Management Of Marine Parks In The Covid-19 Era

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study aimed to 1. explore the policies and measures that the Department of National Parks, Wildlife, and Plant Conservation formulated during COVID-19 to stimulate tourism and 2. investigate the public agencies implementing these policies and measures during COVID-19 to revitalize the tourism of Khanom Beach National Park-South Sea Islands in Khanom Subdistrict, Khanom District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province. Findings revealed that Khanom Beach National Park-South Sea Islands utilized preparation and public relations plans to inform tourists about active preventive measures against COVID-19, the tourism promotion plan fostering the new-normal travel to the national park and the safety measures under the COVID-19 situation. Online announcements were also made concerning the tourism of Khanom Beach as relevant measures and policies from the Department of National Parks, Wildlife, and Plant Conservation and the Ministry of Health were put into practice. Furthermore, the national park also participated in tourism activation and economic stimulation programs led by the government. The policy implementation reportedly produced practical benefits in all aspects. As a result, the number of tourists increased due to perceived safety contributed by the national park's monitoring efforts and compliance with essential measures.

Keywords: National Park, COVID-19, Policy Implementation.

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, Thailand took a hit from the outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), a disease that originated in December 2019 in Wuhan, China (World Health Organization, 2019; Communicable Disease Academic Development Group, 2021) and later evolved into a global pandemic. World Health Organization (WHO) first announced that COVID-19 was a dangerous contagious disease on February 11, 2020 (Communicable Disease Academic Development Group, 2021) and subsequently declared it a contagious global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Hfocus news agency, 2020). Currently, it remains inconclusive to pinpoint the exact date when the outbreak would stop. Consequently, global tourism growth has been interrupted since the first quarter of 2020 (Tourism Economic Review, 2019). The number of tourists declined by 22.7% compared to the same period in 2019.

The declination continued to worsen as April 2020 suffered a 97% drop in visitors in comparison with the same period in 2019, marking the worst decade low after the global financial crisis in 2009, an event that also caused the number of international tourists traveling to Thailand in the first quarter of 2020 to plummet (Tourism Economic Review, 2019).

As the Minister of Tourism and Sports explained, "today, tourists must forget that we have to travel in a new way, so-called the new normal. The old way of traveling probably no longer works" (Ratchakitprakarn, 2021). To improve the tourism sector, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has launched a scheme known as Amazing Thailand Safety & Health Administration (SHA) with the cooperation of the Ministry of Public Health, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, and the private sector. SHA certification is awarded to those in the tourism industry complying with hygiene and safety standards to regain tourist confidence and assure safety in service employment. Similarly, to promote tourism and stimulate the Thai economy, the Department of National Parks, Wildlife, and Plant Conservation has announced the reopening of 155 national and forest parks for tourism (Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation, 2021). However, there are various perspectives and case studies of Covid-19 research articles in tourism that mainly discuss the major impacts, behaviors, and experiences related to tourism demand and supply. Most prior studies suggest future research moves from investigating Covid-19 impacts to doing transformation research that can inspire, motivate and inform them to adopt new ways of developing, undertaking, and politicizing (Sigala, 2020: Yang et al, 2021). To discover what regulations and measures these parks implemented to earn public trust and ensure safe tourism, this study used the area scope of Khanom Beach National Park – South Sea Islands in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, which is one of 155 parks reopened under the supervision of the Department of National Parks, Wildlife, and Plant Conservation (Department of National Parks, Wildlife, and Plant Conservation, 2021). Research articles have research questions. How to implement public policy in the covid-19 era ?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this study, policy implementation theories were reviewed. Meter and Horn (1975) suggested that policy implementation refers to action taken by an individual or a party in the public or private sector purposely to fulfill predetermined policy objectives. The study also reviewed policy-making theories, significant theorists implementing policies, and the deductive theory's approach to policy implementation. Meter et al. (1975, pp. 445-488) introduced a conceptual framework of "the policy implementation process" to investigate the process of policy implementation. Furthermore, Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) indicated that public policy must be formulated with a strategy to ensure successful implementation. More specifically, there are three steps. 1. Policies, plans, or projects to be implemented should start small and initially go through a pilot test as a sub-project. 2. Steps in the policy implementation process should be kept simple and easily understandable to maximize success in goal fulfillment. Simply put, avoid defining complex operating methods that would make implementation unnecessarily difficult. 3. Strategies such as market mechanisms should be employed to eliminate difficulties in managing policies and plans.

Furthermore, there are critical issues introduced in a study of policy implementation strategies (Gardiner & Balch, 1980). 1. Information strategies prioritize the provision of information through the choice of media to foster public access to such information. Hence, selected media should match the target audience's educational levels and ways of life. 2. Facilitation strategies help policy-related beneficiaries and targets comply with the policy, learn more about relevant public services, or cooperate with public officers to comply with the policy. 3. Regulatory strategies are sanctions placed against individuals and parties who fail to comply with the policy. These strategies are designed to allow or prohibit individuals or parties from taking action for the greater good. 4. Incentives strategies are positive reinforcements given to intervene in market and pricing mechanisms to ensure that the targets gain benefits from demand and supply in the forms of reward, compensation, and cost reduction privileges when they adhere to the policy.

General information about COVID-19 .According to the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (2019), TAT Governor has stimulated tourism by upgrading the entire industry with the SHA scheme to ensure that tourists can employ SHA-certified services with peace of mind as the COVID-19 situation improves and it is safe to travel again. It is a measure that tourism businesses in Thailand employ to ensure tourists' healthy and safety and increase confidence during the pandemic (Pongsakornrungsilp et al., 2021). Under SHA, operators in the tourism industry must change how they provide services to achieve three basic hygiene standards as required by the Department of Disease Control.

1. The hygiene of buildings and their internal equipment
2. The provision of cleaning equipment to prevent the spread of germs
3. Protective measures for operators

Note that specific details are available based on each SHA certification type. Business operators passing a set of standards can display their respective SHA badges.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a documentary research design, and secondary data were collected from books and academic documents both in print and online, such as research results, theses, scholarly writings, and academic articles. Furthermore, data were also gathered from online media such as Facebook, given that the contents are relevant to the policy implementation of Khanom Beach National Park-South Sea Islands for tourism stimulation during COVID-19. The obtained document data were analyzed with content analysis and presented descriptively. More specifically, the data were validated and analyzed in steps as follows. Data, theory, and methodology triangulations were initially employed to validate the obtained data. Subsequently, the triangulated data were used to construct a summary with additional associations with other concrete evidence and facts.

RESULTS

Before the invasion of COVID-19, National Park-South Sea Islands were already extremely appealing to Thai and non-Thai tourists and regarded as one of the prime destinations in Thailand. The destination is famous because it contains several touristy spots along the sea and mountains. It serves several tourists through services and hospitality such as restaurants and hotels every year. Hence, its tourist attractions were usually packed with tourists, especially when events were held. Unfortunately, after COVID-19 hit Thailand, the government enacted an emergency decree forbidding individuals to engage in activities or gather in groups since they would risk spreading the virus. As a result, tourism was halted. The atmosphere along the beach became quiet and peaceful as both Thai, and foreign tourists were gone. Since tourism slowed down and fewer tourists came to the area, its local economy suffered. On the bright side, nature and marine ecosystems have time to restore themselves. Coral reefs were noticeably more beautiful after the enactment. Pink dolphins were also spotted enjoying their spacious sea more often. These observations indicated that the ecosystems were relieved from tourism and could thrive again. To restart tourism at Khanom Beach National Park-South Sea Islands with new normal, public measures and policies against COVID-19 were incorporated into a plan.

Findings suggested that the national park was prepared and ran public relations campaigns to raise tourists' awareness of the anti-COVID-19 measures. Through these measures, destinations may limit the number of visitors. Furthermore, tourists must not get into a large group, always wear masks, and check-in and out when entering and leaving tourist attractions, restaurants, and hotels. The tourist destinations also had their plans to regularly clean their spaces and support the new-normal tourism of the national park (Department of National Parks, Wildlife, and Plant Conservation, 2021). In general, the following procedures were in place.

1. The national park has implemented the COVID-19 preventive measures according to the Center for the Administration of the Situation due to the Outbreak of the Communicable Disease Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19).

2. The national park has strictly followed the health and safety measures for tourism service providers and the preventive measures for controlling the spread of COVID-19 in national and forest parks.

3. The national park has also operated according to the preventive measures for controlling the spread of COVID-19 in national and forest parks.

4. Officers were required to wear cloth or surgical masks while performing their eight-hour duties.

5. Officers were assigned to screen tourists before entering and employing services. One or two officers were required to station at every entry and exit point.

6. Tourists were allowed to enter the perimeters of the national parks and forest parks only after wearing a cloth or surgical mask.

7. The number of allowed tourists was controlled in specific areas. Waiting areas were provided, and tourists may wait in these areas while observing social distancing.

8. Tourists were required to check in and out as they entered and left areas using the Thai Chana platform. Alternatively, they may fill out a form to include their names and time of entry and exit.

9. Waste separation facilities were provided, and a management measure for infectious waste was in place.

10. Measures to control hygiene and prevent infection in the area were implemented, with special care in areas where food and beverage are sold, such as welfare stores and restaurants.

Further details of the measures are as follows. (1) Operators of the stores and restaurants must wear cloth or hygienic masks at all times while providing services to tourists. (2) Adequate ventilation must be provided and maintained in these stores to avoid germ accumulation. (3) Tools and equipment must be regularly cleaned using appropriate cleaning liquids. The tools and equipment include dining tables, cooking utensils, tools involved in food consumption, and tools used for cleaning purposes. (4) Pre-cooked meals must be adequately covered and scooped out of their containers using appropriate utensils, such as spoons and tongs. (5) Seating in the areas provided for tourists to dine in must be appropriately spaced. (6) Public relations efforts must be made to inform tourists, communities, and relevant agencies about the reopening of tourism in national and forest parks. Reservation must be made in advance via the QUEQ application. Tourists were urged to seek knowledge, advice, and guidelines for reducing the risk and preventing the spread of COVID-19 through various information channels, such as the guidelines for employing services in the national and forest parks, audio broadcast, and Facebook fan pages (Department of National Parks, Wildlife, and Plant Conservation, 2021).

The policies were implemented to prepare for the reopening and translated into practices through various measures. Some included assigning officers to screen tourists at entry points and asking tourists to check in and out of the areas using the Thai Chana platform, in which visitors were required to input personal information, including names, national IDs, homelands, and purposes of visit. Furthermore, tourists were required to prove that they had at least two doses of COVID-19 vaccines. With these measures implemented, tourist destinations were allowed to gather visitor data, and if there was a COVID-19 incident, these data could be used to track and trace infections and properly formulate hygiene control and infection prevention solutions, especially for areas where food and beverage are sold. The park's welfare stores and restaurants were required to obtain an SHA certification and report their measures to maintain the cleanliness of their venues. Possible practices included spraying disinfectants and wiping surfaces, limiting numbers of tourists, requiring masks, and encouraging social distancing. Tourists were only allowed in if they wore cloth or surgical masks. Some of these were in line with the Ministry of Public Health. The ministry's recommended measures included social distancing, wearing masks, measuring body temperatures, and using alcohol spray. In addition to policy implementation, the stores and restaurants in these parks also participated in various government projects to attract more tourists (Department of National Parks, Wildlife, and Plant Conservation, 2021).

Since National Park-South Sea Islands are collectively famous as a tourist destination with stores, restaurants, and hotels, the implementation of public policy to stimulate tourism was a sound decision, generating multi-dimensional benefits. Overall, these policies were designed to build confidence and promote a sense of safety in tourism. Consequently, with minimized COVID-19 risks and improved trust, the number of domestic tourists visiting the destination has gradually increased (Department of National Parks, Wildlife, and Plant Conservation, 2021).

At the arrival of COVID-19, National Park-South Sea Islands experienced a decline in

the number of tourists. However, during Phase 1 and 2 of COVID-19, the number increased with the help of tourism stimulation activities. Hence, the implementation of policies to stimulate tourism and promote the perception of safety among tourists at the park was found to be effective. Some of the measures utilized technology such as CCTVs to monitor compliance with measures, and they reportedly could assure tourists that they were safe. Stores, restaurants, and accommodations participating in government programs also experienced a quantitative improvement in service employment. When tourism was halted, nature recovered quickly. When potential visitors see images of spectacular scenes of nature and sea on the park's Facebook page, they cannot resist the temptation. With enough recovery time, the sea looked more beautiful than ever. With restaurants, hotels, and destinations strictly enforcing COVID-19 control and monitoring measures, tourists felt more comfortable visiting. Moreover, participating in government programs drove prices significantly lower.

In terms of obstacles and limitations to implementing public measures and policies, although every measure proved to be beneficial in promoting tourism through enhanced safety and participation in public programs, south of Thailand was not yet SHA certified. TAT's SHA certification improves perceived safety among tourists. To maximize the effectiveness of SHA, the general public also needs to be educated about SHA badges as well. Another obstacle was that some measures were delayed, and there was no pre-planning to deal with such delays.

CONCLUSIONS

Marine National Park-South Sea Islands had the preparation, and public relations plans to inform tourists about COVID-19 prevention measures. The park also planned to regularly clean various points of their tourist destinations, with the cleaning prioritized based on anticipated visitor volumes. This action is congruent with the idea of policy implementation suggested by Pressman and Wildavsky (1973). Policy implementation is the interaction between predefined goals or objectives and actions or operations intended to produce results accordingly. Tourist destinations at Khanom Beach welcome several tourists annually, and there are many stores,

restaurants, and hotels available. Policies were effectively implemented in the area and produced multidimensional benefits, such as enhancing perceived safety and confidence among tourists. When more tourists travel to the area, a higher risk of infection follows. Hence, policy implementation also means risk reduction. This conceptual framework also resembles Alexander's (1985) definition of policy implementation, which is to carry out a set of action plans in the field to benefit targets intended by specific policies.

Regarding policy implementation models, the Department of National Parks, Wildlife, and Plant Conservation has announced a plan to reopen national and forest parks for tourism. Since Khanom Beach is one of the national parks to be affected by this plan, it has adopted the said policy and prepared for the reopening. Following the policy, it provides special services for tourists, such as assigning officers to screen tourists at entry points, asking tourists to check in and out of the areas by using the Thai Chana platform or manually filling out the form, and observing the measures of the Ministry of Public Health of social distancing, wearing masks, measuring temperatures, and using alcohol spray. This concept of policy implementation is in line with the first variation proposed by Edwards and George (1980, p. 148), which is communication. Policy decisions and directives in implementing the policy communicated to operators must be clear, accurate, and consistent. With clarity, accuracy, and consistency in communication, chances of successful policy implementation increase. Moreover, the national park planned to promote tourism through the new-normal model, which was believed to be an assurance of safety in tourism. This ideology is congruent with Chantarasorn's (1984) rational model, which proposed that key factors promoting successful policy implementation include clear objectives, missions, and assignments. Based on the model, Khanom Beach National Park planned to clean its tourist destinations at various points, anticipated to experience a peak in volumes. Disinfectants were also sprayed at various locations. There were also measures to limit the numbers of tourists to suit ideally safe capacities. Additional safety measures under the COVID-19 situation were also issued. Additionally, online announcements were made about traveling to Khanom Beach, and that staff may use their discretion to screen and permit

visitors to enter each tourist destination. This concept is similar to the policy implementation model of Edwards and George (1980, p. 148) in Variable 3, titled "Dispositions or Attitudes of Implementers." The variable was perceived as a critical factor for the success of policy implementation when operators have the opportunity to use discretion in formulating policies.

Regarding measures based on policy implementation procedures, officers at National Park-South Sea Islands recognized the situation when fewer tourists visited the area. Fortunately, the Department of National Parks, Wildlife, and Plant Conservation has issued an urgent policy for its parks to reopen for tourists regardless of COVID-19. Hence, it was deemed appropriate for National Park-South Sea Islands to seize this opportunity and implement the policy for its benefits from tourism stimulation. As a result, measures suggested by the government were eventually applied to increase the safety of accommodations and food services collectively as a tourism revitalization plan. After translating the policy into practice, the number of tourists increased, and this phenomenon corresponds to the policy implementation process known as micro-implementation (Chantarasorn, 2002). Micro-implementation contains three steps, including mobilization, deliverer Implementation, and institutionalization or continuation.

In terms of policy implementation strategies, officers at National Park-South Sea Islands recognized the importance of providing news and information and hence decided to notify the national park's target audience through its Facebook page. Examples of publicized information included the measure to spray disinfectants according to the preventive measures against COVID-19 on surfaces of risk areas such as viewpoints, national park offices, visitor centers, tourist home-stays, restrooms, handrails, and doorknobs. Disinfectants were used to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and maintain hygiene in the area so that tourists can confidently visit the tourist destinations. Another strategy employed was the public relations efforts to educate tourists about guidelines for reducing risk and preventing COVID-19 and suggest that they should strictly follow them. The service utilization guidelines were published on the signs around the national and forest parks and publicized through audio broadcasts and Facebook pages. The choices of communication channels were appropriate since they could maximize reach. Tourists were also required to check in and out of the areas using the Thai Chana platform, a convenient solution introduced to facilitate the tedious registration process. Furthermore, officers at the national park were also given the authority to exercise their discretion to prohibit non-complying visitors from entering a site, restaurant, accommodation, and hotel. In terms of other tourism stimulation activities, stores, restaurants, accommodations, and hotels also participated in government programs designed to boost the local economy. Examples of these state-led programs were Kon La Krueng (50-50 co-payment), Rao Tiew Duay Kan (we travel together), and Thai Chana (Thais win). These implementations were consistent with the four strategies that Gardiner and Balch (1980) proposed for policy implementation, including information, facilitation, regulatory, and incentives strategies. These strategies were utilized to improve the success of implementing the anti-COVID-19 public policies in tourism.

SUGGESTIONS

In terms of policy, National Park – South Sea Islands is suggested to join the SHA scheme led by TAT. The national park is a famous tourist hot spot and contains several appealing attractions in mountains and the sea. It also hosts several restaurants, accommodations, and hotels and serves a large number of tourists at various locations. Therefore, participating in SHA would mean that several of its service providers would earn SHA certification badges, and they symbolize efforts operators put in to safeguard public health and safety amid COVID-19. These badges also assure tourists that they can travel safely with peace of mind. On a side note, operators in the tourism industry have to work harder and make changes to improve sanitation and compliance with public health measures to earn SHA badges. These efforts, in turn, help uplift the quality of local tourism.

For operations, National Park – South Sea Islands is recommended to consider enhancing their public relations efforts by publicizing the tourists' guidelines for reducing risk and preventing the spread of COVID-19 through online media to ensure the general public could access this piece of information

more conveniently. More importantly, the opening and closing dates of the tourist destinations should also be updated daily or in real-time.

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