning with the necessity of basic survival. Survival alone, however, is not enough for living well. For living a good and contented life, one essential ingredient is education or learning (Payutto, 2018).

Buddhists do not own Dharma

According to Buddhist teachings, Dharma is a natural truth (Buddhadasa, 1999). This natural truth existed before humankind. It is the duty of each being to act in accordance with nature. Such understanding, or intelligence, can be acquired through education, communication, or practices involving the natural truth (Payutto, 1987; 2006). Buddhists not only live in a shared natural environment but are part of communities embedded in the natural order of things, where everything is necessarily interrelated. Further, Buddhadasa (1971) observes that Buddhists do not see the quest for personal fulfilment or enlightenment as one of isolated individuals pursuing their own greatest good. In line with this understanding, the current study applies Dharma as a knowledge element in the integration of spiritual tourism, community participation, and EE objectives. While the concept of Dharma bears close links with the primary aim of environmental education (EE). EE, at its root, seeks to make individuals and communities understand the complex nature of their natural and non-natural environments.

Spiritual tourism is an EE tool

As mentioned, the concept of Dharma bears close links with the primary aim of EE and EE must involve everyone because it is a process of maintaining or developing environmental quality through education programs targeted at the community at large (Wals, 2012; Sundar, 2007; Singh, 1987). As a developmental instrument, education can improve the quality of life of

communities by helping them explore environmental issues, engage in problem solving, and take action to improve the environment. As a result, individuals develop a deeper understanding of environmental issues and have the skills to make informed and responsible decisions (adapted from Wals, 2012; Singh, 1987). Thus, if travel activities are deployed as education tools, this could ensure an increased emotional impact. If travel activities occur in a religious place, the impact on education could / should be greater (Cohen, 2006).

Promoting NPM for inclusion in UNESCO’s list of World Heritage Sites

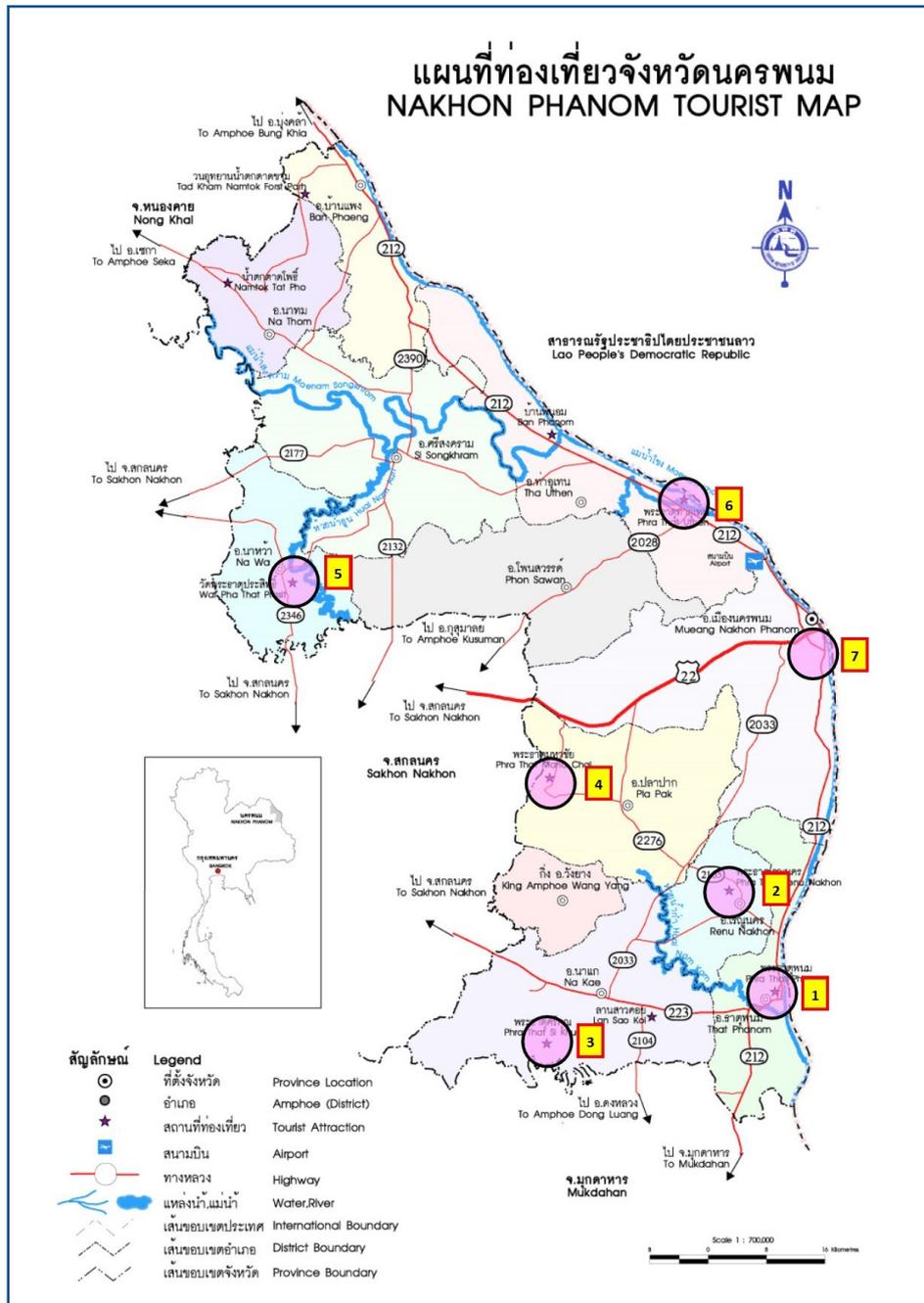
NPM (Nakhon Phanom Province) is located on Mekong basin in the northeast of Thailand (Figure 2). Its features a richness of authentic historical and cultural sites, and dominant geographic features. The province’s geographical location has made it a major centre of the GMS (Greater Mekong Sub-region). In 2017, the Thai Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, and Ministry of Education resolved to promote the Phra That Phanom

Figure 2 : Nakhon Phanom Province Location Map



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Thailand_Nakhon_Phanom_locator_map.svg

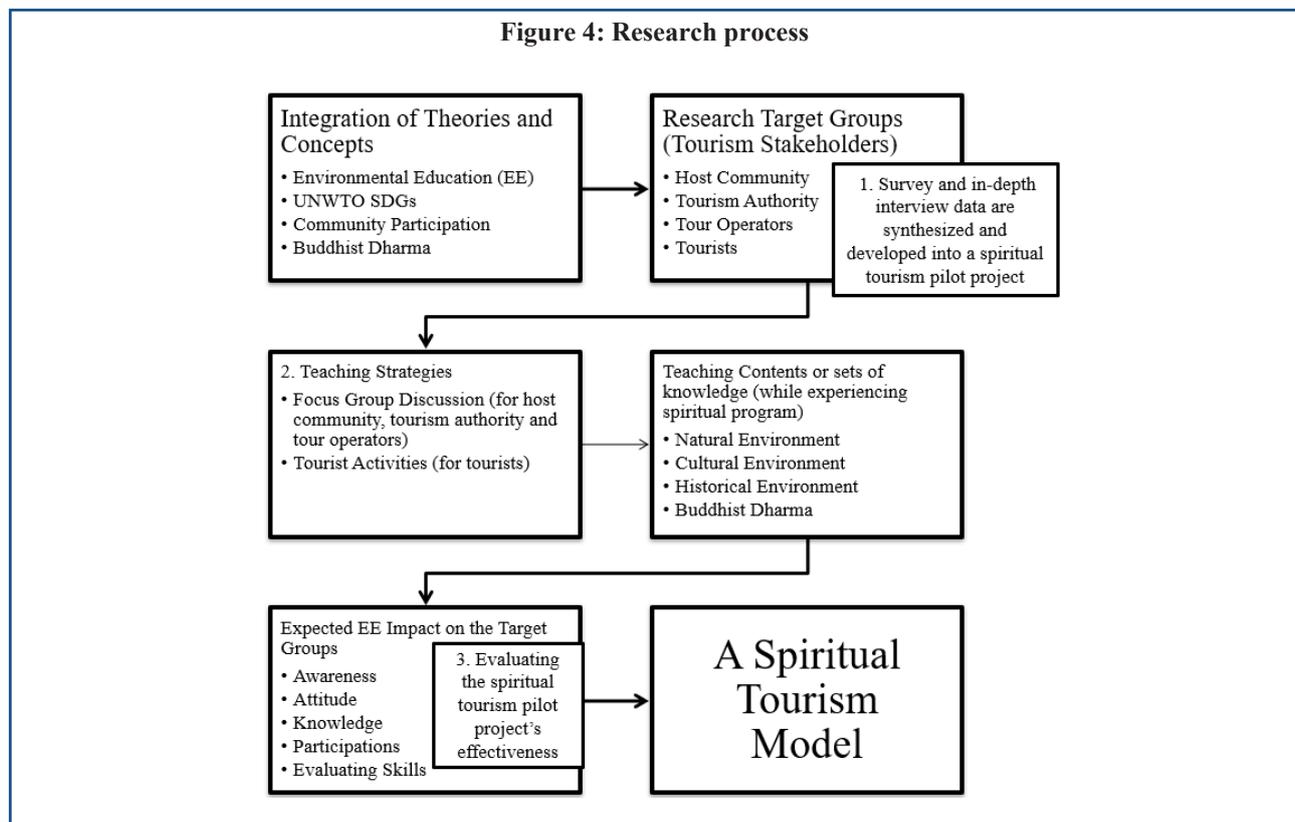
Figure 3: Nakhon Phanom Tourist Map



Source: Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2019

Relic (Figure 3, destination 1), a 2500-year old pagoda in the Phra That Phanom temple containing the chest bone of the Lord Buddha. To do this, they proposed its inclusion in UNESCO’s list of World Heritage Sites (Bureau of International Cooperation, 2017). At the time of writing, *Phra That Phanom, its related historic buildings and associated landscape* are on the UNESCO Tentative list, and thus remain under consideration by the agency.

Some years before the promotion plan came into being, the provincial government tested a sustainable tourism policy in the area. This included public relations activities aimed at preserving tourism sites, including historical constructions and ancient remains that are listed and unlisted by the Fine Arts Department in the Ministry of Culture (Kamwan and Jarumanee, 2017). However, the Nakhon Phanom four-year Development Plan (2014-2017) observed that NPM lacks practical sustainable support. Thus, tourism stakeholders,



especially local intellectuals, have had limited opportunities to participate in developing tourism guidelines and supporting their own tourism community and resources. Moreover, the poor integration of local education and tourism knowledge management, and the lack of reinvestment of income generated from sustainable tourism development were identified as major weaknesses of the provincial government's management approach.

Community participants and EE educators

The development of this spiritual tourism project focused on the tourism resources of NPM such as pagodas (phra that), Buddhist temples, and festivals. The concept of participation was applied as a tool for tourism stakeholder empowerment, especially as a means to enhance community ownership of the area and members' sense of belonging, which would affect the relations between the community and the environment, nature and culture (Cohen and Uphoff, 1977). Academic studies have emphasised the significance of attitudes of local residents and owners of facilities for tourism development (Nunkoo *et al.*, 2013). Community participation empowers by giving people the power to evaluate the value of their own culture, natural resources, and local wisdom, which in turn leads to growth in self-esteem (Besculides *et al.*, 2002). The current study operated from the perspective

that, through participation in the project, local residents of the community would transform their role and turn into EE educators who could evaluate their own natural and cultural resources. In this process, EE educators are concerned with teaching (or guiding) and learning about complex issues of environment and human understanding (Palmer, 2002).

Methodology

The development of the spiritual tourism project was based on a mixed methods approach, drawing from a variety of social science and humanities research. In seeking an understanding of this study's social context (Cohen, 1984), a single research approach or a set of numbers from quantitative data collection was insufficient to clearly explain human or tourist behaviour. Therefore, an integrated methodology, using both survey and participatory action research (PAR) in a mixed methods approach, was applied for a holistic analysis.

Figure 4 outlines the research process and the three steps involved in the development of the model used in this study. The process began with a survey of the NPM tourist sample group in seven major tourism communities and in-depth interview of key community informants (Appendix 1). Step one involved ascertaining which community showed the most

Table 1: Tourist demographics and travel behaviour and key aspects of NPM tourists

Survey Results	Percentage (%)	S.D
Tourist demographic		
Gender	-	0.49
Male	42	
Female	58	
Average age 36 yrs old	-	13.25
Occupation	-	2.46
Gov. employee	32	
Students	21	
Self-employed	19	
Other	28	
Travel Behaviour		
Travel by personal transportation	74	1.58
Rental transportation	26	
<i>Period of stay</i>	-	0.83
1 day	56	
1 day and 1 night	20	
More than 1 night	24	
<i>Attractions (more than 1 answer possible)</i>	-	1.01
Temples	85	
Natural attractions such as waterfalls and river banks	22	
Tourist perceptions toward tourism's impact on environmental conservation		
	Perception level (Likert scale average)	S.D
Traditions have gradually been developed by ancestors and given to posterity as heirlooms for conservation.	4.65	0.68
Tourist attractions that are historically important and valuable, such as ancient monuments, ancient communities, museums and temples should be conserved as they are.	4.63	0.74
Culturally valuable tourist attractions created by ancestors deserve to be conserved as they are.	4.59	0.72
Traditions and local people's lifestyles are of interests to tourists.	4.48	0.76
Tourist can play a part in conserving attractions such as temples that are historically and religiously important and valued.	4.43	0.81
Understanding of Buddhist Dharma regarding environmental conservation		
Dharma can help people understand the truth of life.	4.48	0.75
The Dharma principle helps people be conscious about conserving the environment	4.48	0.77
The Dharma principle helps people be conscious of the need to help each other.	4.45	0.77
Tourist activity requirements		
Praying while knowing the meaning of prayers and knowing the intention of making donations	4.28	0.89
Guidance for Dharma in daily life such as a doctrine for working, making friends and building relationships.	4.26	0.87
Implanting for environmental conservation, such as planting a tree.	4.26	0.85
Lessons about the relationship between nature and humans, such as how to farm in each season and the links between the Mekong River and people's lifestyles.	4.24	0.84

potential to be a spiritual tourism community (Appendix 2). Step two involved the synthesis of two sets of data from step one with data from focus group discussions (teaching strategies) with key informants of the community to design a spiritual tourism pilot tour programme. Finally, at step three, data for evaluating the effectiveness of the pilot tour programme were collected using reflection techniques together with participant experiences. This set of data was collected from tourists as well as the host community.

With regard to data collection, the study considered its population mean (μ) of tourists to be uncountable or infinity, as no official records are available in each site. Therefore, the sample size calculation applied the Khazanie (1996) technique, with significance level at 95%, error (E) at 1/10, and standard deviation (S.D.) (σ) from an infinite population. Data were collected from November 2015 to January 2016 using a questionnaire. The survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including the proportion, percentage, mean, and standard deviation (S.D.).

The survey covered a sample group of tourists visiting in seven communities along the main tourist route of NPM's TAT campaign (Figure 3), which covers seven Relics housed in seven districts. The group of key informants was developed using the snowball sampling technique. Then, a spiritual tourism pilot project was developed with cooperation from the host community showing the most potential for spiritual tourism, through the use of focus group discussions. Participants in the focus group discussions were representative of the local tourism community, and shared community tourism resources as local accommodation owners, restaurant owners, local food suppliers, community leaders, policy makers, and local guides. Finally, the

effectiveness of this programme was evaluated through the reflection technique after participants had experienced the tour programme and its development process.

Results and discussion

Questionnaire data were collected from 442 respondents ($n = 442$). The questionnaire covered four main aspects: tourist demographic data and travel behaviour, tourist perceptions of tourism's impact on environmental conservation, an understanding of Buddhist Dharma regarding environmental conservation and self-development, and tourist activity requirements. The results of the survey are tabulated in Table 1.

The survey results tabulated above showed that the average age of NPM tourist was 32 years old with females outnumbering males (58% and 42% respectively). About one-third of the sample group worked for the government while the rest were students (19%), self-employed (21%) and others (28%). Most of them travelled by their own transportation (74%) and more than half of the sample group travelled to NPM for only one day (56%). Sets 2-4 of the data, regarding tourist perceptions of tourism's impact on environmental conservation, understanding of Buddhist Dharma regarding environmental conservation, and tourist activity requirements, provided the modalities for synthesising the pilot tour project together with the community in the next process.

Appendix 1 contains data regarding the key informants from the seven major tourism communities. The data were collected from in-depth interviews of 37 key informants, with the representative group constructed

Table 2: Spiritual tourism products and services of Tha Uthen, NPM

	'5 A' tourism factors	Tha Uthen spiritual tourism products and services
1.	Attractions	Mekong view, historical sites, temples and old village, history of tribal migration, local lifestyle of tribe, the Thai-Nyaw
2.	Access	25 km. from the city of NPM
3.	Accommodations	Guesthouse near the attraction (locally owned)
4.	Amenities	Local food, handicrafts, souvenirs (all possessing authenticity)
5.	Awareness	Local volunteer guides with the ability to transfer their knowledge of local history, Buddhist Dharma, and the environment and its relation to human behavior
	Tourist targets and their behaviour - Students at all levels and government organizations - Travelers in groups of friends or family - 1- to 2-day travel programmes - Affordable travel budget more than 1,000 baht per day - Travel by car/van/mini bus	

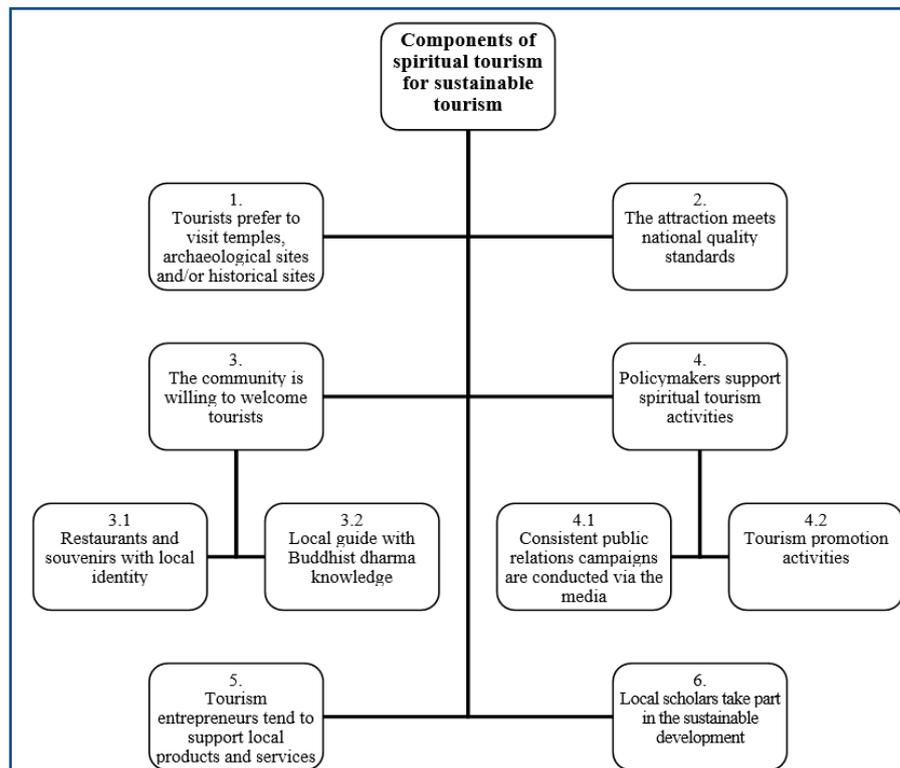
through the use of the snowballing technique, starting with interviewing the abbot of each major temple. The interviews in each community were terminated when information showed weakness in community participation and lack of tourism products and service providers. The results showed that Community No. 2, 6, and 7 demonstrated the highest levels of cooperation among stakeholders. Further, the results tabulated in Appendix 2, summarising the key products and services of each community, showed that Tha Uthen (Community No. 6) demonstrated the greatest potential as a spiritual tourism community since it contained several core products and services bearing the authenticity of the local, was located close to the city of NPM, and included volunteer tour guides with knowledge and experience. In comparison, the other 6 communities showed weaknesses in community participation or lack of tourism products and service providers.

The Tha Uthen community is located in the Tha Uthen District beside the Mekong River in the north of NPM. The custodian of the site was a local volunteer guide who serves as a pension servant. The guides were in general the former primary school principal and other teachers with a vast store of historical and cultural information. These local volunteer guides demonstrated important characteristics for spiritual

tourism personnel, namely their passion for and sense of belonging to their hometown. Their success also arises from their dedication to environmental conservation and community development, and their desire to ensure that the community remains a valuable tourist destination for decades. These findings confirm that community participants with higher levels of knowledge are more interested in high levels of community participation, as argued in earlier studies (cf. Rasoolimanesh *et al.*, 2017).

The spiritual tourism pilot tour programme was developed in collaboration with groups of tourism stakeholders, the Tha Uthen community leaders, the local and provincial tourism policy authority, providers of local tourism products and services, volunteer tour guides, and the local tour operator. Provincial and tourism scholars were also included, resulting in a total of 15 participants in the focus group discussion. Most of these participants had taken part in the earlier in-depth interviews. The results presented in Table 2 summarise the tourism fabric of the community, based on the ‘five As’ of tourism (Dickman, 1997), as well as the targeted tourists and their customary behaviours. The elements of tourism formed the basis for the spiritual tourism pilot tour programme of Tha-Uthen where the programme’s activities were linked to specific teaching content in relation to the attractions

Figure 5 : Components of the development of spiritual tourism for sustainable development in NPM



and amenities.

During the pilot spiritual tour programmes (one- day-one-night tour programme), local tour volunteers were able to provide input to create a comprehensive knowledge package following the attractions of the Tha Uthen travel route, including details on the nature of the Mekong River, fine arts in old communities, places of worship, cultural locations, and the way of life of the Thai Isan ethnic group and the people of Thai-Nyaw descent.

An important qualification for a spiritual tourism destination in the study was the presence of local volunteers who can transmit knowledge (about nature, history and culture, and Buddhist Dharma) to tourists. This transfer was undertaken to provide tourists with understanding, experience, and inspiration from this new knowledge, in order to improve their quality of life and conserve the environment and local culture. This was reflected by tourists from Bangkok who experienced the spiritual tourism pilot programmes:

... Tha Uthen is new for me. I gained more knowledge about Mekong cultures, environmental and cultural conservation ... I gained a lot of knowledge. If I hadn't come here, I wouldn't know ... Traveling can change attitudes and knowledge from not knowing to knowing ... travel helped me gain an understanding of Dharma, and I think me and my family can apply it to our daily routine ...

... Feel good to see local lifestyles. The community hasn't changed its lifestyle ... still preserves the archaeological sites ... these are an interesting combination ...

... Earlier, I knew that there were relics in Tha Uthen ... didn't know that they were brought from Vietnam and many Thai tribes live here. It's a good combination because I always thought they are all the same Thai ... When I come here, there are shrines and temples. Children can speak the tribal language ...

... I like this kind of tourism ... not touristy in terms of commerce ... people help each other and that makes it more interesting ...

The developed spiritual tourism project for NPM showed great potential. During the process of development, it was seen that each of the stakeholders participated in all stages, especially the host community leaders and volunteers. The project showed the potential of the people's motivations regarding environmental concern, as confirmed by community's key informants, volunteer tour guide (1) and (2):

... For tour guides, they'll have income and be proud of themselves. These (tourism) activities can raise their motivations for taking care of their home ...

... This programme is on the right track. Even though it takes time to develop on people's concerns, it's enough ... If you are keen on knowledge, you have to discuss the dharma ... If you come here, you have to talk to people who know the story ...

To develop the personnel in the community, all tourism stakeholders must have real knowledge regarding the attainment of EE objectives. This knowledge will affect the environment, culture and way of life of the people. This effect was confirmed by another community key informant (volunteer tour guide 3):

Table 3: Educational components with spiritual tourism concepts

Stage of EE evaluation	EE educator	Teaching content	Target group	Evaluations Techniques
Knowledge Awareness Attitude Participation	Local guide	- Mekong natural habitat - Local culture - Temples and historical sites and their history - Religious festivals - Buddhist dharma	Youth local guide Tourists	Reflection on site or online
Knowledge Awareness Attitude Participation	Community leader or chief		Community/small business owners	Focus group discussion Reflection
Knowledge Awareness Attitude Participation	Local guide Local scholars		Policy makers	Focus group discussion

Figure 6 : The 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals



Source: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org>

... Dharma is nature. We have to lift people up and enhance them ... the most important resources are human resources. If local people don't understand and (have to) ask for help from outsiders to explain their hometown, that means they're not qualified to be locals.

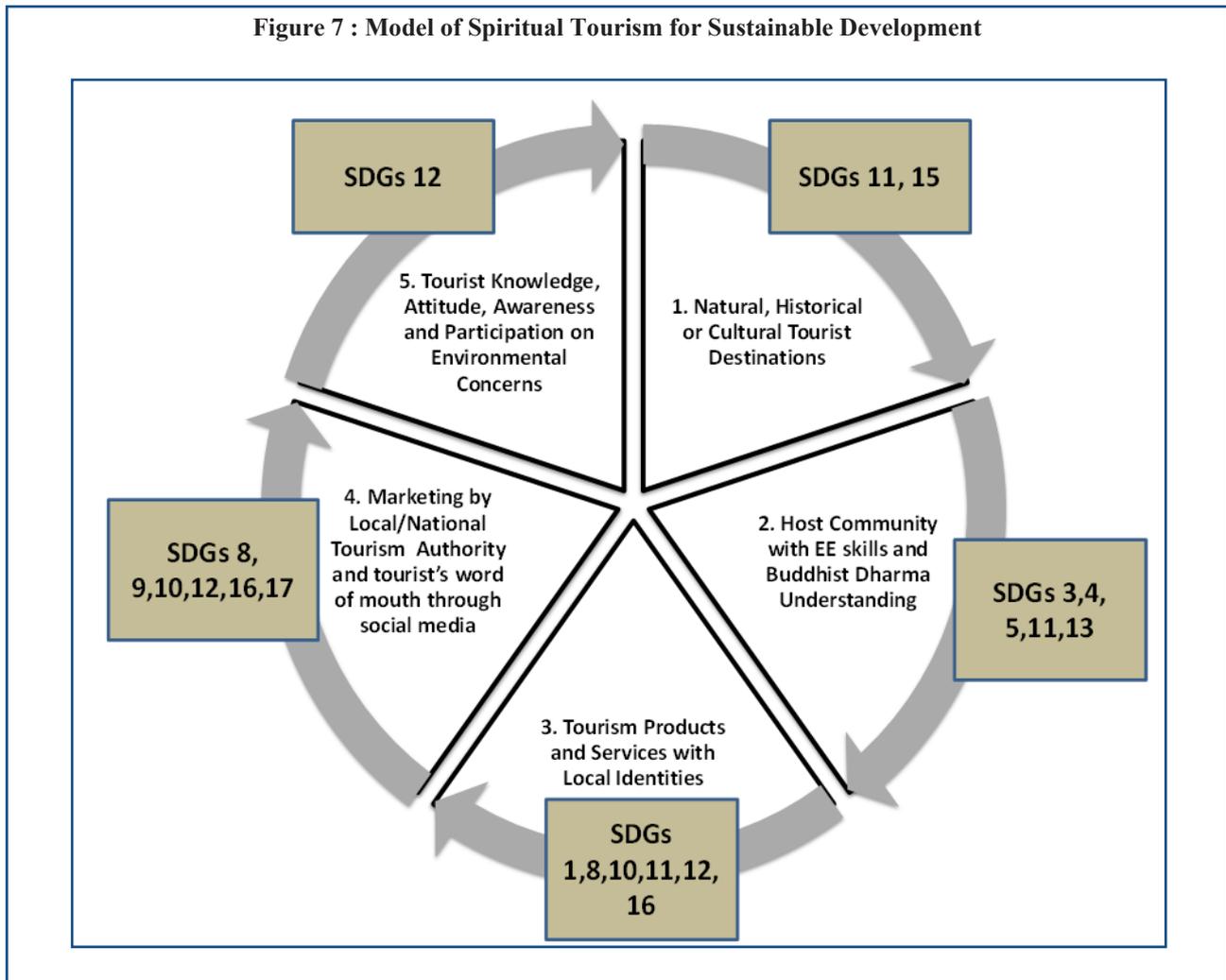
The various components that were taken into account in the development of a spiritual tourism project for sustainable tourism in NPM are explained in Figure 5

At the end of the development process, the output of the research process was a spiritual tourism project for sustainable tourism. This project carries expectations that the effects of development will remain and result in changes in the behaviour or way of life of the people in the community, in a positive way that is consistent with the goals of a sustainable learning environment. Further, this will be transmitted from generation to generation, including knowledge of the places of historic importance, historical buildings, dwellings, local historical knowledge, habitation, culture and lifestyles of local tribes, food, costumes, and clothing. Finally, the study takes into account the importance of sacred geographies and elements of nature and natural history that inspire and enhance the meaning of the journey (Eppig, 2018:57). After participants' (both are tourists and host community) experimenting with the spiritual tour programme and its effectiveness was evaluated (by using a reflection technique), it was found that the educational components can be

integrated as illustrated in Table 3. This Table presents the result of the spiritual pilot tour programme together with a reflection technique analysis based on the EE objectives/EE stage of evaluation, the nature of the EE educator, the knowledge to be transmitted (teaching content), the nature of the learners (target group), and the teaching and evaluation techniques to be used (applied from Sundar, 2007).

Moreover, the findings of the study confirmed that developing education programs for residents or the host communities required both hands-on training and formal learning components. This project also provided residents with the knowledge of the positive and negative impacts of tourism development on their community. Similarly to Cárdenas (2015), this study provides a tool for tourism planners (tourism stakeholders) to assess their community's level of awareness and agreement with regard to using EE for increasing their understanding and knowledge of sustainable tourism development. In the process, their environment becomes a place to live in, know about, learn about, plan for, and take care of (Sauvé, 1996). The development process of the project could apply to any tourism destination, travellers and host communities. It is not restricted to adherents of Buddhism and does not require sharing in the same beliefs since the aim of the journey is self-development.

Figure 7 : Model of Spiritual Tourism for Sustainable Development



Motivations for self-development are the key for tourists' activities. The spiritual tourism stakeholders could understand positive inner values, such as compassion, kindness, and generosity (Lama, 2012), and thus appreciate the value of the environment whether, human-made or natural, and host communities with EE skills were glad to take care of their homes to ensure continued visits. Together with historical places, cultural places and Dharma, residents begin to incorporate environmental concerns into their daily lives, including at home, at school, in their neighbourhoods, at work, and at play and / or in leisure (Singh, 2012).

As mentioned earlier, the primary aim of EE is to help individuals and communities understand the complex nature of their natural and non-natural environments, and its activities must involve everyone. EE is all about humans and the planet and it shares the core of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, results of the project confirmed that the **People** (the project participants) have gained knowledge on environmental concerns which

potentially leads them to live sustainably in a healthy environment. We also witness **partnership** among tourism stakeholders from the tour programme designing, tourism products and services, and tourism activities which are an evidence of the sustainable community.

Conclusion

The project proposed in this study combines a process of participative education with the implementation of sustainable tourism activities. There is no arguing that the spiritual tourism activities in this study were informal education tools that involved a process of knowledge transfer and human transformation. The activities were related to the creation of group dynamics and interpersonal relationships among people in the community, and to the development of shared values and beliefs (Jeffs and Smith, 1990). The principles of Buddhism were at the centre of this process of assessing target groups' wisdom or real knowledge. If each individual knows and understands an appropriate way of life, knows how to think, speak,

and operate, when it comes time to cooperate together (participation), the results will be greater. Ethics are the key to facilitate the appropriate way of life. Buddhists believe that all people have an equal opportunity to maximise their self-development and well-being. Educational activities (in this case meaning spiritual tourism activities) can be put into practice in the form of timeless principles such as compassion, good will, harmony, cooperation and wisdom (Payutto, 1997) in order that each individual reach the appropriate way of life.

This participation process results in a balance of the four pillars that will lead to sustainability in human society and the environment. The study concludes that the process and factors involved in the development of the spiritual tourism project for sustainable development positively impacted the attainment of EE objectives by the target groups. Particularly, the participation of the host community at all stages during the project's development process was an essential component.

This spiritual tourism project can be consistent with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, which provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet. At the core of this agenda are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Figure 6), which are an urgent call to action for all countries (United Nations, 2015).

Tourism is one of the major human activities that impacts on the planet and human lives. A *Model of Spiritual Tourism for Sustainable Development* (Figure 6) has been developed elaborating the components of spiritual tourism in NPM (see Figure 4). Practically, further study will be required to investigate how well it matches with the SDGs.

Further study must be conducted on the spiritual tourism market in terms of tour program attractiveness. The inability to explore longitudinal effects is one of the main limitations of this project. Development impacts on human behaviour and environment require further study, in order to investigate the continued participation of research targets. Further, alongside the continuous evaluation process of the tour programme, there is a need to explore how it could apply to classroom activities in order to build environmental awareness among young students at various educational levels and be used as an educational tool for sustainable development.

Ethical Considerations

This study involved human participants. The project was certified by a University Committee for Research Ethics (Social Sciences) in full compliance with international guidelines for human research protection. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the survey, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions.

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Appendix 1 Key informants from seven major tourism communities

Community	Policy makers	Small accommodation/ restaurant owners	Souvenirs /food products (Shops owned by the community)	Local Tour operators	Local guides	Local leaders
1. That Phanom	-	-	Pornprasert, caramel stirred candy shop owner	34.-35 WinWin Smile, owner and tour guide	Wat That Phanom Primary school teacher (youth tour guide project manager)	3. Representative of That Phanom temple abbot
2. Renu Nakhon	4. Chief of Renu district governor	5. Furgfa, noodles restaurant	6. Tipwiman, Local hand-woven cotton & silk distributor		7. Renu Primary school teacher (youth tour guide project manager)	8. Abbot of That Eenu temple
3. Nakae	-	9. Baan Piman Homestay	10. Local fabrics, indigo-dyed fabrics, hand-woven fabrics		-	11. Abbot of That Srikun temple
4. Pla Pak	-	-	-		12. Director of PlaPak Primary school 13. Primary school teacher (youth tour guide project manager)	14. Abbot of That Maha Chai temple
5. Na Wa	-	15. Na Wa Guesthouse	16. Chief of Local hand-woven cotton & silk maker under The Foundation of the Promotion of Supplementary Occupations and Related Techniques of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit of Thailand		-	17. Abbot of That Prasit temple
6. Tha Uthen	18. Chief of Tha Uthen district governor	19. Sririporn Guesthouse 20. Restaurant owner	21. Pickled fish (Som Pla Dow, pickled giant mudfish)		22. Primary school teacher (youth tour guide project manager) 23. Former of primary school teacher (youth tour guide project co-operator)	24. Abbot of That Tha- Uthen temple *25. Mr. Pichai *26. Mr. Wanchart *27. Mr. Weeradech
7. Meuang	28. Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) 29. Tourism and sport ministry (Nakhon Phanom office) 30. Chamber of Commerce (SANOK cluster) 31. Dr. Alarmjit Shinnachang (Director of Environmental Conservation Center, Nakhon Phanom Province)	32. Nong-yard homestay	33. Vietnamese food and sausage shop owner		36. Primary school teacher (youth tour guide project manager)	37. Abbot of Maha That temple

* Senior citizens, former primary school principals and local volunteer tour guides

Appendix 2 Summary of the products and services in seven major tourism communities of NPM

Major relics (primary attraction)	Name of Temple	District Location and Distance from City (km.)	Tourism products and services			
			Tourist attraction for 1-day trip (secondary attraction)	Volunteers/ tour guides	Souvenirs (produced by the community)	Accommodations
1. That Phanom Relic	Pra That Phanom	That Phanom (54)	Mekong Gate, local restaurants along Mekong river	First year of youth hosts training	Caramel stirred candy	Guesthouse, hotel
2. Renu Relic	That Renu	Renu Nakhon (51)	Cultural exhibitions of Renu and Pu Thai tribes, Renu's signature rice noodles restaurants	Provides for group tour only	Local fabrics (from other areas)	Homestay
3. Sri Khun Relic	That Sri Khun	Nakae (61)	Udomtham Forest Temple, Little Pupan Memorial Monument	Volunteers (retired public servants)	Local fabrics, indigo-dyed fabrics, hand-woven fabrics	Homestay, resort
4. Maha Chai Relic	That Maha Chai	Pla Pak (40)	-	First year of youth hosts training	-	-
5. Prasit Relic	That Prasit	Na Wa (98)	Hand-woven cotton & silk making under The Foundation of the Promotion of Supplementary Occupations and Related Techniques of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit of Thailand	Youth hosts (only weekends)	Local hand-woven cotton & silk	Resort
6. Tha Uthen Relic	That Tha Uthen	Tha Uthen (26)	Temples, Tha Uthen Old Community, Chai Buri historical attraction, Nyaw lifestyles, Vietnamese shrine, two-coloured river viewpoint, and restaurants at the estuary(Songkham Estuary)	Local volunteer guides	Pickled fish (Som Pla Dow, pickled giant mudfish)	Guesthouse
7. Nakhon Relic	Maha That	Meuang (0)	Temples, Anna Church, Old Governor Hall Museum, National Library, Mekong sailing, Ban Na Jok, Ho Chi Minh Museum	Youth hosts	Pork sausage	Hotel, resort, guesthouse, homestay