

PERCEPTIONS OF SUSTAINABLE ELEPHANT TOURISM IMAGE IN THE THAI SOCIAL CONTEXT: TOWARDS A HERITAGE-BASED MANAGEMENT APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies in elephant tourism have predominantly focused on animal welfare and tourist behavior, thereby reflecting a significant opportunity to elucidate the image formation process through the dimensions of cultural heritage and Thai identity—key factors that differentiate Thailand's tourism on the global stage. This article aims to analyze the cognitive processes underlying the perceived image of sustainable elephant tourism within the Thai social context and to synthesize heritage-based management guidelines. The study integrates knowledge from five theoretical frameworks: perception, destination image, cultural heritage, sustainable tourism, and animal welfare. The analytical results reveal that the perceived image of sustainable elephant tourism in Thailand stems from both the attributes of the tourism activities and a semantic interpretation process that integrates four core elements: (1) tourist perception; (2) the legitimacy of elephant welfare based on the Five Domains Model; (3) the value of living cultural heritage; and (4) Thai identity as a soft power. Consequently, cultural heritage serves as the semantic foundation that accentuates the distinctiveness of Thai elephant tourism, whereas animal welfare is a fundamental prerequisite for international acceptance. These findings culminate in the proposition of a conceptual framework for heritage-based elephant tourism management, which strives to strike a balance between international standards and the preservation of cultural values. This approach contributes to fortifying the overall destination image and acts as a critical mechanism in stimulating tourists' revisit intention, destination loyalty, and enhanced willingness to pay for sustainable Thai elephant tourism.

Keywords: Image Perception, Living Cultural Heritage, Sustainability, Elephant Welfare, Willingness to Pay

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INTRODUCTION

Destination image serves as a pivotal construct in tourism research, significantly influencing how travelers interpret the value of a specific locale. This cognitive and evaluative process subsequently dictates critical behavioral outcomes, namely revisit intention, destination loyalty, and willingness to pay (WTP). Increasingly, destination image has evolved into a primary determinant in the tourist decision-making process, often superseding mere physical attributes (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Boonsot & Phaengsoi, 2021; Pitayachaval et al., 2023; Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019). This shift is propelled by the global movement toward sustainable development and responsible tourism, where travelers now prioritize ethical, social, and environmental considerations—most notably, animal welfare. Consequently, contemporary tourist perception is no longer confined to direct experiential contact but encompasses a deeper interpretation of the values and responsibilities embedded within tourism activities (Boonsot & Phaengsoi, 2021; Flower et al., 2021; UN Tourism, 2024).

Elephant tourism in Thailand has operated as a commercial enterprise for over half a century, experiencing exponential growth as a mainstream industry over the past 37 years. Currently undergoing a transition toward "Ethical Elephant Tourism," this sector remains a vital engine of the Thai tourism industry, bridging the dimensions of economic viability and conservation (Bansiddhi et al., 2020; Tulvandhana et al., 2025; Yothicar & Sangsawang, 2022). However, under the weight of global social scrutiny, the industry faces challenges that transcend mere revenue generation. There are growing demands for rigorous animal welfare standards, specifically those aligned with the Five Domains Model (Mellor, 2016), and long-term management sustainability. These factors directly impact Thailand's international destination image and, by extension, tourist loyalty (Pitayachaval et al., 2023). In the Thai context, elephants are not merely a tourism resource; they represent "Living Cultural Heritage," intricately woven into the nation's spiritual and historical fabric (Timothy & Boyd, 2003)—ranging from the martial history of the Ayutthaya period to the traditional wisdom of mahouts and their shared way of life (Fine Arts Department, 2019; Wongtes, 2015; Samui Elephant Haven, 2024; Yothicar & Sangsawang, 2022).

While extant literature has focused predominantly on animal welfare or tourist behavior, a significant scholarly lacuna remains regarding how the image of sustainable elephant tourism is forged within the context of cultural heritage and Thai identity (Eoseewong, 2016). This article seeks to address this gap by analyzing the perception of such images through an integrated conceptual lens, encompassing Perception Theory, Social Constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), Cultural Heritage, and Sustainability. The objective is to elucidate the formation process of the Thai elephant tourism image and to propose a heritage-based management framework. Such an approach aims to achieve a strategic equilibrium between conservation imperatives, international welfare standards, and the deployment of cultural Soft Power to communicate "Thainess" to the global community.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR LITERATURE SYNTHESIS

The systematic process for literature collection and selection was conducted through the following four stages:

Stage 1: Scoping and Keyword Identification

The scope of this study was defined by five core conceptual pillars: (1) Perception, (2) Destination Image, (3) Cultural Heritage, (4) Sustainable Tourism, and (5) Animal Welfare. Keywords were utilized in both Thai and English to ensure comprehensive retrieval, including terms such as "image perception," "destination image," "living cultural heritage," "sustainable tourism," "elephant welfare," "Soft Power," "elephant tourism," "Five Domains Model," and "Thailand."

Stage 2: Literature Search

A comprehensive search was executed across major academic databases, specifically Google Scholar, ThaiJO (Thai Journal Online), Scopus, Web of Science, and ScienceDirect. This was supplemented by manual hand-searching of reference lists from relevant articles and authoritative reports from organizations such as UN Tourism, the Fine Arts Department (Thailand), and the Office of Knowledge Management and Development (OKMD). The search period was restricted to publications between 2003 and 2025 (B.E. 2546-2568) to capture the evolution of contemporary conceptual developments.

Stage 3: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The Inclusion Criteria targeted academic articles, empirical research, institutional reports, or books directly addressing the five core concepts, with a particular emphasis on those situated within the Thai or Southeast Asian social contexts. Conversely, the Exclusion Criteria eliminated works that did not directly engage with cultural or sustainability dimensions, non-peer-reviewed publications, and opinion-based articles lacking robust scholarly evidence.

Stage 4: Synthesis and Categorization

A rigorous full-text review was conducted to facilitate a thematic synthesis. Literature was categorized based on recurring themes aligned with the research objectives, culminating in the identification of four primary components: (1) Tourist Perception, (2) Elephant Welfare and Sustainability, (3) Living Cultural Heritage, and (4) Thai Identity and Soft Power.

Following this categorization, the interrelationships between these four components were synthesized through an integrative lens. This process resulted in the distillation of three critical perspectives: (1) the Sustainability Perspective, (2) the Cultural Heritage Perspective, and (3) the Thai Social Context Perspective. The theories of Social Construction and Destination Image served as the overarching interpretive framework to elucidate these complex interconnections.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR HERITAGE-BASED ELEPHANT TOURISM MANAGEMENT

Table 1 Interrelationships between Core Components, Analytical Dimensions, and Theoretical Foundations of Heritage-Based Elephant Tourism Management

Core Components	Analytical Dimensions	Theoretical Foundations
1) Tourist Perception	Knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences	Perception Theory
2) Elephant Tourism Sustainability	Animal welfare, environmental stewardship, community engagement, and management	Sustainable Tourism, Animal Welfare
3) Thai Elephant Cultural Heritage	History, culture, and traditional wisdom	Cultural Heritage Theory
4) Thai Identity and Social Meaning	Thainess, collective beliefs, and national symbolism	Social Construction Theory

This study proposes an integrated framework that synergizes Perception Theory, Destination Image Theory, Sustainable Tourism Theory, Animal Welfare Theory, Cultural Heritage Theory, and Social Construction Theory. By positioning Image Perception as the central analytical axis, this research transcends mere activity-based assessments to provide a holistic understanding of how sustainable elephant tourism images are constructed. The framework integrates dimensions of perception, sustainability, and animal welfare with cultural heritage and social meaning, categorized into three pivotal perspectives:

The Sustainability Perspective: This evaluates how tourists perceive the equilibrium between elephant welfare, environmental conservation, and community benefits, all of which must align with non-negotiable international standards.

The Cultural Heritage Perspective: This perspective focuses on the creation of a "living history" deeply rooted in the Thai way of life and traditional wisdom. It aims to shift the conventional paradigm—which often views elephants merely as animals for tourism—toward a more profound appreciation of their heritage value.

The Thai Social Context Perspective: This examines how Thai society constructs and assigns symbolic value to elephants, ultimately shaping a distinct national identity that is recognized and remembered by the global community.

The perceived image of sustainable elephant tourism within the Thai context is thus a result of the seamless integration of management sustainability, cultural heritage value, and the social meanings ascribed to elephants in Thailand. These elements function collectively to define the memorable image of elephant tourism in the minds of travelers, as illustrated in Figure 1)

PILLARS OF SUSTAINABLE THAI ELEPHANT TOURISM MANAGEMENT

Tourist perspectives regarding elephant tourism are inherently heterogeneous, shaped by a complex interplay of prior knowledge, personal beliefs, past experiences, and individual value systems. Empirical evidence suggests significant divergent perceptions between European and Asian tourists, particularly concerning animal welfare (Flower et al., 2021). Such perceptual variance is a well-documented phenomenon in tourism scholarship, rooted in the subjective nature of destination evaluation (Ajzen, 1991; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). To achieve sustainable management, four fundamental pillars must be addressed:

1) Cultivating Tourist Insights and Perceptual Depth (Tourist Insight & Perception)

Elephant tourism begins with the cognitive interpretation of the traveler. Understanding the diverse cognitive frameworks—where, for instance, European tourists may prioritize welfare while Asian counterparts emphasize cultural immersion (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019)—is crucial. These internal perceptions significantly dictate decision-making, satisfaction levels, and the symbolic value assigned to Thai elephant tourism (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Winter, 2020; Flower et al., 2021). This "split-second" process of selection, organization, and interpretation has profound long-term implications for destination image, word-of-mouth advocacy, and revisit intentions (Pitayachaval et al., 2023; Pike & Ryan, 2004).

2) Establishing Globally Recognized Sustainability Standards (Global Sustainability Standards)

Sustainability in this context is defined by the strategic equilibrium between economic utility and resource conservation (UN Tourism, 2024). At the core of this pillar is elephant welfare, operationalized through the Five Domains Model, which provides a holistic assessment of nutrition, environment, health, behavior, and mental state (Mellor, 2016). Furthermore, management must extend to ecological stewardship to mitigate footprint (Buckley, 2012) and ensure equitable community benefit-sharing (Murphy, 1985; Charoenmahavit, 2022; Yothicar & Sangsawang, 2022). Achieving this balance provides the "international passport" or legitimacy required to harmonize global welfare expectations with the preservation of indigenous cultural values.

3) Strategic Differentiation through Living Heritage (Living Heritage Differentiation)

Drawing upon Cultural Heritage Theory (Timothy & Boyd, 2003), this pillar leverages values co-created and transmitted across generations. It reflects the intricate socio-environmental relationship between humans, nature, and Thai society. By shifting the paradigm of elephants from "utilitarian tourism commodities" to "Thai Elephant Cultural Heritage," Thailand can distinguish itself from global competitors. Utilizing historical narratives—such as the legacy

of Ayutthaya war elephants and the traditional wisdom of mahouts—redefines the elephant as a profound cultural icon (Fine Arts Department, 2019; Wongtes, 2015; Yothicar & Sangsawang, 2022). This contributes to a Collective Memory that serves as a "Meaning Foundation," anchoring the perceived image of sustainable tourism.

4) Leveraging Thai Social Identity and Soft Power

Anchored in Social Construction Theory, this pillar reinforces the elephant's role as a national signifier and a potent form of Cultural Capital (Eoseewong, 2016; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). By integrating the elephant's role into history, education, religion, and the contemporary Thai lifestyle, the elephant transcends its biological status to become a symbol of the nation's Soft Power (Nye, 2004). This strategic alignment elevates elephant tourism into a sophisticated communication tool, fostering positive collective memories and projecting "Thainess" onto the global stage. Such a framework supports a heritage-based management approach that is uniquely resonant within the Thai context (Boonsot & Phaengsoi, 2021).

ANALYSIS RESULTS

The analytical synthesis of the four core components reveals that the image of elephant tourism within the Thai social context is not merely a reflection of frontline activities. Rather, it is the product of a sophisticated and nuanced semantic construction process. The key findings are categorized as follows:

- 1) Perception: The image formed in the minds of tourists is a synergistic blend of rational information and emotional resonance. Tourists do not perceive elephants simply as wildlife; instead, they utilize their personal knowledge, past experiences, and internal values to interpret the latent significance embedded within the activities (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Ajzen, 1991).
- 2) Sustainability: Sustainability serves as an indispensable prerequisite for establishing business legitimacy, particularly regarding international animal welfare standards. However, the analysis highlights that within the Thai context, true sustainability must be coupled with the preservation of cultural values to authentically resonate with modern, conscientious travelers (UN Tourism, 2024), thereby achieving Legitimacy through Sustainability.
- 3) Cultural Heritage: As a "Living Heritage," Thai elephants possess a unique competitive advantage on the global stage. The analysis identifies the elephant's status as an entity inextricably linked to historical narratives, such as the Ayutthaya martial legacy, traditional mahout wisdom, and the historic royal elephant kraals (Paniat) (Wongtes, 2015; Fine Arts Department, 2019). These dimensions serve as a meaning foundation that transforms a standard visit into a profound cultural experience.
- 4) National Identity and Soft Power: Thai society has successfully constructed a potent national symbolism around the elephant through various social mechanisms (Charoenmahavit, 2024; Eoseewong, 2016; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Yothicar & Sangsawang, 2022). This has transformed the elephant into a form of Cultural Capital and a formidable Soft Power asset, effectively communicating "Thainess" to a global audience (Nye, 2004).

Synthesis for Impact

By integrating these four findings, a clear management structure emerges: Sustainability provides legitimacy; Cultural Heritage and Identity drive value and differentiation; and Perception acts as the integrative bridge connecting these elements to the tourist's heart. This framework strikes a strategic balance between heritage authenticity and modern sustainability, as conceptualized in Figure 1.

Strategic Recommendations for Heritage-Based Elephant Tourism Management

To enhance international competitiveness, Thailand must pivot toward a heritage-based management approach that harmonizes rigorous animal welfare with the preservation of local identity. This article proposes four strategic pathways for practitioners and policymakers:

Strategy 1 : Developing the "Thai Elephant Quality Standard" (Integrated Dimensions): Policymakers should develop a comprehensive certification that merges the Five Domains Model (Mellor, 2016) with cultural heritage criteria. Indicators must encompass nutrition, environment, health, behavior, and mental well-being, while simultaneously integrating the preservation of local wisdom, such as the use of indigenous medicinal plants for elephant health and the documentation of mahout-elephant lineages.

Strategy 2: Human Capital Uplift via the "World Heritage Mahout Curriculum": A dual-track vocational training program for mahouts should be established, covering: (1) Modern veterinary-based elephant care, and (2) Historical storytelling and traditional wisdom (e.g., the significance of the elephant kraal, martial history, and the spiritual "Kwan" rituals). The issuance of formal Certifications will bolster tourist confidence and ensure ethical conduct within the industry.

Strategy 3: Experience Design through Historical Storytelling: Operators should transition from utilitarian activities (e.g., riding/trekking) to Living Cultural Experiences. This includes "Warrior Elephant Trails" where tourists walk alongside elephants while learning about Ayutthaya history, or "Ritualized Feeding" that blends modern nutrition with traditional beliefs regarding auspiciousness. Transforming water activities into participation in ancient "Royal Bathing Traditions" can further elevate the cultural value.

Strategy 4 : Transparent Auditing and Certification Mechanisms: A multi-stakeholder participatory audit committee (comprising government, academia, civil society, and operators) should be established. Third-party Audits should be conducted annually, with results made transparent via an online platform. Facilities meeting these standards should be awarded a Certification Badge with a QR Code, allowing tourists to instantly verify the facility's evaluation history and ethical standing.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Thai Elephant Cultural Heritage serves as the most critical differentiator, distinguishing Thailand's elephant tourism from its regional and global competitors. The discussion is synthesized into the following key dimensions:

1) Elephants as Living Cultural Heritage: The findings reaffirm that elephants in Thailand transcend the status of mere wildlife or utilitarian resources; they are "Living Cultural Heritage." This aligns with Timothy and Boyd (2003), who posit that heritage value is derived not solely from the physical entity but from the collective meanings and memories synthesized by society. In the Thai context, this heritage is forged through a collective memory dating back to the Ayutthaya period. The Yuttahatti (elephant duel) serves as a potent symbol of independence and valor, perpetually reinforced through the national education system and media, thereby anchoring the Thai national identity.

2) Unique Traditional Wisdom and Management Systems: The strength of Thai elephant heritage is reflected through the specialized wisdom of mahouts and historical evidence such as the Paniat (royal elephant kraals), which constitutes Intangible Cultural Heritage. This study demonstrates that the symbiotic relationship between humans and elephants, transmitted over centuries, has evolved into a unique management system distinct from other Asian nations. This supports the Social Construction Theory of Berger and Luckmann (1966), suggesting that the significance of an entity is a product of long-term social accumulation. Consequently, elephants hold a "special status" in the perceptions and emotions of tourists that surpasses other species.

3) Semantic Foundation for Soft Power Enhancement: Cultural heritage functions as a meaning foundation, possessing the mechanism to shift tourist perception from merely viewing an "activity" to experiencing "Thainess." This resonates with Nye's (2004) Soft Power concept, where cultural capital effectively communicates values and constructs a positive national image.

on the global stage. Therefore, heritage-based elephant tourism management is not merely a presentation of the past, but a strategic utilization of history and belief to establish a resilient and sustainable position in the international tourism industry.

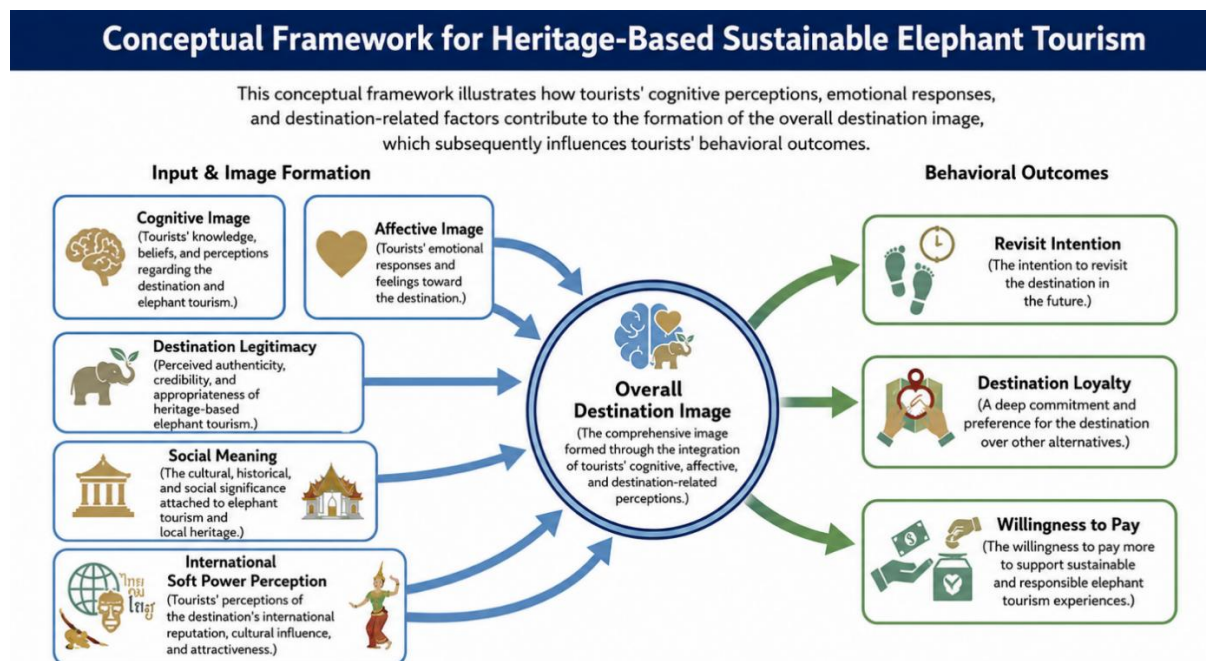


Figure 1 An Integrated Framework for Heritage-Based Sustainable Elephant Tourism Management

Note: The initial thematic synthesis and formatting of this content were supported by NotebookLM (Large Language Model), with all final verification, critical analysis, and substantive revisions performed by the researcher.

4) Cultural Heritage and Ethical Conflicts: Applying the Five Domains Model (Mellor, 2016) directly within the Thai context without cultural adaptation may lead to "contextual void" and friction with local wisdom. The heritage-based management approach offers significant potential to resolve such ethical tensions through three primary mechanisms:

Mechanism 1: Redefining Necessity into Value: By reframing animal welfare from an "external mandate" to the "evolution of modern mahout wisdom" (Samui Elephant Haven, 2024), the industry can reduce local resistance and instill professional dignity without necessitating the abandonment of traditional ways of life.

Mechanism 2: Shifting Debate toward Semantic Negotiation: Utilizing historical narratives and national symbols (Eoseewong, 2016) as intermediaries for ethical negotiation allows tourists to perceive dimensions far more complex than a singular welfare criterion. This results in international standards being balanced by cultural intelligence.

Mechanism 3: Transforming Constraint Costs into Market Premium: The increased operational costs associated with elevated welfare standards are reinterpreted by the market as a "fair price for heritage conservation." This is consistent with findings that Willingness to Pay (WTP) increases significantly when tourists perceive deep cultural significance (Pitayachaval et al., 2023).

It is imperative to note that this approach is effective only when supported by transparent external auditing and active civil society participation. Absent these, cultural heritage risks being reduced to "Cultural Instrumentalism"—a mere façade that obscures underlying issues rather than providing genuine solutions.

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