Issues in developing a sustainable ecotourism certification framework: The case of Chiang Mai, Thailand

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Abstract:

This paper reports on a study of ecotourism certification and sustainable development in the research area of Chiang Mai that has been developed by using qualitative case study research. As will be shown in this paper, government agencies and ecotourism enterprises in Chiang Mai are critically important stakeholders and their views may affect the development of ecotourism certification. Thematic analysis was used to address commonality, differences and relationships within the dataset. Analysis of related empirical data has shown that the quality of ecotourism products and services in Chiang Mai is inconsistent. Three main themes emerge from the data analysis: (1) unclear functioning of government agencies in ecotourism development, (2) difficulties associated with implementing the effectiveness of Thailand Tourism Standards, and (3) lack of awareness of environmental conservation amongst ecotourism operators. It will be shown in this paper that the theoretical and empirical investigations described in this study can lead to a better understanding of ecotourism certification development from both demand and supply sides of the ecotourism industry.

Keywords: sustainable development, ecotourism, certification system, tourism standard
1. INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry is one of the most profitable industries in Thailand. According to a 2013 Thai government report (Department of Tourism, 2013), international tourist arrivals to Thailand reached 21.7 million, while tourism revenue was 942 billion baht (approximately 31 billion Australian dollars). However, the rapid growth of the tourism industry has significant impacts on Thailand’s socio-culture, economic and natural resources, and more responsible tourism practices, including cultural and environmental conservation, are needed.

Since 1997, the concept of ecotourism has been adopted as a strategy to promote sustainable development, and to develop national tourism policies (Sriphnomya, 2002; Thavarasukha, 2002). Ecotourism has been defined in a variety of ways (Ross & Wall, 1999), with its benefits purported to include: providing conservation tools to enhance the potential of sustainable tourism development; providing well-being to host communities; and maintaining natural resources in tourist destinations (Wanichanugorn, 2002; Stem et al., 2003; Braden & Prunikovo, 2008).

Although Thailand boasts a diverse range of natural attractions and has a great opportunity to promote ecotourism, the standard of ecotourism products and services in Thailand is still inconsistent. Ecotourism products and services need to move beyond the concepts of ecotourism and demonstrate ecotourism practices (Thavarasukha, 2002; Honey, 2002). In order to investigate how this transition can be made, a case study approach will be used, with Chiang Mai being selected to be the single case study in this research. Chiang Mai is the main tourist destination in northern Thailand, with its natural attractions and indigenous hill tribes enhancing its distinctive diversity. Moreover, Chiang Mai is a gateway to other provinces in the North and has been promoted by the Tourism Authority of Thailand as an ecotourism and adventure tourism hub of the northern region.

However, to date, ecotourism operators in Chiang Mai have chosen not to be certified by national or international standards, even though it has been demonstrated that certification is a tool that can motivate businesses and improve their environmental, social and economic achievements. This study investigates ecotourism stakeholders’ needs and their perspectives of ecotourism certification, and highlights issues associated with implementing an ecotourism certification model to assist in developing an ecotourism industry in Chiang Mai and the surrounding region.

This paper is divided into five main sections. The first section, the introduction, is followed by an examination of the literature pertaining to ecotourism concepts, the ecotourism movement in Thailand, Thailand Tourism Standards, and best world practice in ecotourism certification. The third section outlines the study research methods, while the fourth section provides the research findings, which are categorised by three main issues: (1) unclear functioning government organisation in ecotourism development; (2) discontinuity of ecotourism policy and planning; and (3) demand and supply-based perspectives of an ecotourism certification system. The fifth and final section presents the conclusions and implications of this study.
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature related to ecotourism certification development in Thailand can be categorised into three themes: (1) ecotourism concepts and sustainable development; (2) the ecotourism certification system: world best practice; and (3) Thailand Tourism Standards in the context of ecotourism.

2.1 ECOTOURISM CONCEPTS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable tourism and ecotourism development

The fundamental principles of ecotourism can be found in concepts such as sustainability and sustainable development (Higham, 2007). Ecotourism started to receive greater attention during the late 1960s and early 1970s when ecologists and environmentalists became concerned about the inappropriate use of natural resources (Fennel, 2008; Higham, 2007). In terms of tourism, the word ‘sustainability’ referred to a new form of tourism development that was concerned about the negative impacts of mass consumption and led to a new branch of the discipline: sustainable tourism (Mowforth & Munt, 2008). Some scholars claimed that tourism development is extremely unsustainable because of its impacts on environments and cultures of tourist attraction areas (Harris et al., 2002).

The building of infrastructure and other activities associated with tourism produces impacts on the environment of the destination area and the culture of the host communities (Mason, 2008). Therefore, if tourism development is to be sustainable, infrastructure must be designed appropriately and only activities that do not negatively impact the ecosystem or biodiversity should be implemented. Moreover, tourism development needs to ensure that it does not further threaten endangered species, particularly in sensitive areas (Buckley, 2009). For example, World Wildlife Fund supports sustainable tourism and its associated infrastructure when it is concerned with effective conservation of natural resources, minimises its footprint in ecological areas and distributes proper benefits to local people (WWF, 2002).

Various definitions and characterisations of ecotourism are provided in the relevant academic and industry literature. For example, the International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as ‘a responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people’ (UNEP, 2001), while ATREE (2006) notes that ecotourism can be categorised by four essential characteristics: it should (1) be nature-based; (2) demonstrate eco-cultural sustainability; (3) promote conservation education among stakeholders; and (4) have significant involvement that is of local benefit. Furthermore, ecotourism involves three main stakeholders – tourists, tour operators and host communities – who work collaboratively to raise awareness of the environment and sustainability for local communities of tourism destinations (Blamey, 2001; UNEP, 2002; ATREE, 2006; Fennell, 2008).

In line with these descriptions, this paper defines ecotourism as ‘responsible travelling in natural and cultural areas that provides benefits to locals and their communities with minimal impacts on local environment and culture’.

Ecotourism Development in Thailand

In the early 1990s, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) was the government agency that had sole responsibility for tourism development in Thailand. TAT participated in the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992, with this his summit being organised by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). The outcome of this summit, known as Agenda 21, was a comprehensive program of actions adopted by 182 governments. Agenda 21 provided a blueprint to secure the sustainable future of the planet from 1992 towards the 21st century (UNEP, 2002), with one part of Agenda 21 providing the action plan for travel and the tourism industry: Agenda 21 for the Tourism and Travel Industry (WTO, 1996). This action plan was designed to raise awareness among
tourism and travel stakeholders, and the program was adapted for local implementation. The principles of this action plan were integrated into Thailand’s sustainable development policy (TAT, 2001).

In order to meet the future challenges of tourism development, TAT has continuously promoted the sustainable development concept within the Thai tourism industry, and has encouraged responsible tourism practices. The concept of ecotourism can be seen as a sub-component of sustainable development (Diamantis & Westlake, 2001), and, as a new form of alternative tourism, has appeal in Thailand as a means to promote sustainable tourism development (DT, 2011).

TAT has been working toward the formulation of a National Ecotourism Policy since 1993, and in 1997 Thailand started to focus on sustainability and set up the National Ecotourism Council, which included representatives from the public, private, academic and NGO sectors. This council aimed to monitor the development of the National Ecotourism Policy and Action Plan and also arranged subcommittees on different aspects of ecotourism management (ATREE, 2006). However, despite Thailand launching the National Ecotourism Action Plan, it is not clear whether this plan has been implemented in organisations, or remains just a good idea (Fennell et al., 2001).

**Thailand Tourism Standards (TTS) in the context of ecotourism certification**

The overall goal of ecotourism development in Thailand is to assist the tourism industry to become more sustainable (Sriphnomya, 2002). National tourism standards need to be developed to improve the quality of tourism products and services in Thailand. Font and Bendell (2002) support the argument that tourism standards are a tool that will benefit the tourism industry by helping it to become more sustainable. As well as taking into account established acceptable practices for tourism products and services, the standards criteria should be concerned with all aspects of the tourism industry, including social and cultural responsibility, environmental concern and awareness, the conservation of natural resources, and the well-being of local communities (Font, 2002). However, Font (2002) also argued that tourism standards often only address the environmental criteria rather than social and economic criteria.

The Department of Tourism announced national tourism standards, known as Thailand Tourism Standards (TTS), in 2004. By 2011, TTS had addressed 38 standards covering all types of tourism products and services, including tourism activities, tourist destinations and attractions, and tourism business registration. These activities support Font’s (2002) claims that the common purpose of tourism standards is to help to improve sustainable tourism from both demand and supply sides.

2.2 THE ECOTOURISM CERTIFICATION SYSTEM: THE WORLD BEST PRACTICE

This section outlines the ecotourism certification schemes related to travel and tourism, and the benefits of certification. Honey and Steward (2002) described certification as the procedure that audits and gives written assurance on the facility, product, process, service and management system that meet the standard criteria and then rewards businesses or activities with a logo or seal. Focusing on the link between the concept of ecotourism and the certification system, Buckley (2002) stated that there is a significant level of environmental concern about tourist destinations in both developed and developing countries. This concern is further highlighted in the academic literature on tourism certification, with most research in this area focusing broadly on certification for tourism sustainability (Medina, 2005).

Of particular relevance to this research, Fennell (2008) defined ecotourism certification as programs that cover businesses, services and products involved in the ecotourism industry. Ecotourism certification programs need to encourage small and medium enterprises to not only focus on environmental awareness, but to be respectful of the needs and well-being of local communities. Moreover, ecotourism certification programs should educate all ecotourism stakeholders so that they become socially and environmentally responsible businesses that are concerned with more than just economic benefits.

As a component of this study, ten certification programs were studied to draw a comparison between the context of ecotourism certification development in Chiang Mai and ecotourism certification worldwide. These programs are detailed in Table 1: Ecotourism Certification Worldwide.

Table 1: Ecotourism Certification Worldwide (source: Ecotrans, 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Travel Countries</th>
<th>Certifying Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST)</td>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>Costa Rican Tourism Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eco Certification Program</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Ecotourism Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecotourism Label</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>Ecotourism Ireland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Globe</td>
<td>International 83 countries</td>
<td>Green Globe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eco Awards Namibia</td>
<td>Namibia</td>
<td>Eco Awards Namibia Alliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecotour Certification Program</td>
<td>Hawaii</td>
<td>Hawaii Ecotourism Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainable Tourism Eco-Certification Program (STEP)</td>
<td>International, U.S.A.</td>
<td>Sustainable Travel International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eco-Romania</td>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>Association of Ecotourism Romania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecotourism Kenya’s Eco-rating scheme</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Ecotourism Kenya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The European Ecotourism Labelling Standard (EETLS)</td>
<td>International, Europe</td>
<td>European Ecotourism Network</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some of the challenges for ecotourism certification include demonstrating the benefits of certification to ecotourism stakeholders and, as government policy is one of the main supports to ecotourism development, ensuring that the certification fits within the existing ecotourism policies so that it can be implemented (Fennell, 2008). Points that need to be considered for appropriate ecotourism policy and
implementation include public and private sector roles, integrated planning, natural resources conservation and preservation, funding, marketing, operator concerns, socio-cultural concerns, regulation, monitoring, and education and training (Liu, 1994 cited in Fennell, 2008).

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) insists that governments have an important role in the operation of certification systems and suggests that certification systems can bring benefits to stakeholders in the tourism industry. In 2003, twenty out of the 59 recognised certification schemes were led by government agencies (WTO, 2003), with the major government support coming through areas such as finance, marketing, expert know-how in criteria setting, training and technical support. It is also worth noting that government agencies use certification systems to promote national interests, while private sectors apply for certification to upgrade their competitive advantages and for the marketing benefits of being certified (Font, 2002b).

3. STUDY RESEARCH METHODS

This section outlines the research methodology adopted in this study and provides details on the qualitative case study, including the documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews.

Qualitative case study
A single qualitative case study was chosen for this study, which investigates ecotourism certification development in Chiang Mai. A single case study is an appropriate design because of the complexity of the tourism phenomenon in Chiang Mai, where ecotourism certification systems have been inconsistently managed from both procedural and operational points of view. The selection of this case was related to ecotourism development theory and represents a significant contribution to ecotourism knowledge in the north of Thailand (Yin, 2014).

The qualitative case study was exploratory in nature. An exploratory approach was chosen because there is very little data on ecotourism certification development existing in research case studies (Jenning, 2001). The methods used were documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used to address broad areas of similarity and difference within the dataset (Yin, 2013). Additionally, thematic analysis aims can be divided into three sets: commonality, differences and relationships. This paper applies these themes to ecotourism certification development in the research area (Chiang Mai).

The documentary analysis of Thailand Ecotourism Policy and Planning and Thailand Tourism Standards (TTS) was undertaken to gain a better understanding of the context in which ecotourism certification development in Chiang Mai sits. An official document associated with sustainable development and ecotourism policy in Thailand was obtained to disclose TTS criteria, which are currently and widely adopted in this research area. Thai official document used in this research are Thailand National Tourism Plan; The National Ecotourism Action Plan; Tourism Strategy of Ministry of Tourism and Sports; ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan; Chiang Mai Tourism Strategic Plan; Tourism Authority of Thailand Annual Report.
Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with eighteen participants who were involved in the operation and management of ecotourism certification in Chiang Mai. Analysis was undertaken using NVivo 10 software. The eighteen participants can be divided into two main employment groups: ecotourism operators (13) and personnel from local government agencies (5). Details on whether the ecotourism operators were certified or not are provided in Table 2: List of research participants.

Table 2: List of research participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Certified</th>
<th>Uncertified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trekking</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rafting</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elephant Camp</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock Climbing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecolodge</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tour Operator</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zipline</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: Small Farm</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Agencies (TAT)</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- National Park (3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The semi-structured interviews used two different formats – one for ecotourism operators (G1) and one for personnel from government agencies (G2). The interviews with ecotourism operators included questions related to ecotourism knowledge, ecotourism activities adopted in their business, their needs and perspectives on ecotourism certification programs, and the ecotourism situation in Chiang Mai. The interviews with the personnel from government agencies (G2) investigated ecotourism policy and planning-making processes, organisation policy, and strategies and missions associated with ecotourism development in Chiang Mai.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section presents the research findings in relation to the commonality, differences and relationships within the dataset. The commonality finding from both groups of research participants is that there is an unclear functioning of local government agencies related to ecotourism development in Chiang Mai, while the differences relate to environmental awareness and factors that influence ecotourism operators that chose to be certified, or remain uncertified by tourism standards. The third area, relationships, identifies the relationship between ecotourism public policy and the role of government agencies in the ecotourism policy-making process.
4.1 Unclear functioning government organisation in ecotourism development

There are three main government agencies located in Chiang Mai that are responsible for tourism development in the area: the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), the Chiang Mai Provincial Office of Tourism and Sports, and the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation (National Parks).

TAT is the government body that supplies information and data on tourist destinations and attractions to the public, with the intention of encouraging both domestic and international tourists to travel in and around Thailand. TAT has established a regional office in Chiang Mai. The Chiang Mai Provincial Office of Tourism and Sports (within the Ministry of Tourism and Sports) has responsibility for developing the quality of tourism products and services. National Parks is an agency within the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and has a significant role in maintaining ecological stability and preserving biological diversity in protected areas. There are 13 national parks located in Chiang Mai and these offer visitors a tremendous variety of natural attractions.

Since the tourism industry is a significant source of revenue, other provincial government agencies that have representatives in Chiang Mai are also involved in tourism development. However, tourism policy and planning in Thai government agencies focus on all types of tourism development, not just ecotourism, and ecotourism is not seen as a key priority for local government agencies and, therefore, must compete with other tourism niches in Chiang Mai, such as cultural and historical tourism, agritourism, sport tourism, health tourism and adventure tourism. Furthermore, ecotourism development in Chiang Mai is integrated with, and linked to, adventure tourism and it is difficult to define and identify pure ecotourism activities in the region.

Considering the local government role identified in the interviews, it appears that the local government role specific to ecotourism certification development in Chiang Mai is unclear. One of the G2 participants, for example, was concerned that the annual fiscal-year budget was insufficient to focus on ecotourism activities as the budget will be allocated throughout the year to support programs that are already proposed and approved. Furthermore, the coordination between the provincial government organisations associated with ecotourism development in Chiang Mai is still weak and there is a lack of integration between individual parts.

One of the biggest issues is that, at the provincial administration level, there are several kinds of budget allocations for the different operating teams that cover a variety of activities, with tourism development being just one area of responsibility amongst many. Likewise, the local administration or sub-district administration will have budget support to develop the local area overall and the natural preservation and natural resources usage in tourist attractions is only one area of their responsibility.

Additionally, most ecotourism destination areas in Thailand are in national parks, (Thavarasukha, 2002). The findings from the interviews demonstrate that tourism operators in Chiang Mai did not use ecotourism routes or attractions in national parks to attract or serve tourists. One G1 participant said that ‘the main activity of the company is organising trekking and bringing people to live in the forest without facilities. It aims to make tourists learn the local culture and participate with local people. However, most of the trekking attractions would normally use the same trails that impact on natural areas... for example, there is just a few creeks where is possible for rafting and every ecotourism company in Chiang Mai would share the same creek’.

Another research participant from the government agencies group (G2) explained that ‘in Chiang Mai there is lacking of cooperation between National Parks and tourism business associations or entrepreneurs. Most tourists who come to visit national parks mostly is domestic tourist and in private. They do not usually come with tour agencies. Another group included youth tourists who come to do school activity. The National Parks has some cooperation with local community and academic association instead’.
Moreover, there is no officer or staff member who is specifically responsible for ecotourism in Chiang Mai and, at the provincial administration level; there are several kinds of budgets provided for many operational teams that cover a wide range of responsibilities and activities. Tourism development is only a subset of the main tasks that this is agency responsible for. Likewise, in the local government agencies, nature preservation and natural resources usage in tourist attractions are just some of their many and varied tasks.

4.2 Discontinuity of ecotourism policy and planning to encourage certification system

It appears that ecotourism policy and planning is not the main focus in any government agency and there is no official authorised government agency that is directly responsible for ecotourism development in Chiang Mai.

There are five local government agencies in Chiang Mai that participated in this project. The first agency noted that there are 17 provinces in the northern area of Thailand, with the Office of Tourism being located in 8 locations. The office in Chiang Mai is the centre of the northern tourism region and focuses on the potential development of tourist attractions. Ecotourism or half-adventure tourism is one of the tasks in the responsibility of this agency, but not its only responsibility.

As a domestic government agency, there is a framework for its marketing strategy, which focuses on different aspects of tourism. For example, with the tourism strategy for learning, adventure tourism is a main selling point of the northern region Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) was previously the direct government agency responsible ecotourism development. During that time TAT focused on ecotourism and had activities and projects to systemically develop this type of tourism to achieve the universal standard and increase the competitive advantage in the world tourism market. For example, in 1998 there was an educational project about the ecotourism policy, which included all aspects of ecotourism development. This project then approved The National Ecotourism Plan of Action in order to set ecotourism standards and promote sustainable tourism development. This plan helped to increase knowledge and basic understanding about ecotourism and dealt with both ecotourism policy and the ecotourism practical strategy.

However, TAT’s main focus is now tourism marketing and promotion for Thailand and the tourism standard came to be the responsibility of the Ministry of Tourism and Sports. As a result, The National Ecotourism Plan of Action no longer exists within the national tourism policy and planning as, unfortunately, this plan of action lacked a clear timeline and a specific government agency to follow the plan.
4.3 Perception on Thailand Tourism Standards and ecotourism development

Ecotourism certification, in principle, should encourage sustainable tourism. However, in reality, the specific criteria may not be enough to provide adequate protection to the environment because it is a voluntary program. One research participant from the government agency group (G2) stated that it is good to have standard practices as part of a tourism development plan. In several countries, the tourism standard is considered to be crucial in developing high levels of safety and service and it follows that if Thailand implemented tourism standards and certification, standards would be improved. However, while there is a controlling system for tourism development in relation to business registration, at present there is no law or specific regulation that enforces tourism standards in Thailand. It is up to the individual tourism entrepreneur to decide if they will be certified or not and there are no specific measures to control their activities. For example, with regard to safety systems in tourism operations, if an accident occurs, there are no government agency measures or systems in place to respond to, or to deal directly with, the accident and exercise relevant laws. Furthermore, often tourists do not know who to report their problem to, or which government agency is responsible for their case. If a tourism entrepreneur does not take responsibility for an accident or a problem, there is no designated agency to take a role, make a decision, or solve the tourist’s problem.

Additionally, the Thailand Tourism Standard (TTS) is not widely known. Although there is assessment and certification available, there is no public relations process that would communicate to the ecotourism stakeholder how important TTS is. This lack of awareness is compounded by the fact that it takes time, budget, and available human resources to meet the standard, which makes it less attractive to the business owners.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this paper is to highlight issues in identifying and establishing an appropriate ecotourism certification model for Chiang Mai. This paper is important for a number of reasons: (1) there is a little academic research focusing on ecotourism certification development in Chiang Mai and this paper fills that gap; (2) Chiang Mai is the main tourist destination in the north of Thailand, and also positioned by Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) to be an ecotourism and adventure hub of the northern area; (3) new strategies to promote Thailand tourism aim to raise the awareness of balance between the use of tourism resources and preservation of natural resources and the introduction of an ecotourism certification program could assist with this; and (4) tourism development in the north of Thailand needs to secure and maintain local culture and the way of life of the people who live in tourist attraction areas, and ecotourism certification can assist the local community to achieve this goal.

Even though TTS are currently operating in Thailand, there is no evidence that any tourism enterprises in Chiang Mai are certified by TTS. The number of certified company in Chiang Mai is still low. The important issues in this phenomenon relate to the needs of both demand and supply side ecotourism stakeholders with regard to the development of ecotourism certification. This research contributes to the body of knowledge in this area by filling deficiencies and gaps within the current literature by providing more information about the situation in Chiang Mai. Moreover, this research helps to explain why tourism operators in Chiang Mai choose to remain uncertified, despite being knowledgeable about certification and its benefits. The significant research finding in this paper are that, to be successful and effective, an identified ecotourism certification framework for ecotourism development in Chiang Mai needs government support and a dedicated staff member or government body that is specifically responsible for the development and promotion of ecotourism, and that further research in this area is required.
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