

Executive Summary of Priority Recommendations

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP), United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) are participating in the ecotourism component of the UN Joint Program on Integrated Highland Livelihood Development in Mae Hong Son (UNJP). The overall Human Security Goal of this Program is to improve the quality of life and reduce poverty among vulnerable groups in underserved areas of Mae Hong Son through both protection and empowerment measures. Ecotourism and community-based tourism (CBT) have been identified as one of the potential areas to foster economic development, specifically under activity 1.3 of the program. This Baseline Study for Ecotourism Development in Mae Hong Son is a key activity to support the development of the UNJP Ecotourism strategy.

Outcome 1

To enhance productivity, diversify the economic base and promote small scale business/enterprise development, thereby increasing income generation of vulnerable groups (agricultural communities in remote areas, ethnic minorities, refugees in camps and migrants) in underserved areas, through capacity building and targeted skills development.

Output 1.3 Eco-tourism opportunities are identified and initiatives formulated with support from local authorities.

Carry out survey and assessment of development potentials.

Carry out strategic planning exercises with local authorities and communities.

Provide technical assistance, training and provision of inputs for implementation of action plans.

The tremendous growth in the tourism sector, especially ecotourism centred on visitation and enjoyment of Mae Hong Son's distinct and precious cultural and natural heritage has presented the province with a number of challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, tourism is generating significant foreign exchange earnings and fuelling local investment in tourism related services and infrastructure and creating jobs. On the other hand, partly because of the uneven capacity to plan for and manage tourism's negative environmental and socio-cultural impacts, the resources underpinning the national tourism industry are in danger of being irrevocably damaged.

The UNJP aims at strengthening the eco-tourism sector and providing opportunities in some of the targeted communities (i.e. some of the most vulnerable populations including ethnic minorities). The baseline survey will guide the program design by identifying existing activities, potential new activities, the best locations and methods to implement these activities.

The original proposal required the team to make recommendations for action focused on 1) the provincial office for tourism and sports (POTS); 2) professional and community tour guides and 3) target communities. Based on the outcomes of the baseline study, CBT-I have worked on and expanded this frame, making core recommendations for action, on 3 levels:

- 1. At Provincial level,** focus should be on systematic support for ecotourism in/from **Mae Hong Son city**. This focus is due to the capital's key importance as a strategic 'provincial ecotourism driver.' Mae Hong Son is a base for most of the province's most experienced, committed tourism stakeholders, skilled in cultural heritage, CBT and ecotourism. The capital also has exceptional cultural and natural resources in its own right. However, MHS stakeholders are experiencing tough challenges, particularly increased competition and a gradual deterioration of product quality, undermining the provinces ecotourism USPs. **Now is the time to strengthen ecotourism in and from Mae Hong Son city. If ecotourism is not strong in the capital, it will much more difficult to drive success into the local level.**

1) Ecotourism Task Force 2) Service Providers 3) CBT Community

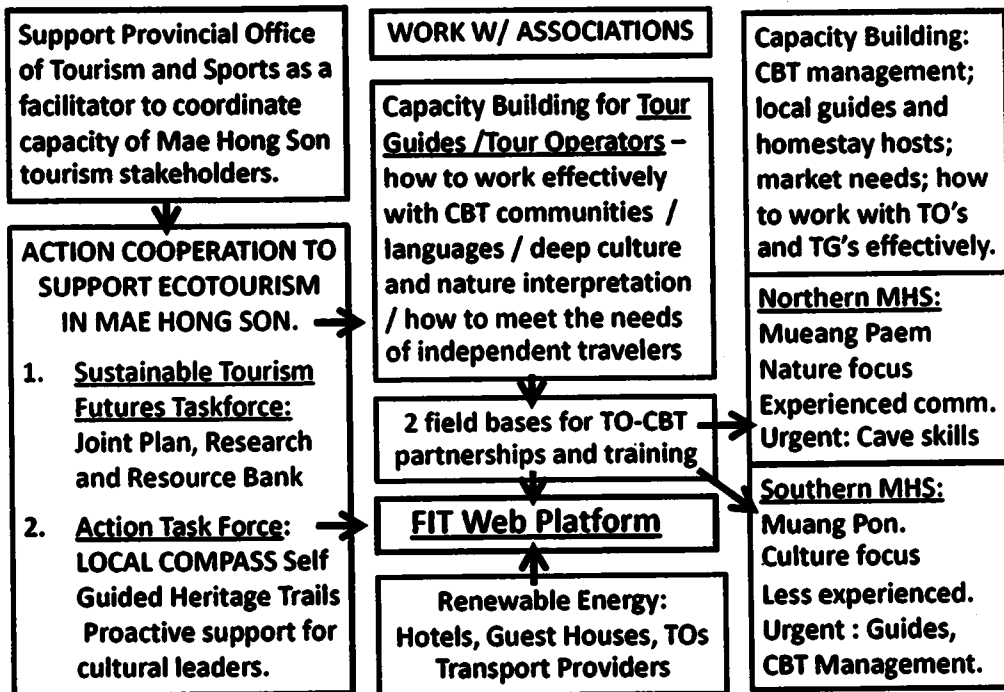


Figure 1: Showing a summary of key action recommendations

This should be achieved through 2 main strategies. Firstly, a **sustainable tourism futures taskforce** should be established, under the facilitation of the POTS. This taskforce of experienced and respected Mae Hong Son tourism veterans will have the job of leading the development of a tailored ecotourism development model for Mae Hong Son, based on broad stakeholder consultation and multi-sector, participatory planning. The taskforce will ensure that relevant tourism research is collected, disseminated and put to good use. Practitioners, including young blood, should be invited to join an **ecotourism action task force**, to build on exiting ecotourism and cultural heritage routes in Mae Hong Son, and strengthen Mae Hong Son's ecotourism and cultural community through special events.

Many stakeholders interviewed during the study shared the insight that more fully independent travellers (FIT) are visiting the province. This trend should grow, due to a lack of international flights, combined with the fact that 1) more travellers now research and book travel on-line, and 2) more travellers are driving to MHS by bus/car/motorbike (TAT). Activities need to be developed to meet the specific needs of these travellers, in particular the top end of educated FIT's who value exploration and quality experiences of nature and culture. This should be a combination of self guided city tours, excursions for self-drivers and quality ecotour programs offered by local tour operators when travellers arrive in Mae Hong Son's main hubs: Mae Hong Son, Pai and Mae Sarieng.

The task force should work on a 'Local Compass' for Mae Hong Son: self-guided, themed heritage and nature trails/maps with good quality information, allowing independent travelers to explore, appreciate the city's cultural and natural heritage, and support local community and environment friendly businesses. Local suppliers should be prioritized on these routes, and should be trained to welcome guests. Bicycle hire should be available. Simple, interactive activities for visitors should be developed. Tourists could collect stamps in a 'Local Passport', which could lead to a reward, such as a 'Green Guest' certificate. Road routes can apply the same concept to longer routes, linking destinations, based on clusters, and themes, such as 'cave exploration', 'meet the peoples', 'local food', etc.

2. **Linkages level**, actions at this level should focus on building the capacity of MHS ecotour operators and professional (licensed) tour guides. These key groups require tailored capacity building to better understand the needs of quality independent travelers (for example exploring, enjoying private time, and spontaneous interaction), and also to work (more) effectively with community CBT groups and community tour guides to deliver top quality services. Professional tour guides should receive special training to work as a team with local guides, and improve deep culture and nature interpretation, adding value for Mae Hong Son's guests, while optimizing benefits for the communities and environment.

Tour operators need training to develop 'win-win' tour programs with local communities, which make best use of the tour operator's skills and the community members' local resources, while meeting the needs of the target tourists. A later phase of training should focus on *participatory product development and formalizing roles and responsibilities of partners*. For example, developing a 'ready for market' checklist for CBT communities, and 'Responsible Partner' checklist for tour operators and guides. Formal agreements could also be reached between selected tour operators and target communities.

To improve their sustainability performance, hotels, restaurants and transport providers should receive training in how to reduce energy consumption, alternative and renewable energy, waste management and how to support community enterprises.

Due to the importance of FIT tourists and the increasing role of ICT in Mae Hong Son, a special web platform should be developed to promote MHS eco and sustainable tourism suppliers to independent travelers, including the Local Compass project. The platform should be interactive, making full use of social media channels and stimulating word of mouth recommendations. The platform could also prioritize promotion of tour operators/tour guides/communities which had successfully completed training programs.

Special events should be held regularly, opening a space for local suppliers and cultural leaders to creatively share ideas and achievements with each other and with the public.

3. **Community level**. Overall, capacity building should focus on CBT Management, building the skills of community guides and homestay hosts and working effectively with tour operators and tour guides. Communities also need assistance to differentiate between (the needs of) different potential markets, select priority markets and tailor their products.

Based on the need for field study centers, in addition to UNJP-development related criteria (poverty alleviation, vulnerability, NRM, etc.) communities should be selected partly based on their suitability as (contrasting) field centers for stakeholder training:

For this reason, the team suggest **2 top priority sites and actions** in target communities:

- 1) **Mueang Paem**, Pang Ma Pa district: this is an **experienced** community (the villagers have welcomed guests for more than 30 years), located close to Pai in **northern** Mae Hong Son. The people are ethnic **Karen**. Due to the proximity of Mueang Paem to an outstanding cave (Tun Yaow), specific capacity building related to appropriate development and guiding in caves is absolutely essential. Due to the availability of skilled resource people in Tham Lot sub-district, building local capacity to plan and operate sustainable, cave-tourism could best be approached at the tambon level. The focus of interpretation in Mueang Pon could be **nature** interpretation.
- 2) In **southern** Mae Hong Son, **Mueang Pon** should be the priority community. Mueang Pon is a relatively **inexperienced** community, with striking **cultural** resources. In Mueang Pon, focus should be on multi-stakeholder participatory planning and developing the community as a provincial field learning center for cultural heritage interpretation.

Other, specific recommendations, per target community are summarized below:

Mueang Pon

Organisation and people

- Strengthening/training for the homestay group
- Local guide training in interpretation/language/local food for health
- Master plan: CBT development to Celebrate Local Crafts & Culture w/TAO

Product Development

- Organic/Thai Yai coffee shop and restaurant
- Thai Yai cooking course and homestay
- Local arts and crafts workshop

Marketing

- Product Design and Marketing training for local occupational groups
- Facilitate supply chain linkages with hotels/restaurants in MHS/CNX/BKK
- Training to understand different needs of tourists and target marketing planning

Mae Lui

Organisation and people

- Training: CBT Preparation Management
- Local Guide and Homestay Host Training
- Water and rafting safety training

Product Development

- Well organised homestay and nature interpretation program in coordination with NP
- Learning and community service for students and volunteers (e.g. water testing)
- Could look again at natural dyed cloth for supply chain linkages

Marketing

- Need to facilitate communication – phone
- Training to understand more about tourists, marketing partnerships and access
- Information about the community and tourism services

Mueang Paem

Organisation

- Organisation strengthening – CBT for NRM and CD. Accounts
- Use current buildings and develop better information for tourists
- English and Culture and Nature interpretation Training: LGs, youth guides, host families

Product Development

- Caves (priority Tham Yaow): walkways, information, training for guides, solar powered lanterns, gate to close cave
- Weaving: design capacity building, techniques for selling politely
- New program to share NRM successes (community forest)

Marketing

- Marketing and IT training for Thai markets (school has internet)
- Promotion of village
- Partnerships and linkages – tourism and weaving/textiles

Tambon Level: Sustainable Cave Tourism Learning Center. The superb quality of caves in this area, combined with their sensitivity, and the risks of not acting to protect them makes a Tambon-level approach attractive. There are highly experienced researchers and cavers in the area who could help build Tham Lot sub-district into a national – regional learning center.

Based on the success of the initiatives above, Mae Hong Son may be established in a future phase as **the center of best practice in Northern Thailand on CBT, Ecotourism and adding value to agricultural products through tourism linkages.** All of the province's wealth of ecotourism resources, research, lessons learned and best practice could be collected, as well as harnessing the skills and experience of tourism stakeholders into a training center for ecotour operators, ecotour guides, CBT practitioners, etc. The center could deliver courses linked with best practice ecotourism and CBT field sites, and a one stop service for tourists.

Additional Recommendations

- Although they may be highlights, CBT/ecotourism projects do not sell Mae Hong Son. The destination of MHS sells CBT/ecotourism. Supporting projects in the field must take place alongside building the profile of MHS as an ecotourism destination;
- Development of a specialist, trained, multi-lingual Mae Hong Son Eco Guide Unit. Expand language opportunities to include French and German as priorities;
- Local product design/packaging to add value to local art and crafts, and a project to catalyze supply chain linkages focusing on Bangkok, Hua Hin, Chiang Mai, Brand.

The Environment, Natural Resource Management and Energy

- Serious, quantitative and qualitative research to identify the resource limits in Pai, MHS and MSR and set resource use benchmarks. Zoning and tax for forest conservation;
 - Capacity Building in Energy and waste management for hotels, restaurants, TO's;
 - Provincial level promotion of Mae Hong Son as a "Green Lifestyle" city.
- **Priority recommendations for key responsible government agencies:**

✓ **Provincial Office of Tourism and Sports (POTS)**

POTS as facilitator/secretariat, bringing expertise together from across sectors to facilitate an integrated approach for sustainable tourism development

Facilitate the development of a minimum standard for MHS ecotourism

Lead Guide Unit project for MHS, with urgent guide training for Mae Sarieng

Give certificates or stamps to eco-tourists on a MHS "Green Steps Passport"

Appropriate signage – competition to design local signs from local products

✓ **Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), Mae Hong Son**

Research on ecotourism markets for MHS – North and South

Develop an ecotourism marketing plan, through multi-stakeholder process

More information Thai/English/French/German