

Environmentally Friendly Operational Practices: Perspectives from Hotels in Phatthalung Province

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to study the environmentally friendly practices of hotels in Phatthalung province, focusing specifically on hotels rated 3 stars or higher on Agoda.com. Qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews, were used as research tools. The data collection tools were adapted from the Green Hotel standards (2013), the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) (2008), and Green Globe (1994), which were combined into 6 main components. Purposive sampling was used to select participants, and content analysis was performed to interpret the data. The study results indicate that most hotels still lack clear policies regarding environmentally friendly operations, primarily due to insufficient knowledge about environmentally friendly or green practices. However, some hotels are beginning to adopt more sustainable practices, such as using energy-saving equipment, waste separation, supporting local products to increase income distribution, and promoting local employment opportunities. However, most hotels still need to improve in terms of developing employee environmental awareness, publicizing the hotel's environmental support approaches, and conducting CSR activities to give back to the community.

Keywords: *Environmentally Friendly Operational Practices, Green Hotel, hospitality.*

Introduction

In recent decades, environmental concerns have grown significantly (Laroche et al., 2001). In markets where consumers are increasingly environmentally conscious, they recognize the impact of their purchasing decisions, which are closely tied to environmental issues (Laroche et al., 2001). Following the COVID-19 pandemic, society experienced notable shifts in values and tourist behavior, particularly regarding environmental awareness. Tourists began to prioritize sustainable and responsible destinations, opting for eco-friendly products, carbon-neutral travel, conservation-focused experiences, and green accommodations (Tourism Marketing Research Division, 2024).

Green hotels are establishments that promote environmental sustainability by adhering to eco-friendly practices and programs aimed at protecting the planet. A 2022 survey by Booking.com revealed that a majority of modern travelers prefer eco-friendly hotel options over traditional ones, with 81%

expressing a desire to stay in sustainable accommodations. Conversely, 49% believe there is a lack of sufficient eco-friendly hotel options (Global Compact Network Thailand, 2022). Additionally, the increasing impacts of global warming and climate change have raised global awareness about the importance of environmental respect. Consequently, hotels, a significant component of the tourism industry, are seeking ways or methods to make their establishments sustainable or environmentally friendly (Moise, Gil-Saura, Ruiz Molina, 2021; Alreahi, Bujdosó, Dávid, Gyenge, Green, 2023; Merli, Preziosi, Acampora, Ali, 2019) by implementing green practices in hotel management and operations (Hoang, Truong, Nguyen, 2021; Jafari, Özduran, Saydam, 2023).

Phatthalung province, located entirely within the Songkhla Lake basin, is notable for its natural resources, forests, and mountains that support ecotourism and cultural tourism, as well as various forms of wisdom, historical civilization sites, and religious sacred places. As a result, Phatthalung province has seen a significant increase in tourist growth over the past five years. In 2018, Phatthalung was a "secondary city" for tourism with the highest revenue, experiencing a growth rate of 14% with up to 1.6 million tourists annually (Asawin Phakkhawan, 2019). In 2023, Phatthalung province saw a 124.84% increase in tourist arrivals compared to 2022, making it the fastest-growing tourist destination in the South. In 2024, the occupancy rate increased from 543,912 visitors in 2023 to 684,300 visitors, with tourism revenue amounting to 4,045.13 million baht, representing an increase of 223.11% (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2024). Regarding accommodation, the increase in tourists has led to the growth of lodging businesses in Phatthalung province. Currently, Phatthalung province has 203 lodgings (Phatthalung Provincial Statistical Office, 2022). Most of the hotels are owned by local people who have not yet implemented standard environmental management practices. Some also lack knowledge of standard environmental hotel management.

Given the significant increase in the number of guests and its impact on resource and energy consumption, effective environmental management of accommodation establishments, particularly hotels, is essential. Hotels utilize substantial amounts of energy and resources while generating wastewater and waste through their services, which contribute to their environmental impact. Therefore, implementing environmentally friendly hotel operations is vital. Such hotels can play a crucial role in fostering a society that embraces eco-friendly services and consumption. However, developing accommodation establishments in Phatthalung to operate sustainably requires not only awareness from the businesses themselves but also active participation from relevant agencies and local communities to ensure these establishments meet environmental operational standards.

Research Objectives

This study aims to study the environmentally friendly operations of hotels in Phatthalung province.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach, using semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. Data was obtained from 12 key informants representing eight hotels located in Phatthalung Province. The selection criteria required that participating hotels hold a rating of three stars or higher on Agoda.com, because energy consumption depends on the size of the hotel (Becken & Patterson, 2006; Kasim, 2007). Purposive sampling was used to select the sample, and content analysis was applied to analyze the data. These scales were summarized into six components: environmentally friendly policies, hotel staff development, public relations campaigns, product procurement and raw material sourcing, environmental management, and community engagement.

Research Results

1. Respondent's Profile.

Table1 : Respondent's Profile.

Hotel	Type of Hotel Ownership	Size	No. of Rooms	Stars Rating ¹
Hotel 1	self-managed	Medium	102	4
Hotel 2	self-managed	Medium	46	3
Hotel 3	self-managed	small	46	4
Hotel 4	self-managed	small	4	3
Hotel 5	self-managed	Medium	79	3
Hotel 6	self-managed	Medium	45	3
Hotel 7	self-managed	Medium	56	3
Hotel 8	self-managed	Medium	76	3

¹Star rating based on Agoda.com, <https://partnerhub.agoda.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/star-rating-checklist-thailand-properties-only.pdf>, accessed on 15 September 2024

Table2 : Summary of environmentally friendly operations of the hotels.

Practices	Description	Hotel							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Environmentally friendly policy	Having an environmentally friendly policy	/	/	/					
	Support local products to boost the community's economy.	/	/	/	/				
	Having green spaces.	/	/	/	/	/	/		/
	Support environmentally friendly products.	/	/	/	/				
	Having multiple methods to reduce energy consumption.	/	/	/					
Hotel staff development	Provide training or send employees to training programs to enhance their environmental knowledge.	/	/	/					
	Staff members demonstrate environmentally conscious behavior.”	/	/	/					
	Staff's attire reflects the local identity.”	/	/	/					
	Staff can provide information about the local community.”	/	/	/	/	/	/		/
Environmental public relations campaign	Provides environmental education to guests via posters or stickers in rooms.	/							
	Promotes guest participation in environmental conservation.	/							
	Runs campaigns to raise awareness of eco-friendly services.	/							
	Promotes its eco-friendly operations via media and online platforms.	/	/						

Practices	Description	Hotel							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Product procurement and raw material sourcing.	Uses local products (e.g., food, handicrafts).	/	/	/	/				
	Uses environmentally friendly goods and services (e.g., Green Label, low-carbon, energy-saving).	/	/	/	/				/
	Uses natural materials in services.	/	/	/					
Environmental Management.	Sets the air-conditioning temperature to 25°C.	/	/						/
	Drinking water is served in glass bottles instead of plastic.	/	/				/		
	Separates waste into categories	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
	Uses efficient water-saving devices (e.g., sensor faucets).								
	Uses energy-efficient electrical devices (e.g., LED lights, Energy Label No.5).	/	/	/			/		
	Uses renewable energy in hotel services (e.g., electric vehicles).								
	Avoids disposable products, using refillable bottles instead	/	/	/	/				
Community engagement.	Supports local products for hotel decoration.	/	/	/	/				
	Sells souvenirs reflecting local or provincial identity.		/	/					
	Provides information on community tourism or promotes CSR activities.	/	/						
	Provides information on local culture, traditions, and cultural respect.	/	/	/		/			
	Supports local employment.	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/

2. Environmentally friendly operations of the hotels.

1) Hotel sustainability policies or management.

The study revealed a significant deficiency in hotel operational policies concerning sustainability and environmentally friendly practices. Only 3 out of 8 hotels have clear environmental regulations or operational policies. When discussing obstacles, all hotels agreed that the main obstacle is the lack of understanding of what it means to be a green hotel or to operate in an environmentally friendly manner, and many hotels expressed a desire to improve their operations to be more environmentally friendly.

“I believe the primary challenge is that hotels still lack a clear understanding of what it means to be a green or environmentally friendly hotel.” [Hotel 1]

“The hotel still lacks clear measures regarding sustainability policies, but some hotel operations do incorporate energy-saving practices in certain areas.” [Hotel 6]

“The hotel prioritizes sustainability issues, but their implementation in the hotel may still be limited.” [Hotel 7]

“The management prioritizes this issue because they are owners within the Phatthalung Tourism Business Association and therefore have a policy to promote and upgrade the hotel to be environmentally friendly.” [Hotel 5]

“Although the hotel may not have a clear environmental policy, we do have environmentally friendly practices, such as only opening certain areas, turning off lights in areas without guests, having housekeeping clean with the air conditioning off and windows open for ventilation, and turning off lights in some unused areas.” [Hotel 2]

However, one aspect of the hotel's operations that clearly demonstrates its environmentally friendly practices is the presence of green spaces.

“The hotel is designed and built to blend in with nature. We have a lot of space that can be used for gardening to make guests feel relaxed and refreshed. [Hotel 2]

“The hotel landscaped the gardens so that guests feel a sense of true relaxation.” [Hotel 8]

“The area surrounding our hotel is planted with large trees. In some places, we've added flowering plants and potted plants to enhance the hotel's aesthetic appeal.” [Hotel 1]

Additionally, many hotels were found to lack the use of local products for promoting the community's economy, whether through hotel decorations or food ingredients, as well as methods to reduce energy consumption.

2) Hotel staff development.

Staff skill development in hotels typically occurs in two primary ways: (1) through activities organized by the hotel to enhance employees' skills, and (2) by sending hotel staff to participate in training programs offered by various local agencies. In Phatthalung Province, most hotels work in collaboration with multiple sectors and frequently send representatives to participate in training activities as opportunities arise. However, there is a notable lack of training specifically aimed at developing environmentally friendly hotel operations, and some hotels have never taken part in such initiatives.

“When a provincial agency organizes training and sends an invitation to participate, the hotel always sends employees to attend.” [Hotel 2]

“The training organization usually sends an invitation, and the hotel sends employees to participate. However, the hotel has never participated in training related to environmentally friendly hotel management. [Hotel 5]

“The hotel has previously participated in training on environmentally friendly hotels, and they want to implement it at the hotel.” [Hotel 1, Hotel 2, and Hotel 3]

Five out of eight hotels felt that environmentally friendly or green hotel operations were not well understood, and they believed their staff should be more environmentally conscious. It was also found that the dress code of many hotels did not reflect local culture. However, since most of the staff were local residents, they were able to provide accurate information about the local community, local attractions, and the community's diverse cultures.

3. Public Relations for Environmental Policies.

Hotels should communicate information about environmentally friendly services and raise awareness of environmental management and energy conservation among managers, staff, and guests. The study found that while many hotels still lack environmentally friendly operational policies, all hotels are actively raising awareness among their employees about energy conservation. For example, in housekeeping, employees are encouraged to clean without turning on the air conditioning, to turn off lights, and to open windows to promote air circulation during their work. Additionally, there will be regulations that all employees must follow, which state that if an area is not in use, the lights in that area should be turned off. Furthermore, during periods of low occupancy, hotels only open on certain floors. Hotels can encourage guest cooperation with environmental guidelines by displaying posters, brochures, cards, or stickers to attract guests. However, many hotels have not yet initiated this program.

“We believe that requesting guests to turn off lights or reuse towels may be perceived as imposing on them, and therefore we consider it inappropriate.” [Hotel 5]

“We have not yet displayed posters encouraging guests to conserve water or electricity; however, this is a good practice that the hotel intends to implement in the future.” [Hotel 7]

“The hotel did not ask guests to cooperate in saving energy.” [Hotel 6]

4. Product procurement and raw material sourcing.

Green procurement encourages hotels to choose local products, support their communities, and minimize long-distance transportation, which helps conserve fuel and reduce carbon dioxide emissions (Department of Climate Change and Environment, 2018). The study found that hotels use locally sourced ingredients in their guest services.

“Sangyod rice is a native rice variety first cultivated in Phatthalung province. Therefore, the hotel uses Sangyod rice as the main ingredient in a beverage that reflects local identity, called Phatthalung Sangyod Rice Milk and Butterfly Pea Flower. [Hotel 1]

“The hotel will feature decorations made from souvenirs or local products. Additionally, staff attire will reflect the local culture, highlighting its uniqueness.” [Hotel 2]

“Most of the food ingredients come from the local community. [Hotel 4]

The use of environmentally friendly products, such as green labels, low-carbon options, and natural materials, remains an area needing improvement in hotel services. To enhance procurement processes, hotels must equip management with information about the environmentally friendly procurement of goods and services. Additionally, it is essential to raise awareness and promote understanding among procurement staff.

5. Environmental Management Process.

Most hotels have established clear environmental management practices, particularly with regard to waste segregation, which involves separating general waste, recyclable materials, hazardous waste, and food waste. In terms of energy conservation, many hotels, especially newer establishments, have adopted energy-efficient lighting and appliances with high energy-efficiency ratings, such as those certified with Energy Label No. 5. However, a substantial number of hotels have not adjusted air-conditioning settings to the recommended temperature of 25°C and continue to provide single-use amenities, including individual shampoo and shower gel bottles.

“The hotel has a waste segregation system, separating general waste, hazardous waste, and water bottles for sale. The proceeds will be used as a central fund for employee recreational activities. Wet waste will be collected and used as pig feed. [Hotel 1]

“Our hotel will focus on waste segregation, including plastic bottles, glass bottles, general waste, and various food scraps.” [Hotel 2]

“The hotel does not have a kitchen. Most of the waste is general waste, which will be sorted and placed in an area designated by the hotel for the municipality to manage. [Hotel 6]

“During the COVID-19 pandemic, the hotel upgraded to all LED lighting and energy-efficient appliances like air conditioners. We also focused on using environmentally friendly and green-labeled products for various materials and equipment and are considering installing solar panels.” [Hotel 5]

“The hotel uses energy-saving equipment such as LED light bulbs and solar streetlights in the hotel walkways.” [Hotel 2]

“We didn’t set the air conditioning to 25°C because some of the hotel’s units are quite old and don’t cool efficiently.” [Hotel 7]

The key issue is that hotels use a large amount of water daily to serve their guests. However, most hotels do not implement effective water management practices, such as utilizing efficient water sensor systems for conservation. By adopting water-saving equipment, hotels can achieve benefits in both cost savings and environmental sustainability.

6. Community engagement

From interviews with all 8 hotels, it was found that local residents were employed, and over 60% of the staff were local residents. This is beneficial in terms of income distribution within the community and

understanding the community's culture and context, which will help them answer questions or provide information to guests accurately.

"All staff members are from the local area." [Hotel 4]

"This might be because people from larger provinces don't stay long in quieter provinces. That's why we primarily focus on local residents." [Hotel 7]

Additionally, some hotels will engage in activities that preserve local culture and traditions, demonstrate respect for the community's culture, and support local products.

"The hotel supports various traditional activities, such as Songkran Day, where an area is set up for guests to pour water over Buddha images. They also provide scholarships to local schoolchildren." [Hotel 3]

"Since we don't have a kitchen, the food served to tourists or the snacks provided are ordered from people in the village, which also distributes income to the community." [Hotel 2]

Conclusion

Many hotels in Phatthalung province still lack environmentally friendly operational policies and service measures. However, some have begun to adopt the concept of Environmentally Sustainable Practices (ESPs), including energy conservation and waste management. These findings align with previous studies, such as those by Bohdanowicz (2006); Han, Lee, Trang, and Kim (2018); Singh, Cranage, and Lee (2014); Zaiton, Herman, Kasimu, and Hassan (2016); and Chan, Okumus, and Chan (2017). These studies concluded that environmentally friendly hotels are more committed to implementing technologies that save energy, using high-efficiency equipment, and adopting waste sorting practices for better management and reduction. Despite the lack of understanding regarding environmentally friendly operations in many hotels in Phatthalung province, an obstacle when compared to Green Hotel standard establishments that have dedicated green teams, there is still potential for improvement. Hotels can benefit from raising employee awareness about environmental issues and providing more training on environmental knowledge. This suggestion aligns with the work of Jusdijachlan and Ridwan (2023), who recommend organizing workshops or training sessions focused on environmental conservation. Giving employees opportunities to engage with environmental and conservation issues can enhance the organization's environmental performance and create a competitive advantage.

Clear environmental policies can positively impact hotels and lead to environmental, social, and economic benefits for the surrounding community. However, even though some hotels implement environmentally friendly practices, they often fail to communicate these efforts to guests effectively. This oversight means that hotels miss opportunities to showcase their environmental initiatives to customers and stakeholders (Khatter, McGrath, Pyke, White, & Lockstone-Binney, 2019). When hotels successfully implement sustainability policies, they can significantly reduce the overall carbon footprint of the industry (Krishnan, 2016), contributing to the future development of green hotels.

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