Touring responsibility: The trouble with ‘going local’ in community-based tourism in Thailand

Harng Luh Sin, Claudio Minca

Royal Holloway University of London, Department of Geography, Egham, Surrey TW20 0EX, United Kingdom
University of Colorado at Boulder, Department of Geography, Guggenheim 110, 260 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309-0260, USA
Wageningen University, Cultural Geography, Droverdalsesteeg 3, 6708BP Wageningen, Netherlands

Abstract

This paper discusses the question of responsibility with reference to community-based tourism. Local communities are often presented by the tourist industry as an inherent value to recognize and protect. Tourists visiting distant places are thus frequently exhorted to ‘go local’ through having a ‘real’ experience with local people and communities; they are also invited to behave responsibly and to appreciate the value of responsible management. In this article, we reflect on the consequences of the ‘contact zone’ produced by these trends and, more in general, on the rapid changes that the label ‘responsible tourism’ is generating in the ways that many travelers approach the experience of local communities and their lifestyles. We do so, by analyzing an Elephant Camp in Thailand, where tourists spend periods being involved in life of the camp and the management of the elephants. The tourists at the Elephant camp indeed show how this approach to travel often becomes an imbroglio of detachment and involvement, of paternalistic protection and mutual exploitation, of generosity and hospitality, but also of corruption and self-interest. All in all, we present the Elephant Camp as a laboratory for reflecting on how questions of responsibility towards distant people and places, especially when actually enacted in place – which is what tourism does – often become a complicated affair, which is at the origin of new opportunities but also new tensions, of learning and but also misunderstandings, of neo-colonial practices but also of actual support to the local economy.

Keywords:
Community-based tourism
Responsibility
Care
Community
Local
Thailand

1. Introduction: Tourism, responsibility, care, community

Recent decades have seen a rise in what is called ‘community-based-tourism’ – travelers choosing tours or holiday accommodations that benefit ‘locals’, helping out while having fun, or do-gooders on vacation (Jones, 2005; Reed, 1997; Ruiz-Ballesteros and Hernández-Ramírez, 2010; Simmons, 1994). Central to the rhetoric in community-based-tourism is the idea that tourism ventures can and should bring about positive impacts to host destinations, and that, with strong overtones of ‘social’, ‘justice’, ‘pro-poor’, ‘green’, and ‘eco’, tourism has the capacity to make a direct and tangible improvement to host communities, or at least minimize harm.

These communities manage both the impacts and the benefits of this tourism, strengthening their self-governance, economic alternatives, and traditional ways of life in the process.

(The Pachamama Alliance)
the world (see, for example, Responsibletravel.com). Yet alongside enthusiastic and positive statements on the great potentials that all forms of ‘responsible tourism’ (including the community based one) has in addressing poverty and environmental issues, are also pessimistic and cynical assessments of the ethical implications of many of these ‘alternative’ forms of travel, with journalists suggesting that they are nothing but a “a morally seductive adaptation of modern mass tourism” (MacKinnon, 2009). Positioned against larger trends such as ethical consumerism in tourism, religious mission travel, work and study immersion programs, and academic fieldwork as ‘community based tourism’, this paper therefore considers some of the key implications of travel based on supposed benefits to social, charitable or environmental causes.

‘Responsible tourism’ – another branding line to similar ethical preoccupations (see Sin, 2010) – is indeed very often related to ideas of community, normally to ‘traditional’, ‘local’ communities. The word ‘community’ is omnipresent in the promotional material produced by that part of the industry busy with organizing forms of responsible tourism.

Community based tourism enables the tourist to discover local habitats and wildlife, and celebrates and respects traditional cultures, rituals and wisdom. The community will be aware of the commercial and social value placed on their natural and cultural heritage through tourism, and this will foster community based conservation of these resources.

The community may choose to partner with a private sector partner to provide capital, clients, marketing, tourist accommodation or other expertise. Subject to agreement to the ideals of supporting community development and conservation, and to planning the tourism development in partnership with the community, this partner may or may not own part of the tourism enterprise (Responsibletravel.com).

Tourists are offered the chance to ‘travel like a local’ and to get in contact with these communities, sometimes even in very remote areas, and to enjoy their ‘hospitality’ (another mantra in the tourist popular literature) and act in order to support the locals’ livelihoods. One example amongst many is the Karen homestay in Northern Thailand that describes itself as “community based tourism at its best – share life with the local Karen people – interactive, authentic, fun and fascinating!” The website further shares the background of the community, where Karen people were described to be living within National Park boundaries and hence in fear of persecution. This situation was improved “with the help of a local NGO, The Project for Recovery of Life and Culture (PRL)...where the community developed a ‘Community based Tourism’ program to invite guests to stay in their community and share their day to day life”, and since then, “the community had become well known as a ‘learning centre to understand Karen life’ (Responsibletravel.com).1

In this article we would like to argue that the tourist community, for responsible. In this article, we would like to argue that the tourist community, for responsible travelers, somehow responds to a widespread rhetoric of ‘a return to a community’ of some kind.” Our claim is that these manifestations, present in different interpretation along the entire political spectrum, may have a key role in determining how responsible tourism, especially those branded as ‘community-based’, are influenced by both this communitarian thinking and a widespread desire ‘to go local’ in order to protect and preserve an ideal cultural and political horizon represented precisely by other people’s communities, normally located in the Global South. At the same time, some self-appointed ‘responsible tourists’ are also part of a virtual global community, a community that shares ideals, travel styles, concerns for the environment, sensitivity for the well-being of the locals and, more general concerns about the preservation and the protective care of (others’) local communities. The imagined communitarian thinking in Western public culture, often accompanied by a rather superficial but pervasive rhetoric of ‘a return to a community’ of some kind.” Our claim is that these manifestations, present in different interpretation along the entire political spectrum, may have a key role in determining how responsible tourism, especially those branded as ‘community-based’, are influenced by both this communitarian thinking and a widespread desire ‘to go local’ in order to protect and preserve an ideal cultural and political horizon represented precisely by other people’s communities, normally located in the Global South. At the same time, some self-appointed ‘responsible tourists’ are also part of a virtual global community, a community that shares ideals, travel styles, concerns for the environment, sensitivity for the well-being of the locals and, more general concerns about the preservation and the protective care of (others’) local communities. The imagined communities promoted by responsible tourism indeed often makes implicit reference to a hypothetical self-sufficient isolated human consortium, a utopian space where individual subjects can be represented (and visited) as if they were discrete parts of a larger (but vulnerable) collective Self, that responsible tourists want to get to know in person and at the same time help and protect (Minca, 2011).

Community therefore remains a very popular trope in tourism, often intended as a metaphor associated with a specific set of expectations and related spatial arrangements. The interest on the part of a growing number of tourists for visits to remote and ‘traditional’ people and regions, and for acting responsibly while doing so, is discussed in this paper as part of a reassuring practice of confirmation of the existence of presumed ‘local’ figures (normally the natives and, in particular, their selected representatives) that putatively stand there and live ‘locally’; this form of tourism gravitates around the actual possibility of an apparently unmediated contact with these living figures while behaving responsibly, as tourists. In investigating this complicated space of negotiation – between ideas of community and the actual people working and living in that ‘local’ – we highlight how the practice of ‘going local’ and caring (for distant less-privileged communities and their members) is a rather messy business involving questions of power, of morality and the actual management of places, peoples, jobs, money. Our empirical case shows indeed that people traveling responsibly often act in ways that are in line with a specific rhetoric of care and sustainability supported by a popular industry.
literature committed to explain what it is to be a responsible traveler and to sanction the proper spaces for this operation.

In this article we thus analyze one specific case of responsible tourism, an Elephant Camp\(^2\) in Thailand, in reference to which these questions are discussed in detail, with a special focus on the contradictions and the ‘messiness’ that the adoption of a responsible behavioral code - but also a parallel re-signification of ‘the local’ on the part of the industry - may produce. After a first review of the main lines of thought emerging from the academic literature on ‘responsibility in tourism’, we spend some time reflecting on the consequences of ‘community thinking’ in tourism and on how this relates to broader questions of care for other peoples in less-privileged corners of the world, where questions are often framed within a postcolonial set of conceptualizations. We then move to discuss in detail the illustrative case of the ‘Elephant Camp’. Here, those tensions and the need for a thorough theorization of what it means ‘to go local’ responsibly, together with the implications of the presence of volunteers and of responsible tourists in close contacts with what is conceived as the local community, are critically examined. We conclude with a few considerations on the impossibility of managing the concept of responsibility in tourism without engaging with all its complicated political economies on the ground, produced as they are by the involvement of real bodies, and by the practices of the tourist and of ‘the toured’ in that specific site. The contact zones of these fascinating encounters are thus the true site of investigation of this paper, in light of what the rhetoric of responsibility may produce when actualized with real people in place, and of how these very real people engage in full with ideas of responsibility and community projected on them from a distant somewhere else.

2. Responsibility and care in tourism

Since the late 1980s, research in tourism have frequently discussed notions of ethics and responsibility, and this in the initial stages was seen to be represented by,

- tourism which is developed and maintained in an area (community environment) in such a manner and at such a scale that it remains viable over an indefinite period and does not degrade or alter the environment (human and physical) in which it exists to such a degree that it prohibits the successful development and wellbeing of other activities and processes (Butler, 1993, p. 23).

Often referred to as ‘alternative tourism’ (Weaver, 1991, 1995) and/or ‘sustainable tourism’ (for key initial pieces, see Cohen, 1987; Pearce, 1987), central to these new trends is the idea that also tourism ought to consider ethics, morals and responsibility, since implicit morality is accepted in all aspects of life – including consumer and corporate decisions – and that the distinction between what is social or ethical and what is economically viable is but an artificial result of the larger “historical transformation that disembedded the market from social life” (Foster, 2008, p. 225; see Polanyi, [1944] 1957). Amongst such notions of alternative travel are the above mentioned ‘new’ forms of tourism such as ‘responsible tourism’ and ‘community-based-tourism’, where research has so far suggested that the drive for these travels originated from tourists’ demands of a holiday that fulfills “the satisfaction of social needs: contact with other people and self-realization through creative activities, knowledge and exploration” (Krippendorf, 1987, p. 105). Consequently, most material promoting these forms of tourism has been focused on encouraging critical and reflexive thinking on the part of the consumer, who will in turn pressurize the industry into adopting responsible practices in order to meet his demand (Goodwin and Francis, 2003; Tearfund, 2000a,b).

In such material, tourists are encouraged to ask difficult questions to themselves and to the tourism industry in general, such as “ethical issues about working conditions, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities; about who benefits; about the environmental consequences; and about whether or not traveling to a particular place supports democracy and human rights or undermines them” (Goodwin and Francis, 2003, p. 275). Within such material is also the emphasis on the ‘local community’ in tourism destinations, where Haywood suggested that, “healthy, thriving communities are the touchstone for a successful tourism industry” (1988, p. 105), and “in light of the fact that conventional tourism does not meet expectations regarding sustainable social development and environmental conservation, community-based tourism has become the new panacea for ‘bottom-up’ tourism development” (Ruiz-Ballesteros and Hernández-Ramírez, 2010, p. 201).

Numerous works have since debated on whether or not community-based tourism does indeed empower locals (see, for example, Blackstock, 2005; Novelli and Gebhardt, 2007; Okazaki, 2008; Wearing and McDonald, 2002), with some suggesting that it could instead be yet another neo-colonial strategy resulting in dependency on non-government organizations (NGOs) and external agencies, while promoting concerns of tourists at the expense of local needs (Manyara et al., 2006). A related and similarly scrutinized field would be that of volunteer tourism – where tourists take on a volunteer opportunity or charitable cause in their travels. Because the volunteering stint almost always occurs in the context of a local host community, volunteer tourism is often bound up with the same concerns of empowering local communities and questions on who actually benefits in tourism (see, for example Cousins et al., 2009; Lyons et al., 2012; McGehee, 2012; Sin, 2010).

Indeed, underlying the popular discourse of responsibility in tourism development, is often an assumption that tourists, travel agencies and multinational corporations owning hotel chains, airlines and other tourist services, originate from the ‘developed world’. The host destinations and ‘locals’ are often regarded to be of the ‘developing countries’ and passively subject to the actions of the global industry. Responsibilities here are thus seen to be those of the ‘privileged’ towards ‘others’, and the overwhelming imperative to be responsible related to the great advantages accorded to the developed world (see Massey, 2004, 2005)\(^4\). Smith and Duffy, for example, highlight this notion of responsibility of the privileged towards the less privileged in some basic questions about ethics in tourism: “is tourism all about the egoistic satisfaction of those paying for the privilege or should ethics play a part? What does it mean to say that a certain way of behaving, or a particular kind of tourism development, is wrong? Can the tourism industry ‘afford’ morality?” (2003, p. 7) ‘The privileged’ – namely the paying tourists who can afford travel and the large tourism companies who earn profits from tourism – are all pictured to have great responsibilities in ensuring ethical tourism developments. This overwhelming focus on the tourist, the consumer, or the privileged, underplays the important implications of the agency of the ‘other’, and assumes a perpetual unevenness in the relationships between the tourists and toured according to which responsibility must be allocated.

---

\(^{2}\) Pseudonyms are used in replacement of the actual name of the camp itself and of the respondents interviewed.

At the same time, tourism further complicates matters for many would-be ethical or responsible consumers, since in this case, unlike many other (again product-oriented) industries, the two ‘worlds’ (i.e. the ‘First’ and ‘Third’ worlds, if they are indeed separate) are brought together into a shared space as tourists and companies act out their ‘care’ and ‘ethical responsibilities’ in place, that is, in their travel destinations. In comparison, in most other industries where fair trade or ethical consumption is promoted – be it tea, coffee or eggs – most at the consumer-end, consumers never personally encounter the farmers or even the chicken that they are supposedly responsible for. In a typical ‘fair’ product for example, the concrete application of the Fair Trade principles by companies is something that cannot be observed directly by the consumer. Since the beneficiaries of the fair characteristic (the producers in the South) are located far from the ones who finance it (the consumers in the North), there is an information asymmetry that requires a certain level of trust from the consumers (Becchetti and Huybrechts, 2008, p. 735).

Ethics as observed in tourism is therefore a rather unique situation – since tourists actually do personally see and ‘engage’ with the ‘other’ that s/he had committed responsibility to in opting for ‘ethical tours’. In fact, Korf has even suggested, using the case of philanthropic giving after the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, that “[i]n the 21st century, spatial distance has become much more fluid: life-styles have become more cosmopolitan, global tourism has brought large numbers of Westerners into remote places where they personally experience an encounter with distant others” (2007, p. 371), and this in turn encourages a vanishing distance between what was perceived as radically separate conditions of being ‘away’ or ‘at home’ (see England, 2007; Lawson, 2007; Massey, 2004; Popke, 2007; Smith, 1998). Through such encounters, tourists are able to assess in person whether what is done is ‘ethical’ or not and, in some cases, even to observe that the ‘other’ - the ‘local’ or ‘cared for’ – may not always be receptive of the care and responsibility enacted (see Sin, 2006, 2010). Discussions in this paper therefore highlight what happens when tourists actually meet the ‘other’, and how this often results in situations that complicate the idealized notions of ethical tourism or consumption. For example, a simple act of giving related to ideas of philanthropy and aid may become challenging once one considers the politics and nuances of how to give, what to give, and who to give – all of which are made all the more apparent when giving is not done at a distance and anonymously, but in person and directly to the intended recipients of care. Yet despite this, ‘going local’ is prevalent amongst almost any responsible or ethical travel initiative. On Responsibletravel.com, one of the most successful travel websites focusing on this aspect, the notion of the ‘rebellious tourist’ best encapsulates this fascination with all things ‘local’:

When you think of Rebellious Tourism think of how Michael Palin travels – with a sense of humour, local guides, using local transport. Real-life characters such as Palin, Bruce Parry and Simon Reeve get their confidence from a curiosity to discover and learn about new places and people. It’s clear to see it pays off and they are consistently rewarded with acceptance, laughter and wonderful travel experiences (Responsibletravel.com, 2010).

This means that tourism, as an industry that is transnational in nature, will have to continually contend with differing expectations and interpretations of responsibility. In (especially community-based) tourism then, it is vital to appreciate that tourist destinations are indeed places that bring together the tourist and the ‘locals’ places whereby each party is able to observe first-hand what is practiced in the name of ethics and responsibility. Much like Massey suggests, in tourism, “‘place’ [all the more] must be a site of negotiation, and that often this will be conflictual negotiation” (Massey, 2004, p. 7). Such encounters in tourism therefore ground this research, where we examine the contact zones or ‘communities’ where responsibilities are enacted.

The tourist community is thus considered here as a sort of political horizon, in the sense that it represent a project that can never be realized, but only deferred, endlessly deferred. According to Esposito’s critique of the Western concept of communitas, community is all too often presented simply as a sort of wider (than the individual one) subjectivity, a conception based on the assumption that it is a property belonging to subjects that join together, or some sort of substance produced by their union (Esposito and Campbell, 2009, p. 2; see also Minca, 2011, p. 21). What these subjects are supposed to have in common, that unites them – this is the conventional claim – is the ethnic, territorial, and spiritual property of every one of its members. This romantic and essentialist rhetoric of community is indeed important also in the ways in which community is promoted and organized by the tourism industry today (Minca, 2011, pp. 21–24). The tourist ‘desire for community’, in its different articulations, seems to be influenced by those Western communitarian philosophies/ideologies that promote and seek a putative return to the origin, to an original time where some hypothetical community was indeed unique and pristine (see Agamben, 1993; Blanchot and Joris, 1988). This is why we claim that in its tourist manifestations, the rhetoric of community is somehow related to a widespread popular discourse of loss (of the original community), and the widely publicized need for protection of traditional – that is, genuine, non-modern – communities from the devastating power of modernity (Esposito and Campbell, 2009, p. 134). The perceived lack and loss of an original community is precisely the referent of so much tourism promotional material (see Sin, 2010). At the same time tourists are invited to get themselves involved in this communitarian realm by entering spaces with no clear sense of place and time, and dealing with hosts with no clear individual subjectivity other than that of being ‘local’ – and putative members of a local community (Minca, 2009). The setting for the encounter between tourists and the human objects of their gaze (and related care) is therefore based on a imagined ideal of a stable cultural relationship, where the hypothetical responsible tourist is envisioned to enter a contact zone (Pratt, 1992) and face a similarly placid, happy and docile ‘local’ subject (for an extended analysis on this theme, see Minca, 2011).

The interest (and desire?) within tourism for the experience of faraway communities provided by travels in and to foreign lands has by now a long history. Colonialism and modern science, especially social science, have indeed prepared the field for an understanding of the culture of others which has taken a political form that now reverberates in many of such tourist manifestations. The “political economy of showing” – to speak with Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) – that has driven, and still drives today, many ‘presentations’ of culture for the visiting tourist has indeed deep roots in Western modernity and often consists, even today, in the reiteration of performances in which the idea of culture is mediated by the rhetoric of community, a local community to be sure. In addition, questions of authenticity, often associated with the reasons for actually-traveling-to-places-to-see-things-in-the-real, are also often accompanied by a paternalistic language aimed at giving meaning and ethical flavor to the penetration of the living spaces of others. Sofield and Birtles, for example, suggest that “there is a growing desire by millions of travelers for access to ‘primitive’ societies, a hunger to taste if only briefly their traditional ways of life, a wish to see, experience and photograph their ‘exotic’ practices” (1996, p. 396). Novelli and Tisch-Rottensteiner go further in elaborating the tensions between authenticity and development, and highlighting that “tourists who visit the hill
tribes in Northern Thailand generally expect an authentic experience, but their expectations are often not met as hill tribes are increasingly being influenced by Western lifestyles and progress" (2011, p. 54). The “Burmese community volunteering, Thailand” project is a case in point (Responsibletravel.com):

This project has become particularly popular with volunteers because it gives them the freedom to teach whatever skills they think may be beneficial to the Burmese migrants. Whether it be computer training, English language classes, self-development (such as female empowerment), or simply caring for the children in the community – there are no restrictions as to what volunteers can do to help the Burmese community... This is not a tourist area and volunteers will be immersed in the day-to-day Thai culture, and cannot fail to learn from experiences of the Burmese people.

The culture of “others” is often presented with specific spatial arrangements, either in the form of spectacle – in a theatrical performance of selected and orderly elements of the culture in question – or in the form of an actual penetration (again, selectively operated) of the “drama of the quotidian”. Brochures promising responsible cultural travel experiences in faraway lands are populated by the smiling faces of unnamed people, frequently accompanied by abundant exposure of their bodies, and by more or less sophisticated folkloristic images; the promise here is of unmediated (often articulated in the language of political correctness) contact with the local population, of a learning experience about their deep culture: of penetration, in a respectful but nonetheless deep way, of their living spaces (see, for example, Oakes, 2006, 2011).

Racial typologies of the past are re-enacted via the cultural geographies of a globalized market selling the experience of primal face contact with their either smiling or hieratic representatives. The “theatrical” and the “zoological” intermingle in these colorful performances of the local collective Self (Ewen and Ewen, 2006). The touristic machinery is thus deeply affected by a sort of “museum effect”, that is, by a widespread tendency on the part of the tourist industry to convert the quotidian scenes of everyday life of the mahouts and join in with various communal activities, and that “the relationships that I managed to build [with mahouts and their families]... were incredible”. The Elephant Camp was thus chosen as a site for this research, as it represented what was marketed and made available for tourists to enter an idealized image of a unique and pristine community – where traditional ways of life such as mahouts as a customary skill passed on from father to son, living in simplistic wooden stilts, and the semblance of an extraordinary yet original lifestyle portrayed through what seems like a close and harmonious relationship with nature, especially through the comfortable closeness mahouts enjoy with elephants. The fact, however, that the Elephant Camp was indeed set up specifically for tourism purposes only seven years ago at the point of research, and made up of transient coming and going of elephants, families, or different family members, was something that hardly mentioned to tourists. It was indeed a very new traditional community, a temporary ‘tourist’ community of sorts. For example, most of the mahouts’ children were either back in their hometowns (typically in Northeast Thailand) or studying or working in Bangkok. Also, during harvest season, many mahouts head back to their hometowns to help out. Since the beginning of fieldwork in 2009, we have personally come across new mahouts becoming new members of the Elephant Camp community, and many families leaving this Elephant Camp to join other tourism-oriented elephant camps (that do not offer community-based tourism)5. Indeed, the Elephant Camp itself was relocated in 2011 – a ‘mobile’ community, indeed – due to issues associated with the rental of the land, and each mahout family decided on that point whether to move to the new camp, or to relocate elsewhere. The idea of an everlasting traditional community based on kinship and ties to place hence quickly falls apart simply by looking at the histories involved in the site of our research. Yet even so, the image of a pristine and intact community unaffected by modern ills continue to surround discourses of the Elephant Camp, and it was observed for example, that British coordinator based on site (Emma) often told volunteer tourists about how different mahouts were skilled in different areas such as farming, traditional medicines, motorbike repairs, and so on, and how this made the Elephant Camp community a stable, self-sufficient, and comprehensive one.

5 The Elephant Camp is based near Pattaya in Thailand. This is one of the earliest developed beach resort areas in Thailand, and the city of Pattaya is also infamous known for the commercial sex tourism. Because of the huge numbers of tourist arrivals in Pattaya, the region surrounding Pattaya city is filled with purpose-built tourism attractions, of which elephant camps that offer rides and circus shows dominate. The Elephant Camp is therefore a rare hybrid in the region, where community-based tourism discussed in this paper is offered alongside tie-ups with big travel companies that bring in busloads of tourists for 20 min elephant rides at the Elephant Camp.

6 While the question of volunteering is an important one in contemporary ‘responsible tourism’, and while we recognize that it intersects in important ways with the topic here discussed, however, we deliberately decided not to engage with the related literature in full in order to be able to focus more in depth on question of responsibility and community. This choice was also motivated by the fact that describing the visitors of the Elephant Camp as ‘volunteers’ responded, in our view, also to a fashionable way to promote the local ‘community’ dedicated to some ‘green’ activity. (For discussions on the implications of volunteer tourism, see Lyons et al., 2012; Sin, 2010; Wearing and Neil, 2001).
Tourists, or so-called ‘volunteer tourists’, or ‘volunteers’, are hence introduced to the ‘community’ at the Elephant Camp, and typically stay a minimum of one week (never more than 6 weeks), although a shortened one-day experience programme is also available. Volunteering in the camp involves helping mahouts carry out day-to-day tasks of taking care of the elephants (such as feeding, walking, riding, and showering them). Participant observation and in-depth interviews were conducted with the mahouts and their families (18 recorded interviews), the two local Thai coordinators (4 recorded interviews) and one British coordinator (based onsite, 2 recorded interviews), and the 8 volunteer tourists onsite during the fieldwork period (8 recorded interviews).7

To augment our understanding of community-based tourism on the ground, additional interviews were conducted with 11 key decisions makers in tour companies involved in offering community-based tourism, and 2 representatives from not-for-profit organizations involved in community-based tourism in Thailand between June 2009 and January 2012.

3.1. Actually meeting the other 1: going local in

Amongst calls to assume responsibilities in tourism, the continued enamour towards communities can be seen in how ‘going local’ is to be consistently encouraged. While often used as a tag line as if the term was self-explanatory, deconstructing discourses around ‘going local’ revealed that this might mean an assortment of things, and many times, guidebooks and websites and interview respondents refer to several aspects of ‘going local’ simultaneously. For example, going local could translate into tours run by locals that have (supposed) deep connections to the places visited, or into living – and making ‘real connections’ – with local people, or even into supporting local economies by providing sources of income and employment. Most prevalent is an explicit invitation to ‘truly travel’ (as compared to being bussed around like a mass tourist), to get to know something local (for discussions on the higher perceived social and cultural capital involved in ‘travelling’ rather than ‘touring’, see Crang, 2006; Minca and Oakes, 2006, 2011; Oakes, 2006). This is clearly emphasized in the following quotes from travel guidebooks like Clean Breaks:

It’s far too easy to visit Thailand and come away feeling that you never really got to see what life for Thais is like outside of the tourist centres. If you’re curious, then a visit to the tranquil rice-growing village of Ko Pet in the northeastern Isan region may be just what you’re looking for (Hammond and Smith, 2009, p. 301).

Indeed, as argued earlier, this interest in the ‘local’ reflects a continued colonial tradition of displaying the ‘local’ as if they were an abstract construction of the ‘other’ (Ewen and Ewen, 2006). The tourist need as presented and evident in much of the promotion material in contemporary travels to the Global South thus revolve around the promise of unmediated (but assumed to be politically correct) contact with the local population. Care in tourism, and the drive to ‘go local’, especially in community-based-tourism, can therefore be seen as an expression of this desire to have an encounter and contact zone with a radically different ‘other’, but also with some putative traditional community, presume somehow closer to its own ‘origins’.

Where to find this ‘other’ to be encountered hence becomes an important endeavor within tourism. On the one hand, places that fulfil particular stereotypes (e.g. rural, traditional, and poor) are often easily categorized as those suitable for tourists and tourism to practise and enact their ideas of responsibility. On the other hand, it appears that with a growing demand for community-based-tourism, such ‘suitable places’ could very well be increasingly ‘crafted’ for tourist consumption. A clear example can be gleaned from looking at how responsibletravel.com collates and hosts the largest number of responsible travel options within one site, something that shows how certain places, such as Cambodia and Lao PDR, are favoured in responsible tourism, or at least have a larger representation in terms of tours provided.

Taking Lao PDR as an example, respondents like Jean-Yves Palie (Product Manager, Exotissimo Travel Laos), Luzi Matzig (CEO, Asian Trails Ltd), and Willem Niemeijer (Founder, Khiri Travel), echo a similar sentiment – the country is relatively ‘untouched’ and ‘not yet spoilt by mass tourism’, and therefore presents itself as the new frontier, or the outback of tourism in Southeast Asia – perfect for seeking the ‘other’, and their vulnerable communities.

What stands out sharply in Table 1 is also the fact that countries like Malaysia and Singapore are not known or deemed suitable for responsible travel. This is not to say the tourism in Malaysia and Singapore is irresponsible, but rather that what the tourism industry does in these countries is hardly ever marketed and sold as being ‘responsible’. Respondents suggested that this was because the perceived state of wealth and development makes some places and countries easier to market as destinations of responsible tourism, and others – like Singapore, and Malaysia much more difficult. While there are few who will explicitly argue that tourism sells because the happy, youthful and privileged tourist is provided with a self-enhancing opportunity to encounter the poor and submissive ‘other’ in an idealized and presumed ‘original’ community (see Minca, 2011), the emphasis on such ‘untouched places’ where tourists are said to be able to ‘be a part of local communities’, ‘make a difference’ or ‘bring joy to locals’ is an aspect often observed in marketing material for community-based-tourism. For example, in a meeting between Hamish Keith (Managing Director of Exotissimo) and Bill Tuffin (World Wildlife Federation Consultant) organized in order to “assess the potential of community-based ecotourism in several wetlands sites in the Northeast of

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Arrivals of international tourists (millions, 2010)</th>
<th>Number of ‘responsible holidays’ options on responsibletravel.com</th>
<th>GDP Per Capita (2009 in current US$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brunei</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>27,390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao PDR</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>6902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>No data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1836</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>36,573</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>3893</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>1130</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7 Interviews with mahouts and their families were conducted in Thai and translated on the spot by one of the two Thai coordinators. All other interviews were conducted in English.

8 The term ‘local’ is acknowledged to be a highly problematic one – who exactly is a ‘local’? Is, for example, a guide from Bangkok leading a tour in Chiang Mai considered a local? Or is an elephant mahout hailing from Surin but who has worked in an Elephant Camp in Pattaya for the past 10 years considered a local? Also, local communities’ tend to be used without definition in popular media – often ignoring the deep implications of assuming the existence of monocultural communities, when indeed in many situations heterogeneity (e.g. age, race, religion, gender, etc.) may instead be more commonly observed.

4 For year 2009 as data for 2010 is unavailable.
Thailand [where] the WWF is interested in helping communities... generating funding for conservation activities freeing them from dependence on donor funding” (Tuffin, personal communication, 8 December 2009), Keith argued that:

I think we're definitely looking at [Northeast Thailand, or Isan], it's an interesting area for us, because it's a sort of new Thailand, a sort of cultural Thailand... a home stay now is almost an integral part of Isan programme... it's really part of what they [tourists] are looking for... it's real people, stay in their house, and be with their families (personal communication, 17 December 2009).

Tourism in general’s preoccupation on finding and going to ‘un-touched places’ (see for example, Cloke and Perkins, 1998; Cohen, 1988; Farbotko, 2010, as well as numerous tourism marketing materials) in this respect brings about a problematic reframing of the inequalities between peoples and places, where destinations and ‘local communities’ are continually depicted as poor and destitute in a bid to attract community-based-tourism. While such initiatives in tourism are potential avenues for income generation and rural livelihoods sustainability, as argued in many pro-poor tourism resources (Ashley et al., 2001; Hall, 2007; Roe and Urquhart, 2001; Scheyvens, 2007), they do little to question the broader societal structures that continue to place the tourist in a position of privilege, when containing and mutating the ‘local’s agency. Such instances highlight the paradoxical relationship between ideals of community and responsibility in tourism, where it is suggested that being responsible means that we can or should put local communities on the pedestal to be gazed at, protected, and defended, but that in doing so, we inevitably become irresponsible as we subscribe to problematic notions of a placid and passive local in an equally stagnant but reframed and celebrated as traditional and genuine community (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998).

At the same time, the potential to create communities or ‘places for care’ in tourism results in additional aspects not yet discussed and considered in full in both academic and popular literature. Willem Niemeijer, Founder of Khiri Travel, for example, shared his company’s ethos in choosing what projects to support:

one of the criteria that we have now is that we would like to have a project [where tourists provide donations] that our passengers could actually visit if they wanted to. They could actually see it... for example, providing solar energy into villages that are off the grid in Laos, which is a new project that we’ve been doing, that they could actually go and have a look at how it works, and actually say ‘wow, this is nice,’ I am going to provide it as well, so they get really involved in the projects (personal communication, 17 December 2009).

The prevalence of such tours suggests that many of the occasions in which tourists actually meet the ‘local’ are increasingly in a ‘controlled’ context, deliberately created by tour providers or non-government organization. The opportunities and situations whereby the much sought after contact with the ‘local’ can hence hardly be considered as unmediated, while the premise of this contact as (politically correct) care rather than exploitation should perhaps be put under greater scrutiny. Much as how the tourist gaze (Crang, 1997; MacCannell, 2001; Urry and Larsen, 2011) has long been argued to be led by all sorts of directives coming from tour guides, travel marketing materials, and national tourism promotion boards, perhaps the ‘involvement’ or ‘care’ in tourism are also directed by similar sets of authorities that claim understanding and expertise over what should or should not be considered responsible (Minca and Oakes, 2011). In addition, the creation of such spaces to observe or practise care brings to mind doubts about the potential consequences of what has been argued to border on voyeurism on poverty (Scheyvens, 2007; Selinger and Outten, 2009). The images of poverty and dire need hence tend to run in line with what are typically used as images to encourage consumer responsibility in tourism and become further reinforced in such ‘crafted’ spaces. Indeed, underlying principles of care in tourism always sets apart the privileged as ‘giving’ or being responsible for the less privileged, thereby reifying the rich-poor divide, where both tourist and host actively perform their respective identities: locals must appear poor and needy to appeal to tourists, who in turn need to take on the role of a gregarious and generous foreigner able and willing to care deeply for the locals he or she meets (however transient the tour may be) (see Sin, 2010). It is therefore by no accident that care in community-based-tourism perpetuates inequalities, and this perhaps also addresses the root of this obsession for representations of such static cultural types in local communities – the need to create spaces to encounter the intermediary ‘other’ so as to establish who we are, requires the creating, controlling and containing of the ‘other’ – an abstract figure that is presumably waiting for the tourist with their eternal smiles and open to inspection (Minca, 2011, p. 37).

3.2. Actually meeting the other 2: the politics of giving in tourism

At the same time, the emergence of the caring tourist means that tour companies have to make choices on who to sponsor, which community, school, or NGO to collaborate with, or even what cause to promote. Who is local and where is ‘the community’ become important boundaries to be defined, defended, and protected so that the caring tourist can ‘give’ adequately. Fieldwork has highlighted however, that respondents often made such important choices on the basis of personal judgments or convenience, rather than through comprehensive understandings of the impacts one’s practices of care might have. For example, Emma, one of the coordinators at the Elephant Camp, admitted that the location of the camp was the result of numerous reasons outside of responsibilities:

I often think [why are we in Pattaya?]. I think mainly because... Lek [Thai coordinator of the Elephant Camp] is kind of settled here and this was where we were and we kind of know the area, but then we've kind of also got the best of both worlds in the sense that we're so near the beach as well, I think we can offer people a lot of things, and we're easy access from Bangkok (personal communication, 16 November 2009).

As this example shows, the choice of site, in this case in Pattaya, was due to all sorts of reasons: Lek’s personal attachment and investments in the area, the proximity of Pattaya to the airport and the beach – all factors considered mainly for the marketability of the project as a destination. While the attractiveness and accessibility of the project to tourists is an important factor in ensuring that it does produce income for the mahouts, little consideration however was given to the fact that both mahouts and elephants were migrants from Surin or Buri Ram provinces in Northeastern Thailand. Indeed, the ‘village’ and ‘local community’ where tourists visit is simply a group of mahouts who typically have left behind wi...
ves and children in their hometowns in Northeastern Thailand. The fact that elephants were not native to beach environments and Pattaya was also seldom mentioned. The situation on the ground is thus far different from what is often marketed in tourism brochures and advertisements – as a tourist, one hardly discovers or chance upon ‘real’ communities. Instead, ‘locals’ are all too often put together in settings that reflect what the operators believe tourists imagine as the real, rustic, and idyllic community, and even when this is not entirely true, efforts are continually put in to convince tourists, or at least downplay any doubt.

In presenting care towards the ‘local’ then, one of the most basic and direct manners of practising responsibility frequently mentioned amongst respondents is simply ‘to give’, whether this was done in their personal capacity or as corporate philanthropy. Examples of giving abound – Exotissimo Foundation, for example, was set up specifically to manage donations from their tourists and the company’s pledge to donate US$1 per tourist, and how such funds should be disbursed to the various projects they support. Also the Elephant Camp’s website encourages tourists to make donations in order to help maintain the camp’s environment. Giving in these instances again suggests an imagined productive relationship between tourists and local-communities-in-need, where the hypothetical happy and healthy tourists enters a contact zone together with a placid and docile ‘local’ subject” (Minca, 2011).

In the course of the fieldwork at the Elephant Camp however, many issues regarding monetary gifts emerged. Questions concerning how the funds were channelled to the camp, and the lack of transparency in the management of both donations and profits from volunteer tourists were often brought up by various parties involved. Such instances highlight the contested nature of what responsibility is, and of how one can best be responsible, and is a reflection of how situations on the ground often prove to be controversial.

At times, the integrity of such ‘caring’ initiatives can come under question, but rather than attempting to ascertain which project or scheme is ‘responsible’ or not, we prefer to focus on the varied understandings of responsibility and on how, when practised on the ground, abstract notions and ideals encounter real difficulties. Echoing Noxolo et al. arguments that care and responsibility on the ground can be messy, uncertain and refused, a “politics of disconnection” (2012, p. 2) emerges when tourists actually meet the ‘community’ and become enmeshed within complex social relationships and realities that are seldom presented and perhaps actively neglected in tourism marketing material.

Tourists at the Elephant Camp further revealed how ‘easy’ ways to care for and donate responsibly to ‘locals’ are not quite as simple as they are often presented by the industry literature. What was most frequently brought up in private discussions at leisure and meal times amongst tourists was how they battled with differing ideas towards what constituted suitable gifts to their mahout hosts and how this should be given. On the Elephant Camp’s brief provided to tourists before their trips to Thailand, it was suggested that personal gifts to individual mahouts should be kept at a minimum, and that cash donations should instead be directed to the camp as a whole. This reflects an age-old ideal advocated in numerous sources from travel guidebooks to advises on how one can do more with cash instead. You know, like paying for their children’s school fees. So in the end I bought huge tins of cookies and also gave some cash (personal communication, 26 November 2009).

Indeed, there was usually little consensus and each tourist would eventually make up his or her mind and act on it. The examples this section brings up hence highlight the contradictory and sometimes difficult decisions encountered in giving, where little is certain on the eventual impact of gifts – even as much commitment and contemplation are invested in how best to care as a tourist. Arguably, the idealized community, or a throwback to an original state where simplistic or traditional communal arrangements based on mutual trust and agreement, is once again presumed and celebrated in tourism, while gifts to individuals are considered as inappropriate as these are demonized as selfish and problematic.

3.3. Actually meeting the other 3: bodies, care, sex

Because of this attraction towards the actual life of local communities in situ, responsible tourism typically enters the domestic sphere, and this brings about several other rather sensitive issues, as what seems mundane and banal can become a major concern affecting the actual relationship between tourists and locals. This section reflects on how tourists are not just abstract figures passing by but indeed bodies in place, and as such they can represent trespasses to the ‘community’ and its established moral practices. However, when care is the premise of tourists entering, and relating with, the ‘local’, such trespasses are often tolerated as both tourists and the ‘others’ assume their respective roles as placid figures normally not politicized.

At the Elephant Camp, two such transgressions could be observed – the first was the issue of tourists staying late or overnight in the Elephant Camp and having alcoholic drinks with mahouts; the second was related to past accounts of tourists having sex with

---

13 1 US$ then converted into approximately 30 Thai Baht (on 25 August 2011).
mahouts. Staying overnight at the camp is not unheard of, and is in fact a highlight offered by the project – this usually happens for only one or two nights weekly for tourists to fully experience what mahouts’ lives are like. Tourists would typically join mahouts to cut and collect grass or pineapple leaves for their elephants the following morning at 5 a.m. However, as the existing arrangements (at the point of research) were such that tourists could opt to stay in the camp or the volunteer house as they wished, there was a clear sense that unhappiness was brewing amongst certain parties in the camp, over rowdy behavior of tourists and some mahouts after drinking. An interview with a mahout, Pan, for example highlighted such sentiments expressed by several of their families:

Oh, very noisy. He [Pan] cannot sleep, everyone cannot sleep. Every men say no problem because they understand she [referring to a previous volunteer tourist] come here to holiday and party. But wife have to be wake up and every wife go complain to Khun Ten [Thai manager of the Elephant Camp]… if the volunteer come one week and have a song and have dinner one day ok. But that time is not one day. Every day (personal communication, 25 November 2009).

While drinking and drunken rowdiness is perhaps not exactly an effect of tourism itself (some of the younger mahouts will gather around for booze every night whether or not tourists are staying in the camp), there was a sense that such behavior was encouraged by the actions of tourists – Lek asked on more than one occasion: “the people in England drink beer in the afternoon? Many? More than one can a time?” (personal communication, November 2009). Such questioning was usually followed by statements of Thai people not drinking so much, or that drinking was only done on special occasions like New Year, Songkran (Thai New Year), or weddings. It was also suggested that mahouts were drinking so regularly after observing the farangs [foreign white people] like Emma and Ellie (who lived in the camp) and other tourists staying overnight. These observations therefore illustrate the delicate balance between care and irresponsibility when tourism set in domestic spaces is concerned – the ordinariness of mundane actions, in this case enjoying an alcoholic drink (something very typical and not unexpected for a tourist to do), can at times become contentious, especially when it facilitates to attribute ‘poorly behaviour’ to ‘foreign influences’.

Another issue constantly brought up by coordinators of the project were the ‘scandals’ and gossip about the intimate relationships between certain mahouts and volunteer tourists that continued to circulate in the camp long after the other tourists were gone. During the interviews, it was mentioned on several occasions that mahouts’ families had noticed that young male mahouts had spent nights alone in a room with a young female volunteer tourist. In Eka’s words, “some people don’t like it because in the camp everyone will know and in Thai culture it is not accepted for a boy and girl to be alone at night before marriage” (personal communication, 30 November 2009). While such could be one-off situations and not at all reflective of the norm of tourism in the Elephant Camp, such stories and ‘scandals’ were repeated time and again by different parties throughout fieldwork at the camp, and reflected that while these trespasses are tolerated, they are certainly not forgotten.

At the same time, an interview with one of the tourist revealed that she may have had no qualms about “making out” or “having sex” with a mahout at the camp, but had stopped herself from doing so because she felt uncomfortable about how the Thai coordinators may talk about her after she was gone:

I would totally make out with xxx [name of mahout withheld] if not for the fact that Lek and Eka keep telling us who had sex with who. I mean, he is hot, and he seems game. And it’s not a big deal if this happened at home. But it’s just weird with all these scandals. You know, I don’t want to be one of those stories too (tourist, name withheld on request, personal communication, November 2009).

On the one hand, tourism as it plays out in domestic spaces opens one to all sorts of ‘opportunities’ to be romantically or sexually involved with locals, on the other, the close relationships with people in the community, such as Lek and Eka, also pressurizes volunteer tourists to behave in ways deemed appropriate according to the expectations and standards they hold. An interview with John Roberts, Director of Elephants, Anantara Golden Triangle, highlighted that similar issues were concerns at their Elephant Camp as well:

[we used to] let the volunteers go down at night, and then we have young boys [mahouts] and we have young girls [tourists]… the young boys have a funny idea… it can be sexual molestation… but the mahouts they don’t know that, they get a funny idea… that all Western girls like to sleep with mahout… and the other problem that we have is of course mahouts are all married, and their wives are there as well…I consider that socially harmful…[we] should not encourage teenage girls to flirt with married mahouts! (personal communication, 26 January 2010).

Indeed, it was perhaps the lack of clarity and control at the Elephant Camp that was an issue:

Lek has actually said to me, it’s ok for you to stay Hana, ‘cause you’re an old lady… I know what she meant, because… you know how it is like with the younger ones, there is very few people who are your age here, you’ve the constant stream of attractive young volunteers who may not understand about the culture, they might be drinking they might be partying, they might be encouraged by the young mahout to do that, and before you know it the whole dynamic has changed, the older people start to resent it, the wives start to resent it, and you’ve got conflict (Hana, personal communication, 25 November 2009).

Embedded within these negotiations then is the key question if ‘going local’ in presumed traditional communities should always be seen as a way to be responsible in tourism; and if this was to be enacted in the domestic arena of ‘locals’ homes, how issues observed in this section factor into consideration? What indeed are the boundaries of ‘responsibilities’ in spaces of this kind? Too often, the drive to be responsible misses out the intricate details of how ‘responsibilities’ are enacted in places, and the complications that intimacy – while seen as a positive thing in some accounts (see, for example Conran, 2011) – can potentially also bring into questions whether it still remains ‘responsible’ when ‘love’ and sexual intimacy are involved (see also Franklin, 2003; Jacobs, 2010; Mallam, 2008). Indeed, sentiments on the ground clearly show that romantic or sexual relationships between mahouts and tourists are seen negatively by the ‘local community’, even in case of mutual agreement between the parties involved. Yet, because ‘a tourist that cares’ is set up as constitutive of community-based-tourism (as compared, perhaps, to a paying customer who does not care in commercial sex tourism), such instance of trespasses are accepted or at least tolerated as transient risks to the community. The ‘local’ is therefore never passive or placid; instead, s/he is just in an active performance in line with the greater structures that assumes her/him as an abstract threshold figure, a member of an idealized community in the process of constant becoming.
4. Conclusions

In this article, we investigated the relationship between responsibility and community-based-tourism, with a detailed analysis of an Elephant Camp in Thailand. This analysis was based on a few starting key assumptions: first, that contemporary tourism, especially tourism marked by considerations of individual and social responsibility, is literally obsessed with the mantra of community. Communities, ‘local’ communities to be sure, are mentioned all the time as a putatively existing object, out there, often imagined in a sort of cultural fixity, to be protected from tourism and possibly supported by tourism. They are normally presented as part of a broader global geography of authentic, traditional, marginal, often vulnerable and poor places in remote and less remote corners of the planet. A clear hierarchy, tinted by a degree of colonial flavor, is expressed by the definition of the ‘helpers’ and those ‘in need of helps’, often coincidental to the binaries between the tourists and the toured; this hierarchy also reveals how responsibility is geographically conceived in tourism, and how the ‘local’ is often imagined as entirely deprived of agency, a passive subject of the tourist organized gaze. From our analysis of some the key tenets of responsible tourism, the question of giving intersects with other major global cultural questions about the implications of ‘going local’ and how this relate to the preservation and the care of communities as defined at this scale.

Our empirical investigation has thus showed how ‘going local’ brings about a series of tensions and contradictions that problematize the very concept of responsible travel and tourism, especially when tested, so to speak, ‘on the ground’ (for a different approach to the ‘ground’ in tourism, see MacCannell, 1992, 2011; Oakes, 2006). The experience of responsible tourist behavior and codes of practice when dealing with presumed local communities is indeed challenged – in the Elephant Camp here examined – by the agency of the ‘locals’ and by the contact zones produced by the very presence of tourists and external organizations. The imperatives of all attempts to go local, including the actual giving of things or money on the part of the tourists, but also the sexual interaction and the abuse of alcohol that are implied by the very nature of responsible tourism in the Elephant Camp here examined – in the Elephant Camp we do not dare generalize, an emotional journey with conservation volunteers in South Africa. Geoforum 40 (6), 1069–1080.


