

EXPERIENTIAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT ON LANNA LOCAL PLANT-BASED GASTRONOMY

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Abstract

The rise in plant-based gastronomy has boosted demand for plant-based food tours around the world. This study aims to identify the elements that contribute to the local plant-based gastronomy tourism experience, develop a resource utilization model, and create guidelines for the development of experiential tourism. A mixed-method design is employed. The research sites included three ecological areas in Chiang Mai province, namely highland, upland, and lowland. Data were collected via a questionnaire and a focus group of 30 key stakeholders, which was comprised of 10 groups (Thai and foreign tourists with a special interest in the topic, chefs, travel agents, tour guides, target communities, tourism organizations, tourism academia, media, and local government organizations). The results revealed that the key elements contributing to the plant-based gastronomy tourism experience pertain to 21 local plants (among 190 plants found). The resource utilization model was developed in three stages: pre, during, and post-travel experiences. The experiential tourism development guidelines identify the groups of young chefs, and health conscious people, as the major target tourists. Good conservation of local plants and effective communication using social media are also crucial to development.

Keywords: experiential tourism, gastronomy tourism, local plant, tourism development

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INTRODUCTION

As global tourism is constantly changing, every tourism destination is seeking to offer unique, extraordinary, and memorable tourism experiences to attract tourists and maintain a sustainable competitive advantage (Vivic and Dujakovic, 2016). Experiences that are unique and beyond expectations can help tourists to be impressed and remember their tourist destinations much better (Park and Santos, 2016). The factors that affect tourist experiences are diverse, whether it is the quality of service, the environment of the tourist attraction, value for money, tourism activities, quality of accommodation, transportation, and, importantly, food and beverages (Prombrom and Kimphakorn, 2015). Aside from helping to create a memorable experience for tourists, the introduction of food and beverages, especially local foods, can also help to promote the culture and folklore heritage of the destination (Jacinthe and Tibere, 2017). Tsai (2016) confirms that tourists' experiences with local food can help them to remember the destination better. Local food experiences, which include the sourcing of raw materials, the cooking process, and food stories, is a current global tourism trend leaning towards being more popular in the future. The Tourism Authority of Thailand has laid out a guideline to promote "Thai Local Experience" through the concept of gastronomy tourism. The country's very first action was to host the UNWTO World

Forum on Gastronomy Tourism in 2018 in Bangkok (UNWTO, 2018) followed by hosting the first ASEAN Gastronomy Fair and Forum in 2019 (PATA, 2019). Gastronomy tourism has proven to be one of the country's strengths, with Thailand awarded the "best street food destination in the world" in 2018. There is a great opportunity for the country to promote food tourism through local experiences.

However, it is quite clear that the Thai food experience presented to tourists in the past few years still comes in the form of food tasting or cooking lessons for tourists (Suntikul et.al., 2015). Also, most food experiences focuses on the famous Thai dishes such as Pad Thai, Tom Yam Kung, etc., even though Thai food is very diverse, especially local food from different regions; tourism activities which involve local food are still limited. In northern Thailand, especially in Chiang Mai, there are farmers' groups scattered in different ecological areas including high mountains, uplands, and lowlands (HRDI, 2016). These areas are all interesting as different sources of local food. For example, the high mountain regions are a good source of fruits and vegetables, while the uplands provide a source of edible wild plants, and the lowlands produce succulent vegetables (HRDI, 2016). The seasons also determine the products and availability of various kinds of indigenous plants. Different areas in Chiang Mai Province, e.g. Mae Taeng District and San Sai District, have a group of tourists

interested in visiting agricultural activities who tend to stay longer in these areas (Pichayakul, 2014). However, tourism activities being conducted in the area are still just general visits. This has been a matter of discussion among villagers and farmers for years, with locals recognizing that there should be an impressive experience for tourists who come to visit their villages and farms.

Besides this, the disappearance of native plants is another important issue that villagers and farmers have realized. The fact that village youths have a lack of knowledge regarding local plants can lead to the loss of local wisdom. It is agreed that the use of local plants for creating unique tourism experiences should be done concretely. The rise in plant-based eating has inevitably led to more demand for plant-based food tours around the world (Krantz, 2019). Plant-based or vegan tours are one of the fastest-growing categories on travel sites like TripAdvisor (Krantz, 2019). However, studies on plant-based gastronomy tourism are very limited. This study might be pioneer research in the field. It aims to contribute to the development of experiential tourism on plant-based gastronomy, for which the development model and guidelines have been rarely mentioned in previous literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Experiential Tourism Concept

Smith (2006) indicated that ‘experiential tourism’ is a term that encompasses a variety of tourism and traveler categories, including cultural tourism, ecotourism, educational travel, experimental tourism, heritage tourism, and nature tourism, where activities are environmentally sensitive, display respect for the culture of the host area, and the focus is on experiencing and learning, rather than merely standing back and gazing. Experiential tourism involves active participation, involvement, and even immersion in the local culture and activities. Some characteristics of experiential tourism are, for example, low impact, low volume, and high yield, very personal, unique, and individual for each visitor, engagement of all five senses, learning a new skill, or engaging in a new activity (Smith, 2006).

Richards (2010) proposed that experiential tourism has evolved from cultural tourism to meet the needs of tourists. For cultural tourism, tourists are treated as the recipients who come to see the way of life or local culture, or to visit the places and buy souvenirs only. For experiential tourism on the other hand, tourists will actively participate in tourism activities based on their interests.

Experiences should be memorable, revealed over a duration, and typically involve multiple sensations; experiences occur across sets of dimensions. Based on Pine and

Gilmore's (1999) framework, there are four dimensions of experience: entertainment, education, escapism, and esthetics, which should be considered. In addition, Smith (2006) suggested that the tourism provider must integrate all aspects of the tourist's experience including the pre-travel experience, during travel experience, and post-travel experience.

Local Gastronomy and Tourism Development

Tourism related to food has been known alternatively as food tourism, culinary tourism, and gastronomy tourism (Karim and Chi, 2010). Food related activities at a tourism destination are sometimes classified as a component of cultural tourism (Corigliano, 2002; Richards, 1996). Several studies (Boyne et al., 2002; Henderson, 2004; Karim, 2006) have confirmed that food is an intrinsic component of a destination's image, and an important motivator in the decision to visit a particular country. For 'local gastronomy', it is referred to, in the context of tourism, as a selection of products that represent the culture of a destination (Sims, 2008). The cultural value of food is about identifying and communicating cultural expressions of symbols and images of idealized realities (Bertella, 2011). Local gastronomy can reflect a distinctive national or cultural identity (Du Rand and Heath., 2006), promote national cuisine to tourists, and contribute to a destination's competitive advantage (Sims, 2008).

The use of locally sourced products can be beneficial for guests as well as hosts (Boniface, 2003). The purchase and consumption of local food can connect tourists with the places where food is produced and the local food producers. This type of connection can be an important part of the tourism experience (Sims, 2008). Tourists who are interested in local food are considered an emerging new tourism niche (López-Guzmán and Sánchez-Cañizares, 2012).

Local gastronomy reflects the local identity and authenticity through branding and marketing strategies, while building connections between consumers and producers (Hall and Wilson, 2008). Therefore, local gastronomy can be considered a tool to integrate tourism development through its capacity for typifying the place and culture. Local gastronomy has been recognized as a major part of the local culture, and tasting local food is an important part of creating a tourism experience, as it serves as both a cultural activity and a form of entertainment (Kim et al., 2009, Kim and Eves, 2012).

Local gastronomy is an essential manifestation of the intangible heritage of a destination; as such, it contributes to each tourist's sense of authenticity in their experience of that destination (Okumus et al., 2007). Richards (2014) added that local gastronomy is not just a form of intangible heritage, but it is also becoming one of the leading attractors of tourism. Local gastronomy experiences have been shown to help sustain tourism development,

contributing to maintaining a destination's identity (Gössling et al., 2011). To take advantage of gastronomy, destinations will need to engage in a process of awareness-raising which reaches across the food, hospitality, cultural and tourism sectors (Richards, 2016).

Plant-Based Gastronomy Tourism

Gastronomy is often referred to as the art of cooking and good eating; however, this is only one part of the discipline. Others have suggested that gastronomy is the study of the relationship between culture and food. Someone who is seriously involved in gastronomy is often involved in tasting, preparing, experiencing, experimenting, researching, discovering, understanding, and writing about food (Kivela and Crotts, 2006). Karim (2006) looked at

gastronomy in the context of tourism. He found that the style of cooking and the image of the food are important factors in gastronomy tourism. Recently, there has been an increasing interest in plant-based or vegan gastronomy as people become more aware of health and environmental problems (Medevar, 2019).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on the concept of Pine and Gilmore's (1999) 'experiential tourism' which features the four dimensions of experience, namely entertainment, education, escapism, and esthetics. The framework also adopts Smith's (2006) concept of tourism experience stages: the pre-travel experience, during travel experience, and post-travel experience. The theoretical framework is presented in Figure 1.

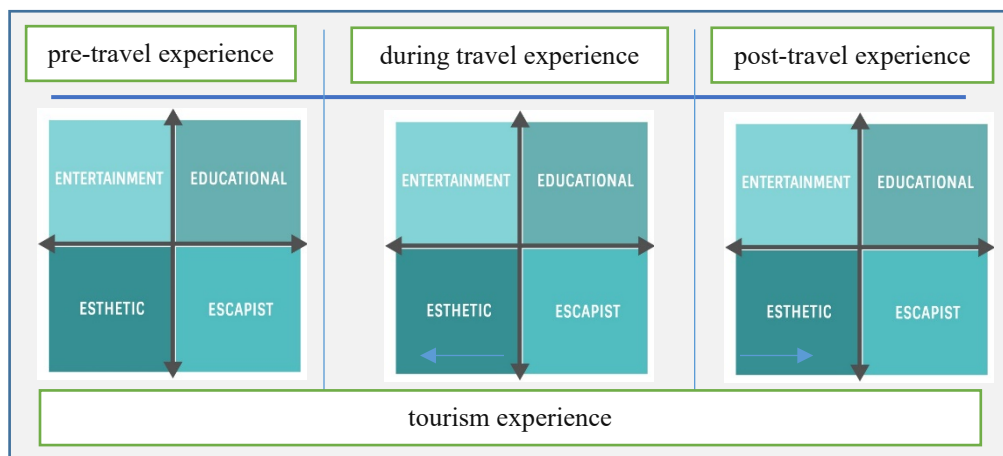


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

METHODOLOGY

Research Sites Selection

Prior to the study, the research team surveyed three different areas according to their altitude from the sea level: highland (altitude above 1000 m), upland (altitude 500-900 m), and lowland (altitude 200-400 m). These areas feature different ecological landscapes with different kinds of plants. When selecting the sites, the seven tourism components, namely Attraction, Accessibility, Amenity, Accommodation, Activity, Ancillary Service, and Administration (Sittikarn and Jaima, 2010) were used as the selection criteria. The three villages chosen were Ban Pang Ma Kluay, Pa Pae Subdistrict, Mae Taeng District, Chiang Mai Province; Ban Don Jiang, Sop Poeng Subdistrict, Mae Taeng District, Chiang Mai Province; and Ban San Ton Pao, San Pa Pao Subdistrict, San Sai District, Chiang Mai Province, which were representative of the highland, upland, and lowland areas, respectively.

Identifying Experiential Tourism Elements

To identify elements that contribute to the development of experiential tourism in Lanna local plant-based gastronomy, 30 key stakeholders, from 10 distinct groups, including 3 foreign tourists with a special interest in the topic, 3 Thai tourists with a special interest in the topic, 3 chefs, 3 travel agents, 3 tour guides, 3 representatives from the

target communities, 3 related tourism organizations, 3 tourism academics, representatives from 3 media organizations, and representatives from 3 local government organizations, were invited to take part in the focus group discussions. The first discussion aimed to investigate the four dimensions of experiential tourism to identify the key elements. The second and the third discussions were conducted to form a resource utilization model and to set the experiential tourism development guidelines. In parallel with the focus group discussions, a questionnaire-based survey was conducted, collecting data from 412 tourists who experienced local food and gastronomic events in Chiang Mai. The survey was employed to compare the survey results with the results from the focus groups.

Developing a Resource Utilization Model

The data obtained from the focus group discussions was analyzed using a thematic content analysis. The analysis was based on the three stages of the tourism experience, that is the pre-, during-, and post-travel experiences. The analysis results were used as a basis to form a resource utilization model to support the development of experiential tourism in Lanna local plant-based gastronomy. The model was cross-checked with the survey results to confirm the potentiality of resource utilization. A pilot trip was then organized to test the model.

Developing Experiential Tourism Development Guidelines

To develop the guidelines for experiential tourism development, the results from both the focus group, and the survey were taken into account. The focus group of 30 key stakeholders, comprising of 10 groups, including 3 foreign tourists with a special interest in the topic, 3 Thai tourists with a special interest in the topic, 3 chefs, 3 travel agents, 3 tour guides, 3 representatives from the target communities, 3 related tourism organizations, 3 tourism academics, representatives from 3 media organizations, and representatives from 3 local government organizations, participated in the guideline development. The survey results were used to cross-check each guideline.

RESULTS

Key Elements of Experiential Tourism on Plant-Based Gastronomy

It was agreed among the stakeholders that the educational and the escapist dimensions of experience are the significant elements contributing to the development of experiential tourism in Lanna local plant-based gastronomy. Participants in the focus groups revealed 190 kinds of plants that are locally consumed. However, when asking the participants to identify the most interesting plants from their areas for gastronomy tourism promotion, there were 21 plants agreed upon as identity plants representing each ecological area. These plants are as presented in Table 1- 3.

Table 1: Identity plants in highland: Ban Pang Ma Kluay

Common (local) name	Scientific name	Plant parts used	Season
1. Miang	<i>camellia sinensis</i> var. <i>assamica</i>	Leaves	Jan-Dec
2. Makhwaen	<i>Zanthoxylum limonella</i> Alston	leaves and seeds	Aug-Oct
3. red galangal shoots	<i>Alpinia galanga</i> (Linn.) Swartz.	shoots and blossoms	Mar-Apr / May-Oct
4. red banana	<i>Musa itinerans</i> Cheeseman	Blossoms	Jan-Dec
5. elephant banana	<i>Ensete glaucum</i> (Roxb.) Cheesman	stalk	Jan-Dec
6. wild banana	<i>Musa acuminata</i> Colla subsp. <i>Acuminata</i>	stalk	Jan-Dec
7. Ma King	<i>King</i> (Hodgsonia) <i>heteroclita</i> (Roxb.) Hook.f.	Seeds	May-Jun

Table 2: Identity plants in upland: Ban Don Jiang

Common (local) name	Scientific name	Plant parts used	Season
1. Organic soybean	<i>Glycine max (L.) Merr.</i>	Seeds	Mar-Apr / Aug-Sep
2. Phak Kood	<i>Diplazium esculentum (Retz.) Sw</i>	Leaves	Jan-Dec
3. Phak Kood Kong	<i>Lygodium flexuosum (L.) Sw.</i>	Leaves	May-Jul
4. E Ngor E Kan	<i>Amorphophallus brevispathus Gagnep</i>	stalk and blossoms	Apr-May
5. Phak Nam	<i>Phak Nam</i>	Stalk	Jan-Dec
6. Phak Po Kha Tee Mia	<i>Selaginella argentea (Wall ex. Hook & Grew) Spring</i>	Stalk	May-Jul
7. Bon Baew	<i>Typhonium roxburghii Schott</i>	leaves and stalk	May-Aug

Table 3: Identity plants in lowland: Ban San Ton Pao

Common (local) name	Scientific name	Plant parts used	Season
1. Phak Bung Nokkhao	<i>Emilia sonchifolia (L.) DC.ex Wight</i>	Leaves	Jan-Dec
2. Phak Nok	<i>Centella asiatica (L.) Urb</i>	Leaves	Jan-Dec
3. Haak Kluay	<i>Peperomia pellucida (L.) Korth</i>	Leaves	Jan-Dec
4. Som Sook	<i>Saraca indica L.</i>	Leaves	Jan-Dec
5. Phak Kad Jon	<i>Brassica chinensis Jusl. var. parachinensis Tsen & Lee.</i>	Leaves	Nov-Jan
6. Jee Jor	<i>Merrernia umbellata Haller f.</i>	Fruits	Jan-Dec
7. creeping cucumber	<i>Melothria pendula Linn.</i>	Fruits	Jan-Dec

The first two plants in the highland group are well-known for their unique smell and taste. These two plants are in line with the social identity of the area, whereby the general public knows about Ban Pang Ma Kluay as a source of Miang and Makhwaen. The community also defines itself as the village of Miang and Makhwaen. The other plants are agreed to have a good and exotic taste

that might impress tourists. Regarding the upland list, the first plant corresponds to the social identity as people commonly know that Ban Don Jiang has been a source of organic soybean for over 20 years. In the upland area, farmers have a way of life which includes picking various wild plants around their farms when they go to work in the fields; these they cook when they go home. These

plants can be used to create a memorable experience for tourists. For the lowland, people in the area normally use the identity plants as main ingredients in their local fresh salad, which is agreed to be a healthy

dish for local people.

These identity plants can serve as the educational dimension of the tourist experience as well, as it is reported in the survey results that most tourists (95%) are willing to learn about the ingredients of local plant-based food at a certain level,

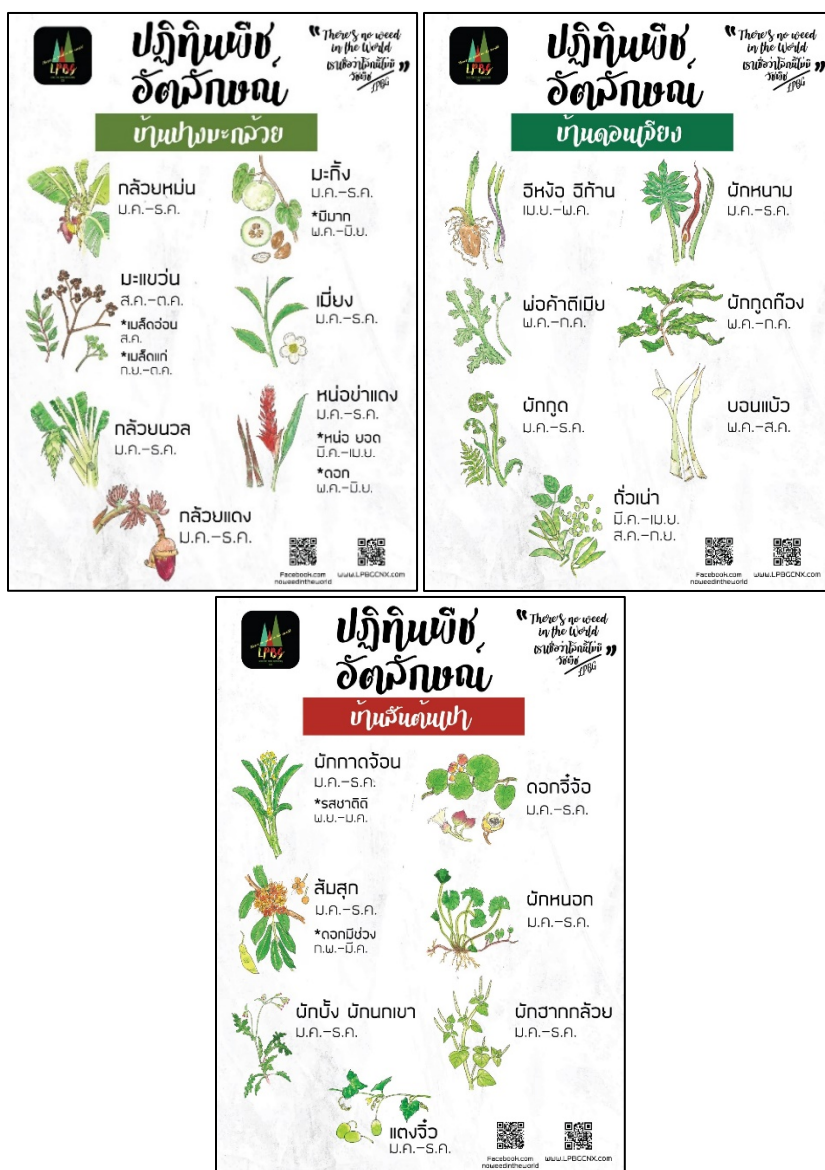


Figure 2 Plant Identity Calendars

from the plantation to the kitchen. Among the survey respondents, 67% of tourists wanted to travel to the plantations and stay overnight in the villages to experience the authentic local lifestyle – the escapist dimension of experience.

Resource Utilization Model

The stakeholders discussed how to utilize their resources to serve in experiential tourism of local plant-based gastronomy in their areas, and came up with a model presenting the three stages of the travel experience. For the pre-travel experience, information of local plants is required, in order to create awareness among tourists. Thus, plant identity calendars (Figure 2) and an online database (available at www.lpbgnx.com) were made to serve this need for information.

In the stage of during travel experience, the focus group results indicated that human resources must be taken into account. The survey

results suggested that the major priorities are as follows: the expertise of service personnel, including local guides, cooks, and staff; the process of service provision; the venue of the experience; and the visual aids, respectively. The personnel are required to have a good knowledge of local plants and effective communication skills. All service processes must be planned and conducted well. The venue must be clean, safe, and unique. Visual aids are also required to enhance tourists' experiences.

For the post-travel experience, the focus group discussions stated that review and feedback from tourists is needed. There should be a strategy to encourage tourists to write a review or create a video clip and post them on social media. It is agreed that the contents posted after trips can raise awareness on the value of local plants and expresses the impressive tourism experience which in turn encourages other tourists to take a similar experience.

	Pre-travel experience	During travel experience	Post-travel experience
Resources	Local plant Information - plant identity calendars - online database - websites / social media	Human resources / venue /presentation - expertise of service personnel - process of service provision - venue of the experience - visual aids	Feedback / Review - posts on social media - photo review - video clips

Figure 3 Resource Utilization Model

Evaluation results from the pilot trip (30 participants) indicated that all aspects were rated with a high level of

satisfaction (5 is the highest score) as shown in Table 4 below

	Evaluation aspects	Mean score (5)
Pre-travel experience	Travel information/ conditions	4.31
	Timing of information distribution	4.25
During travel experience	Service personnel	4.54
	Service process	4.31
	Venue	4.20
	Service quality	4.25
Post-travel experience	Applicability of knowledge and experience	4.39

This indicates that the resource utilization model was potentially

applicable. To illustrate, some pilot trip activities are shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4 Some activities during the pilot trip

Experiential Tourism Development Guidelines

As presented earlier, the educational and escapist dimensions are key elements of the development of experiential tourism in local plant-based gastronomy; it is important to identify the major target tourists. The survey results indicated that young chefs (34.71%) and health lovers (32.60%) are potentially the major groups of tourists who would be interested in local plant-based gastronomy. The group of chefs wanted to learn about local plants and the cooking wisdom from local experts. There is, thus, a conclusion from the focus group discussions pointing out that the tourism activities offered should involve foraging for local plants, knowledge and experience sharing with local experts, and cooking with local cooks. Using local plants to create new menus by chefs and new food products for selling as souvenirs can also be introduced. However, it is noted that the number of tourists should be controlled to maintain the service quality standard.

For the information dimension, the stakeholders agreed that the information presented should feature the importance of local plants to the environment and ecosystem, nutrition information, and the medicinal power of the plants. The information should be distributed through online social media as the survey results indicated that most tourists (84%) obtained tourism information from online social media, especially Facebook,

Twitter, Instagram, and Line.

To mobilize experiential tourism of Lanna's local plant-based gastronomy into the next level, it was concluded in the focus groups that each sector is encouraged to follow these guidelines.

1) Local experts must share their knowledge of the local plants to the general public to educate people more about these plants. Sometimes, communities should invite some famous young chefs to learn from the community scholars, to make the village well known among the chef community. Sending some exotic ingredients to target restaurants can also be a good idea for public relations.

2) Service personnel are required to maintain service quality. Regular training for local personnel including local guides, farmers, cooks, and youth in the community is necessary. The communities must also conduct more research and development for their new local menus and products.

3) Academic sectors should provide reliable scientific data to provide supporting information relating to the nutrition and medicinal power of the local plants.

4) Policymakers at both local and national levels should take the issue of local plant-based gastronomy into account and make policy applicable at the operational level.

DISCUSSION

It appears from this study that the educational element is crucial to the local plant-based gastronomy

experience. This finding is quite surprising, as other studies (Kim et al., 2009, Kim and Eves, 2012) tend to see gastronomy as a form of entertainment, which is opposite to the educational dimension. Hence, further development of experiential tourism must include re-exploration of the two dimensions. In the development of the resource utilization model, the importance of local plants was revealed. The existence of local plants is important to biodiversity and balance in the ecosystem. Knowledge of nutrition and the medicinal power of the local plants is key to environmental conservation. This might be added to the process of raising awareness as reported in previous work (Richards, 2016). As mentioned earlier, the use of social media is popular among tourists. However, it appears from the pilot trip that personal media, like celebrity chefs, tends to be one of the influential tools for promoting local gastronomy tourism. It was noticed from the focus group discussions that a beautiful location is also crucial to tourism development. This finding confirms the work of Karim (2006). Human resources development is seen as the other key to success in tourism development. The local personnel training should involve tasting, preparing, experiencing, experimenting, researching, discovering, understanding, and writing about local plants, as reported in the work of Kivela and Crofts (2006). It is observed from the research process that most participants are elders; thus, it is

necessary to involve more young people to sustain tourism in the area. The involvement of young chefs and youth in the community results in an awareness of plant conservation. It can be discussed here that it is not only the tourism experience but also natural conservation that further research must take into account.

CONCLUSIONS

This study reported that the educational and the escapist dimensions are the significant elements that contribute to experiential tourism development in Lanna local plant-based gastronomy. The educational dimension features identity plants from the three ecological areas: highland, upland, and lowland. Some plants are well-known as they have been produced locally for years, while some are consumed by local people in their daily routines. These plants are agreed to have healing power; thus, they can be an attractive element for tourism. The cooking process and local stories behind each plant are also good elements for creating a memorable experience. It appears that a group of young chefs and health conscious people are the major potential tourists. The resource utilization model was developed based on the three stages of experiential tourism. In the first stage, the pre-travel experience, focus is placed on information regarding the local plants. In the second stage, the during travel experience, the emphasis is put on the quality of service and local personnel. For the

last stage, the focus is on the review and feedback from tourists. Guidelines for the development include inviting new generation chefs to learn about local plant-based ingredients, raising awareness of local plants among people in the community, improving and maintaining the quality of service, increasing the value of the local plants by creating new menus and products, promoting tourism experiences through scientific research, and mobilizing tourism development with policy support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommended that communities should preserve their local plants, as well as their eating culture for future generations to inherit and to prevent local species from becoming endangered. As the research team collected the plant data for just a few months, the present data might not cover all plants in the area. Therefore, the communities should continue recording plant information in each season to get more comprehensive information. It is also recommended that the group of chefs should help the community to promote local ingredients by using them in their restaurants and inviting other chefs to have similar food experiences in the villages. For government organizations, it is recommended that policymakers should take the local plant-based gastronomy into account when promoting national tourism. For further research, it is suggested that

researchers conduct a study for developing souvenirs from local plants or a study regarding the digital content of plant-based gastronomy.

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