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 (Fidler & 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

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swordfish ([Billfish Foundation, 2021](#)). Billfish angling is a worldwide, multi-million-dollar industry, mostly due to the popularity of fishing tournaments ([Ditton & Stoll, 2003](#)). According to Holland, Ditton, and Graefe ([1998](#)), billfish are the ultimate quarry since this fishing experience includes several non-catch values such as nature appreciation, challenge, adventure, and excitement. This romantic image is a holdover, in part, from authors such as Ernest Hemmingway and Zane Grey. Book and magazine publishers often use astonishing photographs of billfish leaping from the water to capture the imagination of potential anglers ([Rockefeller, 1989](#)) or re-kindle the memories of those who have been successful in the past. Catching billfish requires guided trips since these fish are a deep-water species. Information about billfish and other fishing opportunities is available at hotels, marinas, by word-of-mouth, or on the internet.

National Tourism Organizations (NTOs) play important roles for international visitors who search for specific activities, services, or destinations ([So & Morrison, 2004](#); [Vyas, 2019](#)). Although NTO websites could facilitate fishing tourism by providing information on species, regulations, or links to operators and resource agencies, only 58% of them do so ([Lovelock, 2009](#)). The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT, 2021) does not promote recreational fishing, but tourists can find information on tour operators by conducting online searches. There is a need for NTOs to connect resource management agencies and service providers with the tourism industry ([Lovelock, 2008](#)). If marketing is a constraint, then tourism revenue will suffer ([Laarman & Durst, 1987](#)).

The internet is a primary source of information for domestic and international visitors to learn about Phuket (Pearl of the Andaman Sea) as a fishing tourism destination. What factors contribute to positive and negative marine fishing experiences? How can this information be useful for service providers and tourism officials? A study was designed to answer these questions using a sample of TripAdvisor reviews from anglers about their fishing trips at Phuket, Thailand.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Site

Phuket is Thailand's largest island (geographic coordinate at the Phuket City Hall: 7° 53' 23" N, 98° 23' 56" E) occupying about 222 square miles in the Andaman Sea. In addition to the main island, Phuket consists of 32 small islands off its coast, including Similan and Bon Islands and neighboring Phi Phi Islands – one of Thailand's most attractive tourist destinations. According to the Köppen climate classification, Phuket is located in a tropical monsoon climate with average temperatures between 25-32 °C. Year-round heat and sunshine create favorable conditions for "sea-sand-sun" tourist activities, especially during the dry season from December to March. Its popular beaches include Patong, Rawai, Karon, Kamala, Kata Yai, Kata Noi and Mai Khao. Phromthep Cape features Thailand's most beautiful sunset viewpoint. Phuket attracted nearly 10 million visitors in 2019 ([Statista, 2021](#)), mainly through its natural and cultural assets. In addition to being a mass tourism destination, this global seaside resort is also a nature lover's paradise ([Kontogeorgopoulos, 2004](#)). By diversifying the sea-sand-sun product, resort ecotourism blurs some traditional boundaries ([Ayala, 1996](#)). This juxtaposition is not a contradiction since hotel guests are a primary source of soft ecotourists ([Weaver, 2001](#)). For example, Phuket is one of Southeast Asia's premier yachting destinations with full marina facilities and a deep-water port used by cruise ships ([Shepherd, 2002](#)). Some of these passive ecotourists also participate in marine fishing ([Laarman & Durst, 1987](#)). It is also a main unloading port for tuna and billfish fleets from the southern Indian Ocean and the Andaman Sea ([Nootmorn, 2015](#)).

The marine fishing market in Phuket likely consists of three types of anglers: family, tourist, and specialized (Hallenstvedt & Wullf, 2001) which represent a mix of soft and hard ecotourists. Given that anglers are heterogenous, it would be unwise for tour operators to focus exclusively on generic fishing experiences or simply catching fish. Billfish would also be of interest to many non-tournament anglers (soft ecotourists). Catching a billfish would produce a lifetime memory, likely preserved on social media. Many vacationers would pay top dollar for this experience, one that addresses sustainability and improves local tourism economies.

2.2.Data Collection

Online Consumer Reviews (OCRs) are popular since nearly everyone has a smart phone and access to an internet connection while on vacation. Visitor feedback through blogs, video clips, and OCRs are becoming the “travel opinion leaders of the electronic age,” reshaping how people make travel-based decisions (Levy, Duan, & Boo, 2013:49). Although individuals are not responding to a common set of items, online responses can be useful for understanding the complexity of visitor responses and experiences (Prakash, et al., 2019). Studying virtual communities is important since it represents a rich and non-intrusive source of information (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2015) that would be difficult to obtain through other methods (Law, 2006; Schuckert, Liu, & Law, 2015). One of the main advantages for using this approach is anonymity since subjects are unaware of any research activity that is occurring (Banyai & Glover, 2012).

This study used TripAdvisor, a social platform for tourists to share information about experiences, destinations, or perceptions of service quality (Munar, Gyimóthy, & Cai, 2013). This website is a popular source of travel content (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), attracting 390 million visitors a month with over 465 million total reviews (Filiari, 2016; Valdivia, Luzón, & Herrera, 2017). Individuals simply click a 1-5 rating scale (1=terrible to 5=excellent), followed by a prompt to make some open-ended comments. Some studies have found that OCRs posted on TripAdvisor were useful for understanding wildlife tourism experiences or destinations (Cong et al., 2014; Prakash, et al., 2019).

2.3.Sampling Strategy

In August 2018, anglers had posted a total of 339 reviews on TripAdvisor after booking a trip with one of 17 fishing guides on the Andaman Sea. This data set represented each season over multiple years since marine recreational fishing occurs year-round. To reduce the amount of user-generated content, reviews were limited to the six most popular fishing guide services at the time. This procedure removed 78 reviews, leaving 261. Angler reviews on these companies were copied from the internet and pasted in a word processor for content analysis.

The first objective was to divide the reviews into positive or negative categories using the 5-star rating system (1=terrible to 5=excellent) assigned by anglers at the time of posting. Reviews that scored four or five were placed in a positive file, whereas those scoring one or two were placed in a negative file. Average reviews (scoring 3) were removed from consideration (n=4). After establishing the sampling frame (n=257), 100 reviews were selected using a simple random procedure, in proportion to the population (see Table 1). The sample consisted of 80 positive and 20 negative reviews (nearly 40% of those in the population), likely surpassing theoretical saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Using standard protocols, each review was examined to determine its amount of variation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mayring, 2000). On average, anglers made over 11 comments ($x=11.15$) per review.

Table 1. Reviews from the six most popular fishing tour operators in Phuket, Thailand (2018).

Company	Reviews	Percent	Positive	Negative	Sample
A	93	36.2%	28	8	36
B	59	23.0%	21	2	23
C	37	14.4%	5	9	14
D	31	12.1%	11	1	12
E	20	7.8%	8	0	8
F	17	6.6%	7	0	7
Total	257	100%	80	20	100

Working independently, coders placed words and phrases into meaningful categories using an inductive process. Afterwards, the research team met to resolve any differences, thus ensuring a high degree of inter-coder reliability and validity. The final analysis resulted in 10 categories common to both positive and negative aspects of the fishing trips: experience; fish; crew / staff; logistics; equipment / technique; food; boat; non-fishing activities; price / cost; and miscellaneous (Table 2).

Table 2. Categorization of angler comments

Themes	Details	Positive example	Negative example
Experience	Overall experience of fishing trip	"Excellent live board experience"	"Waste of time"
Fish	Size, type, and amount	"FIVE sailfish"	"Not much fish"
Crew / Staff	Service provided by the crew / staff	"Wonderful people!"	"Crew were rude"
Logistics	Booking, shuttle, and organization	"First class, professional service"	[shuttle was] "30 minutes late"
Equipment / Technique	Fishing style and condition of gear & equipment	"Good equipment"	"Bottom fishing gear was unusable"
Food / Beverage	Quality / quantity of food and drink	"Food was wonderful"	"Chicken on board made five people violently ill"
Boat	Condition, speed, and capacity of boats	"Yacht is large, well maintained and beautiful"	"Laughed at the size of the boat"
Non-Fishing Activities	Complementary recreation	"Snorkeling was amazing"	"The snorkelling stop is rubbish"
Price / Cost	Expense	"The price was the best"	"Keen on taking your money"
Miscellaneous	Other angler comments	"Fishing beautiful surroundings"	"Bad weather and timing"

2.4.Limitations

Results from this study came from a sample of online reviews that may differ from those collected in another format. Trip descriptions presumably came from international anglers since marine fishing is not popular with residents (Derrick et al., 2017). It was impossible to determine angler nationalities since all reviews were in English.

3. Results and Discussion

The reviews produced 1,115 comments from anglers about their fishing trips at Phuket, Thailand (Table 3). Most of the evaluations were positive. A majority of comments focused on non-

catch factors, not specifically about fish. For example, “A great day out at sea...fish or no fish.” Although catching fish was important for many anglers, trip satisfaction consisted of many non-catch factors. Some outcomes exceeded expectations but others were unmet, “After looking at the brochures we went out full of hope on landing a trophy fish but that certainly wasn’t the case.”

Table 3. Positive and negative aspects of fishing trips

Positive		Attributes	Negative	
n	Percent		n	Percent
201	22.89	Experience	55	23.21
122	13.89	Fish	50	21.11
115	13.09	Crew / Staff	29	12.24
94	10.71	Miscellaneous	24	10.13
89	10.14	Logistics	9	3.80
78	8.88	Equipment / Technique	43	18.14
69	7.86	Food / Beverage	6	2.53
45	5.13	Boat	8	3.37
45	5.13	Non-Fishing Activities	5	2.10
20	2.28	Price / Cost	8	3.37
878	100.00		237	100.00

3.1.Reasons for angler satisfaction

The 80 positive reviews yielded 878 comments by anglers (78.7% approvals). Over a third of them (36.8%) were about fish or fishing experiences. Anglers used expressions such as fabulous, amazing, and awesome to describe their trips. Some of their comments referenced specific fish. For example, “We caught 5 good size tuna and 4 sailfish” but others were generic, “Lots of fish caught.” Some anglers got the chance to eat some freshly caught fish. “We had a great lunch including some of our catch.”

However, nearly two-thirds (63.2%) of the positive comments addressed non-catch factors. Some anglers mentioned friends and family members. For example, “We have a 5 yr old little boy who thought it was the best day of his life.” Some of the posts mentioned special occasions, such as holidays, birthdays, or anniversaries. Anglers remarked about the attitude and enthusiasm of the captain and crew. Their knowledge of the area and work ethic were valued. Food and beverages were also important. “Food was great and beer icy cold.”

Other factors seemed to play a lesser role in fishing satisfaction, such as the boat, logistics, and price. Some anglers said that the boats were spacious, comfortable, and well maintained. Those who were satisfied praised the logistics, and gave positive recommendations to their fishing tourism operators. Although price was the least mentioned category, several anglers made comments such as, “Sensational value for the money.”

3.2.Reasons for angler dissatisfaction

The 20 negative reviews consisted of 237 comments about fishing tourism (21.3% disapprovals). Over a quarter of them addressed the overall fishing experience. For example, “it was dreadful,” and “worst experience of my life, totally shocking.” Few anglers mentioned anything about not catching enough fish. “From 9 to 5 no bites” and “Guess what? The fish were on holiday

too." Some anglers attributed this outcome to fate or bad luck, "We didn't hook up. I guess that's fishing." Others blamed the commercial fishing industry for overharvest.

Angler dissatisfaction included several non-catch categories. Some anglers were frustrated with the amount of time spent on trolling, a passive type of fishing. "Trolling is a complete waste of time. We did no POPPING or JIGGING." Depending on group size, some tour operators used a lottery system to select fishing participants, an unpopular method for those not chosen. "We paid to fish and did not even get to hold a rod in my hands." Other anglers criticized the use of hand lines as an improper fishing technique. The poor condition of gear or equipment was an issue for some anglers as evidenced by comments such as, "broken guides, outworn reels, cheap rods, really bad quality hooks." Some of the boats were also in bad shape.

Several anglers mentioned logistics as a source of dissatisfaction. For example, "They were 40 minutes late picking us up from our hotel." Crowdedness was an issue for some anglers, "So 10 crammed onto a medium sized boat." Language was a major barrier for some anglers. "Not a single crew member on board spoke a word of English." Several anglers were dissatisfied with food issues. For example, "Lunch is appalling" and "Fish and chicken were cut up by the Deck Hand and left on trays in the sun for over an hour (36 degrees)."

The captain and crew received much criticism from anglers who were dissatisfied with their fishing experience. For example, "Crew were rude," and "Very disinterested in what they're doing. Put it this way, no guests thanked them for the day upon disembarking." Several anglers remarked on trip value, in relation to cost. For example, "Waste of time and money, not worth it." Others felt cheated because the experience fell short of their expectations. "They are keen on taking your cash." Yet, relatively few anglers complained about trip price since they knew it was not refundable.

4. Summary and Conclusions

This study found that most anglers were pleased with their fishing experiences at Phuket, Thailand since over three-fourths of their comments were positive. Many participants described their trips as fabulous, amazing, and unforgettable. In other words, unique and authentic experiences – an ideal match with creative tourism ([Wattanacharoensil & Schuckert, 2014](#)). Most of the outings were with friends and/or family members, increasing the likelihood that the experience would be posted on social media. Any information, either positive or negative, can be influential for tourists who often make travel decisions after reading online reviews. Fishing tour operators should make a habit of reading these reviews, especially the negative comments, to improve customer relations.

Anglers described their fishing experiences differently. Some anglers enjoyed passive involvement, such as trolling, while others preferred holding a rod and reel. Catching fish or seeing others catch fish was an important aspect of most fishing trips. Participants reported catching a variety of fish. Some captains allowed anglers to eat their catch onboard. Many individuals found this activity to accentuate their fishing experience, consistent with pesca-tourism recommendations ([Meneghello & Mingotto, 2016](#)). Other species, such as highly-prized billfish, were photographed and released after capture.

It is common for non-catch motives to be associated with fishing satisfaction ([Fedler & Ditton, 1994](#)). Indeed, the fishing experience is more than simply catching fish. Non-catch factors such as reducing stress, being outdoors, creating memories, and spending time with friends or family members were indicators of fishing success. Interestingly, "fishless" anglers use many of these same reasons to justify their involvement since rationalization is a frequent, post-trip coping behavior ([Manning, 2017](#)). Conversely, participants can be successful at catching fish and still have

unsatisfactory fishing experiences if non-catch factors are lacking or improperly addressed (Graefe & Fedler, 1986).

Not all anglers had positive fishing experiences. The majority of complaints were general in nature. Not catching any (or enough) fish was the next highest category of angler dissatisfaction. Anglers paid large sums of money to participate in marine fishing. Boats equipped with modern technology likely increased their expectation for catching fish (Borch, 2004). Some anglers blamed the commercial fishing industry in Thailand for low harvest rates (Panjarat, 2008). Despite much global concern about marine overfishing (Cooke & Cowx, 2004), the portion of catch by recreational anglers in Thailand is thought to be less than 1% (Derrick et al., 2017).

Non-catch factors played a more important role in angler dissatisfaction than lack of fish. For example, poor service quality prompted some anglers to comment on issues such as equipment / technique or unpleasant interactions with the crew / staff. Not surprisingly, several individuals felt cheated after the trip and used the internet to vent their frustration. Prakash et al., (2019) found that it was common for dissatisfied visitors to complain.

Thailand suffered a major tourism setback during most of 2020-2021 due to COVID-19, as did virtually every country worldwide. Travel restrictions and lockdowns imposed by government officials caused visitation to plummet. Aside from Bangkok, Phuket was most affected since it is a global tourism destination. Although the pandemic devastated local tourism economies worldwide, the absence of visitors improved environmental quality. Low fishing pressure was a boon for many marine species, hence opening a new chapter for this activity. Billfish anglers (tournament or tourist) could be an important niche market since each of them must practice catch-and-release fishing. Since many international visitors rely on the government as a trustworthy source of information, now is the time to promote fishing tourism in Thailand through photos/videos, testimonials, tour operators, or links to resource management agencies. Specific examples might include fishing species and seasons, fleet size and facilities, so tourists can set their expectations accordingly. Meanwhile, some tour operators might need to upgrade their services, such as English speaking and storytelling skills to welcome back anglers during the post-pandemic era.

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