

# Success Factors in Community-Based Tourism in Thailand: The Role of Luck, External Support, and Local Leadership

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**ABSTRACT** *The dominant narrative regarding tourism in Thailand centers on the various negative social and environmental consequences of rapid growth, but in the midst of this explosive expansion of conventional tourism, a less recognized story has recently emerged. Due to the efforts of researchers, environmental activists, non-governmental organizations, and public officials, community-based tourism (CBT) has become in the past decade an important component of the domestic tourism market, and signifies trends that are more encouraging than those associated with more conventional forms of tourism in Thailand. While it is true that some rural communities in Thailand struggle to plan, initiate, and sustain CBT projects, it is nevertheless possible, with the right combination of circumstances, to pursue successful CBT. The paper explores the emergence of CBT in Thailand, and examines the case study of Mae Kampong, a village in the Northern Thai province of Chiang Mai that is renowned nationally as a showcase CBT community. Using data and observations gathered during more than 30 research or study-tour visits to Mae Kampong, this paper argues that fortunate geographical conditions, external support, and transformational leadership represent the most important determinants of success for CBT in Thailand.*

## Introduction

The typical narrative regarding the growth of international tourism in Thailand is by now quite familiar to those interested in Southeast Asia. This narrative highlights the rapid growth of tourism beginning in the mid-1980s and the many ways in which tourism policies almost always, and regardless of the circumstances, have favored quantity over quality. Such growth-at-any-cost policies have indeed produced impressive annual gains in the number of tourists visiting Thailand, but the price paid for this growth is a wide range of deleterious consequences, including the social costs associated with sex tourism (Martin & Jones, 2012), the exacerbation of regional and individual income inequality (Leksakundilok & Hirsch, 2008), the commodification of cultural traditions (Cohen, 2008), the degradation of the natural environment (Calgaro & Lloyd, 2008), and the inability of communities hosting tourism to create substantial backward linkages to local economies

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(Lacher & Nepal, 2010). Although it is true that Thai government agencies have paid greater lip service in recent years to addressing the harmful consequences of conventional tourism, and scholars have explored ecotourism (Jitpakdee & Thapa, 2012), wildlife tourism (Duffy & Moore, 2011), and other alternatives to the “sun, sea, sand, and sex” formula so prevalent in Thailand’s historical tourism trajectory, many studies and especially media stories about tourism in Thailand continue to highlight the damage that mainstream tourism causes to individuals or communities.

While pessimistic or sensationalist stories about mass tourism continue to inform the narrative about tourism in Thailand, an important but less familiar story has emerged in the past decade, namely a successful effort on the part of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and rural communities to promote community-based tourism (hereafter CBT) as a way of countering the drawbacks associated with conventional tourism in Thailand. Despite multiple challenges such as geographical remoteness, national policies that favor large and well-connected travel firms, and insufficient knowledge, financial capital, and managerial experience, several rural communities throughout Thailand have nevertheless pursued a form of tourism that shifts ownership, benefits, and control toward members of the community and away from external actors.

In the literature on CBT, the question of success is a controversial one and depends largely on one’s perspective and expectations. If success connotes great financial rewards in absolute terms, the elimination of poverty, or escape from the vulnerability and insecurity that characterize agricultural work, then one could argue that few communities in Thailand participating in CBT have proved successful. However, a different conclusion is reached if one takes a less quixotic approach, wherein net gains in community benefits and significant community participation in tourism determine the achievement of success. Likewise, allowing members of communities to make judgments about their own success, and to define success on their own terms, casts efforts to facilitate CBT in Thailand in a positive light.

In order to discuss the planning and development of CBT in Thailand, this paper spotlights Mae Kampong, a village in northern Thailand renowned for its CBT initiatives. This study centers on several objectives: to document the history of CBT in Mae Kampong, to evaluate the benefits and challenges associated with individual and community participation in CBT, and to determine the most important determinants of success in Mae Kampong. Due to its promotion by tourism officials, Mae Kampong has become well known within Thailand as a model, or showcase, CBT community. Mae Kampong also benefits from being only 50 kilometers from Chiang Mai, northern Thailand’s largest city and—as the capital of the eponymous province, which received 2.5 million Thai and 1.9 million foreign tourists in 2011 (Tourism Authority of Thailand [TAT], 2013a)—one of Thailand’s most popular tourist destinations. Tourists visit Chiang Mai and northern Thailand generally, for many reasons, including cultural tourism (in the form of visits to religious, historical, and ethnic sites such as indigenous minority “hill tribe” villages), and nature tourism based on jungle trekking, outdoor adventure activities, and experiences involving captive wildlife such as monkeys, snakes, tigers, and elephants. In the past decade, as the number of tourists visiting northern Thailand has grown, so has the demand among some tourists for more authentic destinations and experiences that remain off the beaten tourist track. Mae Kampong is one such destination, and serves as an example of a successful effort to participate in tourism, while at the same time avoiding some of the most severe negative impacts.

Although CBT in Thailand has received a lot of attention from Thai journalists, tourism officials, and academics writing predominantly for a Thai audience, there is relatively little peer-reviewed work published on the topic, other than a handful of studies (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2005; Leksakundilok & Hirsch, 2008; Nguangchaiyapoom, Yongvanit, & Sripun,

2012; Walter, 2009; Wong, 2008). This paper therefore addresses a neglected topic, but one that deserves more attention because it not only offers an alternative interpretation of the nature of tourism in Thailand, but also provides insights and lessons on what best facilitates community control over, and development of, tourism in Thailand. After discussing the features of CBT in general and describing the methods used to gather data for this study, this paper goes on to examine the specific factors that have led to successful CBT in the community of Mae Kampong. Ultimately, this paper argues that Mae Kampong's success is based on three factors: sheer luck, significant external support, and individual leadership within the community. Further, because this combination of factors is relatively uncommon, it may be difficult for communities elsewhere in Thailand to replicate Mae Kampong's high level of success.

### **Principles, Characteristics, and Limitations of Community-Based Tourism**

Most assessments of CBT trace scholarly interest in the concept back to the 1985 publication of Peter Murphy's *Tourism: A community approach*. Although several authors explored the community dimensions of tourism prior to this time (Heenan, 1978; Loukissas, 1983; Murphy, 1983; Pizam, 1978), Murphy's (1985) study ushered in an era of growing interest in CBT. Hoping to put the needs and capabilities of communities at the forefront of tourism development that usually favors powerful business and state interests, Murphy (1985) uses systems theory to argue that a successful community-oriented tourism strategy depends on effective interconnections between the environmental, commercial, social, and management components of tourism.

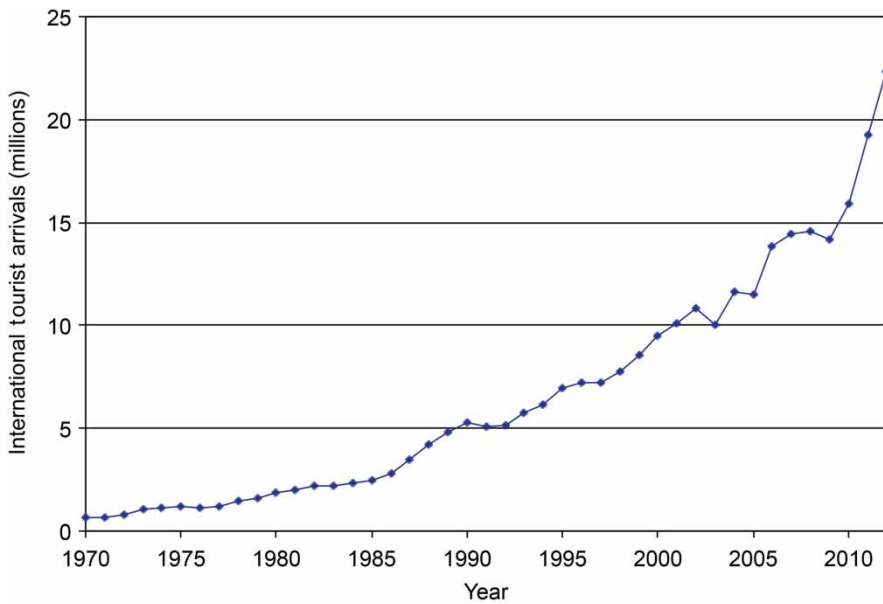
Since the mid-1980s, many scholars, entrepreneurs, community activists, and tourism planners have attempted to define, extend, and identify best practices associated with CBT. As a result of such sustained attention, there is little agreement on what exactly constitutes CBT. Despite such differences, the majority of definitions of CBT in the literature tend to include most or all of the following characteristics: environmental sustainability, community participation, equitable distribution of financial benefits, community empowerment, improvements in standard of living, and community management, control, and ownership of tourism projects.

Complicating efforts to define CBT is the ambiguity regarding what constitutes a community (Beeton, 2006), as well as the conflation of community tourism, which refers simply to tourism that takes place in small (and often rural) communities, and CBT, which assumes both that control over the planning of tourism resides in the hands of community members and that benefits are concentrated locally. There are also important differences between CBT and tourism that is merely oriented toward communities. For example, Honggang, Sofield, and Jigang (2009) argue that CBT, defined alternatively as "Communities Benefiting through Tourism", allows communities to tap into existing mass tourism markets in order to capture economic benefits, regardless of whether members of the community possess ownership of tourism businesses. Similarly, Simpson (2008, p. 2) puts forth the concept of Community Benefit Tourism Initiatives (CBTIs) to describe projects that transfer "benefits to a community regardless of location, instigation, size, level of wealth, involvement, ownership, or control". According to Simpson, CBTIs allow stakeholders such as businesses, governments, and NGOs to deliver benefits to communities without having to overcome the political or social hurdles that commonly hinder community involvement in the tourism planning process. Despite several case studies (Dwyer & Edwards, 2000; Li, 2006; Tosun, 2000) that illustrate the possibility of community benefits in the absence of full community control or ownership, evidence from the majority of successful examples of CBT indicates that community initiative and control are indeed essential, and that in

practice, tourism can be community-based and community-oriented at the same time. Moreover, just as some have questioned the absolute necessity of community ownership and control for the generation of benefits for community members, others have scrutinized the very notion of participation which, together with an equitable share of benefits, constitutes the “the basic premise of CBT” (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009, p. 35). In particular, while many assessments of CBT (Brandon, Lindberg, & Hawkins, 1993; Rocharungsat, 2008; Simmons, 1994) highlight the importance of community involvement in the initiation, planning, and ongoing evaluation of tourism, others (Henkel & Stirrat, 2001; Weaver, 2012) argue that participation has become a dogma that too often goes unquestioned. Additionally, participation is an attractive principle in theory, but comes in a wide variety of forms in practice. At one end of the spectrum are plantation (France, 1998), manipulative (Pretty, 1995a), passive (Pretty, 1995b), or pseudo (Tosun, 1999) forms of participation that give communities virtually no real power over decisions, and do little more than require locals to carry out plans hatched by others. At the other end are forms of participation that feature self-mobilization (Pretty, 1995b) and empowerment (Scheyvens, 2002), whereby individuals take the initiative to develop tourism in their communities without heavy external involvement or coercion. Aside from the difficulty of achieving inclusive and active forms of participation among tourist destination communities, CBT as a whole has also been criticized because of its inability to overcome the global, national, and local power inequities that limit community benefits and constrain community control over tourism (Blackstock, 2005; Butcher, 2012).

Notwithstanding such concerns about the limitations of CBT to produce substantial, equitable benefits or community empowerment, it is clear from the enduring attention paid to CBT by scholars, NGOs, and tourism officials that it will persist as a niche form of tourism that seeks to challenge, or at the very least supplement, the existing conventional tourism industry. This is especially true in countries such as Thailand where for many decades, tourism grew rapidly with few controls or regulations, resulting in many harmful consequences. Of course, it is undeniable that the meteoric growth of tourism, whereby the number of international tourist arrivals grew by 335% between 1992 and 2012 (Figure 1), yielded economic benefits in the form of employment, foreign exchange, and economic diversification. Nevertheless, beginning in the 1990s, Thai activists began to sound the alarm regarding the social, cultural, and especially environmental impacts of unfettered tourism growth.

The initial impetus for CBT emerged at this time, when in 1994, the Thai Volunteer Service (TVS) teamed up with a new tour operator, Responsible, Ecological, Social Tours (REST), to bring urban Thais to rural communities that hosted TVS projects. In addition to offering study tours to rural communities, REST worked directly with interested communities on capacity-building so that they could plan, monitor, and market CBT activities. In 2006, the leaders of REST created the Thailand Community-Based Tourism Institute (CBT-I) in collaboration with the Thailand Research Fund (TRF), a government agency that administers research grants to Thai researchers. It is hard to underestimate the importance of CBT-I to Thailand’s efforts to increase awareness of CBT as a community development strategy and model of alternative tourism. With a mission to “provide support and facilitate cooperation among stakeholders from grassroots to international levels, in order to strengthen the capacity of Thai communities to manage tourism sustainably” (Suansri & Richards, 2013, p. 545), CBT-I has, in the 7 years since its establishment, assisted over 100 communities throughout Thailand with training, research, and evaluation. This assistance has allowed Thai communities to identify community resources suitable for tourism development, implement CBT projects, and form linkages to tour operators, educational institutions, and other CBT organizations in both Thailand and the Greater



**Figure 1.** International tourist arrivals in Thailand, 1970–2012.

Source: TAT (2013b).

Mekong Subregion. In recognition of its successful efforts to promote sustainable community-based development, CBT-I has received commendation from many organizations, including Conservation International, the International Ecotourism Society, the World Travel and Tourism Council, and UNESCO.

Largely as a result of the efforts of REST and then CBT-I, CBT has emerged in Thailand as a prominent part of the domestic travel market. Due to the great influence of these two entities, communities and government officials at all levels continue to view CBT in ways that are shaped by CBT-I's definition of CBT: tourism that takes environmental, social, and cultural sustainability into account, and that is managed and owned by the community, for the community, with the purpose of enabling visitors to increase their awareness and learn about the community and local ways of life (CBT-N, 2013). In its widely read and influential *Community-based tourism handbook* (Suansri, 2003), REST delineates several elements of CBT in the Thai context. These include the sustainable use of natural resources, the promotion of cultural traditions unique to specific destination communities, the inclusion of all community groups in the planning of tourism, the allocation of tourism profits to a community fund meant for social and economic development, the fair and equitable distribution of benefits, and the promotion of shared educational experiences between tourist and host. The approach taken by Thai academics, community leaders, and public officials toward CBT thus incorporates not only components that are found in virtually all definitions of CBT, such as participation, benefits, and community ownership, but also components mentioned less often, such as environmental sustainability, cooperative profit-sharing, and mutual learning.

## Methods

The central case study for this paper is the village of Mae Kampong, located in the province of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand (Figure 2).

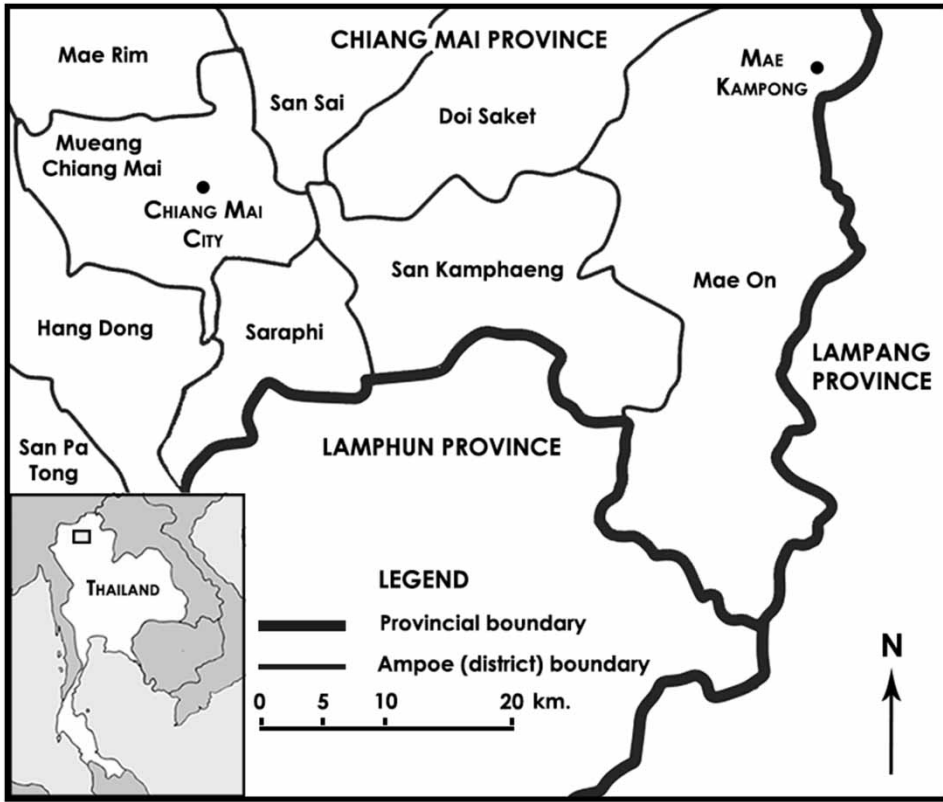


Figure 2. The location of Mae Kampong in Southern Chiang Mai province, Thailand.

Mae Kampong was founded roughly 100 years ago by settlers looking for fertile land, and agriculture still accounts for a large share of both income and employment. Of particular importance are crops that grow well in the high (1,100 meters) elevation of the village: these include mountain herbs, coffee, and tea, from which a fermented local chewing snack, known in the Northern Thai dialect as *miang*, is produced. The population of Mae Kampong is 312 according to the most recent government statistics (Rural Development Information Center [RDIC], 2013), but this number may not be entirely accurate because reported figures for Mae Kampong’s total population vary widely from one source to the next, and in interviews conducted as part of this research, village leaders cited population figures (377 total people) that contradict data from previous studies as well as the latest official Thai government records. Regardless of its small population and—until the construction of a paved road in 2000—remote location, Mae Kampong emerged in the late 1990s as a tourist destination because of its geographical and topographical features. Specifically, its high elevation ensures clean air and a cool climate, and its setting adjacent to a stream that runs through a forested mountain valley creates a natural escape for Thais living in congested and polluted urban environments.

The emergence of tourism in the Mae Kampong area in the late 1990s was a blessing in many ways, since declining demand for *miang*, the target of most productive activity of the village historically, translated into a need for economic diversification. At the same time, however, the unregulated nature of tourism in this, and other, regions of Thailand prompted village leaders to become increasingly concerned about the economic, cultural, and environmental impacts of tourism in their community. In response to these concerns, the



community decided after several meetings, workshops, and focus group sessions to pursue a deliberate strategy of CBT whereby ownership, benefits, and control of tourism activities would remain in the hands of village residents. With the assistance of government funding, Mae Kampong officially launched its CBT program in 2000. The centerpiece of Mae Kampong's CBT initiative was, and remains, a homestay program that allows visitors to stay overnight with a resident family. In its incipient years, only five families participated in the homestay program, but the number has steadily grown to 24 today; this represents approximately 20% of all households in Mae Kampong.

The number of families participating in Mae Kampong's homestay program has grown to match increasing tourist demand. In 2012, there were a total of 4,657 visitors to Mae Kampong. This represents an increase of 208% from just 5 years prior, when 1,513 tourists visited Mae Kampong. Unlike the rest of Thailand, where only 10% of visitors to certified homestay communities are foreigners (Suansri & Richards, 2013, p. 535), the share occupied by foreign tourists in Mae Kampong is relatively high, hovering from year-to-year around the 50% mark. Mae Kampong offers three types of tours to visitors: one-day tours (which account for 20% of all visits to Mae Kampong), homestay tours (60% of all visits), and specially designed study tours (20% of all visits) that come in both one-day and overnight varieties. Overall, when the three tour options are pooled together, 80% of all visitors to Mae Kampong stay at least one night with a homestay family. Both one-day and overnight visitors can choose from a range of activities, including performances of traditional music and dance, jungle treks to nearby waterfalls and vista points, visits to local bamboo and rattan artisans, and participation in local activities—such as the offering of morning alms to monks, cooking and eating with homestay hosts, and Thai massage—and rituals, such as *Baisi Soo Kwan*, a traditional Thai welcome ceremony in which strings are tied around one's wrists by village elders. Additionally, visitors to Mae Kampong are able to observe local economic activities such as tea or coffee harvesting, fermentation of *miang*, blacksmithing, and the production of aromatic pillows stuffed with dried tea leaves.

Mae Kampong provides an excellent case study to examine CBT because, as mentioned earlier, it is widely considered by Thai academics, community activists, and tourism policymakers to be among the most successful examples of CBT in the entire country. For example, among 10 well-known case studies examined in Boonratana's (2010) study of CBT in Thailand, Mae Kampong was the most successful in achieving such characteristics as community involvement, equal income generation opportunities, community empowerment, collective benefits, and retention of traditional lifestyles and culture. Similarly, in an assessment of CBT in Thailand written for a United Nations World Tourism Organization report on domestic tourism in Asia and Pacific (Suansri & Richards, 2013), Mae Kampong is one of only three case studies highlighted among the more than 100 communities in Thailand that explicitly promote CBT. The success of Mae Kampong is especially noteworthy considering the many studies (Chandraprasert, 1997; Kantamaturapoj, 2005; Novelli & Tisch-Rottensteiner, 2012; Wong, 2008) that highlight the challenges and limitations associated with struggling or failed CBT projects in Thailand. As a result of growing recognition among practitioners and public officials of Mae Kampong's successful CBT efforts, the community has received several awards, including the Thailand Tourism Award for Community-Based Tourism in 2007 (given by the TAT) and the Pacific Asia Travel Association's Gold Award for cultural tourism in 2010.

Awareness of the success of Mae Kampong's CBT initiatives has also garnered (and stemmed from) sustained attention from Thai tourism researchers, particularly conference participants (Kallayanamitra, 2011; Silparcha & Hannam, 2011; Suriya, 2010; Wongsawat & Bhuntuvech, 2009) and graduate students who either focus exclusively on Mae Kampong

or use it as one of several case studies in their Master's theses and doctoral dissertations (see, for example, Boonpitak, 2003; Mitchob, 2001; Rocharungsat, 2005; Satarat, 2010). However, despite this sustained attention on CBT in Mae Kampong, studies published in books or peer-reviewed international journals remain rare, with the exception of Choibamroong (2011), Dolezal (2011), and Laverack and Thangphet (2007). Furthermore, the majority of existing studies provide only descriptive accounts of Mae Kampong's CBT efforts or mention Mae Kampong in passing, and offer little analysis of the role played by specific factors in the success of the community.

Using convenience sampling, the authors conducted interviews with 30 residents of Mae Kampong. The subjects of these semi-structured interviews included not only participants in tourism (such as homestay owners, musicians, dancers, or guides), but also village residents who do not participate directly in tourist-related activities. Several extended interviews were conducted with the former *poo yai baan* (village headman), who spearheaded early CBT efforts and continues to serve as the chairman of the Mae Kampong Tourism Committee. Interviews covered a range of topics, including people's perceptions of the benefits, costs, and limitations of CBT, the reasons why individuals choose to participate in tourism activities, the dilemmas inherent to expanding tourism, while trying to limit its consequences, and opinions regarding the economic, social, and environmental impacts of tourism in Mae Kampong. Participant observation, conducted during more than 30 research or study-tour visits to Mae Kampong over a three-year period, also yielded valuable insights and data, as did analysis of secondary data from brochures, websites, journal articles, and newspaper articles. Throughout the process of data collection, close attention was paid to triangulation since it was rare for the exact information to be given more than once, especially with regard to dates or numerical information. Triangulation was also crucial in this study since information on Mae Kampong provided in many previous studies (particularly conference papers and theses) and on websites is often inconsistent and contradicts primary data gathered for this research from village residents and leaders.

### **Taking Advantage of Fortunate Circumstances**

The importance and success of CBT in Mae Kampong are evident when examining the ways in which tourism activities have boosted incomes as well as the capital available in cooperative village funds. In less than a decade, household incomes in Mae Kampong have more than tripled, going from 49,000 baht (\$1,672) in 2003 (Untong, Phuangsaichai, Taweelertkunthon, & Tejawaree, 2006, p. 72) to B154,550 (\$5,275) in 2012 (RDIC, 2013). At the community level, the contribution of tourism to village revenues experienced an even more remarkable rate of growth. Though written records are not available prior to 2007, village leaders estimate that in 2000, the first year of CBT in Mae Kampong, tourism generated approximately B80,000 (\$2,730). By 2012, written records show total revenues of just over 2.6 million baht (\$88,737). Considering the declining value of agricultural commodities, especially *miang*, to the overall economy of Mae Kampong, this increase in village and household income is almost entirely attributable to the growth of tourism. While it is true that the success of CBT in Mae Kampong relates to many factors typically covered in most assessments of CBT in the academic literature, the research on which this paper is based indicates that the most important reasons for Mae Kampong's success are luck, external support, and individual leadership. This section examines the role played by fortunate circumstances, while subsequent sections explore the importance of external support and local leadership.



If given the choice and opportunity, a majority of rural communities in Thailand would surely choose to participate in tourism in order to diversify their local economies and generate additional income and employment. However, most villages in Thailand suffer from geographical disadvantages such as remoteness or a lack of suitable natural resources. In this sense, Mae Kampong is fortunate because it is located just 50 kilometers from Chiang Mai, a major transportation and tourism hub. Its close proximity to Chiang Mai, and the paving in 2000 of the road that runs through the village, make it convenient for tourists to reach the community. Fortunately, though accessibility could make it difficult to control the number of tourists who reach the village, the winding two-lane road that connects Chiang Mai and Mae Kampong cannot handle large tour buses, thereby helping to restrict the number of visitors. Mae Kampong is also lucky to be located at a high elevation that ensures a temperate climate and fresh air. Moreover, its location along a stream, in a steep forested valley, helps to create a landscape that is attractive to tourists from urban environments. The combination of these two fortunate circumstances—proximity to an urban center and a lush natural landscape—is relatively rare in Thailand. Hence, remote villages in attractive natural settings, or accessible communities with insufficient marketable natural assets, stand at a disadvantage compared to communities like Mae Kampong that can utilize their beneficial locations and environmental settings.

Since participation is a key feature of CBT, communities with an existing history of cooperation and active involvement in key decisions are well positioned to develop community-based forms of tourism. Luckily for Mae Kampong, a pattern of cooperation was already established by the time discussions of CBT were first held, in the late 1990s. In particular, every resident of Mae Kampong has belonged, since 1986, to a cooperative that manages, and shares the profits from the sales of, power produced by three micro-hydroelectricity generators built in the village since the early 1980s. Managing the electricity cooperative not only gave residents first-hand experience with collaboration and conflict management, but also established a mechanism by which profits from tourism could be collected and distributed to all members of the community. Currently, after collecting payments from individual tourists or tour companies, the Mae Kampong Tourism Committee pays homestay owners, guides, musicians, and dancers for services provided, and then distributes the remaining profit to the following funds, individuals, or groups: the electricity cooperative (30%), the community development fund (20%), the Chair of the Tourism Committee (25%), the social welfare fund (15%), and members of the Mae Kampong Tourism Committee (10%).

The electricity cooperative pays an annual dividend to all members of the village, and Mae Kampong residents are able to draw on the social welfare fund to help defray costs associated with childbirth, education, hospitalization, or the death of a family member. Further, by paying for community-wide initiatives such as reforestation, waste management, surveillance of illegal hunting or logging activities in community forests, and the construction of buffer lines meant to contain forest fires, the community development fund similarly benefits everyone in the village. In 2012, the 4,657 tourists that visited Mae Kampong generated approximately B838,000 (\$28,601) in visitation fees, which went toward the aforementioned funds, individuals, or groups. Since 65% of these visitation fees go automatically into the electricity cooperative, social welfare, and community development funds, it is reasonable to assume that in 2012 alone, at least B544,700 baht (\$18,590) went specifically into funds that benefit all members of the community. In short, Mae Kampong was fortunate to have a system of profit-sharing in place, making it straightforward and convenient for community leaders to implement key components of CBT, namely participation and equitable distribution of financial benefits. In a sense, it can also be said that Mae Kampong was lucky to begin with because its geographical

circumstances allowed the generation of micro-hydroelectricity in the first place, and this in turn led to the creation of a cooperative system that could easily absorb the introduction and growth of CBT.

### **The Necessity of External Support**

Aside from its ability to take full advantage of fortunate geographical and historical circumstances, Mae Kampong has also successfully utilized external support to advance its CBT goals. Heavy external involvement by state actors, NGOs, and private businesses in the efforts of communities to initiate and sustain tourism projects is criticized by many advocates of CBT, especially when funding for CBT is secured from external donors, since this results in a lack of financial sustainability for many CBT projects around the world (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009; Mitchell & Muckosy, 2008; Weaver, 2012). However, as Giampiccoli and Mtapuri (2012) argue, external facilitation, particularly from government agencies, is an essential element of success in CBT. This would seem to be the case in Thailand, where 71% of communities deemed by the Office of Tourism Development (OTD) as possessing a high level of CBT readiness received assistance from external agencies, compared to 57% of communities with a medium and low readiness (Satarat, 2010, p. 297).

Though academic researchers and private tour companies have played a role in highlighting Mae Kampong as a CBT community, the external actors most important to its success are government agencies and NGOs. Mae Kampong has received research funding, marketing, and training support from several federal Thai government agencies. First, the TRF, which has funded over 70 CBT-related research projects throughout Thailand (Choibamrong, 2011), enabled a group of nine residents of Mae Kampong to conduct over half a dozen workshops and focus groups aimed at educating members of the community about the benefits and costs of community-based ecotourism, assessing the potential for CBT in Mae Kampong, and ascertaining the CBT model most appropriate to the community. In addition to facilitating consultation and collaboration over a period of several years, the TRF research funding enabled meaningful participation, which “cannot take place before a community understands what they are to make decisions about” (Cole, 2006a, p. 632). Second, despite continuing to put a priority on maximizing tourist arrivals and revenues, the TAT, a state enterprise under the Ministry of Tourism and Sport, responsible for tourism promotion, has also in the past decade slowly shifted part of its focus toward ecotourism, CBT, and other forms of alternative tourism (Leksakundilok & Hirsch, 2008). As part of this shift, the TAT has sponsored many magazine articles, radio spots, and television programs about Mae Kampong. The publicity generated by TAT-sponsored programming has greatly boosted awareness of Mae Kampong among a Thai audience, and village leaders report that inquiries and visitation increase noticeably immediately after the airing of such programs.

The third government agency involved in providing assistance to Mae Kampong is the National One Tambon, One Product (OTOP) Administrative Committee, a body within the Thai Prime Minister’s Office that brings together representatives from several government ministries (including Interior, Agriculture and Cooperatives, Commerce, and Foreign Affairs) in order to administer the OTOP program. The purpose of the OTOP program is to promote the best local products from Thailand’s over 7,200 Tambon (sub-districts). Shortly after formally launching CBT in 2000, Mae Kampong received the OTOP designation for its community-based homestay project. In 2004, Mae Kampong received further recognition when it was named an OTOP Village Champion. Finally, the OTD, a branch of the Ministry of Tourism and Sport assisted Mae Kampong indirectly by establishing and implementing a rigorous set of homestay certification standards since 2005, while the

Department of Skill Development in the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare provided hospitality training to homestay hosts in the early years of operation.

Besides the marketing support, research funding, and training provided to Mae Kampong by government agencies, NGO assistance has also contributed to the community's success. The organizations that helped the most in getting CBT off the ground in Mae Kampong, and then promoting it once it was launched, are REST, and the NGO that it eventually became, the Thailand CBT-I. In July 2000, after helping Mae Kampong prepare to host overnight guests, REST brought the very first homestay visitors (a group from Kagoshima, Japan) to the community. This initial experience eventually ushered in the Mae Kampong homestay program, which was officially launched five months later in December, 2000. Since then, REST and CBT-I have assisted Mae Kampong with marketing and promotion by, among other things, providing information about the community on its affiliated websites, and holding it up in public meetings and conferences as a showcase for CBT. This free marketing support is important to Mae Kampong's success, because it allows the community to avoid spending tourism revenues on advertising, and also ensures that Mae Kampong does not suffer from the marketing problems that, according to several authors (Boonratana, 2011; Leksakundilok & Hirsch, 2008; Suansri & Richards, 2013), afflict many CBT communities in Thailand.

The greatest contribution of REST and CBT-I to Mae Kampong's success is the ways in which the early and then sustained involvement of these organizations made education and learning, rather than leisure and recreation, the primary focal points of CBT in Mae Kampong. Nearly 60% of visitors to Mae Kampong come as part of a study tour organized by institutions of higher learning, and education is the primary reason cited for visiting the village (Boonratana, 2011, p. 56). This educational focus facilitates success because it enables Mae Kampong to tap into a guaranteed and perpetually replenished market (secondary and tertiary students), to avoid having to create entertainment-oriented spectacles that would compete unfavorably against more attractive entertainment options elsewhere in the region, to take pride in tourists' desire to experience and learn about local life, and to make the most of what some say is the high learning potential offered by homestays in Thailand (Walter, 2009).

### **Transformational Leadership**

Leadership is generally neglected in the literature as a success factor, and when it is mentioned, it is usually listed as just one of many reasons for a community's success in fostering CBT (Armstrong, 2012; Moscardo, 2008; Wilson, Fesenmaier, Fesenmaier, & Van Es, 2001). By contrast, Aref (2011) contends that the success of local development generally, and CBT specifically, depend largely on the quality of local leadership. Similarly, Blackman et al. (2004) argue that successful CBT programs require an individual "champion" to motivate members of the community, provide information, and serve as a bridge between the community and external actors. Several studies (Laverack & Thangphet, 2007; Pongponrat, 2011) have also illustrated the importance of strong and competent leadership to the success of CBT in Thailand.

Luck and external support are important factors in the success of CBT in Mae Kampong, but without effective individual leadership, the fate of tourism in Mae Kampong would remain uncertain. Mae Kampong is fortunate to have an individual champion that is willing to shoulder the bulk of responsibility for the initiation, development, and management of CBT. As *poo yai baan* (village headman) of Mae Kampong for 12 of the past 17 years, Prommin Puangmala initiated CBT in Mae Kampong and continues to be the most significant reason for its ongoing success. Though Prommin stepped down as village

headman in 2012, he continues to oversee the management of CBT in the village in his capacity as Chair of the Mae Kampong Tourism Committee. Interviews with residents of Mae Kampong conducted for this research reveal a high level of respect for Prommin among different groups within the community, and nearly every single subject states that Prommin's leadership is a primary reason for the success of CBT.

There are many specific reasons that collectively have contributed to the success of CBT in Mae Kampong, but one overarching theme, or strand, that ties them together is the involvement of Prommin. For example, a headman with little authority or respect would find it difficult to work with external actors in ways that benefit the community. Prommin enjoys a good working relationship with many external actors, from academics researching CBT or bringing students on study tours, to activists working for NGOs such as CBT-I, to officials at all levels of government. Prommin is also the principal reason that CBT in Mae Kampong features a high level of community participation, which is a key component of CBT and the success factor mentioned most often in stories, programs, and academic studies about Mae Kampong. Prommin's efforts to involve and inform members of the community through several formal meetings and workshops helped to overcome the lack of knowledge and awareness that often curtail participation in rural areas of less developed countries (Cole, 2006b). As a result, unlike other rural communities in Thailand that are "still marginalized from the tourism planning process and are unable to control who is coming to their village" (Novelli & Tisch-Rottensteiner, 2012, p. 68), Mae Kampong has achieved active participation in the tourism development process, defined as local involvement in the "whole process of tourism development including decision making, implementation, sharing benefit, monitoring and evaluation of tourism development programs" (Tosun, 1999, p. 128). It should be noted as well that Prommin and other community leaders established the electricity cooperative in 1986, which itself required a level of collaboration and cooperation that greatly enabled subsequent community participation in CBT.

Besides taking the lead role in bringing together the community and administering a thorough and deliberate process of consultation, Prommin also took steps to ensure that the benefits of tourism would be distributed as widely and equitably as possible. He did this by making the decision, as village headman and chair of the Tourism Committee, to use the structure of the existing electricity cooperative to manage the CBT program. This decision meant that revenues generated from tourism activities would go, as discussed earlier, into funds that benefit every member of the community. Interviews with village residents and Prommin himself reveal that there is still a small number of people that remains unaware of this benefit, because these funds existed prior to the introduction of tourism and the benefit is hidden rather than explicit, as it is for locals like homestay owners and guides who work directly with tourists. Nevertheless, by linking tourism to community-wide funds, Prommin disabused people of the notion that CBT would benefit only certain village residents. An additional way in which Prommin's leadership fostered the equitable distribution of benefits is the formation of occupational groups, which bring together residents doing similar work in order to share ideas, plan and coordinate future activities, and provide mutual financial support in times of crisis. Mae Kampong currently has over a dozen occupational groups, many of which—such as the bamboo weaving, blacksmithing, folk dancing, herbal tea pillow, homestay, Thai massage, and traditional music groups—benefit directly from tourism. Due to the formation of occupational groups and Prommin's guidance to individuals interested in participating in tourism, at least 40 households (out of 123) now interact with, or sell products directly to tourists, while the rest receive annual dividends, or are able to draw, from funds whose deposits depend partly on tourism revenues.

A specific set of skills and personality traits make Prommin, the community's CBT champion, a rare and highly effective leader. Prommin's greatest skill is his ability to

fulfill multiple roles competently. As the former village headman, Prommin was required to reconcile conflicting views and desires, and gain the trust of his fellow villagers by demonstrating a willingness to advance the interests of the community as a whole. Prommin has earned this trust because of his many accomplishments as village headman, beginning in 1996. These accomplishments stem from Prommin's ability to secure funding from several government bodies, and include the establishment of a forest fire buffer line, the paving of the village road, and the construction of a toilet for every household in Mae Kampong. For his role in increasing the percentage of households with toilets from 5 to 100 in just 2 years, Prommin received the award for the Village Health Volunteer of the year for Chiang Mai in 2000, as well as the Best Public Health Volunteer Award for the Northern Region in 2001 (Satarat, 2010). Prommin's role as village headman involved more than just governing at the local level. He also had to interact with government officials at the national and regional levels, and exhibit savvy political skills and vision. For example, by asking representatives from the Tambon (Sub-District) Administrative Organization to serve on the Mae Kampong Tourism Committee, Prommin ensured an ongoing relationship with officials that could provide services and funds to Mae Kampong. As well as serving effectively in a political capacity, Prommin has also straddled other worlds successfully. Whether it is interacting with tour operators and tourists as an entrepreneur and homestay program manager, exchanging ideas with activists at conferences, or contributing to academic studies of CBT (Sarobon, 2003), Prommin moves easily from one role to another.

Organizational, managerial, and social skills have greatly helped Prommin, but it is his authority and legitimacy that, coupled with these skills, have translated into a successful CBT model in Mae Kampong. Prommin's authority and legitimacy derive from several sources. As the longtime elected village headman of Mae Kampong, Prommin automatically enjoys a certain measure of respect that all formal leaders receive in rural parts of Thailand. This baseline respect was significantly enhanced due to the trust that Prommin built among village residents during his tenure (and beyond) as headman. Additionally, external recognition of Prommin's accomplishments and talents has brought a great deal of positive attention to this small and previously unknown community. According to many residents interviewed for this research, Prommin has instilled a sense of pride among community members, who appreciate the emerging notoriety that the village has enjoyed in the past decade as its accomplishments continue to be recognized on a national stage. Unlike many rural Thais, who adhere to a cultural norm of modesty and a desire to not bring undue attention to oneself, Prommin welcomes the attention and sees it as enhancing both the reputation of the village and the pride that residents feel toward their community. For this reason, the identity of Mae Kampong has been strongly shaped by Prommin, whose accomplishments are often noted in stories about Mae Kampong, and even communicated to visitors in public displays. For example, in the village's central pavilion, where community meetings and visitor education sessions are held, an eight-foot-tall poster board publicizes Prommin's receipt of the "Thai Wisdom Teacher" designation from the Ministry of Education's Office of the Educational Council. This award, which was given to Prommin for his success in creating and disseminating knowledge in the "field of community funds and enterprises," is also advertised on the village's homestay contact information road sign (see Figure 3).

Related to the point above, regarding his embrace of publicity and external validation, Prommin possesses the charisma required to arouse in others "enthusiasm, excitement, emotional involvement and commitment to group objectives" (Bass, 1985, p. 40). In this sense, Prommin embodies the qualities of a transformational leader, which according to Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and Van Engen (2003) inspires motivation through the demonstration of optimism and enthusiasm about common goals, explores new ways of tackling



**Figure 3.** Road sign (top) in Mae Kampong that indicates Prommin Puangmala’s receipt of Thai Wisdom Teacher designation.

old problems, mentors others according to their individual needs, and exhibits behavior that creates respect and a desire among others for association with the leader.

**Conclusion**

Despite providing an encouraging alternative interpretation to the typical narrative of unchecked and destructive tourism growth in Thailand, the success of CBT in Thailand



in the past decade remains a neglected and underappreciated story. To bring this story to light, this paper uses the case study of Mae Kampong, one of the most renowned examples of CBT in the country, to explore the conditions that best enable success. Whether success is defined as a long-term viability, the equitable distribution of benefits, heightened cultural and environmental awareness or meaningful community participation in the initiation, implementation, and assessment of CBT, there is little doubt that the national, and increasingly international, recognition granted to Mae Kampong for its CBT efforts is well deserved. In principle, while authors such as Butcher (2007) and Mowforth and Munt (2009) may be correct when they argue that some CBT projects ultimately promote reactionary agendas, encourage communities to live subsistence lives, and eschew transformative social and economic change, the example of Mae Kampong illustrates that success is possible even in the absence of revolutionary changes to the political, economic, and social conditions that characterize Thai life. In other words, in light of the great difficulty of challenging the deep and long-standing structural inequalities of Thai society, the creation of net benefits and the active involvement of the community should not be discounted when determining whether or not CBT in rural Thai communities is successful.

The evidence from this study both confirms and extends previous studies of success factors for the planning and management of CBT in developing countries. For example, Mae Kampong features every single condition for success listed in Armstrong's (2012, p. 1) comprehensive survey of CBT enterprises:

engagement with the private sector; a strong and cohesive host community; genuine community participation, ownership and control; planning for commercial viability; sound market research and demand-driven product development; attractive, quality products based on community assets; transparent financial management; appropriate stakeholder support and effective monitoring and evaluation.

Similarly, the five factors identified by Kibicho (2008) as being essential to successful CBT development—recognition of benefits, expression of objectives, inclusion of relevant stakeholders, effective implementation of decisions, and involvement of a legitimate leader—are all evident in the case of Mae Kampong. However, this paper also extends previous studies by highlighting the importance of three factors that in other studies are either listed alongside a host of other conditions, or in the case of luck, rarely ever mentioned. Moreover, by arguing that the transformational leadership of Prommin Puangmala, the former village headman of Mae Kampong, is the key reason for the success of CBT, this study makes the case for a more serious consideration of the role played by individual “champions” in expediting and enhancing other success factors.

There are two principal lessons that one can draw from the research on which this paper is based. First, since most rural communities in Thailand lack Mae Kampong's particular combination of transformational leadership and fortunate environmental, historical, and spatial circumstances, it is reasonable to assume that it will be difficult for other CBT communities to replicate the success of Mae Kampong, at least to the same degree. Tourism planners and policy-makers in Thailand should, therefore, recognize that while communities may succeed in acquiring external support, and some may possess fortunate geographical or historical circumstances, the absence of charismatic and skilled leadership will seriously impede a community's ability to achieve a high level of success. A second lesson relates to the nature of participation in successful CBT projects, and the optimal balance between internal and external involvement. Though many CBT projects around the world do little to challenge the status quo, and instead simply enrich the economic and political power of existing elites, Mae Kampong illustrates that widespread profit-sharing and participation are indeed possible even in situations where success depends

principally on the actions taken by individual leaders, as well as on the support of external agents such as government officials, NGOs, academics, and private tour operators. Thus, while the history and operation of tourism in Mae Kampong do exemplify the self-mobilization and active participation essential to most definitions of successful CBT, it is interesting that this self-mobilization was inspired and managed by the village headman, in cooperation with other key community elites such as the abbot of the village's Buddhist temple, village elders, and the informal leaders of the six hamlets (known in Thai as *pang*) that make up Mae Kampong. In this way, tourism in Mae Kampong is both *community-based*, in that the community itself initiated tourism and retained control over its nature and direction, and *community-oriented*, in that village elites and external actors took steps to generate benefits for the community as a whole. In the end, considering that "self-initiation is rare in Thai society" (Leksakundilok, 2004, p. 166), it is commendable that Mae Kampong mobilized internally and created a successful model for CBT in Thailand, even if this success is partly contingent upon the involvement of outside entities and the transformational leadership of local elites.

On a final note, this paper has praised the efforts of Mae Kampong to foster an equitable and sustainable form of tourism, but lest the discussion appear overly laudatory, it is important to note that there are several limitations and dilemmas associated with CBT in Mae Kampong. To begin with, as a highly charismatic and larger-than-life leader, Prommin casts a large shadow and makes it difficult, albeit unintentionally, for subsequent leaders to follow in his footsteps. This is especially true for the current village headman, who has thus far shown little interest in tourism, perhaps because it is so closely affiliated with his predecessor. The charismatic, transformational leadership that has proved so crucial to the success of CBT in Mae Kampong thus brings with it a tradeoff, namely that sustained success may now be overly reliant on a form and level of leadership that is rare. Related to the long-term viability of CBT, Prommin himself indicated in interviews that he is concerned about whether future generations will remain in the village and continue to promote low-volume, community-based forms of tourism, or instead commute or migrate to urban areas with greater social and economic opportunities. Equally worrying is the possibility that future political or economic changes may threaten the degree to which external organizations are willing or able to assist communities such as Mae Kampong. Finally, the revenues generated by tourism activities support community-wide funds, and thus benefit all residents of Mae Kampong, but unsurprisingly, those individuals that work directly with tourists, including homestay hosts and local tour guides, benefit more than those who do not. This observation was made in interviews with several village residents, who applauded the growth of CBT in their community but, at the same time, commented on discrepant access to the additional benefits that come from working directly with tourists. The success of CBT in Mae Kampong in the long term will, therefore, depend largely on how well future leaders communicate the communal benefits of CBT, plan for possible disruptions to their relationships with external actors, and resist the temptation to continue expanding tourism beyond the community's carrying capacity.

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