Developing Cultural Tourism through Local Festivals a Case Study of the Naga Fireball Festival, Nong Khai Province, Thailand

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Abstract

This article aims to study international tourists' opinions and the international tourists' demand for the Naga Fireball Festival and guidelines to promote the value of the Naga Fireball Festival in Nong Khai province, Thailand. The researchers used the Mix Method. For the quantitative method, 400 questionnaires were collected and the data was analyzed using mean, standard deviation and Chi square tests. For the qualitative data, we used a focus group discussion with academics, tourism entrepreneurs, representatives of involved public organizations and local philosophers to discuss about promoting the value of the Naga Fireball Festival in Nong Khai province, Thailand. The results show that most tourists would like to see the Naga Fireball Festival because it is based on the local culture regarding the Naga serpents. In reference to the demand of international tourists, positive attitudes of local residents towards tourists (S.D. = 0.51), experience in telling stories about the Naga Legend (S.D. = 0.56), awareness of the local life style and culture along the Mekong River (S.D. = 0.50), day trips to sacred sites dealing with the Legend of Naga (S.D. = 0.52), landscape arrangements (S.D. = 0.49), safety and security for tourists (S.D. = 0.50), and reliable sources of information about the Naga Fireball Festival (S.D. = 0.56) were at the highest level. The following guidelines which are proposed to increase the value and worth of the Naga Fireball Festival for international tourists include six goals: 1) setting up routes to sacred sites involved with the legend of Naga 2) improving the quality the landscapes at cultural destinations 3) opening a museum dedicated to the legend of Naga 4) publish pocket books with pictures and descriptions of the legend of Naga 5) establishing Homestay along the Mekong River 6) increasing the role of the local community's participation in the Naga Fireball Festival.

Keywords: Cultural tourism, Naga Fireball Festival

1. Introduction

Festivals and events are strong cultural components which can substantially increase in numbers (Lee & Wick, 2004). As a cultural product, local festival activities provide a chance for tourists to experience and have contact with the host population and its cultural expressions, experiencing the uniqueness of the culture, heritage and the character of its place and people (Wall & Mathieson, 2006). Additionally, it helps to enhance local pride in the cultural and to increase the local economy (Tezak et al., 2011).

Regarding Nong Khai province, cultural tourism provides tourists a chance to experience the life style of the local residents along the Mekong River which reflects on their wisdom and their beliefs. The Naga Fireball Festival is a prominent attraction for domestic and international tourists. This festival is based on the supernatural phenomenon of the Naga fireball at the end of Buddhism Lent. They were allegedly shot from the Mekong River in northwestern Thailand by a mythical serpent known as the Naga, and also recently became the focus of a major festival that attracts many (mainly domestic) tourist pilgrims (Cohen, 2007). Thus the Naga Fireball Festival seems to be a tourism product with exciting experiences in cultural tourism and it also reflects the strong beliefs of local residents regarding the legend of the Naga – the serpents in the Mekong River which are believed to have great power to protect them and bring them a peaceful life.

However, with tourism development, conflicts arise especially with the process of commodifying culture into saleable products (Ashworth, 1992). Selling history to tourists necessitates generalization and simplicity and a version of the past that harmonizes with the expectations of tourists (Palmer, 1999), since history can appear distorted and devalued. This in turn, may result in feedback that has an adverse effect on tourist flows if tourists are seeking

authenticity (Hughes & Allen, 2005). Therefore, to improve cultural tourism in Nong Khai province, in particular, the Naga Fireball Festival, these research questions were raised: 1) what are international tourists' opinions and the international tourists' demand regarding the Naga Fireball Festival in Nong Khai province and 2) what guidelines would promote the value of the Naga Fireball Festival to international tourists in Nong Khai province.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Festivals in cultural tourism

Cultural tourism is often recalled as the main tool used to counteract seasonality in destinations and to overcome problems related to the maturity stage of their life cycle. It is often considered a viable policy option to implement when a mass-tourism destination reaches its maturity stage, as well (Figini & Vici, 2012). This opinion is consistent with Hennessey et al. (2008) who state that culture is an important part of the tourism product and is one of the factors that can improve the competitiveness of a tourism destination. Cultural tourism can be defined as the movement of persons to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence with the intention to gather new information and experiences and to satisfy their cultural needs (Richard, 2001). This takes on several forms, such as visiting museums and religious sites, sightseeing at historic sites or attending local festivals (Smith, 2003) which have been generating a significant amount of arts travel.

Community festivals and special events have grown rapidly in number throughout the world (Chang, 2006). Felsenstein & Fleischer (2003), state that local festivals are increasingly being used as instruments for promoting tourism and boosting the regional economy. As a type of cultural tourism product, it is important to satisfy festival customers by offering high quality products and services, as well as products that are unique to the festival (Kim et al., 2010). Based on cultural resources that are diverse and the different types of culture satisfy different needs and will have different capabilities to attract (Hughes & Allen, 2005). In addition to that, tourist will travel to the destination best suited to their cultural need. The travel distance that tourists are willing to travel will depend on the pulling power of a destination's cultural resources and the perceived cultural distance between the tourists' culture and that of the host (Ivanovic, 2008). Therefore, the festival organizer should try to showcase products or services with distinctive characteristics of the destination's festivals to influence tourists' decision-making for travelling.

2.2 Naga Fireball Festival for cultural tourism in Nong Khai province

Cultural activities in Nong Khai province are plentiful and rich. There are famous cultural activities and festivals which attract a lot of domestic and international tourists such as, Loy Krathong Festival, Songkran Festival and cultural festivals dealing with the Buddhist religion (Nong Khai Provincial Office, 2011). Among these traditional festivals, the Naga Fireball Festival is prominent and has become a unique cultural activity of Nong Khai province.

The Naga Fireball Festival is based on a stunning natural phenomena namely the Naga fireball which was allegedly shot from the Mekong River in northwestern Thailand by a mythical serpent known as the Naga at the end of Buddhist Lent (Cohen, 2007). The Naga are sacred serpents in Thai Buddhism which are regarded as having strong magical powers, vast knowledge, and are friendly and helpful. They protect meditators and dispense wisdom. They help to bring rain, personal protection and to grant fertility and wealth (Wood, 2007). Local residents along the Mekong River strongly believe in the legend of the Naga. They believe that the Naga serpents have power to protect their lives and give them peace.

During the Naga Fireball Festival, many activities take place such as tourism light and sound performances to remind people of the Legend of the Naga, and floating decorated boats with splendid lanterns along the Mekong River to pay respect to the Naga. Because the festival is organized at the end of Buddhist Lent, making merit and practicing meditation in the temple are usual activities for local Buddhist as well.

Therefore, in reference to Nong Khai province, the legend of the Naga and the Naga Fireball Festival play a crucial part in local cultural life. It is not only a tourists' product to attract international tourists, but also reflects the local wisdom and authenticity of the region along the Mekong River.

3. Objectives

- 1) To study international tourists' opinions and the international tourists' demand regarding the Naga Fireball Festival in Nong Khai province.

- 2) To study guidelines to promote the value of the Naga Fireball Festival to international tourists in Nong Khai province.

4. Research Methodology

To ensure the study was objective, the researchers employed the mixed method as shown below:

4.1 To study international tourists' opinions and the international tourists' demand regarding the Naga Fireball Festival in Nong Khai province

Quantitative data was collected from questionnaires in which the participants were international tourists who traveled to Nong Khai province. The questionnaire consisted of three parts: 1) demographic information including sex, age, educational level, marital status and income; 2) international tourists' opinions regarding the Naga Fireball Festival and 3) the international tourists' demand regarding the Naga Fireball Festival. The questionnaire also used a Likert scale with five options: strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree and strongly disagree. The researchers interpreted the completed questionnaires by making the question scale a 5 point scale, as shown in table 1:

Table 1. Significance of points

Mean Scores	Levels of Significance
1.00-1.80	Lowest
1.81-2.60	Low
2.61-3.41	Moderate
3.42-4.20	High
4.21-5.00	Highest

According to data from the Department of Tourism (2011) there were 39,112 international tourists who traveled to Nong Khai province in 2011. In this study, the researchers applied Yamane's formula (1973) with a 95 % confidence level to calculate the sampling size as 400. Quantitative data was analyzed by the mean, standard deviation and Chi-square tests.

4.2 To study guidelines to promote the value of the Naga Fireball Festival regarding international tourists in Nong Khai province.

A focus group discussion was organized to collect the qualitative data. There were eight experts including academics, tourism entrepreneurs, representatives of involved public organizations and local philosophers related to the Naga Fireball Festival. They discussed guidelines to increase the value and worth of the Naga Fireball Festival regarding international tourists. Data analysis was performed using descriptive analysis.

5. Research Area

Nong Khai province is located in the northeast region of Thailand. It is a Thai – Lao border province with the Mekong River as a natural boundary and it is only 25 kilometers away from Vientiane – the Lao PDR capital. This province has a population of 510,263 with 95% being Buddhist. Thus, the local life style and cultural activities are mainly based on Buddhism. Moreover, the first Thai – Lao Friendship Bridge is located here which supports trade and tourism in this region.

Figure 1. Research area

6. Research Results

6.1 International tourists' opinions about the Naga Fireball Festival in Nong Khai province.

An Mean of 39.50% of tourists would like to see the Naga Fireball because it is a supernatural phenomenon. There were 41.80% of tourists who have enjoyed the Naga Fireball one time and 93.50% of tourists would like to revisit Nong Khai province to see this phenomenon. An Mean of 39.20% of tourists have had wonderful experiences related to supernatural phenomenon and 39.50% of tourists think that the significance of this phenomenon reflects the beliefs and faith of the local communities along the Mekong River regarding the Naga serpents. Concerning impressions of the Naga Fireball Festival, 49.50% of tourists have a good impression of activities involved with the Naga legend and 41% of tourists would like to engage in activities such as illuminated boat processions which pay homage to the Naga. Another 42.5% of tourists think they should pay respect to the spiritual value of the Naga Fireball Festival. Finally, 51.50% of tourists think the Naga Fireball Festival should be improved regarding cultural tourist activities in order to reflect more on the meaning of this festival.

6.2 The international tourists' demand for the Naga Fireball Festival in Nong Khai province.

Table 1. Tourists' demand for the Naga Fireball Festival

Items	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Interpretation
Positive attitudes of local residents towards tourists	4.53	0.51	Highest
Establishing connections between local community and tourists	4.46	0.55	High
Sharing of opinions between the local community and tourists	4.50	0.56	High
Experience in telling stories about the Naga Legend	4.54	0.56	Highest
Learning about the beliefs of the local community regarding the Naga	4.40	0.50	High
Awareness of the local life style and culture along the Mekong River	4.53	0.50	Highest
Creative activities to interpret the culture of local communities along the Mekong River	4.48	0.57	High
Making merit on the final day of the Lenten Season	3.47	0.50	Moderate
Light and sound presentations about the Legend of Naga	4.34	0.58	High
Day trips to sacred sites dealing with the Legend of Naga	4.52	0.52	Highest
Maintaining and preserving the authenticity of the Naga fireball Festival	4.42	0.62	High
Expanding the role of the local community in planning activities	4.30	0.70	High
Wonderful memories of the cultural experience	4.41	0.53	High
Souvenirs involved with the Naga fireball	4.24	0.64	High
Publishing pocketbooks about the Legend of Naga	4.36	0.58	High
Local guides to explain the basics of the Naga Fireball Festival	4.46	0.57	High
Landscape arrangements	4.58	0.49	Highest
Physical capacity of local services	4.20	0.69	High
Arrangement for accommodations with a theme about local identity	4.37	0.61	High
Public transportation available to support festival activities	4.50	0.52	High
Facilitates for tourists	4.48	0.52	High

Table 1. Tourists' demand for the Naga Fireball Festival (Continued)

Items	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Interpretation
Safety and security for tourists	4.53	0.50	Highest
Visitor information center for Nong Khai province	4.34	0.69	High
Official website about cultural tourism regarding the Naga fireball	4.28	0.71	High
Up-to-date tourist information about the Naga Fireball Festival	4.46	0.54	High
Reliable sources of information about the Naga Fireball Festival	4.57	0.56	Highest
Keeping and analyzing tourists' feedback	4.42	0.68	High
Total	4.41	0.11	High

Table 1 shows this study's results regarding the tourists' demand for the Naga Fireball Festival in Nong Khai province, in detail as shown below:

Positive attitudes of local residents towards tourists was at the highest level (Mean = 4.53, S.D. = 0.51).

Experience in telling stories about the Naga Legend was at the highest level (Mean = 4.54, S.D. = 0.56). Awareness of the local life style and culture along the Mekong River was at the highest level (Mean = 4.53, S.D. = 0.50). Day trips to sacred sites dealing with the Legend of Naga was at the highest level (Mean = 4.52, S.D. = 0.52). Landscape arrangements was at the highest level (Mean = 4.58, S.D. = 0.49). Safety and security for tourists was at the highest level (Mean = 4.53, S.D. = 0.50). Reliable sources of information about the Naga Fireball Festival was at the highest level (Mean = 4.57, S.D. = 0.56).

Making merit on the final day of the Lenten Season was at the moderate level (Mean = 3.47, S.D. = 0.50). Establishing connections between the local community and tourists was at the high level (Mean = 4.46, S.D. = 0.55). Sharing opinions between the local community and tourists was at the high level (Mean = 4.50, S.D. = 0.56). Learning about the beliefs of the local community regarding the Naga was at the high level (Mean = 4.40, S.D. = 0.50). Creative activities to interpret the culture of local communities along the Mekong River was at the high level (Mean = 4.48, S.D. = 0.57). Light and sound presentations about the Legend of Naga was at the high level (Mean = 4.34, S.D. = 0.58).

Maintaining and preserving the authenticity of the Naga Fireball Festival was at the high level (Mean = 4.42, S.D. = 0.62). Expanding the role of the local community in planning activities was at the high level (Mean = 4.30, S.D. = 0.70). Wonderful memories of the cultural experience was at the high level (Mean = 4.41, S.D. = 0.53). Exhibitions about the Legend of Naga was at the high level (Mean = 4.33, S.D. = 0.61). Souvenirs involved with the Naga fireball was at the high level (Mean = 4.24, S.D. = 0.64). Publishing pocketbooks about the Legend of Naga was at the high level (Mean = 4.36, S.D. = 0.58). Local guides to explain the basics of the Naga Fireball Festival was at the high level (Mean = 4.46, S.D. = 0.57).

Physical capacity of local services was at the high level (Mean = 4.20, S.D. = 0.69). Arrangement of accommodations with a theme about local identity was at the high level (Mean = 4.37, S.D. = 0.61). Public transportation available to support festival activities was at the high level (Mean = 4.50, S.D. = 0.52). Facilities for tourists was at the high level (Mean = 4.48, S.D. = 0.52). Visitor information center for Nong Khai province was at the high level (Mean = 4.34, S.D. = 0.69). Official website about cultural tourism regarding the Naga fireball was at the high level (Mean = 4.28, S.D. = 0.71). Up-to-date tourist information about the Naga Fireball Festival was at the high level (Mean = 4.46, S.D. = 0.54). Keeping and analyzing tourists' feedback was at high the level (Mean = 4.42, S.D. = 0.68).

6.3 Guidelines to promote the value of the Naga Fireball Festival

A focus group discussion was organized in which eight experts including academics, tourism entrepreneurs, representatives of involved public organizations and local philosophers related to the Naga Fireball Festival. The contents of the discussion were based on the background of the cultural tourism in Nong Khai province and the results from the quantitative data on international tourists' opinions and the international tourists' demand for the Naga Fireball Festival. Guidelines to promote the value of the Naga Fireball Festival were proposed as detailed below:

6.3.1 Routes to sacred sites involved with the legend of Naga

Regarding Nong Khai province, the Naga fireball is the belief of local residents along the Mekong River about the serpents which protect meditators and dispense wisdom, as well as having strong magical powers. They have many peaceful and wrathful forms. That is why a connection between the local residents and the Naga serpents was created. In Nong Khai province, there are many sacred sites involved with the legend of the Naga such as Wat Hin Mak Peng Temple, Si Chiang Mai district, Din Pieng Cave – an underground cave which is distinguished from the numerous rock shelters, and so on. In terms of cultural tourism, tourism entrepreneurs should focus on establishing tourism routes to connect the sacred sites of the legend of the Naga which will make activities more exciting and amazing for international tourists. This cultural tourism route will attract cultural tourists who seek a deep cultural experience and leisure tourists who attend the Naga Fireball Festival as well.

6.3.2 Improving the quality of landscapes at cultural destinations

The provincial government should have policy on waste management especially rubbish in the rivers and improving landscape with clear and fresh atmosphere not only during the Naga Fireball Festival but also continuously. Safety and security should be a high priority for tourists.

6.3.3 A museum dedicated to the legend of the Naga

Nong Khai is well-known as a town of the Naga. It seems to have a cultural heritage which reflects local residents' life style and their belief in supernatural powers. It is important to carry on and preserve the local culture. Thus, a museum is an alternative way in which exhibitions can be organized to present the legend of the Naga and local residents' beliefs in the Naga. Therefore, the provincial government should plan and support a budget to establish a museum dedicated to the legend of the Naga. This museum would be a cultural exhibition and center of wisdom and knowledge for both international tourists and local residents.

6.3.4 Publish pocket books with pictures and descriptions of the legend of the Naga

Local belief in the legend of the Naga seems to be an intangible cultural resource. It is necessary for it to be transmitted in visible techniques to present and perceive easily. Thus, picture and pocket books are appropriate to relate myths/history to international tourists.

The Nong Khai Provincial Office of Tourism and Sport, Nong Khai provincial cultural officials and local philosophers should work together to publish pocket books about the legend of the Naga which present cartoon stories with pictures about local beliefs, local history and local rituals about the Naga serpents. This would provide another venue to enhance awareness of the local culture along the Mekong River. It is useful for international tourists and younger ones in the community as well.

6.3.5 Establish Homestay along the Mekong River

Nong Khai province is located in the valley of the Mekong River as a natural boundary with Laos PDR. It is an advantageous location to establish Homestay along the Mekong River. During stays in Homestay, tourists would have the chance to experience community life along this river by attending the daily activities of the local residents. They could engage in making conversation with local philosophers about history and the legends of Nong Khai province, boating and fishing along the Mekong river, enjoy Thai – Laos markets or making local food with host residents. These activities are good ways to enhance awareness of the local life style and to pay respect to the beliefs of local residents there.

6.3.6 Increasing the role of the local community participation in the Naga Fireball Festival

Therefore, in terms of cultural tourism in Nong Khai province, local residents play a crucial role in the planning and organizing of the Naga Fireball Festival. Because this festival is based on the culture of local community belief in the Naga, it is important to consider local residents' attitudes to preserve the authenticity and significance of the festival. Apart from that, disseminating of knowledge from local philosophers to younger ones in the communities is crucial to carry on the value and significance of the festival.

7. Discussion

Based on the background of the Naga Fireball Festival and tourism resources in Nong Khai province, the guidelines to promote the value of the Naga Fireball Festival to international tourists in Nong Khai province are proposed included 6 aspects. There are creating routes to sacred sites involved with the legend of Naga as Briedenhann & Wickens (2004) state tourism destinations with a rich resource base of cultural treasure hold significant comparative advantages in their potential to attract tourists for an authentic experience. Thus, the clustering of activities and attractions along a route will enhance a more meaningful experience for tourists, while improving the quality of the landscapes at cultural destinations, establishment is consist with Tyrvainen et al. (2014) suggest the quality of the landscape and the perceived environment have an effect on the tourists' experience. Thus, they are crucial issues in tourism destination management. Taheri & Ansari (2013) state a role of museum is one of the most appropriate representations of a cultural institution. As a symbolic part of culture, museums are regarded as sources of wealth and a magnet for tourism, so, a museum dedicated to the legend of the Naga and publishing pocket books with pictures and descriptions of the legend of the Naga seem to fascinate international tourists. Apart from that, local residents could offer Homestay programs to tourists and get some benefits in return, while tourists would get new firsthand experiences from community Homestay as a cultural product (Lama, 2013) that is why establish Homestay along the Mekong River and increasing the role of the local community participation in the Naga Fireball Festival should be focus on promote tourism in local area. It is consist with Tosun (2000)

state Community participation in the tourism development process has emerged and been refined in the context of destination. It plays an important role in delivering tourism experiences which ensure both visitor satisfaction and ongoing benefits for the residents of destination areas.

8. Conclusion

In this article, the researchers studied international tourists' opinions and the international tourists' demand for the Naga Fireball Festival and guidelines to increase the value and worth of the Naga Fireball Festival in Nong Khai province, Thailand. Mix Method was applied. The results show that most tourists would like to see the Naga Fireball Festival because it is based on the local culture of the Naga serpents. Regarding the demand of international tourists, the positive attitudes of local residents towards tourists (S.D. = 0.51), experience in telling stories about the Naga Legend (S.D. = 0.56), awareness of local life style and culture along the Mekong River (S.D. = 0.50), day trips to sacred sites dealing with the Legend of the Naga (S.D. = 0.52), landscape arrangements (S.D. = 0.49), safety and security for tourists (S.D. = 0.50), and reliable sources of information about the Naga Fireball Festival (S.D. = 0.56) were at the highest level. The guidelines to increase the value and worth of the Naga Fireball Festival for international tourists proposed include the following six goals: 1) routes to sacred sites involved with the legend of the Naga 2) improving the quality of the landscape at cultural destinations 3) a museum dedicated to the legend of the Naga 4) publish pocket books with pictures and descriptions of the legend of the Naga 5) establish Homestay along the Mekong River, and 6) increasing the role of the local community's participation in the Naga Fireball Festival.

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