Responsible tourism in Thailand: Evidence from tour operators

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Abstract: This paper points out indicators of responsible tourism which are of strategic significance to tour operators seeking to develop their country towards achieving a competitive advantage. It looks at the extant literature covering the notions of responsible tourism and responsible tour operators. Qualitative research involved in-depth and semi-structured interview questions employed to collect responsible tourism data from tour operators' direct experiences. The findings revealed that eighty-eight responsible tourism indicators for tour operators could be divided into five categories relating to the responsibility of tour operators, organisations' sustainability policies, products and services, partners and clients, benefits for society and culture, economic benefits, and benefits for the environment.

Keywords: Responsible tourism, Tour operators, Sustainable Tourism indicators, Thailand.

1. Introduction

Sustainability is playing a significant role in tourism development (Mathew, 2009). Sustainability in tourism is designed in different tourism activities. Responsible tourism (RT) has been generalized to sustainable tourism, ecotourism, and even ethical tourism, which is probably a typology of socially conscious practice taking place from tourism (Caruana et al., 2014). The aspect of RT products remains distinct from general tourism, as it seeks niche markets to engage with special tourism groups (Goodwill and Francis, 2003). The motto of the Thai Responsible Tourism Association (TRTA) (2024) states that sustainable tourism comes from responsibility. Meanwhile, world tourism is confronted with uncertain situations from climate change and over-tourism to terrorism, inequality, and emerging diseases. The issue of climate change has been fueling the consumer demand for responsible products and transparency from organisations (George, 2017). Increasing evidence proves that RT is required for current tourism development to achieve sustainable destinations, not only to meet economic expectations but also to mitigate climate change and improve social equality. Thailand has attracted overwhelming tourist numbers from around the world to visit and spend for two decades (Chaiyakot et al., 2023). Additionally, it remained in the top ten global rankings for both the number of tourists and tourism revenue in 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic (World Economic Forum, 2019).

The country's major target of tourism development is directly aimed to bring economic benefits as tourism is one of the vital engines to drive economic development, boost foreign exchange, and generate employment opportunities. Accordingly, the mainstream tourism concept has an influence over almost every sector of tourism. Invading protected areas to build tourism facilities, as well as tourist fraud and community exploitation associated with tourism activity have often been seen through the media. The tour operator registration category in Thailand is divided according to guarantees and areas of operation, while the tour business license is permitted for both a legal person and a natural person (Department of Tourism, 2024).

The involvement in business and destination sustainability is undoubtedly the responsibility of tour operators since they can play crucial roles in employing sustainable practices in the travel and tourism industry (Font and Cochrane, 2005; Hamid et al., 2021). They provide crucial relations between demand and supply, control the market system, and direct tourism flows (Schwartz et al., 2008; Ullah et al., 2021).

Therefore, responsibility for business operations depends on the specific situation facing each company. Several tour operators in the country prefer to run their business for mainstream tourism. However, a few special groups of tour operators were found to serve alternative tour programmes, as tour operators are intermediaries working closely with tourists and suppliers in the destination (Swarbrooke,1999; Budeanu, 2005). Many studies indicate that tour operators play crucial roles in protecting and the sustainability of tourism destinations (Swabrooke, 1999; Wijk and Persoon, 2006; Fray and George, 2010). TRTA was established in 2017 by gathering tour operators who have similar concepts of responsibility from different regions across the country (TRTA, 2024). This study aims to provide the responsible tourism guidelines from the empirical practical evidence of tour operators who are members of TRTA and conduct their tour business in the northern, central, and southern regions of Thailand, thus formulating sustainable tourism indicators for responsible tour operators.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Responsible Tourism

Responsible tourism (RT) is a "sustainable approach to the practice of tourism" (Sharpley, 2013: 383). RT is the new way of sustainable tourism as it involves responsible actions through which sustainability can be achieved (Kim et al., 2017). In short, RT is defined as "making better places for people to live in and better places for people to visit, requiring that operators, hoteliers, governments, local people, and tourists take responsibility and action to make tourism more sustainable" (Goodwin, 2014: 1). RT requires sustainable development by actions from tourists, tourism suppliers, government bodies, and local authorities (Spenceley, 2008). Characteristics of RT include minimizing impact, generating economic benefits for local communities, involving local people in decision making, conserving nature and culture, providing meaningful connections between visitors and hosts, and being accessible and culturally sensitive (Caruana et al., 2014: 16). It implies that RT is embedded within both the demand and supply sides, production and consumption, and involves all stakeholders (Goodwin, 2016; Bianchi et al., 2020). Notwithstanding this, RT is often understood not to be greatly different from sustainable tourism, ethical tourism, and ecotourism (Fennell, 2008) since these all have the ultimate outcome of minimising the negative impact and maximising the benefits of tourism development (Sica et al., 2021).

2.2. Responsibility of Tour Operators

Curtain and Busby (1999: 137) indicate that specialist tour operators include small to medium-sized independent companies, specializing in particular geographical areas or types of holidays. Tour operators are the key stakeholders in the tourism supply chain, as they contribute to direct sustainable tourism development (Mamhoori, 2015). Additionally, Sigala (2008) states that in working towards sustainability, tour operators can control tourist flows, influence tourism stakeholders including their clients, and work with local communities. The sustainability framework for tour operators proposed by Ariya et al. (2021) could be summarized as stating that tour operators have to communicate responsibility to all categories of relevant stakeholders: clients, guides, hosts, conservation agencies, partners, and transportation and accommodation providers. A majority of sustainable tourism practices are related to environmental conservation, while tour operators are key players and have potential in promoting sustainability (Park, 2009; Hamid and Isa, 2020). Budeanu (2005) points out that tour operators are the intermediaries between service suppliers (hotels, transport, restaurants, etc.), tourists, and travel agents. Khairat and Maher (2012) conclude that sustainable practices in business include long term competitiveness, high quality experiences for customers, customer loyalty, safeguarding

destinations, increasing benefits for local communities, and providing income for conservation. Robert and Tribe (2008: 585) discuss the economic sustainability performance indicators for small tourism enterprises including buy local policies, the degree of spending in the local economy, and percentages of locally made goods used in business. TUI, the well-known tour agency, declared its 2030 sustainability agenda, "tourism: a force for good". Its idea of sustainability includes promoting culture exchange and understanding, supporting diversity and inclusion, providing education, alleviating poverty, driving up social and environmental standards, creating employment and opportunities for innovation and business creation, and contributing to conservation (TUI, 2024). The sustainability policy of Andaman Discoveries (2024), a southern Thailand tour operator, includes reducing the material consumption of paper, energy, and water in the office that can lead to cost savings and help in terms of staff awareness of the importance of the environment. Camilleri (2016) reveals that the engagement of hotels and tour operators in responsible tourism is motivated by economic responsibility. Booyens (2010) states that governments ought to make greater efforts to push the private sector and other stakeholders to change responsible tourism principles into policies, strategies, and regulations.

3. Methodology

The research data were collected through semi-structured, interrelated, and consecutive focus groups, while the members of the research team facilitated and moderated the discussion. Twelve niche market tour operators who are members of the Thai Responsible Tourism Association (TRTA) from northern, central, and southern regions of Thailand took part in the event (Table 1). Interview participants were selected based on the research study as well as the knowledge and experience of participants considering the phenomenon under investigation, to capture the meaning of the phenomenon under their consideration (Venkatesh et al., 2016, Creswell and Clark, 2017). The focus group generally consists of 7 to 12 individuals who share certain characteristics relevant to the focus of the study (Marshall and Rossman, 2006).

A majority of local tour operators were scattered nationwide, particularly in the main tourist destinations. The participants in this study comprised two main groups: local domestic tour operators, and inbound tour operators whose main clients came from western countries. Certain operators held the positions of founders and tour guides. TRTA had to revise its responsible tourism indicators after the COVID-19 pandemic for both its old members and newly registered members. The stakeholders were left free to discuss their operations according to loosely drafted issues, since RT separates different practices in line with the specific type of ethical issue: economic, socio-cultural, and environmental (Lee et al., 2017). In this way, all participants had an opportunity to discuss independently in detail their operations and experiences. Then rough data (table 2) were analysed, divided, and grouped into five categories:
 1) Organisation's sustainability policy
  2) Products and services, partners and clients
  3) Benefits for society and culture
  4) Benefits for the economy
  5) Benefits for the environment

Indicator's analysis. This step took place through participants discussing details of each category; the similar words were checked and aligned to provide robustness indicators. Eighty-eight indicators were obtained for responsible tour operators. Those were sent to all stakeholders to provide a repeated check and to validate the results.

Table 1.
No. of local tour operators and locations.

Region	No. (12)	Location
North	4	Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son
Central	3	Bangkok
South	5	Phuket, Phang Nga, Satun, and Songkhla

Table 2.
The categories of tour operator's tourism responsibility.
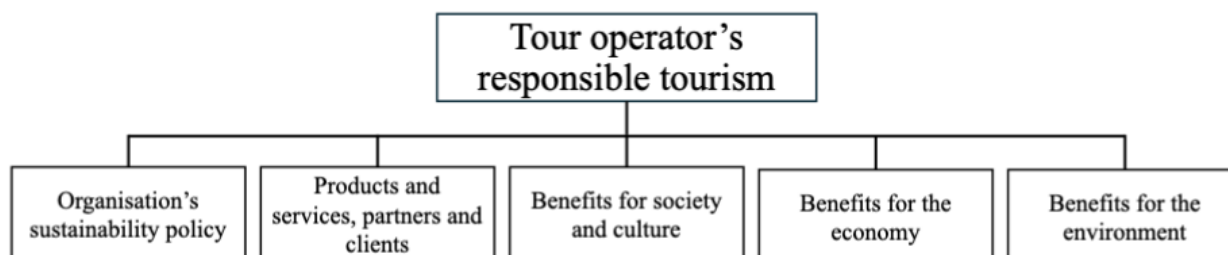
4. Findings

Eighty-eight indicators of responsible tourism for tour operators were compiled from the experiences of TRTA members. They are related to managers, staff, office supplies, products, services, and to social, cultural, economic, and environmental benefits (Table 3).

Table 3.
The number of responsible tourism indicators for tour operators.

Categories of sections	Issue	No. of indicators	
		Permanent member	Initial Member
Organisation's sustainability policy	Manager	4	1
	Staff	6	2
	Office supplies	5	3
Product and service, partner and client	Product	4	3
	Vehicle	4	2
	Guide	4	3
	Food	6	1
	Accommodation (Homestay and home lodge)	8	1
	Tourism activity	8	5
	Partner	7	3
	Client	9	5
Benefits for the three pillars of sustainability	Environment	7	4
	Culture and society	10	3
	Local economy	6	2
Total		88	38

4.1. The details of the Indicators of Each Category
4.1.1. Organisation's Sustainability Policy

The members of TRTA comprise tour operators, tourism communities, guides, and academics. Local tour operators are small scale entrepreneurs (SME) and work with tourism communities. From the point of view of TRTA members, RT is adopted as a tool for the conservation of local culture and traditions, the protection of natural heritage, local development through community participation, and the distribution of revenue to the local community (Mathew and Mimmi, 2022). Basically, organisations are required to fill in primary forms for the initial registration in order to filter members. Fundamental criteria include the organisation's sustainability policy. However, it seems that the first entrance criteria are rather broad and diluted. The new criteria for organisation sustainability policy include the characteristics and capacity of a sustainable organisation executive, characteristics, equality, rights of staff, and the concept of the green office (Table 4). The support of local products such as dried food, beverage ingredients, or handmade containers has become essential for members, while income distribution among people in the villages represents responsible action (Robert and Tribe, 2008: 585; Andaman Discoveries, 2024).

Table 4.
The indicators of an organisation's sustainability policy.

Category: 1 Organisation's sustainability policy	
Issue	Indicators
1.1 Manager	1.1.1 Commit to responsible tourism management
	1.1.2 Set goals and plans for responsible tourism operation
	1.1.3 Create awareness of responsible tourism among employees in the organisation, tour guides, and partners
	1.1.4 Direct the organisation to operate according to responsible tourism guidelines
1.2 Staff	1.2.1 Understand responsible tourism
	1.2.2 Follow organisational policy
	1.2.3 Gain social welfare benefits required by laws covering social security, and accidents
	1.2.4 Insurance while on duty
	1.2.5 Receive the wage required by law
	1.2.6 Being trained to upskill, reskill, and gain new skills
	1.2.7 Hiring local workers and promoting career advancement for women, the underprivileged, the elderly, the disabled, and those of different genders and ethnicities
1.3 Office supplies	1.3.1 Guidelines for using office equipment
	1.3.2 Use green label materials and save energy
	1.3.3 Check equipment and maintain it regularly
	1.3.4 Use technology in transections and communicate to reduce the use of office supplies
	1.3.5 Promote the use of community products in the office such as tea, coffee, rice, containers, wicker, etc.

4.1.2. Products and Services, Partners and Clients

RT requires minimization to create environmentally friendly products and services to meet the clients' needs. Tourist attractions comprise natural and manmade destinations. RT is concerned with dishes to serve to clients, while local raw materials and wisdom must also be considered. Moreover, RT attends to reliable information details from both the media and tour guides. Basically, homestays and ecolodges in villages must provide good facilities along with sanitation and safety equipment for

tourists. RT activities emphasis lower energy usage or renewable energy usage with activities such as walking tours, biking, or public transport, which have a low impact on local culture, and use services belonging to local entrepreneurs or people, thus promoting conservation, restoring local ways of life, and providing conditions of safety and comfort to everyone when travelling (Robert and Tribe, 2008: 585; UN, 2013). Often, cases of cheating tourists occur in Thailand, where a lack of strict tourism laws and regulations make it possible for anyone to register to become a tour operator. RT, such as ethical tourism, requires control in creating trust among partners and customers, thus RT partners prioritise responsibility and transparent actions. Notably the treatment of clients includes giving relevant information before travelling, providing trip meetings and incident reports, checking satisfaction levels, and requesting permission to use photos for public relations (Table 5).

Table 5.
The indicators of products and services, partners and clients.

Category: 2 Products and services, partners and clients	
Issue	**Indicators**
2.1 Product	2.1.1 Cultural community way of life, historical and natural tourism sites, and tourism attractions located in protected areas
	2.1.2 Create experiences from the exchange of knowledge between host and visitors
	2.1.3 Minimize impact on local culture, way of life, and environment
	2.1.4 Provide clear and fair service information (Tour programmes) and conditions (travel itinerary, price, and cancellation) in accordance with the law
2.2 Service: vehicle	2.2.1 Legally registered, safety standards, and regular fixing, checks, and maintenance
	2.2.2 There is safety equipment such as seat belts, fire extinguishers, first aid kits, life jackets, and helmets, (Bicycle) etc.
	2.2.3 The vehicle operator has a valid driver's license, readiness to serve, good manners, and is polite and humble
	2.2.4 Always turn off the engine while the customer gets out of the car, and do not start the engine while waiting
2.3 Service: guide	2.3.1 Have a license and perform duties according to the type of license
	2.3.2 Have knowledge of responsible tourism and give accurate tourism information
	2.3.3 Be honest, responsible for duties, and dress politely
	2.3.4 Do does not seek benefits from tourists and service providers
2.4 Service: food	2.4.1 Use local ingredients for cooking
	2.4.2 The cooking and eating places are clean, hygienic, and safe
	2.4.3 Use environmentally friendly and reusable materials
	2.4.4 Serve low energy cooked food
	2.4.5 Serve the proper quantity of food to avoid waste
	2.4.6 Conduct the proper management of food waste
2.5 Service: accommodation (Homestay and home lodge)	2.5.1 The place owner welcomes guests and introduces the place, rules, and practices
	2.5.2 The building structure is strong, clean, safe, and neat
	2.5.3 The bathroom is clean and hygienic
	2.5.4 The bedrooms have ventilation and clean bedding
	2.5.5 There is enough light in each spot
	2.5.6 There is a first aid kid, and it is not expired

Category: 2 Products and services, partners and clients	
Issue	Indicators
	2.5.7 There are signs and contact numbers in case of emergencies
	2.5.8 There is a fire extinguisher that can be used, and is not expired
2.6 Service: tourism activity	2.6.1 There is a risk management plan and safety information before tourism activities begin
	2.6.2 Inform customers of the disclaimer
	2.6.3 Minimize impacts on the environment and community culture
	2.6.4 Promote the conversation and restoration of culture, way of life, and environment in the area
	2.6.5 Communities or owners of tourist attractions participate in tourism activities and are willing to serve
	2.6.7 Have place, materials, and equipment that are safe and eco- friendly, and be ready to serve
	2.6.8 Eco-friendly activities and reduced energy use, e.g., walking, cycling, boating, using local vehicles, etc.
	2.6.9 Tourism activities can be changed as appropriate due to force majeure or unfavourable weather conditions
2.7 Service: partner	2.7.1 Understand responsible tourism
	2.7.2 Choose a partner who is ready and responsible for service work
	2.7.3 Follow the partner's policies
	2.7.4 Pay compensation as specified in the contract or according to mutually established agreements
	2.7.5 Have clear communication channels
	2.7.6 Ready to communicate and resolve complaints, addressing opinions and suggestions from tourists
	2.7.7 Ready to follow to responsible tourism criteria
2.8 Service: client	2.8.1 Provide information related to responsible tourism *(Code of conduct, do and don't, packing list, etc.)*
	2.8.2 Request necessary tourist information (full name, passport ID, DOB, dietary and health restrictions)
	2.8.3 Meeting with tourist groups to inform them of programme details, activities, travel, location requirements, and tourist attractions
	2.8.4 Prepare relevant documents in case the customer does not wish to travel or do activities according to the travel programme (Release form)
	2.8.5 If a tourist has an accident, they must prepare an incident report and take them to hospital
	2.8.6 Provide detailed information about the travel programme such as history, weather, culture, occupations, etc.
	2.8.7 Provide experiences and learning in the places for tourists (The role of the tour guides and local interpreters)
	2.8.8 Ask for opinions and evaluate satisfaction levels with services
	2.8.9 Send thank you letters, request permission to use photos for public relations, and send pictures of activities to customers

4.1.3. RT Benefits for Culture and Society

Empirical study has revealed that mass tourism is absolutely different from alternative tourism in terms of the negative impact on particular communities and vulnerable people who have difficulties in utilizing resources although they belong to them. Negative social impacts include cultural change,

increased crime, begging and gambling, prostitution, and inequitable distribution of the profits from tourism (Deery et al., 2012). RT has attempted to reach a better understanding of positive impacts from the tourism phenomenon. Ruhanen et al. (2019) pointed out that RT, as the sociocultural aspect of sustainable tourism, has displayed the potential for tourism operation which includes conservation and restoration of local culture and ways of life, providing education for locals, opportunities to exchange experiences between hosts and visitors, and creating awareness for tourists (Table 6). Chafe (2005) states that tourists with more travel experience seem to display greater sensitivity with regard to the negative impact on tourism attractions.

Table 6.
The indicators of benefits for culture and society.

Category: 3 benefits for culture and society
Indicators
3.1 Preserve and restore the culture and way of life of the community
3.2 Create unity and strength for people in the community
3.3 Develop skills, potential, and knowledge in responsible tourism management for local communities
3.4 Create a community that is accepted by outside agencies
3.5 Raise the quality of life for people in the community
3.6 Exchange of knowledge between the host and the visitors
3.7 Create acceptance of different cultures, traditions, and ways of life
3.8 Create pride for people in the community
3.9 Promote a sense of love for one's hometown
4.1 reate awareness among tourists

4.1.4. RT Benefits for the Local Economy

Sustainable tourism and responsible tourism are defined by UNEP and UNWTO (2005: 11-12) as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities". Frey and George (2010) state that RT not only promotes community involvement but also ensures economic benefits to host communities. Additionally, RT creates empirical opportunities to shift the distribution of tourists away from major destinations to travel to less visited areas, allowing local people to sustain incomes for demonstrations and exhibitions of local resources such as cuisine, art performances, souvenirs, and particular aspects related to destinations offering cultural richness (Mathew and Nimmi, 2021). TRTA members point out that RT assists in redistributing tourists from major destinations to secondary city destinations, providing job opportunities for local people, community funding, and creating a circular economy in the community (Table 7).

Table 7.
The indicators of benefits for the local economy.

Category: 4 Benefits for the local economy
Indicators
4.1 Distribute tourists and income to secondary tourist attractions
4.2 Create jobs and careers for local people
4.3 Distribute income through the tourism supply chain to local areas
4.4 Add value to products and services in the community through travel programmes and tourism activities
4.5 Promote village funds from tourism
4.6 Expand the economic benefits, and create a circular economy for local communities

4.1.5. RT Benefits for the Environment

Thailand remained in the top ten for number of tourists and revenue from tourism in 2019. In contrast, its tourism environmental sustainability status was ranked at 130 from 140 countries (World Economic Forum, 2019). The increasing number of tourism businesses are seeking certification and recognition for implementing green supply chains (Center for Responsible Travel (CREST), 2017). RT emphasizes the promotion of sustainable use of local resources (Spenceley, 2005). TRTA members stress that RT approaches can create environmental awareness, save energy, provide natural and cultural conservation, and promote waste management, and environmental education trips (Table 8). Obviously, RT activities assist in protecting the environment and reducing the carbon footprint (Caruana et al., 2014). That means both suppliers and customers must align in facing environmental challenges and must implement solutions together.

Table 8.
The indicators of benefits for the environment.

Category: 5 Benefits for the environment
Indicators
5.1 Create awareness of environmental conservation
5.2 Reduce pollution and traffic problems
5.3 Restore and conserve natural resources, culture, and the ways of life and the environment of the community
5.4 Reduce energy consumption and use alternative energy
5.5 Learning about environmental conservation through tourism activities (Planting forests, collecting rubbish, processing waste, etc.)
5.6 Manage community waste according to the 3 Rs principles (Reduce, reuse, recycle)
5.7 Create an environmental management network

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The challenge of tourism development in developing countries mainly emphasizes economic benefits. In many situations, it seems to neglect the sustainable development principle. Responsibility becomes the last resort to stop the impacts from unplanned development. Tour operators have a pivotal role to balance responsibility among tourism supply changes. TRTA members have made the effort to improve tourism services to general standards by renewing the responsibility indicators from their experiences. From the methodological point of view, the indicators of tourism operators overall included 88 relevant indicators encompassing executives, staff, offices, services in tourism supply chains, partners, clients, and the social, cultural, economic, and environmental benefits from tourism. These criteria are significantly meaningful for tour operators in this country where sustainable and responsible tourism policy is not always consistently implemented. Finally, greater efforts are required to inspire mainstream tour operators to make a substantial contribution to the responsible tourism framework.

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