‘Responsible Backpacker Tourism’: contradiction or contribution? Small-scale tourism and local impacts in South-East Asia

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Backpackers

Outline of talk:
• Who are they & where do they go?
• What do they contribute? Economic impacts
• So what? Conclusions
Backpackers: who are they?

• *No single accepted definition!*  
• Data problems: no international figures  
• Gov. of Australia estimate: 10% of international arrivals are backpackers  
• For Thailand (major gateway) if use 10% figure for arrivals → possibly between 1 & 1.3 million backpackers in SE Asia in 2007
Main routes: SE Asia, Latin America 'Gringo Trail', Australasia, minor routes in South Africa etc.

SE Asia changing routes:
- **Mature** (Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore)
- **Emerging new routes** (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos)
- **Declining** (Indonesia)
- Arrival at main air hubs (Bangkok, Singapore) then overland travel
- **BUT** increasing backpacker use of LCCs
Backpacker trails: SE Asia
Defining Backpackers

- Enclaves (Khao San Road, Bangkok) & parallel infrastructure
- Often Europeans: in SE Asia 70-80% (UK, Germany, Netherlands, Scandinavia)
- **BUT** growing Asian backpacker market
- Young: 70-80% are 20-29 yrs old
- Not just students. Some studies: only c 20%, professionals c 40%
- Usually educated to university level
Economic impact

a) Foreign exchange earnings & leakage

• Although lower foreign exchange earnings compared with mass tourism

BUT

• Longer Average Length of Stay (ALOS) → higher spend in country per tourist!
Economic impact

AND

• Minimal foreign exchange needs for building & operations: local materials (wood, bamboo, cement) for simple chalets
• Or for conversions of existing properties
• Lower economic leakage: conventional tourism c 70% leakage from country
• Backpackers only c 30% leakage
Economic impact

b) Linkages with local economy

- mass tourists demand imported goods (familiar brands) **BUT**
- backpackers consume local goods & services (food, transport etc)
- **Stronger linkages to local economy than conventional tourism**
Economic impact

c) Employment

• Although mass tourism more direct employment per tourist than small-scale tourism (e.g. large hotels staff : bed ratio)

→ Question of job opportunities i.e. own guest house or cleaner at Sheraton?
Economic impact

d) Local ownership/participation

- backpacker tourism - lower entry costs (low capital needs): more local ownership
- often higher returns than agriculture, fishing or informal sector
Social & cultural impacts

- Trends: ‘mass backpackers’, ‘hardcore backpackers’ & ‘backpacker plus’
- Issue of ‘massification’ of backpacker market. Little difference with mass youth travel?
- Small numbers of ‘hardcore’ backpackers (decline?)
- Small but growing ‘backpacker plus’ segment
‘Responsible’ backpacker tourism?

• Clear economic benefits for developing countries from backpackers
• Lower economic leakages & stronger linkages than mass tourism
• Longer ALOS: substantial spend per PAX
• Some developing countries (Malaysia, S. Africa) govt encouragement → backpackers in strategic tourism planning
BUT...

- Better dialogue needed between industry & government
- More detailed research needed on backpackers & market characteristics
- Segmentation: what effect on industry? Different needs?
- Also on impacts (spend, multiplier & economic linkages)
- New Asian backpackers?
• Social/cultural impacts: mass backpackers some costs for host country
• Question: *are backpackers really ‘responsible’ tourists?*
• Or just young *tourists*?
• How to manage this sector?
• Challenges for host country: they are mobile, educated (consumerist!), technologically aware. . .
• Difficult to manage!
• Backpackers: important tourism sector.
• Not full solution **BUT useful part for tourism-led development**

Thank you!
References


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