

**ECOTOURISM IN THAILAND'S ANDAMAN COAST:
AN ASSESSMENT OF MODES, LOCALITIES AND MEDIATORS**

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SUMMARY

This thesis is based on research examining the current state of ecotourism in Thailand's Andaman Coast, and assesses its effectiveness in contributing towards environmental sustainability and social equity, benefits which are considered fundamental ecotourism's *raison d'être*. Thailand's Andaman Coast is a part of Southern Thailand which is blessed with a coastline and archipelago of great natural beauty. These natural assets, together with scores of world-class beaches, have helped it become an important international tourist destination, as highlighted by the popularity of the Leonardo DiCaprio movie 'The Beach' which was recently filmed there.

Looking back, tourism first became a significant industry in the early 1980s, and after becoming established in Phuket, quickly expanded south easterly to the border with Malaysia and northwards to the border with Burma. Thailand's Andaman Coast is now estimated to receive over ten million visitors a year, with the relatively small island of Phuket accounting for at least half of these arrivals. To put these numbers into perspective, the whole of Indonesia, a vast and fascinating country which includes the renowned island of Bali, only receives around five million tourists per annum. For Thailand's Andaman Coast, tourism is responsible for bringing economic prosperity and identity to a region that remained a quiet backwater for most of its history.

In recent years, Thailand has experienced sustained periods of high economic growth, and strong international demand has encouraged tourism's rapid expansion throughout the whole country. Unfortunately this growth has been mostly uncontrolled, and has caused serious environmental problems, and the marginalisation of many local communities. It has been a destructive process marked by highly unequal stakeholder power relationships, which has been exacerbated by poor governance and a notable lack of effective regulation. In theory, one of the solutions to this type of development problem should be ecotourism, an activity

which purports to be nature-based, environmentally sustainable, socially equitable and educative. As such ecotourism is widely touted as being the answer to problems caused by inappropriate tourism development.

In seeking to assess the veracity of this conjecture, this thesis examines the relationship that the Andaman Coast's main stakeholders have with ecotourism; in terms of its effectiveness in improving sustainability and community empowerment through environmental and cultural education. These issues are assessed against the background of the region's underlying social, economic and political conditions; as well as the power networks and relationships that create them. Unfortunately this research finds little evidence from past and current ecotourism practice to suggest that meaningful structural change will happen anytime soon. The unavoidable conclusion is therefore that without a radical transformation of Thailand's institutions, so as to create a more equitable, inclusive and transparent society; ecotourism will remain marginal to the overall process of tourism development. As such the outlook for the Andaman Coast's environment and many of its minority communities is considered to be unpromising.

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Figure 1. Thailand's Andaman Coast and its Main Tourism Localities



CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

My interest in the effects of tourism on developing countries grew after journeying overland through South America and Southeast Asia in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As a result of these travels one of the many places to capture my imagination was Thailand's stunning Andaman Coast (see map Fig 1), which I first visited in early 1981, just before it became a mass tourism destination. Tourism arrivals to Thailand as a whole have increased seven fold since that time (TAT 2007), and over the course of many subsequent visits my interest was stimulated by the adverse nature of the changes I was witnessing, and led me to ponder the underlying reasons for such rapid negative transformation. This provided the motive for properly researching these issues when the opportunity presented itself in later life.

Nowadays, tourism is one of the world's largest industries, and has gained a very high profile due to its importance to both local and national prestige and their economies. However, in common with many other industries in developing countries, tourism is seriously challenged by issues of environmental sustainability and social equity. Thailand has been an international destination since the 1930s, when British and French foreign office personnel began stopping over on the way to their eastern colonies. Tourist volumes remained low until the mid 1960s, but then took off dramatically with the arrival of thousands of American GIs on leave from the Vietnam War. It was following this period that the country, and in particular the beach resort town of Pattaya, became notorious as an international sex-tourism destination.

Gradually, though, the country began to attract a more mainstream class of tourist, and volumes have increased almost every year for the past three decades. During this time the global travel industry and media have become accustomed to representing Thailand as a kind of 'Magical Oriental Tropical Kingdom', where Phuket and its surroundings were the first to capture the international imagination, particularly the dramatic islands of Phang Nga Bay, made famous by the 1974 James Bond movie 'Man with the Golden Gun'. This movie provided the world with the imagery of a spectacular tropical coastal topography that helped

transform Thailand's Andaman Coast from being a sleepy backwater to an international tourism destination.

When it comes to describing Thailand's charms, the international media is replete with persuasive verbiage, as demonstrated by the introduction to Lonely Planet's booklet 'Thailand's Islands & Beaches', which includes the following irresistible imagery in describing the Andaman Coast:

Holiday legends, golden tans, cocktail sunsets, gentle land, magical, azure seas, blond beaches, cleanse the senses of greyer landscapes, warm sun, dramatic limestone mountains, dash of mystery, napping under palm trees, smooth looking-glass waters, paradise, secret beaches, watery blue, chase the myth, uncharted territory, low-key backpacker villages, world-class resorts, virgin jungles of tumbling waterfalls and stalactite caverns, scuba dive with whale sharks, scale the heights of sea cliffs, paddle through mangrove forests and prehistoric caves, feasting on one of Asia's best cuisines (Lonely Planet 2007).

Successful national tourism campaigns, such as 'Amazing Thailand' in 1998/99, have made heavy use of such evocative style; as did its replacement, 'Seven Amazing Wonders of Thailand' in 2007, which included the country's beaches and nature as two of its seven wonders (www.tatnews.org). White-sand tropical beaches have always captured the imagination of westerners (Lencek and Bosker 1999) and Thailand has benefited enormously from having a surfeit of these. When these attractions are added to relatively safe travel, ostensibly friendly locals, and the lure of sexual adventure, it is no wonder that Thailand is such a powerful magnet to western tourists, even though many have found to their disappointment that the reality can be quite different. Thailand is known around the world as 'The Land of Smiles', but often this is a façade which also hides many 'Hearts of Ugliness'. With the rapid exploitation of its natural resources for economic growth and profit, there is scant regard shown for the environment, or the livelihoods and cultures of local and minority

communities. People who find themselves in the way of the all-powerful business/government alliances are invariably pushed aside, co-opted, or in some cases eliminated. The regulation of growth and the fostering of stakeholder participation and co-management under such adverse economic-political conditions is a huge challenge.

One major sector of the tourism industry, which is often claimed to be its fastest growing, is ecotourism, ie ‘eco-friendly tourism’, which is intended to be nature-based, environmentally sustainable, socially equitable, and educative. This is a cleaner and greener version of tourism, which adherents hope will solve the problems that mass tourism is now generating. These problems are particularly acute in the developing world, a designation that applies to most of Southeast Asia, especially Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam and Cambodia - all of which have become important international destinations in recent years. As such, Thailand, and particularly the Andaman Coast, is a rewarding place to study tourism development, because the industry is now well established and much change has already occurred. The Andaman Coast (which is also referred to as ‘the region’ throughout this thesis) comprises Thailand’s western coastline and islands lying between its borders with Burma and Malaysia. The topography is inspiring, comprising warm coral seas, scenic offshore islands, fine sand beaches, mangrove forests, dramatic karsts, lowland rain forest and broad river estuaries. As such, the Andaman Coast offers a fascinating range of locations having a full spectrum of tourism development stages. These offer a variety of tourism types, ranging from crowded mass tourism beaches, to secluded localities where ecotourism can flourish. The region is therefore a fitting place to study environmental and social changes resulting from rapid tourism growth.

Throughout most of its history, Thailand’s Andaman Coast was, comparatively speaking, a quiet backwater, which had little impact on events in the rest of Southeast Asia. The region’s oldest indigenous people are the Negrito or ‘Sakai’, who in very ancient times (possibly as long ago as 60,000 years), inhabited much of present day Thailand, and who still survive in

small marginalized groups in inland forest areas, one group of whom provides a dubious tourism attraction for Trang tour operators. Another minority people, also marginalized but less so, are known as the Chao Leh or ‘Sea Gypsies’, which are common collective names for the Moken, Moklen and Urak Lawoi ethnic groups. Because they have no written language, the origins of these people are unclear, but are probably a mixture of seafaring Proto-Malay, Bugis and Andaman Islander, that migrated to the region in small groups hundreds of years ago. Most of them now live in a number of dispersed seaside communities throughout the region (Wongbusarakum 2002, Granbom 2005). Islamic Malays have also built up a strong presence in the region through migration that began prior to the Malacca Sultanate of 1402-1511 (Wyatt 2003:73). This has led to large present-day communities, distributed mainly in coastal districts and islands.

The region’s now-dominant Thai Buddhist influence began to assert itself during the Sukhothai Period (1238-1583), with the establishment of a Thai ruling house at Nakhon Si Thammarat, formerly a powerful Langkasukan and Srivijayan entity (Wyatt 2003:39), which at times had extended its influence as far south as Pahang. Thai Buddhist influence was then maintained during the Ayutthaya Period (1351-1767), despite frequent challenges to its tributary status by outsiders such as the Dutch and powerful local rulers. In the early Chakri Era (1768 - present), in response to Burmese threats, King Rama I enforced Bangkok’s suzerainty over the southern region, including Pattani and the northern Malay States (Wyatt 2003:135). Also under Rama I, Songkhla came under a ruler of Chinese descent, and this was followed by significant levels of Chinese migration into the south, continuing until the twentieth century. In spite of a period of violent conflict with the northernmost Malay states in the 1830s, which eventually led to their cessation to British Malaya in 1909, Thai Buddhist hegemony was gradually established over the south. This has continued to strengthen until the present time, due to a steady influx of Thai and Thai Chinese migrants from other parts of the country. Unfortunately this has also resulted in increasing violence and unrest in the provinces with the largest Muslim populations.

Over the centuries a number of important economies were established in the Andaman Coast, including: fishing, coconut, charcoal, rubber, palm oil, tin, gypsum, and latterly tourism, These industries brought in a steady stream of migrants from other parts of Thailand and Southeast Asian regions. Tin mining in particular attracted large numbers of Chinese, especially between 1855 and 1880, and it was during this time that Phuket's landscape first began to be ravaged. Later, in the early 20th century, Phuket suffered further deforestation to allow commercial rubber planting. However, until the 1960s the Andaman Coast's economic development was gradual, with Chinese and Thai Buddhists settling in medium-size towns such as Phuket, Krabi, Trang and Satun, and accumulating wealth through tin, rubber and fishing, as well as trading and retail operations. In this way the Thai Buddhist and Chinese in particular established patterns of economic domination throughout most of the region (Pongpaiboon 2004:57), which they later successfully leveraged into tourism development. As for other ethnic groups, the Malay population lived mainly in rural and coastal areas and remained focused on smaller scale fishing, rice farming and rubber tapping. The minority Chao Leh and Sakai communities stayed largely isolated and have never played a significant role in the economy. With the advent of tourism, a growing number of westerners, including businessmen and retirees, have made their home in the Andaman Coast, mainly concentrating in Phuket and Krabi, where the infrastructure is more conducive to their needs. Phuket now has three English language newspapers and tourism has almost totally displaced the island's traditional economies. It is ironic that Phuket's natural beauty was destroyed firstly by those who came to exploit it, and then afterwards by those who came to enjoy it. Since the late 1970s the Andaman Coast has seen a steady increase in arrivals and now around ten million visitors per annum would be a fair estimate (see Appendix 1). The only major disruption to tourism's steady increase in the Andaman Coast occurred in on Boxing Day, December 26th. 2004, with the sudden tragedy of the Indian Ocean Tsunami, which killed 5,395 people, with Khao Lak and Phi Phi Island being the worst affected in terms of tourism casualties and

destruction (Rittichainuwat 2006). However, the region has since made a rapid recovery and arrival figures have resumed their long-term upward trend.

Geographically the Andaman Coast features a varied and heavily indented coastline, associated with a large archipelago that contains many islands of great natural beauty. Its scenery encompasses towering limestone cliffs, fine sand beaches, and dense mangrove forests. Tourism development can be found that corresponds to all stages of the well known ‘Butler Curve’ (Butler 2004), as well as that of Dobias (1989), who created a similar model based on his own research in Thailand. An adaptation of these curves is shown in Fig 2:

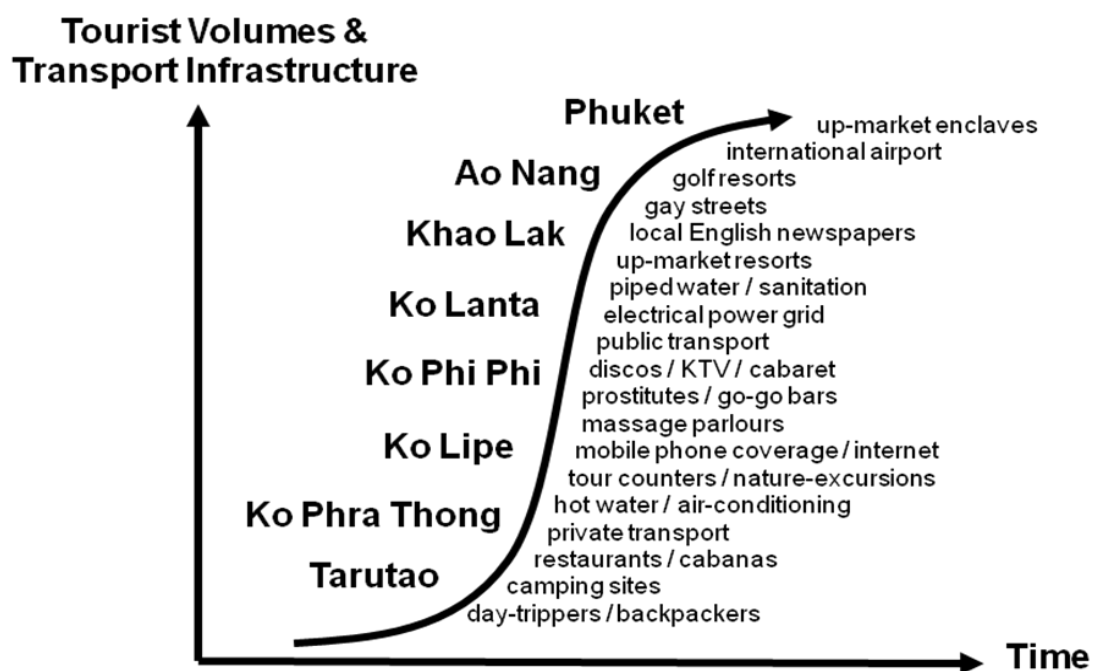


Figure 2. Andaman Coast Tourism Locality Life Cycle

Unfortunately, most development has been unregulated, and is now seriously affecting the environment and social stability of many localities. Of these there are several notorious examples, with the most renowned being the island of Phuket, which is now mostly degraded landscape and ugly urban sprawl, dotted with clusters of resorts and tourism localities. To this, one could add a number of other internationally known islands, such as Ko Phi Phi, Ko

Muk, Ko Lanta and Ko Lipe, all of which appear to be following the same depressing route as transportation infrastructure improvements encourage more and more visitors.

The Andaman Coast's many natural attractions have also encouraged the proliferation of nature-based excursions and marine activities, the most popular of which are island boat tours, sea kayaking, and scuba diving. However, years of strong demand, which were always met by ready supply, have reduced most of these operations to what can only be termed 'mass excursionism', that cater to too many people and have negligible conservation or eco-educational content. Though these tours are notionally nature-based, very few retain anything approaching the tenets of genuine ecotourism; in fact, many are responsible for the degradation and destruction of fragile sites. While there have been a number of genuine efforts to run proper ecotourism and follow eco-friendly practices, in the form of eco-excursions, tours, and eco-resorts; these have only had a marginal impact on the region's dominant development paradigm of uncontrolled, ad-hoc, opportunistic growth, operating amidst minimal regulation and a marked absence of planning and coordination. In short, ecotourism looks seriously challenged in terms of being able to provide a catalyst for more sustainable forms of tourism.

The great irony is that tourism is now compromising the very attractions that it depends upon for its continuance, and within another decade or so will surely seriously threaten the region's attractiveness as a worthwhile international destination. It should be pointed out that these problems are by no means unique to Thailand's Andaman Coast. From my own travels within Southeast Asia it is clear that many other currently popular and attractive tourist localities have similar problems. Some obvious examples are: Boracay (Philippines), Cameron Highlands (Malaysia), Dalat (Vietnam), Cat Ba (Vietnam), Ko Chang (Thailand), Ko Samui (Thailand), Ko Tao (Thailand), Kuta (Indonesia), Luang Prabang (Laos), Pai (Thailand), Pulau Redang (Malaysia), Pulau Tioman (Malaysia), Sapa (Vietnam), Siem Reap (Cambodia), Sipadan (Malaysia), and Vang Vieng (Laos). The few possible exceptions in

Southeast Asia to this general depressing trend are Taman Negara, Mulu National Park and Gunong Kinabalu, although many would argue strongly that even these places have serious problems. It is noteworthy that all three are protected national parks in Malaysia, where there is at least a modicum of regulation.

The main objective of this research is to understand the role of ecotourism in the Andaman Coast, and the extent to which it is nature-based, environmentally sustainable, socially equitable and educative. This required examining the relationships between ecotourism and its stakeholders in the context of the region's underlying social, economic, political, and cultural conditions. In order to achieve this objective the thesis is organized by chapter into the following sections:

Chapter 1: Introduction – an overview of the research area and the aims and objectives of the research.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework – an examination of the demand-driven nature of tourism and the meaning of the terms 'ecotourism', 'environmental sustainability', and 'social equity', as these relate to tourism activity in Thailand's Andaman Coast.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology – an overview of data collection methods, fieldwork and its limitations, and the selection and interviewing of key informants.

Chapter 4: Ecotourism: Description, Assessment and Discussion – which is structured under the main groupings of: Ecotourism Modes, ie describing what form it takes; Ecotourism Localities, ie where it happens; and Ecotourism Mediators, ie who influences it.

Chapter 5: Conclusions.

CHAPTER 2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The focus of this research is ecotourism, which is a small but growing subdivision of sustainable tourism. Ecotourism can be considered as a sector within the tourism industry, and also a guiding philosophy which may eventually transform the industry for the better, ie, it is both “a reality and an ideal” (Weaver 2001b). In relating this to the broader perspective of Thailand’s overall environmental sustainability, there is now little doubt that along with many other Southeast Asian countries, Thailand is experiencing serious (and possibly insurmountable) difficulties through its failure to regulate growth. The following is typical of how many academics assess the gravity of the overall problem:

The experience of Thailand shows how closely economic development is linked to environmental degradation, unless very strong protective measures are taken. It has become clear that the economic growth that took place during the 1980s and 1990s in Asia has had a dramatic, even devastating, effect on the region’s environment. People in urban environments suffer deteriorating air quality, worsening water quality, and growing mountains of waste. The river systems are polluted, soil is losing its fertility, forest cover is declining, deserts are spreading, resources are being depleted, and biodiversity is being lost everywhere. The situation is dire and worsening, and global issues of climate change, ozone depletion, and acid rain compound it (Ross and Pongsomlee 2002).

In particular, after studying the economy of the southern Thai province of Satun, Andriess and Westen (2008) concluded:

In the Thai case, unsustainable environmental pressure may well undermine the current economic model. Unfettered private development of fisheries, aquaculture, and tourism may well exhaust the natural resource base before diversification into other industries has sufficiently progressed. Thailand’s record in taking timely remedial action is hardly encouraging: witness, for instance, the abandoned

aquaculture ponds on the Gulf of Thailand coast, poisoned by speculative short-term exploitation. Moreover, the socio-economic cleavages observed raise worries about the social sustainability of the development trajectory.

From this it would seem that Thailand's problems with sustainability may be so deep rooted as to be insoluble without wholesale changes in government and society. Though tourism is only a small part of this overall concern, it is a very visible one given Thailand's position as a major international tourism destination. The serious problems being caused by tourism were first recognised in the early 1990s, when Parnwell (1993) for example, said in relation to Thailand: "Tourism is responsible for fundamentally transforming, and in some cases severely damaging, the natural resources upon which the industry has been built over the last two decades or so."

Some years later, Erik Cohen, the doyen of tourism research in Thailand, concluded that:

Thailand is an ambiguous example of success in tourism development. Enjoying a very positive tourist image, it succeeded in attracting rapidly growing numbers of foreign tourists. But this success was achieved at a high price: tourism contributed significantly to the often reckless destruction of natural resources, characteristic of the process of Thailand's rapid economic development as a whole, even as those resources contributed the basis for its success (Cohen 2001).

So Thailand clearly has a problem with tourism sustainability; however, difficulties can arise by asking such questions as, "What is it that should be sustained?" and, "For whose benefit is it to be sustained?" Sustainability is very difficult to achieve because stakeholders usually have fundamentally different perspectives, which tend to be in serious conflict with one another. For example, the sustainability objectives of some of the major tourism stakeholder groups could include such diverse interests as the following:

The Government – sustaining the economy; The Tourism Industry – sustaining a profitable industry; Local Communities – sustaining their livelihoods and local cultures; Environmentalists – sustaining nature and wildlife; Tourists – sustaining their enjoyment.

The dilemma posed by sustainable development is perhaps best summed up by Sofield (2003):

Who for example is to measure current consumption of a resource and make judgments about what is the appropriate level of exploitation to ensure that the needs of future generations are met? How is that level of consumption to be determined? How are any proposed restrictions to be enforced? Who is to determine just what is of value that needs to be preserved, protected and conserved?

In considering the above factors, it is no surprise that the World Wildlife Fund has flatly stated that, “Sustainable Tourism is currently an unachievable ideal” (WWF-UK). Or as others have suggested, “Sustainability is a concept that cannot be sustained” (McKercher 1993).

Notwithstanding this negative view, in the effort to find sustainability solutions, an important component is ecotourism, ie ‘eco-friendly tourism’. However, this is a much-debated and misunderstood concept, with few experts being able to agree on what it actually comprises, and how it relates to overall tourism. “It is a broad and loose garment this word ‘ecotourism’” (Wearing and Neil 2009). Ecotourism is often claimed, usually without much substantiation, to be worldwide tourism’s ‘fastest growing sector’. This now generally accepted ‘fact’ seems to date from the 1998 issue of *The Economist* (‘Dream factories: a survey of travel and tourism’, *The Economist* 10 January 1998 pp.3-16), and is repeated year after year. By now an enormous literature has been generated on ecotourism by hundreds of scholars, but without its scope or utility becoming much clearer (some examples being: Wheeler 1991, Wheeler 1994, Pattullo 1996, Rattner 1996, Barkin 1996, Wearing 1999, Doan 2000, Luck 2002, West

and Carrier 2004, Diamantis 2004, Wall 2006, Weaver and Lawton 2007). Ecotourism has many critics and some are convinced that all the hype is a sham, e.g., “The fuss, the attention ecotourism is receiving is, in my opinion, totally out of proportion to its effectiveness as a salutary management tool” (Wheeller 1994). Notwithstanding this, a key idea of ecotourism is that it is a vehicle for encouraging sustainable tourism development, and should therefore play a vital role in the conservation of nature and the empowerment of local communities (as suggested by Dowling 2000, Kruger 2005).

Sustainable tourism and its relationship to mass tourism have also been difficult to conceptualise. Clarke (1997) proposed that this relationship has undergone at least four positional changes since the dichotomy of sustainable tourism and mass tourism was first problematised. She identified these relationships, that compare sustainable tourism to mass tourism, as being roughly chronological, and ordered them into an evolutionary sequence of: polar opposites, continuum, movement, and convergence. Another problem is that the terms ‘sustainable tourism’ and ‘ecotourism’ are used so loosely that they give the erroneous impression that they are interchangeable. This is particularly so in Thailand where their misappropriation by the tourism media has removed any real meaning. And sustainable tourism should really be regarded as being all-encompassing and including everything connected with tourism, whereas ecotourism is a narrower concept that focuses more on nature and local communities. Hence, the notion of sustainability is highly problematic, even leaving aside further difficulties posed by its relationship to other social constructs such as equity and authenticity (see Cohen 2002). Over the years there have been many statements and publications from the Thai government and tourism authorities on the importance of sustainability. However, instead of enumerating concrete environmental measures, these have always been very general objectives and guidelines. Some would describe them as weak, vague and meaningless. One notable exception to this is ERIC (2007), which was published by academia and not the government. To quote one prominent researcher,

The rhetorical use of such euphemistic concepts as sustainability and equity betray the actual practice of tourism development in Thailand, which has with rare exceptions emphasised growth, productivity and expansion at the expense of the altruistic goals currently espoused by Thai officials (Kontogeorgopoulos 1999).

Over the years there have been many ways in which the concept of ecotourism has been defined, interpreted, and operationalised (eg Gaymans 1996, Brandon and Margoulis 1996, Acott et al 1998, Sirakaya et al 1999, Dolinac 2006), as well as a study comparing the merits of 85 different definitions (Fennel 2001). But while the subject continues to be debated, the simplest definition is probably the one suggested by the International Ecotourism Society, ie “Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people”. A more comprehensive definition was usefully proposed by Martha Honey (Honey 1999), and specifies six criteria, which state that ecotourism should:

1. Involve travel to natural destinations and bring tourists closer to nature and local communities
2. Minimise impacts and be non-consumptive
3. Build environmental awareness and be educative
4. Provide direct financial benefits for conservation
5. Provide financial benefits and empowerment of local people
6. Respect local culture

(with very little ecotourism in Thailand’s Andaman Coast satisfying these basic conditions).

Honey (1999) also added ‘promotion of democracy’ as a criteria, but this seems far too idealistic a goal given Thailand’s current political reality, as well as asking far too much of ecotourism. This would also involve much contradiction; for example the governments of Singapore, Brunei and Bhutan are publicly supportive of ecotourism (and do offer some genuine ecotourism) without being seriously considered as being democratic.

I personally prefer my own simple definition: that ecotourism be regarded as being nature-based, environmentally sustainable, socially equitable, and educative; where the ‘ecofriendliness’ of a particular ecotourism activity is based on elements such as: low impact on ecosystems; high percentage of local employment and participation; respect for local culture and aesthetics; low consumption of energy and water; operation within carrying capacities; low impact of infrastructure; high percentage of local supplies and materials; low production of waste, sewage and pollution; small eco-footprint; and high eco-educational content.

An alternative perspective is to consider what is not ecotourism, because in Thailand much ‘greenwashed’ advertising (of tourism pretending to be eco-friendly) describes activities such as the following as being ecotourism when they are not, ie: purely adventure experiences in wilderness, mountain, or jungle; specialized trekking, climbing, rafting, and off-road driving; intrusive wildlife watching, staged cultural and nature attractions; penetration wreck and cave scuba diving; luxury lodges, resorts, and up-market enclaves with large ecological footprints; activities based on skills and resources coming mainly from outside the local economy

There is also the question of whether or not ecotourism itself is inherently sustainable and there are two reasons why this may not be so. The obvious one being that the ecotourism activity fails to become established in the first place. For instance Wall (1996) suggests that:

In addition to providing positive experiences for tourists, ecotourism, if it is to be sustained, must be economically viable, environmentally appropriate, and socio-culturally acceptable. If positive experiences are not available, then tourists will cease to come—there will be no tourism!

The second possibility is that ecotourism does become established but then transforms into unsustainable tourism. In Thailand this has been vividly shown in the case of ‘eco-excursionism’ sea kayaking in Phang Nga Bay, where participant volumes have grown to the

point where it has simply become mass tourism. Wheeler pointed out the inevitability of this some years ago: “As projections for increased participation in tourism, including ecotourism are realised, then the futility of eco/sustainable tourism will, I believe, become apparent” (Wheeller 1994). A more recent study by Doan, based on an analysis of many ecotourism case studies, sadly concluded that, “The question of whether ecotourism is a form of sustainable development does not have a definite answer...” (Doan 2000). All this suggests that when conditions are unfavourable, as they are in most developing countries, ecotourism may be only a transition stage on the road to mass tourism. In other words it is a reversal of the ideal developmental progression, where ecotourism acts as catalyst in transforming mass tourism into sustainable tourism (Fig 3).

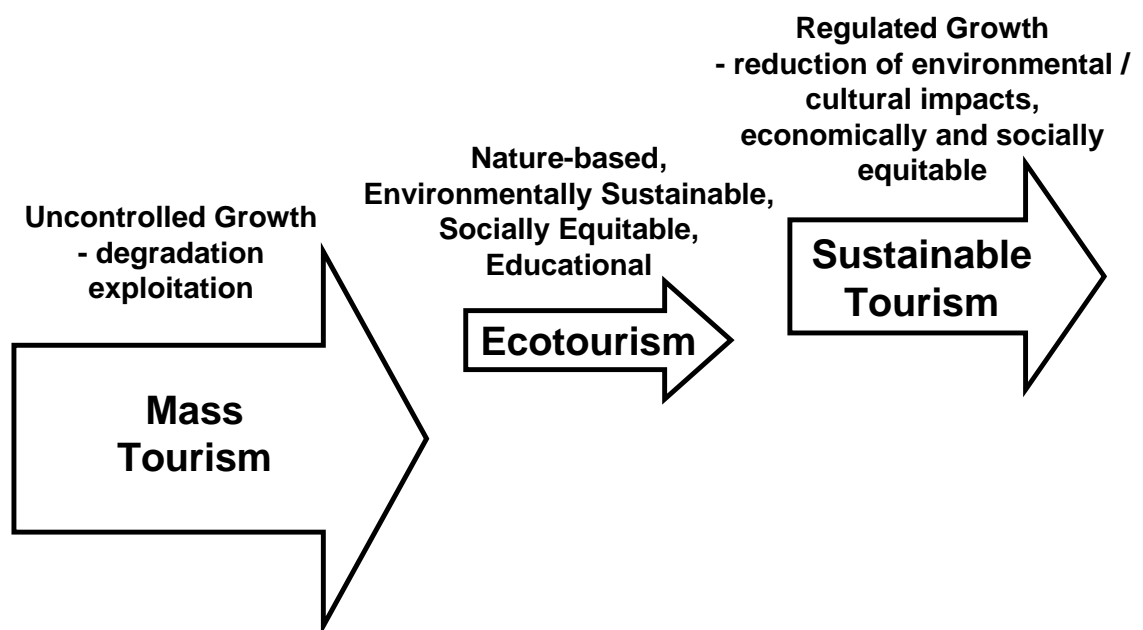


Figure 3. Tourism’s Ideal Progression

There are in fact a number of practical reasons why ecotourism has proven difficult to operationalise, and thus become a source of unsustainability in itself. For instance there are valid claims that ecotourism results in the following (adapted from Kruger 2005): habitat alteration, soil erosion and pollution; consumptive land use by local communities; flagship

species declining or their behaviour becoming seriously altered; insufficient revenue for conservation; and local communities becoming antagonistic.

Where all these factors can be exacerbated by: too many tourists; local communities not being involved; insufficient management control; wildlife having priority over local people; and locals not getting environmental education.

At its most basic level ecotourism aims to get tourists to enjoy the outdoors and become more interested in nature and indigenous cultures. All are worthy objectives. Anecdotal evidence suggests that globally, the majority of ecotourists are (supposedly) environmentally conscious westerners (eg Wearing and Neil 2009), and in the long run this ought to have a positive influence on domestic tourists in developing countries via the ‘demonstration effect’, which would then lead to greater demand-driven pressure for genuine ecotourism, and in turn sustainable tourism. Furthermore, ecotourism is globally becoming very fashionable, and many stakeholders, such as NGOs, government departments, and tourism industry participants, are recognising (or at least paying lip service to) its principles of environmental sustainability and local participation. Unfortunately demand-side pressure is still insufficient, and very few supply-side stakeholders are either willing or able to operationalise ecotourism’s ideals, mainly because their primary motive is making a profit in a very competitive business environment. The answer therefore would seem to lie in regulation. One major problem is whether ecotourism should prioritise nature or people, and many difficulties arise from the apparent incompatibility of these two fundamental objectives. This is particularly pertinent with regard to the establishment and management of national parks.

At this point it may be worthwhile asking whether a whole region or even an entire country could be modeled on the tenets of ecotourism, since the ideal would be that ecotourism influences and envelops all tourism. In the case of Bhutan this has indeed been attempted (Tobgay 1991, Brunet et al 2001, Dorji 2001, Hershock 2006), although in Bhutan it would be

more correct to say that tourism is geared towards sustainability, since most of its attractions are cultural. Bhutan's tourism model is 'low volume-high yield', which aims to preserve the country's cultural heritage by imposing strict control over arrival visas, and enforcing high minimum spending levels. Of visa revenues collected, some 35% are supposedly directed towards tourism infrastructure and poverty alleviation. Bhutan's is a classic supply-driven paradigm, but one that is hard for developing countries to implement, because it depends on good governance, firm regulation, and top-down control; and most importantly, it requires very strong tourist attractions. Seemingly Bhutan has all of these but at present, no Southeast Asian countries are able to meet these criteria. However, certain regions could possibly employ a variant of the 'Bhutan Model'. Laos was probably in a position to do this in the early 1990's before mass tourism became firmly established. In Thailand's Andaman Coast it could have been possible to achieve this in places like the Adang Archipelago, or the Krabi Islands, if efforts had been made earlier. Unfortunately, and despite these areas now being designated national parks, this possibility is most unlikely, as shown by the environmental and social disaster that the islands of Ko Lipe and Phi Phi are becoming (see Wongbusarakum, Supin (2002 and 2007)). The Bhutan case illustrates the differences between demand-driven and supply-driven regimes, as shown in Fig 4.

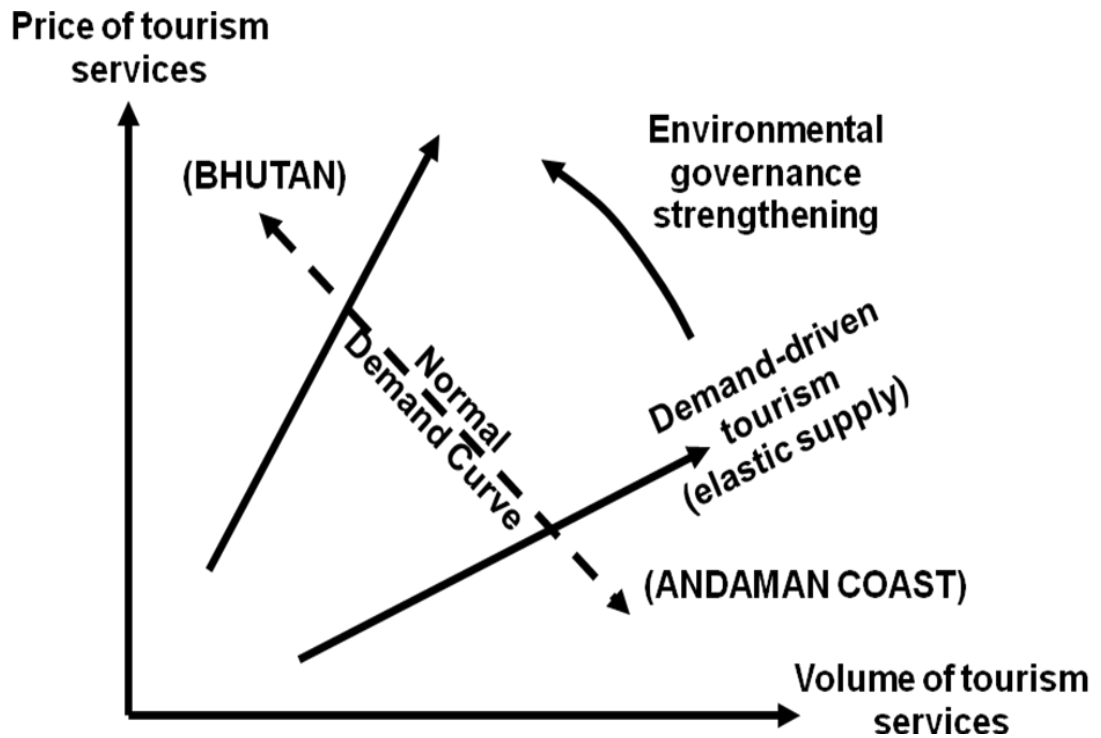


Figure 4. Demand-Driven Tourism versus Supply-Driven Tourism

In general, developing countries seem to be condemned to demand-driven tourism, while developed countries can often attain supply-driven tourism (maybe better expressed as supply-controlled tourism). The conditions under which demand-driven tourism becomes dominant are related to dependency theory and power imbalances, as discussed for example by Britton (1991) and Cheong and Miller (2000), which can be correlated to levels of social, economic and political development. These result in radical differences in levels of environmental governance between demand-driven and supply-driven regimes. In short, demand-driven means ever-increasing numbers of tourists are being catered for and tourism producers having little choice but to acquiesce to their needs. Conversely, supply-driven puts local tourism producers in charge and allows them to choose the aspects of tourism that benefit them. Switzerland is one of the best examples globally. It is clearly very difficult for ecotourism to be established and sustained under regimes of demand-driven tourism, and Thailand suffers accordingly. Thailand does have pockets of genuine ecotourism here and there, but these normally transform into mass tourism as soon as improvements in transport

infrastructure allow. The above structural reality, ie that tourism in Thailand is so obviously demand-driven, is the fundamental difficulty in attempting to change the negative directionality of the development process, together with that fact that the majority of tourists to Thailand prefer mass tourism to ecotourism - otherwise they would not popularise it.

Central to the problem of defining ecotourism and assessing its utility are the different perspectives of a multitude of stakeholders, and whether these relate more to the ethics of ecotourism or to its profitability. For example Holden (2003) says:

There is little evidence to suggest that a new environmental ethic (ie from an instrumental ethic to a more conservation-based ethic) is desired by the majority of tourism stakeholders, with the exception of eco-warriors and possibly some environmental based NGOs. A simple reason for this lack of desire is probably explained by a consideration of whom a new environmental ethic would benefit or more poignantly disadvantage.

And as for 'bottom-up' ecotourism (or community based tourism) he adds:

...it cannot be assumed that united local communities will necessarily advocate conservation. This is particularly likely to be the case when alternative forms of development to tourism are perceived as offering better economic and social opportunities.

Stakeholders will obviously interpret and use ecotourism in ways that best serve their interests, and they have many differing perspectives. For example is it is: a profitable niche market? – eg most of the tourism industry; a more fulfilling touristic experience? - a minority (but growing) number of tourists; a spearhead for sustainable development? – NGOs; a vehicle for increasing livelihoods? – local communities; a means of educating mass tourists? – environmentalists; a route to 'greening' mass tourist destinations? – environmentalists; a

means of funding environmental protection and conservation? –environmentalists; a publicity theme? – governments and agencies.

Another way of looking at this comes from a study by Leksakundilok (2004) who describes ecotourism practice in Thailand as comprising four categories: a) adherence to the concept and idea of nature-based tourism management - such as by national parks and environmentalists; b) focusing on local community development and management - mostly by NGOs, community developers and some government agencies; c) pushing the ecotourism development process into all forms of tourism - mainly by scholars, TAT and some entrepreneurs; d) using elements of ecotourism to support business images - mostly by tour operators, investors, some media and government agencies (ie greenwashing). These differing perspectives illustrate the challenges in using stakeholder analysis in evaluating the efficacy of ecotourism projects.

Ecotourism also suffers heavily from the problem of ‘greenwashing’, and this is made abundantly clear when comparing most Thai tourism media (brochures, websites, publications, etc.) with what is happening on the ground. There is much casual use of the ‘eco label’ as a marketing tool, which gives a false impression of the minor impact that ecotourism is making. The website DiscoveryThailand.com provides a good example of this:

Although more recognised as a tropical paradise island, Phuket is still a great destination for the adventure seeker or eco-tourist. Inland Phuket has plenty of opportunities for treks and other eco-activities. There are key places of natural beauty on the island and other places for people interested in this type of experience.

In fact nowadays ‘Inland Phuket’ offers virtually nothing that can be remotely considered ecotourism, or ‘key places of natural beauty’. It is true though that eco-excursion companies use the island as a springboard into adjacent areas, such as Phang Nga.

To reiterate, to be considered genuine, ecotourism must be nature-based, environmentally sustainable, socially equitable and educative; however, as discussed, there are serious doubts as to whether these basic tenets can be successfully operationalised to achieve practical results. On the other hand it can be argued that ecotourism has been successful in a number of places in Southeast Asia, and some examples which I have personally witnessed include:

- Attracting domestic and international attention to an area's ecological value and discouraging predators (eg the reduction of dynamite/cyanide fishing of coral reefs at Bunaken Island, Indonesia).
- Elevating the economic and social status, and self-esteem, of indigenous people, so their cultures can better resist intrusion and marginalisation (eg the Igorot of Sagada, Philippines).
- Providing economically viable alternatives to destructive forms of exploitation and development (eg at Nam Ha Forest, Luang Nam Tha, Laos).
- Facilitating positive two-way cultural flows, in which tourists from consumerist societies gain respect for self-sufficient indigenous cultures, who in turn gain environmental awareness from the tourists (eg Muang Noi, Laos).
- Stimulating environmental awareness amongst indifferent or irresponsible mass tourists through 'eco-excursionism' in beautiful surroundings (eg Tam Coc, Vietnam).
- Educating domestic tour groups and schoolchildren, and focusing them on environmental activism in their own and neighboring countries (eg the Belum-Temengor Forest anti-logging movement, Malaysia).

In contrast there are also many ways in which ecotourism has been criticized: (adapted from Mowforth and Munt (2003) and supported with examples reported in Southeast Asia)

- It is a hollow cliché, a meaningless label, and often a ‘greenwashing’ marketing ploy used by unscrupulous operators; eg Chiang Mai’s many ‘ecotour’ providers and a large amount of the region’s tourism promotional material (Cohen 1996).
- It is one of the mantras of the ‘Lonely Planet Army’, which is constantly searching out new areas of ecological and cultural value and opening them to mass tourism and commercialization; as is happening for example in many remote parts of Laos and Vietnam (Santikul and Bauer (2006), and Straits Times 17/06/2008 ‘Vietnam’s crown jewels lose luster’).
- It reduces indigenous people to the status of objects, zooification and ‘living museums’, eg the Burmese Padaung (long neck) women who sought refuge in Thailand but became exploited (Tourism Concern: ‘Burmese Refugees Trapped by Tourism’ 28/03/2008, also Teo 2002).
- It can result in damage to fragile ecosystems in spite of claims of having minimal impact, eg diving activities in Sipadan, Malaysia prior to the expulsion of the resorts (Musa 2003).
- It seldom provides meaningful benefits to enough people and is a development path that leads nowhere, eg Bintan Resorts ecotour program, Indonesia (Potter 2007).
- It takes no account of the energy consumption, and carbon emissions, required to transport tourists to their ecotourism destinations (particularly air travel).

The above criticisms can be countered by saying that by virtue of being open to such condemnation, none of these examples represents genuine ecotourism. But this is a rather circular argument, which could probably be expressed by the statement “The best eco-tourist is one who does not travel, and the best eco-resort is the one that is not there”, a phrase often repeated in a variety of different forms. Unfortunately such utterances are trite and provide no solution to the very real problems of environmental and cultural destruction for millions of people. The challenges are not black and white and a great many compromises are necessary.

Ecotourism is much more a case of on-going damage control, attempting to ensure that natural resources and communities will not be degraded or destroyed, rather than ensuring clear-cut, lasting solutions.

At a deeper, more philosophical level, ecotourism presents many other contradictions, particularly in its relationship to local communities and cultures. For example, the following arguments have been made, and they are at the root of why genuine ecotourism is so difficult, and perhaps impossible to achieve (adapted from Butcher 2007):

- Ecotourism represents a romanticised search for the authenticity of the past through closeness to nature and simple communities – *but through lifestyles that most Westerners would reject as being unacceptable for themselves.*
- Ecotourism espouses traditional skills and cultures as the basis for sustainable development in poor communities – *but uses methods that are largely regarded in the West as being conservative and backward-looking.*
- Ecotourism claims to know what is best for local communities – *but advocates measures that are often imposed contrary to their wishes by outside forces.*
- Ecotourism celebrates cultures that are entrenched in the past - *rather than cultures that can create a future.*
- Ecotourism can liberate local people - *but often ends up constraining their development and trapping them in poverty.*
- Ecotourism emphasises local communities – *often at the expense of more important regional and national priorities.*
- Ecotourism celebrates ‘small scale’ – *when ‘large scale’ could often be better.*
- Ecotourism claims to achieve a symbiosis between the conservation of bio-cultural diversity and human development – *but these are two contradictory concepts that can rarely be reconciled in the midst of poverty.*

The above arguments give some idea of the theoretical and conceptual difficulties faced by what is termed ecotourism.

The Ecotourism Process

The task of developing a typology of ecotourism has kept many scholars busy, and many different schemes have been proposed. Some attempts have involved concepts such as: 'hard' versus 'soft' ecotourism (originating with Laarman and Durst 1987); 'active' versus 'passive' ecotourism (Orams 1995); and 'deep' versus 'shallow' ecotourism (Acott et al 1998). More recently Weaver (2005) has usefully proposed two main categories, ie 'Minimalist Ecotourism' (nature-based, shallow understanding and non-transformational), and 'Comprehensive Ecotourism' (nature/cultural-based, deep understanding and transformational), both of which are then further subdivided into 'Soft' and 'Hard' variants, with the latter classification being justified because: the hard/soft dichotomy is a well-recognized construct within the ecotourism literature that usefully differentiates respectively between small-scale, alternative-type products and market segments and those that align with large-scale or mass tourism.

However, I would postulate that these categorizations should not be polarized, but seen as continua, ie ranging from 'minimalist' to 'comprehensive', and from 'soft' to 'hard'.

Furthermore, in order to properly assess the ecotourism assets of an area or region, when looking at the supply side of ecotourism (ie the providers) the soft and hard variants of ecotourism should encompass four distinct modes:

1. Soft Ecotourism:

- a) Eco-Excursions (day trips)
- b) Eco-Resorts / Lodges

2. Hard Ecotourism:

- a) Eco-Tours (overnight trips)
- b) Homestays / Camping

Which can be arranged as a matrix:

	Soft	Hard
Activity	Eco-Excursions	Eco-Tours
Accommodation	Eco-Resorts/Lodges	Homestays / Camping

Weaver (2002) expanded on this approach with a Hard-Soft 'ecotourism spectrum' (Fig 5):

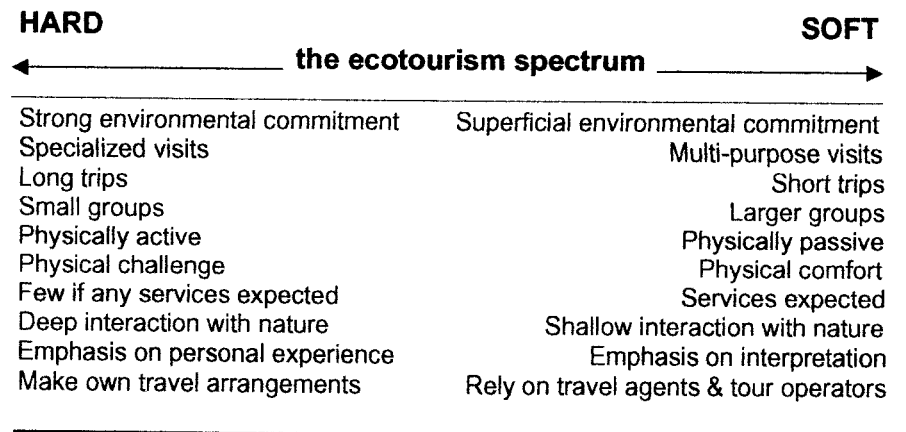


Figure 5. The Ecotourism Spectrum (adapted from Weaver 2002)

Developing a Framework for Ecotourism

In order to facilitate the study of ecotourism this research is based on a framework which utilises the tri-classification shown below, as this appears to be the most useful way of encompassing the entire ecotourism process and its impact on the environment (through environmental sustainability), communities (through social equity), and tourists (through education).

Ecotourism Modes: eco-excursions; ecotours; eco-resorts and eco-lodges; homestays and camping.

Ecotourism Localities: national and marine parks; 'other eco-zones'.

Ecotourism Mediators: government departments (national and local); national and marine parks (which can be localities and mediators); TAT and government linked agencies; industrial sectors; transport infrastructure; 'big tourism' (ie powerful tour operators and developers); travel agents; tour counters (small entrepreneurs selling tours for a commission); tour guides; NGOs; academia; media (mainly printed and web-based); communities.

In order to assist in visualizing and modeling the structure and process of ecotourism, these above classifications are incorporated into a three division 'demand side – mediator – supply side' ecotourism stakeholder schema, as represented in Fig 6.

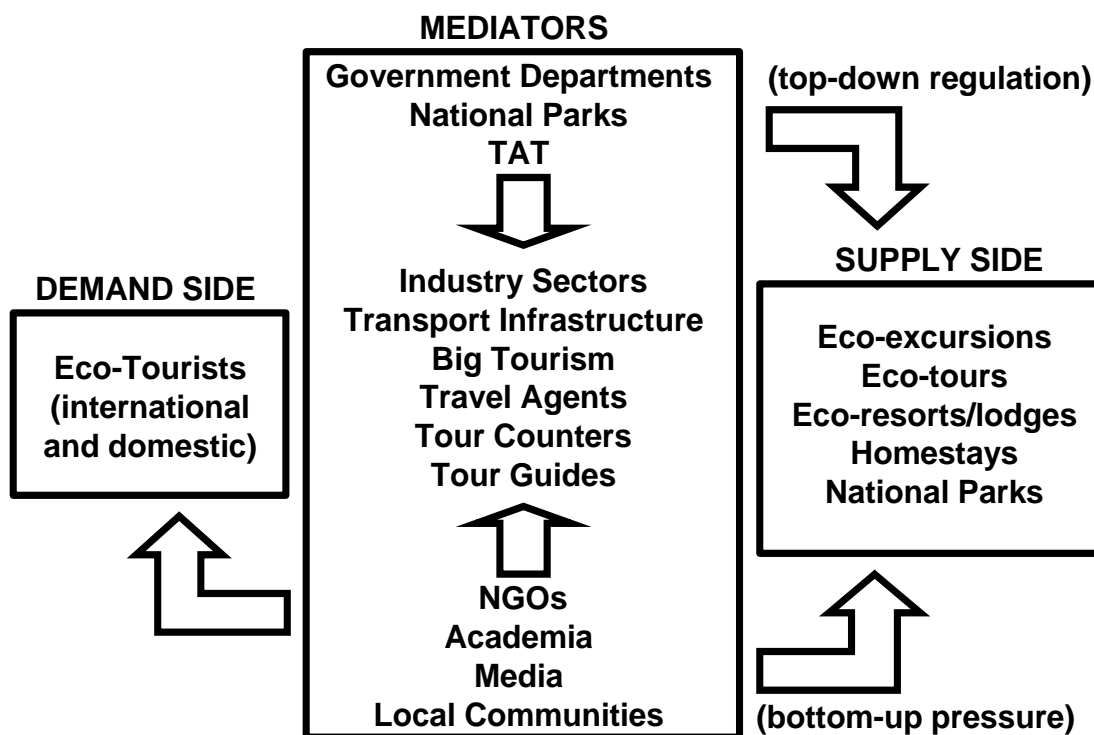


Figure 6. The Ecotourism Process

This model, which shares similarities with a more complicated (and to my mind confusing) effort by Weaver (Weaver and Lawton 2007), attempts to show how ecotourists purchase ecotourism services from the suppliers, with the process being heavily influenced by the presence of a variety of mediators. In fact three different types of ‘mediator’ can be identified, depending on the directionality of their influence on the ecotourism process (arrows indicating direction of influence). For example some mediators are capable of top-down regulation, while some are capable of bottom-up pressure (whether they choose to or not is a different matter). Those in the middle are subject to influence both from above and below (as well as from the forces of demand and supply). Each mediator’s vertical position in the hierarchy approximates to their relative power. Top-down ‘regulators’ can normally only expect to control the supply side, because for example it is difficult for governments to dictate to people that they should only take ecotourism-style vacations – Bhutan being an exception. Whereas bottom-up ‘pressurers’ can potentially influence both supply and demand sides. This

indicates that successful ecotourism comes about more as a result of supply side regulation. As previously mentioned, the main challenge is to establish how the ecotourism process, as schematized above, can be successfully operationalised to achieve sustainability for the environment, social equity for communities, and education for the tourists.

Related to this issue is Dolnicar's (2006) suggestion that there is a fundamental contradiction between the concepts of ecotourism and sustainability. He says that sustainability is 'supply-side oriented', ie for it to be viable, the tourism destination has to both want it and be in a position to achieve it – ie have the desire and control. Whereas ecotourism is 'demand-side oriented' - ie it is mainly the customer rather than the supplier who wants it. This is supported by another study identifying three main 'demand forces' that led to ecotourism in Thailand (and presumably elsewhere): a) the demand for environmental and resource conservation, b) the need for human development based on grassroots participation, and c) the demand of the tourism market for educational experiences related to the environment (Leksakundilok (2004) citing (TISTR 1997)). However, it seems clear that though ecotourism may be driven by demand, for it to be successful the supply side must do the regulating. There are probably two main reasons for this: a) there are simply not enough genuine ecotourists to ensure a satisfactory outcome from demand-side pressure alone, and b) the inherent difficulty of demand-side regulation with so many different tourist sources, comprising domestic and international clientele. Therefore the onus has to be on the supply side, ie the Thai authorities and the Thai tourism industry, to tackle the issue.

The growth of 'Mass Ecotourism'

Over the years a symbiotic relationship between ecotourism and mass tourism has developed in Phuket, and particularly in nearby Phang Nga Bay. Nick Kontogeorgopoulos of the University of Puget Sound has written extensively on this subject (Kontogeorgopoulos 1998a, 1998b, 1999, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2004a, 2004b, and 2005), with his more recent papers representing a distillation of his thinking on the subject, modified by feedback and input from others. However, it must be borne in mind that tourism in the Phuket area (which he mainly focuses on) is not necessarily representative of the way tourism has developed in the Andaman Coast's other five provinces. Some of whom have made attempts to restrain the sun, sea, sand and sex style tourism that Phuket is famous for; for example the government of Trang Province has publically committed to a policy of eco-friendly development (SIDA 2007).

Kontogeorgopoulos' main ideas can be summarized into three key themes:

1) Mass ecotourism – ie the synthesis of ecotourism and mass tourism into so called 'mass ecotourism'; may have utility in terms of promoting eco-awareness amongst mass tourists who would normally not be exposed to it. However, where this so-called 'mass ecotourism' is uncontrolled, it will eventually degrade the natural attractions it depends upon, due to the proliferation of unscrupulous copycat competition. Many examples of this are provided by the newly opened tourism markets of Vietnam and Laos, where what was initially ecotourism has quickly become mass tourism or up-market tourism – ie the very antithesis of ecotourism. Many interesting and unique sites are now saturated with tourists, which has cost them their original attractiveness to tourist's who want to experience 'real' indigenous life. Two sad examples of this are the tribal village areas of Mai Chau in Vietnam and Vang Vieng in Laos. Moreover, Kontogeorgopoulos's belief that 'mass ecotourism' stimulates awareness of nature is contested by some, including Weaver (2005) who feels that;

Contemporary ecotourism is largely incapable of fulfilling its potential to achieve meaningful environmental and sociocultural sustainability. More ominously, it is also vulnerable to being transformed into other, less benign forms of tourism. It is often the large scale magnitude of contemporary soft ecotourism that is cited as the great danger to destinations, with additional growth being equated with additional threat to the natural and cultural environment, as per the logic of the destination lifecycle model.

On the other hand Orams (1997) found evidence that the attitudes and behaviour of soft ecotourists can be transformed. However, this was achieved in Australia using iconic fauna, namely the feeding of wild dolphins, therefore it may not have much relevance to mass ecotourism in developing localities like Thailand's Andaman Coast that have few iconic fauna, other than some tame elephants and a few hard-to-spot dugong and turtles. On the evidence of my own research I have to reluctantly agree with Weaver, that in the absence of industry regulation, ecotourism is highly likely to transform into mass tourism. However, if it can be somehow controlled, in the longer term it may positively change environmental attitudes, which is probably its real value.

2) Ecotourism is a tough business. Southern Thailand is a very difficult political and cultural environment for genuine ecotourism to be successful. Tourism is largely unregulated and those organisations that theoretically have the power to be able to affect some degree of control over its development, ie government agencies, and big tourism, seem unable or (more likely) unwilling to do so. Compounding this is that NGOs, media, and academia are too weak and disorganized to effectively pressurize power holders into taking responsibility and imitating action. In fact there is an element of gangsterism about the business climate in Southern Thailand [and indeed some scholars such as Ockey (1998) claim this is true of most of Thailand]. The most successful ecotourism operators have learned to be 'street smart' and know how to 'play the local game'.

3) Empowerment is problematic and difficult to operationalise. Because of local ethnic and religious fragmentation, and pronounced hierarchies of power, in Southern Thailand it is very difficult to achieve genuine empowerment for local communities through ecotourism, at least empowerment as Westerners would perceive it. It is usually only the rich and well-connected elites that gain much from ecotourism and indeed much from tourism in general. Most local people are simply low-level wage earners who have to compete with outsiders from other parts of Thailand. Kontogeorgopoulos' therefore considers that empowerment will not apply so much to communities, but to employees in ecotourism companies, who presumably hope to take over the business if and when the foreign founders depart or are forced out.

It is interesting that Kontogeorgopoulos did not include scuba diving in his research, which is a curious omission since it is probably the only widespread example of genuine ecotourism in the Phuket area. Nor does he study eco-resorts and homestays, possibly in the belief that eco-resorts do not qualify as ecotourism, and homestays are too few in number to be important.

The Ecotourists

It is worth asking what percentages of tourists really have a deep interest in conservation and want to learn about nature and local culture. Some academic work has been carried out in relation to Thailand in terms of travel motivation and image, particularly by Tapachai and Waryszak (2000), Rittichainuwat et al (2001), and Henkel et al (2006); with the latter indicating that Thai domestic tourists regard cultural sightseeing, friendly people, and food to be significant; while international tourists find nightlife and entertainment more important. It needs mentioning that Thailand has serious image problems in some sections of the tourism market because of its reputation as a sex destination (Nuttavuthisit 2007). However, 'value for money' is another strong image that tourists have of Thailand, and indeed compared to many sun-sea-sand European and Caribbean destinations it is good value (one example being a meal of tiger prawns, costing around 75 euro per kg on the Portuguese Algarve compared with around 20 euro in Phuket). In fact Thailand was recently awarded the designation of 'Best Country Brand for Value for Money' by the Country Brand Index (CBI) during World Trade Market (WTM), London, 2008 (thailandtourismupdate.com). Some of the above research also suggests that pollution in Thailand is an important concern, and therefore the overall impression is that the country may not be the destination of choice for most committed ecotourists. According to my fieldwork, relatively few tourists engage in overnight ecotours to remote areas or stay at homestays or basic campsites. Most who do get to sample nature are excursionist 'mass ecotourists', who do not seem to have much interest beyond day trips away from the beaches and flesh pots. However, as discussed above, it is quite possible that they could be transformed by exposure to local nature and cultures.

Many scholars have attempted to create typologies of ecotourists and the following list of Lindberg's is typical; although most tourists probably move between categories, from place to place and from time to time:

Type 1) Hard-Core Nature Tourists: Scientific researchers or members of tours specifically designed for education, removal of litter, or similar purposes.

Type 2) Dedicated Nature Tourists: People who take trips specifically to see protected areas and who want to understand local natural and cultural history.

Type 3) Mainstream Nature Tourists: People who visit the Amazon, the Rwandan gorilla park, or other destinations primarily to take an unusual trip.

Type 4) Casual Nature Tourists: People who partake of nature incidentally as part of a broader trip. (Lindberg 1991)

Another typology was generated by the study of visitors to Thailand's Doi Inthanon National Park near Chiang Mai, which identified five clusters of tourist types, ie: Birding Eco-tourist, General Eco-tourist, Highlights General Tourist, Highlights Traveller and Trekker. One finding was that ecotourists were older and better educated than other tourists (Hvenegaard and Dearden 1998, also Wearing and Neil 2009), so it seems that demographics and psychographics may be important in predicting what sort of person is likely to be interested in ecotourism. Other research has found that ecotourists tend to be: older, male, better educated, willing to pay more, travel more frequently, prefer couples or small groups, require more personalised service, be interested in nature for its own sake, desire destination information and instruction, willing to use 'adventure type' accommodation, want to experience local customs, food and drink. (Garrod and Wilson 2003)

Plog's 'Psychocentric-Allocentric Continuum' (Plog 1974) can help explain the development of tourism in the Andaman Coast from the standpoint of tourist psychographics. According to his well-known bell-curve model, Plog's 'Allocentrics' are adventurous tourists, and his 'Psychocentrics' are cautious tourists. It can be assumed that Allocentrics are more likely to be ecotourists than Psychocentrics. Looking at the timeframe from 1980 to 2000, when tourists began visiting Phuket, Ko Lanta and Tarutao: Until 1980 Phuket was receiving only Allocentrics, during which time there were no tourists going to Lanta or Tarutao - by 1990

Phuket was receiving mostly Midcentrics, Ko Lanta Allocentrics, and Tarutao hardly anyone – and by 2000 Phuket was receiving mostly Psychocentrics, Ko Lanta mostly Midcentrics, and Tarutao Allocentrics. In other words there has been a kind of ‘Plog Wave’ advancing steadily southwards through the region, starting in Phuket and ending in Lipe, with the Allocentrics moving on to greener pastures when localities became too developed (Fig 7).

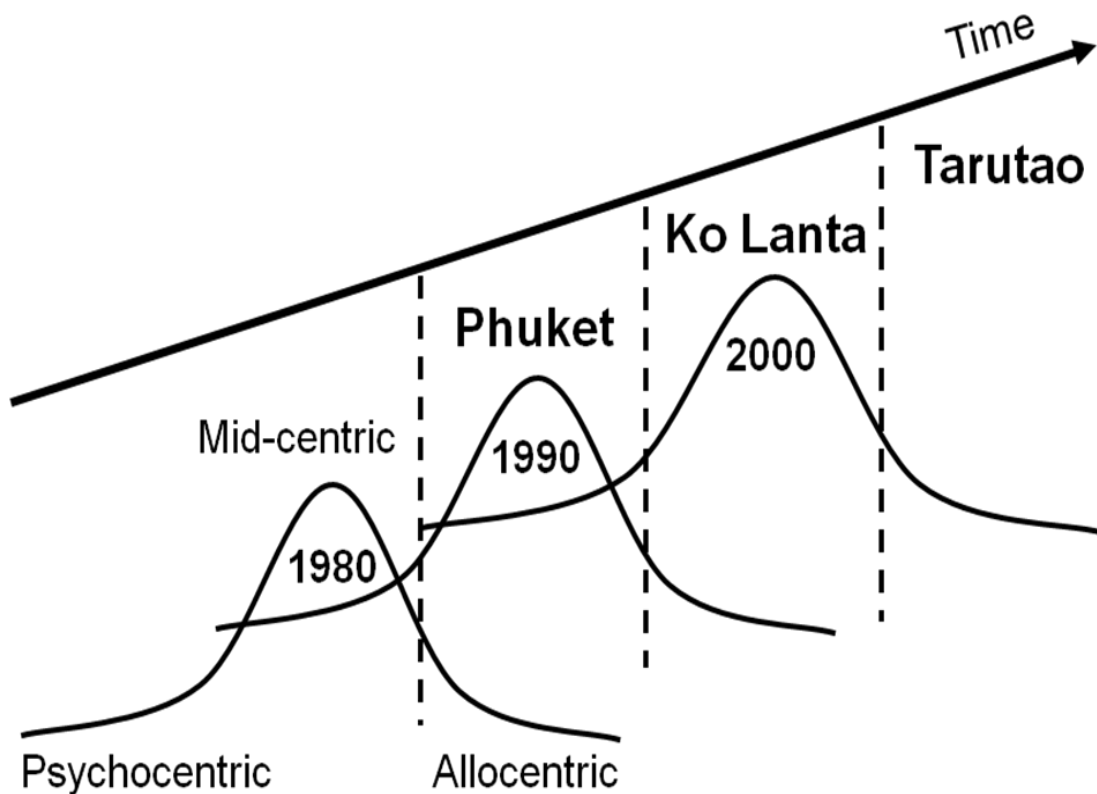


Figure 7. A ‘Plog Wave’ through the Andaman Coast

Further research on Plog’s continuum by Litvin (2006), has shown that its bell distribution is in fact skewed toward the psychocentric end of the curve, suggesting that most tourists are psychocentric and less likely to be ecotourists. However, it is not unreasonable to assume that this study is western-centric and will not necessarily apply to Asian tourists (who this research suggests are generally highly psychocentric). Another view on this is Kontogeorgopoulos’s ‘Mass-Alternative Tourism Continuum’ (Kontogeorgopoulos 2003b) which proposes a continuum (progressing from allocentric towards psychocentric) comprising backpackers, adventurers, and mass ecotourists. Again Kontogeorgopoulos states that his

findings apply mainly to Western tourists. All this suggests that most ecotourists will eventually stop coming to the Andaman Coast when the remoter localities have been developed, which present trends suggest within the next 20 years. Where they will go to after that is anybody's guess, since most of Southeast Asia is heading the same way and 'authentic' destinations are rapidly disappearing.

It should be noted that the term 'backpacker' is now problematic, because huge numbers of tourists travel light, including many affluent people who claim it is the only way to achieve enough mobility to be truly 'authentic'. As such the term backpacker is becoming redundant in a descriptive sense and certainly no longer characterizes the hippy budget traveller of years ago. There has also been much debate over the benefits to local communities of being a 'backpacker destination' (see for example Scheyvens 2002), where backpackers constitute a type of destructive 'Lonely Planet Army'. For example:

Even among the voices who speak up in defence of backpacking - as a group sowing the seeds of a global community, and spending money chiefly with local small business along the way - few disagree that backpackers act as 'wedges' for tourism to develop in a location. Once backpackers have 'found' a place, there is little turning back. Where they lead, others almost inevitably follow. (Hickman 2008)

Overall, the research on this subject is inconclusive, and since the term backpacker seems to have lost utility its use has been minimized in this thesis.

It is worth reviewing some of the features that attract ecotourists to a destination (adapted from Kruger 2005): Natural Beauty; Distinctive Ecosystems – mountains, tropical highlands; rainforests, rivers, lakes, karsts, swamps, mangroves, coral islands, beaches; Flora and Fauna - especially if 'charismatic'; Tribal People - distinctive indigenous cultures; Wilderness - unspoiled pristine environments; Interesting Local small-scale Economies; Areas Difficult to Access - therefore having few other tourists.

In fact tourist's attitudes towards destination environment and local culture are highly ambiguous, with most professing environmental concern, but often displaying quite the opposite behaviour (the overnight camping in Phi Phi's Maya Bay is an example of this – where 'back to nature' tourism turns into a rave party after sunset). Since it is clear that the environment of the Andaman Coast is continuing to worsen in nearly every tourism location, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the majority of visiting tourists are hedonistically-oriented and largely indifferent to their impact on the destination. In other words there is insufficient pressure from the demand side of the tourism industry to stimulate more eco-friendly tourism. In fact research done in Australia suggests that most tourists (both locals and foreigners) are oblivious to environmental degradation:

Previous studies on perceptions of the environmental impacts have often concluded that tourists are not very perceptive of their own effects on the visited natural areas, or that what they do notice are primarily the direct impacts (like rubbish and vandalism) of other tourists. This study found that many tourists to the west MacDonnell ranges did not distinguish in either a general sense, or for specific environmental impacts, between the site that they were at and other sites visited in the area, despite a measurable increase in deterioration at sites with higher annual user numbers. To this extent, the results are consistent with previous work (Hillery et al 2001).

Research conducted in tourist locations in Krabi Province (Krabi Town, Ao Nang, Ko Phi and Railay Beach) supports the idea that the majority of tourists are not too concerned about aesthetics, or by inference the environment, ie:

...the statistical findings suggest that tourists do not pay a premium for reductions in aesthetic pollution, congestion or noise pollution. The implication is that the economic incentives for hotel managers to focus on environmental quality are limited. This may lead to the evolution of unsustainable tourism developments that

move quickly from brief boom periods into a vicious circle of environmental degradation and economic decline (Baddeley 2004).

More conscientious foreign visitors to the Andaman Coast, probably Western and Japanese, may be disillusioned by the lack of control and commitment exhibited by government, local communities and the tourism industry, and feel there is little they can do to influence things. A general ethos of 'enjoy it while it lasts' seems to prevail. This attitude could be considered a 'Tragedy of the Commons' (Hardin 1968), except that the region is not really a commons, but the home and source of livelihoods for tens of thousands of people.

More often than not, resources are overused and degraded, as is the unfortunate fate of most 'common pool resources'. When this happens, sustainable development is severely threatened: economic well being declines, environmental conditions worsen, social injustice grows, and tourist satisfaction drops (Briassoulis 2002).

On the other hand, according to an EU-Chulalongkorn University project, Thailand is facing challenges because it is:

Primarily viewed in the EU as a mass tourism destination, suffering from a degraded image in terms of its environment and social conditions, Thailand is increasingly shifting away from the growing expectations of the EU customers and tour operators in terms of sustainable tourism management (ERIC 2006).

Though this suggests that Western customers may be concerned after all, ERIC's claim seems to be contradicted by ever-increasing arrivals from Europe.

Another negative factor from an environmental point of view is the threat posed by the increase in 'Tourists of Asian Origin' (in line with Asia's economic growth). Research points to Asian tourists (principally meaning Thai and Chinese) demanding higher standards of food and accommodation before they will go on ecotours, ie they will only go if they can be treated

as up-market or mass ecotourists. In some locations this has given rise to suppliers facing the dilemma of needing to upgrade their infrastructure to attract greater numbers of Asian tourists, without compromising the authentic experience that attracts genuine (mainly Western) ecotourists (Santikul and Bauer 2006). This sounds pessimistic but Weaver (1998) was optimistic that ecotourism could change Asian attitudes to ecotourism. He states, “It is also likely that, with increased prosperity and exposure to ‘western’ environmental attitudes, ecotourism will emerge as a more popular recreational option among the domestic-tourism sector.” Though eleven years after he wrote this there are still no clear signs that his prophecy was correct. But what about Thai domestic ecotourists – are there significant numbers of them? A survey carried out on young Thais came to the somewhat lame conclusion that, “it appears that the respondents are positive about and support the concept of ecotourism. They have ecotourism experience and are interested in related activities. This suggests that ecotourism should be promoted and enhanced as a form of responsible tourism among Thai youths” (Sangpikul and Batra 2007). However this view was not confirmed by observing the majority of Thai tourists on outdoor excursions or from the comments of tour operators and resort owners, who say they behave badly.

Ecotourism and Social Equity:

Turning to the tricky issue of social equity for local communities in tourism localities, there are three main perspectives to be considered, as illustrated by the following types of comments repeatedly heard throughout the Andaman Coast:

From the 'TOP' (eg resort developers) – “the locals are sitting on valuable land which they are incapable of developing and are being selfish in trying to hold on to because we can make far better use of it for the greater good of society”.

From the 'BOTTOM' (eg minority communities) – “we have lived here for hundreds of years following our traditional lifestyle and the land has become ours to use as we wish. Outsiders should leave us alone”.

From the 'MIDDLE' (eg NGO's) – “we must consider alternative views and include local communities as an integral part of development plans”.

Such illustrates the problem of trying to find solutions that please all stakeholders, and brings in the complex issue of stakeholder analysis – as studied for example by Brughal and Varvasovszky (2000). In the relationship between ecotourism and communities, the success of an ecotourism project and the degree of empowerment it achieves, seems dependent upon the manner in which the ecotourism projects are initiated, established and controlled. It is important to identify in each specific case whether these processes are a) top-down or bottom-up, and b) exogenous or endogenous. With the emergence in recent decades of a 'new development orthodoxy' that emphasizes the importance of participation, empowerment, bottom-up planning, and indigenous knowledge to the success of eco-development; then it would seem that ecotourism should aim to be bottom-up and endogenous. However, in practice, socio-economic, political and cultural realities make this very difficult to achieve, and therefore most ecotourism operations tend to be top-down and exogenous - in other words they are controlled and initiated by powerful outsiders. Jones (2005) noted that, “It is rare in the literature to find examples of community-based initiatives that are not managed, co

managed, or initiated by ‘outsiders’”. Even though ecotourism imposed in this fashion has a high chance of failure. In Bintan Indonesia, a series of expensively-initiated ecotourism projects failed mainly because the process was top-down and exogenous (Potter (2007)). Another way of viewing this is whether the initiative for ecotourism comes from the demand side or the supply side of the market. In the Andaman Coast it nearly always comes from the demand side, with ecotourism operations usually being started by tourists, who after exploring the area and seeing opportunities decide to stay back and start businesses. All the early sea kayaking and scuba diving operations started out this way (John Gray etc). It is quite understandable that local communities have no great interest in supporting ecotourism operations that they did not initiate, and from which they derive no great benefit. But this begs the question of who is going to initiate ecotourism projects if the locals show no inclination to do so.

Communities are often marginalised because they cannot adapt to and compete with more aggressive newcomers, which is a universal problem that can be explained by conflict theory. But in spite of this some communities are still able to profit from tourism, especially where they are central to the touristic experience, ie in places where there would be little touristic experience without them. One such example are the Hill Tribe Trekking ‘ecotours’ in Northern Thailand (see Cohen 1996) – where if you take away the hill tribe people there is no hill tribe tour. Unfortunately the Andaman Coast has very few local communities where the people themselves are the main attraction. Perhaps only the ‘Sakai’ in Trang Province would qualify as ‘exotic primitive people’. But by all accounts tourism has not helped the Sakai community very much, and they seem to be subject to ‘zooification’ (Hanneberg 2006). As for the Urak Lawoi of Ko Lanta and Ko Lipe, and the Moken of Surin Islands; they may not be ‘exotic’ enough for the average tourist, although their nomadic-fisherman style way of life is in fact quite fascinating. On Ko Lanta and the Surin Islands such communities are mainly seen as a harmless curiosity, whereas on Ko Lipe they are often seen as a nuisance, especially by outside developers. In reality all of these island communities have been marginalized by

mass tourism (see Granbom 2005 and Wongbusarakum 2002 and 2007) and ecotourism has not yet provided meaningful solutions.

As uncovered by this research, the general picture is that despite a few exceptions (on Ko Phi Phi and Ko Pannyi for example) most local communities in the Andaman Coast are seriously lacking in either the 'capability' or 'capacity' to profit from tourism of any sort, be it ecotourism or mass tourism. This reinforces the reality that running any tourist business requires business sense, that most locals have not yet acquired (see McKercher 1993, Seomodinto and Wong 2004).

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Area of research and personal involvement

For the purposes of this research Thailand's 'Andaman Coast' is the coastline and associated archipelago stretching from Thailand's border with Burma in the north, to its border with Malaysia in the south, and for simplicity is also referred to as 'the region'. It includes, going from north to south, the provinces of Ranong, Phang Nga, Phuket, Krabi, Trang and Satun (Fig 1). Although the Andaman Coast is often referred to simply as 'Southern Thailand', especially in traveller guidebooks, this term is both inaccurate and misleading. Southern Thailand also includes the three mainly Islamic provinces of the former Sultanate of Pattani (ie Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat), which in terms of tourism are quite different from the Andaman Coast. These provinces, together with Songkhla, have experienced a long-standing and recently escalating insurgency (see for example McCargo 2008), which has reduced normal tourism to negligible proportions. Currently their only significant tourism activity is the well-established 'sex, shopping and eating' tourism by Malaysians to Had Yai, together with some other equally nefarious border towns such as Sungei Golok and Betong. Though the rural nature of these provinces may give them future ecotourism potential, they remain outside the scope of this research. Other tourism destinations that are often referred to as Southern Thailand (but not included in this research due to space and time constraints) are the islands of Ko Samui, Ko Pha Ngan, Ko Tao and Ang Thong National Park. These all lie off the coast of Surat Thani Province and because they have very similar tourism development problems to the Andaman Coast are worthy of future research.

My familiarity with Thailand's Andaman Coast was acquired through many visits over a 28-year period. I first went as a tourist in November 1981, and have been a regular visitor ever since, often for extended periods. Over the years I have personally visited nearly every tourism locality, some on numerous occasions. From October 2005, until my most recent field

trip in December 2009, I adopted a research-oriented approach to my visits, and undertook fieldwork in a number of locations, concentrating particularly on the islands of Phuket, Ko Phi Phi, Ko Lanta, Ko Muk and Ko Lipe (Appendix 2). This period of fieldwork, done for this thesis, covered the region's recovery from the December 2004 Tsunami to the global financial crisis in 2008. I freely admit that being an adventure-oriented ecotourist, my views on tourism development are biased because of what I consider to be highly negative changes over the past three decades. During my early visits most places still felt rural and natural, although they could hardly be considered pristine, since tin mining and rubber cultivation had already altered much landscape and rain forest. But subsequent development has in my view had an increasingly negative effect, though this opinion seems not to be shared by most tourists, who clearly revel in the vastly improved infrastructure and facilities. Being an early visitor to the Andaman Coast I accept that in some small way I am also responsible for its transformation of the into a mass tourism destination, by virtue of telling everyone how marvelous a place it was. Nevertheless, as an environmentally conscious traveler I strongly feel that the changes are both regrettable and avoidable. The Andaman Coast represents a microcosm of the general trajectory of unsustainable growth being witnessed throughout developing countries, with its most serious consequence being climate change.

Hypothesis and fieldwork methodology

To address the objectives of this research the following hypothesis is presented for falsification or otherwise on the basis of the evidence uncovered:

The majority of those activities that are marketed as ecotourism are environmentally sustainable, socially equitable and educative; and genuine ecotourism is replacing mass tourism as the dominant tourism development paradigm.

My chosen methodology involved surveying the Andaman Coast and investigating cases that I felt were relevant to the objectives of the research. This entailed visiting nearly all tourism

localities, identifying and conducting interviews with key informants, along with my own observation of, and participation in, organized tours. I felt that examining ecotourism in a wide variety of contexts and locations would be a more regionally holistic approach than simply focusing on one locality or on one type of ecotourism activity. It is valid to ask whether this methodology was sufficiently thorough, compared with undertaking a full scale 'total area survey', involving structured interviews with all the major stakeholders, combined with participation in every possible type of ecotourism activity. While such an exercise would have obviously generated much more data, it was clearly beyond the capacity of a single researcher; therefore a more limited survey using 'case study methodology' (Tellis 1997) was employed at as many selected localities as practicable. Ideally cases would have been chosen so as to be representative of all the elements in the ecotourism tri-classification outlined in the previous chapter (ie Modes, Localities and Mediators), although again this was not as thorough as wished, owing to the time required to cover such a large field and the reluctance of government-linked officials and powerful businessmen to cooperate or respond candidly in interviews. Most of the case studies therefore focused mainly on eco-excursions and eco-resorts, where key informants could be more easily approached. In this regard my research focus changed from the time I started fieldwork. Initially I was concerned with the apparent overall lack of sustainable tourism; while later on I focused more on evaluating ecotourism on its own terms, and the impact it had sustainability.

In many cases I joined ecotourism excursions both as an observer and a participant. My main objectives were to assess how genuine the experience was, and what tourists, operators and local communities got out of it compared with what they expected. I identified as many knowledgeable people as I could who were willing to be interviewed. These included a wide variety of individuals such as: local and western tourists, ecotourism operators, mass tourism operators, tour guides, boat operators, diving operators, western tour operators, resort/hotel owners and managers, restaurant operators, local teachers, national park personnel, NGO personnel, academics, local authors, freelance writers, yachtsmen, community leaders,

minority leaders, village heads, homestay operators, ex-pat retirees, tourism organizations, newspaper/magazine editors, journalists, activists, environmentalists, and government officials. Interviews were conducted at any time and location convenient to the interviewee; usually at their offices, place of business or residence, or sometimes in bars and restaurants or during tours. Nearly all interviews were conducted face to face, with a number of follow-up interviews by telephone in order to clarify or obtain additional information. My questions were chosen to be appropriate to the knowledge and level of education that I thought someone in their position would possess, and to uncover their understanding of ecotourism and sustainability issues in relation to their own activities. Typical questions included:

What are your impressions of this tour? Does this tour qualify to be called ecotourism? What are tourists learning from this tour? How is this ecotourism operation impacting the environment/local communities? What/who are the biggest challenges/threats to these ecotourism operations? Who is benefiting from it? What other ecotourism activities do you know taking place? Are any government departments or NGOs concerning themselves with ecotourism. Are any academic or NGO studies being conducted in the area? I told some interviewees that I was engaged in an academic study and others that I was writing a book, depending on which I felt would elicit the better response. With regard to interviewing tourists, if time had allowed, it would have been much more enlightening to have conducted a series of structured interviews and surveys. However, I did not consider this to be a practical measure considering the resources I had at my disposal.

Where I met with reluctance to discuss certain issues (such as who was exercising the power behind the scenes) I tried approaching the question from different perspectives and was ready to change direction or drop it if further resistance was encountered. Most of the private sector interviewees were very cooperative and I met with some of them a number of times over the course of several visits. Except for government-linked officials, I felt that most people were being reasonably candid and truthful. Most of the comments are not attributed, because I do

not wish to compromise people's livelihoods or personal safety, which in some places such as Ko Lipe, is a real possibility (see Wongbusarakum 2002).

Existing sources of research and challenges

Fieldwork was combined with a thorough review of existing literature and web content, especially on work specific to the region. This included the work of: Cohen, Chettamart, Dobias, Granbom, Hanneberg, Henley, Hvengaard and Dearden, Kontogeorgopoulos, Montgomery, Parnwell, Pipithvanichtham, Ruohomäki, Shepherd, Sriphnomya, Weidermeyer, Wong and Wongbusarakum. Also examined were a number of academic and NGO-funded studies, which have recently been carried out in the region. Examples of these are: CHARM 2007 in Phang-Nga, SIDA 2007 in Trang, Berkeley-Chulalongkorn 2005 in Krabi and 2007 in Krabi and Ko Lanta, and SACSTP 2008 in Trang/Satun. While these are useful to a researcher it is doubtful as to how much they effect meaningful change in the way tourism is carried out. For example the obvious lack of action following the 2007 Trang SIDA study project shows how bringing in experts and spending considerable sums of money is no guarantee that local authorities will maintain interest once the funding runs out and the consultants have gone home. Another serious problem is that most projects and academic studies appear to 'pull their punches', and the avoidance of tough issues is a striking feature of nearly all NGO work. Except for Wongbusarakum's research on the Urak Lawoi of Ko Lipe (which resulted in her being physically assaulted), and Granbom's research on the Urak Lawoi of Ko Lanta (which also resulted in her being threatened), the majority of studies and projects shy away from criticizing major stakeholders such as government departments, big business interests and national parks. They rarely 'name names' so to speak. A prime example of this was the way the Trang SIDA study was forced to remove any reference to the non-conservationist activities of Hat Chao Mai National Park in its final reports. Hardly any reports go into deep discussion of stakeholder power, motivation and vested interest. Obviously this is because these issues are highly sensitive and there is physical danger in

trying to penetrate powerful business-government linkages and networks. Many studies fail to delve enough into specific issues, and rely too much on bland generalities and platitudes for fear of upsetting influential people. Of course it may be that the task of getting powerful people to tell the whole story is next to impossible in a country like Thailand (or anywhere else for that matter) and it is also a limitation in my own research.

Also, most NGO and academic studies seem highly focused on the role and empowerment of local communities in providing sustainability solutions. While not denying the importance of this approach, the influence of local communities on overall development trajectory is normally marginal compared to that of powerful stakeholders, the main ‘resource exploiters’ as it were. The Berkeley 2007 Ko Lanta study is an example of such a bottom-up focus, which undoubtedly satisfies the leftist biases of most academics and NGO researchers, but does not get to the heart of the island’s problems. Admittedly it is uncertain whether bottom-up environmentalism works any better than top-down environmentalism, as demonstrated by the apparent success of Singapore’s command and control approach. This is a complicated issue that needs greater research focus.

With regard to official interviews and obstacles to research, I generally found that talking to Thai government officials, at any level, (ie provincial, municipal, and local), as well as the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) and the National Parks, was somewhat unrevealing. These people did give a certain amount of factual information, but were usually unprepared to be candid or objective in assessing the main challenges within their areas of authority. Perhaps understandably, they adhered to the line that everything is doing fine and they were all doing a great job. I got the distinct impression that they were always ‘looking over their shoulder’ and probably unwilling to confide in foreigners – perhaps understandable in the circumstances. The few powerful tourism businessmen I managed to talk to were even less forthcoming. However from the existing literature, I got the feeling that other researchers, even those who are local or from famous academic institutions, were no more successful in

this regard. This lack of input from certain powerful ‘mediators’, especially influential entities such as government, TAT and big tourism, highlights how in many respects this research is incomplete and needs to be supplemented by more penetrating fieldwork, if and when that becomes possible.

CHAPTER 4 ECOTOURISM: DESCRIPTION, ASSESSMENT AND DISCUSSION

Ecotourism in the Andaman Coast is assessed and discussed under the following previously defined tri-classification:

Ecotourism Modes (how ecotourism is carried out), ie: eco-excursions, ecotours, eco-resorts and eco-lodges, homestays and camping.

Ecotourism Localities (where ecotourism is carried out), ie: national and marine parks, and 'other eco-zones'.

Ecotourism Mediators (who controls and influences ecotourism),ie: government departments (national and local), TAT and government linked agencies, industrial sectors, transport infrastructure, 'big tourism' (powerful tour operators and developers), travel agents, tour counters (small entrepreneurs who sell tours for a commission), tour guides, NGOs, academia, media (mainly printed and web-based), and local communities.

There is an unavoidable degree of overlap between these classifications. For example national and marine parks are discussed under localities though often they are also ecotourism mediators, this is because many parks allow outside-operated tours and resorts within their jurisdiction, thus they can heavily influence the way ecotourism is conducted. Also, for reasons that are clear from previous sections, it is difficult to derive an accurate estimate of the number of ecotourists visiting the Andaman Coast, however by some imaginative interpretation of the published TAT statistics (TAT 2007) this figure is probably in the region of 10 million per annum (see Appendix 1 for calculations). This chapter includes a number of case studies of ecotourism (or attempts to establish ecotourism) that have been chosen to illustrate the challenges involved.

Ecotourism Modes:

Eco-excursions

Excursions, day trips in other words, are by far the most popular form of those activities normally described as ecotourism, but as shown previously, for the most part they do not constitute genuine ecotourism. In theory excursions can give ecotourism a wider appeal by allowing them to be combined with mass tourism. Thus ecotourism can be created wherever there are suitable natural attractions near centers of mass tourism. However, in laissez-faire regulatory regimes this can easily lead to the destruction of the associated natural attractions when entry to the market is uncontrolled. There are many examples of such ‘uncontrolled ecotourism’ in the Andaman Coast, mostly involving unprofessional ‘fly-by-night copycat’ operators, with possibly the most notorious sector being sea kayaking in Phang Nga Bay. It can of course be argued that the only reason sea kayaking became established in Phang Nga was because the local longtail boats were too big to access the best hongs (sea-cave systems). If they had been able to their associations would have undoubtedly opposed kayaking and prevented them from becoming established, most likely resulting in an even more destructive free for all. Another two environmentally problematic businesses thriving in the region are elephant trekking and four-wheel drive safaris. These have proliferated from a few relatively environmentally-neutral small-scale ventures, to environment-threatening mass tourism operations, in the same way as sea-kayaking evolved; with large numbers of elephants now eating everything in sight and noisy four wheel drive vehicles churning up the remaining jungle.

The crucial factors here seem to be a) how accessible the natural attractions are to tourism; and b) if the activities are in a national park, how effectively the park can police them. For example the popular day trips to the Similan Islands are reasonably well conducted from an environmental viewpoint (except for too much littering), with the main tour operators

emphasising proper snorkeling procedures and care of wildlife etc. However, almost none of Krabi's crowded 'Four Island Tours' and 'Hong Island Tours' (using longtails or speedboats) qualify as ecotourism because they involve huge groups speeding from island to island, and a total lack of educational content (tour guides basically land you on the beach and leave you to it). As regards scuba diving, this comprises both eco-excursions (day diving) and eco-tours (live-aboard dive boats) and though it is one of the most authentic and popular forms of ecotourism in the region, it also has its own problems, mainly due to lack of control over numbers. In summary, there were relatively few genuine non-scuba diving eco-excursions found during this research. The few that did qualify include those organized by: John Gray SeaCanoe, Paddle Asia, Pataranak Krabi, Krabi River Tour, Andaman Discoveries and the Had Yao and Libong Nature Resorts. In contrast there were many excursions that could in no way be considered ecotourism.

Case Study 1: John Gray – the problems of being an ecotourism pioneer

As a number of researchers have discovered (for example Shepherd 2002, Kontogeorgopoulos 1998, and Dowling 2000), an excellent case study of ecotourism in the Phuket area is John Gray's SeaCanoe operation in Phang Nga Bay. This operation was started over 20 years ago with the intention of getting tourists out of Phuket for a day to experience the nature of 'Real Thailand'. John Gray chose Phang Nga Bay because it is logistically convenient and a superb place to start such a business. The bay's natural attractions have been described as follows:

...the dramatic Phang Nga Bay, a proposed UNESCO World Heritage site, is situated to the north east of the island (Phuket) and contains over 150 limestone islands, with stunning cliffs, pockmarked with caves that are home to swiftlets, bats and other tropical wildlife. Mazes of mangrove forest line the estuarine bay. Once in the bay, though only an hour or so from the mainland, the experience is like being in the

wilderness. Caves link the outside of limestone sea stacks to internal rooms, open to the sky known in Thai as ‘hongs’ (Shepherd 2002).

Unfortunately for Gray copycat competitors soon piled in and turned this ecotourism into mass tourism, which emphasizes the question as to whether ecotourism operations can ever be sustainable in Thailand. Phang Nga’s problems have been recognized by many as typifying the country’s tourism problems (for example Seenprachawong 2002).

John Gray has attracted much attention from researchers by pioneering sea kayaking in Thailand, and also because he is an outspoken larger-than-life character. He stands well over six feet tall and has an engaging personality that draws people into wanting to listen to him. He is very passionate about the environment and having been involved in Phuket tourism for over two decades is considered one of its ‘grand old men’, whose opinions on the region’s tourism and conservation are sought after. His original ‘SeaCanoe’ company won many international awards for ecotourism, although the company had to be renamed ‘John Gray’s SeaCanoe’, after his local partners broke away and appropriated his trademark name for a new company. The two companies now operate in competition – with dozens of others.

Gray is an avid environmentalist and the author of a critical blog called ‘The Gray Area’ (www.johngray-seacanoes.com/documents/gray-area.htm). During a series of interviews he gave me his views on the state of ecotourism and the environment in Phuket and around. He was not aware of any serious work being done by environmental NGOs in the Phuket/Krabi area, apart from some recent involvement by the Thailand Environmental Institute (www.tei.or.th/main.htm), whom he has worked with in the past. He previously had contact with a so-called ‘Phuket Environmental Club’ from Phuket Rajabhat University but now suspects it is a bogus organization that tries to wangle free canoe trips. Around eight years ago the Prince of Songkla University Phuket Campus (www.phuket.psu.ac.th/web49) formed an environmental group and held seminars and workshops that he participated in. However

these showed no long-term benefits and the group appears to have ceased functioning. John Gray also participated with the Institute of Ecotourism at Srinakharinwirot University, Bangkok (www.swu.ac.th/en/content/eco.asp) but feels it may only have been a vehicle for hotel development. He is especially critical of Thailand's national parks, which he says are simply money making enterprises that do not care about conservation. He claims that one park close to Phuket (presumably Phang Nga) officially logged only 36,000 visitors in 2007 when it actually received several million. Undisclosed fees are collected at the bottom of the organization and flow upwards through the system hierarchy, with personnel at all levels taking a cut. In this way huge revenues are dissipated without the parks doing their jobs. He also considers TAT Phuket to be next to useless in terms of conservation because it is beholden to 'big tourism'. Although he respects Dave Williams of Paddle Asia (www.seakayaking-thailand.com), another Phuket-based environmental activist, he says that Phuket has too many irresponsible and sub-standard tour operators, many of whom specialise in low-cost packages for Eastern Europeans and thus have to keep costs rock-bottom.

Gray also rails against the corrupt practices of Thailand's 'tour counter industry', which he says takes kickbacks to push the products of unscrupulous tour operators. There are scores of these counters in every tourism center, usually staffed by attractive girls and festooned with colourful give-away flyers. They are mainly owned by small-scale entrepreneurs, who rent space in a prominent location, and try to make a living from the small commissions paid by the tour operators they promote (Shepherd 1998). These tour counters are subject to minimal regulation, and most tour operators, including Gray, are obliged to use them to attract the greater part of their business. He says he would prefer not to use these "counter industry corrupt whores", but has to since he currently only gets 30% of his business through the internet, though he is aiming to increase this to 100% by better marketing. He says that lack of control over numbers is now bringing far too many visitors to the 'hongs' and this has caused damage to mangroves, by destroying root systems and breaking branches. Some hong mangroves have receded by 20 metres in places. There is no restriction on numbers of

tourists, licensing or maintenance of standards, and this is unlikely to change in the short term. Caves that were estimated to have a carrying capacity of around 120 passengers per day in 1992 now see 3000 per day going through. He estimates that there are currently 22 companies offering kayaking out of Phuket, and around 30 offering kayaking into Phang Nga Bay if those from Phi Phi and Ao Nang are included. Gray says that these ‘fake operators’ offer poor guiding (ie no training, poor English, no natural knowledge, follow the leader approach etc) “they go to places of natural beauty and destroy them” with the tourists spending much of their time on the beach or snorkeling, whereas his tours are all about kayaking the hongs. He says that only the national parks can remedy the situation, by properly regulating the industry and providing an educative role for local communities. However, “they won’t do this because the governors of Phang Nga and Phuket Provinces are in the pockets of ‘big tourism’ and want their share of the huge revenues”.

I joined Gray and his crew on one of his ecotours. We kayaked into a very impressive hong in the northeast of Phang Nga Bay, and being off-season there were few other tourists present. Going into one of these deep inlets, with its sheer cliffs, hidden caves, and mangrove forests, is an unforgettable experience. However, Gray says this will all change when the island of Ko Yao Noi (which is much closer to these sites) is developed for mass tourism (which now appears to be happening). He says that as well as cheap competition spoiling the hongs, he has a particular beef about the pollution created by two stroke outboard motors, which he claims are used by the vast majority of tourist speed boat operators in Thailand (and most local boatmen use diesel driven longtails - which are probably even more polluting). As well as coming into conflict with the national parks, Gray has also had serious problems with the birds nest monopoly that collect the nests of swifts for the lucrative Chinese bird’s nest soup market. When the monopoly tried to impose a per capita charge on SeaCanoe’s operations a few years ago, Gray refused to pay it, which resulted in one of his managers being shot and injured outside his Phuket office (Shepherd 2002).

Case Study 2: Trang - questionable ecotourism in the 'eco-friendly province'

Trang is actively promoting itself as the 'ecotourism province' (SIDA 2007) and its island Ko Muk is home to a very popular marine attraction known as the 'Emerald Cave'. This is a sea cave which upon entering at the base of a high cliff, leads via a long dark passage to an exquisite hidden beach and lagoon (like a mini version of the set of the movie 'The Beach'). Except at very low tide, the only way of entering this unique 'lost world' is by swimming the passage. Unfortunately, and even though the cave is within a National Park (which requires fees to be paid), there is no restriction on the numbers of tourists allowed in. As a consequence this spectacular cave is often inundated by Thai tourist boats, disgorging hundreds of swimmers (or non-swimmers, judging by the way they form long snakes by clinging desperately to each other's life jackets) usually all around the same time of day. This results in this natural attraction becoming a screaming hell, "it was more an experience of social Thai traveling than of a quiet, mystical, geological feature in nature" (Hanneberg 2006). The Emerald Cave encapsulates the problems of achieving sustainability in Thailand because there is no control over entry to natural attractions such as these, despite the apparent attempts by various authorities. And if a National Park cannot achieve it, even though the cave is within their jurisdiction, what hope is there for other natural attractions that become popular and profitable? By contrast Phi Phi's famous Viking Cave is now closed to tourists because of the power of the bird nesting monopoly there. There are similar overcrowding problems at Trang's Lay Cave, a popular inland subterranean river system with an associated religious legend, which requires boats to traverse it. One unimpressed consultant reported "the caves are visited in large numbers by religious tourists of Malaysia, with the Buddha Hall their prime destiny. During these visits people with modest ecotourism in mind should stay out of here." It was a similar story during a visit made to an indigenous Sakai village in Trang's foothills. Here the same consultant reported, "the feeling was embarrassing on their behalf (sic). It is not good for the tribe if hordes of 40 tourists visit just to look at them as

monkeys in a zoo” (Hanneberg 2006). So this is the not-too-satisfactory situation at three of ‘ecotourism province’ Trang’s ‘star natural tourist attractions’.

Case Study 3: A surprise in Krabi Town – a tiny pocket of genuine ecotourism.

Nowadays Krabi Town is the usual ugly Thai urban sprawl, but a simple and surprisingly good ecotour can be found right in the middle of it. Leaving from the main quayside, this is known as the ‘Krabi River Ecotour’ and comprises a one or two-hour river trip by longtail boat, costing around 300 baht per head depending on group size. This voyage goes upriver through dense mangrove forest to two towering karst limestone structures that can be seen from the town centre (locals call them the ‘Gateway to Krabi’). There are plenty of Golden Headed Kingfishers, Brahminy Kites and huge monitor lizards to be seen on the way. It comes as quite a surprise to see this kind of scenery and wildlife so close to the centre of a bustling town. The eastern karst contains a huge scenic cavern that is best seen early in the morning when sunlight streams in through various holes. There is also a visit to a fishfarm where captive puffer fish can be seen being inflated by the boatman irritating them (not so eco-friendly). The ‘Krabi River Ecotour’ is a very basic tour run by local longtail operators, and though having little formal educational content other than the boatman’s local knowledge and commentary, is very enjoyable and convenient.

On the other hand, on the town’s main quayside, near the former ferry terminal (which was recently relocated to a new facility out of town), there are tour agents such as PP Family (a successful Ko Phi Phi Muslim clan which also runs a major ferry service) who offer a plethora of tours taking advantage of the area’s natural attractions. However, the PP manager told me that there was no control over numbers to the destinations, “so you can bring as many people as you like”. As such it is likely that more and more operators will keep piling in just so long as there is demand, just like the destructive sea kayaking business in Phang Nga Bay.

Ecotours

In theory these overnight trips should be much more eco-friendly than eco-excursions, by virtue of attracting mainly 'hard' eco-tourists and being more likely to be run by professional ecotourism operators. The overnight sea kayaking ecotours offered by companies like John Gray SeaCanoe and Paddle Asia are among the few genuine examples in the region. When properly run these are as close to true ecotourism as is possible in the Andaman Coast, unfortunately the number of people who go on such tours is quite small. A variation of this type of tour, having much greater range, is where the kayaks are transported on board an escort boat and people either sleep on deck or in a beach campsite. Another form of ecotour that is reasonably genuine are the three to four day trips to Khao Sok National Park, which is located to the northeast of Phuket in Surat Thani Province, on the eastern side of the isthmus watershed. These tours involve kayaking and overnighting in 'floating bamboo bungalows', and are good quality soft-ecotourism. Some of Southeast Asia's international schools are big customers of this destination. Scuba diving, in the form of live-aboard dive boats, is another form of genuine ecotour, and there are a large number of these in the region. Several companies organise what could be described as eco-cultural tours, the most prominent of these being Andaman Discoveries (www.andamandiscoveries.com) who combine these with NGO community-based work in Phang Nga and Ranong Provinces. However the small scale of this kind of tourism is illustrated by the fact that in 2009 Andaman Discoveries' annual volume was only around 250 tourists.

Case Study 4: Scuba Diving – the nearest thing to genuine ecotourism?

Of the all ecotourism practiced in the region, for various reasons discussed below, scuba diving probably comes closest in terms of conservation, although because the industry is dominated by foreigners it does have empowerment issues which need to be addressed. Diving operations comprise both eco-excursions (day-diving trips), and eco-tours (liveaboard

diving boats). Unlike most other types of ecotourism, diving is better positioned to maintain a degree of overall control over its operating standards. There has even been at least one semi-successful industry association established in the region, ie the Thai Diving Association (TDA), although a previous one (DOCT based in Phuket) now appears moribund. This progress has been possible due to some of diving's inherent characteristics, namely: 1) diving requires training and swimming skills that relatively few people have; 2) no single operator is dominant in any given diving area; 3) operators have a clear common interest in conserving dive sites since these are of paramount importance to their success; 4) both sides of the industry, ie the supply side (operators) and the demand side (customers) are dominated by Europeans, who are arguably more environmentalist than domestic tourists; and 5) scuba diving is a well established worldwide activity that has maintained a strong environmental ethos for many decades. Nearly every diver, other than perhaps some cave and wreck extremists, has a strong interest in marine life and its conservation. However, in spite of all these advantages, the Andaman Coast diving industry and the authorities are either unable or unwilling to control the numbers of divers at the most popular dive sites. Anecdotal evidence suggests that most of these sites are now over-dived. While hard up-to-date documentary evidence is unavailable, my own considerable diving experience in the area, together with many interviews with divers, bears this out. An official of the Diving Operators Club (DOCT) of Thailand said something similar in April 2004:

I think it's safe to say that right now that way too many dive boats and divers are allowed to operate in the Similan Islands Marine National Park. The most popular dive sites of the Similans are (always) crowded and make the experience for dive tourists not very enjoyable. Large dive boats drop and pick-up their divers right above the dive site (rather than using dinghies) and thus create a lot of noise pollution and scary moments for divers on the reef. (www.doct-phuket.org/news/news15.htm).

The recent CHARM project tried to initiate the co-management of marine resources using the diving industry as a foundation, and its failure to operationalise this is highly illustrative of

the difficulties in getting tourism stakeholders to cooperate (see CHARM 2007b). CHARM is the acronym for Coastal Habitats and Resources Management, and was a five-year project funded by the European Union and the Kingdom of Thailand, running from 2002 to 2007. It initiated the most important study so far undertaken on the region's diving sector, ie the 'Assessment of the Private Dive-Tourism Sector in Phang Nga Bay, Thailand' prepared for CHARM by Winfried Wiedemeyer in 2004 – ie before the Tsunami (CHARM 2004b). This study was based on two months of fieldwork by Wiedemeyer, a professional consultant, together with feedback gained from a two-day workshop attended by the main stakeholders. Weidemeyer's detailed 74-page study identifies most of the problems of environmental conservation in Thailand. It explores how stakeholder cooperation on working practices could be established, so as to achieve environmentally sound coastal habitats, and resources co-management in the area. Its 'Mission Objective' is stated as being "to develop viable approaches to integrate a sustainable support from the local dive sector into the co-management process of marine and coastal habitats and resources"; a philosophy which should extend to the whole tourism industry. Unfortunately, though well supported at the time, the CHARM initiative has produced few worthwhile results. Like so many similar projects there was much initial lip service that gradually faded into oblivion.

In 2006 and 2007 I conducted several interviews on Ko Lanta with the owner and founder of the island's first scuba diving operation. These interviews yielded the following observations: Scuba diving became established on Ko Lanta in the early 1990s and there are now 21 dive shops based on the island. Most of them are located in what has now become the main town, Ban Saladan, which has grown up close to the ferry terminal. Others operate from kiosks in resorts on the beaches that stretch down the west coast. We discussed the problems of sustainability of the diving sector, and particularly whether the area was being over-dived. A visiting German tour operator listening to our conversation was indignant upon hearing this, and became vociferous in his assertion that there was plenty of room for more divers out there (an unsurprising point of view considering that his business depends on high volumes). This

highlights the demand-driven nature of the problem. The diving operator, a respected figure in the local industry, was more objective in his assessment (maybe to impress me with his conservation credentials). He recently undertook a proprietary study on the area's diving site capacities, and found that though many dive sites do get crowded in the high season (particularly December and January), the area as a whole should not be considered over-dived. He admitted that capacities are hard to measure with any degree of accuracy, but over the years he had noted no appreciable damage to corals or reduction in fish life arising from scuba diving. However, he did say that there has definitely been damage from commercial fishing and large snorkeling groups (most divers point the finger at these two). He felt that industrialized fishing by trawlers is the region's main threat. These fleets are owned by powerful Thai Chinese who cannot easily be challenged, and because they are in cahoots with the authorities they can trawl the marine parks with impunity, especially out of season. He admitted that most people would consider Ko Phi Phi and Ko Tao (in the Gulf of Thailand) to be over-dived in the high season, when ten or so large diving boats can often arrive on site at the same time, each disgorging scores of divers (also my own personal experience). Other than CHARM he did not see many environmental NGOs active in the area (actually CHARM is more of a conservation project than an NGO), but recently when there was an algae problem at Hin Daeng (a dramatic underwater pinnacle and one of the best diving sites in the region), it was studied by Phuket Marine Biological Center (PMBC) (www.pmbc.go.th) under Mr Nipon Pongsuwanthe, suggesting they may become more activist in future.

According to the Lanta dive operator, diving in Thailand is not regulated in terms of the number of dive shops that can operate; however licensing is required, with safety stated as a major issue, along with environmental protection. The local Marine National Park (Mu Ko Lanta) now levies 400 baht per diver and have their local headquarters near the Southern lighthouse on Ko Lanta. However they are said to do little with all the money they collect, rarely visiting offshore sites, and focusing mainly on their own marine theme park. A diving industry grouping, known as The Thai Diving Association (TDA) (www.tda-cmas.org) was

set up in 2004, and will hopefully include all diving operators in the country. Its purported mission is safety, environment and marine life and is backing an artificial reef project, comprising sinking old navy ships, helicopters and railway coaches. The Lanta operator considers diving to be the only form of genuine large-scale ecotourism in the region (although admitting that it is nearly all foreign-owned and most dive masters are also foreign). He also feels that there is now some degree of control over tourism development on Lanta. For example micro light planes, jet skies and banana boats are not allowed; there are restrictions on hotel height and distance from the shoreline; and there is some protection of nature. However there is no central sewage or fresh water system on the island yet. However, dive boats are now being forced to have sewage holding tanks rather than discharge into the sea. One problem is that few Thais are interested in diving, and though some 'rich Bangkok kids' do get qualified, they rarely go on to work as instructors. There have been moves by the authorities to force each dive operator to train a certain number of locals, but so far this has only been partially successful. It would seem that the industry's foreign dominance is more due to lack of interest on the Thai side rather than any desire by operators to exclude locals. The local Chao Leh find ready employment in the industry because they make good boatmen and captains, and though not entrepreneurial themselves, they are more than willing to work hard for others. Freshwater cave diving is now becoming popular in both Krabi and Trang Provinces, as demonstrated by well-known cave diver Dr Mike Gadd's record-breaking activities (www.dr mike.smugmug.com) in the region's huge flooded cave systems.

Eco-resorts and Eco-lodges

A number of up-market resorts have 'greenwashed' themselves by embellishing their operations with 'eco-labels'. Tourism websites are replete with examples of this; such as (www.eco-tropicalresorts.com/Asia/thailand.htm), which shamelessly describes the huge 'Banyan Tree Phuket' resort (located in the Laguna Phuket enclave) and 'Club Andaman Beach Resort' (located on Patong Beach) as 'Thailand Eco Lodges'. Most people familiar

with genuine ‘eco lodges’, such as Lisu Lodge in Northern Thailand (www.asian-oasis.com/lisu.html), would find such claims ludicrous. Admittedly it is difficult to apply strict criteria in deciding what actually constitutes an Eco-Resort or an Eco-Lodge, or to quantify the differences between the two, apart from the rather obvious fact that the former should be larger than the latter. For the purposes of this research they are treated as much the same, although this begs the question as to why there shouldn’t be such a thing as an ‘eco-chalet’, since some of the accommodation in National Parks could qualify (although ironically these usually host large domestic tour groups and not real eco-tourists – see section on national parks) In any case many environmentalists consider the term Eco-Resort to be an oxymoron, despite its widespread usage in marketing and advertising. A far better term would be ‘eco-friendly resort’, where three main criteria of eco-friendliness could be applied. At the most basic level it could be asked if the resort is: 1) environmentally-friendly? – based on degree of degradation caused; 2) socially equitable? – based on percentage local participation; and 3) sustainable? – operating within carrying capacities.

A more comprehensive list of defining criteria would include the following: percentage local employment and participation; consumption of energy and water; percentage within carrying capacities; negative impact and cost of infrastructure; percentage local supplies and materials; production of waste, sewage and pollution; respecting local culture and aesthetics; size of eco-footprint; eco-educational component; impact on ecosystem.

All of these variables can be assessed objectively and there are a number of green certification programs that attempt this (a practice known as ecolabeling), eg: Green Globe 21, ECOTEL, Blue Flag; which all constitute efforts to legislate for eco-friendliness. “As an instrument of consumer choice, ecolabels are a valuable environmental management tool in tourism“ (Buckley 2002). However, they are also problematic, because they are often countered by a combination of insufficient human capacity, knowledge and willingness to implement - plus greed. The problems of operationalising green certification programs, as they apply to resorts,

homestays, tour operators and entire destinations, can be enumerated as follows (adapted from a 2000 report by WWF-UK): poor uptake due to skepticism within the industry of their effectiveness; belief that generic programs are not suited to local circumstances and do not address specific sector needs; not perceived as strong marketing and sales tools; no universally recognized program or logo; too many schemes reduce credibility and cause confusion; smaller companies lack the funds and the capacity to implement and maintain them, therefore are limited to larger establishments; many are process-based (commitment) and not performance-based (achievement); some are merely paid memberships based on self-evaluation; lack of full public reporting and transparency of results; evolving standards mean many resorts display obsolete logos; many neglect the social aspects of sustainability.

It is sometimes argued that up-market tourist enclaves should be considered a form of eco-friendly tourism (mainly by the companies who own and operate them). There are currently three examples of large enclaves in Southeast Asia, ie:

- 1) Laguna Phuket (Phuket, Thailand) - with six deluxe resort hotels, five luxurious spas, 18-hole golf course, 30 restaurants and bars.
- 2) Nusa Dua (Bali, Indonesia) - twelve high-class resort hotels, twelve spas, 18-hole golf course.
- 3) Bintan Resorts (Riau, Indonesia) - eleven high-class resort hotels, nine spas, four 18-hole golf courses.

Some of the reasons behind the dubious claim that these enclaves are eco-friendly is that they tend to be: exclusive, up-market, controlled parkland environment, low density, unpolluted, of assured quality and security, meeting international standards etc. On the other hand they could also be characterized in less glowing terms, ie as being: neo-colonial, elitist, outside controlled, dependent on foreign tourists, having poor economic and cultural linkages to the locality, locals being only low-level employees, large ecological-footprints, generic touristic experiences, staged/artificial attractions, where 'tourists only meet other tourists', 'empty

meeting grounds' and so on. Also, no matter how clean and green they look, there is always the problem of who and what was occupying the land before the enclave was built. Laguna Phuket can legitimately claim that it was built on the site of an abandoned tin mine that was formerly a toxic waste dump and thus of little use for anything else. However, Bintan Resorts was built on land that had been occupied for hundreds of years by locals, mainly Orang Laut and Bugis people, who were unceremoniously ordered to leave and given little compensation (see Potter 2007, Bunnell et al 2005).

As for the effect of scale of development on ecofriendliness and sustainability, this is still unclear, but probably both small and large development contributes equally to the problem.

For example one academic has stated that:

it is generally the presence of competition from smaller, less regulated, companies that leads to the rapid over-development of resorts, or the reluctance of large companies to increase their costs by attending to the long-term sustainability of locations - Tim Forsyth, London School of Economics and Political Science (www.fathom.com/course/21701788/index.html)

The Andaman Coast has a growing number of smaller-scale up-market exclusive resorts. One of these is the Six Senses Hideaway Yao Noi Resort, on Ko Yao Noi - formerly known as the Evasion Hideaway (www.phuket.com/sixsenses-yaonoi). This very expensive resort is claimed by its owners (and some sycophantic journalists who wangle free stays there) to be eco-friendly. Ostensibly it is a very tasteful development - spacious, lots of greenery, jungle trails winding up hills, and mangrove board walks. However, each villa has its own pool and the air-conditioning is kept on most of the day, which is hardly eco-friendly, and the beach is imported fine sand (because the original beach was gravelly). When I visited the resort the German manager gave me a very positive run down of its eco-credentials, including its waste disposal procedures etc. However, I personally found the resort's focus on 'hideaway', 'exclusive', and 'private' etc slightly ridiculous for a place touting itself as eco-friendly. Why

would eco-conscious people travel to so-called unique, pristine, and original localities just to sit around their private pools sipping cocktails, or hide in their air-conditioned rooms? The resort's glossy publicity material reeks of hedonism and materialism, and its eco label is rendered insincere by the fact that when the resort was being constructed in 2007, its contractor used Burmese labour, which it housed in squalid shacks and didn't pay or feed properly. Being experienced Karen hunters these workers were forced to kill and eat nearly all the wildlife on Ko Yao Noi (this being reported to me by a number of locals). This makes something of a mockery of Evason's numerous claims to sustainability, which includes being "proud to be the first Green Globe 21 Certified resort in South East Asia". While the resort clearly attracts many well-heeled people (judging by the way it is always fully booked) it is totally out of character with the social atmosphere of Ko Yao Noi, a place that is still a welcoming community. There are not many tourist places left in Thailand where people take the time to ask who you are, to come in and sit down and talk. There is nothing wrong with eco-friendly up-market resorts per se, however they should make some attempt to stay socially connected to the locality in which they are situated. Better examples of eco-friendly up-market establishments are the Golden Buddha Resort (www.goldenbuddharesort.com) on Ko Phra Thong, and the Koh Ra Ecolodge (www.thaiecolodge.com), both located near Kuraburi in Phang Nga province. Thom Henley, author of 'Krabi Caught in the Spell' (Henley 2003) and a respected conservationist (www.thomhenley.com), ran an ecolodge near Ao Nang for a few years, however he gave it up after becoming involved in a land rights dispute. He is somewhat negative concerning the state of ecotourism in the region and does not see it being carried out to any degree. He thinks that TAT and the National Parks should be in a position to provide support and leadership in this area but does not see this happening, and not much likelihood of it happening in anytime soon (personal communication 8th December 2009).

Case Study 5: Had Yao and Libong Nature Resorts – the challenges of running eco-resorts

In recent years Trang Province has been the setting for an eco-tourism venture that takes the form of two nature resorts, one in Had Yao, the 'Haadyao Nature Resort', and the other on Ko Libong, the 'Libong Nature Beach Resort'. Had Yao is a prominent mainland cape, some 30 miles southwest of Trang City, that is so rural it has the isolated feel of an island. The cape is dominated by a huge karst sandwiched between a long white beach and a wide river. There are tall beachfront casuarinas trees, sheer cliffs, huge caves, and even a hidden beach – only reachable at low tide. So far mass tourism has bypassed Had Yao and it retains the rustic laid-back character of the Railay Beach of 20 years ago. Where else in Thailand can you be the only person on a three-mile long west-facing beach at sunset? Had Yao has two resorts, namely the Haadyao Nature Resort and Sinchai Resort. Sinchai looks ramshackle but its superb beach location under towering cliffs, makes it a seductive laid-back bohemian hideaway. With some excellent rock climbing on hand it is probably going to be inundated any time soon by climbers driven out of Railay Beach, Krabi by rising prices.

The Nature Resort is owned by a retired professor from Malaysia, together with his wife, a well connected Thai lady. With their son and daughter they run the nature resorts of Had Yao and Ko Libong (www.trangsea.com). These two businesses are run jointly as a foundation, which is overseen by a committee, however, the owners say they run at a loss and have to be financed by the family fruit farm near Krabi. The two resorts receive very few Thai visitors and instead cater for the foreign "eco-aware" market. The owner's view is that most Thai tourists do not like nature and demand modern accommodation, aircon and KTV. They say that Thailand's problems stem from its people being too accepting, too passive and giving too much respect to seniors who do not deserve it. Corruption is endemic and leads to the government being unable to restrain businessmen who exploit Thailand's natural resources for profit. The most powerful stakeholders in Thailand are big businesses who use political connections and 'under the counter' payments to get their way. The way things are presently structured they cannot be prevented from doing this and some of them will not hesitate to hire gunmen if they feel there is no other way.

Nature Resorts say that their two main missions are local empowerment and environmental conservation; but they accept that it is difficult to fulfill these two objectives and still run a commercially viable operation. In fact they seem to spread themselves too thin by trying to run two resorts, and spend much of the time firefighting and neglecting marketing and PR efforts. They have had problems with previous managers who ended up running their own businesses on the side, and some of Libong's locals apparently burned down some chalets during one dispute. There are likely to have been other conflicts that they do not wish to talk about, such as those encountered by outsiders such as John Gray in Phang Nga, and Wally Sanger, who operates the 'Paradise Lost' resort on Ko Kradan. In spite of such problems Nature Resorts offer 11 interesting eco-excursions: 1) Island Hopping – to Ko Muk, Ko Wean, Ko Cheuk, and Ko Kradan; 2) Dugong, Dolphin and Bird watching; 3) Pirate Cave and Mangrove Forest; 4) Bicycle Village Tour; 5) Jungle Walk and, Sea Gypsy Cave; 6) Mangrove Kayaking; 7) Rubber Tapping and Batik; 8) Thai Cooking; 9) Fishing Tour; 10) Kayak to Libong Secret Beach; and 11) Cycling Along the Coast. Along with these they also offer plenty of educational material on the local sights and wildlife. Nature Resorts are not positive on the benefits of homestays, because “the cultural gap is so wide that outsiders will find staying with locals an uncomfortable and possibly embarrassing experience”. They cite the instance of a village headman who insisted on sleeping in same bed as his Swedish male guest – not because of sexual inclination but because he thought it the polite thing to do! They feel that it is far better to have a resort close to a local village, in terms of getting the tourists to engage with locals in a more appropriate manner.

Because of their rarity, and the likelihood that they may soon be extinct, 'dugong tours' are a major draw for tourists coming to Had Yao and Ko Libong. Some experts think that the dugong (a coastal dolphin-like mammal) will only survive another 10 years if its current downtrend continues. Unfortunately, dugong watching is somewhat unexciting for the average tourist, because the animals are very hard to spot. They only surface for a few

seconds every 20 minutes or so and stay quite far from the boat. The experience does not compare to whale watching. Libong's flocks of migratory birds are also less than spectacular for the non-enthusiast, and the combined dugong and bird trip, nearly six hours on an open boat, is far too long a day in the burning sun. Most boat drivers are unable to speak English or even understand Malay, so as a learning experience the tour suffers. The Libong nature visitor center, which is funded by the Ministry of the Environment, is unmanned, but has explanatory visuals, although mainly in Thai. A major problem with the dugong tours is that like Ko Muk's Emerald Cave, there is no control over the numbers of boats going out to see them. They are shy animals and many visitors end up not sighting them at all because the boats disturb them. One consultant who went and saw nothing reported, "the dugong tour would give more sightings if the boat could lie still for an hour or two, with the passengers not allowed to jump into the water" (Hanneberg 2006)

Homestays and Camping

Originally the term 'homestay' applied to a form of tourism that allowed the visitor to live with a local family to learn the local lifestyle and possibly improve their language skills. However, in Southeast Asia this term has been misinterpreted and devalued by many guesthouses and small hotels that use it for marketing purposes, presumably to convey to potential guests an impression of friendliness and authenticity. The relatively few genuine homestays in the region purport to provide greater eco and cultural experiences than Eco-Resorts and Eco Lodges, which indeed many do. But whether many tourists are prepared to put up with the reality of a homestay in the search for authenticity is debatable. Most foreigners avoid homestays for a variety of reasons: eg their hard sleeping arrangements, noise, chattering, TV on late at night, restrictions on alcohol, animal noises very early in the morning, heat and stuffiness, basic toilet facilities, mosquitoes and other crawling insects etc. Some homestays claim that students are their best customers, particularly rural Thai Muslims who are on low budgets; and say that most urban Thais are not enticed, because they want TV

air-conditioning and comfort. However other operators claim the opposite, saying a growing number of urbanites are prepared to try it, to get back to their roots, as at the successful homestay program on Ko Yao Noi (TAT 2008).

The Koh Yao Noi 'Community based Ecotourism Club' (www.koh-yao-noi-eco-tourism-club.com) was established in the mid 1990s. According to its website they offer a combination of homestay, fishing expeditions with local host families, exploring the islands of Phang Nga, swimming, snorkeling, cultural exchange and conservation. They put out an upbeat environmental and empowerment message, and at least one genuine ecotourism operator, Paddle Asia, offers them on its website as an option. In fact there are now three separate homestay associations on Ko Yao Noi, run under the auspices of the 'Conservation Tourism Club' (TAT 2008), and they do appear to be popular. Miss Lao Wan of (www.kohyaohomestay.net) told me that they charge visitors 680 baht per person per night, with full board and range of local traditional activities. Visitors are mostly urban Thais and they stay for an average of 3 days / 2 nights. Mr Run of Ko Yao Adventures also told me that:

There are now three associations because they decided to do it on a village basis.

Most of the homestay houses are in the south of the island and up to 40 percent of the population (of the south) may be involved in one way or another. The customers are mainly Thai city dwellers who want to get back to their roots, and though the houses are comfortable, only around 10 percent of 'farang' (white foreigners) stay there, probably because of language barriers and privacy issues etc. A number of Japanese school children recently came to learn rice planting. The reason that homestays work on Ko Yao Noi is because the island has stronger communities and the people are more open minded than on other islands.

Another attempt at establishing a homestay program is on Ko Phra Thong near Khuraburi. This has been set up in new buildings donated by the Lion's Club International of Thailand following the Tsunami, and is run by the NGO 'Naucrates'. It is too early to gauge the

success of this venture because Ko Phra Thong currently receives few visitors due to its poor transportation infrastructure (the ferry/bus system is uncoordinated and expensive). Another attempt was by the Pataranak Foundation in Krabi, an NGO-type organization that attempted to run homestays in a rather interesting rural locality southeast of Krabi town. However they gave up after not being able to get enough visitors to make it profitable. They cite problems of getting foreigners and “fussy” Thai domestic tourists to accept less than comfortable accommodation and spartan rural conditions.

In Southern Thailand generally, homestays have not yet established themselves in great numbers, in contrast to the well-known ‘Hill Tribe Trekking Tours’, in the upland regions of Northern Thailand. But even in the northern hills the degree of real contact between ‘host’ and ‘guest’ has changed radically since Cohen did his first research in the early 1980s (Cohen 1996), and may now be better described as ‘mass homestay tourism’, similar to a lot of Borneo’s well known Dayak longhouse tourism. On balance, properly run homestay programs should be considered genuine ecotourism, but they seem unlikely to become mainstream options in the near future.

Camping, in one’s own tent, as is practiced in most temperate developed countries, is not hugely popular in the Andaman Coast, and neither is it in most of Southeast Asia; mainly because of the availability of cheap guesthouses, the need for ventilation when sleeping, and the fear of poisonous insects. However, for the hard-core eco-tourist, camping is often the only way to get close enough to nature (sometimes too close!). There are a number of Andaman national parks offering tents for budget overnight accommodation; however these are usually clustered close together near beaches, sometimes in their hundreds. Purpose built toilet, shower and eating facilities are usually close by and the tents are really just places to sleep in. It is very difficult to conceive of this as ecotourism. However, there are a number of genuine ecotours that involve camping, usually the type associated with multi-day sea kayaking trips, such as those organized by SeaCanoe and Paddle Asia, where the campsite is

set up by a support party that goes ahead by powered boat. Localities that can be visited in this manner include: Bamboo Island and Maya Bay (Krabi); Ko Rok Nok (Krabi); Ko Nui and Ko Bubu (Krabi); and Ko Tarutao (Satun).

In a recent development, one-night camping excursions are now allowed within national park territory on Phi Phi's Maya Bay (made famous by the movie 'The Beach'). These are supposedly for a maximum of 20 people, but groups of 40-50 are normal, and 70 not uncommon. Though the national park has granted one company permission to operate these excursions (www.mayabaycamping.com), so many tour counters on Phi Phi sell tickets that there is no real control over numbers. In spite of Maya's awesome natural surroundings the experience is hardly ecotourism. The customers are mainly young backpackers who wander around before partying, playing loud music and getting drunk. I saw scores of cases of beer being unloaded during my visit and some tour counter personnel say the experience is best described as 'sex, drugs and rock and roll in the wild'. 1,900 baht is charged for one night, inclusive of sleeping bags, food and some free drink. Most people sleep on the beach but if it rains there are big tents to shelter under.

It should be noted that there are three other important forms of tourism that have not been examined in this research, ie: yachting, golfing, and cruise liners. For completeness these are therefore briefly examined from an environmental point of view.

Yachting and boating is a major tourism activity in the Andaman Coast, but one which is not normally considered as ecotourism because of its highly personalised (some may say elitist) nature, and its lack of educational or conservation focus. On the other hand some argue that it does represent ecotourism, because yachting is nowadays conducted in an eco-friendly manner (toilet holding tanks, care over anchoring, permanent moorings etc). However, this must be balanced against the serious environmental problems arising from the construction of marinas, such as cutting down mangrove forests and other natural habitats. Further research is needed on this sector.

Golf is another major tourism sector that is well known for negative environmental impacts, particularly in Phuket, because it requires extensive land clearance and very high fresh water usage. Golf courses are of course a longstanding target for the wrath of environmentalists, and as such are very difficult to equate with ecotourism, in spite of strenuous greenwashing attempts by resort owners who produce glossy brochures replete with pictures of lakes, trees and hornbills.

As for the cruise industry, there are many liner companies (particularly Singapore based) that use the Andaman Coast and particularly Phuket and as a regular port of call. However, unlike the Caribbean and Antarctic, the impact of cruise liners on Thailand's coastal environment has yet to be properly studied, though it is likely that these visits have some negative effects.

To summarise the above; research and case studies have been presented which outline the way various modes of ecotourism are practiced in the Andaman Coast. These indicate very few instances where ecotourism can be considered operating satisfactorily, and in fact most such operations can be seen to be either: exploitative of nature and/or local communities, greenwashed, or powerless to behave in a genuinely eco-friendly fashion. 'Mass ecotourism' excursions appear to be the worst offenders, and therefore proper regulation of these alone could yield great benefit.

Ecotourism Localities

Regarding localities, a useful typology of ecotourism destinations was proposed by Weaver (1998) and has been adapted in a series of lectures given by Prof Wong Poh Poh at National University of Singapore in 2007:

- a) Comprehensive: where the entire country is oriented to deliberate ecotourism (eg Bhutan).
- b) Diversionary: where isolated ecotourism sites are situated near to and augment mass-tourism products (eg Phang Nga, Thailand).
- c) Regional: involving the adoption of deliberate ecotourism at sub-national scale, eg isolated province, geophysical entity such as mountain range or wilderness, national park (eg what Trang Province would like to do).

Thailand is obviously far from emulating destination type a), however the Andaman Coast offers a number of examples where destination types b) and c) are being or could be attempted. The most important of these are national and marine parks.

National and Marine Parks:

The Andaman Coast has many national and marine parks that serve as both localities for, and mediators of, ecotourism, the main ones being (in alphabetical order with province in parentheses): Ao Phang Nga (Phang Nga), Had Chao Mai (Trang), Had Nopharat Thara-Mu Ko Phi Phi (Krabi), Khao Lak-Lam Ru (Phang Nga) Khao Lampi-Had Thai Maoeng (Phang Nga), Laem Son Ranong (Phang Nga), Lamnam Kraburi (Ranong), Mu Ko Lanta (Krabi), Mu Ko Phayam (Ranong), Mu Ko Phetra (Trang/Satun), Mu Ko Similan (Phang Nga), Mu Ko Surin (Phang Nga), Sirinat (Phuket), Tarutao (Satun).

Figure 8. Main National Parks in Thailand's Andaman Coast (as per Department of National Parks website):



National parks are a good barometer of the state of ecotourism and sustainable development in a country; because it can be reasonably argued that if ecotourism cannot be established within the confines of a national park then there is little hope for the rest of the country. The challenges that all national parks face are highly context specific, and it is important to understand that most parks face very different challenges. As such it is difficult to compare their performance against one another. It is also clear that one of the main determinates of their success is how easily the park can be accessed by tourists and outside tour operators. For example, in the Andaman Coast, Ao Phang Nga National Park is one of the easiest to access, and Surin National Park is one of the most difficult. The difference that this inherent degree of control makes is reflected in the relative efficiency of their operations and their reputations, with Phang Nga being the subject of much more criticism than Surin.

The role played by Thailand's many national parks is highly ambiguous, and they are often criticized for being less interested in nature conservation than in generating revenues for their own people. Disbursement of park fees is often highly opaque, a notable example being the huge revenues accruing from day-trippers to Ko Phi Phi Leh (made famous by the movie 'The Beach'), as well as the daily fees levied on the region's legions of diving operators. There are many cases of private developers being able to build on national park land, presumably in return for 'under the counter' payments. The Amari Resort at Pakmeng (which ironically hosted the consultants for the Trang SIDA 2007 project) is said to be just one of these. In contrast, a startling example of a failed attempt to get away with this is the huge abandoned resort at the southern end of Nai Yang Beach on Phuket. This was illegally built on land belonging to Sirinat National Park and was due to be managed by Hyatt. However, after the fall of the Thaksin government, permission to build was suddenly withdrawn, leaving the huge almost-finished building to be reclaimed by jungle. Commercial fishing fleets regularly encroach into national parks. This seems to be common in the Similan and Surin Islands in the off-season and the parks turn a blind eye. In some cases the national parks themselves have built concrete-block style accommodation within their boundaries (concrete, though

ugly, is much cheaper and longer-lasting than wood) but again what happens to the revenues is largely concealed from the general public. The national park system in Thailand faces many problems, and in usually fails to protect the environment because of rent seeking activities, a problem that bedevils many Thai institutions. Some national parks are experiencing serious problems with indigenous people living within their boundaries, such as in the Adang Archipelago. It is now recognised that the national park's centralized top-down management structure does not allow for effective local decision-making and initiative.

Any discussion of the performance of national parks must recognize a number of variables that impact on their success, for example:

Legacy Factors: previous deforestation and mining (outsider extraction rights); indigenous people (land rights, local extraction rights); small-scale subsistence extractors (hunting, fishing, fruit and wood gathering).

Present Conditions: ease of access; border environment/security; buffer zones; type of main attractions (flora, fauna and topography); tourism mainly driven by demand or supply; visitor profile; main activities; accommodation capacity; park and third party services; information and learning aids.

Potential Threats: change of park status; withdrawal of official support; encroachment by large-scale commercial resource extractors (logging, palm oil, prawn farming, fishing, mining); encroachment by resort developers.

Officially, all of Thailand's national parks come under the umbrella of the Royal Forestry Department (RDF) (www.forest.go.th). This is a much-criticized organization, particularly by ecotourism operators and environmental activists. Some are quite vociferous, and give the impression that 'an unholy trinity' of government, national parks and powerful businessmen,

is hell-bent on profiting from whatever is left of Thailand's natural heritage. They point out that two of the most environmentally threatened islands in the Andaman Coast, ie Ko Phi Phi and Ko Lipe are technically within the boundaries of national parks (although the parks themselves claim that they have been given no mandate over these particular islands – which may be true). A number of complaints about national parks have made it into print. For example Dave Williams of Paddle Asia was quoted in 'The Jungle of Ecotourism' Phuket Post 22.05.2008: "I certainly don't see anyone patrolling the park to make sure that people aren't doing illegal activities in Phang Nga Bay National Park. In fact, in the 15-plus years that I've been going out in the bay I have never seen a patrol boat ever."

On a later occasion he added: "I saw a dozen jet skis in Phang Nga Bay a couple of days ago. They are illegal in the bay, yet when we called the park, no one answered the phone. Even if they had, they probably wouldn't do anything. One child was on a very powerful jet ski and he couldn't have been more than 10 years old. My clients were shocked!" (Dave Williams of Paddle Asia – personal communication 25th Feb 2009).

Ao Phang Nga National Park comes in for the most heat because its proximity to the mass tourism markets of Phuket and Ao Nang - Krabi, which results in huge numbers of daily excursionists kayaking the hongs and visiting James Bond Island. SeaCanoe's founder John Gray is also highly critic of this particular park, as previously highlighted.

More general criticism of Thailand's national parks includes that of Worldtwitch Thailand. On 26th July 2000 (www.worldtwitch.com/park_ripoff.htm) it referred to the decision to raise the entry fee from 20 baht to 200 baht in year 2000 (many parks now charge 400 baht for foreign adults):

This extra charge will not benefit national parks in any way, since park fees have by law to be returned to the central agency, RFD, which isn't exactly renowned for its probity in administering funds. High-ranking positions in RFD are known, at least on occasion, to be bought and sold for millions of baht. Some RFD bosses put the

squeeze on park and sanctuary chiefs who are expected to return part of their protected area budgets to them. The money is then passed up through the system to powerful politicians, so as to buy favours.

Bangkok Post online forum 8th Feb 2008 also blasted the parks:

The national park encroachment is so common in every province in Thailand mostly by people who have political connections and with acknowledgement of corrupted government officials. These encroachments are done on large tracts of land for mass production of commercial products by big business groups and not by some poor farmers who trying to feed their families. The land encroachment and illegal fishing in national parks and public lands in the south are so common that the news media failed to make proper investigation.

Even Lonely Planet, which normally treads carefully in such matters, refers to the parks in 'Thailand's Islands and Beaches' (Lonely Planet 2006): "However, business interests have often won out over environmental protection in several of Thailand's national parks. Islands that are technically exempt from development often don't adhere to the law and there is little government muscle to enforce regulations."

Apart from Ao Phang Nga, a number of other regional parks have experienced tourism related problems over the years, and are therefore in the front line for this kind of opprobrium. For example: Ko Phi Phi National Park (due to Phi Phi Don's overdevelopment and the lack of transparency concerning Phi Phi Leh's revenues); Mu Ko Lanta Marine National Park (for lack of transparency over its huge scuba diving levies and resort encroachment); Had Chao Mai National Park (for resort encroachment and its treatment of Ko Muk's Muslim residents); Mu Ko Phetra Marine National Park (for pandering to birdnesting concessionaires and allowing them to shoot at people); Ko Tarutao Marine National Park (for Ko Lipe's uncontrolled development and Ko Adang's Urak Lawoi problems and resort encroachment).

Obviously the RFD disagrees with all this and claims to be doing its best under difficult conditions. A position statement was made by a staff member in 'Issues and Challenges of Ecotourism in the National Parks of Thailand' (Pipithvanichtham 1997), which enumerated the following challenges that they face:

1. Unclear Boundaries: "Some communities existed in these areas long before the government assumed control, while others are comprised of people who recently migrated from other regions. ... Many times, settlements were included within the park boundary by mistake. ... The problem of people living in forest areas is compounded by unscrupulous land developers (such as resort and golf consortiums) and politicians who use the issue to win votes. Thus, many local people sell their land without legal ownership, and then further encroach into the forest. Likewise, some are hired to encroach on the forest (which once degraded can be turned into agriculture area). With no support from politicians and local authorities, these problems have stymied the RFD's efforts."
2. Inadequate Staff: "In general, both the numbers and skills of national park staff are insufficient. ... Though the RFD has the desire to employ more staff with various educational backgrounds and skill levels, the RFD is constrained by decreasing budgets and unrealistic government regulations."
3. Lack of proper management plans and guidelines: "... due to the rapid increase in the number of national parks, not every park has a management plan. Another problem is that there are no written guidelines for park managers."
4. Weakness in public relations: "A major responsibility of the RFD in the past was to monitor and manage logging in Thailand. This, combined with the RFD's past tendency to assume the role of law enforcers, has made for a relatively low public opinion of the RFD. ... Most parks lack up-to-date information and interpretive material."

5. Construction development project: “The current budget system allots very little money for conducting research projects or educational programs within a park.”
6. Lack of partnership programs: “...creates a conflict of interest between the RFD and other groups, resulting in a lack of mutual trust.”
7. Intensive needs for recreational use: “The once isolated beaches of Pee Pee Island (Ko Phi Phi) in the Andaman Sea are an example of how uncontrolled tourist development can have adverse effects on the environment. The RFD has no authority on Pee Pee Island, and subsequently the development of resort hotels and emergence of slums has grown unchecked. The result has been the depletion of the very resources that drew tourism to the island in the first place. Many tourism-related agencies and private groups, who do not understand the role of nature or are blindly motivated by economic incentives, have accused the RFD of being uncooperative and a hindrance to development.”

A number of other issues are also commented upon, such as the much-questioned issue of the collection and disbursement of fees (*my comments*):

Parks do not keep the income generated from entrance fees, but rather it is put into a shared fund which in turn every park, including proposed parks, can access by submitting proposals for projects which cannot be covered by their annual budget. (*there is no mention of course that much of the revenue may not reach the fund in the first place - as many critics claim*)

As for the types of tourist visiting the parks:

In general, the Thai visitors are interested in sightseeing and picnicking, while foreigners are interested in interpretive information and nature-based experiences.” Park enforcement has had to change over the years, “...patrolling with firearms was once common practice. While this strategy has been effective in some areas, it also caused conflict between officers and local communities (*not surprising*). Nowadays, this method of law enforcement is less common...For better protected area

management, the public and local people need to be involved in conserving Thailand's national parks. (Pipithvanichtham 1997)

It would seem that of all tourism organizations in Thailand, the national parks would be the best positioned to both support ecotourism and provide a full range of ecotourism services, eg transportation, eco-friendly accommodation, eco-excursions and overnight ecotours. In some places the national parks have in fact built their own accommodation, for example at Similan Islands, Surin Islands, Ko Rok, Ko Kradan, Ko Tarutao and Ko Adang. Most of these are simple chalets without air-conditioning or hot water (except for the expensive ones at Similan and Surin), with most built with concrete and some from wood. Some parks also offer tented accommodation, which is heavily used by Thai tourists, who arrive in large groups during national holidays and spend a few days picnicking and swimming, often resulting in piles of rubbish left strewn around for the park staff to clear up and burn.

Apart from a few 'hard eco-tourist types', the majority of western tourists avoid staying in national park accommodation because they say they find them 'too Thai', and complain about: the lack of English spoken by staff, only basic Thai food being on offer, constraints over alcohol, lack of interpretive material etc. My own view is that very few of Thailand's national parks have the capacity to run proper ecotourism within their jurisdiction, with the possible exception of Surin National Park, which manages to show some degree of organizational competence in running snorkeling trips (although they pay little attention to informing visitors of the interesting Moken 'Chok Madah' Nature-Cultural trail). Perhaps the RFD should send their personnel to parks like Gunong Mulu National Park in Sarawak, Malaysia to see how they are run (Mulu is one of Southeast Asia's best organized parks, in spite of having to deal with long-standing land disputes with local populations, and a number of other thorny legacy issues). Another major criticism of certain Thai national parks is that they allow private developers to build resorts within their boundaries, such as at Ko Lanta, Pak Meng, Ko Adang and Nai Yang. This could be via simple bribery between the park and

the developer, with the connivance of the government; or it could be due to the park not having the power to prevent a government-supported developer from getting his way. In either case it is very difficult for a researcher to establish the truth of what is happening since such parties are obviously not prepared to discuss these activities.

There is currently a new French funded initiative involving Thailand's national parks together with several academic organizations and World Wildlife Fund. It is known as the SAMPAN Project (Strengthening Andaman Marine Protected Area Network sampan.marineoperations.org) and involves three Andaman Coast national parks, ie Surin, Similan and Lanta. It is designed to strengthen their management and operations and improve the sustainability of tourism therein. It remains to be seen whether SAMPAN can address the parks problems by radically changing the culture within their organizations. Overall, the behaviour of Thailand's national parks is crucial to understanding the problems of tourism sustainability and worthy of much more research than has yet been undertaken. The problem is getting all the relevant stakeholders to talk candidly.

Other Eco-zones

There are in fact eight categories of protected area in Thailand. In addition to the national parks there are also: forest parks, wildlife sanctuaries, non-hunting areas, national forest reserves, botanical gardens, arboretums, and biosphere reserves (Chettamart, 1987). These are all places where ecotourism could and in some cases does occur. To this list of protected places should also be added: World Heritage Sites, ASEAN Heritage Parks, private nature and wildlife parks and some would even claim, enclave developments such as Laguna Phuket (see section on eco-resorts). However, there are very few of these 'other eco-zones' in the Andaman Coast, and apart from a few unprotected areas such as beaches, islands, mangrove forests and upland forest; most of the places where ecotourism could or does take place are nominally under national park jurisdiction.

Case Study 6: Phuket – mass tourism overwhelms ecotourism

Phuket is now the tourism capital of Southern Thailand and a province in its own right.

Following on from the earlier tourism development of Pattaya, Phuket was the first place on the Andaman Coast to receive visitors in large numbers, starting in the early 1980s (see Cohen (1982) for details of Phuket's early development from being a backpacker destination).

Nowadays, much of the island has been transformed, largely by tourism, from a quaint and picturesque backwater, into a heavily urbanized commercial center. Phuket and its environs have long been portrayed by the tourism media as being the archetypical 'tropical paradise', and even as an ecotourism destination. The following hyperbole is quite typical:

"Environmentally conscious developers are turning this Phuket Island into a paradise getaway for eco-tourism" (www.hotelphuket.net). Many people may think this statement credible, especially since Googling 'Phuket ecotourism' (in February 2008) produced 68,900 hits, 'Phuket eco-resorts' 81,700 hits, and 'Phuket eco-tours' 62,800 hits. In fact it is quite misleading, because there is almost no genuine ecotourism in Phuket itself, and in fact the island is often held up as the exemplar of how uncontrolled tourism can ruin a destination within a couple of decades. One has to travel out of Phuket to find any traces of ecotourism but the majority of it is sham, as noted above. According to Siam Safari (www.siamsafari.com), one of Phuket's prominent early ecotourism operators, the main problems with ecotourism in Phuket, and Thailand in general, are: lack of knowledge, information and training in ecotourism activities; inexperienced guides; lack of official control and regulations of companies or natural locations visited; inexperience in marketing; a lack of business ethics.

(from Griefenberg 1997)

One of the few genuine Phuket ecotourism operators, apart from John Gray, is Dave Williams of Paddle Asia (<http://paddleasia.com/index.htm>), a company offering kayaking (multi-day

tours), mountain biking, and rock climbing. Williams has been quoted as saying “Ecotours -- now that's about as vague a term as anything these days. In Phuket everything from ATV tours to 4X4 rallies are labeled ecotours.” (‘The Jungle of Ecotourism’ Phuket Post 22.05.2008). His views on the region’s ecotourism are decidedly negative, he claims; “There is very little true eco tourism in Southern Thailand in spite of almost everyone claiming to run eco tours. Companies that apply for eco tourism awards are usually the opposite of actual eco tourism, instead they're heavily into the mass tourism day trip market. So, instead of spending money on education for their staff or the locals, they're more into patting themselves on the back for doing something that they don't really do” (personal communication by email Feb 25th 2009).

The Phuket Post is also critical of the area’s ecotourism from time to time, for example in the same issue as the quote above it says that:

Ecotours on and around Phuket include almost anything under the blistering sun. A responsible traveler can easily find ecotours listed outside tour-guide offices, on the Internet or in one of countless hotel brochures. From scuba diving to mountain biking, jungle trekking to sea kayaking, animal rehabilitation projects to authentic cultural entertainment shows, Phuket does not lack eco-activity. Even if tour operators advertise eco-friendly tours, however, they may still use practices that cause environmental problems. Many snorkeling tours offer eco-friendly trips yet wrap hundreds of lunches in plastic and Styrofoam. Some encourage people to jump in the water before providing a little knowledge of how to care for the fragile coral that might sustain damage from swim fins. Many trekking operators advertise jungle safaris and wilderness treks, yet those who sign up for package tours are often transported to their destinations in rundown vehicles billowing black exhaust. The TAT certainly doesn't have a firm grasp on the concept nor do they punish companies that claim one thing but actually do another. Tourists and non-Thai residents can't do

much to lobby governmental officials such as the TAT and the Royal Forest Department.

Ecotourism associations in Phuket are fairly thin on the ground. Although there is a 'Phuket Eco-tourism Association' (PETA), its website had expired as of February 2009, although blog postings were still being made by PETA's representative Pakdee Kutanang (Ms) in February 2009 (activist John Gray described this organization as "bogus"). On the mainland, in Phang Nga Province, there is the 'Ecotourism Training Centre' (ETC) (www.etcth.org) and its website informs the visitor that, "ETC is now launching a commercial counterpart called Sustainable Marine Adventures & Responsible Tourism (S.M.A.R.T.). SMART will offer commercial scuba diving and other coastal ecotourism adventures using ETC graduates as its employees, and using 10% of the gross revenues to fund the ETC mission." (John Gray described this organization as being "real" – which my later research supported though it also ran into serious problems – see below). Other ecotourism projects around Phuket include a projected integrated ecotourism-based resort at Baan Bang Rong Mangrove Forest Reserve. Aphrom Promchanya, of the Prince of Songkla University, Thailand has spoken on this (in an undated PowerPoint presentation obtained by Googling). But apart from a Bangkok Post article on 9th Feb 2004, there have been no further updates on this project, and my own visits to the area (close to the Ko Yao Noi jetty) could not establish whether it really actually existed.

In summary, it is clear that Thailand's national parks have a pivotal role in the development of ecotourism throughout the country. However it is also clear that they face huge challenges in order for them to be able to positively influence this in an effective manner. Committed government action is needed to prioritise the restructuring of the entire parks system and changing its culture to support environment protection rather than simply allowing them to be vehicles for personal enrichment.

Ecotourism Mediators:

Government Departments

The Thai Government is of course the country's ultimate ecotourism mediator, in the sense that it can theoretically impose legislation affecting every aspect of the way ecotourism is conducted. However, things do not usually work that way in Thailand, mainly because policies are largely focused on economic growth, and government officials can be easily co-opted by powerful business interests. The most visible sign of the Thai Government's interaction with ecotourism is via TAT (discussed below) and the national parks (discussed previously).

TAT and Government-linked Tourism Agencies

Thailand's best-known government-linked tourism agency is Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) (www.tourismthailand.org), which like the national parks comes in for fierce criticism from ecotourism operators and foreign environmental activists for not taking a more proactive role in sustainable tourism development. These critics usually characterise TAT as being beholden to big business interests – 'big tourism'. In my interviews with TAT officials they were certainly friendly, but also seemed very concerned about toeing the party line, and made a great effort to give the impression that everything was under control and they were doing a great job so far as the environment is concerned. They claim to be very supportive of ecotourism, in spite of their cluttered official website, 'Amazing Thailand' (www.amazing-thailand.com), providing a befuddled description of what ecotourism actually comprises: "Soft adventure options blend with eco-tourism in mountainous jungle terrain, with trekking on foot or elephant back, 4-wheel drive safaris, mountain biking, whitewater rafting, and meeting with remote highland communities."

[It is worth noting that the official-looking website THAILAND.COM also conflates adventure tourism and nature tourism into its own perception of ecotourism; similarly Thai Ecotourism and Adventure Association (<http://www.teata.or.th>)]

At one time TAT took an interesting initiative in promoting ecotourism in Thailand by establishing the web-based ‘Thailand Ecotourism Information Centre’ in conjunction with Kasetsart University, ie

(http://conservation.forest.ku.ac.th/ecotourdb/english/About_us/About_us.htm). However, close examination of this website reveals little activity since 2002 and it now appears to be defunct. Nevertheless, for many years TAT has produced a large number of very well crafted glossy brochures which extol the charms of Thailand’s natural attractions, for example:

‘Adventurous Holidays’; ‘Into the Blue World’; ‘Marine Wonderland’; and ‘Family Fun Under Tropical Sun’. The latter brochure tells us in its section “Supremely Green & Ecologically Clean” that tours in Thailand enable “much closer opportunities for contact with the nature, not to mention the sense of dignity you can feel at preserving the fragile terrain.”

Over the years TAT’s brochures have obviously had a positive effect on arrivals, for instance a survey once revealed that 72.5% of a group of people who had never visited Thailand imagined that the country had ‘unspoilt countryside’ (Tapachai and Waryszak 2000).

The most common criticism of TAT is that they are strong on rhetoric, the importance of sustainability, and how ecotourism can make a difference; however they have no influence over what happens on the ground. Their prestige in Thailand is such that they are only subject to mild domestic criticism, as seen in the rather obsequies tone of papers on ecotourism emanating from certain Thai scholars (for example Thavarasukha (2000) and Sriphomya (2000) – two papers given at the same workshop). And even a respected ecotourism company like Paddle Asia is not embarrassed to say on its website

(www.paddleasia.com/responsible_ecotourism.htm) that: “In Thailand, the boom in eco tourism has prompted the TAT (Tourism Authority of Thailand) to join forces with the Royal

Forest Department to promote better management of certain natural Thailand tour destinations.”

Although this is at variance with what Paddle Asia’s owner Dave Williams says in private (see above), it is highly understandable since he needs to be seen as politically correct in order to continue operating. But where exactly are the effects of this ‘better management’ being felt? The sad thing is that TAT, like the Royal Forestry Department, should be in a position to make a real difference to ecotourism and sustainability in Thailand, but so far both organizations have punched way below their weight. At least one Thai scholar has claimed that one should not expect too much from government agencies regarding the proper regulation of ecotourism (and tourism generally) in Thailand:

In the provinces, the lines of administration are vertical, from each agency up to Bangkok. This leads to a lack of coordination among government agencies in the same province. The government officials seem to be confused about their roles in tourism and environmental management. This has meant that any problems resulting from the tourism industry still wait for solutions. All tourism master plans prepared in the provinces have been developed by the TAT (or an organisation hired by TAT) without participation from local government officials and local people. There is no follow up so that the strategies can be adjusted to be more practical if that is desirable. High-ranking officials in the provinces do not play key roles as leaders in environmental and resource conservation. Information necessary to promote and manage ecotourism (geology, the function of forest ecosystems, history and the evolution of local communities, and their present socio-economic conditions including their ways of life) has not been organised and hence ecotourism does not develop as rapidly as it could. Another negative factor is that the laws governing preserved areas are outdated and the levels of fines and penalties are very low (Wanichanugorn 2000).

However, according to a paper delivered by Sriphnomya in 2000, for a while things seemed to be looking up:

To achieve the goals of ecotourism a cooperative network has been established. The network includes the Ecotourism National Board, the Thai Ecotourism Society, the Thai Ecotourism Association and Ecotourism Local Committees and the Foundation for the Protection of Environment and Tourism (Sriphnomya 2000).

While this array of august organisations must have seemed promising to Thailand's ecotourism in 2000, a websearch conducted in December 2009 could find no evidence that any of them were still functioning. Some may have been subsumed into the aforementioned 'Thai Ecotourism and Adventure Association'; however this appears to be just a loose association of a few adventure tour operators. In conclusion, it does not seem that there are many credible government-linked ecotourism organisations operating in Thailand.

Industrial Sectors and Transport Infrastructure

There are a number of industrial sectors whose activities are capable of seriously compromising ecotourism operations, ie by destroying natural habitats, wild life and local livelihoods. The most important of these in the Andaman Coast are: commercial fishing, prawn farming, plantation and agriculture, mining and quarrying; and in Phuket in particular, creeping urbanization. Such activities are normally controlled by powerful business interests, who cannot easily be challenged by local communities or NGOs. However, another factor which is having a greater impact on ecotourism and tourism development generally, is the drastic improvement in the region's transport infrastructure. It now has two international airports, ie Phuket and Krabi; plus two domestic airports, ie Ranong and Trang. The main highway system has also been upgraded in recent years, although unlike Trang, Phuket still has no direct rail connection to Bangkok (probably because most of Thailand's main southern line is single track and cannot handle any more traffic). The ferry system connecting Phuket,

Phi Phi, Krabi and Ko Lanta has been upgraded with bigger and faster ferries and new jetty complexes. There is now a day-long island-hopping ferry service from Ko Lanta to Langkawi in Malaysia, thus enabling travel from Penang to Phuket entirely by sea. While all this has been responsible for increased arrivals into the region, the most important transportation factor relating to ecotourism has been the replacement of long-tail boats and slow ferries by high capacity speedboats for both day excursions and transporting tourists to islands far offshore. This has resulted in formerly remote places like the Surin Islands, Similan Islands, Ko Hong, Ko Rok, and Ko Lipe being inundated with tourists and in effect becoming mass tourism destinations.

'Big Tourism'

'Big Tourism' refers to powerful developers and tour operators who normally do not provide ecotourism as part of their business but can nevertheless influence how it is conducted – usually in a negative way. This also includes resort developers that encroach on national park land, or big tour operators who run mass excursions that overwhelm places of natural beauty (see cases above). Given the present political climate in Thailand, such powerful entities can virtually act with impunity, and it seems unlikely that their influence will diminish in the short term, if indeed ever.

Case Study 7: The Surin Islands and Khao Lak – 'big tourism' disempowers local communities

Recently in the Surin Islands, a Kuraburi diving operator tried to empower indigenous Moken people by chartering their longtail boats for scuba diving. The idea was to base scuba divers in the islands in national park accommodation, and then use the Moken boats for day diving (in contrast to all other diving operators who have divers living aboard large diving boats for four to five days). This would have been a win-win situation for all concerned: ie the Moken getting paid for the rental of their boats; the national park paid for their accommodation; and

the divers enjoying a less expensive and more diverse and local touristic experience. True ecotourism! Alas, it was not to be, because a diving competitor who had clout with the park, managed to get this novel operation shut down by unfairly complaining that the Moken boats were unsafe. Another example of an ecotourism operator being thwarted by big commercial interests was an attempt by the Khao Lak based Ecotourism Training Centre (ETC) (www.etcth.org) to run a local dive instructor training pontoon off Thai Muang National Park. ETC's managing director Reid Ridgway explained that the UNWTO sponsored project was to try to rectify the dearth of local instructors in the region's diving industry (as compared with Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia where there are many local instructors – for reasons requiring more research). The idea was to have a diving platform permanently moored off the national park as a convenient means of training local instructors while teaching them English, something that ETC has a proven track record in. However, associated commercial interests managed to sabotage the plan when it became obvious to their personnel that they would not financially benefit from it, ie the long-term benefit to the local community came second to their own self-interest.

Travel agents and Tour Counters

The influence of the so-called 'tour counter industry' is often central to whether ecotourism operations succeed or not. Tour counters are found everywhere, in locations such as Phuket, Ao Nang, Railay Beach, Krabi Town, Ko Phi Phi, Ko Lanta and Trang. Some are little more than sidewalk stalls, while others have set up in the foyers of hotels and resorts; and a smaller number are full-scale tour agency establishments housed in proper offices. They make money from arranging transportation, and accommodation - and crucially, eco-excursions and other tours. Surveys undertaken by myself and others indicate that (unsurprisingly) counter staff recommend tours on the basis of the amount of commission they receive from the operator, and the price they can sell it at, rather than the quality or 'greenness' of the tour. I found that most counter staff have no idea of what constitutes ecotourism. Because they operate in a

very competitive market (some counters are only yards away from each other) they simply try to sell as much as they can (see also Kontogeorgopoulos 1998, and Shepherd 2002).

However, it may be unfair to blame the tour counters entirely, because unscrupulous 'ecotour' operators are equally to blame. If these operators were obliged by regulation, from either government, National Parks or TAT, to maintain standards of quality and quantity, the problem would not arise. Unfortunately in the laissez-faire free-for-all world that is Thailand, this simply doesn't happen, and it is generally accepted that nothing much can be done about it (from Shepherd 2002).

Much ecotourism business is also generated through inbound tour operators and 'ground handlers' (ie logistics arrangers for overseas tour operators). These operators are also heavily driven by price, since they are just as profit-driven as the tour counter people. This seems especially true of Asian tour specialists, who bring in large groups of tourists from China, Taiwan and Korea. These seek the lowest possible price from their local suppliers (ie the ecotour operators) since they usually offer extra tours, including ecotours, as a total package. The agents I interviewed say that "tourists from Asian countries aren't too fussy how 'genuine' the tour is, they just want it to be cheap". Overall it is clear that Thailand's tour counter and ground handler industries play a major role in selling sub-standard tours indiscriminately.

Tour Guides

High quality tour guiding is clearly central to successful ecotourism, but unfortunately this only happens on a very small percentage of tours, such as John Gray SeaCanoe and Paddle Asia. On mass ecotourism excursions most so-called tour guides only concern themselves with making sure that everyone has a ticket and where the cold drinks can be found. Usually tourists are dumped onto a beach for an hour or so and told to wander round and amuse themselves. On the other hand most diving operators do exhibit high quality tour guiding,

with dive leaders explaining the underwater topography and marine life on the deck of the boat prior to diving by means of marker boards, and pointing out interesting features during the underwater tour.

Case Study 8: Ko Rok – a daytrip in Mu Lanta National Park

Ko Rok is about 50 kilometres southwest of Ko Lanta, and offers one of the Andaman's most popular day trips, often referred to in promotional literature as an ecotours. Ko Rok actually comprises two small islands very close together, which are under the control of Mu Ko Lanta National Park; which also offers ecotourism day trips and overnight camping tours in addition to the many private tour operators also doing so. The park has built at least 12 bungalows (out of concrete but still reasonably tasteful) although it is unclear as to who actually gets to stay in them, since they do not seem to be offered through tour agents. I took a Ko Rok daytrip from Ko Lanta (costing 1,300 baht in November 2007), which entailed an hour-long speedboat ride out to the islands. These high capacity boats are normally fast and comfortable, but on this particular day the ride was very lumpy due to strong offshore winds and a heavy swell. The four-man crew was Urak Lawoi, and though quite efficient as seamen they were not qualified to be ecotourism guides. Only one was able to speak (broken) English, and hence they provided no educational content, other than passing around a couple of laminated sheets showing fish and coral. We visited three different snorkelling locations that had good coral, but did not see a lot of fish and certainly none larger than around 9 inches long. Upon arriving at the reef the crewman simply announced, "We are here for 30 minutes so enjoy". We later went ashore to enjoy a reasonable local lunch in the shade of trees on the northern island's main beach, in the company of several huge but tame monitor lizards. There is a nature trail leading up to a viewpoint, but since we were not told about it we had no time to follow it (it requires at least an hour and half, which was our total time on the island). A short distance across the island the northern bay is strewn with rubbish and the remains of a broken floating jetty - probably a remnant of the 2004 Tsunami. At least 8 large speedboats followed us around all day on the same schedule, which enabled the crews to take time out to

play their regular game of sepak takraw after lunch (similar to many other boat trips in Southeast Asia, such as the poker games on the infamous Na Trang island party trips in Vietnam). The snorkelling sites were generally too crowded to be properly enjoyed, although the corals seemed relatively undamaged, and all boats used either permanent moorings or soft lines to coral heads. The National Park charges 400 baht per entry and a ranger was present on the beach of the northern island. However the ranger station provided very little useful information and the ranger could not speak any English. In all this was really just another crowded nature-based mass tourism product.

On Ko Lanta itself, as with everywhere else in the region, it seems that every natural attraction possible to visit within a day has been appropriated by some sort of excursion. No cave, waterfall (even those that are often dry), mangrove forest or coral island is untouched. There is a plethora of activities on offer, such as: 4x4 off-road driving, trail or mountain biking, elephant trekking, jungle trekking, caving, sea kayaking, canoeing through mangroves, horse-riding, Thai cookery classes, snorkelling, scuba diving, Thai boxing tuition, yoga, rock climbing or visits to the Orchid Nursery (all taken from the list of activities offered by Narima Resort). However, most of Lanta's nature excursions do not constitute ecotourism, which to its credit Narima does not claim them to be, although the literature handed out by the many local tour counters is full of 'eco-this' and 'eco-that'. These are not ecotours because there is hardly any educational content, and little if any of the revenues go towards conservation. No one seems to know what happens to the National Park fees that are collected in many locations, especially all the thousands of scuba diving trips made every day. Lanta's tourism promotion literature is replete with 'green washing' and exaggeration, for example old rubber plantations have been miraculously transformed into rainforest etc. Googling 'ko lanta ecotourism' produces 6,580 hits – with most of them totally misusing the term ecotourism. This 'mass ecotourism' is certainly popular though of questionable value to the environment, although it may improve some tourist's environmental awareness.

NGOs

Over the years there have been relatively few NGOs active in the problems of tourism development on the Andaman Coast, either at international or local level. In the case of international NGOs the reason for their relative lack of interest is probably related to the paucity of iconic fauna in the region, plus the absence of a sudden major environmental catastrophe. The 2004 Tsunami did attract the attention of plenty of international NGOs, but this was much more a human catastrophe than an environmental one. For example the websites of WWF Thailand (<http://www.wwf.or.th>), Greenpeace Southeast Asia (www.greenpeace.org/seasia), and Tourism Concern (www.tourismconcern.org.uk) for example, are noticeably quiet on tourism related issues in the region, although the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has an office in Khuraburi and some small projects in the area (www.iucn.org/thailand). The Tsunami did spawn a number of internationally funded community-based tourism organisations, particularly around Khao Lak and Khuraburi, of which Andaman Discoveries (www.andamandiscoveries.com), founded by an American, Bodhi Garrett, is the most prominent. Most of these organizations are now becoming much more commercially oriented now that post-Tsunami funding is drying up, and are trying to make a living from small-scale eco-cultural tours to local villages etc.

It is interesting to note the different levels of NGO activity between the northern and southern sectors of the Andaman Coast. One would think that given the greater seriousness of the problems in the southern provinces (ie Krabi, Trang and Satun) there would be more NGO activity there, but in fact it is the opposite. This seems to be due to a) the greater devastation of the Tsunami in the north, and b) the higher resistance to NGO presence in the south (Ko Lipe being a prime example – they have been warned to stay away). On the domestic front, local NGO indifference to tourism is not entirely unsurprising, since most of them see local community problems as being their primary focus (see Ungpakorn 2003). Some researchers have characterised the entire Thai NGO movement in such terms as: "...its preoccupation

with the rural areas, its focus on issues rather than ‘totalizing’ programs, its avoidance of hierarchy, and its emphasis on flat networking...” (eg Bello et al 1998) – attributes which would seem to render local NGOs ineffective with regard to tourism issues involving powerful players and government agencies.

In the Andaman Coast, Yad Fon (based in Trang) is a reasonably influential environmental NGO, but again one that does not concern itself too much with tourism. This is surprising considering that tourism development is now in conflict with some of the local communities that Yad Fon is most concerned with, including the Muslims of Ko Muk, just off the coast of Trang.

Undue deference to power is said to explain the relative lack of activism in Thailand’s academic institutions, NGOs and grassroots organizations. As a number of well-publicized mega projects such as the Nam Choan or Pak Mun Dams, have shown, it is only when local people’s livelihoods are directly threatened that they are willing to risk involvement and confrontation. The reason for this is possibly a general lack of trust and social capital in Thai society. In ‘Building Social Capital in Thailand’, Unger (1998) supports this: “The paucity of social capital in Thailand had the effect of weakening efforts by Thais to cooperate in pursuit of shared goals.”

Vertically, this paucity manifests itself in an absence of faith in government institutions and big business. Horizontally, it manifests itself in a lack of faith in other communities. This seems to have resulted in ‘an every man for himself’ ethic, where socially conscious behaviour is in very short supply. This research found that there is much evidence of this happening in Thailand’s Andaman Coast, which in many places is exacerbated in communities that are experiencing disruption from a rapidly expanding international tourism industry.

Thailand's environmental NGOs face a number of constraints, which are enumerated below (from Lee and So 1999). Many of these constraints were also discussed in my interviews with Yad Fon, ie: most local NGOs are not well financed and are dependent on foreign financing – some up to 80 or 90 percent; they do not have professionally trained long term staff - they focus on local issues and events, and do not have a strategic view; there are many different kinds of NGOs, with their concerns ranging from the environment, rural development, human rights, indigenous people and so on – thus making it difficult to build alliances; they have undeveloped media and public relations capacity - most of Thai society treats them as troublemakers; they are under close supervision by the government through licensing – who use this as a political means to make them conform to their policies.

Much of the above criticism resonates with my own research findings and specifically my discussions with Trang's Yad Fon organization. The unavoidable conclusion is that Thailand's environmental NGOs are unlikely to make much impact on improving tourism sustainability or encouraging ecotourism in the near future.

Academia and Media

Although they have not directly addressed ecotourism, at least three academic institutions have made some effort to study tourism development issues in the Andaman Coast, namely: Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University, and the two Prince of Songkla University campuses - in Phuket and Had Yai. Of these three Chulalongkorn has been the most active; and has been jointly involved with University of California, Berkeley in Krabi Province and Ko Lanta, as well as in a European Union funded project with the unwieldy title of 'Meeting European standards for Sustainable Tourism Management: Capacity-building of Thai enterprises and policy-makers. Promotion of good practices in the Thai tourism sector'. This was a joint 12-month project between the Environmental Research Institute of Chulalongkorn University (www.eric.chula.ac.th/eric), and 'The Natural Guide' (Bumi Kita Foundation)

(www.naturalguide.org), which ran from October 2006 to October 2007. The main output from this project is full-colour 138-page illustrated handbook, in English and Thai, titled ‘Sustainable Tourism Management in Thailand: A Good Practices Guide for SMEs’ (ERIC 2007). This is an excellent publication; with lots of practical advice for tourism operators. Unfortunately the booklet is not readily available, and in fact I did not encounter a single copy of it in circulation during my fieldwork. The publisher informed me that only seven hundred hard copies were printed and distributed to public and private sectors in Thailand, plus some sent to large tour operators in Europe, although many other soft copies were distributed around the world by email. There is no doubt that if all tourism stakeholders adhered to the booklet’s recommendations, it would solve most of the country’s problems. If only things could be that way.

The impact of national newspapers on the Andaman Coast’s ecotourism has not been fully ascertained during this research; however, regarding the local media, Phuket has three English language newspapers, ie: ‘Phuket Gazette’ (www.phuketgazette.net); ‘Phuket Post’ (<http://phuket-post.com>); and Siangtai Times (www.siangtai.com) - which has both English and Thai language sections. While all three journals can be critical on environmental issues, a large degree of self-censorship is exercised to avoid getting into trouble with powerful figures or government agencies. According to Nick Davis, the editor of the Phuket Gazette (probably the best of these papers), Phuket’s English language newspapers “have no problem with reporting on environmental problems providing it is done in a non-accusatory manner and there is very strong evidence of guilt”, ie when the official legal process has already determined responsibility. In other words “they are not going to go out on a limb without solid facts to back up a story”. Although the region has no organized journalistic activism as such, there are a number of environmentally concerned free-lance writers (such as John Gray), who are often published. However, Davis says that these contributions are “carefully edited for liability and factual accuracy, bearing in mind that it is often very difficult to pinpoint who is actually at fault”. The repercussions of accusing powerful figures of

misdeeds, such as encroaching on National Park land, illegal development, waste dumping etc, are too great for the paper to give free reign to activists. The Gazette “picks and chooses its stories and a number are held back or edited such that readers must make their own conclusions”. However, it is prepared voice strong criticism on issues that are relatively clear-cut. On recent example was the story in the Gazette of fishermen using cyanide on turtles and clown fish to capture them for sale to the aquarium market (although this is very much a case of going after the weak rather than the powerful – something that the national parks are often accused of). The Gazette does try to create awareness throughout the island’s tourism industry in response to what it feels is increasing demand from foreign tourists for eco-friendly tourism services, and it feels that hotels especially are reacting positively to this. Of the local Thai language newspapers Davis felt that they give little coverage to environmental issues, possibly because of a combination of lack of journalistic interest amongst newspaper staff - plus a readership that is “mainly interested in crime stories, gossip about TV stars, and the gory details of gangland shootings.”

Local Communities

Throughout the Andaman Coast, local communities have in general only benefited from tourism in terms of supplying low wage earners and boatmen. The Muslim communities of Ko Lanta and Ko Muk are a good example of this, though these communities have the additional handicap of many western tourists not wanting to stay in their villages because of alcohol restrictions and post 9/11 anti-Islamic ramifications. Most of the rewards from tourism have gone to people from outside the region, and despite the efforts of organizations such as Andaman Discoveries around Khuraburi, very few local communities in Thailand’s Andaman Coast have managed to become empowered by ecotourism. This reinforces the fact that there is so little genuine ecotourism in the region. However, at least two Muslim extended families (or clans) have been empowered by mass tourism, for example those on Railay Beach, and Ko Phi Phi, who managed to hold onto their land and develop it with up-market

resorts. The clan on Ko Phi Phi also managed to build up a successful ferry operation (PP Family). A few more communities could be considered to have been enriched by mass tourism (it would be incorrect to say empowered - since they have little control over the overall tourism operation). For example Ko Panniyi, close to 'James Bond Island' in Phang Nga Bay, has been enriched in this way. Many Phuket tourism websites estimate the number of lunchtime visitors to Ko Panniyi at between two to three thousand during the peak season. They all arrive by boat at around the same time, eat their lunch, wander round, buy a few handicrafts, and then depart. By evening this small village on stilts has reverted to its former tranquility, apart from a few tourists who stay overnight. Many such communities must wish they had such an internationally known attraction next door to them, giving them all the benefits of tourism and none of the hassle. Panniyi Island is not admired by everyone however, one researcher for example "Corrado Ruggeri visits the Thai village of Ko Panniyi, which has transformed itself into a tourist attraction...All fake, for the use and consumption of the tourist who is satisfied by the performance. Ko Panniyi presents the tourist with a 'recita', a show or spectacle, not authentic culture" (quoted in Mee, C. 2007:271). As if the villagers would care about what he said! But despite these few success stories most of the region's local people must be envious when they look at the amount of money pouring in to the area through tourism and see so little of it going to them, except for the low wage earners or those who run small businesses. They also have the vexation of seeing so many jobs going to people coming from other parts of Thailand like Issan, and their bosses telling them that outsiders can do a better job than they can.

To summarise: while there are many different entities exerting influence on ecotourism in the Andaman Coast, the government is clearly the most potentially influential, via its nominal control over the national parks and TAT. Strong legislation is therefore required in order to strengthen the power, capacity, and credibility of these organisations, and thus enable them to withstand commercial pressures coming from other mediators and do their job of supporting ecotourism and sustainable tourism development.

Discussion

The Andaman Coast has seen an explosion of ‘nature-based day-excursions’, particularly those being sold through the ‘tour counters’ that are ubiquitous in mass tourism locations. Copycat competition is rampant and aggressive entrepreneurs pile into whichever activity currently looks profitable. Nowadays virtually every natural attraction groans under large numbers of daily visitors, especially in the high season. But despite the camouflage of much ‘green marketing’, most of these tours bear no relationship to ecotourism. This is because of intense crowding, along with very little regard for environmental sustainability and educational content. In fact most such tours end up damaging the environment. For example, speedboat tours to Ko Rok and many of the picturesque Trang and Krabi islands are blatant forms of outdoor mass tourism, where hundreds of people arrive at the same time and swamp the best beaches and snorkelling spots. This is exemplified by the problems faced by John Gray’s SeaCanoe - a successful and innovative ecotourism operation that quickly spawned scores of competitors who eventually overran and degraded the best sea kayaking sites. Tourist carrying capacities are almost never officially recognised – because they would almost certainly be ignored even if anyone took the trouble to calculate them in the first place.

The scuba diving industry is perhaps the only tourism sector capable of maintaining a degree of control over its operating standards, and has even been able to organise at least one semi-successful industry association, ie The Thai Diving Association (TDA) – though a previous effort now appears defunct. This is probably because the diving industry has some important characteristics that distinguish it from other types of tourism. However, in spite of this, diving has been unable or unwilling to control the numbers of visitors to the most popular dive sites, in fact many divers consider them to be over-dived in the high season. This is in contrast to Sipadan in East Malaysia, where all diving resorts were recently demolished and visitors severely restricted (this may have been more influenced by sovereignty and security issues,

arising from an ongoing border dispute with Indonesia, rather than environmental concerns - the island has also been raided by Philippine pirates in recent years with hostages being taken).

The region has a growing number of exclusive 'hideaway' resorts, which obviously appeal to the type of people who find pleasure in travelling to interesting countries like Thailand, and then shutting themselves away from it. The odd thing is that most of these hideaways consider themselves 'eco-resorts', although they are in complete opposition to ecotourism's tenets of community participation and empowerment. A prime example of this insular form of tourism is Evason's Six Senses 'eco-resort' on Ko Yao Noi. The Evason organisation makes much of its environmental commitment and even has an area environmental manager in their Phuket Rawai resort (www.sixsenses.com/Evason-Phuket). However, they too have skeletons in their cupboard. In general the modernist architecture of the vast majority of resorts is highly inefficient in terms of energy usage, water usage and waste disposal. The avoidance of even the minimal existing regulations is commonplace, and places a further burden on the environment (Berkeley-Chulalongkorn 2007).

The 'homestay' concept, which is common in places like Europe and Australia, has yet to achieve huge popularity in the region, probably because there is too wide a cultural gap between the 'hosts' and the 'guests'. The region's best example of a seemingly successful homestay program is Ko Yao Noi's Ecotourism Club. Other homestays that used to function, or still claim to be functioning, include Krabi's Pattanarak Project and Ko Sukorn's SACSTP project (but in practice they may now be moribund). The relatively few true homestays that do operate, as opposed to the many hotels that appropriate the homestay name for marketing purposes, seem to appeal to a small (but possibly growing) number of urban Thais who are keen to get back to their roots, along with a few hardcore western ecotourists.

As such the present status of ecotourism in Thailand's Andaman Coast can be summarized as follows:

There is very little that complies with accepted ecotourism criteria and thereby constitutes genuine ecotourism. The term ecotourism is loosely applied and grossly misused, with the practice of 'greenwashing' widespread, especially with respect to most so called 'eco-excursions' and 'eco-resorts'. Ecotourism tends to be dominated by westerners, with Asian participation being low on both the demand side (the ecotourists) and the supply side (the operators). 'Hard Ecotourism' is likely to remain a very small market sector, which will only attract dedicated nature-oriented tourists and outdoor enthusiasts. 'Soft Ecotourism' is growing, but is usually centered on eco-excursions and eco-resorts, most of which are only superficially environmentally friendly. Ecotourism has evolved into mass tourism in many locations, and as yet there is no sign of the reverse happening, ie nature excursions transforming into genuine ecotourism and mass tourism into ecotourism, nor is it beginning to move in that direction. Ecotourism is usually imposed top-down from outside local communities, whereas it would be more effective if it grew organically from within local communities. However, political realities preclude this. The authorities should promote genuine eco-excursionism in natural locations that are close to mass tourism markets; emphasising eco-educational content, and targeting students and domestic tourists. This would probably be the most effective way that ecotourism could play a role in spreading an environmental message. Successful genuine ecotourism can help nurture a 'culture of environmentalism' through education and the demonstration effect (a bottom-up approach); as well as stimulating official legislation for eco-friendly development (a top-down approach). These two positive consequences would appear to have the most potential for encouraging sustainable tourism in the region.

From this research it is apparent that each of the six provinces of Thailand's Andaman Coast have different approaches to the problems of tourism development, and some general characterisations of each province can be made. However, it is clear that these comments

should be further refined by means of in-depth candid interviews with a wide range of government officers, business leaders and national park officials, but which in my experience would be very difficult, if not impossible, to obtain:

1. Ranong Province has so far seen little mass tourism development, and still has good potential for ecotourism on certain offshore islands, such as Ko Chang, which are still at an early stage of development.
2. Phang Nga Province seems to want to portray itself as an ecotourism destination, however this image is blighted by its lack of control over its most popular national park, in Phang Nga Bay. However, the province is demonstrating greater responsibility regarding its two offshore marine national parks, ie Similan and Surin Islands, and offers a couple of eco-friendly resorts on Ko Phra Thong and Ko Ra. Phang Nga's primary mass tourism locality is Khao Lak, an area which is still recovering from the devastation caused by the 2004 Tsunami. However, even allowing for this tragic event, and in spite of having a number of up-market and tasteful resorts, Khao Lak is for the most part a rather generic and soulless strip development (apart from the short coastline around its southern headland) stretched between a busy trunk road and a rather featureless beach. Given enough time it will surely resemble Phuket.
3. Phuket Province is now mostly overdeveloped and seems to have abandoned itself to mass tourism and establishing itself as the regional business and transport centre. Given the poor quality of the province's governance, its environment is likely to get worse rather than better. It is rapidly becoming a kind of 'Bangkok by the Sea'.
4. Krabi Province has at least undertaken some long-range planning and appears to be making attempts to attract more up-market tourism. In Railay and Phi Phi it has two of the region's most beautiful beach locations. However, whereas the former is making solid progress towards becoming eco-friendly, the latter has become a xbyword for environmentally destructive tourism development and may now be beyond the point of no return.

5. Trang Province so far has not seen much mass tourism development, and recognising its broad range of natural attractions sees its advantage in being able to promote ecotourism. Publicly the province's government is giving the effort some serious attention, though in operational terms there are signs that much may turn out to be unachievable.
6. Satun Province can offer the attractions of the largely undeveloped Tarutao-Adang National Park. However, in spite of efforts towards sustainability, its credibility is seriously challenged by an inability to solve serious social and environmental problems on Ko Lipe, which is rapidly becoming a mass tourism destination.

In short, with the exception of scuba diving operations, the only genuine ecotourism offered in the Andaman Coast is by a few specialist sea kayaking operators such as John Gray and Dave Williams; plus a few eco-friendly resorts, such as: Narima on Ko Lanta, the Had Yao and Libong Nature Resorts, Golden Buddha Resort on Ko Phra Thong and Ko Ra Ecolodge. Andaman Discoveries has also had some small-scale success with community-based tourism. However, these efforts are too few in number to make much impact on environmental sustainability, social equity, or education, and therefore in overall terms, ecotourism cannot be considered to be a success in the region.

While the process of overdevelopment now seems unstoppable, efforts could still be made to limit further damage by enforcing environmentally friendly practices for resorts, transportation companies and tour operators. The excellent publication 'Sustainable Tourism Management in Thailand: A Good Practices Guide for SMEs' (ERIC 2007) is a step in the right direction. It recommends measures that could be operationalised through government mandate, though in practice these would almost certainly be undermined by the informal business-government alliances that are able to prevent any legislation that threatens their revenues. Overdevelopment has become ingrained in a demand-driven economy like Thailand's, because tourism projects are such convenient vehicles for businessmen's self-

enrichment, and government official's rent seeking. It is apparent that such people regard this as a far higher priority than the interests of the broader community.

It really all goes back to the need for the government and government linked organisations such as TAT and the National Parks to show some mettle in regulating tourism. The difficulty is that they must make political decisions that are acceptable to the full range of stakeholders, and which can be supported by existing institutions, as well as the culture, tradition and habits of the general population. Without the transformation of Thailand's current power structures, to create an equitable, inclusive and transparent society, sustainable tourism, or for that matter sustainability of any kind, seems unlikely. Nevertheless ecotourism's potential for influencing tourism development in the long-term must continue to be exploited because of its capacity to modify tourist, corporate, and community environmental behaviour (Hanneberg 2006). In this regard there is no lack of practical strategies to transform mass tourism to sustainable tourism, such as those listed below: (adapted from Butler 1991)

1. Reduce the number of tourists by restricting access or charging higher fees.
2. Restrict the building of new tourism accommodation and transport infrastructure.
3. Upgrade the tourism zone's environmental infrastructure.
4. Convert mass tourism to ecotourism by creating protected enclaves or national parks.
5. Upgrade from down-market tourism to up-market tourism.
6. Harden natural resources against higher tourist volumes.
7. Empower local communities to resist intrusion and marginalisation.
8. Educate tourism's stakeholders, particularly domestic operators and tourists, to respect the environment and local cultures.

There are stakeholder groups who by positive action could remedy the country's environmental problems. These include: Government Departments (by legislation); National Parks (by enforcing standards in areas already under their jurisdiction); Environmental NGO's (by greater activism); Local Communities (through empowerment); The Tourism

Industry (by self regulation); Tourists (by destination selection). The question is whether they will do so.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS

With respect to the Andaman Coast, this research has attempted to establish whether there is sufficient evidence to defend the hypothesis that:

The majority of those activities that are marketed as ecotourism are environmentally sustainable, socially equitable and educative; and genuine ecotourism is replacing mass tourism as the dominant tourism development paradigm.

However, after assessing ecotourism and the role it plays in tourism development, I feel that the converse is true, ie sufficient evidence has been uncovered to falsify this hypothesis. Not enough genuine ecotourism has been identified, and it is apparent that most of that which purports to be ecotourism does not comply with its basic tenets. Furthermore, the small amount of genuine ecotourism that is present makes almost no impact on the damaging effects of mass tourism. In short ecotourism is of minor importance in terms of tourist volumes and revenues, and despite a number of well-intentioned efforts, has failed to become sufficiently established to be considered an important sector and play a meaningful developmental role. The main reason for this is that current social, economic, political and cultural conditions in Thailand are not conducive to its success. On the contrary, these conditions are far more conducive to the entrenchment of selfish elites and self-perpetuating systems of patronage. In this milieu genuine ecotourism can only exist on the margins of mass tourism; or in spaces that mass tourism has not penetrated. Even then it always appears likely to transform into mass tourism. This depressing process seems to be inevitable whenever transport infrastructure (ie airports, roads, bridges, fast ferries etc) improves to the point where entrepreneurs find it profitable to encourage mass tourism. Most of that which masquerades as ecotourism is in fact commercially-driven nature excursionism, or 'greenwashed' mass tourism, neither of which adhere to the tenets of ecotourism. In short ecotourism is having a marginal impact on tourism sustainability in the Andaman Coast and from my experience and observation it is much the same story in the rest of Thailand and most other Southeast Asian countries, and for the same reasons. It is a problem endemic to

developing countries because they are invariably subject to demand-driven tourism, in combination with poor governance, predatory entrepreneurialism, weak civil society, and low eco-awareness; all of which result from adverse social, economic, political and cultural conditions. At present it is quite unrealistic to think of ecotourism as being an answer to tourism challenges that have their roots in long-established structures that facilitate uncontrolled entrepreneurialism and elite self-interest.

The difficulty in establishing and maintaining ecotourism is only one of the challenges facing tourism in general, and these need to be highlighted in order to flesh out the bigger picture of overall tourism sustainability. As such this research has revealed a number of important issues pertaining to the Andaman Coast, which can be summarised under the following headings:

Social Issues

Low levels of trust, social capital, education, and empowerment seriously undermine the ability of local communities to unite and resist the actions of powerful business-government alliances. Many local people live at subsistence levels and experience poverty, insecurity and impermanence, and hence they naturally have higher short-term priorities than the preservation of their environment, even when they recognise that it would be in their long-term interests to do so. Environmental degradation and the empowerment level of local communities appear to be linked, but in complex ways; as illustrated by the capacity of local people to destroy their own environment if left to their own devices. It is extremely difficult to foster meaningful cooperation between tourism stakeholders, because of differing priorities and perspectives, combined with a lack of institutional mechanisms where they can establish regular dialogue with one another and build up trust.

Economic Issues

Inequalities between the Developed and Developing Worlds have resulted in a dependency structure, where development agendas are dominated by the power of the consumer and the acquiescence of the producer - in other words the market is highly demand-driven by customers who have far more economic power than providers. Modernity and growth are always high national priorities, and mass tourism is preferred in order to attract FDI, foreign aid, foreign exchange, and create employment opportunities. Global economic growth, modernisation, and increasing consumerism, are bringing ever-more tourists, who cause rapid environmental and social change. Global media and mass tourism have created intense international peer pressure that encourages every strata of Thai society to want to emulate western material standards.

Political Issues

Thai society is fractured by huge imbalances in the distribution of 'power-knowledge' [a useful concept popularised by Michel Foucault (see for example Foucault 1980)] which is so unevenly distributed that it causes serious conflicts of interest between stakeholder groups, notably between business-government alliances and almost everyone else; which makes collaborative management of natural resources difficult if not impossible. With its 'top-down / growth-oriented' approach, the Thai State fails, in the name of development, to prevent the rich from exploiting the poor, and locals becoming marginalized and displaced by outsiders both at business and wage earner levels. Poor governance is an important factor in the general lack of regulation in tourism development; and society's lack of voice results in an inability to control the predations of powerful profit-oriented businesses-government alliances.

Government at all levels is too weak, corrupt and lacking in sufficient will to implement effective planning and control. Self-regulation of the tourism business has proven totally insufficient, and therefore in spite of the above challenges, the government and its agencies must take responsibility and exercise authority on an equitable basis, otherwise nothing will happen.

Cultural Issues

Many Thais appear to be ill-informed, and their inherent fatalism and lack of community engagement, along with weak interest in activism and a critical media, reinforces patterns of domination by powerful actors and the persistence of patron-client relationships. Thailand's present socio-economic-political environment encourages an unrestrained 'culture of greed'. Also at government level there is a marked lack of awareness and involvement in environmental issues, as well as the willingness to address them. Only superficial short-term problems are publicly acknowledged and not deep long-term structural ones. Another problem is that the majority of Thai domestic tourists choose to vacation in large groups, and demonstrate low levels of environmental awareness and ambivalence towards nature and local cultures. Most of them do not behave like 'stakeholders in the environment', and often act as if the nation's natural resources do not belong to them. Minority communities, particularly the non-religious Urak Lawoi and Moken, have become marginalized, because in addition to lacking power they also lack sufficient social cohesion and communal consciousness to resist the predations of outsiders. On the other hand a few Muslim communities, whose strong faith seems to be a source of community strength, show that family and clan cohesion can enable them to profit from tourism.

In sum, there is very little effective control over the tourism industry: either in terms of self-control by effective industry associations; government control in the form of committed honest civil servants; or grass roots pressure in the form of empowered and vocal local communities. In more specific terms, tourism's problems stem from the proliferation of: mass tourism style 'eco-excursions', high capacity passenger speedboats, inappropriately designed hotel accommodation, lack of control over pollution and waste disposal, overuse of fresh water, encroachment on national park land, and the alienation of local communities. In simple terms it is the influx of too many tourists and more money than the region's economic, social, cultural and political structures can properly absorb. More than a decade ago researchers were reporting "numerous problems with uncontrolled mass tourism development...where

overcrowding, pollution and shortsighted planning have degraded formerly 'pristine' coastal resort destinations" (Kontogeorgopoulos 1998). Since then the situation has grown worse.

Most of the solutions put forward by NGOs and academia emphasise bottom-up community approaches, but because the problems mainly stem from self-interested top-down control, this methodology shows little progress. In defence of NGOs it can of course be argued that bottom-up approaches are the only practical ones having any chance of success, because entrenched government-business interests are highly unlikely to cooperate. Most NGOs would probably claim that change can only come from below, so this is where efforts need to be focussed. This is certainly the view of prominent community-based tourism NGOs such as Andaman Discoveries, who are active in Phang Nga and Ranong provinces.

One of the many challenges facing Thai tourism is to build eco-awareness throughout every sector of the industry; ranging from rent-seeking government individuals and departments, profit-obsessed developers; to disempowered and fatalistic local communities. Another target must also be domestic tourists, who culturally seem to lack much enthusiasm for nature. This is not just a foreign perspective; Thai's from all sectors of society routinely accuse each other of having little interest in nature and disrespecting the environment, though at the same time they seem unable or unwilling to do much about it. Even TAT alludes to this in some of its publications, for example when talking about its 'Keep Thailand Beautiful' campaign (TAT 2007): "...to raise awareness and stimulate a sense of environmental conservation and being good hosts, resulting in the change of behaviour of domestic tourists in the long-term."

One problem seems to be the lack of trust and social capital in many sections of Thai society, with ordinary people quick to characterise big businessmen as being greedy 'Chao Pho' (big-boss gangster) types (see Ockey 1998, 2000), and government officials as being habitually corrupted and intimidated by big business. Greedy businessmen do indeed exist (and in Southern Thailand they are often Thai-Chinese) and they wield enormous power. The kind of

power that can enable resorts to be built illegally on National Park land; trawler fleets to fish in protected waters; prawn farms to replace ancient mangrove forests; and bird's nest concessions to be guarded by people who often shoot at innocent intruders with impunity.

The Thai government has always seemed to have officially played a 'hands off' approach to tourism development. This may have been appropriate in its initial stages; because of the way it allowed local small-scale organic entrepreneurial growth to create the classical 'tropical beach island ambiance', as exemplified by the idyllic beaches of Phuket and Ko Samui in the early 1980s (described in Cohen 1996). However, this obviously no longer works with the sort of rapid expansion now being experienced. It is obvious that as large-scale development starts to dominate, a laissez faire model has serious limitations and is unable to prevent overdevelopment, environmental degradation and the marginalisation of locals. In other parts of Thailand, and indeed worldwide, many islands and beaches have followed a similar depressing downward spiral, as typified by well-studied cases such as Boracay Island in the Philippines (eg Trousdale 1999). Unfortunately this process is inevitable given the endemic nature of poor governance throughout most of Southeast Asia. Good governance being defined here as: "the rule of law, respect for human rights, transparency, accountability and public participation among other principles... a precondition for realizing broader goals of economic growth and sustainable and equitable development' (TWN, *New Frontiers* 13:3 May-Jun 2007)." Hardly any of which can be said to apply to most of present day Thailand or Southeast Asia generally.

The Andaman Coast's indigenous populations face great difficulties in profiting from, adapting to, or mitigating the effects of tourism. Some communities such as Ko Lipe's Urak Lawoi have owned and operated their own resorts and restaurants (some still do), but they are nevertheless being inexorably marginalised and cheated out of their land by rapacious mainlanders. On Ko Muk the Thai Muslims have become little more than low wage earners and longtail boat operators, and are rapidly becoming a landless squatter community. Much

the same could be said for the Moken community in the Surin Islands. It is worth remembering that these local communities were largely in control of their lives until fairly recently. In common with many of the region's other minority communities (principally Thai Muslims), their societies are being permanently transformed by tourism, and in some cases this may soon have dangerous consequences by encouraging Islamic radicalisation to take root in vulnerable localities.

In most localities it is invariably the wealthy well-connected outsiders who are successful in developing tourism projects, and although the industry does provide significant employment opportunities for local people, many workers are brought in from other parts of Thailand (and Burma), usually because they are considered more hard working and reliable than the local people. It is thus difficult to quantify tourism's net benefit to local communities. It may bring greater employment and improved infrastructure, but at the cost of higher price levels and disruption to local culture and social life. Local government officials are themselves often resort owners or tour operators, and therefore have a strong vested interest in policies that maximize profits from their business activities. Many officials, from the level of Phu Yai Ban (village head), up through to Kamnan (subdistrict headman), and on to Governor, are well known to their constituents for self-serving behaviour and lack of public concern. To properly appreciate the dynamics of this requires an understanding of each locality in terms of the stakeholders groups that drive tourism development. For example these can be government departments, powerful businessmen, resort owners, tour operators, transport operators, and sometimes (but rarely) local communities. There are fundamental differences in the power, priorities and perspectives of these groups that need to be understood, as well as serious obstacles in getting them to cooperate with each other. As discussed, most academic and NGO studies have focused on local communities, but powerful stakeholders also need putting under the spotlight, because they are the ones that make the most impact. The Andaman Coast has seen many so-called stakeholder meetings and workshops but these never seem to have lasting effect because tough questions are rarely asked.

In the end the responsibility lies with the authorities. Only they have the power to take effective action. Because there is now so much nature-based tourism activity in the Andaman Coast, in addition to addressing the main challenges to overall tourism development through proper planning and regulation, the authorities should direct efforts towards transforming these nature-based activities into genuine ecotourism and give it a leading role in sustainability.

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APPENDIX 1 AN ASSESSMENT OF ECOTOURISM VOLUMES

Available statistics are insufficient to allow a calculation of the number of ecotourists visiting the Andaman Coast with any degree of exactitude. Although the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) publishes annual statistics (TAT 2007), as of December 2009 only the 2007 report was available. This document gives the total number of international tourists to Thailand in 2007 as being 14.469 million, which ranked it 18th globally according to the UNWTO World Tourism Barometer (Vol 6, No 2). It also contains some useful overall tourism statistics, but few that enable the number of ecotourists to be established in a meaningful way. In addition, the Andaman Coast is not identified by TAT as a distinct area, and the matter is further complicated by the fact that this region has a large number of tourist entry points served by various means of transportation. In short it is very difficult to gauge the number of ecotourists visiting the research area and the activities they engage in.

However, examining the available statistics in an attempt to make meaningful estimates yielded the following:

- TAT unofficially estimates that for year 2008 the whole of Thailand received close to fifteen million international visitors, with Phuket receiving around five million international and domestic visitors (TAT Singapore direct communication 23/12/2009).
- TAT officially reported that Thailand's domestic tourism for 2007 was 46.539 million, thus giving a rough ratio of domestic tourists to international tourists of around 3 to 1 (TAT 2007). Though using TAT's 2007 figures for its Southern Region, as shown below, this ratio is only 1.22 to 1, perhaps showing that the south is more popular with international visitors than Thais.
- TAT reports that its Southern Region (which also includes popular destinations such as Had Yai, and Ko Samui as well as the Andaman Coast) received 8.537 million

domestic tourists and 7.003 million international tourists in 2007, ie 15.54 million in total (TAT 2007). Based on the amount of tourism infrastructure in each locality it would seem reasonable to assume that around two thirds of these tourists, say 10 million (comprising 5.5 million domestic and 4.5 million international tourists) visited the Andaman Coast in 2007.

- Phuket Airport website www.phuketairportonline.com/ reported its 2008 arrivals to be 2.851 million.

TAT's 2007 report gives the following breakdown (in millions) for international visitors to Thailand (where interestingly the ratio of males to females is almost 2 to 1):

East Asia	7.981	(55%)
Europe	3.689	(25%)
The Americas	0.817	(5.6%)
South Asia	0.685	(4.7%)
Oceania	0.731	(5.0%)
Middle East	0.453	(3.1%)
Africa	0.105	(0.7%)
Total	14.469	(100%)

Anecdotal evidence from my own fieldwork suggests that the majority of ecotourists are 'westerners'; ie they come from Europe, The Americas and Oceania, which have respective totals of $3.689 + 0.817 + 0.731 = 5.237$ million. Using the above statistics to estimate the number of international tourists visiting the Andaman Coast versus those visiting the whole of Thailand gives roughly 4.5 million out of 14.5 million = 30%, therefore it would seem reasonable to assume that the same ratio of 'westerners' visit the Andaman Coast, ie around 1.6 million.

However, the percentage of these 'westerners' who can be considered ecotourists is hard to pin down. My own web searches were inconclusive on this, however some observers claim that worldwide the volume of ecotourists to total tourists (ie international and domestic) is between three and seven percent (eg 'Promises and Challenges of Ecotourism', Dalia Acosta, Tieramerica, 28th December 2009), although most estimates of this nature are probably unsubstantiated guesswork. Anyway, taking double this percentage (say 10%) of the above-calculated Europe, Americas and Oceania 'westerner' total of 1.6 million, gives an estimate of around 160,000 ecotourists visiting the Andaman Sea Coast every year. However, this figure still seems high on the basis of my fieldwork, and given the fact that the well-known ecotourism company Andaman Discoveries only caters for 250 tourists per annum. Therefore the real figure may be less than 100,000 ecotourists per annum, which would be equivalent to only around 1.0 % of the total number of tourists visiting the region. Without a thorough quantitative survey of all ecotourism activity in the region this is probably the best that can be derived from available data, however, it seems clear that there are not huge numbers of genuine ecotourists visiting the region.

Visits as a tourist/diver/yachtsman/tour guide:

1981 November: Phuket, Phang Nga

1983 November/December: Phuket, Ko Phi Phi, Ko Lipe, Ko Adang

1985 December: Phuket, Phang Nga

1986 December: Phuket, Ko Phi Phi

1988 December: Phuket

1991 May: Phuket

1995 December: Phuket, Phi Phi

1999 May: Ko Muk, Ko Ngai, Ko Lanta

2000 November: Ko Lanta, Krabi, Phuket

2001 March: Ko Lipe, Ko Bulon Lae

2002 April: Trang, Ko Muk, Ko Lanta, Railay, Ao Nang

2003 January: Had Yai, Trang, Ko Lanta, Krabi

2003 March: Trang, Ko Muk, Ko Lanta, Railay

2003 April/May: Tarutao, Ko Lipe, Trang

2004 February: Had Yai, Trang, Railay, Krabi

Visits in a research capacity:

* **Indicates participation in organised tours**

2005 5th to 16th December

Trang, Ko Muk, Kradan, Ko Lanta, Railay

*Ko Muk Emerald Cave tour

* Lanta diving tours

Khun Yong (resort operator Railay)

Russel Manton (resort operator Ko Muk)

Brian (yacht charter and resort operator Ko Muk)

Charnarong Techarachit (resort owner and operator Phuket, Ko Phi Phi, Ko Muk)

2006 10th to 19th November

Phuket, Krabi, Ko Phi Phi

*Phi Phi diving tours

*Krabi Island boat tour

John Gray (ecotour operator Phuket)]

John Heike (diving operator Ko Phi Phi)

Natalie Constantin (hotel operator Ko Phi Phi)

Phil Price (diving operator Ko Phi Phi)

2007 16th April – 26th April

Phuket, Phang Nga, Railay, Ao Nang, Ko Kradan, Ko Muk

*Ko Muk round island tour

*Phang Nga Island tour

*Ko Pannyi tour

Craig Rice (property developer Phuket)

Charnarong Techarachit

Khun Yong

Wally Sanger (resort owner Ko Kradan)

Khun Chai (resort owner Ko Muk)

Russel Manton

Khun Mayow (resort operator Ko Muk)

Brian

2007 12th November – 4th December

Krabi Town, Ko Lanta, Trang, Had Yao, Ko Libong, Ko Lipe, Ko Muk, Ko Kradan

*Krabi River ecotour

*Ko Rok ecotour

*Ko Adang nature tour

Khun Mart (hotel owner Ko Lanta)

Christian Meitz (diving operator Ko Lanta)

Surin Pranchan (Tour operator Ko Lanta)

Khun Sinchai (resort operator Had Yao)

Lawrence Siaw (eco-resort operator Had Yao and Libong)

Anita Siaw (eco-resort operator Had Yao and Libong)

Watcharee Amplord (Trang Municipality)

Miss Yuan (Trang Municipality)

Korapin Tohtubtiang (Thumrin Hotels Trang)

Khun Klissada (TAT Trang)

Khun Ploenjai (NGO Trang)

Miss Phit (tour operator Trang)

Khun Kitchai (resort owner Ko Lipe)

Steve Parker (resort operator Ko Lipe)

David Hinchliff (bar operator Ko Lipe)

Miss Boi (tour operator Ko Lipe)

Khun Bow (ex park ranger Ko Adang)

John (tour operator Ko Lipe)

Khun Jack (resort owner Ko Lipe)

2008 26th March – 18th April

Phuket, Ko Yao Noi, Ko Yao Yai, Ko Phi Phi, Ao Nang, Trang, Ko Lipe, Ko Sukorn

*SeaCanoe ecotour

John Gray

Adam Skolnick (Thailand travel writer)

Tim Markin (NGO manager Ko Yao Noi)
Simon Warren (restaurant owner Ko Yao Noi)
Khun Bean (restaurant owner Ko Yao Noi)
Elizabeth (restaurant owner Ko Yao Noi)
Kitty Norrie (ecotour operator Ko Yao Noi)
Sandra Jaensch (manager Evason Ko Yao Noi)
Andrew Hewett (adventure tour operator Ko Phi Phi)
Sybilla Endemann (hotel operator Ko Phi Phi)
Luciano Butti (author and restaurant owner Ko Phi Phi)
John Heike
Natalie Constantin
Phil Price
Thomas Gennaro (publisher Krabi Magazine)
Matt Dallow (writer Krabi Magazine)
Khun Wichit (NGO manager Krabi)
Marcus (diving operator Ko Phi Phi and Ko Muk)
Watcharee Amplord
Miss Yuan
Korapin Tohtubtiang
Khun Pisit Charnshoh (NGO Trang)
Khun Poo (NGO Ko Muk)
Miss Phit (tour operator Trang)
Dick (resort operator Ko Sukhorn)
Khun Dee (resort operator Ko Sukhorn)
Miss Da (homestay operator Ko Sukhorn)
David and Karen (school operators Ko Sukhorn)
Steve Parker
David Hinchliff

Miss Boi

Khun Jack

Paolo Perin (resort operator Ko Lipe)

Soi Pooh (resort owner Ko Lipe)

Heike Waelde (schoolteacher Ko Lipe)

Khun Meat (resort owner Ko Lipe)

Nari Hantalav (tour operator Ko Lipe)

Doug Olthof (NGO Pakbara)

2009 20th March – 31st March. Phuket, Ko Yao Noi, Ko Phi Phi, Railay

*Phi Phi Leh Day Trip

*Similan Island Day Trip

*Surin Island 3day/2night tour

John Gray

Charnarong Techarachit

Tim Markin

Kitty Norrie

Dave Williams (ecotour operator Phuket)

Lao Wan (homestay manager Ko Yao Noi)

Khun Run (adventure tour operator Ko Yao Noi)

Sybilla Endemann

Sukanya Boonma (resort manager Railay)

Khun Yong

Nick Davis (newspaper editor Phuket)

Chris Williams (diving operator Khuraburi)

Helen Macnee (diving operator Khuraburi)

Reid Ridgeway (ecotourism consultant Khao Lak)

Khun Or (resort owner Ao Nai Yang)

Saengrawee Thongdee (NGO Bangkok)

2009 9th December – 19th December. Ko Lanta, Ao Nang, Ko Phra Thong, Khuraburi

*Ko Hong Day Trip

Surin Pranchan (Lanta Tourism Association)

Tom Henly (author, eco-lodge operator and environmentalist)

Bodhi Garrett (community-based tourism NGO founder)

Karen Spackman (community-based tourism NGO manager)

Khun Nu (local environmental activist)

Michael Silverman (community-based tourism consultant)

Khun Root (Phang Nga newspaper editor and tour organiser)

Piyapat Nakornchai (homestay coordinator)

Khun Choui (resort owner Ko Phra Thong)

Porntip Makornpan (Director TAT)

Notes:

This listing comprises face to face interviews and does not include:

- 1) Comment and opinion coming from people unidentified by name, such as colleagues of interviewees and tourists who were present during part of the interview.
- 2) Telephone interviews conducted whilst in Thailand and from Singapore.
- 3) The many impromptu conversations I had with unidentified tourists, guides, divers, tour personnel and boatmen encountered in hotels, whilst I was traveling, participating in organised tours, and in bars and restaurants etc.
- 4) Ad hoc discussions with presenters and participants at various conferences and lectures etc.
- 5) E-mail correspondence with various academics, NGO personnel and tourism stakeholders.

- 6) Attempts (often abortive) to interview various people from business, government, TAT and national parks.