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Local Community Participation and Benefit Sharing in
Community-Based Ecotourism in Lao PDR: The Case Study of
Phuo Khao Kouay NPA

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Local Community Participation and Benefit Sharing in Community-Based Ecotourism in Lao PDR: The Case Study of Phuo Khao Kouay NPA

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1. Introduction

Lao People's Democratic Republic (hereinafter Laos) has received attention as an ecotourism site because of its rich environment and varied culture. In a 2007 article in the New York Times, Laos was ranked first of "53 places to go in 2008" (Lee, 2007). The World Tourism Organization held the World Ecotourism Conference 2009 in the capital, Vientiane. Laos was awarded the title of "World's Best Tourist Destination 2013" by the European Council on Tourism and Trade (ECTT) (ASEAN Secretariat News, 2013). One of the most attractive ecotourism sites in Laos is the National Protected Area (hereinafter NPA), where wild animals can be observed and sports such as kayaking and trekking are available. The NPA was established based on Prime Minister's Decree No. 164 on "Establishment of National Biodiversity Conservation Areas" formulated in 1993 and managed by the government. Although this protection area was originally called the National Biodiversity Conservation Area (NBCA), it was subsequently renamed NPA (Sirivongs and Tsuchiya, 2012). Eighteen NPAs were established in 1993, and two sites and two corridors connecting the NPAs were added. These areas occupy around 14.3% of the country (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, 2005; Science Technology and Environment Agency, 2004). The government uses NPAs and boundary restrictions to protect and conserve biodiversity or water resources. However, it also allows tourists to visit some NPAs with ecotourism potential. Profits from such tourism are used for the management of these sites. In addition, the conservation of an ecosystem can positively affect the attractiveness of the ecotourism site, with the presence of NPAs enhancing tourism development.

However, land and resource management by the government sometimes creates conflict with local residents. This is because the government generally sets the boundary for the area to protect and conserve without considering the opinions of local residents, that is, a top-down approach. However, the environmental services and natural resources of the NPAs are vital for local people's livelihood. Local people traditionally obtain certain materials/resources (e.g., food, firewood, and medicine) from

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the NPA or access it for cultural activity. Such top-down management by government could prevent local people from accessing these areas. Moreover, although the establishment of NPAs negatively influences the local area, travel agencies in urban areas such as Vientiane or foreign companies profit from ecotourism.

Within this context, in cooperation with international organizations and NGOs/NPOs, Laos' government attempted to ensure that projects that benefit from ecotourism are also allocated to local residents, especially the poor and ethnic groups. Such ecotourism is known as "community-based ecotourism" (hereinafter CBET). The idea of CBET emphasizes two elements, namely, the "community-based" and "eco" approaches to achieve a well-matched balance. As previously mentioned, if tourism is implemented only based on "eco" objectives, it may ignore local residents' livelihoods. By contrast, if tourism is implemented only based on the "community-based," approach, it may only pursue economic development without considering the sustainability of the environment and natural resources.

For CBET to succeed, it is necessary for local residents to recognize the benefits of protecting and conserving the environment and natural resources. If they recognize that the better the natural condition of the ecotourism site, the more benefit ecotourism generates for the local area, this can create more incentive to cooperate with protection and conservation activities. In this sense, CBET is regarded as a payment for ecosystem/environmental services (hereinafter PES) system. People can receive services from the ecosystem/environment for free. PES is the mechanism through which they can be recognized as a beneficiary of an ecosystem or environmental service, and they are then induced to pay to receive such services.

Some studies reveal key factors regarding sustainable management while supporting the effectiveness and necessity of CBET projects. Tosun (2000) suggests it is important that local residents, especially in developing countries, are engaged in decision making and receive some benefit to enable them to participate in projects. Khanal and Babar (2007) demonstrate that local communities should manage and make decisions by themselves, and the benefit from CBET should be given directly to local communities. Kiss (2004) also demonstrates that CBET projects should provide local residents with an incentive to be involved in project management. That is, the sustainability of CBET depends on the engagement of local residents in the project and on benefit sharing among stakeholders.

This paper focuses on the number of local residents that can participate in CBET and how the benefit from CBET is allocated among stakeholders. This paper takes Phou Khao Kouay NPA (hereinafter referred to as PKK-NPA) as the case study of a CBET project implemented in an NPA.

2. Literature review

Some previous studies have evaluated CBET in PKK-NPA (hereinafter PKK-CBET) (Sirivongs and Tsuchiya, 2012; Mori, 2016; Ounmany, 2014; Douangphoy et al., 2015; Park et al.,

2018). Douangphoy et al. (2015) demonstrate that PKK-CBET has ecotourism potential, and the local villagers also have a positive attitude regarding their involvement in the initiative. Park et al. (2018) conclude that local residents participate in and manage the project more actively in PKK-CBET than that in Sayabouly province. While only a proportion of the local villagers can be engaged in projects in Sayabouly province—as local guides and homestay hosts, for example—local residents in PKK-CBET can receive more benefit through selling handicrafts and food. In addition, the local community in PKK pools a portion of the benefit into a village fund, which is then used for microfinancing (Mori, 2016; Ounmany, 2014; Park et al., 2018). Park et al. (2018) also indicate that local people can voluntarily manage CBET projects, in that they conduct the training for local guides after donor organizations have completed supporting them. According to Mori (2016), while the foundation of the CBET project is laid by the administration and the donor organization, local villagers define the operational rules themselves through discussion.

According to Sirivongs and Tsuchiya (2012) local residents have a positive attitude regarding participation in PKK-CBET because they recognize the economic outcome generated by cooperating with the project. Sirivongs and Tsuchiya (2012) suggest that villages where CBET projects have been implemented display stronger commitment regarding the protection of the environment in PKK-NPA than those in which such projects have not been implemented.

Park et al. (2018) indicate that according to one villager, the CBET project increased his annual income from 450,000 kip (US\$55) to over 1,100,000 kip (US\$135). Additionally, the project took the social aspect within the community into the consideration. For example, the village leader selects local guides from among the poorest households to avoid an increase in the income gap while considering their English speaking skills and the knowledge of the area. This project also tries to reduce the inequality between the genders by creating work in which women can participate. To do so, homestay duties and the production and sale of handicrafts are introduced while men are generally involved as local guides and staff for outdoor sports because it requires physical strength (Ounmany, 2014; Park et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, Ounmany (2014) argues that the participants in the PKK-CBET are biased in the community. This research reveals that there is a difference between the villagers who are engaged as local guides and those who are not, although the local community in PKK-CBET more voluntarily manages the CBET project than the local community in other projects. This can cause economic disparity and conflict within the village or among villages. Ounmany (2014) conducted an interview survey and clarified that local residents or villages who are not involved in CBET illegally obtained some resources from PKK-NPA.

Although previous studies demonstrate that the PKK-CBET benefits local communities, there are issues that still need to be addressed. For instance, these studies do not address how the benefit from CBET is allocated among the members in the local community, that is, the benefit

sharing aspect of the project. In particular, they do not survey sources of benefit other than from serving as local guides or homestay hosts. Based on a field survey, this research focuses on comprehensive sources of benefit and then tries to clarify the current condition and problems regarding local participation in and the benefit sharing structure of the project.

3. The basic information of the research area

PKK-NPA was established in 1993 based on Prime Minister's Decree No. 164 to protect the biodiversity and ecosystem in the area, which includes the capital Vientiane, Vientiane province, and Bolikhamxay province. PKK-NPA has the two entrances: one in Vientiane province and one in Bolikhamxay province. The entrance in Bolikhamxay province is near village H, which is about 100 km from the capital. PKK-NPA has various wild animals and plants, and is particularly famous for wild Asian elephants and many types of orchid. Given the presence of endangered species, this area has been strictly managed by the government since it was designated an NPA in 1993. Nonetheless, because the government does not have enough resources (experience, technique, knowledge, human capital, and so on), support from donor organizations plays a role in the management of PKK-NPA. For example, the Australian Center for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) has launched the "Effective Implementation of Payments for Environmental Services in Lao PDR," a project to protect a wild green peafowl. Scheufele et al. (2016) demonstrated that this project gives local people the economic incentive to cooperate with the protection of the green peafowl (e.g., to employ them as the monitoring staff and to reward the village if the project goes well). As another example, the Nam Luck dam hydropower project, which is located upstream of PKK-NPA, donates 1% of its profit for the management of PKK-NPA (McNeely, 2007)[†].

The PKK-CBET project was implemented in 2003 in cooperation with the Department of Tourism, the Department of Forestry, and with the support of the DED (Deutscher Entwicklungsdienst: German Development Service). It targeted two villages (N and H) in the Thaphabath district, Bolikhamxay province as the project site. Danish and Swedish NGOs constructed a visitor center to inform tourists about the NPA and supported capacity building for the households offering homestays (Part et al., 2018). In addition, these households were advertised via a poster written in both English and Lao. Thanks to their support, local villagers were empowered to obtain the skills required to become local guides and homestay hosts.

The unique tourism activity of village N is the observation of wild animals. If tourists are lucky, they can observe wild Asian elephants. Village H is located in 10 km from village N. Tourists can enjoy kayaking and trekking around waterfalls (Tad Leuk, Tad Xay, Pha Xay) near village H. Table 1 presents the basic information of the two villages according to the field survey. *Nuai* in the

[†] However we need to pay attention to the opinion that the project destroys the environment and the life of the local people (Sayboulaven, 2004, Kouangpalath et al., 2016).

fourth column is the equivalent of a neighborhood group. The village leader forms some *Nuai* groups according to the spatial unit and selects the head of the groups. Each head needs to manage his/her own group and deal with matters such as the resolution of conflict within the group. Villagers cooperate with other *Nuai* members to perform tasks such as harvest work.

Table 1: Basic information

	Population	Household	Neighborhood Group (<i>Nuai</i>)	Area (ha)	Established
N village	668	125	8	2,250	1948
H village	551	97	6	2,250	1789

Source: The author's field survey in 2015.

Table 2: Payment for each tourism role

	N village	H village
Local guide	100,000 kip/3~6 tourists	100,000 kip/3~6 tourists
Homestay		
Accommodation	30,000 kip/night/person	30,000 kip/night/person
Meal	40,000 kip/meal/person	30,000 kip/meal/person
Stay in the observation hut	100,000 kip/night/3~6 tourists	-
Entrance fee for PKK-NPA	50,000 kip	50,000 kip
Donation to village fund	50,000 kip	50,000 kip

Source: The author's field survey in 2015.

Table 2 presents a breakdown of fees that tourists are required to pay. This is compiled based on the field survey conducted by the author and following Douangphoy et al. (2015), Sirivongs and Tsuchiya, (2012), Park et al. (2018), and Ounmany (2014). The author conducted interviews with village leaders and the head of the village tourism office in September 2015. The questionnaire survey was conducted in cooperation with Training and Model Forest Division, Faculty of Forestry Sciences of the National University of Laos in March 2016 and September 2017.

The payments made by tourists are classified into five categories. First, the fee for the local guide in PKK-NPA. Tourists cannot visit PKK-NPA unaccompanied and should hire a local guide, which is one way ecotourism in NPA can create job opportunities in the village. Second, the payment for homestays, which includes the fee for accommodation and food. Third, if tourists stay in the observation hut, they incur an accommodation fee and should be accompanied by a local guide. Fourth, the entrance fee into NPA. This profit is used for conservation, empowerment of staff, or regional development (Kenny-Lazar, 2016). This system can be regarded as a PES. Fifth, the payment for the village fund. Tourists are required to pay 50,000 kip to this fund when visiting the village. The fund is managed by the villagers and plays the role of an informal finance system, or microfinancing. The

fund mechanism was designed by the adviser from DED. The rate of interest, which is determined by the villagers, is 5% per month in village N and 3% per month in village H. Neither rate is lower than those in the formal finance sector. However, because local villagers generally have difficulty accessing the formal finance system, the informal system has an important role in the rural area. The two villages have other opportunities to obtain benefit through activities such as the production of handicrafts, or the management of restaurants and retail stores.

Two types of benefits occur in the two villages. One is private profit generated from being a local guide or homestay host. Households involved in these activities can earn more income than they could before the project began. The other is the profit for the village or the region, not the individual household, such as the village fund or the entrance fee. The former system can provide the individual household the benefit directly. The latter is to enhance the wealth of the village and region as a whole, which is an indirect benefit for households in the villages.

Based on the results of the questionnaire survey, the next section shows how many local residents can be engaged with CBET, and what benefits they and the village can obtain. The questionnaire survey reveals whether villagers are engaged as local guides and homestay hosts, if they have experience of selling handicrafts or food, and whether they have borrowed from the village fund. Those who have borrowed from the village fund were asked the reason for taking the loan. Moreover, this survey asked if they had requested the PKK-CBET in the questionnaire.

4. Questionnaire survey

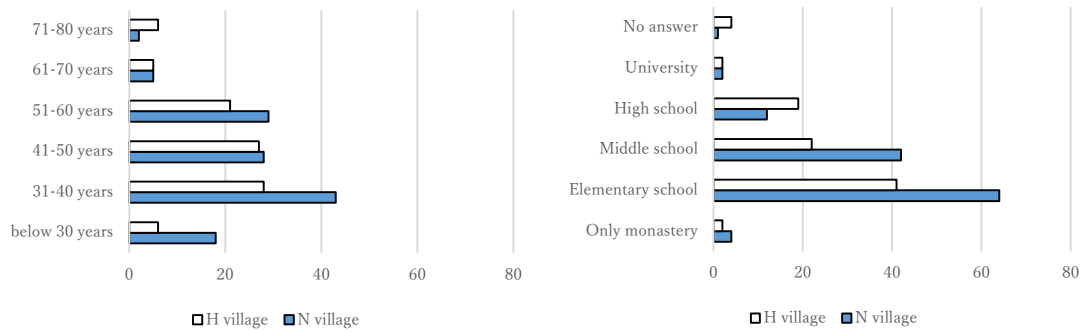
This questionnaire survey was conducted with a representative of each household in village N in September 2015 and in village H in March 2016. As a result, we obtained responses from all 125 households in village N and from 94 out of 97 households in village H, a response rate of 100% and 96.7%, respectively. Table 3 and Figure 1 present the gender, ethnic group, age, and educational background of the respondents. While most respondents in both villages belong to the Lao ethnic group, village H has more members of the Khmu ethnic group. In addition, a few villagers in both villages are members of the Hmong ethnic group.

Table 3: Gender and ethnic groups

Gender	N village (n=125)	H village (n=94)	Ethnic group	N village (n=125)	H village (n=94)
Male	74 (59%)	54 (58%)	Lao	120 (96.0%)	67 (72%)
Female	51 (41%)	10 (31%)	Khmu	2 (1.6%)	18 (19.4%)
No answer		29 (11%)	Hmong	1 (0.8%)	1 (1.1%)
			No answer	2 (1.6%)	7 (7.5%)

Source: The author's questionnaire survey in 2016 and 2017.

Figure 1: Ages and educational background



Source: The author’s questionnaire survey in 2016 and 2017.

5. Results

This section presents the results of the questionnaire survey. To begin with, we focus on the situation for local guides and the homestay hosts in the two villages. As shown in Table 4, 26 (3.8%) households in village N and 20 (3.6%) in village H are involved in homestays. A total of 10 (8%) households in village N and 10 (10%) in village H are involved as local guides. These results indicate that many households are not engaged in these roles in the two villages.

Table 4: The number of households engaged as local guides and homestay hosts

	local guide	homestay
N village	26 (3.8%)	10 (8%)
H village	20 (3.6%)	10 (10%)

Source: The author’s questionnaire survey.

Next, we focus on how many households have experience of selling handicrafts and food. As shown in Table 5, 53 households (42%) in village N and 41 households (44%) in village H have sold handicrafts to tourists. A total of 59 households (47%) in village N and 55 households (59%) in village H have served food to tourists. To ascertain the benefit flow in detail, we count the number of households who have ever sold handicrafts and/or food, except for those involved as local guides and homestay hosts. In village N, 22 households (17%) have obtained a profit from the sale of handicrafts and 36 households (29%) have done so from serving food. In village H, 20 households (22%) have obtained a profit from the sale of handicrafts and 37 households (40%) have done so from serving

food. Their businesses benefit local residents who are not engaged as local guides and homestay hosts, although the benefit is not as large.

Table 5: Experience of selling handicrafts and serving food

	Handicraft			Meal		
	Yes	No	No answer	Yes	No	No answer
N village	53 (42%)	72 (58%)	0 (0%)	59 (47%)	65 (52%)	1 (1%)
H village	41 (44%)	38 (41%)	14 (15%)	55 (59%)	23 (25%)	15 (16%)

Source: The author's questionnaire survey in 2016 and 2017.

Regarding the village fund, the results reveal that 64 households (51%) have borrowed from the village fund in village N and 70 households (75%) have done so in village H, as shown in Table 6. We now focus on households who have borrowed from the village fund except for those involved as local guides and homestay hosts. A total of 43 (34%) households in village N and 52 (53%) in village H have borrowed from the village fund. Moreover, we attempt to ascertain what benefit households who are not heavily involved in tourism activities obtain from the village fund. The results indicate that 17 households (13%) in village N and 11 households (11%) in village H have borrowed from the village fund, excluding those involved with selling the handicraft and meals as well as local guides and homestay hosts.

Table 6: Experience of borrowing from the village fund

	Yes	No	No answer
N village	64 (51%)	61 (49%)	0 (0%)
H village	70 (75%)	13 (10%)	10 (8%)

Source: The author's questionnaire survey in 2016 and 2017.

Why do local residents borrow from the fund? Table 7 presents the reasons. In both villages, the most common reason is to cover construction costs. Moreover, a relatively high number of households borrowed to cover educational costs and the purchase of agricultural capital. Their reasons are categorized as investment in physical and human capital.

Besides, some households have borrowed because of medical bills and a shortage of food. These reasons reveal that the village fund works as a safety net to assure their standard of living in villages. Because Laos does not have sufficient irrigation facilities, agriculture depends on natural conditions such as rain-fed paddy fields and slash-and-burn, which means that the harvest yield is unstable. In this situation, the village fund plays an important role as a safety net for unexpected illness

or poor harvests. According to Ounmany (2014), the interest rate in first three months is excused if local people borrow to cover medical bills.

Table 7: Reasons for loan from the village fund (multiple answers allowed)

		Counts	
		N village(n=73)	H village (n=70)
Reason	Food shortage	3	15
	Construction of a new house or building	34	37
	Ceremonial occasion	3	10
	Education	15	21
	Purchase of agricultural capital	10	26
	Purchase of non-agricultural capital	1	14
	Purchase of leisure goods	0	1
	Medical bill	6	3
	Other	1	8

Source: The author's questionnaire survey in 2016 and 2017.

On the other hand, the interview survey by Ounmany (2014) reveals that one village that is involved in tourism work complained that the village fund is utilized for investment in tourism development rather than for private loans. Such complaints may lead to conflict and the relationships within the village may be fragile. The village fund can be viewed as common pool resources (CPRs). It means that while any community members can access it, the use by one member can reduce the availability of use by others. The attribution can give appropriators the incentive to overuse CPRs. Ostrom (1990) shows that the rules to resolve conflict among community's members and allocate resources play an important role to manage common resources appropriately and sustainably. To keep the village fund system sustainable, the two villages need to pay attention to the coordination with stakeholders.

Ounmany (2014) suggests that most villagers engaged as local guides and homestay hosts belong to the Lao ethnic group, which is the majority group in Laos. Can other ethnic groups benefit from CBET? The results of the questionnaire survey suggest that although there are not many households from other ethnic groups, they can also benefit from the CBET. Although there may be differences between the benefits that different ethnic groups can derive, the results suggest that villages attempt to allocate the benefits evenly as possible.

Table 8: Ethnic groups involved in CBET except for Lao group.

	N village	H villages
Local guide	1	2
Homestay	0	3
Handicraft	1	6
Meal	2	13
Village fund	1	15

Source: The author's questionnaire survey in 2016 and 2017.

However, both villages have households that are not involved in tourism activities; 26 (21%) households in village N and 5 (6%) in village H. Although village H has more households who can receive the benefit from CBET than village N, both villages should pay attention to tourism activities.

Finally, Table 9 presents the requests that local residents have for CBET, and classifies their responses as tourism resources, social infrastructure, training, resource management, and others. The requests for tourism resources include that herds of wild elephants are brought in from other regions, that the waterfalls in PKK-NPA are improved to be more dynamic, and that a fish pond is established as a new tourism resource. Although they may respond to regional development, their requests are far from the original idea of the ecotourism, which is established not for rural development, but for the conservation of the environment or natural resources.

Local residents requested the development of social infrastructure such as the expansion of campsites and accommodation, the establishment of a bridge in PKK-NPA, and the improvement of the road between the village and PKK-NPA. Specifically, the most responses were regarding the improvement of the road. Their requests are also against the idea of the ecotourism. However, people are sometimes unable to access PKK-NPA due to the poor condition of the road, especially during the rainy season. Some social infrastructures need to be improved, but their impact must be carefully considered.

Some households requested English language training. According to the head of the tourism office, the training was implemented at the beginning of the project but has not continued. In addition, some feel that the work of local guides should be rotated among the villagers. As previously mentioned, a few members may oversee the local guide activities, meaning that the profit is unequally allocated in the village. To improve equality in the community, this issue should be tackled. Only one respondent indicated that the elementary school needs to be improved. Although it may not be directly related with tourism, it may be necessary to develop human resources in the future.

It is suggested that to manage local resources, government management must be enforced and forest resources need to be strictly monitored. According to the village leader and the head of the tourism office, trees are illegally cut down and wild elephants are hunted in PKK-NPA to sell on the

black market. Some villagers recognize this as a serious problem and therefore have the motivation to monitor PKK-NPA themselves. As other opinions, the improvement of the income and water supply are mentioned.

Table 9: Requests for CBET

Contents		Counts
Tourism Resource	Purchase of “New” Elephants	1
	Development of the tourism site near the waterfall	5
	Development of fishing pond	1
Infrastructure	Building of camp site and accommodation	2
	Building of the bridge	3
	Development of road into the tourism site	70
Human resources	English training	7
	Rotation of guides	1
	Improvement of elementary school	1
Management	Management of forest resources in NBCA	17
	Enforcement of the government’s management	28
Others	Income improvement	3
	Improvement of water supply	18

Source: The author’s questionnaire survey in 2016 and 2017.

6. Discussion

This section discusses the next steps for PKK-NPA based on the result of previous sections. First, PKK-CBET must develop a financial mechanism to support the conservation of the environment and to empower the local community. To begin with, it is necessary to reform the entrance fee and the payment toward the village fund. Tourists derive multiple benefits from the CBET. They can enjoy ecotourism based on the ecosystem service generated from PKK-NPA. Additionally, it can be assumed that tourists relax. Taking this into consideration, the current pricing is not high enough for tourists to compensate for ecotourism services.

Moreover, parts of the profit that the tourism agency receives should be redistributed to the management of the PKK-NPA, rural development, and the empowerment of the local people by introducing a financial mechanism, such as a PES system. The profit that the tourism agency can receive is much larger than one the local community can receive, even though the environment in PKK-NPA and the local community generate the intrinsic value of CBET. In terms of fairness, a larger proportion of the benefits should be reallocated to the PKK-NPA and the local community. As

previously mentioned, the electric company that manages the hydroelectric power in Nam Lueck river donates 1% of its profit to conservation in PKK-NPA.

This challenge can provide the company as well as rural areas more benefit. The more the condition of the environment and natural resources can be improved and the better the service provided by the local residents, the more benefit the tourism agency can obtain. Actually, a pricing system should be created and the amount should be calculated according scientific discussion and analysis. Fortunately, research and case studies regarding PES have already addressed this issue. A PES approach is used to redistribute the benefits into ecotourism or CBET sites in some projects. However, the PES approach should be challenged in the future.

Second, PKK-CBET should create a benefit sharing system in which more local residents can be involved, which can encourage them to cooperate with the protection and conservation initiatives in PKK-NPA (Sirivongs and Tsuchiya, 2012; Ounmany, 2014). The results in the previous section reveal that some households cannot access the benefit from CBET and there is a difference in the profit that each household can obtain. To advance this project, the local community should create an inclusive mechanism to allocate the benefits to more households. Ounmany (2014) suggests that when evaluating the CBET, we should focus on the indirect profit for the community such as the development of social infrastructure, the improvement of hygienic conditions, and the investment in capacity building as well as on the direct profit for the individual. In this sense, the village fund is utilized not only for loans but also for investment in CBET to develop the local community. Such investment indirectly contributes to the local residents.

Third, the benefit from CBET should be transferred not only to the two villages implementing CBET but also to the wider area around the PKK-NPA. While the current CBET project can provide the project villages with economic profit, other villages receive nothing. However, it may worsen their situation because the strict management in NPA may exclude the local residents who utilize the resources in PKK-NPA. Ounmany (2014) and Sirivongs and Tsuchiya (2012) report that villages who are not engaged with CBET pay less attention to the management of PKK-NPA than those be done. To sustain the PKK-NPA, it is necessary to obtain comprehensive understanding in the region, which is why part of the benefit generated in PKK-CBET needs to be transferred to the entire region around PKK-NPA.

7. Conclusion

This paper attempts to reveal the number of local residents that can be engaged with PKK-CBET and how the benefit from CBET is allocated within local communities. The results indicate that the benefit is transferred to the local community in various ways, excluding private activities such as local guides, homestays, selling handicrafts, and serving meals, and systems for the community, such as the village fund. However, each household can receive different benefits. This paper provides some

suggestions for the further development of CBET.

Future studies should extend the research regarding tourists who are consumers in the area. This area of research has not been fully explored in the context of PKK-CBET. For example, the characteristics of tourists visiting PKK-NPA should be analyzed to develop the future strategy. Moreover, it is necessary to calculate the pricing of ecosystem services from PKK-NPA or services provided by the local community, and then review the entrance fee and the payment to the village fund.

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