Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Master of Science

of

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“Sustaining Island Tourism through a Tourist Lens: Three Islands in the Gulf of Thailand”

Department of Geography

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9:00 A.M.
Remote Defence

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Philip Dearden, Department of Geography, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Rick Rollins, Department of Geography, UVic (Member)

External Examiner:
Dr. Farhad Moghimehfar, Department of Recreation & Tourism Management, Vancouver Island University

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Dr. Don Juzwishin, School of Health Information Science, UVic

Dr. Stephen Evans, Acting Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing industries in the world and bears significant weight in global economic terms. One of the world’s top ten international tourism destinations, Thailand, had a record-breaking 39 million international tourists in 2019. While these economic benefits are significant, there are concerns about the sustainability of the industry from an environmental and social/cultural perspective. Further, the tourism industry will be affected by the outbreak of COVID 19, and visitation in 2020 is expected to fall to around 14 million, the lowest level in 14 years. Sustainability concerns can be especially severe in small tropical islands where the land base is small, resources scarce and local populations have low incomes and limited opportunities for livelihood diversification. Especially in the midst of a global pandemic and the impending risks of climate change, it is crucial to reset, carefully consider concerns about sustainable tourism development, and move forward with management regimes that embrace sustainability principles. This thesis examines the application of sustainable tourism to small tropical islands by using Koh Phangan, Koh Samui and Koh Tao in the Gulf of Thailand as case studies to aid in sustainability planning for the future.

A standardized questionnaire was administered to 1261 tourists visiting the three islands during the peak tourism season (January to March) of 2018. Tourists were asked questions about the diversity of activities they engaged in; the importance of environmental, social, economic, and logistical factors for visiting the Island and their satisfaction with those factors; overall satisfaction with their tourism experience and how that relates to their expectations; preferences for the future of tourism on the Island; and demographic and travel characteristic questions.

The thesis is presented in three papers. The first paper focusses on the behavioral approach, and compared visitors to each island, noting differences in tourist demographics, travel characteristics, and social motivation factors. On all three islands, tourists would like to see an increase in the amount of community-based tourism attractions, access to traditional culture, and standard of cleanliness. On all three islands, the majority of respondents were dissatisfied with ‘learning about conservation’ and ‘learning about local cultures.’

The second paper focussed on the limits of acceptable change approach and used cluster analysis of visitor motivations to identify three types of visitors that were described in terms of
the specialization concept. Cluster 1 ("very high importance generalists") had the greatest mean importance scores for all environmental, social, economic, and logistical factors, with predominately "very high" importance scores for most factors, and the most areas of concern identified. Cluster 2 ("high importance generalists") tourists had "high importance" for most factors. Finally, cluster 3 ("mixed importance") had the greatest variability in terms of the importance scores, the lowest mean importance score for all factors, and the least number of areas of concern identified.

The third paper explores scenario planning as a vehicle for sustainable tourism planning on the island of Koh Phangan and is framed within the Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC), Tourism Opportunity Spectrum (TOS), and Ecotourism Opportunity Spectrum (ECOS) models. Most respondents preferred the "green scenario" in which access is by ferry, the current amount of tourists is maintained and growth is managed, current forest and natural areas are retained, food and accommodations are managed by local businesses, transportation remains as is or with minor road improvements, traffic is regulated and the number of vehicles on roads is managed, the implementation of community waste management, no surface water storage/reservoirs on land, and tourism is managed and operated on a small scale with focused efforts to implement sustainable community-based tourism with limits on tourism growth.

Collectively, these findings suggest that tourists can play an important role in identifying management priorities, and that tourists tend to support a more sustainable tourism industry, as opposed to a focus on "mass tourism". The study argues for adopting place-based planning practices, and creating educational opportunities to ensure that the benefits from tourism are not outweighed by the costs. As tourism expands, there is often a push to enhance visitation and the economic benefits that tourism provides; however, it is important to consider the environmental, social, economic, and logistical capacities of a tourism destination.