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PERCEIVED BENEFITS AND SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL PRESSURES OF URBAN SERVICE TOURISM IN HAT YAI, THAILAND

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Abstract: *Border cities often pursue service-led tourism because visitor spending supports accommodation, transport, food, retail and leisure. The same demand may also intensify pollution, living costs and pressure on urban land. This study provides a 2025 post-pandemic descriptive update on perceived socioeconomic and environmental impacts of service tourism in Hat Yai, Thailand. A cross-sectional questionnaire survey covered 300 respondents recruited through purposive and snowball procedures, with equal quotas of residents, tourism operators and domestic/international tourists (n = 100 each). Responses were analysed descriptively and pooled across stakeholder groups. The sample was young (64.0% aged 18–25), predominantly female (62.3%), and 59.0% held at least a bachelor's degree; students formed 47.7%. Most respondents perceived economic benefits: 91.3% agreed or strongly agreed that tourism increased residents' income, and the same proportion perceived improved living standards. However, 72.0% also agreed that tourism increased living costs. Tourism-related pollution was reported by 76.0%, and 62.0% perceived damage to green areas; 95.0% reported that conservation efforts were present. These findings describe a coexistence of perceived economic benefits and social-environmental pressures among surveyed respondents. Because the study uses non-probability sampling and pooled descriptive results, it neither represents Hat Yai's wider populations nor establishes differences between stakeholder groups. The findings point to policy considerations including benefit-sharing, affordability monitoring, lower-emission mobility, waste management and protection of urban green space; the study did not evaluate these measures.*

Keywords: *border tourism; service economy; stakeholder perceptions; tourism impacts; urban sustainability*

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Introduction

Tourism is simultaneously an economic system, a form of mobility and a mechanism of urban transformation. In service-oriented destinations, visitor demand supports accommodation, transport, food and beverage, retail, wellness and entertainment, producing direct and indirect income across local value chains. These gains are central to the political attractiveness of tourism development. Nevertheless, tourism growth can also externalize costs through congestion, waste, emissions, higher land and housing prices, pressure on public services and the commercialization of local culture (Long et al., 2019). The central policy question is therefore not whether tourism is beneficial or harmful in the aggregate, but how its benefits and burdens are distributed across places and social groups. This question is especially salient in border cities. Their accessibility, cultural familiarity and price differentials allow short-distance international mobility to support dense clusters of tourism services. An earlier study surveyed 423 Malaysian cross-border shoppers in Hat Yai and examined consumer ethnocentrism, foreign-product judgment and local helping purchase (Kuncharin & Mohamed, 2014). Because this pre-pandemic study focused on shopping behaviour, it provides historical context but does not offer a recent account of broader socioeconomic and environmental tourism perceptions during Hat Yai's post-pandemic recovery. The present study addresses this gap by documenting perceptions reported in a 2025 survey. Hat Yai's tourism offers combines shopping and markets, urban recreation, accommodation, food, wellness, health-related services and nightlife. This concentration of activities creates a useful setting in which to document pooled tourism perceptions among surveyed residents, tourism operators and visitors; the study does not compare these groups.

Recent tourism scholarship has increasingly shifted attention from visitor arrivals and destination competitiveness towards residents' quality of life, sustainability and social justice. A systematic review of 18 studies found that tourism was perceived to benefit local economies, employment opportunities, community pride, cultural exchange and the availability of facilities. However, negative effects were also reported in relation to health, safety, the quality of the physical environment, cost of living, access to public facilities and social relations (Nopiyani & Wirawan, 2021). These findings support a multidimensional assessment of tourism impacts, since perceived economic benefits may coexist with pressures on residents' well-being (Hu et al., 2024; Ramkissoon, 2021; Šegota et al., 2024). Research on housing further indicates that tourism intensity and seasonality can weaken housing affordability for residents (Mikulić et al., 2021). Environmental studies also link tourism and urbanisation to complex emissions patterns, highlighting the need to assess economic expansion alongside environmental performance (Purwono et al., 2024).

Earlier research on tourism in Hat Yai provides a resident-focused baseline. Karnchanan (2011) examined residents' perceptions of individual and collective tourism benefits and dis-benefits, while Kayat et al. (2013) surveyed residents in 47 communities in Hat Yai City Municipality. Building on this local evidence, the present study documents perceptions collected in 2025 across a broader set of socioeconomic and environmental topics, including perceived income benefits, living costs, pollution, damage to green spaces and conservation efforts. The survey included residents, tourism operators, and domestic and international tourists. However, responses were analysed descriptively and pooled across these categories. The study therefore does not establish differences between stakeholder groups or represent their views separately. Its contribution is a recent descriptive account of tourism-related perceptions among the surveyed respondents, rather than a comparative analysis of stakeholder groups.

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Literature Review

Tourism Impacts, Exchange and Stakeholder Heterogeneity

Social Exchange Theory (SET) remains a useful starting point for interpreting tourism attitudes because individuals tend to support an exchange when anticipated benefits exceed perceived costs (Ap, 1992). In destination research, these benefits may include employment, income, business opportunities and improved facilities, whereas costs may include crowding, inflation, social disruption and environmental damage (Stylidis et al., 2014). However, stakeholder positions condition the exchange. Operators may earn revenue directly, residents may bear neighbourhood-level externalities, and tourists may evaluate convenience and experience quality. Aggregating these groups can therefore obscure meaningful differences. In the present study, SET is used as an interpretive lens only; the survey did not estimate a structural exchange model or test causal hypotheses.

Tourism stakeholders may experience and evaluate tourism impacts differently because their roles and interests in a destination vary. For example, residents may be concerned with community-level effects, tourism businesses with operating conditions and economic opportunities, and visitors with the quality of their destination experience. Comparative research supports examining these perspectives separately. Byrd et al. (2009) surveyed residents, entrepreneurs, government officials and tourists in rural eastern North Carolina; their analysis identified significant differences between stakeholder groups for seven of the nine tourism-impact items. In Malaysia, Ho et al. (2017) combined exploratory interviews with a questionnaire survey involving tourists, residents, government agencies and business operators on Tioman Island. The groups identified different environmental problems and differed in their views of responsibility for addressing them. These studies show the value of explicit stakeholder comparison. In Hat Yai, previous research has focused on residents (Karnchanan, 2011; Kayat et al., 2013). Although the present survey includes residents, tourism operators and tourists, its pooled descriptive analysis does not test whether their perceptions differ. Table 1 compares these studies with previous research in Hat Yai and the present study. While the earlier Hat Yai studies focused on residents, the present survey includes residents, tourism operators and tourists. However, its pooled descriptive analysis does not test whether their perceptions differ.

Table 1: Comparative Evidence on Tourism Impacts and Stakeholder Perceptions

Study and setting	Population and analytical method	Main findings	Remaining gap and relevance to the present study
Karnchanan (2011), Hat Yai City Municipality	359 residents; questionnaire survey examining individual and collective tourism impacts and resident perceptions.	Tourism-related employment was identified as a perceived benefit; increased living costs were identified as a dis-benefit.	Provides a local baseline but focuses on residents and predates the 2025 survey.
Kayat et al. (2013), Hat Yai City Municipality	Residents from 47 communities; questionnaire survey examining individual and	Residents who perceived individual or collective benefits tended to evaluate	Provides local evidence but does not compare residents with

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	collective impacts and tourism evaluations.	tourism more positively.	tourism businesses or visitors.
Kuncharin and Mohamed (2014), Hat Yai	423 Malaysian tourists who had shopped in Hat Yai; survey examining consumer ethnocentrism and local helping purchase.	Examined local purchasing among Malaysian cross-border shoppers.	Focuses on tourists' purchasing behaviour rather than perceptions of broader socioeconomic and environmental impacts across groups.
Hampton (2010), Kukup, Malaysia, and Bintan, Indonesia	Comparative case study of cross-border tourism and local economic linkages.	Tourism generated income, employment and local economic linkages; the distribution of benefits varied between the two destinations.	Offers regional context on distribution but does not compare perceptions of residents, tourism businesses and visitors in Hat Yai.
Byrd et al. (2009), rural eastern North Carolina	Residents, entrepreneurs, government officials and tourists; mail-back questionnaire with nine Likert-style items; ANOVA and Scheffé tests.	Significant differences between stakeholder groups were found for seven of the nine items.	Demonstrates the value of direct group comparison, but its rural United States setting differs from urban Hat Yai.
Ho et al. (2017), Tioman Island, Malaysia	Tourists, residents, government agencies and business operators; 46 exploratory interviews followed by a questionnaire survey with 320 respondents.	Stakeholder groups identified different environmental problems and views of responsibility for addressing them.	Provides Malaysian multi-stakeholder evidence but focuses on environmental problems in an island destination.

Recent tourism scholarship has increasingly shifted attention from visitor arrivals and destination competitiveness towards residents' quality of life, sustainability and social justice. A systematic review of 18 studies found that tourism was perceived to benefit local economies, employment opportunities, community pride, cultural exchange and the availability of facilities. Negative effects were reported in relation to health, safety, the quality of the physical environment, cost of living, access to public facilities and social relations (Nopiyani & Wirawan, 2021). A review of research on residents' quality of life in tourism contexts found that subjective composite measures have predominated. Hu et al. (2024) therefore recommend combining subjective and objective scales to improve generalizability and using longitudinal designs to examine the dynamics of tourism development and quality of life. Housing research also indicates that tourism intensity and seasonality can weaken housing affordability for residents (Mikulić et al., 2021). Environmental research links tourism and urbanization to complex emissions patterns, supporting the assessment of economic expansion alongside environmental performance (Purwono et al., 2024).

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Economic Dividends and Distributive Pressures

Tourism can expand local demand, diversify employment and create opportunities for small businesses in food, transport, retail and hospitality. Evidence from a comparable Malaysia–Thailand border destination provides context for this potential. In Padang Besar, Azmi et al. (2017) found that most surveyed domestic visitors were day-trippers, many visited during weekends, and spending commonly included food and beverages. Such findings suggest that repeat and weekend visits may support demand for local businesses in border destinations. However, the extent to which this spending circulates within Hat Yai's economy was not measured in the present study and would depend on visitor spending patterns and local business linkages. Tourism-related gains may also be seasonal or uneven, while visitor demand can place pressure on commercial rents, housing affordability and the prices of everyday goods. Research on tourism intensity and seasonality has linked these pressures to weaker housing affordability (Mikulić et al., 2021). Work on tourism-led property investment also highlights how tourism-related rent extraction can produce uneven spatial outcomes (Wijburg et al., 2024). Distribution therefore remains central to tourism sustainability: destination growth may coexist with reduced purchasing power among lower-income residents.

The economic contribution of cross-border tourism also depends on how much visitor spending is retained locally and how its benefits are distributed. In a comparative study of Kukup in Malaysia and Bintan in Indonesia, Hampton (2010) found that cross-border tourism generated income, employment and some local economic linkages. However, the benefits were unevenly distributed in Kukup, while tourism development in Bintan relied partly on migrant labour. These findings suggest that local ownership, employment and connections between tourism businesses and local suppliers can shape how visitor demand benefits host communities. In Hat Yai, survey items on perceived income gains, employment opportunities, promotion of local products and unequal tourism benefits provide a descriptive basis for examining how respondents view these issues. The survey does not measure actual local procurement, expenditure leakage or the distribution of tourism income.

Figure 1 illustrates the long-term trend in visitor arrivals to Songkhla Province, used here as a provincial proxy for tourism activity in the Hat Yai area. Visitor numbers generally increased from approximately 2.95 million in 2010 to 7.63 million in 2018, before easing slightly to 7.50 million in 2019. The series then declined sharply to 3.09 million in 2020 and 0.53 million in 2021, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic period. Visitor numbers subsequently recovered, reaching 2.92 million in 2022, 5.62 million in 2023 and 7.44 million in 2024, before moderating to 7.18 million in 2025. The 2025 figure was approximately 4.3% below the 2019 level, indicating a substantial recovery in provincial visitor activity, although the pre-pandemic peak had not yet been regained. These figures refer to visits recorded across Songkhla Province, including day visits, and should not be interpreted as counts of unique visitors to Hat Yai city (Kanabkaew, 2021; Ministry of Tourism and Sports of Thailand, 2026).

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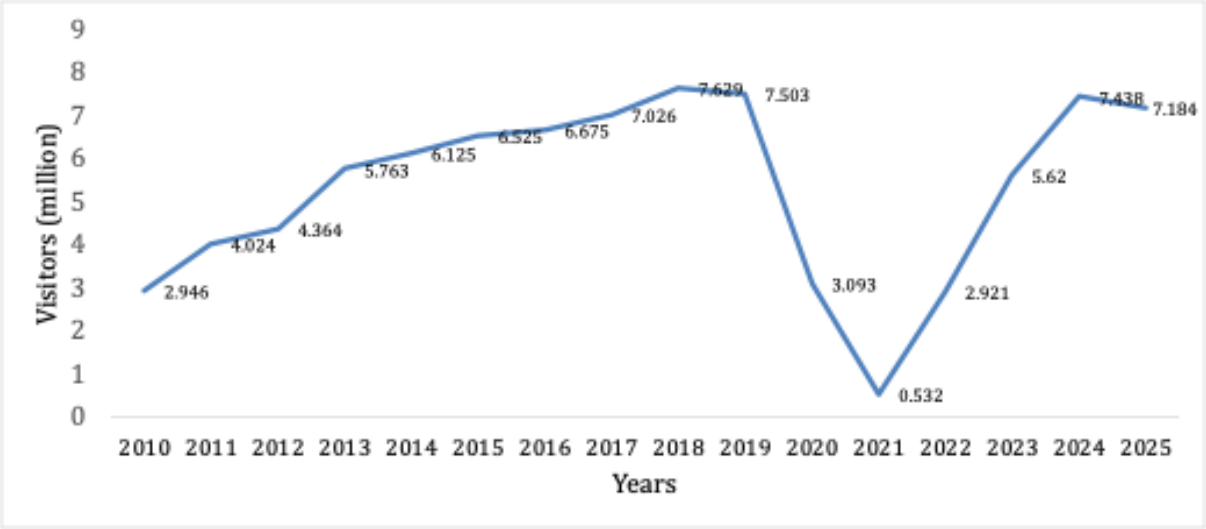


Figure 1: Annual Visitor Arrivals to Songkhla Province, 2010–2025

** Note. Visitor figures refer to Songkhla Province, not Hat Yai city, and represent visits rather than unique individuals; day visitors are included. Data for 2019–2025 are compiled by Thailand Stats (2026) from the Ministry's annual domestic tourism statistics. As the two periods are drawn from different publications and data releases, comparisons across the full period should be interpreted with caution. Data for 2026 are excluded because the year is incomplete.*

In border destinations, weekend and short-stay visits may create opportunities for visitor spending to reach local businesses through purchases of food, retail goods and tourism services. Evidence from comparable Malaysian Thai border settings indicates that visitors to Padang Besar include weekend shoppers and day-trippers, with reported spending concentrated partly on food and beverages (Azmi et al., 2017; Rafie et al., 2021). These findings suggest a possible channel through which cross-border visits may support local commercial activity. However, they do not establish that repeat or weekend travel generates rapid expenditure circulation or measurable multiplier effects in Hat Yai. Since these effects were not directly examined in the present study, they should be treated as a possibility for future investigation rather than as a demonstrated outcome. Hat Yai-specific evidence also indicates that cross-border shopping can direct some visitor expenditure towards local retailers. In a survey of 423 Malaysian tourists who had shopped in Hat Yai, Kuncharin and Mohamed (2014) examined the relationship between consumer ethnocentrism and "local helping purchase." This provides evidence of purchasing activity among Malaysian visitors, but it does not establish how frequently visitors return, whether their trips occur mainly on weekends, or how quickly spending circulates through Hat Yai's economy. Accordingly, the present study's findings should be interpreted as stakeholders' perceptions of economic benefits rather than as a direct measurement of visitor expenditure or its multiplier effects.

Environmental Burdens and Visible Mitigation

Urban service tourism has a material environmental footprint. Transport associated with tourism can contribute to greenhouse-gas emissions and traffic congestion, while food and retail activities can increase packaging use and solid-waste generation. Accommodation and leisure activities may add to water and energy demand, and tourism-related construction can replace vegetation with impervious surfaces. These pressures may be experienced locally even when stakeholders widely welcome tourism's economic benefits. At the global scale, Travel & Tourism accounted for an estimated 6.5% of greenhouse-gas emissions in 2023 (World Travel & Tourism Council [WTTC], 2024). In the same year, fossil fuels—oil, coal and natural gas—

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accounted for 88.2% of the sector's energy use (WTTC, 2024). wttc.org Cross-national evidence further suggests that the relationship between tourism development and carbon emissions may be nonlinear, while renewable-energy adoption can contribute to mitigation as the sector develops (Purwono et al., 2024). Visible measures such as tree planting, protecting green areas, recycling and promoting cleaner mobility may strengthen stakeholder confidence; however, recognition of these measures does not, by itself, demonstrate that environmental pressures have been reduced.

To determine whether visible mitigation translates into measurable environmental improvement, Hat Yai's tourism governance could complement stakeholder perceptions with destination-level monitoring of tourism-related energy and water use, solid waste generated per visitor, greenhouse-gas emissions, and changes in land cover. The UN Tourism Statistical Framework for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism provides a basis for integrating environmental, social and economic information and supports measurement at subnational destination level (UN Tourism, n.d.). Because the present study examines stakeholders' perceptions rather than direct environmental measurements, these indicators are best presented as priorities for future monitoring, not as outcomes established by this study.

Materials And Methods

Study Area and Design

Fieldwork was conducted from 27 February to 7 March 2025 at selected commercial, tourism and recreational locations in the Hat Yai–Songkhla area: Thanyada Village, Central Hat Yai, Kim Yong Market, Samila Beach, Songkhla Aquarium, Lee Garden Plaza, Lee Garden Park, ASEAN Night Market, Chve Chang Temple and Songkhla Old Town. Thirty enumerators were involved in respondent recruitment and questionnaire distribution. Purposive sampling was used to recruit eligible participants from three stakeholder categories: residents, tourism operators, and domestic and international tourists. Snowball sampling was also used to identify additional eligible participants. Recruitment continued until the target of 100 respondents in each category was reached, giving a total sample of 300. The questionnaire was available in English and Thai. Respondents completed it themselves, which took approximately 10–15 minutes. During screening, each respondent selected only one stakeholder category and was counted once.

Instruments and Analysis

The questionnaire recorded information in six sections: (A) respondents' demographic characteristics; (B) the status and forms of tourism services in Hat Yai; (C) perceived socioeconomic effects; (D) perceived environmental effects and responses; (E) challenges and strategies related to tourism; and (F) tourism potential and future development. The present article focuses on the demographic and tourism-service information relevant to its research questions, together with respondents' perceptions of socioeconomic and environmental effects. Items on tourism challenges and future development were not included in the analyses reported here. The questionnaire contained categorical and dichotomous items, ordered agreement-response items, and selected open-ended questions. The income item recorded respondents' monthly individual income in Thai baht (THB). As income was recorded in THB, no currency conversion was applied. Closed-ended responses were summarized using frequencies and percentages. Percentages were calculated using the number of valid responses for each item. The original field report used IBM SPSS Statistics for descriptive analysis. The corrected respondent-level dataset was also used to examine the internal consistency of three exploratory,

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content-based groups of items. The questionnaire items analysed in this article covered respondent characteristics, tourism services and destinations, perceived socioeconomic effects, and perceived environmental effects and responses. The questionnaire items were adapted from previous studies on tourism impacts and contextualised for the Hat Yai setting. Table 2 summarises the variables reported in the article, their response formats, analytical treatment and relevant literature. Demographic variables were summarised descriptively. Responses to the open-ended question on tourism locations were grouped into location categories after spelling and name variations were consolidated. Socioeconomic and environmental perceptions were analysed at item level using frequencies and percentages based on valid responses.

Table 2: List Constructs and Items

Questionnaire section	Variables and items	Response format in the questionnaire	Relevant literature informing the domain
A. Respondent characteristics	Age; gender; marital status; educational attainment; employment status; monthly individual income in Thai baht (THB); place of residence. The income categories on the questionnaire were <THB 10,000; THB 10,001–20,000; THB 20,001–30,000; and >THB 30,000.	Categorical response options. Age and income were recorded in ordered categories.	Study-specific descriptive variables; the supplied questionnaire does not identify a source for these items.
B. Tourism services and destinations	Tourism services identified in the field report across mobility, accommodation and leisure; main tourism locations named by respondents. The manuscript reports location clusters, including commercial and shopping areas, coastal and scenic attractions, markets, heritage locations, parks and recreation.	The questionnaire asked respondents to name the main tourism location they visited; this was an open-ended item.	-
C. Perceived socioeconomic effects	Perceived effect of tourism on local residents' income; tourism-related employment opportunities; promotion of local products; community activity in tourism; improvement in residents' living standards; increases in daily-needs prices and cost of living; and uneven distribution of tourism benefits.	A mixture of yes/no items and ordered response categories. The income item used positive-to-negative options; the living-standard item used helpful-to-not-helpful options; and the cost-of-living item used increase-to-no-increase options.	Ap (1992); Karnchanan (2011); Kayat et al. (2013); Andereck et al. (2005).

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D. Perceived environmental effects and responses	Perceived tourism-related pollution and pollution types; damage to green areas; presence of conservation efforts; use of sustainable energy; environmental awareness; community involvement in conservation; environmentally friendly infrastructure; and tourism's contribution to biodiversity conservation.	A mixture of yes/no items, an item allowing respondents to identify pollution types, and ordered response categories for environmental awareness and community involvement.	Andereck et al. (2005); United Nations Environment Programme and World Tourism Organization (2005).

The questionnaire was reviewed by three academics before administration, and its Thai-language version was translated by a Thai-language teacher. The available study records do not document whether pilot testing, back-translation, or a formal language-equivalence assessment was conducted. Therefore, language equivalence and construct validity are not claimed. Responses were analysed at item level, and items were not combined into composite scores. Cronbach's alpha (Table 3) was calculated for the two-item perceived socioeconomic-benefit group, comprising perceived effects on local income and living standards (α = .500, n = 300); the two-item environmental-burden group, comprising perceived tourism-related pollution and loss of green areas (α = .548, n = 300); and the four-item environmental-mitigation group, comprising recognition of conservation efforts, sustainable energy use, environmentally friendly infrastructure, and biodiversity conservation (α = .576, n = 300). For the dichotomous environmental items, Cronbach's alpha is equivalent to the Kuder–Richardson 20 coefficient (Kuder & Richardson, 1937). These alpha estimates are reported as exploratory internal-consistency diagnostics and are not interpreted as evidence of construct validity.

Table 3. Exploratory Internal-Consistency Results for Related Item Group

Item group	Items included	*n*	Cronbach's α
Perceived socioeconomic benefits	Tourism's perceived effect on local income; perceived improvement in living standards	300	.500
Perceived environmental burdens	Perceived tourism-related pollution; perceived loss of green areas	300	.548
Recognition of environmental mitigation	Conservation efforts; sustainable energy use; environmentally friendly infrastructure; biodiversity conservation	300	.576

These estimates indicate limited internal consistency within the exploratory item groups. Accordingly, the items were not combined into composite scores and were analyzed and reported separately. The questionnaire was treated as an inventory of distinct stakeholder perceptions rather than as a validated multi-item scale. Cronbach's alpha estimates internal consistency; it does not, by itself, establish that a group of items is unidimensional or valid (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). The analysis was descriptive and did not estimate population parameters, test inferential significance, or establish causal effects. The findings therefore describe the responses of the surveyed sample and should not be interpreted as statistically representative of Hat Yai's wider population, tourism workforce, or visitor market.

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Result

Respondent Profile

The sample (Table 4) was predominantly young, with respondents aged 18–25 forming the largest age group (64.0%, n = 192). A further 19.7% (n = 59) were aged 26–35. Women comprised 62.3% of the sample (n = 187), while 71.3% (n = 214) were single. More than half of the respondents held a bachelor's degree (56.7%, n = 170), and 59.0% held at least a bachelor's degree. Students formed the largest employment category (47.7%, n = 143). Almost half reported annual income below RM10,000 (49.3%, n = 148), and most respondents reported living in an urban area (73.7%, n = 221). Overall, the surveyed respondents were relatively young, predominantly female, student-heavy, and mainly urban. These characteristics should be considered when interpreting the findings. The profile describes the survey participants and should not be treated as representative of Hat Yai's wider population, tourism workforce, or visitor market.

Table 4. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Profile	Category	*n*	%
Age	18–25 years	192	64.0
	26–35 years	59	19.7
	36–45 years	31	10.3
	46–55 years	14	4.7
	56 years and above	4	1.3
Gender	Male	113	37.7
	Female	187	62.3
Marital status	Single	214	71.3
	Married	81	27.0
	Other	5	1.7
Educational attainment	Primary	7	2.3
	Secondary	74	24.7
	Diploma/certificate	42	14.0
	Bachelor's degree	170	56.7
	Master's/PhD	7	2.3
Employment status	Self-employed	67	22.3
	Private sector	42	14.0
	Public sector	31	10.3
	Student	143	47.7
	Unemployed	6	2.0
	Other	11	3.7
Annual income (RM)	<10,000	148	49.3
	10,001–20,000	86	28.7
	20,001–30,000	41	13.7
	>30,000	25	8.3
Place of residence	Urban	221	73.7
	Rural	79	26.3

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The Service-Tourism System

Table 5 indicated Hat Yai's service-tourism system across three broad domains: mobility, accommodation, and leisure. Mobility services include express buses, tourist vans, tuk-tuks, taxis, rail and air connections, e-hailing, and motorcycle rental. Accommodation ranges from three- to five-star hotels to homestays, culturally themed rooms, hostels, and backpacker lodges. Leisure services include shopping and markets, parks and recreation, cultural and heritage sites, religious and scenic attractions, and nightlife. These domains provide a descriptive inventory of the tourism services identified in the field report; the respondent-level dataset does not provide usage frequencies for each transport or accommodation service. The survey's open-ended item on respondents' main locations provides a more direct indication of which places were most salient to the 300 respondents. After obvious spelling and name variations were consolidated, Central Hatyai and related Central commercial locations were mentioned most frequently (85 responses, 28.3%). Samila Beach was the next most frequently named location (39, 13.0%), followed by Kim Yong Market (25, 8.3%), ASEAN Night Market (22, 7.3%), Songkhla Old Town (19, 6.3%), Lee Garden (16, 5.3%), and Thanyada Village (16, 5.3%). Public parks were mentioned by 13 respondents (4.3%), while Khlong Hae Floating Market was mentioned by 9 (3.0%). These nine location clusters accounted for 81.3% of the recorded responses; the remaining responses referred to other, less frequently named locations.

The location responses highlight the salience of shopping and commercial areas, particularly Central Hatyai and the markets, while also showing interest in coastal, recreational, and heritage locations. They describe the main places named by surveyed respondents, not the proportion of all Hat Yai visitors who visit each site, actual visitation rates, or visitor expenditure shares. Accordingly, the results support a descriptive account of the leisure and attraction component of Hat Yai's tourism system, while the mobility and accommodation domains should be treated as service categories identified in the field report rather than quantified survey findings.

Table 5. Main Tourism Locations in the Hat Yai–Songkhla Area

Location cluster	Broad service or attraction domain	*n*	%
Central Hatyai and related Central commercial locations	Shopping and commercial services	85	28.3
Samila Beach	Coastal and scenic leisure	39	13.0
Kim Yong Market	Shopping and markets	25	8.3
ASEAN Night Market	Shopping and markets	22	7.3
Songkhla Old Town	Cultural and heritage tourism	19	6.3
Lee Garden	Commercial and leisure services	16	5.3
Thanyada Village	Village-based attraction	16	5.3
Public parks	Parks and recreation	13	4.3
Khlong Hae Floating Market	Shopping and markets	9	3.0
Other, less frequently named locations	Various or unspecified	56	18.7
Total		300	100.0

Socioeconomic Dividends and Costs

Table 6 showed the respondents widely perceived tourism as a source of socioeconomic benefit. More than nine in ten indicated that tourism increased employment opportunities and helped promote local products (97.3% for each item). A similar proportion perceived the community as active in the tourism sector (94.7%). For the ordered items, 91.3% agreed or strongly agreed that tourism increased residents' income, and the same proportion perceived an improvement

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in living standards. These perceived benefits coexisted with concerns about costs and distribution. Nearly four in five respondents (79.7%) indicated that tourism increased the prices of daily necessities. For the cost-of-living item, 72.0% agreed or strongly agreed, while 19.3% selected a neutral response and 8.7% disagreed or strongly disagreed. In addition, 66.0% indicated that tourism benefits were unevenly distributed. Taken together, these responses show a perceived benefit–cost tension: surveyed stakeholders recognized tourism-related economic opportunities while also reporting price pressures and unequal distribution of benefits. Because the results are based on a non-probability sample and self-reported perceptions, they describe the views of the surveyed respondents; they do not establish the actual size or distribution of tourism income, price changes, or causal effects of tourism.

Table 6. Respondents' Perceptions of Tourism-Related Socioeconomic Benefits and Costs

Dimension	Survey item	Response	*n*	%
Perceived benefits	Tourism increases employment opportunities	Yes	292	97.3
	Tourism helps promote local products	Yes	292	97.3
	The community is active in the tourism sector	Yes	284	94.7
	Tourism increases local residents' income	Agree/strongly agree	274	91.3
	Tourism improves living standards	Agree/strongly agree	274	91.3
Perceived costs and pressures	Tourism increases the prices of daily necessities	Yes	239	79.7
	Tourism increases the cost of living	Agree/strongly agree	216	72.0
		Neutral	58	19.3
		Disagree/strongly disagree	26	8.7
	Tourism benefits are unevenly distributed	Yes	198	66.0

Environmental Burdens and Conservation Response

Respondents reported environmental pressures alongside a high level of recognition of conservation and sustainability measures (Table 7). Tourism-related pollution was reported by 228 respondents (76.0%), while 186 (62.0%) indicated that tourism development damaged green areas. These findings show that environmental burdens were noticeable to many surveyed respondents. At the same time, 285 respondents (95.0%) reported that environmental conservation efforts were present. A further 255 respondents (85.0%) indicated the use of sustainable energy, the presence of environmentally friendly infrastructure, and tourism's contribution to biodiversity conservation. Ordered-response items also showed that 229 respondents (76.3%) agreed or strongly agreed with the environmental-awareness item, while 239 (79.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were involved in conservation activities. These findings point to the coexistence of perceived environmental burdens and visible conservation responses. However, recognition of conservation efforts, sustainable energy use, or environmentally friendly infrastructure does not demonstrate that these measures have reduced pollution or prevented green-space loss. As the data record respondents' perceptions rather than

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environmental measurements, the findings should be interpreted as reported views, not as evidence of the actual effectiveness of conservation initiatives.

Table 7. Respondents' Perceptions of Environmental Burdens and Conservation Responses

Environmental dimension	Survey item	Response	*n*	%
Perceived burden	Tourism causes pollution	Yes	228	76.0
		No	72	24.0
	Tourism development damages green areas	Yes	186	62.0
		No	114	38.0
Conservation response	Environmental conservation efforts are present	Yes	285	95.0
		No	15	5.0
	Sustainable energy is used	Yes	255	85.0
		No	45	15.0
	Environmentally friendly infrastructure is present	Yes	255	85.0
		No	45	15.0
	Tourism contributes to biodiversity conservation	Yes	255	85.0
		No	45	15.0
Environmental awareness	Agreement with the environmental-awareness item	Agree/strongly agree	229	76.3
		Neutral	57	19.0
		Disagree/strongly disagree	14	4.7
Conservation participation	Agreement with the conservation-participation item	Agree/strongly agree	239	79.7
		Neutral	49	16.3
		Disagree/strongly disagree	12	4.0

Discussion

A Dividend–Burden Paradox in a Border Service City

The 2025 survey indicates that perceived economic benefits coexist with perceived social and environmental pressures. Most respondents recognised tourism's contribution to local income and living standards (91.3%), while 72.0% agreed that tourism had increased living costs. In addition, 76.0% perceived pollution and 62.0% perceived damage to green areas. This pattern has been documented in Hat Yai before. Kayat et al. (2013) surveyed residents in 47 communities in Hat Yai City Municipality and examined both individual and collective tourism impacts. Karnchanan (2011) likewise reported perceived benefits, including employment opportunities, alongside increased living costs and traffic congestion. The present study therefore provides a post-pandemic descriptive update to this local evidence by including residents, tourism operators and tourists in one survey. Because the sample was non-probabilistic and the findings are pooled across the three groups, the results should be interpreted as exploratory perceptions rather than representative estimates or evidence of differences between stakeholder groups. The survey documents respondents' perceptions of economic benefits, living costs, pollution and green-area damage. It does not identify the mechanisms behind these pressures or attribute them to particular tourism activities. Research

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measuring tourism's carbon footprint in Barcelona, for example, identifies visitor transport and accommodation as important sources of tourism-related emissions in that destination (Rico et al., 2019). This provides context for considering how tourism activity may be associated with environmental pressures; it does not demonstrate that the same sources, scale or effects apply in Hat Yai. Accordingly, transport, retail, food, accommodation and construction should be discussed as possible contextual pathways, not as mechanisms established by the present survey.

Social Exchange Theory (SET) offers a conceptual lens for considering how perceived benefits and costs may relate to attitudes toward tourism. Previous tourism research has linked residents' evaluations of economic, sociocultural and environmental impacts with their support for tourism development (Stylidis et al., 2014). In the present study, however, the possible effect of a growing imbalance between benefits and costs on future support is a theoretical implication, not a result tested by the survey. The study did not track changes in support over time or establish which groups receive tourism revenues and which experience costs. Its consideration of economic, social and environmental perceptions is consistent with quality-of-life research that treats tourism impacts as multidimensional (Andereck & Nyaupane, 2011). The pooled analysis does not establish whether those impacts differ among residents, operators and tourists; this question requires group-specific analysis.

Income Gains Do Not Guarantee Improved Affordability

The 91.3% endorsement of local income gains suggests strong visibility of tourism's economic role, but the 72.0% agreement on higher living costs qualifies any claim of unambiguous welfare improvement. Income and living standards should not be treated as interchangeable. If tourism raises wages or business revenue for some households while increasing rent and daily prices for many, aggregate optimism may coexist with distributive stress. The housing-affordability evidence of (Mikulić et al., 2021) shows that tourism intensification can erode residents' ability to afford housing relative to income, suggesting destination policy should monitor costs against local income rather than relying on visitor receipts alone. For Hat Yai, this implies that tourism success should be assessed through local capture and affordability indicators: the proportion of tourism procurement sourced locally; the share of stable, adequately paid jobs; changes in rents and essential-goods prices; and the participation of micro and small enterprises. Benefit-sharing does not necessarily require suppressing tourism demand. It requires converting visitor expenditure into broad-based value through local supply chains, workforce development, transparent licensing and support for businesses that retain earnings within the city.

Conservation Visibility and Environmental Monitoring

The environmental findings show that perceptions of conservation activity coexist with perceptions of environmental pressure. Although 95.0% of respondents reported that conservation efforts were present, 76.0% perceived pollution and 62.0% perceived damage to green areas. These responses describe what surveyed stakeholders noticed; they do not establish whether conservation initiatives were symbolic, limited to sites or effective in reducing environmental pressures. Nor does the survey measure trends in waste, traffic, emissions or land conversion. The coexistence of these perceptions therefore raises a monitoring question: do the conservation activities recognised by respondents correspond with measurable changes in Hat Yai's environmental conditions?.Visible environmental initiatives may contribute to a destination's environmental image. Bilynets et al. (2023) found that tourists who noticed pro-environmental initiatives were more likely to view a destination as environmentally friendly

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and sustainable; Šerić et al. (2024) also reported associations between sustainable destination image, residents' satisfaction and pro-sustainable responses. These findings support recognising the potential value of visible initiatives, while leaving their environmental effects in Hat Yai to be assessed locally.

A practical next step is to establish and repeat a set of destination-level indicators. Possible measures include tourism-related waste in high-footfall areas; visitor transport modes and the share of trips using public or lower-emission transport; hotel energy and water use per guest-night; air quality near major transport corridors; and changes in urban tree canopy or protected green space. These are proposed indicators for future monitoring, not outcomes measured by this study. Their value is reinforced by research showing that tourism–emissions relationships can vary across destination life-cycle stages (Bertsatos et al., 2025), and that growth in tourism demand can outpace gains in technological efficiency (Sun et al., 2024). Repeated local measurements would help Hat Yai assess whether recognised conservation activity accompanies changes in environmental conditions and identify where further action may be needed.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This study makes an empirical contribution by documenting how surveyed stakeholders in Hat Yai perceived tourism's economic benefits and its social and environmental pressures in 2025. The findings provide a post-pandemic update that brings residents, tourism operators and tourists into one exploratory survey. They do not establish differences between stakeholder groups or represent the wider Hat Yai population, given the non-probability sample and pooled analysis. The study uses Social Exchange Theory (SET) as an interpretive lens but does not claim to extend the theory. Its bounded theoretical contribution is to show why tourism impacts in this border-city context should be examined across multiple perceived dimensions, rather than reduced to a single net balance of economic benefits and costs. This position responds to critiques that tourism research applying SET has often centred individual economic gains and given less attention to wider social experience and community-level impacts (Olya, 2023; Šegota et al., 2024). The present survey is descriptive, however, and does not test economic rationality, exchange processes or support for tourism. It therefore illustrates the relevance and limits of using SET to interpret the reported perceptions; it does not test a revised version of the theory.

Practically, the findings support a destination-management agenda that assesses perceived conditions alongside observable environmental outcomes. The survey records that respondents perceived both conservation activity and environmental pressures. Their coexistence raises a monitoring question: whether recognised initiatives correspond with measurable changes in environmental conditions in Hat Yai. The survey does not determine whether initiatives are symbolic, where they are concentrated, or whether waste, traffic or land conversion is increasing. Research indicates that visible environmental initiatives may improve how tourists perceive a destination's environmental sustainability and may accompany better environmental performance (Bilynets et al., 2023). Sustainable destination image has also been associated with residents' satisfaction and pro-sustainable responses (Šerić et al., 2024). A practical next step is to develop a destination dashboard that tracks both stakeholder perceptions and relevant environmental indicators. Possible measures include tourism-related waste in high-footfall areas, visitor transport modes, hotel energy and water use per guest-night, air quality near major transport corridors, and changes in urban tree canopy or protected green space. These are proposed measures for future monitoring; they were not measured in the present survey.

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Comparing repeated environmental measurements with stakeholder perceptions would help planners assess changes over time and identify where further action may be needed.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, purposive and snowball recruitment was non-probabilistic; therefore, the results cannot be generalised statistically to Hat Yai's wider population, tourism workforce or visitor market. Second, the equal quotas for residents, tourism operators and tourists were set for exploratory comparison and do not reflect the population proportions of these groups. Third, the sample's relatively high proportions of young, student and degree-holding respondents may have shaped the perceptions reported, particularly those concerning mobility, prices and environmental conditions. Fourth, the pooled analysis does not reveal whether perceptions differed among the three stakeholder groups. Fifth, although the respondent-level records were recorded and can be retrieved for further analysis, some supplementary information and documentation about the dataset are unavailable. This limits the extent to which item wording, coding decisions and ambiguously labelled or collapsed response categories can be verified. Sixth, reliance on self-reported questionnaire responses creates the possibility of common-method and social-desirability biases. Finally, the cross-sectional design captures perceptions at one point in time and cannot establish that tourism caused the reported outcomes.

A priority for future work is to retrieve and reanalyse the existing respondent-level dataset. Where the recorded variables and response coding can be interpreted, this reanalysis could report stakeholder-group results and examine group differences using appropriate categorical or ordinal methods. Construct reliability and validity should be assessed only where the available items and documentation support such analyses. Missing supplementary information should be acknowledged, and ambiguous variables should not be assigned interpretations that cannot be verified. Any information that cannot be recovered from the existing records would require a new data collection rather than being treated as part of the archival reanalysis. A follow-up study could use stratified probability sampling or time-location sampling and document the questionnaire, item wording, coding scheme and data-collection procedures in full. It could measure community attachment, tourism dependence, perceived benefits, perceived costs and support for tourism development. A multi-group structural model could be considered if the sample size and measurement properties are adequate. Future research should also combine repeated stakeholder surveys with objective indicators, such as air quality, waste volumes, traffic, rents, land-cover change and tourism employment. Interviews with residents outside tourism value chains could provide further insight into who receives tourism-related benefits, who experiences the costs, and how these patterns vary between peak and off-peak periods.

Conclusion

Service tourism is central to Hat Yai's border-city economy, but its sustainability cannot be inferred from economic visibility alone. Surveyed stakeholders strongly recognised tourism's perceived contributions to local income and living standards, while also reporting perceived increases in living costs, pollution and pressure on green space. Although 95% of respondents perceived conservation efforts as present, this response does not establish how visible those efforts were or whether they improved environmental conditions. The resulting dividend–burden pattern points to the need to consider policies that broaden local value capture, protect affordability, reduce transport and waste pressures, and safeguard urban green space. These findings are exploratory and not population-representative, but they provide a basis for further

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stakeholder-stratified and longitudinal research on tourism, well-being and environmental performance in secondary Southeast Asian cities.

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