



# FLOATING MARKETS: BALANCING THE NEEDS OF VISITORS AS A TOURIST ATTRACTION AND LOCALS WAY OF LIFE. A CASE STUDY OF TALINGCHAN FLOATING MARKET, BANGKOK THAILAND

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**Abstract** *A floating market in Bangkok and its vicinity in the Thai Central plains is usually packed as a tourism product that offers visitors an opportunity to experience local ways of life as in the past. An interview and observation were carried out on September 29, 2012 to get the opinion of international, local visitors and local vendors about Talingchan Floating Market. The Talingchan floating market attracts the locals, families, students and international visitors. Results based on observation and analyses of interviews indicate that Talingchan floating market is an authentic canal-side community market, not a thematic floating market village. The results generated a snapshot of both visitors and community sentiments with understanding of the triple bottom line effects of tourism on Talingchan floating market. There is a clear demonstration of the linkage between tourism and canal side community that has played important role in reducing poverty in the area and dispersion of tourism earnings to local community. The researcher sees the market's potential to develop further provided fresh challenges are adequately addressed without damaging culture and environment by making necessary changes to present it as an attractive tourist attraction and to ensure its future sustainability.*

**Keywords:** *Floating Market, Talingchan, Sustainability, Tourism, Local Community*

## INTRODUCTION

Rivers and canals are synonymous with Thai life and culture which are closely associated to rivers as source of food, transport and relaxation (TAT, 2011). Thailand's rivers nurture and support local communities as their traditional transportation channel (TAT, 2010). Gampell (2002, p.6), explained that 'decades before the advent of rapid transit systems and sleek air-conditioned cars, Bangkok residents travelled the capital's intricate network of waterways in small wooden boats'. According to TAT (2004, p.1), early encounters of Western diplomats when they first sailed into the ancient Thai capital of Ayutthaya were canals (Klongs) with waterborne communities, thereby dubbing the Kingdom "Venice of the East". Suthitakon, et al. (2012) insists that floating markets have been a famous tourist destination

for more than four decades, with 25 well-known floating markets located in the central region of Thailand. Thailand has many picturesque floating markets where goods are sold by itinerant vendors who ply rivers and canals in their boats, delivering commodities to people's homes or meeting to exchange goods in traditional ways (TAT, 2011). Tourism organizations such as, TAT, travel agencies, tour operators as well as hoteliers have successfully marketed and promoted floating markets in Thailand. Floating markets have a special place in travel publications and post cards and have been an indispensable part of a local sight-seeing itinerary. Floating markets have continued to draw attention of international tourists by offering unique Thai experience. Early origin of Thai settlers along the rivers maintained that people needed rivers for water, rice planting and for commuting in a natural and convenient way in the absence of well-developed

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road infrastructure. Important festivals of Thailand such as *Songkran* (Thai New Year) and *Loy kratong* are water based festivals. Charoenphon et al., (2011, p.62) confirmed that Talingchan Floating market was initiated by Chamlong Srimuang in 1987 to honor King Bhumibol's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. This market is situated in the Taling Chan district on the Thonburi bank of the Chao Phraya River. The market is managed by the community committee.

The attractions and services offered by Talingchan community are

Canal (floating kitchen, boat tour)

Land based market (production and sale of local products to visitors)

Provision of local transportation on van, boat and motor bike

Local food and guides

Home stay accommodation for visitors

Talingchan floating market remains open on weekends from 8.30 am in the morning till 4.30 pm in the evening. Visitors' entry is free. Currently, there are about 800-1000 visitors per day to the area (Buasorn, 2010, p. 123). It is interesting to realize the importance of canals which were close to Thai life once, but are losing charm fast as mode of transportation because of the construction of modern road networks.

While the visitors' arrival is ongoing, there is currently little evidence to explore how floating markets continue to sustain operation. A better understanding needs to be developed of how different stakeholders interact, how visitors visualize floating market as tourism attraction, what sorts of recommendations need to be followed to overcome existing challenges. Thus the research objectives are set as follows:

1. To study the existing tourism development, available amenities and activities at the Talingchan floating market as a tourist attraction perceived by visitors and a community representative
2. To explore local vendors' livelihood issues at Talingchan land market
3. To investigate economic, socio-cultural, environmental and management issues impinging Talingchan floating market in tapping needs of both local vendors and visitors

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Szivas et al. (2003) cited in Naipinit and Maneenetr (2010, p. 104) stated that tourism as practiced in developed countries is essentially an economic endeavor, whereas in developing countries it is mainly about leisure consumption as a path to development. This consumption generates jobs, and tourism may be the only remunerative employment possibility in

poor and peripheral regions where few other options are available to people for improving their marginal economic status. Tourism has a high need for human capital and offers a diversity of jobs in a variety of operations of varied sizes and types. Tourism can increase job opportunities for the rural poor in their own communities. It has the potential to help reduce rural out-migration to urban areas, increase employment opportunities for the urban poor and give them additional income to provide for their families in rural areas (United Nations, 2003, p.28). Given its strong economic potentials, tourism has remained an important tool for improving the socioeconomic status of local communities (Jamieson, 2003; Kennedy and Dornan, 2009) cited in Boonratana (2011, p.49). Many of these local communities are often rural and economically marginalized (Hatton, 1999; responsibletravel.com, 2007). Some authors (Sofield, Bauer, Delacy, Lipman and Daugherty, 2004) prefer to use the World Tourism Organization's term 'Sustainable Tourism – Eliminating Poverty'. It not only contributes to economic growth but can also have social, environmental and cultural benefits and costs. 'Triple bottom line' (TBL) is a holistic concept of sustainability where environmental, social and economic objectives are identified concurrently to give balanced considerations.

According to Spinder (2013, p. 21), sustainability will remain a meaningful concept only where it continues to be an environmentally focused concept, and where a systematic integration of environmental issues into other sectors of economy and society is achieved. To simplify, harmonization among the three pillars, in context of Talingchan floating market, the study includes three major players' namely visitors, local vendors and community representative. This shows that issue of sustainable development is an ongoing, fluid process, advocates change and concerns everybody.

In Thailand, there are some floating markets that attract a huge number of tourists, an important source of income for local communities (Vu, 2008) cited in Huynh (2011). Vending is an important way of involving the poor in tourism. A floating market can uplift the profile of the community. Market binds the community as one identity. According to Marten (2010), creating their own retail vendor jobs and selling at a market are important ways to help people with their financial needs. Locals can sell locally made products, souvenirs', local sweets, hand-made arts and crafts at the market place. Availability and opportunity to buy local products creates commercial platform and scenario for visitors to come, buy, sit, stroll, stop- look at the product, enquire price, buy a product and enjoy their time. The visitors' spending support and sustain the local economy.

A market is a place for tourists to spend money, make contact with local people and explore the local culture (Hoang & Tran, 2010) cited in Huynh (2011). According to Charoenphon et al., (2011, p.60), 'Floating Market' means

a market with trade in the water on cargo vehicle by raft or boat while Buakwan & Visuthisamajarn (2012) stated that ‘the floating market is a pattern of space to exchange products between traders and sellers and it is the type of cultural tourism that shows the traditional way of life of people living beside the river bank’, where people live.

Floating market is packaged as a tourism product and offered to domestic and international tourists as an opportunity to experience local way of life (Jamaison, 2003, p. 78).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study the Triple Bottom Line approach (Figure 1) was used to determine the perception and reaction of 10 visitors, 20 vendors and a community leader regarding sustainability to be more effective. Przeclawski (1993, p.11) cited in Burns (2004) proposed an interdisciplinary approach to the study of tourism, in which issues can be examined from different viewpoints. This approach stressed that tourism is a very complex phenomenon, encompassing issues that are: economic, psychological, social, and cultural. According to Burns (1999), Anthropology at its very core is concerned with the holistic and comparative study of human societies and cultures. Its aim is to look at all the components of, and influences on, those societies and cultures.

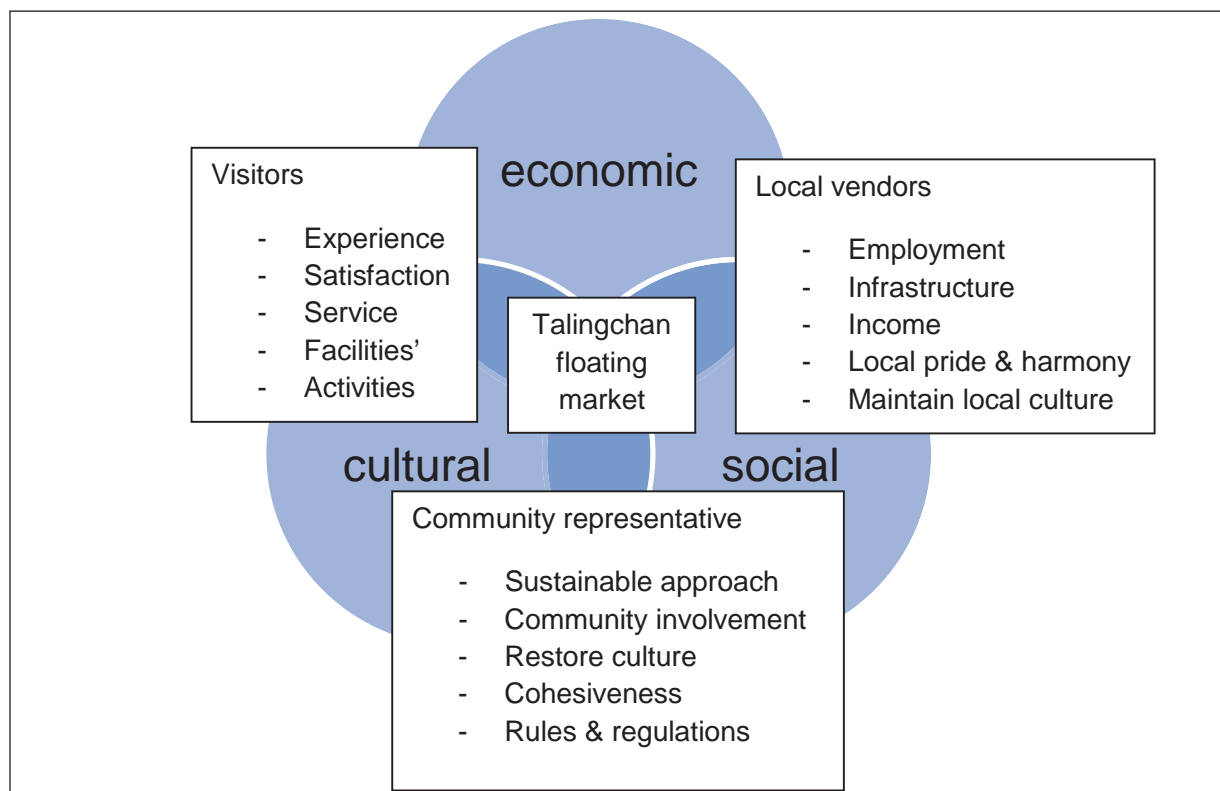
The first stage of this research was collecting data from secondary sources mainly from tourism literature and the World Wide Web, to gain an insight into the features of floating markets. The second stage involved primary data collection using observation, participant observation (boat tour and visit to two home stays) and an interview checklist.

### The Interview

1. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on September 29, 2012 with five Thai females visitors, five international tourists’ (two male Chinese, two female Chinese and one female Russian)

The number of interviews was limited to ten due to limitations of time, intentions and willingness of subjects to participate in this study and the availability of subjects on that day. The ten informants were approached using purposive sampling. A semi-structured interview checklist was used to get the perception of the participants on the following issues: 1) impression of physical surrounding and tourism facilities 2) role of individuals and locals in contributing to sustainability of floating market and 3) home-stay accommodation. All informants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity of the data collected. The interviews were conducted in English language.

**Figure 1 [Balancing Economic Gains and Socio-Environmental Impacts at Talingchan Floating Market]**



2. Semi-structured interviews with a local community representative Mr. ChuanChujan in order to gather multiple perspectives on the three issues stated above. The views reflected by community representatives are directly quoted in this study to support the qualitative analysis.
3. To develop further insight regarding vendors' livelihood issues engagement with tourism at Talingchan floating market, face to face interviews were conducted by approaching a convenient sample of 20 self-operators on September 30, 2012.

The researcher introduced himself to some vendors and tenants at Talingchan floating market and shared the objectives of conducting the interview. The data collection venue was the shops of each respondent. All interviews were transcribed. The interviews were conducted in Thai language that lasted for approximately 75 minutes. The main points were later translated into English. The open ended questions covered issues ranging from motivation to start the business, background of business, performance of the business and future outlook.

The data collected was descriptively analyzed and combined with direct observation. The study employed a qualitative data analysis. As Mason (2002, p. 148) suggested, data was read "literally, interpretively and reflexively". Data was first read literally in order to assess whether there were particular words and expressions that respondents used when they shared their opinion to the researcher. Much of the analysis of the semi-structured interview data involved summarizing the raw data and presenting the results in a way that communicates the most important features.

## OBSERVATION

The study utilized on-site visit of Talingchan floating market and observation in order to assess and review the context and existing tourism development. The researcher utilized direct observation complemented by taking notes and capturing images of the critical issues of the physical surrounding, visitors' activities and activities of people in the community and their behavior when dealing with local and foreign tourists.

Typically, local people bring out their fresh products from orchards and plantations, young plants, vegetables, fish and various food items, whenever they are available. Visitors can shop for locally made decorative products and handmade handicraft products.

There are food shops on rafts (floating kitchen) and boat services cruising visitors along the canal. This gives visitors opportunity to see the lifestyle of people living along the canal. Some visitors prefer sitting at a restaurant along the canal and watch the boats passing by. Many of the boats

were paddled by women wearing straw hats. As the cooking is done on some of the boats, weighing machines and all cooking equipment were visible, including cylinders and stove. Vendors can be seen cleaning ginger, before making paste to be added to curry to make it spicy. It is expected that the wastes from cooking need to be disposed of properly, not throwing in the canal.

## DIRECT OBSERVATION

Touristic environment (sights sound and smells)
Alms giving to monks
Market vendors' activities (call out passersby, selling freshly cooked local and traditional foods, local handicrafts and souvenirs on sale)
Existing tourism facilities (sit on floor to eat, floating kitchen/restaurant, parking, and boat cruise)
Visitors' activities and behaviour (wandering around, shopping for local souvenirs, sampling the food on offer, eating local food)
Classic design, Thai traditional houses along canal
Homestay accommodation for visitors

The land area of the market is limited (200 meters long) and so is the parking area.

## Participant Observation

Boat trip provides opportunity for the visitors to get off at stops on either bank. Homestay is available for a brief stay or to freshen up. Boat riders can witness the lifestyle of people living along the canal. Homestay is one of the novel projects initiated by local communities for tourists to have a glimpse of the simple Thai way of living. Thai houses which offer home stay services are usually two- storey houses and charge 500 baht per night including breakfast. An air conditioner is installed in at least one of the bedrooms. Visitors can taste local delicacies in the form of sweet snacks, mangoes, guavas and sometimes urban snack as potato chips sold in the vicinity of the house.

## FINDINGS

### Tourism Facilities

Based on on-site observation, the Talingchan area is divided in to three sections. The first section is the floating market, the second section is the land market beside the canal and the third section is part of the market separated by road accommodating public lavatories and parking.

The market has plenty of sumptuous food sold at reasonable prices. Friendly bargaining is accepted and encouraged.

As Boonratana (2011, p.57) asserts, floating markets are popular destinations for the locals, apparently because there are products that appeal to different ages and genders, and match different budgets. Vendors usually give positive impression to the visitors. Informants found them service-minded and full of hospitality. The community leader agreed by saying

“....Yes. [Those] vendors keep the rules (no litter, no alcoholic drinks) and they tell visitors. Most visitors know about this place. They put up signs too”.

Public lavatories though clean are old fashioned and inadequate according to the informants of this study. Further, subjects reflected that activities for tourists are confined to feeding fish, visiting market for shopping, taking boat tour around the community and opportunity to experience homestay which is in agreement with the findings of the study of Sukkasem (2013) that in order to promote and support local products and services, existing products and resources must be improved and more choices should be offered to tourists.. The local leader is optimistic. In his opinion,

*“.... it's getting more crowded, lavatories can be a problem. Now they use the community people' toilets (those who join the market). Sometimes certain sections are more crowded than other sections. ....For activities, boat trips for different routes are available --whatever you want to do or see. Or you want to be dropped off and picked up at some place at certain time.....Now they have about 3-4 routes of boat trips.*

### Home Stay Accommodation

Based on the researcher's personal visit, homestay facility is available but it is not a major attraction. Home stay in Thai context, according to Boonratana (2010, p. 288) is defined as “rooms or space within the private homes of community members, offered to guests for a nominal fee, who expects to experience simple rural living or traditional lifestyles, and to interact and have cultural exchanges with the host family, therefore providing a meaningful learning experience for both host and visitors”. Not many visitors are aware of the availability of this facility. In the community leader's view,

“..... it's bed and breakfast at 1,000 Baht for 3 and 300 Baht each for more than three. [And] it's not separate or built for guest. It's authentic home stay with the owner--sharing their house”.

### Economic Sustainability

After the launch of floating market, the locals and the neighbouring communities created jobs to earn money during the weekends despite little or no skill to operate business.

Most of the people who do business in this market are the locals and people from the neighbouring communities. Most of them are agriculturists, farmers and unemployed. When the market operates, these people work either as food or drink sellers, guides and owners of local transportation (van, boat and motorbike). The market is run by people of different ages and gender. Women also work to earn money besides the other roles they play as mothers and wives. Most of the elders are guides and shopkeepers, middle-aged or teenagers are either sellers or employees. The market helps locals and people from neighbouring communities to increase their income and standard of living. The sustainability of the market is important for locals' survival that reduces their migration to Bangkok to find a job. Benefits tend to be dispersed unevenly across the community.

### Box 1: Level of Involvement of the Locals at Talingchan Floating Market

#### Background

- Business owned before the current one: Most of the respondents (14 people) had not owned any business before engaging in a floating market business, 4 had owned food shop, 1 person had owned fruit shop and 1 had owned souvenir shop.
- Existing business: tour guide, grocery shops along the canal, florists, food vendors, boat operators, home stay
- Education of retailers: Most of them had elementary school education
- Outside help in starting business: 10 respondents had no financial supporter, 8 respondents had family support, 2 respondents had their colleagues support
- Part time or full time job: 17 respondents have part-time jobs and 3 respondents have full-time jobs
- Hours of work: most of them work 5-7 hours per day

#### Motivation

- Reason for starting business: 5 respondents have limited earnings, 7 respondents had experience in the same line of business, 2 respondents worked as a hobby, 2 respondents are retirees and 4 respondents need additional income

#### Performance

- Most of them are satisfied with their income (by selling local products, organizing canal tours). Some of them earn 4,000 to 7,000 baht/month

#### Future Outlook

- Business standing in the next three years: Most of the respondents have no idea about their future. Some of

them are pessimistic about their business while some want to expand their business

- Present situation of business: Half of them are happy and satisfied
- Plan to continue the business: half of them have no idea. Some of them will pass the business to their children or spouse and some will pass the business to their friends or family
- Give up business if offered another job: Most of them are ambitious to do this business. Few will give up

The provision of infrastructure and facilities in the Talingchan floating market area provides collective benefits to the whole community because of tourism. The market area has seen changes in the form of public utilities such as road, water and electricity supply. At the beginning, the infrastructure facilities were quite poor but after the market is better known, facilities are added. It makes them feel more comfortable. In the past, nobody thought about the preservation of natural assets but focus only on their survival. But nowadays, natural assets are being preserved because of tourism. Local operators who work at the canal are concerned about the flooding during rainy season.

### Community's Way to Maintain and Conserve Local Culture

Subjects gave opinion as well as recommendations to help maintain local serenity and culture. One Thai respondent asserts that the local community needs to feel proud of their culture. An example is demonstrating how to make local Thai food and local products. The Russian respondent believes that the locals should plant more trees. According to the community leader,

*".....They are careful to let the community grow naturally rather than commercially, that is, they won't hire an outsider businessman to run the market. Most sellers are community people and they maintain their daily life activities-- growing plants/vegetables/fruits, farming, gardening, and cooking local dishes. People interact with others in the community for help and giving their excessive stuff. It's giving and sharing culture. Of course they need income to survive. Now they know the market has been giving them extra income"*.

### Sustainable Practices at Talingchan Floating Market

The local leader revealed that,

*".....During its first 3 years (2006-2008), it was the beginning stage and critical. Since 2009, it has been well established. People know the place and they keep coming back. The majority are housewives and children. The number of foreigners is increasing too--over a hundred each time. In my opinion, it is sustainable"*.

*".... It provides mutual benefits to both visitors and hosts,"* remarked one of the subjects citing the use of natural resources for tourism consumption, such as the use of banana leaf and sugar palm leaf as the food container or for serving the food or packaging of the food.

Another Thai observed the preservation of culture and tradition

*".....Thai dessert is hard to find these days ....original Thai food, fresh vegetable and fruit from the local farm"*.

Some [mostly female informants] exclaimed *"they like it and will come back..... again"*.

According to Abdelhamied (2011, p. 13) insists that customer satisfaction is very crucial for marketing planning since satisfaction does influence customers' intention to patronize the restaurant in future.

Thai respondents proposed varied ways to sustain the local community such as respect local culture, search information first, before the visit, do not leave anything, friendly with nature, support community by buying souvenir, spread by word of mouth and avoid using plastic bag.

The local community leader recommended the same ways.

*".....Not pollute the canal, no littering, don't over feed the fish, plan to stay longer e.g. use their home stay service to enjoy their way of life"*.

### Discussion and Implications

The popular tourist activities at Talingchan floating market are watching boats selling local fruits and vegetables or boats ferrying visitors, shopping, eating, and strolling. Boat tour ferry around a loop gives a glimpse of old Thai style homes, temples, schools, plantations and huge stretches of undeveloped green spaces and have an opportunity to experience home stays.

Talingchan floating market gives a glimpse of Thai way of life of local community who live along these canals. One can see people use canal water for their daily use, growing plants and vegetation, and using boats to sell local products. Alongside these canals, locals set up a market on weekends to sell recent products and earn their livelihood. In the study of Summaniti et al. (2012, p.14), they concluded that floating markets reflect farmers' way of life, their social interactions and various products and services they can offer in the markets.

This study proposes that concerned agencies organize seminar to educate both locals and visitors, especially youngsters, understand the concept of sustainable tourism practices such as limiting the use of plastic, management of waste and keeping canal water clean. These observations

echo the sentiments expressed in the study of Srisuda (2012) who advocated the participation of all sectors in the community in preserving the environment and can provide information about the community and neighbourhood. It was urgently pointed out by respondents towards the need to increase and improve toilets and parking facilities. Similar observations were made by Julakate (2006) in her study who recommended twelve measures for sustainable management of tourism at a floating market, including accessibility to the floating market, deployment of security guards at parking lot, regular cleaning of toilets, food quality measures, and convenient location of a tourist information center and adequate signs which properly guides arriving visitors.

Currently the home stays are not suited to all foreign tourists and thus require remarketing. Additionally, there is a need to reassess the whole retailing process such as quality, price, distribution and display of local products. Last but not the least, to avoid any unforeseen situation or accident in canal, safety of the boat riders must be ensured by regular inspection of the conditions of the boats and security of visitors and locals should be ensured.

## CONCLUSION

Talingchan floating market is a case of successful sustainable destination though economic dimensions appear more important for local vendors. Vendors do incorporate and respect environmental and socio-cultural values in operating their businesses' triple bottom line.

### Ecological dimensions

- Local community at Talingchan area depends on the canal as the existing natural asset and socio-cultural factors to exploit
- Floating boats, floating restaurants as visitors' attractions lead to preservation and maintenance of water resources

### Economic dimensions

- Tourism is consumed at the point of production
- Presence of visitors increase economic growth (visitors spend money which remains in local hands)
- Diverse employment opportunities for local community of all ages and gender as it is labour intensive
- Inclusion of locals in providing direct tourism services (vendors, farmers, florists, guides, boat operators, home stay operators) within environment limits with due regards for long-term appropriate use

### Socio-cultural dimensions

- Has ability to offer and establish linkages between visitors and local vendors (visitors explore local culture as enjoyable experience)

- Promotes local culture (traditional floating markets) but protects it from over consumption

The present study has some limitations. The researcher was only able to assess the responses of those international tourists who could communicate in English and most of them were first-time visitors. The views expressed by visitors are valid for Talingchan floating market area only and should be compared with other floating markets located elsewhere in Thailand with caution because of differences in topography, and socio-economic conditions. The number of visitors approached for the interview is small and findings are, therefore, not intended to generalize the sustainable practices at study site.

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