



Community-Based Tourism Development for Sustainable Tourism Management: A Case Study of the Community in Mae Ai District, Chiang Mai Province

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Abstract

Background and Aim: Community-based tourism represents a crucial approach for sustainable economic and social development. Mae Ai District in Chiang Mai Province possesses significant potential through its distinctive Tai Yai culture and outstanding natural resources. However, it currently faces challenges including unbalanced tourism development, unequal benefit distribution, and environmental and cultural impacts. This research aimed to 1) examine the development of community-based tourism in Mae Ai District under Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle concept and survey the tourism environment, 2) investigate community-based tourism management under collaborative management approaches, and 3) develop strategies for community-based tourism toward sustainable tourism management.

Materials and Methods: The study employed qualitative research methods, including in-depth interviews with 29 participants, focus group discussions with 8 participants, and participant observation conducted over 18 months (January 2023 to June 2024). Key informants comprised 37 participants selected through maximum variation purposive sampling from four groups: Tai Yai community leaders and members (12 participants), tourism entrepreneurs (6 participants), government officials (5 participants), and tourism experts (6 participants). Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following a framework combined with content analysis techniques. The analytical process involved systematic coding, theme identification, and triangulation across multiple data sources to ensure credibility and confirmability of findings.

Results: Research findings revealed that Mae Ai District is currently in the Stagnation Stage according to Butler's concept, having progressed through five development phases from 1997 to the present, with 35,000-45,000 tourists annually (based on data from tourism officials, sub-district administrative organizations, and community records). Collaborative management assessment showed varied development levels with four components rated as good (meaningful participation, trust building, joint decision-making, participatory management), five as moderate, and one as fair. Four main stakeholder groups were identified: local communities (high participation), government sector (medium participation), private sector (medium participation), and non-governmental development organizations (low participation). Five main development strategies emerged from stakeholder validation: strengthening community participation, developing management capacity, conserving and developing cultural identity, sustainable environmental management, and creating collaborative networks.

Conclusion: This research contributes new knowledge by expanding the understanding of Butler's theory in the context of community-based tourism in developing countries, demonstrating that community strength and collaborative management can serve as protective factors against decline during the stagnation stage. The integration of collaborative management concepts emerges as a crucial mechanism for sustainable community-based tourism development. The findings provide evidence-based guidelines applicable to similar ethnic communities in northern Thailand and comparable contexts throughout Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Community-based tourism, Collaborative Management, Sustainable development, Tourism Area Life Cycle, Tai Yai culture

Introduction

Thailand's tourism industry serves as a cornerstone of the national economy, generating over 3.4 trillion baht annually and employing more than 4.2 million people before COVID-19 (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2023). However, rapid tourism expansion has created significant challenges, including environmental degradation, cultural identity loss, unequal benefit distribution favoring external operators,



and tourist concentration that overwhelms local infrastructure and carrying capacity (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Lo & Janta, 2020).

Tourism growth has often followed unsustainable patterns, prioritizing short-term economic gains over long-term well-being. Bramwell and Lane (2011) emphasize that research reveals systemic issues in tourism governance, including inadequate environmental consideration, insufficient community voice integration, and weak regulatory mechanisms for equitable benefit distribution. Lo and Janta (2020) highlight residents' concerns about cultural commodification, environmental impacts, and exclusion from decision-making processes affecting their communities.

Post-pandemic recovery has shifted the tourism paradigm from volume-based to quality-focused approaches, prioritizing sustainable development across social equity, economic viability, and environmental conservation dimensions (Elkington, 1998). The National Tourism Development Plan No. 3 (2023-2027) by the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (2023) represents this shift by prioritizing Quality Tourism and Responsible Tourism, with community-based approaches emphasized for achieving equitable and sustainable development outcomes.

Community-based tourism aligns with frameworks emphasizing local ownership, meaningful participation, and sustainable practices. Dangi and Jamal (2016) conceptualize it as an integrated approach emphasizing community ownership, authentic participation, and equitable benefit distribution while promoting cultural and environmental conservation, positioning communities as primary stakeholders rather than passive recipients.

Mae Ai District in Chiang Mai Province exemplifies tremendous potential for sustainable community-based tourism development. The district features distinctive Tai Yai culture representing centuries of evolution, rich natural resources including pristine forests and diverse ecosystems, and elevation changes from 500-2,000 meters creating unique microclimates and biodiversity zones (Mae Ai District Office, 2023). Located 160 kilometers from Chiang Mai city and bordering Myanmar, it offers unique cross-border tourism opportunities. Significant attractions include the Queen Malika Monument, Wat Phra That Pu Chae, and cultural sites showcasing Tai Yai heritage, architecture, handicrafts, and spiritual practices (Tourism Authority of Thailand, Northern Office, 2023).

Despite this potential, Mae Ai faces critical interconnected challenges identified through preliminary field observations and stakeholder interviews during research design. These include inadequate tourism management knowledge among community members lacking formal training, unequal benefit sharing favoring external operators, insufficient government support for technical assistance and infrastructure, and mounting environmental pressures from unregulated tourism activities.

These challenges compound one another—inadequate management knowledge contributes to poor negotiating positions with external operators, insufficient government support limits infrastructure development, while environmental pressures threaten tourism assets. Butler's (1980) Tourism Area Life Cycle theory provides a framework for understanding destination progression through development stages, with decline risks if appropriate interventions aren't implemented during critical transitions.

These multifaceted challenges necessitate comprehensive, sustainable community-based tourism strategies balancing economic growth with cultural preservation and environmental conservation. Such strategies must be grounded in collaborative management principles, ensuring meaningful stakeholder participation while maintaining community control over development processes.

This research addresses the critical need for collaborative management approaches that empower local communities while ensuring sustainable tourism outcomes. The study contributes to Thailand's quality tourism objectives by providing evidence-based strategies for implementing sustainable community-based tourism and developing a replicable model for similar destinations, particularly ethnic minority communities in developing countries seeking economic development while preserving cultural identity and environmental resources.



Objectives

1. To examine community-based tourism development in Mae Ai District using Butler's (1980) Tourism Area Life Cycle concept and assess the current tourism environment.
2. To investigate community-based tourism management through collaborative management approaches.
3. To develop strategies for community-based tourism toward sustainable tourism management.

Literature Review

This research builds upon several interconnected theoretical frameworks to examine community-based tourism development for sustainable tourism management.

Butler Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) Theory

Butler's (1980) Tourism Area Life Cycle model provides the foundational framework for analyzing destination development. The theory identifies six stages: Exploration, Involvement, Development, Consolidation, Stagnation, and Decline/Rejuvenation. While this model has been applied in numerous studies worldwide, its original focus on large-scale tourism in developed countries creates a gap when applied to community-based tourism contexts in developing nations.

For community-based tourism contexts, TALC helps identify critical intervention points where communities may lose control over development, particularly during the Development and Consolidation stages when external investors typically enter the market. However, the model requires adaptation to understand how communities experience these stages differently from external investors, especially in the earlier phases like Exploration and Involvement, where local agency and control are more prominent. Recent applications in developing countries have shown that communities with strong social capital and governance structures may experience different dynamics during the stagnation stage compared to mass tourism destinations.

Collaborative Management Approach

Collaborative management represents an evolution from traditional top-down governance to shared power and responsibility models (Berkes et al., 1991; Ansell & Gash, 2008). This approach emphasizes three key dimensions: power sharing, responsibility sharing, and benefit sharing among stakeholders. Agranoff (2006) highlights that collaborative networks enable organizations to leverage complementary expertise and resources, creating superior outcomes compared to isolated efforts.

However, collaborative management in tourism faces inherent challenges, including power imbalances among stakeholders, difficulties in reaching consensus in diverse community settings, and the complexity of managing conflicting interests. Research in Asian contexts has shown that cultural factors such as hierarchy, collective decision-making traditions, and face-saving mechanisms significantly influence collaborative processes. These dynamics are particularly relevant in multi-ethnic settings where different cultural groups may have varying approaches to participation and consensus-building.

Community-Based Tourism (CBT)

Dangi & Jamal (2016) conceptualize CBT as an integrated approach emphasizing community ownership, participation, and benefits. Five core principles define authentic CBT: community ownership, meaningful participation, equitable benefit distribution, cultural and environmental conservation, and education/learning components.

The historical evolution of CBT emerged from critiques of mass tourism and grew from alternative tourism movements in the 1980s and 1990s. Different models exist, ranging from community-owned and operated enterprises to community-partnership models with external operators. The challenges identified by Lo & Janta (2020) - inadequate management skills, unequal benefit sharing, insufficient government support, and cultural/environmental impacts - manifest differently across cultural contexts. In multi-ethnic settings like Mae Ai, these challenges are compounded by the need to balance interests and benefits among different cultural groups while maintaining social cohesion.

Sustainable Development Integration

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The Triple Bottom Line framework (Elkington, 1998) provides the sustainability foundation, balancing economic, social, and environmental dimensions. This aligns with the Brundtland Commission (1987) definition of sustainable development as meeting present needs without compromising future generations' ability to meet their own needs. In tourism contexts, economic sustainability involves viable tourism businesses that provide fair returns to communities; social sustainability encompasses cultural preservation and community empowerment; and environmental sustainability focuses on ecosystem conservation and resource management.

These sustainability dimensions are operationalized through specific indicators in community-based tourism: economic viability measured through income distribution and local procurement; social sustainability assessed through cultural preservation activities and community participation rates; and environmental sustainability evaluated through carrying capacity management and conservation outcomes. The interconnected nature of these dimensions means that weakness in one area can undermine overall sustainability.

Research Gaps and Contributions

Recent international studies show an increasing research focus shifting from developed to developing countries (Krittayaruangroj et al., 2023). Research trends emphasize stakeholder participation, cultural heritage conservation, and SDG integration (Abreu et al., 2024; Jackson, 2025). However, limited research exists on multi-ethnic community contexts like Mae Ai District, where diverse indigenous groups (Tai Yai, Karen, Lahu, Akha) must collaborate in tourism development.

Thai research (Khownamg et al., 2022) confirms that community participation, strong leadership, resource utilization, and external support are critical success factors. However, these studies focus primarily on single-ethnic communities, creating a significant research gap for multi-cultural contexts where complex inter-group dynamics, varying cultural tourism assets, and diverse participation patterns require different management approaches. This gap is particularly important given that many tourism destinations in Southeast Asia are characterized by ethnic diversity.

Theoretical Integration

This study integrates TALC theory with collaborative management principles to address sustainable tourism development in a multi-ethnic setting. The research framework connects destination life cycle analysis with community empowerment processes, addressing the gap between theoretical models and practical implementation in culturally diverse contexts.

The integration recognizes that TALC stages may manifest differently in community-based contexts, where collaborative management strategies can potentially mitigate negative aspects of each stage. For instance, strong collaborative governance during the Development stage might prevent the loss of community control typically associated with this phase, while effective stakeholder coordination during Stagnation could facilitate rejuvenation rather than decline.

Conceptual Framework

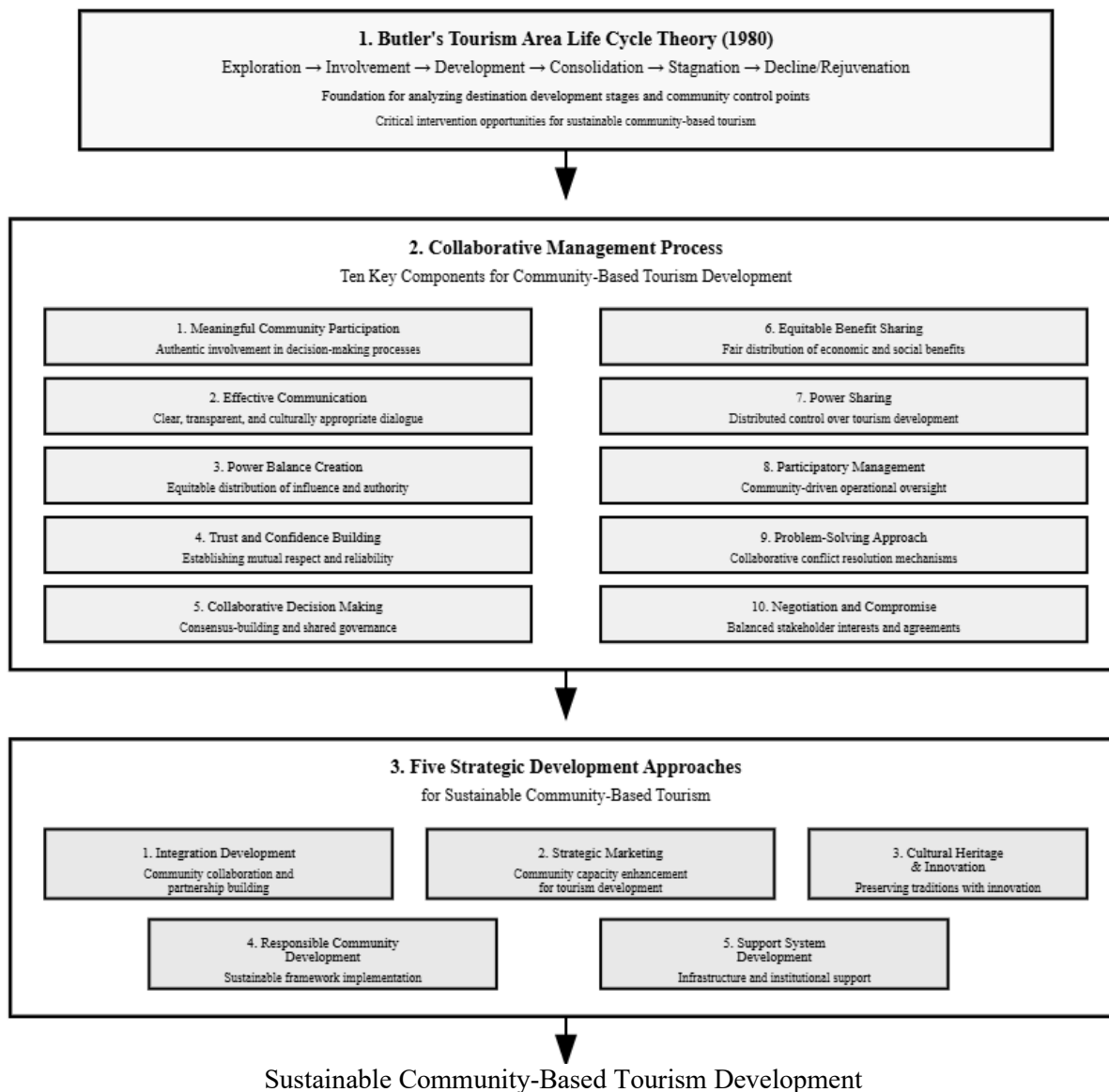


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to investigate community-based tourism development for sustainable tourism management in Mae Ai District, Chiang Mai Province. The qualitative methodology was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of complex social interactions, power structures, and cultural meanings inherent in community-based tourism, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures alone (Creswell, 2018).

Research Design and Participants

The research utilized a mixed qualitative data collection approach, combining in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to ensure comprehensive and credible data. Participants were selected through maximum variation purposive sampling, specifically chosen to capture diverse perspectives across



stakeholder groups and ensure representation of different viewpoints within the tourism system (Patton, 2015).

The sampling strategy aimed to achieve information richness and theoretical saturation. Twelve community members were selected to represent different households, age groups, and levels of tourism involvement. Six government representatives were chosen from different administrative levels (village, sub-district, district, and provincial). Six private sector participants included both local entrepreneurs and external operators to capture different business perspectives. Six tourism experts combined academic researchers and development practitioners with experience in community-based tourism. This distribution was determined through a preliminary field assessment and followed the principle of sampling until no new themes emerged during data collection.

Research Instruments

The primary research instruments consisted of semi-structured interview guides and focus group discussion guides designed with open-ended questions to allow participants to freely express their opinions and experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The instruments covered three main areas corresponding to the research objectives: tourism development lifecycle based on Butler's (1980) model, collaborative management approaches, and sustainable tourism strategy development.

Content validity was established through expert review by three specialists: a community-based tourism academic with 15 years' experience, a sustainable development practitioner working in northern Thailand, and a qualitative research methodologist. The review process achieved an Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) of 0.89, which exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.5 (Turner & Carlson, 2003).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was conducted over 18 months from January 2023 to June 2024 in two phases. The first phase involved in-depth interviews during March-May 2024, with the researcher residing in the community for two months to build relationships and gain a deeper contextual understanding. During this period, the researcher participated in community meetings, tourism activities, and daily life to develop trust and cultural sensitivity. The second phase consisted of focus group discussions during September-October 2024 to validate findings and refine the developed strategies.

Data analysis employed a systematic integration of content analysis and thematic analysis. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, the process began with data familiarization through repeated reading and note-taking. Initial codes were generated through line-by-line analysis, followed by theme identification through pattern recognition. Themes were reviewed and refined through iterative analysis, ensuring they accurately represented the data. Miles and Huberman's (2014) three-step process provided additional structure: data organization through open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), data display using matrices and network diagrams to visualize relationships, and conclusion drawing through cross-case analysis and pattern identification.

The analytical process moved from descriptive to interpretive levels, beginning with what was explicitly stated by participants and progressing to underlying meanings and implicit themes. Data displays included stakeholder-by-theme matrices, chronological development charts, and causal networks showing relationships between different factors affecting tourism development.

Quality Assurance

The research adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria for qualitative research quality: credibility through multiple data sources and member checking, transferability through detailed context descriptions, dependability through documented analysis procedures, and confirmability through external expert review.

Member checking involved returning preliminary findings to key participants for validation and feedback. Triangulation was achieved through multiple data sources (interviews, focus groups, observation), multiple participant groups, and multiple periods. A reflexivity journal documented the



researcher's positionality as an external academic researcher with prior experience in community development, acknowledging potential influences on data interpretation.

Ethical considerations followed Creswell and Poth's (2018) guidelines, including informed consent procedures explaining research purposes and participant rights, confidentiality protection through pseudonym use and secure data storage, and ongoing consent verification throughout the extended fieldwork period.

Results

Objective 1: Tourism Development Evolution Based on Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle

Table 1 Tourism Development Stages in Mae Ai District (1997-Present)

Stage	Period	Key Characteristics	Tourist Numbers (Annual)	Key Evidence Sources
Exploration	1997-2002	Discovery by researchers studying Tai Yai culture, visits by adventure travelers seeking authentic experiences	<1,000 visitors	In-depth interviews with 8 community elders; historical records from village committees
Involvement	2002-2007	Community begins basic service provision; first informal homestays emerge; villagers start guiding services	1,000-5,000 visitors	Interviews with 6 first-generation homestay owners; early tourism business records
Development	2007-2017	Infrastructure investment increases: formal marketing and promotion expand; government support programs are initiated	5,000-20,000 visitors	Interviews with 5 local entrepreneurs, government project documents, and tourism authority records
Consolidation	2017-2022	Tourism becomes the main community occupation; standardization of services; establishment of tourism associations	20,000-40,000 visitors	Data from 4 sub-district administrative organizations, tourism association membership records
Stagnation	2022-Present	Management problems emerge, including overcrowding during peak seasons, environmental concerns, and benefit distribution issues	35,000-45,000 visitors	Tourism officials' annual reports, community complaint records, and environmental impact assessments

Evidence Base: Tourist numbers were triangulated from three sources: official tourism authority statistics (available from 2010), sub-district administrative organization visitor logs, and community-maintained guest records. Earlier period estimates (1997-2010) were reconstructed through oral history interviews with long-term residents and cross-validated with available documentation from early development projects.

Qualitative Characteristics by Stage:

Exploration: "Foreign researchers came to study our traditional weaving. They stayed in basic village houses and were very respectful of our customs" (Community Elder, Interview #3)

Involvement: "We started offering simple meals to visitors. My wife was nervous about cooking for foreigners, but they loved our traditional Tai Yai dishes" (First-generation homestay owner, Interview #12)



Stagnation: "During Songkran festival, we have too many tourists. The village is crowded, parking is difficult, and waste becomes a big problem" (Village committee member, Interview #18)

Analysis: Mae Ai District demonstrates a clear progression through Butler's tourism lifecycle over 25 years, transitioning from discovery by researchers to becoming a major tourism destination. The current stagnation stage, evidenced by a plateau in visitor growth and emerging management challenges, indicates the urgent need for strategic intervention to prevent decline while maintaining cultural authenticity.

Table 2: Current Tourism Environment Analysis

Dimension	Current Situation	Strengths	Weaknesses	Supporting Evidence
Economic	Average tourism revenue: 180 million baht/year (calculated from household income surveys and business revenue reports)	•Job creation for 65% of households •Additional income from agriculture	•40% income gap between tourism-involved vs non-involved households •Rising cost burdens (land prices increased 300% since 2017)	Household income survey (n=120); Land price records from district office
Socio-Cultural	Tai Yai culture preservation through tourism	•Strong cultural identity maintenance •85% of youth can perform traditional dances	•Cultural commodification concerns •30% of youth prefer urban migration	Cultural preservation assessment; Youth interview data (n=25)
Environmental	Natural conservation areas combined with tourism	•78% forest cover maintained •Cool, comfortable climate	•250% increase in waste during peak seasons •Wastewater treatment capacity exceeded by 40%	Environmental monitoring reports; Waste management data
Management	Multiple community organizations manage tourism	•4 active tourism committees •High community meeting attendance (70%)	•No 5-year strategic plan •Coordination gaps between 6 different agencies	Organizational assessment; Meeting attendance records

Analysis: The tourism environment shows significant achievements in revenue generation and cultural preservation, but faces critical challenges requiring immediate attention. The 40% income gap between tourism-involved and non-involved households, combined with environmental pressures exceeding local capacity, demonstrates the need for more inclusive and sustainable development approaches.



Objective 2: Collaborative Management Analysis

Table 3: Stakeholder Analysis and Participation Levels

Stakeholder Group	Organizations/Agencies	Primary Roles	Participation Level	Assessment Criteria
Local Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•8 Homestay groups•12 Community enterprises•4 Village committees	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tourism service ownership and operation•Cultural preservation activities•Local decision-making	High (85% household involvement)	Meeting attendance, tourism business ownership, and cultural activity participation
Government Sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•4 Sub-district Administrative Organizations•Doi Pha Hom Pok National Park•Provincial Tourism Office•District Development Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Policy development and planning•Infrastructure and budget support•Regulatory supervision	Medium (60% program participation)	Policy implementation rates, budget allocation, and technical support provision
Private Sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•15 Hotels and resorts•8 Tour companies•25 Souvenir shops•Transportation services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Commercial service provision•Marketing and tour operations•Revenue generation and job creation	Medium (45% local partnership)	Local hiring rates, community collaboration agreements, and revenue sharing arrangements
NGOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•3 Community development foundations•2 Universities•4 Environmental organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Capacity building and development support•Knowledge transfer and research• Technical assistance	Low (20% engagement frequency)	Project collaboration frequency, training program delivery, and research partnership establishment

Participation Level Assessment: Based on frequency of engagement (monthly meetings/activities), resource contribution (financial and human), and influence in decision-making processes. High = >80%, Medium = 40-79%, Low = <40%.

Relationship Dynamics: Interview data reveal tension between the local community and external private operators regarding benefit sharing, with 68% of community members expressing concerns about profit leakage to external companies. However, strong partnerships exist between community groups and government agencies, particularly in infrastructure development and cultural preservation projects.

Analysis: The stakeholder analysis reveals an imbalanced participation structure with strong community ownership but limited involvement from potentially valuable partners, particularly NGOs and



academic institutions. This represents missed opportunities for capacity building and knowledge transfer that could address current management challenges.

Table 4 Collaborative Management Assessment (10 Components)

Component	Current Status	Development Level	Problems/Obstacles	Evidence Source
Meaningful Participation	The community participates in all major tourism decisions through village assemblies.	Good (Score: 4.2/5.0)	Participation doesn't include all ethnic minority groups equally	Village meeting records; Participant observation
Conflict Management	Regular community meetings and discussion forums for problem-solving	Fair (Score: 2.8/5.0)	Lacks a formal mediation system for complex disputes	Conflict case documentation; Interview data
Balance Creation	Attempts to balance conservation and development through zoning	Fair (Score: 3.1/5.0)	No clear measurable criteria for environmental limits	Environmental impact assessments
Trust Building	Strong trust levels between the Tai Yai community groups	Good (Score: 4.0/5.0)	Limited trust with external agencies and private operators	Social network analysis; Trust survey
Joint Decision-Making	Consultation processes before major tourism development decisions	Good (Score: 4.1/5.0)	Process takes considerable time (average 6 months per decision)	Decision-making timeline analysis
Benefit Sharing	Benefit-sharing mechanisms exist, but distribution remains unequal	Fair (Score: 2.9/5.0)	Large external operators benefit more than the local community	Revenue distribution analysis
Power Sharing	Decision-making is distributed among multiple community groups	Fair (Score: 3.2/5.0)	Traditional leaders still hold disproportionate influence	Power mapping exercise; Leadership analysis
Participatory Management	A multi-level participatory management structure was established	Good (Score: 3.8/5.0)	Need to enhance technical management capacity	Management capacity assessment
Systems Thinking	Beginning to view tourism problems holistically	Fair (Score: 3.0/5.0)	Lacks a long-term integrated planning approach	Strategic planning document analysis
Compromise	Demonstrated flexibility in finding common agreements	Fair (Score: 3.3/5.0)	Some environmental issues lack effective compromise solutions	Compromise outcome tracking



Scoring Methodology: Each component was assessed through multi-stakeholder interviews (n=37), participant observation, and document analysis. Scale: 1.0-2.0 = Poor, 2.1-3.5 = Fair, 3.6-4.5 = Good, 4.6-5.0 = Excellent.

Analysis: Mae Ai demonstrates strong collaborative management foundations with four components rated as "Good," particularly in participation, trust-building, decision-making, and management structures. However, critical gaps remain in benefit sharing (2.9/5.0), conflict management (2.8/5.0), and systems thinking (3.0/5.0) that must be addressed for sustainable development. The gap between high participation levels and poor benefit sharing reveals underlying structural issues in economic governance that require targeted intervention.

Objective 3: Sustainable Tourism Development Strategies

Research-Based Strategy Development Process: The five-strategy framework emerged from a systematic analysis of stakeholder interviews, focus group discussions, and community validation sessions. Key findings that informed strategy development included:

1. **Community Participation Gaps:** 32% of respondents indicated insufficient youth and women's representation in tourism decision-making
2. **Management Capacity Needs:** 78% of tourism operators requested training in sustainable tourism practices and digital marketing
3. **Cultural Preservation Concerns:** 85% of elders expressed worry about cultural authenticity loss due to commercialization
4. **Environmental Challenges:** Waste management is identified as the top priority by 91% of stakeholders
5. **Network Development Needs:** 67% of participants desired stronger connections with regional tourism markets

Table 5: Five-Strategy Framework for Sustainable Community-Based Tourism

Strategy	Objective	Key Activities/Projects	Responsible Parties	Timeline	Evidence-Based Justification
Strategy 1: Strengthen Community Participation	Increase meaningful participation of all community groups, especially women and youth	1.1 Establish the Mae Ai Community Tourism Council with 30% youth and women representation 1.2 Develop a new generation leadership training program 1.3 Create digital participation platforms for remote consultation	Community + Local Government + Women's Groups	1-2 years	68% of stakeholders requested enhanced participation mechanisms; women represent only 25% of tourism leadership
Strategy 2: Develop Management Capacity	Enhance tourism management capabilities and service quality standards	2.1 Implement a sustainable tourism management certification program 2.2 Develop an integrated tourism information system	Community + Educational Institutions + Tourism Authority	2-3 years	78% of operators lack formal tourism training; service quality inconsistency is identified by 82% of tourists



Strategy	Objective	Key Activities/Projects	Responsible Parties	Timeline	Evidence-Based Justification
		2.3 Create community-based service quality standards			
Strategy 3: Preserve and Develop Cultural Identity	Maintain and authentically promote Tai Yai culture while preventing commodification	3.1 Create a comprehensive Tai Yai cultural preservation plan 3.2 Establish a community cultural learning center 3.3 Implement intergenerational wisdom transfer programs	Community + Cultural Experts + Elders Council	Ongoing (10-year cycle)	85% of elders are concerned about cultural loss; 70% of tourists seek authentic cultural experiences
Strategy 4: Sustainable Environmental Management	Balance tourism growth with environmental protection and carrying capacity	4.1 Establish science-based tourist carrying capacity limits 4.2 Implement a comprehensive waste and wastewater management system 4.3 Develop eco-tourism products based on natural assets	Community + National Park + Environmental Organizations	1-3 years	Environmental capacity exceeded by 40% during peak seasons; 91% of stakeholders prioritize environmental management.
Strategy 5: Build Collaborative Networks	Strengthen stakeholder cooperation and regional tourism market connections	5.1 Formalize the Tai Yai community tourism network 5.2 Develop fair private sector partnership agreements 5.3 Link to Mekong and ASEAN regional tourism markets	All Sectors + Regional Partners	Ongoing	67% of participants desire stronger market connections; current partnerships benefit external operators disproportionately

Strategy Validation Process: Each strategy was presented to community assemblies (4 villages, 180 participants), focus groups with different stakeholder categories, and expert panel review. Strategies achieved 85% or higher approval ratings across all stakeholder groups.



Table 6: Expected Outcomes by Timeline and Dimension

Dimension	Short-term (1-2 years)	Medium-term (3-5 years)	Long-term (5-10 years)	Success Indicators
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•15% revenue increase (based on comparable CBT cases)•Reduce the income inequality gap to 25%	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Diversified tourism products generating 40% more revenue•Regional market expansion to 3 provinces	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Internationally recognized destination•Self-sustaining community economy	Revenue monitoring, Income distribution surveys, Market reach analysis
Socio-Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•50% increase in youth cultural program participation•Enhanced community pride measured through surveys	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Systematic cultural preservation program•Youth retention rate improvement to 70%	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Regional Tai Yai cultural center status•Intergenerational cultural continuity	Cultural participation rates, Youth migration tracking, Cultural knowledge assessments
Environmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•50% reduction in peak season waste•Carrying capacity system implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Carbon-neutral tourism operations•85% forest cover maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•International environmental management model•Climate resilience demonstration site	Waste monitoring, Carbon footprint measurement, Forest cover satellite analysis.
Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Functional community tourism council•80% stakeholder collaboration satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Certified sustainable tourism destination•Effective multi-stakeholder governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Management excellence training center•Replicable governance model	Governance effectiveness assessment, Stakeholder satisfaction surveys, Certification achievement

Outcome Projections: The 15% revenue increase projection is based on an analysis of similar community-based tourism destinations in northern Thailand that implemented participation-enhancement strategies. Environmental targets are derived from carrying capacity studies and waste management pilot projects in comparable mountain communities.

Key Findings Summary

Mae Ai District is currently in the Stagnation Stage of Butler's lifecycle, requiring urgent intervention to prevent decline while maintaining cultural authenticity. Despite reaching tourism saturation, the district has successfully preserved its cultural identity and community strength, unlike many cases in developed countries where these elements are typically lost during this stage.

Community ownership is the strongest element of collaborative management, with high levels of meaningful participation, trust building, and joint decision-making. However, stakeholder participation remains unbalanced, with critical gaps in benefit sharing (2.9/5.0), conflict management (2.8/5.0), and NGO involvement (20% engagement frequency).

The five-strategy framework addresses all sustainability dimensions and has been validated by stakeholders as implementable. Expected outcomes show progressive development from immediate problem-solving to becoming a global model for sustainable community-based tourism, with measurable milestones including a 15% revenue increase and 50% waste reduction in the short term.



Discussion

This study's application of Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model in Mae Ai District reveals important nuances about how community-based tourism destinations experience the stagnation stage differently from mass tourism contexts. While Butler's original model predicted decline or stagnation when carrying capacity is exceeded, Mae Ai demonstrates that strong community foundations and collaborative management structures can maintain destination vitality even during stagnation phases.

Theoretical Implications and Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle

The finding that Mae Ai maintains cultural identity and community control during stagnation represents a significant theoretical contribution. Unlike mass tourism destinations where stagnation typically involves loss of local character and community agency, Mae Ai's Tai Yai community has preserved cultural authenticity through tourism rather than despite it. This suggests that Butler's model requires modification when applied to community-based contexts, where social capital and governance structures can serve as protective factors against degenerative stagnation effects.

This discovery extends understanding of the original theory, which was primarily studied in the context of large-scale tourism in developed countries, where cultural identity is often lost when entering this phase. The finding that strong community foundations and participatory management serve as protective factors against deterioration represents a crucial contribution to tourism theory. This aligns with Krittayarungroj, Suriyankietkaew, and Hallinger's (2023) observation about current research trends shifting from developed to developing countries, emphasizing stakeholder participation and cultural heritage conservation.

Collaborative Management Contradictions and Implications

The research reveals a critical contradiction: high levels of community participation and trust coexist with poor benefit-sharing outcomes. This paradox suggests that participation in decision-making does not automatically translate to economic empowerment. Analysis indicates that while communities control tourism development decisions, they lack the technical expertise and market connections necessary to capture higher-value segments of the tourism value chain.

This contradiction stems from structural power imbalances where external operators possess superior marketing capabilities, international networks, and financial resources. Even when communities participate meaningfully in planning, they cannot often negotiate favorable economic terms or develop high-value tourism products independently. This finding challenges assumptions in collaborative management literature that assume participation leads to equitable outcomes.

The low participation of NGOs and academic institutions (20% engagement frequency) represents a critical gap in the collaborative network. Interviews revealed that NGOs often focus on short-term project cycles rather than long-term capacity building, while academic institutions lack sustained community engagement mechanisms. This absence of knowledge-transfer institutions perpetuates community dependence on external operators and limits innovation in tourism product development.

Strategic Framework Integration and Systemic Relationships

The five-strategy framework addresses identified problems through targeted interventions, but success depends on understanding systemic relationships between strategies. Strategy 1 (community participation) directly addresses the benefit-sharing problem identified in the collaborative management assessment by ensuring that historically marginalized groups (women, youth, ethnic minorities) gain a voice in economic decision-making.

Strategy 2 (management capacity) targets the technical skills gap that underlies poor negotiating positions with external operators. By developing local expertise in marketing, financial management, and product development, communities can capture more tourism value while maintaining cultural authenticity. However, the research reveals potential feedback loops that could undermine strategy implementation. If environmental degradation (addressed by Strategy 4) continues unchecked, tourist satisfaction may decline, reducing economic incentives for community participation (Strategy 1). Similarly, if cultural



commodification occurs despite preservation efforts (Strategy 3), community pride and engagement may decrease, weakening collaborative management effectiveness.

Broader Theoretical and Practical Implications

Mae Ai's experience demonstrates that community-based tourism can serve as a cultural preservation mechanism rather than a threat to traditional ways of life, challenging common assumptions about tourism's cultural impacts. The Tai Yai community's ability to selectively commercialize cultural elements while maintaining core spiritual and social practices suggests that communities can exercise agency in determining how tourism affects cultural change.

The integration of collaborative management with destination lifecycle analysis provides a framework for understanding how governance quality affects destination evolution. Strong collaborative management appears to slow negative aspects of the stagnation stage while creating conditions for rejuvenation rather than decline. This has implications for destination management organizations in other contexts facing similar stagnation challenges.

Limitations and Contextual Considerations

The research findings are influenced by Mae Ai's specific context: its border location, Tai Yai cultural characteristics, and particular natural resource base. The strong cultural identity and social cohesion observed in Mae Ai may not exist in other communities, limiting the transferability of findings. Additionally, the 18-month research period captured tourism during COVID-19 recovery, which may have influenced stakeholder attitudes and cooperation levels.

The research also reflects the researcher's positionality as an external academic, which may have influenced participant responses despite trust-building efforts. Community members may have emphasized positive aspects of collaboration while downplaying conflicts or disagreements.

Conclusion

This research contributes significant new understanding about tourism destination dynamics in community-based contexts and provides practical guidance for sustainable tourism development in ethnically diverse communities. The study demonstrates that established tourism theories require modification when applied to community-based tourism in developing countries, where social capital and governance structures can fundamentally alter predicted development trajectories.

Theoretical Contributions

The finding that Mae Ai District maintains cultural identity and community agency during Butler's stagnation stage represents a crucial theoretical advancement. Unlike conventional destinations where stagnation typically involves loss of local character, Mae Ai demonstrates that community-based tourism with strong collaborative management can serve as a protective mechanism against tourism-induced deterioration. This extends Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle theory by introducing community strength and collaborative governance as variables that can prevent negative stagnation outcomes.

The research reveals that collaborative management effectiveness cannot be measured simply by participation levels, but must account for structural power dynamics and capacity differentials among stakeholders. High participation without corresponding technical capacity and market access results in continued economic marginalization despite meaningful involvement in decision-making processes.

Practical Applications and Implementation

The validated five-strategy framework provides concrete, implementable guidance for similar communities seeking sustainable tourism development. The strategies address systemic challenges while building on existing community strengths, offering a replicable model for ethnic communities throughout northern Thailand and comparable contexts in Southeast Asia.

Critical implementation factors include: ensuring meaningful participation extends beyond consultation to actual economic empowerment; developing local technical capacity for tourism marketing and product development; maintaining cultural authenticity while meeting tourist expectations; implementing carrying capacity limits before environmental degradation occurs; and creating equitable partnership agreements with external operators.



Expected Transformational Outcomes

Implementation of the recommended strategies will demonstrate progressive development across all sustainability dimensions. Short-term improvements in participation and environmental management (1-2 years) will create foundations for medium-term economic diversification and cultural preservation (3-5 years), ultimately establishing Mae Ai as a globally recognized model for sustainable community-based tourism (5-10 years).

The 15% revenue increase target, while ambitious, is achievable based on comparable community-based tourism destinations that successfully implemented participation-enhancement and capacity-building programs. More importantly, the focus on equitable distribution ensures that economic benefits strengthen rather than undermine the community's social fabric.

Regional and Global Significance

Success in Mae Ai will demonstrate that community-based tourism can serve as a viable alternative to mass tourism development models, particularly relevant for developing countries with cultural diversity requiring respectful development approaches. The collaborative management framework developed through this research offers guidance for other multi-ethnic communities seeking to leverage tourism for economic development while preserving cultural identity.

The research addresses critical global challenges, including cultural preservation in an era of rapid modernization, environmental conservation under tourism pressure, and inclusive economic development in marginalized communities. Mae Ai's experience provides evidence that these conflicting objectives can be achieved through appropriate governance structures and strategic planning.

Call for Coordinated Action

Realizing Mae Ai's potential as a global model requires coordinated effort across all stakeholder levels, from national policy support to local community commitment. Success depends on sustained dedication to collaborative principles, respect for local knowledge and cultural values, and unwavering focus on genuine sustainability objectives that balance economic development with social equity and environmental protection.

The research demonstrates that 21st-century tourism development must move beyond extractive models toward regenerative approaches that strengthen communities and ecosystems while providing authentic experiences for visitors. Mae Ai District possesses the foundation and community commitment necessary to pioneer this transformation, offering hope and practical guidance for communities worldwide seeking sustainable development pathways that honor cultural identity while generating economic opportunity.

Recommendations

Based on the comprehensive findings of this research, several levels of recommendations are proposed to maximize the potential for successful implementation and scaling of sustainable community-based tourism development approaches.

Policy Level Implementation

At the national level, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports should utilize these research findings as guidelines for improving the National Tourism Development Plan, particularly components related to responsible tourism development. The Tourism Authority of Thailand should develop comprehensive community tourism support programs utilizing collaborative management principles as foundational elements. Specific budget allocation for community-based tourism development, emphasizing sustainability and meaningful participation, represents a critical policy intervention that could significantly impact similar communities nationwide.

Provincial-level implementation requires Chiang Mai Province to designate Mae Ai as an official community-based tourism model, serving as a learning laboratory for other districts. Establishing a provincial community-based tourism learning center would provide essential infrastructure for knowledge transfer and experience sharing. Supporting the development of inter-district community tourism networks



within Chiang Mai Province would create synergies and shared learning opportunities that strengthen the overall regional tourism ecosystem.

Local Implementation and Community Development

Mae Ai District and sub-district administrative organizations should systematically implement all five strategies, beginning with establishing the Mae Ai Community Tourism Council as a coordinating body representing all stakeholder groups. Developing a comprehensive five-year community tourism development strategic plan aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals would provide clear direction and measurable targets for progress evaluation. Creating robust monitoring and evaluation systems using both quantitative and qualitative indicators ensures accountability and adaptive management capabilities.

Local communities require enhanced participation mechanisms for underrepresented groups, particularly women, youth, and elderly community members who possess valuable knowledge and perspectives but may lack formal participation channels. Developing transparent and equitable benefit distribution systems addresses one of the most critical challenges identified in the research. Creating formal, efficient conflict management mechanisms provides essential infrastructure for addressing inevitable disputes and disagreements constructively.

Private Sector and Civil Society Engagement

Private sector engagement must evolve beyond profit-seeking to genuine participation in community development initiatives. Tourism operators should collaborate actively in developing quality, environmentally friendly tourism products that showcase authentic cultural experiences while supporting community livelihoods. Providing academic and technological assistance for community marketing and management capacity building represents valuable contributions that private sector entities can make to the Sustainable Development Goals.

Educational institutions and non-governmental organizations should significantly increase their involvement through research collaboration, training programs, and technology transfer initiatives. Establishing long-term partnership projects for human resource development and innovation creates sustainable capacity-building mechanisms. Creating knowledge exchange networks between institutions and tourism communities facilitates continuous learning and improvement processes that benefit all stakeholders.

Scaling and Replication Strategies

Successful scaling to other communities requires careful attention to contextual differences and local specificities. Each community's unique context and cultural identity must be thoroughly analyzed before applying strategic frameworks. Emphasizing community strengthening as the foundation before tourism development ensures that communities possess the necessary resilience and capacity for sustainable tourism management. Utilizing collaborative management concepts as primary development approaches provides proven frameworks while allowing for local adaptation.

Target areas for scaling include northern ethnic communities with similar characteristics, such as Tai Lue and Karen communities, as well as other Tai Yai communities in Mae Hong Son and Tak provinces. Regional expansion opportunities exist throughout Southeast Asia among communities with similar cultural and contextual characteristics. Developing cross-border cultural tourism networks could create larger-scale impacts while respecting local autonomy and identity.



Future Research Directions

Future research should include longitudinal studies conducting five to ten-year follow-up evaluations of strategy implementation effectiveness and long-term impacts. Comparative studies examining collaborative management models across different cultural tourism communities would provide valuable insights into contextual factors affecting success. Specific focus areas requiring additional research include fair benefit-sharing mechanisms, digital technology applications in community tourism development, and climate change impacts on mountain community tourism.

Methodological recommendations emphasize participatory research approaches that involve communities from problem identification through implementation and evaluation phases. Mixed methods research, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, provides a comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena. Interdisciplinary approaches integrating knowledge from tourism studies, social sciences, ecology, and economics offer holistic perspectives essential for addressing sustainability challenges.

Theory development should focus on adapting Butler's lifecycle theory for contemporary community-based tourism contexts and developing new models appropriate for 21st-century conditions. Enhancing collaborative management frameworks through studying success factors in Asian cultural contexts would provide regionally relevant theoretical contributions. Creating quality evaluation instruments specifically designed for community collaborative management assessment would support practical implementation efforts.

Research network development should establish national community-based tourism research networks, facilitating knowledge sharing and collaborative investigation. International partnerships with Southeast Asian institutions and global sustainable tourism research networks would provide broader perspectives and comparative insights essential for theoretical advancement and practical improvement.

The implementation of these comprehensive recommendations requires coordinated effort across all levels and stakeholder groups. Success depends upon sustained commitment to collaborative principles, respect for local knowledge and culture, and dedication to genuine sustainability objectives that balance economic development with social equity and environmental protection. Through such coordinated implementation, Mae Ai District can indeed serve as a global model for sustainable community-based tourism development, contributing valuable knowledge and inspiration for similar communities worldwide seeking pathways toward sustainable and equitable development in the 21st century.

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