

Women with Neck Coils – The Impact of Tourism

Tourism is big business in Thailand but there is one area of the tourism sector that can come in for criticism – indigenous tourism. The indigenous people of northern Thailand are a massive draw for tourists and the biggest attraction of them all are the neck-ring wearing Paduang women, many of whom live and work in the Chiang Mai Province.

Some feel that these women are being used to make a quick buck and that native culture is being damaged. Others, including many of the women themselves, would argue that this form of tourism has its benefits, especially financial ones.



Tours of native villages and photo opportunities with Paduang women provide Thailand with the chance to strengthen public awareness and enhance the tourism industry. Tourism experts and guides in Thailand would say that there are many potential benefits to indigenous tourism, and the advantage that many advocates will mention is the ability to promote public awareness.

Where some will see interactions with these women as exploitation, others will see it as a chance to showcase this culture to a world that was once unaware of its existence. These women are given a chance to educate tourists about their life and culture in northern Thailand and make a living from their time spent with visitors, through the provision of money, food and other goods.

The more effort that Thai tourism boards put into their advertising campaigns and tours, the greater the tribe's presence. Tourists want to come and meet these women, see how they live and buy their souvenirs.

As a result of this increased demand to visit the Paduang women, the tourism trade in this region has experienced a boom. The chairman of the Mae Hong Son chamber of commerce once stated that the Paduang women with their striking neck coils were the biggest attraction in the region and that an end to the tours or their involvement in the industry would mean disaster for local businesses.



The demand for indigenous women as a tourist attraction has many critics, but the women themselves can see the benefits. Critics of indigenous tourism in Thailand tend to focus on the changes in cultural values and the way that the women exhibited do not showcase the true cultural views of their people, that the old ways have been warped by the demand for entertainment and money. It is easy to see why some would feel this way when so many tours offer authentic Paduang people and goods in fake villages – such as those in Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai. There is an instant fabrication of the situation and a disconnection between the native and the tourist.

The primary example of this, however, is the use of neck rings. Traditionally, the rings were added periodically from the age of five up to the age of twenty, and only girls born under certain conditions would wear them. The importance of the neck rings in Thai tourism now means that more and more girls are made to wear them so that they can help families to bring in money. It has practically become the norm in this society. Some girls rebel against the system, only to find themselves without earnings, whereas those with rings find themselves more appealing to prospective husbands because of their ability to bring in more money.



In the end, as with all tricks in the tourism trade, it all comes down to money. Tour guides in the northern regions of Thailand are willing to create fake villages and tours in order to bring in money from foreign markets and the Paduang women are happy to adapt their cultural values if it means bringing in more money. Neck rings mean tourist dollars and a pretty native girl with these rings, and some souvenirs to sell, can make some decent money by posing for photographs and selling their wares.

In 2008, a visiting journalist noted that up to 10,000 tourists were paying to see 50 of these indigenous women. It is a positive trend that is showing no sign of slowing. As long as the women are paid at a good rate and are happy to take part in the tours, they, and the Thai tourist board, will see this as a win-win situation.

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