

An Investigation of Ecotourism Code of Conduct A Comparative Study Between Thai and Malaysian Tour Operators

Aswin Sangpikul

Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality, Dhurakij Pundit University, Bangkok, 10210

Corresponding author. E-mail address: aswin.sal@dpu.ac.th

Abstract

This study has an objective to examine and compare ecotourism practices between Thai and Malaysian tour operators. The six key elements of ecotourism (i.e. Nature, Education, Impact, Conservation, Community and Corporate Elements) together with the ecotourism code of conduct are employed as a framework to investigate the practices of tour operators. The samples being investigated are two tour operators based in Phuket and the other two in Penang. Participant observation and in-depth interview were used to collect the required data. Data were content analyzed to determine how the tour operators conduct their tours and to find out whether their practices correspond to the ecotourism code of conduct. The findings revealed that Thai and Malaysian tour operators have conducted their tours mainly corresponding to ecotourism code of conduct. However, some practices seem to be less attended by the operators and are not congruent with the ecotourism concept. Suggestions are given to improve their tour performances and to enhance a sustainable tourism business.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Code of Conduct, Tour Operators, Thailand, Malaysia, AEC

Introduction

During the past decade, ecotourism in Thailand has received significant attention in all levels including government, educational institutions, and business sectors. This is because ecotourism has been widely recognized as fundamental to sustainable tourism development by contributing to both natural resources conservation and community development (Sangpikul, 2010). Based on the current situation analysis, there are two issues associated with this research. **The first issue** concerns with the current ecotourism tours (or eco-tours) in Thailand and ASEAN countries. The growing awareness of ecotourism has resulted in the expansion of ecotourism businesses and related activities in Thailand and worldwide. However, previous studies revealed that Thailand and ASEAN countries are currently facing several problems in the ecotourism market, including fake ecotourism, mis-conduct of ecotours, poor quality of ecotours, tourist dissatisfaction, and mis-use of natural resources for tourism (Hakim, & Nakagoshi, 2010; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2004; Sangpikul, 2008; Srisuwan, 2004; Thiengvibonwon, 1999). In the tourism industry, many tour operators are attempting to take the advantages of ecotourism by using the word “ecotourism” as a marketing tool or advertisement to sell their products (Green Washing) rather than offering the real ecotourism experience. In particular, many companies, who label their business as “eco-tours” “green-tours” or “eco-pirates” (Fake Ecotourism), attempt to capture this growing segment by offering only sightseeing tours in the natural areas without any ecotourism implementations (Sangpikul, 2010). Moreover, several tour operators also reduce the quality of services due to price cutting (Poor Quality), and finally resulting in tourist dissatisfaction and poor image of the tourism industry. These issues are the current ecotourism

problems occurring in Thailand and several countries in ASEAN (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2004; Mohamed, 2002; Sangpikul, 2010). For example, Malaysia, our neighbor also faces similar problems like Thailand. Recently, Malaysian scholars have reported the impacts from ecotourism in Malaysia such as green washing practices (Kaur, 2007), lack of tourists' environmental awareness, impacts from tourism activities (Jayaranman, Keng Lin, Lian Yap, & Leng Ong, 2010), and environmental degradation (Mohamed, 2002).

The second issue relates to the limited literature relating to ecotourism business sector. Especially, the issue like ecotourism conduct/practice of the tour operators is rare. Prior studies have indicated that most ecotourism studies were emphasized on local community, natural park development, resources conservation, environmental impacts, and eco-tourist behaviors (Sangpikul, 2008; 2013). Little efforts were explored on the business side including tour operators. In particular, scholars should undertake the research to reveal the actual ecotourism practices /conducts delivered by the tour operators. This is because tour operator is a key player who takes tourists to visit the fragile natural areas. Any tourism impact may be generated by its operations/activities. In fact, there are several ecotourism practices (or Code of Conduct/Green Practice) proposed by related ecotourism organizations. Yet, no empirical study has employed these practices to examine the actual ecotourism conducts of the tour operators. Since the occurrence of ecotourism, many tour operators have offered their eco-tours to attract more tourists. Today there are many tour operators selling a wide range of eco-tours through various marketing channels. However, several issues may be raised among the public and it is doubtful if the tour operators really conduct their tours corresponding to

ecotourism concept or its code of conduct. Also, how do they deliver the eco-tours to provide tourists with ecotourism experience? Hence, this study seeks to find out these inquiries.

Given the above research background, this study aims to examine and compare the ecotourism practices between Thai and Malaysian tour operators. The areas of investigation are based in Phuket (Thailand) and Penang (Malaysia). The reasons to make a comparison between Thai and Malaysian tour operators are *firstly* Phuket and Penang are the destinations where researcher (Author) has often arranged an educational trip for university students (Tourism Major) to gain real experience on nature-based destination development. *Secondly*, several scholars conducted their research on ecotourism-related issues both in Phuket (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2004; Sangpikul, 2010; Sirirak, & Kurit, 2011) and Penang (Hong, & Chan, 2010; Jayaranman, et al., 2010). This may be referred that these two places can be investigated for ecotourism issue. And *finally*, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) is approaching, more research within the AEC is needed to broaden an understanding of the community. This comparative study will reveal the actual ecotourism practices of the tour operators in two countries as well as to learn the commonalties and differences of the ecotourism conducts between Thai and Malaysia tour operators. Furthermore, learning from the neighbor may assist in self-evaluation and future development of the country/region (e.g. Good Practice, Industry Standard). It is expected that after the emergence of AEC, there will be more comparative studies among ASEAN countries to broaden the literature and knowledge on the ASEAN context.

Literature Review

1. An Overview of Ecotourism Situation

During the past decade, ecotourism has received significant attention in all levels including government, educational institutions, and business sectors. This is because ecotourism has been widely recognized as the fundamental to the sustainable tourism development and contributed to the natural resources conservation and the community development. Ecotourism is a form of special interest tourism that generates minimal impacts to the environment and promotes sustainable tourism development (Blamey, 1997; Diamantis, 1999). Its aim is to minimize the negative impacts on the nature and socio-cultural environment, educates visitors about nature, provides economic and social benefits to local communities, and supports the protection and conservation of natural and cultural assets. It, therefore, should be implemented and promoted as an alternative to a mass tourism (Diamantis, 1999; Weaver, 2001). Consequently, ecotourism is significantly growing around the world, including Thailand and ASEAN countries.

Today, ecotourism is not only related to the natural resources development but it also attracts the business sector to promote ecotourism as one of the tourism products. Due to the growth of ecotourism in many parts of the world, several countries with the abundance of natural-based attractions have developed marketing strategies to promote themselves as the leading ecotourism destinations. Thailand and Malaysia are a good example of the countries attempting to market ecotourism as a special interest tourism or a specialty tourism product appealing to both local and international tourists due to the huge revenues earned from this segment (Kaur, 2007; Mohamed, 2002; Sangpikul, 2008). With the

global interest and growing awareness of responsible and green tourism among tourists, many tour operators in Thailand and Malaysia are catching this market by offering ecotourism tours (Eco-Tours) to those who are keen on this kind of special tourism. However, with the expansion of ecotourism business, a lot of tour operators have entered this market. Many of them are trying to take the advantages of ecotourism by using the word "ecotourism" to sell/advertise their nature-tour products rather than providing an actual ecotourism experience. Prior research has revealed several problems occurring in ecotourism such as fake ecotourism, mis-conduct of tour practices, poor quality of eco-tours and natural resources deterioration. These current ecotourism situations may be well reflected as previously addressed in the introductory part, both in Thailand and Malaysia.

Given a complexity of ecotourism concept and in order to promote responsible practices among the tour operators to reduce those negative impacts, several ecotourism associations have proposed the ecotourism codes of conduct for guiding the tour operators when delivering eco-tours in the fragile natural areas. Due to the growing ecotourism businesses, there is a number of tour operators claiming/offering ecotourism products in the market, however, researchers are yet to employ the ecotourism codes of conduct to examine the practices of those tour operators in the actual setting. The current study, therefore, has taken one of the ecotourism concepts (Ecotourism Code of Conduct), in order to investigate the ecotourism practices of the tour operators in Thailand and Malaysia.

2. Ecotourism Definition and Its Principles

The term "ecotourism" emerged in the late 1980s as a direct result of the world's acknowledgment and reaction to global sustainable

development (Diamantis, 1999). The nature-based element of holiday activities together with the increased awareness to minimize the impacts of tourism in the natural environment has contributed to the demand of ecotourism (Diamantis, 1999). Almost two decades, ecotourism today has been a growing segment and becoming the world's significant tourism market (Donohoe, & Needham, 2008; Sharpley, 2006). Recognizing the growth and contributions of ecotourism, there are a number of ecotourism definitions defined in numerous ways in related literature due to different stakeholders' points of view (e.g. Tourism Scholars, Environmentalists, Government Agencies, Business Sector). In general, ecotourism refers to environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying culture features) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impacts, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations (World Conservation Union Commission, cited in Sangpikul, 2010).

In order for ecotourism to be sustainable, there are the ecotourism principles that will support or enhance the development of ecotourism. These principles distinguish ecotourism from other types of tourism activities (Donohoe, & Needham, 2008). The key concept of ecotourism principles state that ecotourism should: (International Ecotourism Society, 2009)

- minimize impact
- build environmental and cultural awareness and respect
- provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts
- provide direct financial benefits for conservation
- provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people

3. Ecotourism Elements

Due to a complicated concept of ecotourism, many people may basically understand ecotourism through ecotourism concept and its principles as discussed above. Moreover, there are mis-understanding of the concept among the academics and industry practitioners. Some may understand ecotourism merely as nature tourism, adventure tourism, community tourism or agri-tourism. Previous research indicates that there is the mis-use of ecotourism for marketing and business purposes due to the lack of true understanding on ecotourism. In addition, the knowledge to thoroughly understand ecotourism elements and its scope/boundary was overlooked; resulting in the incomplete comprehension of ecotourism dimension. A recent study by Sangpikul (2011) has synthesized and analyzed the ecotourism literature to yield the thoroughly understanding of ecotourism dimensions. Based on his study, the six key elements of ecotourism have been identified as presented in Table 1. This is an initial study that has broadened the existing literature by identifying the six key elements of ecotourism for the tour operators. Besides ecotourism definition and its principles, the six elements of ecotourism provide a better and in-depth understanding of ecotourism dimension, particularly the scope/boundary of ecotourism business. According to Table 1, the elements of 1th-5th are the core (true) elements of ecotourism (corresponding to ecotourism definition and principles) whereas the 6th element is an additional aspect for tour operators' management. The investigation of tour operators' practices through the six ecotourism elements (Table 1) together with the code of conduct (Table 2) will yield more in-depth and valued results/discussions to the existing ecotourism literature, especially for the ecotourism business sector.

Table 1 Core elements of ecotourism practices for tour operators

Ecotourism element	Brief description of ecotourism practices
1. Nature element	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a visit to uncontaminated natural areas or protected areas - nature-based activities - low or non-consumptive activities
2. Education element	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - providing travelers the opportunity to learn about the nature - providing ecotourism interpretation - promoting natural appreciation, awareness or respect to the areas visited (among stakeholders) - providing nature education/learning
3. Conservation element	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - wildlife and/or plant conservation - controlled use and sustainable management of natural and environmental resources - collaborative efforts between providers and community in natural conservation - maintenance and/or enhancement of ecosystems and environment - contributions to conservation of natural areas or biodiversity
4. Impact element	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - complying the <u>rules and regulations</u> of the areas visited - maintaining low or minimal impact to the environment and local community - non intrusive exploitation of natural resources - avoiding disturb wildlife or wildlife habitats - proper waste management during the trips - small group consideration - promoting recycling use of materials
5. Community element	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - promoting local employment relating to business operations - enhancing local involvement and partnership of related activities - promoting local culture appreciation - encouraging purchase/use of local products and services
6. Corporate element	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - setting company policies and/or objectives on ecotourism or responsible tourism, and communicate them to staff and customers - providing a code of conduct for tour activities - providing staff a training on ecotourism or related training

Source: Sangpikul (2011)

4. Ecotourism Code of Conduct

In order to examine and compare ecotourism practices between Thai and Malaysia tour operators, this study will employ ecotourism code of conduct as a research framework to investigate their tour practices. On the business side, several related organizations have provided ecotourism code of conduct for doing ecotourism business. In general, code of conduct is a set of guidelines for appropriate social, cultural and environmentally responsible

behavior (Wearing, & Neil, 1999). In relation to ecotourism, the ecotourism code of conduct advises travelers for “do” and “don’t” behaviors in the areas/destinations they visit. It aims to limit the negative impact of human presence on the natural habitat, and promotes the protection of natural and cultural heritage (Tourism Quebec, 2010). Most codes of conduct are given by ecotourism associations in order to guide appropriate conducts for individual travelers and tour operators. The well-known

ecotourism codes of conduct are presented in Table 2. They were selected to represent the ecotourism code of conduct from different parts of the world (i.e. North America, Europe and Australia). In addition, these codes of conduct were frequently cited in the international literature regarding sustainable business practices (Donohoe, & Needham, 2008; Matysek, & Kriwoken, 2003; Weaver, 2001).

According to Sangpikul (2011), there is a close relationship between ecotourism elements (theoretically) and code of conduct (practically). According to Table 2, it discloses that the code of conduct is relatively related to the ecotourism elements. In other words, it may argue that Table 2 (code of conduct) provides more details of what the tour operators should do when conducting ecotourism by linking to the six elements of ecotourism.

Table 2 Selected ecotourism code of conduct from leading organizations

International Ecotourism Society, USA (2009)	Ecotourism Australia (2008)	Ecotourism Norway (2009)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Prepare travelers to minimize their negative impacts while visiting sensitive environments and cultures before departure. (<i>impact element</i>) ● Minimize visitor impacts on the environment by offering literature, briefings, leading by example, and taking corrective actions. (<i>impact element</i>) ● Use adequate leadership, and maintain small enough groups to ensure minimum group impact on destinations. (<i>impact element</i>) ● Brief visitors on proper behavior—on trails, in camp sites, around wild animals, around fragile plants—and with trash, with human waste, with fires, and with soaps. (<i>education element</i>) ● Ensure managers, staff and contract employees know and participate in all aspects of company policy to prevent impacts on the environment and local cultures. (<i>corporate element</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Be efficient in the use of (water, energy) (<i>conservation element</i>) ● Ensure <u>waste disposal</u> has minimal environmental and aesthetic impact. (<i>impact element</i>) ● Develop a recycling program. (<i>conservation element</i>) ● Support principals (i.e. hotels, carriers etc.) who have a conservation ethic. (<i>conservation element</i>) ● Strengthen the <u>conservation effort</u>, and enhance the natural integrity of the places visited. (<i>conservation element</i>) ● Network with <u>other stakeholders</u> (particularly those in the local area) to keep each other informed of developments and encourage the use of this code of practice. (<i>education element</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Norwegian ecotourism business is nature and culture based and has ecotourism as an underlying philosophy for all its business activities. It contributes actively to nature and culture conservation, and is aware of its own effect on the environment and always practices a precautionary attitude. (<i>nature, conservation, and impact elements</i>) ● It is run as sustainable as possible, constantly balancing ecological, cultural, social and economic considerations. (<i>nature, conservation, and community elements</i>) ● It contributes positively in the local community, uses the local workforce, local products and services, works for increased collaboration and shows a general responsibility towards the community. (<i>community element</i>)

Table 2 (cont.)

International Ecotourism Society, USA (2009)	Ecotourism Australia (2008)	Ecotourism Norway (2009)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Give managers, staff and employees access to programs that will upgrade their ability to communicate with and manage clients in sensitive natural and cultural settings. (<i>corporate element</i>) ● Be a contributor to the conservation of the regions being visited. (<i>conservation element</i>) ● Provide competitive, local employment in all aspects of business operations as well as provide local people with a full range of opportunities beyond the service employment sector. (<i>community element</i>) ● Offer site-sensitive accommodations that are not wasteful of local resources or destructive to the environment that provide ample opportunity for learning about the environment and sensitive interchange with local communities. (<i>education element</i>) ● Advise against purchasing specific crafts that are produced from threatened natural resources. (<i>conservation element</i>) ● Protect the integrity of the cultures being visited by minimizing visitor contribution to acculturation and the decline of local values. Enhance visitor understanding of local cultures but avoid improper intrusions into the private lives of others. (<i>community element</i>) ● Establish an operator consortium for training or establish a relationship with a local educational facility and work to integrate needed training components into the curriculum. (<i>corporate element</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Endeavour to use distribution networks (e.g. catalogues) and retail outlets to raise environmental awareness by distributing guidelines to consumers. (<i>education element</i>) ● Support ecotourism education /training for guides and managers. (<i>corporate element</i>) ● Employ tour guides well versed and respectful of local cultures and environments. ● Give clients appropriate verbal and written education (interpretation) and guidance with respect to the natural and cultural history of the areas visited. (<i>education element</i>) ● Use locally produced goods that benefit the local community, but do not buy goods made from threatened or endangered species. (<i>community element</i>) ● Never intentionally disturb or encourage the disturbance of wildlife or wildlife habitats. (<i>impact element</i>) ● Abide by the rules and regulations of natural areas. (<i>nature element</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● It contributes to preserving listed buildings and has local adaptation, local architectural style and distinctiveness as a general goal in its choice of materials and solutions. (<i>conservation element</i>) ● It offers memorable experiences and creates meeting places that give employees and guests insight into local culture, community and environment. (<i>corporate elements</i>)

5. Research Framework

Since there are several ecotourism codes of conduct proposed by related organizations, this study

has summarized and grouped them into similar conducts in order to employ as a research framework.

It is argued that these conducts are related to the

operations (or practices) of the tour operators because they have been proposed by the industry (ecotourism associations). The main idea of the conducts aims to advise related stakeholder on responsible practices such as what can do and what should be avoided when conducting eco-tours and visiting protected natural areas. As the codes of conducts are relevant to tour operations, it therefore may be appropriate to summarize them in terms of a stage (or process) of tour operations such as “before trip”, “during trip”, and “business management”. This is because when conducting any tour, most business practitioners often refer to what we call

“tour management” involving the procedures for delivering the tours such as before tour, during tour, after tour and tour planning/operation (Amstrong, & Weiler, 2002; Patterson, 2002). These tour procedures also apply to the case of eco-tour operators. Consequently, Table 2 has been modified and summarized to establish as the research framework as shown in Table 3. In particular, the framework of Table 3 also shows how the codes of conduct are linked/related to the six ecotourism elements (i.e. nature, education, conservation, impact, community, and corporate elements).

Table 3 Research framework for this study (modified ecotourism code of conduct)

Tour process	Code of conduct for eco-tours
Before trip	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Give clients appropriate verbal and/or written guidance with respect to the natural and cultural history of the areas visited (<i>education element</i>) ● Brief visitors on proper behavior before visiting ecotourism sites (<i>education & impact element</i>) ● Enhance visitor understanding of natural environment and local cultures (<i>education element</i>)
During trip	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Visit a undisturbed/uncontaminated/protected natural areas (<i>nature element</i>) ● Comply the rules and regulations of the areas/destinations (<i>impact element</i>) ● Provide low or non-impact activities in the natural area for the nature enjoyment and appreciation (<i>nature & impact elements</i>) ● Educate tourist on the nature and its environment/ promote natural interpretation (<i>education element</i>) ● Encourage tourists to respect the nature and local cultures (<i>education & community element</i>) ● Maintain small enough groups to ensure minimum group impact on destinations (<i>impact element</i>) ● Ensure waste disposal has non/minimal environmental impacts (<i>impact element</i>) ● Do not disturb wildlife or wildlife habitats (<i>impact & conservation elements</i>) ● Use locally produced goods that benefit the local community (<i>community element</i>) ● Advise against purchasing specific crafts that are produced from threatened natural resources or endangered species (<i>conservation element</i>)

Table 3 (cont.)

Tour process	Code of conduct for eco-tours
Business management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure managers, staff and employees know and participate in all aspects of company policy to prevent impacts on the environment and local cultures (<i>corporate element</i>) • Support ecotourism education/training for guides and managers (<i>corporate element</i>) • Be a contributor to the conservation of the areas being visited (<i>conservation element</i>) • Maintain or enhance the ecosystem of the areas visited (<i>conservation element</i>) • Provide local employment in relation to business operations as well as contribute in local community, use local workforce, local products and services (<i>community element</i>)

Source: adapted from Armstrong, & Weiler (2002); Patterson (2002)

Research Methodology

The samples to be investigated were tour operators who label/claim their businesses (or products) as “ecotourism” or “eco-tour” through the marketing media (e.g. magazines, brochures, the Internet, travel books, etc.). Two tour operators were selected from each country, with a total of four companies to be investigated (due to research project’s limitation). The tour operators in Thailand were purposively chosen based on 1) previous research’s referral on similar topics (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2003; Sangpikul, 2010) and 2) a company with environmental award. This is because we expect that these tour operators may conduct their tours corresponding to ecotourism code of conduct, and there should be something to learn from them (i.e. good practices). However, the tour operators in Penang did not meet such criteria. They were therefore selected on a simple random method by drawing from tour operators’ name list. Two tour operators from Malaysia were chosen from those offering/claiming eco-tours in Penang. In overall, there were a total of four companies being examined. Each company was labeled as company A and B for Thailand, and company C and D for Malaysia. Phuket (Thailand) was chosen as the areas of investigation due to prior studies’ referral while

Penang (Malaysia) was selected due to an educational trip opportunity. In addition, several studies have conducted ecotourism research both in Phuket (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2003; Sirirak, & Kurit, 2011) and Penang (Hong, & Chan, 2010; Jayaranman, et al., 2010) due to a wide range of natural resources and ecotourism activities. Also, both of them are island-based areas with similar geographical features and characteristics.

According to the nature of this study dealing with ecotourism practices of the tour operators, two research instruments (i.e. observation form and interview form) were developed on a base of research framework (Table 3). They were reviewed by concerned parties (academics and industry practitioners) to determine its appropriateness, validity and practical application through the content validity, face validity and pre-test with similar eco-tour operators in Bangkok. Corrections and modifications were made accordingly. For the observation method, researcher (author) participated in each tour program by asking tour operators (sales staff) to recommend a tour that was claimed to be an eco-tour. If there was more than one tour, the simple random sampling was used by drawing only 1 tour program from the tour list of each company. This was due to the limitation of research project. With four companies to be observed, one tour program per one

company was examined (totally 4 tour programs). During the surveys, researcher asked permission from tour operators to conduct the research. When joining the tours, the observation was undertaken at the beginning of the tours until the end. During each tour, the observation form was used to record the tour conducts and practices.

With regard to the interview method, the interviewees were recommended by company staff (salespersons). They were in the positions that involve with tour management or tour conduct of the company, for instance, general manager, operation manager and tour guides (2-3 interviewees from each company). The interviews were conducted at company's office by making an appointment, and ranged from 20-30 minutes each interview. A short note was made during each interview. In overall, there were a total of 15 interviewees. Before making an interview with each company, a formal letter from researcher's university (together with a business card) was given to the interviewees. To increase trustworthiness, all interviewees were informed about researcher's profile and university website (with relevant documents) as well as a reference letter (with contact information) from a local Malaysian professor working at the Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang. This Malaysian scholar used to be a visiting professor at researcher's university and also have arranged several educational trips together. Most interview questions were developed from the research framework, particularly from the section of "business management" because this part requires in-depth information. The same questions were applied to all interviewees, for example, "does the company have a

code of conduct when taking tourists to visit the protected natural areas?", "does the company provide tour guides with any training related to ecotourism/responsible tourism?", and "does the company have any conservation project in the area where tours are conducted?". Data were collected during March-May 2014.

A content analysis was used to analyze data from the observation in order to determine how the tour operators conducted their tours and to find out whether their practices corresponded to ecotourism code of conduct. Content analysis is a common method to analyze data in terms of observation and interview methods in social science research (Donohoe, & Needham, 2008; Ross, & Wall, 1999). Likewise, the data from the interviews were also content analyzed to determine if the tour operators' policy and operations were parallel to the ecotourism code of conduct.

Findings

To facilitate the findings, only major results based on observation and interview methods (what they did and lacked) are combined and presented together on an individual result. Also, please note that the following are the research results collected during the surveys, and are not intended to negatively criticize any company's operations and practices. The goal of the research is to better understand the current practices of the companies that are involved with ecotourism. Table 4-7 present an individual finding (company A, B, C, and D).

Table 4 Finding of company A (Thailand)

Process	Company A
Before trip	<p>This was an overnight trip (two-day trip) traveling by a two-storey boat to visit natural areas around Phang Nga Bay National Park and stayed overnight on Yao Noi island. There were 18 tourists joining this trip. At the beginning of the trip, tour guides provided tourists necessary information such as island location, its environment and geographical characteristics (<i>education element</i>) as well as informed them regarding proper behavior when visiting the natural areas – what can do and should not do when visiting sea caves and lagoons (<i>impact element</i>). Tour guide also presented posters and folders to provide tourists with knowledge on marine ecosystem. Information regarding marine resources and its ecosystem was given in a folder, and it was available on the boat for tourists at all times (<i>education element</i>).</p>
During trip	<p>When arriving at some islands, sea caves or lagoons, tour guides provided canoes (non-impact activity) for tourists to enjoy and learn about the nature and its environment (<i>nature element</i>). Maximum of two tourists were allowed on a canoe plus one tour guide (<i>impact element</i>). When canoeing at ecotourism areas (e.g. sea cave or lagoon), tour guides explained about what tourists saw such as ecosystem, types of marine fish or plants, and general characteristics of the areas (<i>education element</i>). It was observed that tour guides stopped at certain interesting points to explain more information of the areas (<i>education element</i>). While canoeing, food and drink (including any plastic item) was not allowed to be taken on the canoes (<i>impact element</i>). During the trip, it was observed that the garbage was collected and put into a plastic bag, and then disposed on mainland (<i>impact element</i>). However, little effort was done to encourage tourists to appreciate or respect the nature.</p> <p>In the late afternoon, before arriving at the Yao Noi island, tour guides briefly informed tourists about the local culture and the village (<i>education element</i>). They also urged tourists not to buy shells or other animal products as souvenirs (<i>conservation element</i>). Being the overnight trip, tourists stayed in a bungalow or a tent camp on the island. The accommodation was simple and basic (no TV or air conditioners). It was observed that many tourists spent their time outside their rooms by exploring the nature, doing outdoor activities or visiting the local market (<i>community element</i>). Given the overnight trip, tourists had a chance to learn local life and culture such as learning local language and Thai cooking from local people (<i>community element</i>). Tour guides also arranged a Thai boxing show for tourists to learn Thai culture. During the stay, it was observed that local people got involved with tour company by providing some services to tourists such as preparing some meals, providing a long-tailed boat for sightseeing around the island, selling local products, and providing a local performance (<i>community element</i>).</p>
Business management	<p>According to in-depth interviews, company A has a policy to promote responsible tourism in Phuket (<i>corporate element</i>). The owner is a local resident of Phuket, he wants his company to contribute both economically and environmentally to the local area by doing several things to develop his hometown. The company has put a lot of efforts on training its tour guides on professional training. In addition to the professional training, all tour guides were trained in relation to the nature and the environment – e.g. ecosystem, flora, fauna, and wildlife (<i>corporate element</i>). Since the owner of the company has built a good relationship with the local residents,</p>

Table 4 (cont.)

Process	Company A
Business management	he has encouraged them to respect the nature on the island by establishing some conservation projects such as monkey and forestry conservation projects (<i>conservation element</i>). Each year the company pays money to the local community and arranges the activities with local residents and state agencies to clean up the pier and the destination areas around the islands (<i>conservation element</i>). In addition, Company A strongly supports local employment, especially for those who base in Phuket and nearby islands. All staff are local residents for both full-time and part time staff (<i>community element</i>). The company also educates local residents on Yao Noi island regarding environmental awareness and natural conservation by protecting mangrove forest and planting more beach forest on the island (<i>education & conservation elements</i>).

Table 5 Finding of company B (Thailand)

Process	Company B
Before trip	This tour was a day trip visiting a forestry area (near the national park) in Surat Thani Province by a bus (14 customers). The observation was made since the beginning of the trip. Tour guide used a verbal communication to inform tourists about the places to be visited (<i>education element</i>). It was observed that some practices were implemented before arriving at the destination such as briefing tourists about the program and the areas visited, guiding tourists' proper behavior (e.g. what can do and don't in the areas), and informing tour activities - elephant trekking and river canoeing (<i>education element</i>).
During trip	The company took tourists to visit the forestry area which was an elephant camp (<i>nature element</i>). However, complying rules and regulations could not be observed due to a private land. During the trip, tour guides maintained a small group of tourists by dividing them into two groups in order to do two activities at the same time (<i>impact element</i>). The first group took elephant trekking (low-impact activity) while the second group did canoeing (non-impact activity) along the river (<i>nature element</i>). The canoeing activity took place in the natural area (along the river), however , the elephant trekking was conducted in a private land of the tour company. In the elephant camp, there were local products (souvenirs) for sale but not all of them were made by local residents as tour guide said they were made from company staff - non-local residents (<i>community element</i>). Furthermore, it was observed that many products were not originally from the local community in Phuket area. They were more likely from the northern Thailand because they were made from wood. For this trip, there was a local visit but it seemed to be a community that the company has established by itself. It was observed that garbage occurring during the trip was kept well in a plastic bag (<i>impact element</i>). However , several practices were ignored such as lack of educating and encouraging tourists to appreciate and respect the nature. No explanation was given regarding the nature or the ecosystem of the areas visited. It was observed that there was little communication between tour guides and tourists during the trip; mostly like a sightseeing tour rather than an eco-tour.

Table 5 (cont.)

Process	Company B
Business management	<p>According to company B, the company has an aim to run a sustainable business that cares the environment and animals by promoting this policy to all of its staff (<i>corporate element</i>). In relation to local employment, company B has a policy to hire local people in Phuket and nearby provinces (<i>community element</i>). In addition to this, the company also helps the minority (hill tribes) in the northern Thailand by having them work at the elephant camps in Phuket and Surat Thani. Since most tour activities are conducted on its own land (elephant camps) both in Phuket and Surat Thani, thus, there is no much interaction with local residents. In terms of staff training, all tour guides received formal training from the company regarding tour conducts, foreign language and first aid practice. According to company B, there are some trainings provided to tour guides on the nature and the environment (<i>corporate element</i>). According to the interviews, the company has several conservation projects associated with animals (i.e. elephants) in some provinces such as Phuket and Surat Thani Province (<i>conservation element</i>). It also pays attention to wildlife conservation in Thailand, particularly Thai elephants due to a decreasing number of them in Thailand. It has established this project by setting the elephant camps in some provinces this is because the elephants from the northern Thailand are facing with the problems of starvation or overworking in illegal logging camps (<i>conservation element</i>). Revenues for helping these elephants come from the company and the donations of its customers when visiting elephant camps.</p>

Table 6 Finding of company C (Malaysia)

Process	Company C
Before trip	<p>This tour was a day trip (trekking tour) visiting Penang Natural Park with 9 people joining the trip. When arriving at the natural park, tour guide took tourists to the visitor office to brief some information about the park (<i>education element</i>). At the visitor office, there was information about the flora and fauna available in terms of posters and brochures. It was observed that there was a wide range of information for tourists to learn about the park and its natural resources. However, tour guide did not encourage tourists to learn this information at the visitor office. In addition, an issue on proper tourist behavior in the park was quickly briefed (<i>impact element</i>).</p>
During trip	<p>The trip started with a trekking activity; low impact activity (<i>nature element</i>). While walking through the park (nature trail), tour guide pointed us to observe park signs informing visitor of what is prohibited in the park, for example, no littering, no entrance and no picking flowers (<i>education & impact elements</i>). When passing through the important flora areas, tour leader explained us different types of the flora and their value (<i>education element</i>). Wildlife (e.g. monkeys, birds, squirrels) were also found occasionally during the trip. When seeing them, tour leader pointed us to see them and talked about their species and habitants (<i>education element</i>). In the mid of the trip, tour guide took us to a canopy walk activity. Canopy walk is a walkway providing pedestrian access to the forest with the objective to provide a nature-based activity for having visitors explore/experience rainforest's treetops (<i>nature element</i>). The walk-way was about 100-200 meter-length and 20 meter-height above the trees. However, little attention was given to personal garbage (<i>impact element</i>) during the trip, and there was no local visit on this trip.</p>

Table 6 (cont.)

Process	Company C
Business management	<p>According to company C, the company has a policy to promote responsible tourism in Penang and Malaysia by making the awareness among its staff (<i>corporate element</i>). It has an activity to do with the locals in Penang on conservation activity. For example, it has joined the local organizations and schools to promote a project for tree-planting in Penang and wet areas (<i>conservation element</i>). Most employees are Penang residents and nearby states. They are mainly hired as office staff and local guides (<i>community element</i>). Most tour guides receive general and professional guide trainings supported by the industry, not particularly focus on a special training.</p>

Table 7 Finding of company D (Malaysia)

Process	Company D
Before trip	<p>This trip was a day trip visiting Penang Hill. There were 11 people joining this trip. Before arriving at the destination, tour guide verbally briefed some information of the place and activities (<i>education element</i>). However, guidance on proper travel behavior was ignored. At the cable station (Penang Hill), tour guides gave tourists a brochure. The brochure contains a map and information on fauna and flora founded on Penang Hill. It was observed that little information was given to tourists during this stage (<i>education element</i>).</p>
During trip	<p>When arriving at the hill, it was observed that the area of Penang Hill has been developed for the mass tourism rather than a protected area; in most parts of the hill. Nevertheless, there are some undisturbed areas which located on the other side of the hill (<i>nature element</i>). Touring was started with a nature trail first (low impact activity) by walking around the hill (<i>nature element</i>). Besides the nature trail walking around the area, tour guide hired a golf cart (low impact vehicle) to take the group to explore the nature of the hill. The route was approximately 3-4 kilometers. By taking the golf cart, tourist can learn a bit about the nature and local culture on the Penang Hill through tour guide's explanation (<i>education element</i>). However, tourists were not really encouraged to appreciate the nature. On the route, the golf cart stopped at major interesting points, for example, old houses, heritage buildings and forestry areas. Some fauna were also found such as birds, squirrels, and monkeys. Little information was provided regarding the fauna (<i>education element</i>). On the Penang Hill, there were some local vendors selling some products such as tea, local food and souvenirs (<i>community element</i>). Nevertheless, little attention was highlighted by tour guide.</p>
Business management	<p>According to company D, the company has a policy to promote environmental friendly tourism or green tourism in Penang (<i>corporate element</i>). In relation to conservation, it works with a state agency to fund a wildlife conservation project in Penang and Malaysia Peninsular (<i>conservation element</i>). Furthermore, the company also has an activity with the locals to promote an environmental earth day. This project aims to keep Penang clean and become an environmental friendly destination (<i>conservation element</i>). Company staff have joined this annual activity with related stakeholders. The company also recruits local residents to work with the company (<i>community element</i>). More than half of them (local residents) have been working with the company more than ten years. The company realizes the local contribution when designing a tour by offering a community visit (<i>community element</i>). According to company D, most tour guides receive regular trainings from the company, not a special one.</p>

Table 8 Summary and comparison of major findings from 4 companies

Company	Major findings
A (Thailand)	<p>Before trip, company A educated tourists before the group arrived at the destinations. It implemented several codes of conduct on <i>education element</i> such as informing and providing tourists with related information (both verbal and nonverbal messages) about the destinations and the natural resources. It seemed that company A paid much attention on <i>education element</i> before tourists had arrived at the destinations. Tour guide also advised tourists on <i>impact element</i> by introducing proper behavior in what tourists can do and should not do before doing any activity.</p> <p>During the trip, the company took tourists to experience <i>nature element</i> by visiting Phang Nga Bay National Park and arranged a low impact activity (canoeing). In this stage, <i>education element</i> (nature education and interpretation) was also highlighted during the trip. Moreover, the company implemented several codes of conduct on <i>impact, conservation, and community elements</i>. The <i>community element</i> seemed to be well enhanced from this overnight trip by promoting cultural learning with local villagers.</p> <p>Regarding business management, company A has undertaken several codes of conduct regarding <i>corporate element</i> such as setting company's policy, enhancing local employment as well as staff training. It also concerned about <i>conservation element</i> by advising tourists not to buy shells or other animal products as souvenirs. The company also worked with <i>conservation element</i> by supporting conservation projects in the community and promoting environmental care.</p>
B (Thailand)	<p>Before trip, company B provided education element mainly through verbal information such as informing/briefing about the destinations. However, no effort was done on impact element (travel behavior guidance) during this stage (compared to company A and C).</p> <p>During the trip, the company took tourists to visit the <i>nature element</i> by visiting an elephant camp. Although the place being visited was not an ecotourism destination, but it also arranged a low impact activity for tourists: elephant riding and canoeing. It was observed that the <i>community element</i> (visiting elephant camp/buying local products) was not really an authentic community since most people here are from northern region (compared to company A – visiting original village). However, <i>impact element</i> was partially implemented such as garbage control while <i>education element</i> was almost ignored during the trip (compared to company A, C and D).</p> <p>On business management, company B has undertaken several codes of conduct (like company A) such as setting company's policy, enhancing local employment, and supporting conservation project. Especially, company B has the conservation project in relation to elephants.</p>
C (Malaysia)	<p>Before trip, company C provided education element mainly through verbal information (like company B) such as informing/briefing about the destinations and general information about natural resources. However, little effort was done on this element. Some information about proper behavior in the national park was quickly briefed (<i>impact element</i>).</p> <p>During the trip, the company took tourists to visit the <i>nature element</i> by visiting Penang National Park. It was observed that the company paid attention on <i>education element</i> and provided several low/non-impact activities such as nature trail and canopy walk. There was a nature interpretation like company A. However, little effort was made for personal garbage (<i>impact element</i>) when compared to company A and B.</p>

Table 8 (cont.)

Company	Major findings
C (Malaysia)	In relation to business management, company C has undertaken several codes of conduct (like company A and B) such as setting company's policy, enhancing local employment, and supporting conservation project. Especially, company C has the conservation project in relation to tree-planting projects with local community.
D (Malaysia)	<p>Before trip, company D educated tourists mainly through verbal information (like company B and C) such as area information and points of interest at the destination (Penang Hill). There were some destination brochures available for tourists as well. However, little information was give on fauna and flora. The information about proper behavior (impact element) at the destination was ignored (similar to company B).</p> <p>During the trip, the company took tourists to experience nature element by visiting different areas of Penang Hill, and arranged a low impact activity to appreciate the nature (nature trail, golf cart ride). During the trip, it was observed that education element (nature education and interpretation) was also given at major points of interest. Yet, little effort was made on local contribution (community element).</p> <p>Regarding business management, like other companies, company D has undertaken several codes of conduct including setting company's policy, enhancing local employment, and supporting conservation project. In particular, the company focused on conservation element, for instance, wildlife projects and environmental conservation.</p>

Discussions and Recommendations

This part will discuss the findings and provide recommendations for the ecotourism tour operators.

Before Trip

Based on the findings, all companies tried to educate and provide tourists with necessary information of the places being visited. This is because ecotourism is a form of responsible tourism with the aims to educate tourists and reduce tourism impact (Matysek, & Kriwoken, 2003), it is important for ecotourism tour operators to prepare and provide tourists with necessary information of the destinations being visited. In this stage, the ecotourism element of "education" and "impact" will play an important role to distinguish ecotourism experience from other types of tourism. In the mass tourism (before trip), non or very little of these elements will be highlighted by tour guide. Meanwhile, based on the result of the current study, it was observed that some tour

operators tried to educate tourists in several ways. For example, they provided verbal and non-verbal messages to inform tourists about the destination. What they did in this stage corresponds to the ecotourism code of conduct. In ecotourism business, it is a job of tour operator to form (create) an ecotourism experience by starting to educate tourists since at the beginning of the trip. The way to educate tourists may be varied, and it could be in a form of verbal messages (e.g. briefing, talking, informing) or non-verbal messages (reading materials, brochures, leaflets). These messages may add a great learning experience for tourists, at the same time, help promote responsible or appropriate tourist behavior due to the information they received (Matysek, & Kriwoken, 2003; Ross, & Wall, 1999). Furthermore, the messages may also enhance tourists' understanding of natural environment and local cultures as well (International Ecotourism Society, 2009). To provide an eco-tour, education element

can be implemented at the beginning of the trip and also during the trip. Once tourists are educated, they are expected to be careful about their behavior or any action during the trip. And this may help reduce negative tourism impact to the environment. Impact awareness is also regarded as the key element of ecotourism and responsible tourism because it may help prevent damage and deterioration of the environment/destination being visited (Matysek, & Kriwoken, 2003). To arrange an interesting trip, it depends on the tour operators to design an approach to make their tourists educated and enjoyable at the beginning of the trip.

During Trip

According to the findings, it seems that all companies attempted to implement the ecotourism code of conduct during their tours. Several companies did well on their practices, while some may implement only partial conducts. It was observed that the tour practice of company A was likely to be congruent with ecotourism concept than the others, for example, informing tourists of the destination, suggesting on proper tourist behavior, and promoting local contribution. In this stage (during trip), ecotourism tour operators should be aware of ecotourism code of conduct in order to implement them during the trip. It was observed that almost all ecotourism elements (nature, education, impact, conservation, and community) will play an important role during this stage. Because of this, ecotourism can be recognized as a responsible trip (alternative tourism) that leads to the sustainable tourism. Ecotourism therefore is different from other types of tourism as it mainly cares the quality of the natural environment (Donohoe, & Needham, 2008; Matysek, & Kriwoken, 2003). Based on the findings, it seemed that all companies tried to

implement ecotourism elements during their trips. Yet, it was observed that little effort was made on a particular issue such as impact awareness and community contribution. In order to be an ecotourism tour operator and run a sustainable tourism business, it is suggested that basically the tour operators should comply the rules and regulations of the areas/destinations being visited to reduce negative impact. And, in order to deliver ecotourism experience (nature enjoyment and appreciation), tour operators may provide nature-based activities with non or low impact depending on company's products. Meanwhile, simple education may be given during trip, for example, telling the background of the areas/destinations, advising the value/significance of the natural resources (flora/wildlife) or giving natural interpretation. Interpretation is an educational activity that promotes learning and understanding between the natural environment and the visitors by delivering messages or explanation about something (Armstrong, & Weiler, 2002). It is expected that effective interpretation (performed by a tour guide) will encourage appropriate behaviors of visitors and responsible travel that minimizes the negative impacts of visitation (Armstrong, & Weiler, 2002; Diamantis, 1999; Weaver, 2001).

With regards to the impact element, tour operators should maintain a small group to reduce negative impact on the environment. Some advices on do and don't behavior may be re-emphasized during the trip, particularly no disturbing wildlife or their habitats. Especially, tour guides should be a role model for tourists to behave responsibly and encourage them to do so to reduce tourist impact (Diamantis, 1999; Weaver, 2001). In addition, wastes or garbage occurring during the trip (impact element) should be properly managed. Company A is a good example of

this practice to advise tourists not to bring any food or beverage when canoeing. The company also promoted a recycle concept by not allowing tourists to use a plastic bag to cover their mobile phones, tablets and cameras but advised them to use recycled product instead (water proofing container). On the community contributions, company A and B did well on this element by generating local incomes and activities. Company A arranged an overnight trip at a village while company B visited an elephant camp (though not an actual local community). For company C and D, they made a little effort on this. Furthermore, some advices on purchasing against specific crafts/products/souvenir from threatened natural resources (conservation element) are mostly ignored for all companies. For the community contribution, it does not mean that all eco-tours must be accompanied with the overnight trip. A day trip visiting a local village also generates similar contribution; depending on tour activities. Generally, it is suggested that, when appropriate, the tour operator may combine/introduce a local visit into its program and promote local contributions such as using or buying local products/services, arranging a local performance or cultural exchanging.

Business Management

In this stage, the emphasis is given on the corporate element (dealing with business management, administration or policy). Being the ecotourism tour operators, it is a job of the company to clearly communicate its objective/policy to all staff as well as its customers. Being aware or acknowledged by company staff and customers, it is expected that they are more likely to cooperate/help the company to achieve its goal. Following the findings, it seems that all companies have a policy to promote responsible tourism or green tourism. As such, all staff should be aware and work to achieve the company policy.

During the trip, it was evident that tour guides plays an important role in educating tourists and providing them with ecotourism experience and responsible behavior. Nevertheless, some tour guides implemented this practice but some did not. Since ecotourism is a special tourism and needs the implementation of ecotourism principles and its elements to form (create) ecotourism experience, tour operators should support appropriate training for their guides on ecotourism or related issues. Today, ecotourism information is easily accessed through various sources, particularly on the Internet. Learning this through the Internet may be an alternative to a formal guide training. Another important issue for being the ecotourism tour operators is the natural conservation. Based on the findings, it seems that all companies attempted to have natural conservation projects. However, little efforts were made. According to the literature, eco-tour operators should be a contributor in natural or environmental conservation in the areas where they operate. The point here concerns with the areas they operate, not somewhere else. This is because any trip or activity occurring at the ecotourism destinations may have certain impacts from tourists, tourism activities and vehicles. With this concern, the tour operators should take the responsibility of what they do at the ecotourism destinations by restoring, improving or maintaining the ecosystem of the areas they operate through the conservation. Following the literature, there is no a specific form of conservation for tour operators. Thus, tour operators may consider the conservation through a wide range of projects or activities such as forest, plant, flora, and wildlife related conservations. Regarding the community element, this element is recognized as an essential part of the sustainable tourism. Based on the findings, it seemed that most tour operators have contributed to the community

element by visiting local community and hiring local residents. Yet, it was observed that little effort was made to encourage local patronage. According to the literature, there are several ways to contribute to the local community. This may include arranging a local visit, recruiting local people, local participation on tour activities/planning, and cultural exchange program (Donohoe, & Needham, 2008; Patterson, 2002; Sangpikul, 2010). Likewise, it depends on the tour operator's policy/management to implement the corporate/conservation/community elements in this stage.

To conclude, this study has disclosed and compared the ecotourism practices conducted by Thai and Malaysian tour operators. In spite of a small number of the samples being investigated (due to research project's limitation), this study has revealed the actual ecotourism practices delivered by the business sector in two countries. According to the findings, the tour operators in both countries delivered both similar and different ecotourism practices. The similarities are promoting natural appreciation/education, arranging low-impact activities, maintaining small group size, waste management, and supporting local employment. These findings have disclosed that there are some responsible tour operators attempting to deliver ecotourism practices that are congruent with ecotourism principles and its code of conduct. However, the differences may involve with little effort on educating tourists, environmental concern and supporting local community. According to the interviews, these differences might result from owner's perspective, company's policy, ecotourism understanding/implementation, tour operation characteristics and staff training. In addition, some operators may pay different concentration on different issues (tour practices).

Some may focus on a particular practice while some may not. On the other hand, several scholars (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2004; Armstrong, & Weiler, 2002) argue that these different tour practices may occur due to the goal of the company or sometimes owners as well (what they want to be). Some tour operators may just want to a general nature operator by offering ecotourism products whereas some may want to be a specialized operator such as eco-tour operator. Although, there are some similarities and differences among Thai and Malaysian tour operators with given reasons, this study has shown that there are the actual responsible tour operators following the ecotourism code of conduct in two countries. In order to promote the responsible tourism business or ecotourism tour operators, it may involve government and the tourism industry in each country to make this issue at the national level regarding the development of sustainable tourism business like several developed countries such as Australia and USA (Ecotourism Australia, 2008; International Ecotourism Society, 2009).

In relation to the contribution of the study, the current study has given both theoretical and practical values. In terms of theoretical value, this study has employed the six key elements of ecotourism together with the code of conduct as a framework to investigate the tour operators' practices. The study has provided a better understanding on the relationship between the six ecotourism elements and its code of conduct. In the past, the code of conduct was solely proposed by the industry (related associations) as a guideline for conducting eco-tours. Little is known for its background (how it was developed). Now (with the current study), we have learned that the six ecotourism elements are the fundamental (base) to the code of conduct. In other words, we may argue that the six ecotourism elements may assist in the development of the code of

conduct. In the future, a careful investigation on the six ecotourism elements may be further developed as a revised/modified code of conduct containing more details of criteria and indicators for running (or evaluating) an ecotourism business. With a revision/modification, the ecotourism code of conduct could be developed as quality control mechanism to distinguish a real ecotourism tour operator from a fake one.

With regards to the practical contribution, the six ecotourism elements and code of conduct may be viewed as a marketing tool or competitive edge (strengths) over the competitors. In fact, being the ecotourism tour operator does not require high cost/investment to run the business. Instead, it just requires a little effort and true understanding on ecotourism concept by implementing the code of conduct (with six elements) into the tour operations or ecotourism products. For example, some elements such as nature, education and community elements may assist in designing a value added product or product differentiation while conservation element may help promote corporate social responsibility (CSR) as well as a better image of the company. Given the six ecotourism elements and its code of conduct, it is a task of the tour operators in designing or implementing them into their marketing strategies to improve their tour practices, at the same time, to stay competitive in the marketplace, particularly capturing the growing green market segment.

References

- Armstrong, K., & Weiler, B. (2002). Getting the message across: An analysis of messages delivered by tour operators in protected areas. *Journal of Ecotourism*, 1(2/3), 104-121.
- Blamey, R. (2005). *The nature of ecotourism*. Canberra: Bureau of Tourism Research.
- Diamantis, D. (1999). The concept of ecotourism: Evolution and Trends. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 2(2/3), 93-122.
- Donohoe, H., & Needham, R. (2008). Internet-Based Ecotourism Marketing: Evaluating Canadian Sensitivity to Ecotourism Tenets. *Journal of Ecotourism*, 7(1), 15-43.
- Ecotourism Australia. (2008). Ecotourism code of conduct. Retrieved January 15, 2014, from http://www.ecotourism.org.au/code_of_conduct
- Ecotourism Norway. (2009). Ecotourism in Norway. Retrieved January 15, 2014, from <http://www.visitnorway.com/en/Stories/Theme/Ecotourism-Norway>
- Hakim, L., & Nakagoshi, N. (2010). Ecotourism in Asian tropical countries. *Journal of International Development and Corporation*, 16(1), 13-20.
- Hong, C., & Chan, N. (2010). SWOT analysis of Penang National Park. *World Applied Sciences Journal*, 10(1), 136-145.
- Import-Export Bank of Thailand. (2012). ASEAN Tourism Standards. *EXIM E-NEWS*, 7(12), 8-9.
- International Ecotourism Society. (2009). Ecotourism guidelines for nature tour operators. Retrieved January 15, 2014, from <http://www.bigvolcano.com.au/ercentre/codes.htm>.
- Jayaranman, K., Keng Lin, S., Lian Yap, L., & Leng Ong, W. (2010). Sustainable ecotourism: The case of east Malaysia. *TEAM Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 7(1), 27-44.
- Kaur, C. R. (2007). Marine ecotourism: Emerging best sustainable practices and success stories. Retrieved January 10, 2014, from http://www.mima.gov.my/v2/data/pdf/presentation/82.Cheryl_2007_1.pd

- Kontogeorgopoulos, N. (2003). Towards a Southeast Asian model of resort based mass Ecotourism: Evidence from Phuket, Thailand and Bali, Indonesia. *ASEAN Journal on Hospitality and Tourism*, 2(1), 1-16.
- Kontogeorgopoulos, N. (2004). Conventional tourism and ecotourism in Phuket, Thailand: Conflicting paradigms or symbiotic partners?. *Journal of Ecotourism*, 3(2), 87-108.
- Matysek, K., & Kriwoken, L. (2003). The Natural State: Nature-based Tourism and Ecotourism Accreditation in Tasmania, Australia. *Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality and Tourism*, 4(1/2), 129-45.
- Ministry of Tourism and Sports of Thailand. (2007). *ASEAN Tourism Standards*. Bangkok: Ministry of Tourism and Sports of Thailand.
- Mohamed, B. (2002). THE DEVELOPMENT OF ECOTOURISM IN MALAYSIA—Is It Really Sustainable?. Retrieved January 10, 2014, from <http://www.hbp.usm.my/tourism/Papers/paper%20chiang%20mai.htm>
- Ross, S., & Wall, G. (1999). Ecotourism: towards congruence between theory and practice. *Tourism Management*, 20, 123-32.
- Patterson, C. (2002). *The Business of Ecotourism*. Rhinelander, Wisconsin: Explorer's Guide Publishing.
- Sangpikul, A. (2008). Critical review of ecotourism studies in Thailand. *Tourism Analysis*, 13(3), 281-293.
- Sangpikul, A. (2010). *Good practices for ecotourism operator for the sustainable tourism development of Thailand* (research report). Bangkok: Dhurakij Pundit University.
- Sangpikul, A. (2011). Developing good practices for ecotourism tour operators. *Sasin Journal of Management*, 17(1), 53-86.
- Sangpikul, A. (2013). An analysis of tourism and hotel studies in Thailand. *BU Academic Review*, 12(1), 113-126.
- Sharpley, R. (2006). Ecotourism: A consumption perspective. *Journal of Ecotourism*, 5(1), 7-22.
- Sirirak, P., & Kurit, N. (2011). Factors influencing on tourists' ecotourism behavior in Phuket. *Srinakharinwirot Business Journal*, 2(1), 96-108.
- Srisuwan, S. (2004). *Attitude of tour operators in Bangkok toward ecotourism operation*. Master thesis, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang.
- Thiengvibonwong, N. (1999). *The Study of Problems and Management of Ecotourism: A Case of Mae Hong Sorn Province*. Master Thesis, Krirk University.
- Tourism Quebec. (2010). *Ecotourist's code of conduct*. Retrieved January 15, 2014, from <http://www.bonjourquebec.com/qc-en/codeecotouriste0.htm>
- Weaver, D. (2001). *Ecotourism*. Milton: John Wiley & Sons Australia.
- Wearing, S., & Neil, J. (1999). *Ecotourism: impacts, potentials and possibilities*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.