

Marine recreational fishing at Phuket, Thailand

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Abstract: Recreational fishing can produce visitor satisfaction and generate revenue at some global resorts. Yet, government officials seem reluctant to promote angling on tourism websites. Perhaps this is due to a weak linkage with ecotourism, a term often used by developing countries for attracting international visitors to nature-based settings. To learn about fishing experiences in Phuket, Thailand, this study analyzed 100 angler reviews posted on TripAdvisor, a popular source of user-generated content. Reviews consisted of positive (n=878) and negative (n=237) comments. Promotion of fishing tourism requires a multi-benefit approach, more than simply catching fish. Billfish anglers are a promising target market since these ecotourists practice catch-and-release fishing, thus aligning visitor experiences and sustainability with economics.

Key words: *recreational fishing tourism, marine, Thailand, sustainability, ecotourism*

Introduction

Fishing tourism is a niche market (Borch, Policansky, & Aas, 2008) that is growing in popularity (Hjalager, 2010; Hoogendoorn, 2014), especially for those who visit exotic locations (Aas & Arlinghaus, 2009). Failure to understand angler experiences, including catch and non-catch motives (Fedler & Ditton, 1994), can result in decreased participation and loss of revenue at some sites (Finn & Loomis, 2001). Fishing tourism is important for local economies because fish caught by anglers are worth about 40 times more than those harvested commercially (Hayden, 2000). Catch-and-release is one way to prevent overfishing, and a requirement for those who pursue certain species. Although catch-and-release is an imperfect solution for ecotourism (Fennell, 2000), recreational fishing is compatible with sustainability and economics (Zwirn, Pinsky, & Rahr, 2005). Nature based tourism accounts for about 20% of global travel (Conservation International, 2015).

Although Thailand is a mass tourism destination, some of its popularity is due to visitors seeking non-traditional outlets (Wattanacharoensil & Schuckert, 2014). If creative tourism consists of authentic activities and unique experiences that promote self-improvement through personal expression (Richards, 2011), then recreational fishing is an overlooked and understudied travel market. Fishing tourism is a fledgling industry in Thailand (Kontogeorgopoulos, 1998), mostly occurring at marine settings. For example, the Andaman Sea has over 20 fishing tour operators and more than 10 in the Gulf of Thailand (Derrick, Noranarttragoon, Zeller, The, & Pauly, 2017).

The Andaman Sea is a world class, recreational fishing location for many species, including billfish (Ferrell, 2020). Billfish refer to a group of predatory fish that have a spear-like rostrum or "bill" for subduing their prey. Members of this family include marlins, sailfish, spearfish, and swordfish (Billfish Foundation, 2021). Billfish angling is a worldwide, multi-million-dollar industry,

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