

Chapter Twenty-seven

Ecotourism Case Studies in Thailand

Vunsadet Thavarasukha

Introduction

The tourism industry in Thailand is the country's second largest revenue earner, second only to computers and computer components. In 1999, tourism earned 253 018 million baht, compared to 299 780 baht for computers and their components. Rice, once the country's top export earner, managed only 73 811 million baht in earnings. Tourism has stimulated the direct and indirect employment of 11% of Thailand's total workforce, or about 3.42 million people, earning for the government 79 000 million baht in tax revenues.

Thailand is fortunate that its prime location in the centre of South-East Asia and Indochina has helped the country develop into an aviation hub for the region, facilitating access for international visitors. Its location has also created a diverse range of natural attractions, such as beautiful tropical beaches, rugged mountains and dense forests that are home to a myriad of animals, cultural and historical sites reflecting the glorious heritage of Thai civilisation, as well as a sophisticated infrastructure, which allows tourists ready access to all these treasures.

Tourism

These natural benefits plus extensive tourism promotions internationally have led to a strong, continuing increase in the number of tourists coming to Thailand over the past decade. In 1999, 8.5 million foreign tourists visited Thailand, a 10.5% increase over 1998. The government has set its target for year 2000 at a realistic 9.7 million foreign tourists, and is expected to quickly reach the magic number of 10 million.

With so many international visitors coming to Thailand, tourism has had some damaging effects on the country's social and environmental situation. Overcrowding, pollution and waste management problems are just a few of the troubles that Thailand's burgeoning tourism industry has inflicted on the environment. In a keynote address to the "4th International Conference

on Sustainable Tourism: Community-based Ecotourism Development in the Asia Pacific", H.E. Mr Adisai Bhodharamik, Minister to the Prime Minister's Office who is in charge of Thailand's tourism affairs, stated:

"We have learned the lesson in the past that tourism development which was initiated by our central government, rather than according to local needs, caused damage to both the natural and cultural environment.

Therefore we need to find an approach which will help develop tourism without any negative impact on the cultural and natural environment. If we do not pay attention to this matter, I believe that tourism would bring great damage to the country and the world community as a whole".

As a result, the government's policy on tourism in recent years has been geared towards more and more sustainable tourism development, with an emphasis on community participation, non-exploitation, and safety of tourists.

Sustainable tourism means the management of tourism resources in response to economic and social needs, using valuable resources and the environment carefully and wisely, for the maximum benefit and minimal impact in the long run, while improving the quality of these resources and environment. To achieve sustainable tourism, the local people are the most important group to be educated and encouraged to take part in tourism management at every level, provincial, district and sub-district. The local community plays a pivotal role in any effort to sustain such tourism development because the local people are the ideal caretakers of their own environment.

In response to these developments, the more enlightened segments of the tourism industry have turned to a new and more sustainable form of tourism known as "ecotourism". The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has tried to promote and develop ecotourism since 1997. In doing so, the TAT has drafted a master plan for nationwide tourism development, in order to study the potential for tourist attractions and their appropriate management, as well as to allow the people to join in the decision-making process. This has been executed together with the business sector, academics, NGOs and local administration units. Over the past few years, the TAT has also undertaken many awareness-raising campaigns to keep the nation's tourist attractions in good, safe and clean condition with all the necessary facilities for visitors.

What is Ecotourism?

The TAT provides the following definition of ecotourism:

"Ecotourism is tourism in a natural environment where tourism resources are well taken care of and tourists can learn about and enjoy nature; while local people take part in tourism management,

for example, participation in decision making about the tourism business or providing other services which generate income in proportion to the degree of their involvement”.

Another definition of ecotourism is that it is a form of tourism in natural areas that is based on knowledge about the responsibility of humans towards the ecological system of the area. Thus ecotourism is a form of responsible tourism in an identified natural area, including cultural and historical components related to this ecosystem. An important component is the active participation of the local community in the management of ecotourism activities.

At present, the number of real ecotourism visitors is still rather low. Mostly, these tourists are included in other types of tourism such as nature-based tourism, agro-tourism, cultural and historical tourism and health tourism. Many ecotourism areas are in National Parks and specific historical-cultural centres.

The National Parks system in Thailand has been identified for its growing importance to the ecotourism industry. To date, approximately 95% of the visitors to National Parks are Thai. With most parks becoming more accessible by road (or boat for marine parks), there exists excellent potential to expand the number of visitors, particularly international tourists, through increased promotion, improved facilities and guided activities.

The National Parks in close proximity to the Mekong River include sites of prehistoric, archaeological and natural significance. The nature-based tourism potential particularly applies to northeast Thailand, one of the poorest areas of the country that the TAT has identified as a priority for tourism development. As the Mekong region gains increased exposure and popularity, these parks will experience a growing number of visitors in search of quality tours in remote and less-travelled areas.

Thailand has a great opportunity to promote ecotourism, especially when compared to other countries in the Asian region, thanks to a strong and experienced national tourism organisation with numerous active overseas offices. The kingdom also enjoys such benefits as easy access by air, a well-integrated infrastructure linking all regions and numerous popular tourist attractions and activities.

Characteristics of Ecotourism

Ecotourism is “a niche within a niche”, that is, a specialised form of nature-based tourism. Many of the activities are the same, but the mode of business is often quite different. Ecotourists tend to be college-educated with disposable income and are willing to pay more for a “quality experience”, looking for something different or exotic and interested in learning about nature, indigenous culture and having a wilderness experience. The difference

between adventure travellers and ecotourists is that the latter seek a deliberate ecology-based educational experience. Ecotourism can be viewed as part of an alternative strategy to meet the objectives of balance, and sustainable tourist development.

The TAT has formed an ecotourism strategy with the guidelines set out in Box 1.

Box 1: Ecotourism Guidelines

1. Ecotourism development must manage natural resources in order to retain their original condition as far as possible, and ecotourists are to abstain from travelling in sensitive areas which are easily damaged and difficult to rehabilitate.
2. Ecotourism management must take the character of existing resources into consideration in order to arrange appropriate activities.
3. Ecotourism must promote educational development and the creation of awareness to maintain the ecosystem of the area rather than just exploit economic growth.
4. Ecotourism management must involve the local people in the development process particularly in the transfer of community culture. This should include their participation in formulating development plans.
5. In developing sustainable tourism, related organisations must be given their specific roles in promoting ecotourism.
6. An ecotourism plan should be incorporated at district, provincial and regional levels along with sufficient budget allocation.
7. The development objectives should be supported by research which analyses all aspects of tourism so to adjust management guidelines with the aim of solving any problems that arise and to improve the plan step by step.
8. The law should be used strictly to maintain environmental conditions by providing advice and cultivating discipline among tourists.
9. A Code of Conduct should be provided to facilitate proper ecotourism development.
10. An ecotourism network should be established for the coordination of information and joint management at every level.

The State of Play

During the second year of the “Amazing Thailand” 1998–1999 tourism campaign, the number of international tourist arrivals to Thailand reached 8 580 332, a 10.5% increase over 1998. However, the rapid growth of the tourism industry in Thailand has resulted in environmental deterioration of the country’s tourism resources, especially in waste disposal management and the resultant negative attitude towards the tourism industry. The long-term danger of such a situation may be a reduction in the number of return visitors.

In light of these environmental repercussions, the TAT has attempted to analyse the expensive lessons learned and to come up with a plan for the sustainable development of the tourism industry. Ecotourism is one of the strategies for tourism management that is directed towards sustainable development.

The ecotourism potential of Thailand is high due to the country's abundant natural and cultural resources that attract both Thai and foreign tourists. There are more than 600 attractions suitable to be developed into ecotourism destinations. Most of them are in National Parks. Currently, standards of ecotourism services are still low, with many of the operators quite small, offering highly specialised programs, but weak in promotion and marketing.

However, this is beginning to change. In 1997, the operators banded together to form the Thailand Ecotourism and Adventure Travel Association (TEATA), which with support from the TAT and the Association of Thai Travel Agents (ATTA) is pooling resources to promote and market their activities and services.

The association has drawn up standards for each sector of ecotourism, such as diving, bird watching, mountain biking, and is in the process of helping each of its members to bring their operations up to these standards. To assist, the TAT put together and runs special training programs for ecotourism guides who require skills additional to normal tourism guides.

The ecotourism attractions themselves need careful monitoring to ensure they are not abused or overloaded. Many attractions are not ready to accommodate tourists as they lack proper facilities and management. While others, such as elephant trekking in Phuket and sea canoes in Phang-nga Bay, are being strained to their limits because of a rapid growth in numbers.

Nonetheless, the potential for ecotourism activities in Thailand is huge. Thailand has invested in excellent infrastructure to support and enhance its reputation as a premier tourism destination, which in turn is benefiting its fledgling ecotourism industry. Since the days of the first trekkers in northern Chiang Mai Province, adventure travel in Thailand has grown to become internationally famous, with a range of treks to hilltribe villages, elephant treks, rafting, kayaking etc. It is estimated that almost 70% of Thai domestic tourists and 30% of foreign tourists engage in ecology-related activities during their travel.

Thailand's 104 designated National Parks and marine parks are prime destinations for ecotourism pursuits. Here visitors can find the environmental conditions, and abundance of protected flora and fauna, critical to the ecotourism experience. Options range from "intensive" to "passive", depending on the nature of selected activities. Visitors can experience places through small group tours, private tours or as independent travellers.

Spectacular mountain views of Doi Suthep and Doi Pui National Park in northern Thailand are examples of long-standing, popular destinations for all types of travel, from soft adventure to incentive-based. Excursions to Tham Lot take tourists by lamplight into spectacular linked caves full of stalagmites, stalactites and cultural relics. Picturesque forest treks, bird watching, prehistoric archaeological sites, camping and river rafting can all be enjoyed at Ob Luang National Park. And the village of Pai in remote Mae Hong Son Province is becoming the centre of highly popular whitewater rafting and jungle trek tours. These are just a few of the natural resources with well-publicised and organised ecological tours in the northern region.

Whether it is in the northern, central or southern regions of the country, elephant trekking, four-wheel drive safaris, jungle trekking, sea kayaking or canoeing, rafting, mountain biking and rock climbing are just some of the activities offered by established tour operators. In recent years, market demand indicates that participation in simply one of the three adventures is no longer sufficient. Tour companies now boast of "four adventures in one day". In the famed Golden Triangle where the Mekong River merges with the Ruak River, visitors can see at least three countries in a day's outing; the tour can include visits to a market, temple, riverside villages housing various minorities, a wilderness walk and, of course, a boat cruise on the Mekong River.

Case Studies

Umphang is the largest district in Thailand, situated in Tak Province in the northwest, about 600 km from Bangkok. Up until recently it was one of the remotest spots in Thailand, set amid rugged mountains and dense jungles on the Myanmar border, with no roads to provide access. As such it is a pristine destination, with a vast wildlife preserve blessed with rich forest and animal resources, and serving as one of the country's major sources of water. Apart from its natural riches and beauty, it is a district with many diverse customs and traditions of the northern Thai people, particularly Karen and Hmong hilltribes, amid a peaceful rural life. These attractive qualities offer fascinating experiences for visitors who wish to make contact with nature and study different cultures.

When the road from Mae Sot was built, opening up the area, it quickly became popular. So many visitors were travelling into Umphang they began to outweigh the capacity of the wildlife preserve to cater for them during the high season. The most popular activities are whitewater rafting, forest trekking, elephant riding, visiting hilltribe villages and the many stunning waterfalls, including Ti Lo Su Waterfall (acknowledged as the most beautiful in Thailand). Consequently, the limited accommodation and restaurants could not cope with the high demand by tourists, who frequently do not plan their trips before travelling, leading to many problems in the preserve: overcrowding, garbage accumulation and littering, environmental deterioration, destruction

of bamboo for making rafts, the abandonment of used bamboo rafts, and erroneous and unsystemic information.

The TAT was called in to help in 1995. It decided to set up an ecotourism pilot project which would maintain tour activities while preserving the environment, and which would become a blueprint for other soft adventure attractions. The TAT has set up a working group to respond to these problems, the Umphang Tourism Promotion and Preservation Club, consisting of wildlife officials and local authorities, together with tour operators and village businesses. They met continuously to map out measures to solve the problems. In the end, the group formulated eight measures to preserve the natural environment based on ecotourism principles (see Box 2).

Box 2: Measures to Meet Ecotourism Principles

Measure 1: To limit tourist numbers in accordance with the area's carrying capacity

Overnight visitors are limited to no more than 300 per night in the reserve, while daily visitors are allowed to visit by using natural trails under the supervision of forest rangers.

Measure 2: Permission to enter into the preserve

Visitors are permitted to enter the preserve only if they have passes stamped by trained officials of the Tourist Police or the local Umphang Police. They are required to travel with the travel agents or guides who are properly registered under the Tourist Business and Guides Act of 1992.

Measure 3: Garbage reduction and cleanliness enhancement

To keep the area clean, both guides and visitors are required to bring out their own litter and supplies, none of which are permitted to be left behind.

Measure 4: Donation

Visitors must donate a sum of 10 baht per head to help nature preservation work and as a gratuity to the cleaners.

Measure 5: Set up a coordination centre

Coordination centres are set up at the Umphang police station piers and within the preserve to provide security and prevent unethical practices being committed against visitors.

Measure 6: Manage quality services

The Umphang Tourism Promotion and Conservation Club has set up three different sections to look after tourist services, which are:

- The Raft Section controls and limits the quantity of bamboo to be cut in accordance with individual needs. Operators must bring back the rafts from destinations after use.
- The Transport Section controls the bus charge at a fair rate.
- The Food Section controls both the prices and quality of food.

Measure 7: Zoning

Clear-cut zoning for different uses, such as camping areas, cooking areas and parking is mapped out.

Measure 8: Information signs

Installation of notices and signs, and distribution of leaflets to visitors is provided, with information on how to properly conduct themselves.

In addition to solving these tourism-related problems, there are 13 projects under seven plans to promote and develop Umphang ecotourism. They have been mapped out with the support of the Umphang Tourism Promotion and Preservation Club. Implementation of the plans has been carried out since March 1995 (see Box 3).

Box 3: Developing Ecotourism

Plan 1: Public Campaign Plan

To provide an opportunity for public sector agencies, community leaders, operators and media to exchange views on problem-solving and planning of promotion and development, in order to reach consensus on how to make Umphang a model for ecotourism.

Plan 2: Human Resources Development

To educate the local people on how to be good hosts, how to look after the safety of visitors and how to give local information and advise visitors on preserving the environment.

Plan 3: Promotion of Handcrafts

To promote the production of handcrafts and souvenir items with local identity for sale to the visitors; to create jobs and occupations and distribute income among the Umphang people.

Plan 4: Preservation of the Cultural Environment

To campaign for the Umphang people to recognise the value and significance of old houses and other structures which reflect the identity of the community and to retain the ambience of the local natural and cultural environment of Umphang.

Plan 5: Upgrading the Standards of Economy Accommodation

To develop ecotourism accommodation in Umphang by providing know-how and supporting operators to develop and improve their facilities and surroundings in the direction of energy saving and environmental protection.

Plan 6: Marketing Promotion Plan

To provide an opportunity for local operators to learn and understand how to systemically promote their products in the tourism industry. Some operators were chosen to participate in familiarisation trips from which they will gain experience in selling Umphang in the marketplace.

Plan 7: Public Relations

To invite all forms of media to visit Umphang and to publicise Umphang as a model of ecotourism among visitors and the general public, so that they may make advance preparations to avoid over-congestion in the area.

Apart from these plans, an ecotourism handbook for Umphang has been produced which contains geographical facts including flora and fauna, a map of natural trails, rafting routes along the Mae Klong River and guidelines for visiting Umphang. The publication is designed to provide knowledge and understanding about the ecological system. Hopefully, visitors will become more conscious of environmental conservation.

This pilot project has been very successful in terms of local participation, management and planning, personnel and the tourism service development. This success was recognised by the international community when the Umphang project won the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) Gold Award 1998 in the Ecotourism Travel-related Projects category and the ASEAN Tourism Association (ASEANTA) Award 1998 in the category of the Best Asean Conservation Effort category. These prestigious honours highlight the success of Umphang as a role model for Thailand's efforts to seriously move into ecotourism activities.

In contrast to the Umphang pilot project, with its emphasis on natural forest and river attractions, the Ban Prasart project concentrates on archaeology and handicrafts. Ban Prasart is located in Non Soong District of Nakhon Ratchasima Province, about 304 km northeast of Bangkok. Ban Prasart is a medium-sized village surrounded by paddy fields and vegetable gardens. The Prasart stream, a branch of the Moon River, is the main source of water for the community. There is also a man-made pond in front of the Ban Prasart temple.

Ban Prasart was named after the belief that there was a stone castle on the bottom of the river basin. Prasart means a stone castle of the Khmer type found extensively in the northeast. An ancient legend explains the origin of the Ban Prasart castle. During a race to build three castles by the villages of Phimai, Panomwan and Ban Prasart, Phimai falsely signalled that they had completed construction. Unaware of the trick, Ban Prasart quit the race in anger and threw the unfinished castle into the stream, which subsequently became known as the Prasart stream.

The current Ban Prasart village consists of 202 households, with a population of 1219 persons. The characteristic home is a single or double-storey wooden house combined into neighbouring groups. The villagers usually grow perennial fruits, bamboo and vegetables. Each household has its own barn nearby. In the village, there is a school, a nursery and a handicrafts centre.

The importance of Ban Prasart as an archaeological site comes from an excavation of a settlement dating back 3000 years which uncovered 60 human skeletons at different ages, lying on top of one another from a depth of one to five metres. Many accessories were also found scattered in the area: figurative and colourful pottery, bronze bracelets and rings, shell and marble bracelets, small glass beads, bronze axes and iron tools. The Fine Arts

Department says the specimens unearthed are of high quality. It opened the four excavation sites to tourists. Unfortunately the arrival of tourists disturbed the traditionally rural villagers, who gained nothing from the activity.

The TAT adopted Ban Prasart as a pilot project for cultural tourism, with the villagers gaining benefits, and linking it to other tourism sites in the region. Its main objective is handcraft promotion and the sale of souvenirs to tourists, from which the villagers will earn their living in the long run. Handcraft promotion among villagers has been supported by the Centre for Industrial Promotion in Northeast Region, operating under the Industrial Promotion Department and the centre for craftsmanship training in Bang Sai, under the patronage of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit. Training courses are provided on various aspects of product design, quality improvement and marketing. An additional contribution of 80 000 baht has been provided by the Australian Embassy to the housewife career development project in Ban Prasart.

The project has been widely accepted by the public. Ban Prasart became recognised as one of the important archaeological sites in the Lower Northeastern Region of Thailand. The project has generated employment and extra income to the villagers through handcraft making. This is in addition to farm income. It also creates a sense of belonging to the community, and conservation of local ways of life. The environment has become a unique characteristic of the Ban Prasart community through a learning process conducted by TAT.

In addition, the TAT decided to experiment with home stays as a further benefit to the village and propagation of its culture. Students were brought from all over Thailand so the TAT could study the development of social contacts. Since then several youth leadership camps have been organised in the Ban Prasart community.

Conclusion

The TAT's past achievements, particularly with Umphang and Ban Prasart, and an ongoing pilot project based on agro-tourism in the southern village of Khirwan have shown that the agency is taking the right steps in pursuing its goals in connection with ecotourism.

The next goal that the TAT aims to achieve is to develop tourism in Thailand to international standards, while continuing to place strong emphasis on sustainability and community participation. In this way, the TAT hopes to maintain the kingdom's uniqueness, in terms of tourist attractions, high quality services and environmental protection, all of which will have a direct impact on the country's social and economic development.