
8 Neolocalism and Transportation: Biocultural Conservation of the Saen Saeb Khlong in Bangkok

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Abstract

The post-modern world is comprised of a set of confluences that include a mixture of globalised, and therefore increasingly homogenised, experiences. Nevertheless, the tourism sector relies on the uniqueness of place as a core driver of the phenomenon. This chapter focuses on the specific context of the Saen Saeb canal (khlong) in Bangkok, Thailand. The historical significance of the khlong system, the current context of khlong riverboat transportation and the possibility of future tourism development is discussed. In addition, this research brings forth deeper questions of equity and distribution of positive and negative impacts of neolocal transportation development for residents and tourists alike. It includes suggestions regarding the importance of stakeholder involvement to create plans for khlong conservation and development to serve residents and increasing numbers of tourists. The chapter presents an application of the lens of neolocalism as explored through issues of heritage transportation, social capital, biocultural conservation, and sense of place. Issues of biocultural conservation through collaborative partnerships and good destination management strategies for long-term sustainable tourism planning are also proposed.

Introduction: neolocal transportation, social capital and sense of place

This chapter aims to explore the interrelationship between heritage transportation, social capital, biocultural conservation, and sense of place through the application of the lens of neolocalism within the specific context of a river canal (known as *khlong*) in Bangkok, Thailand. The post-modern world is made up of a set of confluences that include an ever-increasing rapid mixture of globalised, and therefore increasingly homogenised, experiences. Yet, for the tourism sector, the uniqueness of place is a core driver of the phenomenon. We travel for many reasons, and often it is to experience differences and 'the other'. Concurrently, for locals, tourism can serve as a driver of capitalistic homogenised development and can result in the loss of heritage and sense of place.

Neolocalism, as a philosophical building block, seeks to address conceptualisations of a renewed sense of place. Schnell (2013a: 624) describes this conceptualisation as a 'countermovement...the conscious fostering of local connections, identities, and economies'. Shortridge (1996) is credited as first identifying neolocalism as a trend and as an intentional search for identity in a place in an 'increasingly rootless society' (Flack, 1997: 38). Since then, the idea has transmuted and changed, and it is now noted that people are forming national and international networks of neolocals, 'mutual support organizations for their mutual interests in preserving distinctive places' (Schnell, 2013a: 71).

The act of travel and the interest in visiting new places are ever increasing globally. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) predicts that from 2010 to 2020, there will be a growth in world tourism of 3.8% annually (UNWTO, 2011). This growth of the tourism sector is strongly evident in Thailand. The Tourism Ministry of Thailand forecasts that inbound visitors will reach approximately 41.1 million this year (Bangkok Post, 2019). This growing trend is largely attributed to the expansion of a global middle class, the improvement of better infrastructure with improved accessibility to destinations, and a wider variety of traveling options that are more suitable to a range of travellers' budgets (OECD, 2018).

Changes in conscious consumption also involve notions of personal awareness of the relationships between individuals, the environment, and the place, and thus, neolocalism engages with more personal experiences of the nature of local places. Schnell (2013b: 625) argues that this

type of new awareness to local connections are understood as more 'authentic, and are an increasingly important part of place-creating narratives'. With this increase in demand, there is also a change in travellers' preferences and includes those who seek more authentic and localised experiences. Today's tourists are becoming more selective and want to travel more 'off the beaten track' to places that are less explored and advertised by the media. Therefore, visitors want to experience the authenticity of the local culture ranging from local gastronomy to participating in local traditional celebrations and activities (Revfine, 2019). These travellers and tourists are seeking to experience a sense of place. According to Wang and Xu (2015: 241), 'sense of place can be described as a compilation of meanings, knowledge, attachment, commitment and satisfaction that an individual or group associates with a particular place'. In addition, local tourism trends, or 'staycations', are becoming popular among people who do not want to travel far from home but still seek to experience new places and activities. Local tourism can involve travellers seeking involvement with local community, and therefore can raise awareness and enable visitors to appreciate and better understand local authenticity in terms of place, people, culture, food, and history (Majumdar, 2018).

This chapter explores notions of ways in which neolocalism can serve as a form of biocultural (biological and cultural) conservation. Through the reinvigoration of interest in local tourism, the use and protection of historical transportation routes can potentially be both conserved and utilised by locals and tourists alike. Yet, according to Ujang and Zakariya (2015: 710), evidence indicates that 'urban regeneration within traditional settings has diminished the place meanings of transformed and or newly constructed places'. This is relevant to the context of the khlongs in Bangkok as many of the canals have been filled in with earth to create more roadway space over time due to modernisation efforts of transportation infrastructure in the megacity. For example, Parnwell's (2007) study utilises the conceptualisation of neolocalist revivalism as related to rural communities in northeast Thailand. He contends that this approach is a strategy to combat the ever-present effects of relentless modernisation and development on society, the economy, and the environment by reviving a variety of social institutions and associational practices that underpin social capital. His empirical case study in northern Thailand demonstrates that 'social capital can (re)emerge from the ashes of modern development to become the lubricant of (neo)localist