



**SEEING THE PEOPLE THROUGH THE  
TREES: COMMUNITY-BASED ECOTOURISM  
IN NORTHERN THAILAND**

by

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Bachelor of Arts, Simon Fraser University 2000

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## **Abstract**

In contrast to popular conventional trekking tours that dominate the Northern Thai tourist industry, this thesis explores community-based ecotourism, one of the alternative strategies currently being used among highland minority groups and NGOs in Northern Thailand. Ecotourism offers a unique strategy that embraces local aspirations for achieving self-determined sustainable development and is promoted locally and globally as a mechanism of achieving economic development alongside environmental conservation. An analysis of findings from participant observation, interviews, and secondary data gathered during fieldwork in 2002-2003, suggests that community-based ecotourism is likely to achieve only limited success on a small scale in terms of the immediate benefits it generates in host communities. Since ecotourism is premised on the commodification of nature and culture, it seems unlikely that ecotourism, which links people, tourism and the natural and cultural environments, will be a successful avenue for achieving long-term sustainability.

*For my grandmothers,  
who also love people and trees.*

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# Glossary

<b>CBET</b>	Community-based ecotourism
<b>PDA</b>	Population and Community Development Association
<b>PRLC</b>	Project for Recovery of Life and Culture
<b>REST</b>	Responsible Ecological Social Tours Project

# **Chapter One: Introduction**

## **Introduction and Background to the Study**

For centuries, people have been travelling for pleasure, relaxation, rejuvenation, on religious pilgrimages, as conquest, for the purposes of scientific discovery and personal education. European tourism dates back to ancient times and is closely associated with pilgrimage tours and crusades (Graburn 1989: 28). In Ancient Greece and Rome, “wealthy citizens vacationed at thermal baths and explored exotic places around Europe and the Mediterranean region” (Honey 1999: 7). The origins of modern tourism are credited to the Grand Tours<sup>1</sup> of Europe that took place from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries for the purposes of education as well as pleasure. These tours provided the ideological basis – that leisure travel was a worthwhile activity – and practical foundation upon which Thomas Cook built his well-known tourist business empire (Wyllie 2000: 19).

In this increasingly globalized and interconnected world, supported by vast networks of transportation and communications technologies, people now surge around the globe at an extraordinary rate. The period after the Second World War saw a tremendous increase in the numbers of international tourists from 25 million in 1950 to approximately 561 million in the mid-1990s (Weaver 1998: 4) and today tourism represents one of the largest sources for the

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<sup>1</sup> See Wyllie (2000), also Graburn (1989) and (1995) for more detailed explanation of the Grand Tours.

movement of peoples recording some 698 million airport arrivals in 2000 (Mastny 2001: 11). With annual revenues reaching nearly \$3 trillion (McLaren 1998: 13), the international tourism industry is up to four times as large as the arms trade and twice as large as the petroleum industry (Graburn 1995).

The advance of international tourism fostered high expectations regarding its potential role in promoting economic growth and overall development for many countries (Page and Dowling 2002: 36). During the 1960s, First World nations, from which the bulk of international tourists flowed, encouraged tourism as a corridor for development and a means of spreading modernizing values to the peoples of the developing nations enabling themselves to earn valuable foreign exchange dollars. Governments in the Third World were given confidence as tourism was touted as a “smokeless industry” that would feed on the natural and cultural capital of their countries requiring little initial investment (Weaver 1998: 45). They were further encouraged by international institutions such as the World Bank that were eager to provide loans and grants for countries that wished to develop their tourist infrastructure (ibid.). As the industry began to grow, however, many countries were faced with the hidden social, cultural, and environmental impacts that were also part and parcel of the glittering tourism package.

As one response to growing local and international concern over the destruction caused by the industry, ecotourism, piggybacking on the environmental movement (Honey 1999), emerged as a possible, more sustainable alternative. As with the term sustainability itself, ecotourism has proven to be a slippery concept, with a wide range of definitions under negotiation in an

ongoing debate. Some praise ecotourism as a saviour of the tourist industry, as a means of achieving resource conservation, responsible environmental management, and social and cultural preservation in tourist settings, while providing educational opportunities and truly rewarding experiences for tourists. Conversely, ecotourism has been viewed as a form of Western environmental imperialism and a continued exploitation of natural and cultural resources under a politically correct name that merely green-washes the industry leaving intact the underbelly of destruction.

The question I raise in this thesis, then, is whether ecotourism, as a project predicated fundamentally on Western environmentalism and the commodification of nature and culture, can ever be closely compatible with local aspirations for community-based development?

The first time I travelled to Thailand was in the waning days of 1994. I had completed a three-and-a-half month Canadian Students in Development Program<sup>2</sup> in Hanoi, Vietnam, my first experience of working in international and community development, and had made my way south with a friend to Ho Chi Minh City. From there we flew to Bangkok; finally, I arrived in the country that had fascinated me for so long. I did not venture to the north on that short trip, but was one of the throngs of tourists who flocked to Thailand's famous southern beaches. It was not until my second excursion to the Kingdom, some six years later, that I visited Chiang Mai, the epicentre of the county's trekking activities.

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<sup>2</sup> The Canadian Students in Development Program (CSIDP) was sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency. The program was designed to give Canadian students an opportunity to gain experience working in international development. The CSIDP in Vietnam was funded by the Asia Pacific Foundation and the Association of Canadian Community Colleges.



Walking around Chiang Mai I was struck by the number of tour companies promoting treks in non-tourist areas to see primitive, colourful ethnic minority peoples living in their own culture and civilization. The promotional descriptions of the highland minorities made a lasting impression on me. Disturbed by how they were being characterized and sold to tourists, I chose not to partake in a trekking tour. However, I was still curious to see the ethnic diversity, which is famous in Northern Thailand.

I was attracted to the study of ecotourism for roughly three reasons, my passion for travel, an interest in environmentalism and its various discourses, and previous experiences working in international and community development. Fascinated by different cultural groups and the natural environments they inhabit, I became a seasoned consumer of travel and tourism paraphernalia and a devotee of the monthly magazine "Escape". It was in the pages of that magazine, and a buffet of others like them, that I plotted my own future 'escapes'. Through my experiences overseas I also saw the dark side of tourism development: garbage piles hidden amongst the trees on the opposite side of the road from beach-front bungalows; women selling their bodies to tourists to feed their children; luxury hotels with huge water fountains and rolling green lawns behind ten-foot gates, shielding wealthy tourists from the drought and shocking poverty that lay just beyond its fences. These images made a lasting impression on me.

My experience in international community development emphasized that 'community' was a much more elusive term than I had thought, and so, for that matter was "development". Environmentalism was another such perplexing idea. I was more or less certain of what these words meant at home, but curious as to

how they were being understood and implemented overseas. I set off for Chiang Mai to study community-based ecotourism for my Master's thesis (see Fig. 1).



**Figure 1: Map of Thailand<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle\\_east\\_and\\_asia/thailand\\_pol\\_2002.jpg](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/thailand_pol_2002.jpg), by permission.

## **Scope of the Thesis**

This thesis is about people, tourism and the environment, and the broader global and local processes that unite them. It looks at community-based ecotourism (CBET) as it is emerging and reshaping the trekking and tourism landscapes of Northern Thailand. CBET seeks to correct the standard trekking tours which, while socially, culturally, and environmentally destructive, have grown to become a major part of the country's Northern tourism industry. By including community members in the decisions and processes that bring tourists into their villages, CBET initiatives aim to halt and reverse local ecological damage, provide alternative employment and income opportunities for villagers, and empower communities to exercise self-determination via stewardship over local natural resources.

Globally, I focus on the international eco-travellers who take off from various, mainly Western, countries and criss-cross the globe, flowing through the channels of the industry and into the villages. Many tourists who choose ecotourism do so because of the perceived benefits of this type of travel, its low impact on the environment and cultural sensitivity, in order to give something back to local communities and to learn about the areas they are visiting. Many travel with a Western environmental consciousness. What are they expecting to get out of their holidays and how do those experiences in turn have an impact upon them?

At the local level, I focus on the CBET projects and the individuals and communities who are actively engaged in ecotourism. The communities who receive tourists have often been seen as passive recipients in the tourist system,

and many studies have focused on the impact of hordes of First World travellers who trample through communities leaving behind their social, cultural, and environmental footprints (Turner and Ash 1975). Inadequate attention has been paid to the agency of the hosts and their active involvement in these global-local processes. Mika Toyota (1996: 237) comments: "...villagers are not just passive recipients of outside influences, but respond to new opportunities and constraints" as agents capable of directing tourism's outcomes in their communities (Milne 1998: 41). My research highlights the active agency of the highland minority population who endeavour to reshape the political and economic landscapes in which tourism activities operate. Marginalized in the wider Thai society with restricted rights and access to resources, highland minority communities, in partnership with local NGOs, are using ecotourism as a tool to re-build and strengthen their communities by seeking stewardship over the local natural environment while capitalizing on the employment opportunities and economic benefits that tourists bring to their communities.

## **Research Methods and Data Analysis**

I was in Northern Thailand from September 2002 to March of 2003 conducting the research upon which this study is based. The data sources fall into two categories: textual sources such as books, pamphlets, brochures, posters, and signboards; and interviews about people's experiences as ecotourists, villagers, ecotour providers, and guides.

The research methods used during fieldwork include participant observation, semi-structured and informal interviews, and textual analysis.

Participant observation served as my primary method of inquiry. Through active participation in the ecotours, I was able to observe the tourists, as they engaged in ecotourism activities, the villagers, as they engaged with the tourists, and the tour providers, as they instructed and guided the tourists through the villages and surrounding environment. This afforded me the opportunity to observe the interactions, dynamics, and structures of the community-based ecotours, while shedding light on the tourists' behaviours in the ecotourist setting. It also allowed me to take part in conversations among ecotourists who spoke openly and candidly about their unfolding experiences as ecotourists. I used this information in conjunction with responses generated through the interviews.

Fourteen ecotourists were interviewed, nine face-to-face and five via e-mail. I invited all ecotourists I encountered on the ecotours to participate in interviews and roughly six declined the invitation. I chose to submit the interview questions to five ecotourists via e-mail as time did not permit a more personal encounter as they left the area immediately upon completion of their ecotour. All the interviews with ecotourists were based on a standardized set of structured questions (Appendix 1).

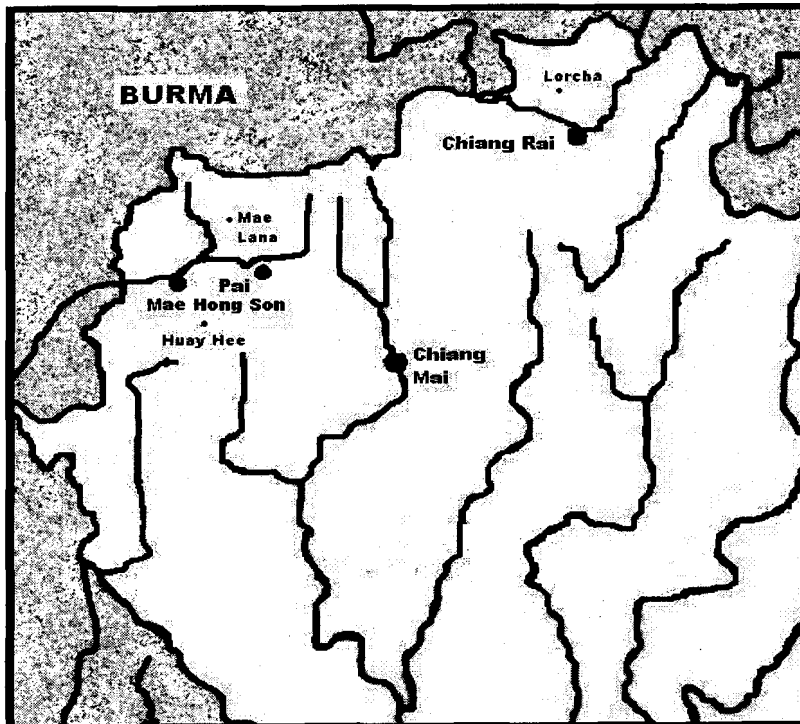
Although the focus of this research is on the community-based ecotourism projects, I took the opportunity to also interview seven tourists who were engaged in regular trekking activities, some of which were marketed as 'eco'. While I did not partake in a regular trek myself, the interviews did help to contextualize the industry in which this type of tourism activity is taking place. Many of the tour operators, NGOs, and villagers often made reference to the standard trekking

tours, several of which are currently being marketed as “eco”. By interviewing regular trekkers I was able to use the responses to compare the statements made by tour operators, villagers, and the NGO staff in regards to how standardized treks have an impact on the social, cultural, and natural environments of the North.

Seventeen interviews were conducted with villagers in two communities that engage in ecotourism activities, nine from Ban Mae Lana and eight from Ban Huay Hee (see Fig. 2). The interviews were structured and based on a standardized set of questions (Appendix 3). In the village of Mae Lana, the interviewees were randomly selected and included members of the ecotourism club as well as villagers who did not participate in any of the tourism activities. This was done in an effort to attain a balanced approach to see how those who may receive only its secondary or trickle-down benefits perceive tourism. Every family in Ban Huay Hee has a representative in the tourism club<sup>4</sup> and, as such, villagers were randomly selected based on who was available during the time when the interviews were being conducted. The headman of Huay Hee was also interviewed as he is well-known to other non-governmental organizations (NGO) and ecotourism groups in the North and often acts as a spokesperson for the ecotourism initiatives that were piloted in his village.

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<sup>4</sup> The tourism club is where the villagers of Huay Hee organize tourism activities and discuss any problems or issues that arise in the village due to the presence of tourists.



**Figure 2: Map of Research Areas in Northwestern Thailand<sup>5</sup>**

Both the Shan village of Mae Lana and the Karen village of Huay Hee are located in the province of Mae Hong Son. Ban<sup>6</sup> Mae Lana, a Buddhist community, is situated northeast from Mae Hong Son approximately 13 kilometres from the border with Burma. Ban Huay Hee, where all but one family have converted to Christianity, is located 26 kilometres southeast of the city of Mae Hong Son (Responsible Ecological Social Tours Project, no date) in Doi Pui National Park. Both projects were initiated with assistance from the Thai NGOs Project for Recovery of Life and Culture (PRLC), and Responsible Ecological Social Tours Project (REST), and offer a glimpse into the ways of life of the villagers with a focus on the local cultural uses of the natural environment. Ban

<sup>5</sup> Based on Dearden (1991: 401).

<sup>6</sup> "Ban" is the Thai word for village and so it is not always used when making reference to the communities.

Mae Lana, with a population of 1,000, is a much larger community than Ban Huay Hee, with a population of 196. Mae Lana is also the more “modern” of the two communities and offers examples of the evolution of Shan architecture on its tours, while the village of Huay Hee does not yet enjoy the luxury of electricity. Both communities are part of larger ecotourism networks in their areas, Mae Lana works closely with two Black Lahu villages, Bokrai and Jabo, while two other Karen villages, Nam Hoo and Huay Goong, offset the mounting pressures on Huay Hee, which has seen an increase in tourist numbers. These networks also help spread the economic benefits of ecotourism around the local area.

I conducted structured in-depth interviews with six different tour providers as well as with some of the guides who led the ecotours. Tour providers were interviewed more than once and the differences in the interview questions reflect the distinctions in the tours they were providing.<sup>7</sup> Most often only one person was interviewed from each company or organization, except in the case of JorKoe Ecotreks<sup>8</sup> where various people provided information on the Thai NGO (Project for Recovery of Life and Culture), the company (JorKoe Ecotreks) and its tours.

Almost all of my interviews were recorded in notes in one of the field journals I was using. I had initially begun tape recording interviews with tourists and later switched to note taking as the recorder proved unreliable. From the outset of the interviews with villagers I had intended to use note taking in

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<sup>7</sup> I am making a distinction here between the ecotourism providers who visited highland minority villages and those whose activities focused specifically on the environment and other natural sites such as forested areas and bird watching activities.

<sup>8</sup> JorKoe Ecotreks is an alternative trekking and tour operator in Mae Hong Son offering community-based ecotourism to highland minority villages in the province.



consideration of cultural differences and the comfort levels of those individuals being interviewed for whom tape recording could have been distasteful or intimidating. Field journals also included notes I made while on the ecotours on what was being presented to the ecotourists by the guides and tour operators, the activities undertaken as part of the tours, and my own reflections. I later used these journals in conjunction with other secondary sources to assemble my data.

Data generated in the community of Lorcha, an Akha village in the province of Chiang Rai, roughly 40 km northwest of the city of Chiang Rai, is used to illustrate a one-day tourist excursion. Data from the Karen village of Huay Hee, and the Shan village of Mae Lana, are used to characterize multi-day trekking excursions. All of these villages hosted tourists before the community-based tourism projects began and, as such, represent an ideal opportunity to track the evolution and changes in tourism in those areas.

A small portion of my research also focused on content analysis of various types of written and visual material such as tourism and travel brochures advertising hill tribe treks, poster boards and other marketing materials, written articles on the area (magazines, newspapers), and electronic media (websites). Through these sources, I was able to gain insight into how eco-tourism is constructed and marketed for the tourist and what its promoters claim to want to do such as preserve nature and culture, educate the tourists, foster sustainable development, or simply provide an adventure.

## **Limitations of the Research**

When I began my research, I intended to focus solely on one eco-tour provider and the villages or areas they visit. There were, however, not enough tourists in the area at the time<sup>9</sup> and I thus chose to expand my research to include tour companies that offered eco-tours in three Northwestern provinces, namely Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Mae Hong Son, Thailand's major trekking areas. I consulted with two companies from each province and actively participated in their eco tours. While I was not able to have ongoing interactions with only one community and get to know its members and tourism operations in great depth, I was able to achieve an overview of some of the emergent trends in community-based ecotourism projects in the North.

Conducting research over such a wide area did have an impact on how well I got to know the villagers and this is reflected in the information they were willing to provide for me. Villagers often pointed to those things that they saw as positive in regards to tourism, both eco and other, which shape their communities. In a culture that does not openly air their grievances with strangers, I was seen as an outsider and therefore unable to get any dissenting or critical information from the villagers. My active participation in the ecotours also made me a tourist in their eyes and hence they did not want to discuss anything that would appear to be pessimistic or distasteful. The underbellies of the projects were not exposed, at least not by the villagers.

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<sup>9</sup> Many of the people I spoke to attributed the decline in the number of tourists as being related to the threat of SARS, the attacks of September 11, 2001 in the U.S. and the impending war with Iraq.

Translation and the use of interpreters in research have undergone much scrutiny in the discipline of Anthropology.<sup>10</sup> While Anthropologists prefer to learn the language of the people they are studying, this was neither possible nor practical for me and I therefore required the use of an interpreter. In an attempt to minimize the difficulties involved in using an interpreter, I chose one who was working with another graduate student in the field of Anthropology thinking that her previous experience would be an asset to her understanding of the processes involved in ethnographic fieldwork. I was taken aback the first evening we were to meet as she did not show up at the hostel where I had booked a room for her. I eventually got a hold of her and she informed me that she would be spending the night with friends and would meet me in the morning before we drove from Mae Hong Son to the village. I was at a bit of a loss as to what to do. I had expected, as I was taught in my methodology courses, that I was going to sit down with the interpreter and explain my research, my research questions and what I expected of her. I had developed what I can only describe as a cookbook approach, your basic ABCs as to how this portion of my research was to unfold. Once in the field, however, I quickly learned to adopt the more useful Thai approach of “mai pen rai”<sup>11</sup> (which roughly translated in this context means “don’t worry about it”) and just go with the flow. In the end, I realized, I would accomplish more that way.

While I visited different areas of the North, I kept the same interpreter throughout hoping to have continuity in the responses that I was given based on the way she was asking the questions. I did experience some difficulties working

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<sup>10</sup> See for example Behar (1993), Palsson ed. (1993) and Rubel & Rosman (eds) (2003).

<sup>11</sup> Mai pen rai literally means “never mind” but is often used as “relax,” “not to worry,” “chill out” and the like.

with the interpreter as she occasionally got ahead of me on questions and had to be reminded to simply follow my lead and not veer off-topic during a formal interview. During one of the interviews I relayed a question to her only to have her explain to me that she had already asked that one and then suggested that we should move on to the next one. Conscious of the differing cultural codes of conduct that govern one's behaviour, particularly in a public setting, I was careful to simply point out that I needed her to ask the question nonetheless as I was recording the answers in a particular order. I then brought the issue up again that evening at dinner by blending it in to a wider conversation about doing research. This way I did not have to confront her directly but knew that she would likely infer from my conversation that I expected her to let me drive the process. There was another incident where the informant got up and walked away in the middle of an interview. I had no idea what had happened. When I asked the interpreter what was going on she responded by telling me that everything was ok, but that she had just bought herself a woven handbag from the woman we were talking with—who was weaving as we interviewed her—and she had simply gone to get it. “Mai pen rai” I thought, I will just wait until she comes back. While these types of scenarios were not covered in any of my classes, they were the realities of the fieldwork experience that I came to expect and learned to enjoy.

Although the interpreter was multi-lingual speaking Thai, Northern Thai, Shan, Karenni and various dialects associated with these languages, there were some limits in her ability to speak English and this could potentially account for

some of the similarities in the answers from the villagers as she relied on words that she was comfortable with to explain potentially complex answers.

For the duration of the research I lived in a guesthouse in Chiang Mai. This allowed me to engage more generally with tourists while living among them. In this setting I was privy to the daily conversations about trekking to see the hill tribes and other highland minority groups as travellers shared their experiences and anxieties with one another. These informal conversations contributed greatly to my knowledge of tourism and trekking activities in the area.

The length of time that I could spend with the ecotourists was limited as most spend only a few days in one area and quickly move on. I had only one opportunity to interview each ecotourist and could not observe at any great length their behaviours outside the ecotourist setting, aside from a few who remained in the area. As some tourists left immediately upon completion of the treks, some of my data was collected via e-mail. I sent the interview questions to those participants and their responses were sent back to me. While some tourists filled them out at great length, others gave far more brief statements and I believe that this also has a limiting effect on the research. I may have been able to get more detailed information had they been interviewed in a face-to-face situation.

## **Ethical Considerations**

As interviewing and participant observation were my primary methods of inquiry, I was careful to obtain informed consent, either written or by oral agreement, before conducting interviews (Appendix 4 and Appendix 5). In some of the more informal settings in which conversations about visits to highland

minority communities took place, I made sure to inform the people with whom I was speaking that I was doing research on tourism and tourists so as to not to inadvertently elicit information from someone who did not willingly share it with me.

The ethical issues arising in my text include my characterizations of the highland communities and peoples I describe. Disconcerted by how these people are portrayed to attract tourists – as simple and primitive groups untouched by modern ways of life – I was conscious of my own depictions of them and was careful not to follow standard Western perceptions and characterizations of primitive, exotic others living in harmony with the natural environment. Conversely, I was also careful not to overstate the agency of these people who continue to be stigmatized and marginalized within the Thai state.<sup>12</sup>

## **Organization of the Thesis**

Chapter 2 provides a theoretical overview of the cultural dimensions of globalization. The chapter begins by exploring Arjun Appadurai's (1996) perspectives on five overlapping dimensions of cultural flow, which are leading to increased global hybridity through a rise in deterritorialized cultural forms. It then looks at the twin forces of media and migration, whose joint effects on the work of the imagination are fundamentally changing the project of self-making under contemporary conditions of globalization. After a brief discussion of the

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<sup>12</sup> Several of the highland minority groups face harsh treatment by the Thai authorities. They are predominantly viewed as illegal immigrants and aliens who are causing environmental damage and using the limited resources of the country. Even children who have been born in Thailand in highland minority communities are often denied Thai citizenship.

highly mobile character of individuals who now constitute the globalized world in which we live, I examine how these landscapes of people have altered the way we must think about and study culture under global conditions. I then show how culture is commodified for the tourism industry and sold as packages of experiences that cater to tourists' desires for eco and authentic experiences. Finally, I outline the landscapes of ecotourism and explore how both hosts and guests are perceiving and constructing the landscapes in which they engage in ecotourism activities.

Chapter 3 looks at the concept of ecotourism, the most popular of the tourism industry's sustainable alternatives. It begins with a brief look at modern Western environmentalism, the rhetoric and practices of which have been the driving force behind global environmental protection and the popularity of the concept of sustainable development. Western environmentalism has spawned the rise of green consumerism and continues to provide niche markets of tourists who take their environmental perspective and activism with them when they go on holidays. Both the growth of the tourism industry and the rise of environmentalism inform ecotourism historically and lend support to it as a concept that has promised to bring economic development and environmental conservation to the tourist areas, essentially sustainable development in its ideal form.

Chapter 4 explores trekking tourism and the community-based ecotourism projects in Northern Thailand. As the growth of tourism in Thailand mirrors the growth of the industry worldwide, and the region experiences one of the highest growth rates in the business, Thailand provides a good base for the study of

alternative tourism. Models of community-based alternatives seek to correct and reorient the standard trekking and tour activities of the North, while providing income, employment, empowerment, natural resource management, and community-directed patterns of development in the villages where tourism takes place. These villages offer empirical insights into alternative tourism and provide real-life examples of global tourist flows coming into direct contact with local populations. Through these villages we can see how both tourists and locals shape and reshape not only the tourist landscape, but also the broader social, cultural, and economic landscapes in which these activities take place. The chapter begins with a brief history of Thailand's economic development since the 1960s before briefly characterizing the situation of the highland minority populations. Conventional trekking tourism is introduced and discussed exposing some of the social, cultural, and environmental impacts it has on these minority populations before turning to the case study communities of Huay Hee, Mae Lana, and Lorcha.

In Chapter 5, I look at the experiences of the ecotourists I interviewed in Thailand during my fieldwork and explore their thoughts about and experiences with ecotourism as a form of travel. What kind of experiences were the tourists looking for and expecting to have during their travels and what has been the impact of their ecotour on them are some of the questions I explore in this chapter. Finally, in Chapter 6, I conclude by summarizing and presenting the findings of my research evaluating whether ecotourism can, in fact, provide local communities with opportunities for achieving self-directed sustainable development.



## Chapter Two: The Global Cultural Economy

The world we like to think of as united, my experience suggests, looks, in fact, more and more like a group of differently coloured kids all sleeping under the same poster of Leonardo DiCaprio, while arguing about whether Titanic is an attack on capitalist hegemony or a Confucian parable of self reliance: in short, a hundred cultures divided by a common language  
**Pico Iyer (2000)**

This account by Iyer speaks to the dynamic and changing nature of globalization, to the cultural interaction and exchange by different actors in a world increasingly shaped by people, images, money, objects, and ideologies on the move. It does so by illustrating that globalization is not simply a synonym for homogenization or Westernization highlighting the different perspectives, or syncretisms, which shape how cultural productions are perceived and understood by the diversity of subjects who consume them around the planet.

Large-scale human contact, interaction, and cultural exchange, while not a new phenomenon, is one that has taken on a drastically new character under contemporary global conditions (Appadurai 1996). The history of our planet is rife with examples of cultural exchange, through merchants, pilgrims, and conquerors, the diffusion of religion and technology, and by warfare (Appadurai 1996, Pieterse 2004). These early interactions were limited by geographical and ecological factors and often could only be sustained through great expenditures of capital and resources (Appadurai 1996: 28). Recent explosions in information and communications and further advances in transportation technologies,

however, means that people, objects, money, images, and ideas are now in constant rapid circulation around the planet. Saturated with media images, documentaries, films, internet sites, marketing strategies, and low-cost transportation, the planet has become a virtual playground bursting with opportunities for cultural exploration and exchange for the adventurous and curious traveller.

Tourism, perhaps more than any other international industry, epitomizes contemporary global conditions not only because of the massive movement of cultural subjects and objects that circulate around the planet, but also because of the political, economic, and social strategies that are also played out within the international tourism system (Lanfant 1995, Wood 1997). With the flows of global travellers decisively on the increase, and the proportion of international tourists still departing predominantly from Western countries, ecotourism presents a unique opportunity to study the cultural dimensions of globalization.

Globalization today is a complex multidimensional phenomenon. Anthropological perspectives, with their tendencies to privilege the cultural, see globalization as part of a historically deep and ongoing process of planetary integration (Appadurai 1996, Pieterse 2004), whereas Economists, Political Scientists, and Sociologists, for example, generally take globalization to be a more recent phenomenon. While there is no one theory or perspective on globalization as a concept, (Meethan 2001, Milton 1996, Pieterse 2004), it is meant to identify processes operating on a global scale, and speaks to the speed and interconnectedness of planetary transactions made possible through advances in transportation and communications technologies that have collapsed barriers of

space and time (Inda and Rosaldo 2002, Lewellen 2002, Mowforth and Munt 1998). David Harvey (1989, cited in Inda and Rosaldo 2002) suggests that globalization is reflected in our changing experiences of space and time, where they no longer restrict the organization of human activity, while Anthony Giddens (1990, cited in Inda and Rosaldo 2002) proposes that it is the changing nature of human interaction across space and time that marks current global conditions. For Arjun Appadurai (1996), understanding globalization means understanding how cultural flows are organized within the current global capitalist system (Milton 1996: 160).

In *Modernity At Large* (1996) Arjun Appadurai suggests that contemporary global processes of media and migration will lead to increased global hybridity and the deterritorialization of identities through the growth of diasporic public spheres and other culturally fragmented forms that replace territorialities with translocalities in a world that is fundamentally in motion. Media and migration, through their joint effects on the work of the imagination, are central to his argument as the primary forces driving the creation of modern identities and informing the perspectives through which actors, both groups and individuals, interpret and navigate the shifting landscapes of the globalized world.

Appadurai (1996: 33-36) uses the concept of landscapes to describe five overlapping dimensions of cultural flow which characterize and shape the global cultural economy today. He terms these: (a) ethnoscaples, the migrants, tourists, expatriates, and the like that constitute the shifting world of people in which we now live; (b) technoscaples, the global configurations of technology and the speed

at which they move between and through previously impenetrable borders; (c) financescapes, global capital flows; (d) mediascapes, the distribution of media capabilities and the images and narratives created by these media; and (e) ideoscapes, the ideologies of states and the counter ideologies of movements. These landscapes, or flows, move rapidly and unpredictably around the globe, not only crossing borders, but now slipping in and through the cracks between them (ibid.).

Appadurai (1996: 33) chooses the suffix “scape” to show that these landscapes are fluid, irregular, and constantly changing. They are shaped by one’s perspective and look different depending on one’s position (individuals, communities, corporations, and nation-states) within the global system (ibid.). These landscapes become the building blocks of imagined worlds and are continuously being reconfigured by the social actors who navigate their flows based on their imaginations of what these landscapes have to offer (ibid.).

These “scapes”, or dimensions of cultural flow, move in non-isomorphic paths and challenge earlier notions that the world was divided into a dominant, developed cultural centre, or core, and a subordinate, underdeveloped periphery (Urry 1995). Under this earlier scenario the characteristics of the traditional and the modern were characterized as mutually exclusive (Meethan 2001: 91), where traditional values were seen as giving way to the modern as societies progressed along a linear path to modernization and development. This “trajectory of modernity” (Meethan 2001: 34) was conceptualized and organized within the confines of nation states, conditions which are no longer relevant under contemporary conditions of globalization (ibid.). The world can no longer be

examined and understood by applying simple centre-periphery models (Appadurai 1996, Meethan 2001), the global order must now be examined in terms of “a complexly interconnected cultural space, one full of crisscrossing flows and intersecting systems of meaning” (Inda and Rosaldo 2002: 26).

## **Towards Global Hybridity**

Much of the literature on globalization centres on two contrasting perceptions. One identifies the erosion of cultural difference and increasing homogenization as a result of global capitalist consumption, while the other suggests increasing cultural diversity and a growth in global cultural hybridity (Appadurai 1996, Milton 1996, Pieterse 2004). With the uneven power relationships that continue to dominate the global economy, the flow of cultural traffic, like the flows of international tourists, moves primarily from the West outward to peripheral areas (Inda and Rosaldo 2002: 13). The situation most commonly described, then, is one where the spread of Western cultural products is absorbing these areas, previously free from commodity relations, into a homogenized global monoculture of consumption (ibid.).

The impression that the consumption of Western cultural products will lead to global homogenization, or Westernization, is refuted by Appadurai, and others, who suggest that this argument puts too much emphasis on the power of the products to transmit specific types of messages, or tap into certain sentiments and nostalgia of the consumers. It also underestimates the ability of consumers to interpret and apply their own meanings and significance to the products they consume (Inda and Rosaldo 2002, Meethan 2001) and ignores the possibilities

that people have all sorts of different reactions to cultural productions and mass mediated forms (Appadurai 1996: 7). Furthermore, it does not take into account that local people are often resistant to cultural homogenization (Teo, Chang, and Ho 2001: 6).

In *Modernity At Large*, Appadurai (1996: 32) argues that “as rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies they tend to become indigenized in one way or another”. As part of its ongoing integration into the global capitalist system, Thailand has absorbed massive inflows of finances, technologies, ideologies, people, tourists, and cultural products (Yamashita 2001: 3). Jory (1999: 466) suggests that Thais consider Western cultural products, such as cellular phones, as mere instruments that are otherwise value free. Rather than serving as examples of Thais becoming Westernized, the products are indigenized in such a way that their use in fact has the opposite effects in that they reinforce a notion of “Thainess” (ibid.). How well a product can do that often signifies its success or failure in the Thai market place. As Ogilvie (1985: 183, cited in Jory 1999: 466) points out “to sell it must work; to work it must be brilliant; to be brilliant it must be relevant culturally”.

Although it can be argued that we can see the emergence of a global culture heavily influenced by the US (Berger 2002), the West can no longer be considered the heart of the global centre for the production of images and imaginary landscapes (Appadurai 1996). There are also vast networks of production, communication, and exchange that bypass the West altogether and serve to link countries and people in peripheral areas to one another (Inda and Rosaldo 2002: 25). These peripheral linkages similarly offer a plethora of

possible landscapes as well as alternate fears of being culturally devoured by the West. Appadurai (1996: 32) put it this way:

It is worth noticing that for the people of Irian Jaya, Indonesianization may be more worrisome than Americanization, as Japanization may be for Koreans, Indianization for Sri Lankans, Vietnamization for Cambodians, Russianization for the people of Soviet Armenia and the Baltic Republics.

The same can be said for the ethnic minorities and hill tribe populations of Northern Thailand. For these people, threats of Thai-ization offer more real concerns than fears of Westernization, although they often host and engage in cultural exchanges with tourists of predominantly Western origins.

It also must be noted that although much of the global cultural traffic continues to move in the direction of the West to the rest, globalization is also marked by reverse flows of culture, the “cultural give and take” (Meethan 2001:160) that shape and alter global processes. Globalization is not a one way affair and the heart of the West has found itself infiltrated by the cultural goods of the rest, most clearly evident in food, music, and clothing styles (Inda and Rosaldo 2002: 18).

Current global conditions, through the rapid and unpredictable movement of peoples, ideas, objects, cultural productions, technologies, and finances is far too complex a phenomenon to be simply seen as a process of homogenization or Westernization (Appadurai 1996, Inda and Rosaldo 2002). This rapid circulation of people and their cultural forms and ideas are fundamentally changing the landscape of self-making in the modern world.

## **Media, Migration, and Their Effects on the Imagination**

Under conditions of globalization, individuals and groups are self-imagining and constructing their lives in new and complex ways. The primary forces driving these creations are media and migration through their joint effects on the work of the imagination (Appadurai 1996). According to Appadurai (1996), these twin forces compel the work of the imagination in new ways allowing for the construction of new identities and possibilities as imagined worlds become somewhat accessible landscapes to a wider variety of individuals.

In his work, Appadurai (1996) shows how electronic media, such as televisions, computers, telephone, digital cameras, and video and the multiple forms these produce— movies, sitcoms and dramas, websites, newscasts, and so forth—penetrate, circulate, and inform the everyday lives of an increasing number of people around the planet. Whether fuelled by the glamour of Hollywood film stars or the devastating images of refugees forced from their communities, electronic media offer a backdrop of millions of evolving scripts for the reinvention of the self and the construction of possible lives (ibid.).

In the same ways that media and its various forms infiltrate and flow through the lives of individuals, people themselves are increasingly on the move. Nearly everybody today knows someone departing for somewhere to travel, work, study, to visit family on other continents, or someone that has already returned home bearing stories of their journeys and fuelling imaginary landscapes for others (ibid.). As a part of this global mixing most people also know someone, or have met someone, already part of a larger diasporic community, who has come from somewhere else, or whose parents have done so, also bearing stories of exile



and escape, of migration and resettlement. In a world where people move in simultaneous circulation with the narratives and images of possible lives, media and migration provide new resources for self-imagining as an everyday project (Appadurai 1996: 3).

## **The Role of the Imagination**

The use of the imagination in this electronic world<sup>13</sup> is different from earlier times in three ways. First, the imagination has broken out of the expressive space of myth, art, and ritual, and is no longer confined to the repertoires of charismatic individuals and revolutionary leaders, but is now an active feature and part of the daily mental mechanics of ordinary individuals in the construction of their everyday lives (Appadurai 1996: 5). Second, as an everyday social project, the imagination is not simply fantasy or escape, the opium of the masses, which implies thought without action, but is rather now an “organized field of social practices as a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility” (Appadurai 1996: 31). The imagination, particularly when shared by a collective group of people “is a staging ground for action and not only for escape” (ibid.).

The third distinction made by Appadurai (1996) is between the individual and collective forms of the imagination. The print media made it possible to unite people who were not geographically close and allowed individuals to imagine

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<sup>13</sup> Here I am referring to the advances made in technology such as the home computer, the internet, web cams, blackberries and the like that allow individuals to communicate in real time around the planet.

themselves as connected to others creating imagined communities and laying the foundations for the creation of the modern nation-state (Anderson 1983).

Through media and migration, the imagined landscapes of community now include what Appadurai (1996:8) calls “communities of sentiment”, or groups of people who “think and feel things together”. These communities unite diverse individuals across the globe who are discovering they have common goals and aspirations (Milne 1998). These types of alliances surface around international sporting events as readily as they do, for example, around environmental movements, anti-war campaigns, and human rights struggles.

Through contemporary processes of media and migration, communities and collectives have new resources through which to broadcast and disseminate their concerns and interests to a wider global audience. Within the tourism industry, and particularly in ecotourism initiatives, host communities may want to pass specific types of information to tourists with the hope that they will share the information with people in their home countries (Milne 1998). Building communities of sentiment in this sense helps foster support for social, political, and environmental goals through the construction of national and international coalitions. These imagined communities (Anderson 1983) are capable “of moving from shared imagination to collective action” (Appadurai 1996: 8).

### **Ethnoscapes and the Ethnographic Project**

Appadurai’s (1996) use of the term ethnoscape is two-fold and purposely ambiguous. On the one hand, it refers to the shifting and highly mobile world of tourists (and their hosts), of migrants, exiles, guest-workers, international

business people, and so forth, who comprise the changing cultural world of people in which we now live. On the other hand, ethnoscaples also refer to the challenges faced by ethnographers around the 'traditional' issues of objectivity, perception, process, and representation (ibid.). These flows of people, global ethnoscaples, also show that in a world in continuous motion, increasingly shaped by deterritorialized groups, the 'ethno' in the traditional ethnographic project is no longer so easily tied to locality given the shifting landscapes in the production of individual and group identities. Contemporary ethnography must attune itself to the complexities of self-making in a world that is increasingly shaped by the imagined possibilities of life worlds offered up through the large-scale global processes of media and migration (Appadurai 1996).

Traditional ethnographic methods were developed primarily to look at small-scale societies characterized mainly by face-to-face interaction (Milton 1996: 162), whereas contemporary ethnography must come to grips with and adapt its methods to accommodate and articulate the complexities of self-making in an increasingly deterritorialized world (Appadurai 1996). Appadurai (1996) suggests that there is an urgent need to study the cultural workings of what has come to be called deterritorialization. This term refers not only to its obvious forms, such as free flows of money, or to transnational corporations that extend well beyond the localities in which they were conceived, but also to the movement of people and culture which today also transcends their traditional locales and identities. Contemporary ethnography must account for these processes and find new ways to "represent the links between the imagination and social life"

(Appadurai 1996: 55) and show how such processes inform and impact local everyday lives and cultural processes.

## **Culture**

Anthropology has long been acknowledged as having culture as one of its central concepts, although how that concept has been analyzed and understood has changed substantially over the course of the last century (Appadurai 1996: 50). In its most recognizable and popular forms, culture is identified in music, art, architecture, clothing styles, religious traditions, farming practices, cuisine, national identities, and sub-national resistances (Meethan 2001). Culture also resides in people's minds, in what they say, in the routines they perform (Milton 1996), in the dreams they have, and the obligations they carry. Pepper (1986) refers to a "cultural filter" to explain how shared forms of knowledge colour how people interpret the world around them and use that understanding to interact with their environment. But culture is also fluid and not static, as people readily react, adapt and change, reshaping the contours of knowledge that give rise to cultural forms. Culture, as it will be used here, is defined as the sum total of material and symbolic productions, "as the beliefs, values and lifestyles of ordinary people in their everyday existence" (Berger 2002: 2).

The concept of culture "grew out of mostly Germanic romantic ideas regarding distinctive characteristics of peoples 'rooted' in national territories" (Kearney 1995: 557). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the concept of culture remained tied to specific localities (Lindstrom 1997: 35). With contemporary globalization, however, culture has become uprooted, unshackled,

and deterritorialized giving it “no sense of place” (Meyrowitz 1985, cited in Appadurai 1996: 29). As cultural persons, products and processes, both material and symbolic forms, easily criss-cross and transcend defined geographical boundaries (Inda and Rosaldo 2002: 11), cultures can no longer be conceptualized as “if they were integrated and self-contained wholes” (Meethan 2001: 120). People today can belong to more than one culture or cultural group, and the boundaries of these groups, like the contours of culture, are constantly being redefined, reinvented, and re-imagined. Thinking about a culture in a globalized world requires thinking about culture without necessarily anchoring it to a fixed space.

In order to do this, Appadurai (1996: 12-13) suggests resisting the use of the noun ‘culture’ as it implies that culture is an object, substance or thing with physical or metaphysical properties. The problem with this is that it insinuates a natural, innate or genetic essence rather an expression of the symbolic processes and shared forms of knowledge that account for the differences in human populations (Lindstrom 1997, Meethan 2001). Appadurai (1996: 13) points out that “culture is better regarded as a dimension of phenomena that attends to situated and embodied difference.” By stressing dimension over substance, Appadurai (1996) argues that we are better able to think about culture less as something tangible that belongs to groups or individuals and more as a heuristic device that enables us to compare, contrast, and describe the differences between them.

## **Culture and Tourism**

In his book *Tourism in Global Society*, Kevin Meethan (2001:4) argues that “tourism is best conceptualized as a global process of commodification and consumption involving flows of people, capital, images and culture”, and suggests that this process of commoditization is central to the entire tourist system.

Nearly all cultures, their products and processes, are easily “touristifiable” (Wang 2000: 2), that is, objectified and turned into commodities to be sold in the marketplace for consumption by tourists (Wood 1997). The most popular and easily marketed forms of culture are associated with sub-national and ethnic minority groups, those often considered backward or primitive, whose dress, communities, and lifestyles can easily be turned into products and experiences for tourists to view and enjoy (Wood 1997). In *The Tourist Gaze*, John Urry (1990) examines the ways in which peoples and places are constructed and commodified by the tourism industry and shows how tourism literature plays a key role in this process (Scheyvens 2002).

John Urry (1990) used the phrase the ‘tourist gaze’ to describe the interest we have in other peoples and places, which is, in part, why we travel (Scheyvens 2002). He suggests that what tourists choose to gaze at and how they gaze are informed by discourses and images found in travel literature, marketing brochures, advertising campaigns, photographs, television, and increasingly via the internet, that fuel imagined landscapes of tourists and lay the foundation for the travel experience (Meethan 2001, Urry 1990). As Martha Honey (1999: 47) has shown “through effective advertising...a destination can literally be created in the traveler’s mind”. In this way the tourist industry, perhaps more so than any

other, relies on representations of peoples and places to convey certain ideas about the nature of the experience, that it will be authentic, ecological, remote, and so forth. In *The Tourist*, Dean MacCannell (1976: 11) argued that the differentiation, compartmentalization, and mundane routinization of modern life creates feelings of fragmentation, discontinuity, and alienation and, as such, modern individuals, through tourism, search for meaning and the authentic elements lacking in their own society, which still exist in other places and cultures (Cohen 1996, Meethan 2001, Wang 2000, Wylie 2000). Much of the travel and tourism literature today tries to capitalize on this quest for authenticity by showing images of “primitive”, “natural”, “backward”, and “exotic” peoples still living in “places set apart from modernity” (Meethan 2001: 91) where the tourist has the opportunity to have an encounter with the “untamed other in its natural, authentic habitat” (ibid.).

Erik Cohen (1996) refers to this as “communicative staging”, which emphasizes the use of images and rhetoric to help shape tourist expectations of what the experience will have to offer. In tourist destinations such as Northern Thailand, communicative staging is widely used to convey ideas to tourists that the highland minority groups they are about to encounter, long since incorporated into the wider Thai society, are untouched, isolated, remote and primitive cultural groups. According to Hitchcock, King, and Parnwell (1993: 13) these types of representations continue to dominate tourism literature on Southeast Asia and often depict these non-Western cultural groups as representative of earlier stages of human development. This is evident in the following advertisement from the Tourism Authority of Thailand:

A trip onto the hill tribes' own ground may be one of the planet's few remaining authentic cultural adventures. Don't miss a chance to sip rice whiskey with a village elder and feel centuries removed from your own world (Tourism Authority of Thailand 2006).

These depictions appeal to tourists who seek to discover a time and a place when people, not yet contaminated by the pollutants of modern life, lived in harmony with the natural environment (Lindstrom 1997: 39-40). Rosaldo (1989, cited in Graburn 1995: 166) referred to this longing for the past as "imperialist nostalgia" which describes a kind of regret carried by Western people about the destruction their societies have caused to the world's cultural groups and natural environment through colonization and industrialization. New forms of tourism, such as ecotourism, are often related to "ethnic" and "cultural tourism" and packaged together to construct an experience wherein tourists have an opportunity to encounter exotic others in still pristine areas where few have travelled (McLaren 1998: 11).

In Northern Thailand, ethnic minority groups are still being represented and sold in tourism literature as primitive and backward cultural groups, living in their centuries-old culture and lifestyles as if they were untouched by modern global and local processes of change.

## **Landscapes of Ecotourism**

Tourism has long been promoted as a component of economic and social development, particularly for what have come to be called Third World nations. With the recent global trends towards sustainable tourism over the past 20 years, tourism continues to play a key role in global strategies for achieving economic



development and is now also promoted as an engine of ecological and cultural conservation (Lanfant 1995: 3). Constructing ecotourism as a landscape of global-local-global flows allows us to consider the ways in which the global cultural forces of tourism and the environment play out at the local level of daily life (Meethan 2001, West and Carrier 2004) and, in turn, how this shapes the global landscapes in which these types of activities occur. This is achieved by looking at the various ways in which the rapid circulation of people, objects, money, images, and ideas intrude into the everyday lives of individuals and communities (Endensor 2001, Lewellen 2002 ) and the way groups and individuals accept and adapt to these global flows, or how they react, reject, and defend themselves against their aggressions (ibid.).

Host communities in Northern Thailand are constructing a landscape with broader social, cultural, political, and economic aims. By engaging in ecotourism, these communities hope to achieve broader political and economic goals, which include gaining rights and access to stewardship over natural resources, and to acquire management skills and experience, economic benefits, and direct control and participation in the tourism activities that shape their communities. Culture and cultural processes are also key components of community-based ecotourism and through the direct exchange of worldviews and daily practices between hosts and guests, communities are gaining control over how they are being represented and sold on the world market. Ecotourism initiatives allow host communities to represent themselves in their marketing materials and highlight those aspects of their own cultural traditions, which they wish to share with tourists. In effect they are actively carving out a space in the global landscape where they are

representing and speaking for themselves. How local communities recreate and reconstruct their identity and how they navigate the landscapes of the globalized world is shaped by their perspectives of the shifting world of tourists and their imaginations of what engaging in ecotourism has to offer.

Ecotourists who visit communities in Northern Thailand are constructing an imaginary tourist landscape based on the history of Western ideas and experiences of travel and environmentalism. For the ecotourists, community-based ecotourism is often seen as an opportunity to view still-pristine natural environments while having direct personal contact with hosts in a way that is socially and culturally sensitive, where the economic benefits of tourism remain in the communities visited. Ecotourism landscapes are also shaped by the rhetoric of sustainable development and environmental conservation, where tourism dollars are supposed to be used to conserve the natural environment. In this sense, their travel is imagined as not only benign environmentally, but also supporting and enhancing the ability of host communities to care for their natural surroundings and support a sustainable future.

## **Chapter 3: Ecotourism and Other Sustainable Alternatives**

Around the world, ecotourism has been hailed as a panacea: a way to fund conservation and scientific research, protect fragile and pristine ecosystems, benefit rural communities, promote development in poor countries, enhance ecological and cultural sensitivity, instil environmental awareness and a social conscience in the travel industry, satisfy and educate the discriminatory tourist, and, some claim, build world peace".  
- Martha Honey (1999)

Sustainable tourism, soft tourism, responsible tourism, green tourism, nature-based tourism, and ecotourism are just a few among the plethora of terms used to describe the new forms of tourism, presented as alternative to mass tourism, that have emerged in the past two decades. The terminologies are confusing as the boundaries between all these forms of travel and tourism are blurred; it is increasingly difficult to discern one from the next. Currently, the most "fashionable" of these terms is ecotourism.

Alternatives to mass or conventional tourism began to take shape in the early 1970s with the growth of the environmental movement in the West, the emergence of the concept of eco-development, and as a response to the criticisms being launched at the tourist industry for the impacts it was having on the social, cultural and natural environments (Honey 1999). While these alternatives were offered in contrast to mass tourism, to try to correct the perceived negative effects of the industry by offering vacations that are environmentally sensitive, socially acceptable, and culturally compatible with the values and needs of host

communities, alternative tourism is still heavily embedded in the wider tourist system and in practice there is much overlap between conventional and alternative tourism and tourists.

Some forms of alternative tourism may not be as sustainable as certain types of mass tourism, such as confined amusement parks, which do not have an impact on the social and cultural environments in the same way as do other activities that place tourists directly in contact with the host culture and environment (Weaver 1998). Alternative tourism also feeds off the infrastructure provided by the mass industry, and tourists often swing between both forms, as is the case in Thailand, where after a trek tourists may choose to head to one of the southern beaches, to the shopping areas, or other well-developed tourist sites, such as the ancient kingdoms of Ayuthaya and Sukhothai. They may also jump to one of the neighbouring countries and continue along well-established or newly emerging tourist routes, like the circuit that now invites travellers from Thailand to take a boat ride down the Mekong River to Luang Prabang, then overland by bus to Vang Vien and finally to Vientienne, the capital city of Laos.

In the early 1950s when the international tourism industry was still in its infancy, the relationship between tourism and the environment was perceived as being a harmonious one. As a result of the proliferation of package tours in the 1960s and a growing awareness of environmental issues, damage to the natural environment caused by the tourism industry drew closer attention and became the subject of much ensuing research (Page and Dowling 2002).

Two lines of thought have come to outline the relationship between tourism and the environment (Page and Dowling 2002). One postulates that

tourism exerts a destructive force on the natural and cultural environments and that as the tourist industry grows in size and scope, even the most remote and protected areas come under increasing pressure. The second stream posits that the two can work together to support and enhance one another where tourist funds provide much-needed revenues for conservation efforts and natural resource management. In this light, tourism can be seen as a mechanism of achieving sustainable development, a central concept embraced by ecotourism.

But application of the concept of sustainable development to tourism is not new. While ecotourism and various other sustainable alternatives are generally credited as arriving on the international stage in the late 1980s alongside the concept of sustainable development, Hall (1998) and Honey (1999) both argue that the concept indeed has much earlier roots and can be associated with the creation of the first national Park in the United States, Yellowstone, in 1872 (Honey 1999: 10) and Banff National park in Canada in 1885, in which the idea of tourism was linked specifically to the environment in the name of conservation efforts (Page and Dowling 2002). Hall (1998) questions whether the current excitement over ecotourism is not simply the re-labelling of old bottles. He argues that current discussion regarding tourism's relationship to development and environmental conservation is part of a much deeper and longstanding debate in Western society, bound up within the wider framework of the best use of natural resources, which is itself underpinned by attitudes towards the natural environment.

## **Modern Western Environmentalism**

How we perceive, approach and interact with the environment is fashioned by our attitudes and beliefs about the natural world. The categories individuals ascribe to it are coded by the social and cultural filters through which they 'see' and then use to make sense of their surroundings shaping their worldviews (Pepper 1986). Worldviews, then, help to construct meaning and value systems for nature, shaping, in part, behaviours and interactions with it (Wearing and Neil 1999: 11). As Kalland and Persoon (1998) point out, however, this relationship is not necessarily a deterministic one.

The dominant environmental paradigm that has underpinned the attitude of the West teaches that nature exists to meet the needs of human beings who are separated from it and dominant over it. Within this anthropocentric framework, one which places human beings at the centre, the natural world has no value outside of those ascribed through human use. This is based upon an atomic, mechanistic view of reality (Weaver 1998: 29-30) where the natural environment is portrayed as a system of component or integrated parts that can be isolated and tinkered with and made more productive through human effort. This perception was advanced in the works of Francis Bacon (Jamison 2001), who portrayed the natural world as if it was the internal mechanisms of a clock. This technocentric or imperialist perspective (Jamison 2001) grew out of the rationalist scientific thinking of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Pepper 1986: 12) and supports the idea that science and technology offer the appropriate tools to break down and manage the systems of the natural world as well as any environmental degradations resulting from industrial processes (Wearing and Neil 1999: 13). It

represents a highly instrumental view of nature and fits well within the Western capitalist industrialist mindset (Jamison 2001). This perspective continues to dominate environmental thought and action in the West.

Its counterpart, ecocentrism (Pepper 1986, Wearing and Neil 1999) or arcadianism (Jamison 2001), recognizes the intrinsic value of all living things, placing the natural world at the centre where human beings are but one integrated part. Ecocentrism is linked to the Romantic Movement (Jamison 2001) and is reflected in the writings of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Rachel Carson. Henry David Thoreau suggested that human beings and the environment were bound together as an integrated whole. If human beings are removed, the earth would survive, but if the natural world disappeared, so too would human beings for they cannot survive without it (Walls 2001: 111). Human beings, therefore, are subject to the laws of nature. Ecocentric perspectives identify strongly with tradition and have influenced environmentalism by providing a love of wild nature, a desire to turn back to the land, and an appreciation of local and indigenous forms of knowledge and relationships to the natural environment (Jamison 2001). An ecocentric argument maintains that modern science and technology are unable to prevent and repair environmental damage, particularly if current economic and resource use trends continue, asserting that we must reduce our impacts on the planet and strive for zero growth strategies if we are to live sustainably (Wearing and Neil 1999:18) and in some cases survive.

These two perspectives, technocentrism and ecocentrism, and the philosophies and practices to which they contribute, have come to shape much of

the debate of modern environmentalism in the West (Jamison 2001, Pepper 1986). Both perspectives reflect our relationship with the natural world and represent the poles of a spectrum rather than hard and fast categories of environmental thought and action.

Modern environmentalism is generally understood “to be a collective social response to environmental degradation and a quest for a viable future” (Isager 2000: 5). It emerged in the West as part of the wider counter-cultural movements that swept the 1960s, such as the hippy, peace, anti-nuclear, feminist, and civil rights movements (Pepper 1986), and today reflects the legacy of these various movements within its framework. Environmentalism, as a discourse, is about the protection of the natural environment through human effort (Milton 1996: 27) and as such reflects and influences social, cultural, political, and economic processes (Tomforde 2003: 347). Modern environmentalism is a complex social and political phenomenon (Isager 2000: 4) taking on various forms around the globe shaped by the political context in which its activities are situated (Milton 1996: 27).

Rachel Carson is widely credited with sparking the modern environmental movement in her consciousness-raising book *The Silent Spring* in 1962 (Butler 1998, Escobar 1995, Jamison 2001, Nash 1996, Sachs 1999). In it she exposed and detailed widespread chemical contamination of America’s farmlands pointing to the devastating effects this was having on human health and the biological environment (Foster 1994, Holden 2000, Nash 1996). On April 1, 1970, some 20 million Americans participated in the country’s first Earth Day celebrations (Nash 1996: 123) signalling a growing public concern about



environmental issues (Holden 2000: 65) and swelling the ranks of individuals who came to see themselves as environmentalists. Jamison (2001) refers to the 1960s and 1970s as a period of environmental awakening, when the impact of decades of scientifically driven modes of development was exposed, questioned, and criticized for the harmful effects the pursuit of ever expanding production and consumption was having on human populations and the natural environment.

The growth in communication technologies, in particular television and other mass-mediated cultural forms, also played a significant role in raising environmental consciousness as the need to protect the natural environment from further destruction could easily be spread to a wide audience (Jamison 2001: 84):

Soon large sections of the population were waking up to a host of ecological dangers symbolized by DDT, L.A. smog, toxic wastes in [sic] Love Canal, the death of the Great Lakes, acid rain, the energy crisis, oil spills, Three Mile Island nuclear meltdown and the clearcutting of the national forests (Foster 1994: 125).

Issues such as industrial pollution, nuclear waste, depletion of the ozone layer, and climate change due to global warming became hot topics for media outlets during the 1980s (Holden 2000: 66) while successfully showing that environmental issues were a global concern, and needed some form of global management (Sachs 1993: 18). Pollution and environmental degradation were not contained within the borders of the nation-state that created it, we now had to think globally while acting locally to protect the environment.

The agencies and mandates of the United Nations heavily promoted management of the natural environment on a planetary scale. The image of the earth as a small fragile ball, one of the most powerful notions in environmentalist discourse, provided the symbol for the first global conference on the environment, the United Nations Conference on Human Health, held in Stockholm in 1972 (Jamison 2001, Milton 1996). While giving rise to such agencies as the United Nations Environment Program, the conference helped to define the environment in global terms and produced two lines of thought, that the earth was one single ecosystem within which humanity represented one moral community (Milton 1996). Probably the most important outcome of the Stockholm conference in 1972 was the establishment of a linkage, on a global scale, between the natural environment and economic development, while placing a premium on development as an essential human activity (Escobar 1995, Milton 1996, Sachs 1992). Poverty came to be identified as a cause of environmental damage, the solution to which was development. Although it was acknowledged that development had harmful effects on the environment, directly through industrial processes and indirectly by creating poverty, the solution was nevertheless more development, only this time with the caveat that development can and must be made sustainable. It was in Stockholm that the idea of eco-development was first put forward (Hall 1998, Page and Dowling 2002), a concept that promoted the idea that all forms of development should conform to the ecological limits of an area. By the 1980s, the concept of eco-development was expanded to include the social and cultural environments of an area and gave rise to community-based models of development (Hall 1998).

The concept of sustainable development was propelled to the forefront of popular discourse in 1987 (Hall and Lew 1998: 13) with the release of the World Commission on the Environment and Development (WCED) report *Our Common Future*, commonly known as the Brundtland Report. Defining it simply as “development that meets the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987: 43), the concept of sustainable development put forth by the WCED is, at best, ambiguous. McKercher (1993, cited in Page and Dowling 2002: 19) acknowledges that, “the widespread support the term enjoys, therefore, may simply reflect the ease with which it can be appropriated by the supporters of various ideologies to perpetuate and legitimate their own views”. Sustainable development as a concept is meant to bridge the gap between developmentalists and environmentalists, or between the opposing paradigms of eco and anthropocentrism (Wearing and Neil 1999: 15). It embraces the contradictory notions that economic growth and development and the benefits of that growth can be made available to all and that this growth causes environmental degradation which is damaging to all (Milne 1998: 36). The 1992 United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development held in Rio De Janeiro drew on the concept of sustainable development and produced the Rio Declaration and Agenda 21 “which together make up an environmental blueprint for the future that calls on industry, including the travel and tourism industry, to develop a strategy for sustainable development” (Honey 1999: 20). The tourism industry has responded, and the result is a plethora of travel and tourism options that present themselves as alternatives to mainstream tourism.

## **Changing Perspectives on Tourism and Development**

Modernization theory provided the dominant paradigm through which development was promoted throughout the world from roughly the late 1940s through to the 1970s. It purported a linear or evolutionary path to progress (Meethan 2001: 44) and was based primarily on a dichotomy between the First World and the Third World, where the First World occupied a more advanced status (Scheyvens 2002: 23). Industrialization was seen as the primary mechanism of economic growth and the means of advancing nations from traditional to modern societies. Within this industrial evolutionary framework, tourism was highlighted as a soft or smokeless industry and an important tool for economic development (Blamey 2001, Nash 1996, Scheyvens 2002, Weaver 1998). The potential growth areas in tourism were identified as engines for infrastructural improvements in transportation and communication through the building of hotels and resort areas and the improvement in airport facilities. It was suggested that tourism development would help diversify the economy and provide employment, the benefits of which would trickle down through the host societies and bring increased prosperity and higher living standards for the local population (Meethan 2001). It was also proposed that tourism could facilitate desired social and cultural changes through “the spread of new skills and technology” (Scheyvens 2002: 23) while helping to shed traditional cultural values, those that were deemed counterproductive to progress and development (Wood 1993).

Jafari (1989 cited in Blamey 2001: 77 and cited in Weaver 1998: 11) characterized this initial period as one of advocacy which uncritically promoted

tourism as an economic benefit to host countries. It soon became apparent, however, that Third World countries that opened their doors to tourism were seeing few benefits. Infrastructural improvements, while costing governments millions of dollars proved to be of little direct benefit to the general population while much of the foreign investment in tourism facilitated the leakage of tourist dollars back to investors in the First World rather than the trickling down of profits to the majority of members in host societies.

### **Dependency Theory**

Dependency theory emerged in the 1970s as a response and a critique of the laissez faire economic policies of modernization (Mowforth and Munt 1998). It was introduced by the dependency school of theorists and is most commonly associated with the work of Andre Gunder Frank, who introduced the notion of 'the development of underdevelopment' (Mowforth and Munt 1998: 45).

Dichotomizing the world into an industrialized core and an underdeveloped periphery, it maintained that Third World societies, integrated into the global capitalist system, were tied to the First World through exploitive relationships where the latter supplied financial and technological expertise and inputs while amassing surpluses from the periphery (Weaver 2001). Dependency theory argued that these relationships fuelled continued economic growth in the centre, leaving the outlying areas in a perpetual and cumulative state of underdevelopment. Underdevelopment, then, "was not a primal condition but rather the result of the historically evolving structure of capitalism" (Lewellen 2002: 32).

Rather than strengthening Third World nations and helping newly independent states acquire prosperity and status in the global arena, from the dependency perspective, tourist flows, predominantly in the direction of First to Third World, created a lopsided tourist equation. The First World created the 'guests' and the Third World was relegated to the position of subservient 'host'. Jafari (1989, cited in Blamey 2001: 77 and cited in Weaver 1998: 11) characterized this period of tourism development as 'the cautionary platform'<sup>14</sup> that questioned the proposed benefits of tourism development and weighed them against the obvious negative impacts that the industry was having on social, cultural and natural environments in tourist destinations.

Dependency theory can be seen to be relevant to the analysis of tourism. Dependency relationships can be analyzed from global, macro perspectives, to ones that focus primarily on relationships within the state and even within specific regions (Weaver 1998). From the perspective of dependency theory, internationally Third World nations become dependent on tourists from the First World, and as trends can change fast, a popular area in one year can have declining tourist numbers the next, wreaking havoc on the economy and the lives of those who have come to depend on tourism dollars. In the case of trekking in Northern Thailand, tour operators from Chiang Mai bring tourists into the surrounding villages. A number of these villages grow dependent on revenues from tour agencies who have the power and resources to change trekking routes

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<sup>14</sup> Jafari (1989) uses the term "platform" to refer to the different perspectives that shape how tourism is constructed, promoted, researched and analyzed etc.

once an area has been deemed saturated and no longer satisfies tourist demands as 'off the beaten track'.

## **Political Economy**

Political economy approaches to tourism highlighted the unequal and uneven power relationships that are at play in the global capitalist economy and are replicated in the tourist system, by presenting a perspective where metropolitan corporations and market conditions determine the pace and form of tourism development with local actors playing only a peripheral role in tourism processes (Milne 1998: 37). This results in the benefits of that development in the Third World being felt more by the West whose companies made profits from their investments in hotels and resorts, and whose airlines and travel agents secured the majority of the revenues from those travelling to the Third World (Scheyvens 2002: 26). This concentration of power in the First World to shape and control tourism development and its outcomes caused Nash (1989) to argue that tourism acts as a form of imperialism. Political economy approaches to tourism have questioned whether tourism is a "passport to development" (De Kadt, 1979) while weighing the social, cultural, and environmental impact that tourism is having on host societies.

## **Post-Modernism**

Post-modern approaches to tourism have underscored the complexity of the modern tourist system and its processes by steering debates away from earlier grand theories and world systems thinking that divided the world into a

core and a periphery (Scheyvens 2002). Post-modern perspectives have shown that while tourism is part of the process of globalization, local people<sup>15</sup> are not simply the passive recipients of global flows, but are rather active agents in global processes. This was done in part by highlighting the diversity of ways in which local people accept, reject or adapt tourism development to suit their own needs and shape, in part, how the industry operates on a global scale (Milne 1998: 41, Scheyvens 2002: 37). That communities<sup>16</sup> should have a say in the direction of development in their communities is one of the principles of most forms of sustainable alternatives.

Alternative forms of tourism emerged in the 1980s as a reaction to some of the problems that came to be associated with the development of mass tourism. Alternative tourism has been generally defined as “forms of tourism that are consistent with natural, social, and community values and which allow both hosts and guests to enjoy positive and worthwhile interaction and shared experience” (Eadington and Smith 1992: 3). Jafari (1989, cited in Weaver 1998) referred to this phase as the ‘adaptancy platform’ which, building upon and addressing the critiques of the earlier platforms, and as a response to the negative effects of large scale tourism (Page and Dowling 2002: 11), sought to promote tourism practices that offered a more benign form of travel (Blamey 2001: 77), encouraged the participation of local peoples, and used local resources (Page and Dowling 2002: 11). The knowledge-based platform offers the latest perspective on tourism development and “aims at positioning itself on a scientific foundation which

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<sup>15</sup> I am not suggesting that local people are a homogenous group but rather I recognize that they have various degrees of agency and perspectives both of which are coloured by class, ethnicity, gender, caste etc.

<sup>16</sup> Communities are also not a homogenous group and are often full of contradictions and conflict.



simultaneously maintains bridges with other platforms” (Jafari 1989a: 25 cited in Eadington and Smith 1992: 11). The adaptancy platform provided only a partial solution to the problems of tourism development, it did so only on a small scale. The knowledge-based platform seeks to take a more holistic approach to tourism development and promote the application of the principles of sustainability to all forms of tourism, whether mass or alternative (Weaver 1998).

## **Defining Ecotourism**

Twenty years ago no one had heard of the word ecotourism and yet it has now become a central focus of the tourism industry, of national and local governments, development agencies and planners, communities, conservationists, non-governmental organizations, environmentalists, academics, and tourists. Ecotourism today is one of the most broadly used yet widely contested and debated tourist concepts as there is still no formal agreement on its scope or definition (Page and Dowling 2002: 21, Weaver 1998).<sup>17</sup> Part of the problem in defining ecotourism is that it is frequently used to represent a variety of interests and activities, from white water rafting to bird-watching to trekking expeditions. These and other tourist activities are simply categorized together through their use of the natural environment (Page and Dowling 2002). One ecotourism industry worker in Northern Thailand commented:

Ecotourism isn't really understood. 100,000 people visit a national park, that is ecotourism. Bamboo raft on a river, that is

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<sup>17</sup> Blamey (1997) suggests that arguments on how to define ecotourism have begun to subside in and the focus has shifted to how to operationalize the concept.

ecotourism. As long as it has some component, [people are] lazy to find out [what it is], [it] takes too much effort, its language, a buzzword” (TO1, 01/17/2003, Chiang Rai).

There are a number of authors who share this perspective claiming that ‘ecotourism’ is deployed in so many different contexts that it has simply become a “catch-all term” (Page and Dowling 2002: 29) for the tourism industry that has rendered it meaningless (Fennell 1999: 181). This lack of precision over what does and does not constitute ecotourism also makes it difficult to know how many tourists specifically choose this as an option although it is often promoted as the fastest growing segment within the industry (Honey 1999, Weaver 1998). Fennell (1999) also suggests that there are some combinations of alternative tourism, such as, adventure, cultural and ecotourism (ACE), or nature, ecotourism and adventure-tourism (NEAT), which are preferred by some tour operators for marketing more “holistic” packages to tourists who are usually unable to clearly distinguish between the variations in any meaningful way (Weaver 1998: 75-76).

Hector Ceballos-Lascurain is widely credited as the first person to formally define the term ecotourism in 1987 describing it as: “Travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in those areas” (1987: 14, cited in Blamey 2001: 5-6). The evolution of the expression was derived from ‘turismo ecologico’ which he used by 1981, which was then shortened in 1983 to ‘ecoturismo’ (Wearing and Neil 1999: 4). Blamey (2001: 5) traces the origins of the term back much further and points out that

Hetzer first used it in 1965 when he identified “four pillars of responsible tourism” and that other references can be found in the work of Miller on national park planning in Latin America in 1978 (Blamey 2001: 5, Honey 1999: 13), and in the work of Environment Canada, which set up a number of ecotours along the Trans-Canada Highway in the mid-1970s (Blamey 2001: 5).

Yong (1991: 1, cited in Hitchcock, King, and Parnwell 1993: 27) defines ecotourism as “tourism to protected areas of outstanding natural beauty, extraordinary ecological interest, and pristine wilderness with the specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals found in these areas.” In a similar vein, Fennell (1999: 43) defines ecotourism as:

A sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism that focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, and which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive, and locally oriented (control, benefits and profits of scale). It typically occurs in natural areas, and should contribute to the conservation or preservation of such areas.

The focus of these two definitions, as within much of the literature on ecotourism, places emphasis on the natural environment (Weaver 2001: 77). Yong’s (1991) definition does not make mention of the need to contribute to the sustainability of the area but rather is focused on the enjoyment of the natural environment by the tourists. The International Ecotourism Society, on the other hand, defines ecotourism simply as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people” ([www.ecotourism.org](http://www.ecotourism.org)). Wearing and Neil (1999: 7-8) suggest that ecotourism consists of four fundamental elements: (1) the notion of movement or travel

focused on natural or protected areas; (2) a nature-based experience centred on the natural environment of the area visited; (3) that is conservation led; and (4) has an educative role. They provide the following definition of ecotourism:

Travel, often to developing countries to relatively undisturbed protected natural areas for study, enjoyment or volunteer assistance that concerns itself with the flora, fauna, geology and ecosystems of an area – as well as the people (caretakers) who live nearby, their needs, their culture and their relationship with the land” (Wallace 1992: 7, cited in Wearing and Neil 1999: 77).

Page and Dowling (2002: 64) suggest there are five fundamental principles of ecotourism, that it is “nature-based, ecologically sustainable, environmentally educative, locally beneficial and generates tourist satisfaction”. They suggest that the first three are essential elements of any ecotourism operation, while the last two are “desirable to all forms of tourism” (ibid.). Honey (1999: 24-25) argues for a more demanding definition of ecotourism and suggests that it has seven characteristics: that it involves travel to natural destinations, minimizes impact, builds environmental awareness, provides financial benefits for conservation, provides financial benefits and empowerment for local people, respects local culture, supports human rights and democratic movements. Honey (1999: 25) defines ecotourism as:

Travel to fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas that strives to be low impact and (usually) small scale. It helps educate the traveler; provides funds for conservation; directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and fosters respect for different cultures and human rights.

Honey’s definition contains many of the elements that shape perspectives on community-based tourism initiatives. JorKoe Ecotreks, one of the

community-based tourism operations that will be discussed in the next chapter, defines community-based ecotourism as a type of tourism which requires a high level of participation by local community members such that tourist activities contribute to local economic development, conserve the natural and cultural resources of the community while providing a socially and environmentally responsible experience for tourists. Denroi (1998, cited in Wearing and Neil 1999: 2) suggests that the goal of community-based initiatives is “to establish direct personal/cultural intercommunication and understanding between host and guest.” In community-based ecotourism ventures, local communities control the tourism flows from which they receive the bulk of the economic benefits (Sechyvens 2002: 71). It is the measure of control that separates this type of operation from the other forms of ecotourism, where the local or surrounding community may receive benefits from tourism activities but they may not be directly involved or consulted on the style and content of those activities. Community-based ecotourism recognizes that host communities are capable of planning, participating in and managing tourism activities. Scheyvens (2002: 56) suggests that communities be active agents in all aspects of tourism development in their communities, that they be given knowledge and information, the “pros and cons” about pursuing this type of development before tourists arrive, and that once established, local community members will continue to be actively involved in tourist activities. Active participation by community members is necessary to maintain the well-being of the hosts by ensuring that the growth of tourism respects local natural resource limitations and cultural needs (Wearing and Neil 1999). Parnwell (1993) suggests that there

is evidence from elsewhere in Southeast Asia that where local communities are given an active and ongoing role in tourism development in their communities, they have been able to reduce its often-negative social, cultural and environmental impacts. Local communities who participate equitably in tourism operations may also be empowered by the experience and gain knowledge and skill sets that allow them to not only effectively monitor tourism development but also to make their voices heard when they have concerns about its direction and impact on the community (Milne 1998, Scheyvens 2002). France (1997c: 149, cited in Scheyvens 2002: 59) defines the process of empowerment as one “through which individuals, households, local groups, communities, regions and nations shape their own lives and the kind of society in which they live”. Tourism initiatives that actively involve community participation and show respect and interest in the natural and cultural environments of host communities can be empowering for local people (Scheyvens 2002).

After conducting an analysis of ecotourism definitions Blamey (2001) concluded that although the concept is often comprised of several characteristics, there are three central dimensions, which represent its essence of the concept: that it is nature-based, educational, and sustainably managed. That ecotourism is nature-based is perhaps the most obvious characteristic of this type of travel. Still, as every type of tourism activity has links to the natural environment, simply identifying ecotourism as nature-based does not distinguish it from other types of alternative tourism, including those activities, such as hunting, fishing, and scuba diving, for example, that rely solely on the natural environment as the basis of their activities (Page and Dowling 2002). According to Ingram and Durst

(1987, cited in Weaver 2001: 74), nature-based tourism is “simply leisure travel that involves the utilization of the natural resources of an area”. Beaumont (1998, cited in Page and Dowling 2002: 58) suggests that ecotourism is a subset of nature-based tourism which is a subset of tourism, whereas Fennell (1999) argues that ecotourism is a subset of nature tourism but represents only one component of this broad category. Both authors agree, however, that what differentiates ecotourism from nature-based tourism are its educative and sustainability components (Fennell 1999, Page and Dowling 2002, Weaver 2001).

## **The Educative Role**

Education is essential in contributing to the success of an ecotourism experience. Ecotourists are often very demanding of information and express a genuine desire to learn about the areas they are visiting in a meaningful way. When tourists are prepared with some background information on the cultural groups and areas they will be visiting and advised on appropriate behaviours in the local setting, there is a better chance that the experience will be a mutually beneficial cultural exchange between the hosts and guests (Scheyvens 2002: 196). Ecotourism “provides both the locals and visitors with genuine non-forced interaction, which does not intrude thoughtlessly on the local lifestyle” (Wearing and Neil 1999: 85). Through education and interpretation, ecotourism helps to increase awareness of local ecological and cultural issues among ecotourists (Weaver 1998, Page and Dowling 2002), particularly for tourists who are new to ecotourism as a form of travel. Meaningful interactions between the hosts and guests, those which involve direct, personal contact, can also help the tourists see

the “big picture” (Page and Dowling 2002: 67) and learn about the issues facing local communities. Ceballos-Lacurain (1988, cited in Blamey 2001: 10) explains that ecotourism offers the opportunity for individuals to immerse themselves in nature in a way that is simply not possible in their ordinary, everyday lives. He suggests that: “This person will eventually acquire a consciousness...that will convert him into somebody keenly involved in conservation issues” (ibid.). The objective here is to instil transformative values in the tourists and the locals alike (Ross and Wall 1999, cited in Honey 1999) and influence behaviour in such a way that individuals work towards sustainable alternatives in all aspects of their daily lives. It also provides an opportunity for the host populations to perhaps learn more about their own surrounding natural environment and begin to use and appreciate what tourists come to see. The educative element can also help to raise the consciousness of hosts regarding the need to protect the natural environment and pursue local development objectives with an emphasis on sustainability (Wearing and Neil 1999: 85). The educative role of ecotourism and interpretation of the local natural and cultural environments are not only important elements in shaping an enjoyable and satisfying ecotourism experience but also play an important role in contributing to global environmental awareness (Crabtree 2000, cited in Page and Dowling 2002).

## **Sustainability**

While sustainability should be a central concern of the entire tourism industry, it is fundamental to the positioning of any tourism experience as alternative (Wearing and Neil 1999: 6). Sustainability is rooted conceptually in



sustainable development, which seeks to balance the social, cultural, economic, and environmental needs of the peoples and natural areas. Sustainable tourism, then, is a form of travel that “does not threaten the economic, social, cultural or environmental integrity of the tourist destination over the long term” (Butler 1993, cited in Weaver 2001: 80). Sustainability, however, like its derivative sustainable development, is highly contested and its ambiguous nature allows for its use in often broad and contradictory ways. It is also a power-laden concept, and how environmental problems are described and understood leads to different perceptions on how their problems will be solved (Isager 2001).

While the language of sustainability has predominantly been in the domain of alternative tourism, Mowforth and Munt (1998) point out that the argument surrounding sustainability and tourism acknowledges that some forms of mass tourism may be equally as sustainable as some forms of alternative tourism. Although it is logical to assume that small-scale tourism will have less impact on destination areas, sustainable tourism does not necessarily mean a deviation from mass tourism and there is no reason to suggest that large-scale operations are inherently unsustainable, particularly if they meet the other principles of ecotourism (Weaver 2001). According to Weaver (2001), high volumes of visitors produce economies of scale and generate enough economic revenue to support the implementation of sophisticated technological systems that can help facilitate sustainable practices.

Perhaps the most successful aspect of sustainability with regard to tourism, however, has been in the marketing of green alternatives. “One cannot avoid the feeling that this is due almost entirely, at least initially, to the correct

perception that sustainable development is viewed as a 'good thing' by the media, and hence the public, and that sustainable products will be enthusiastically purchased" (Butler 1998: 28). The promotion of green principles may also be a wise business decision insofar as it has the ability to generate greater revenue flows through the reduction in waste and an increase in public perception of the product being offered (Weaver 2001: 77). Butler (1998) comments that while the principles espoused in alternative tourism have been widely accepted and endorsed by stakeholders in all areas of the industry, the actual practice of these principles is much more elusive. He suggests that more often than not tourism operators merely pay "lip service" (Butler 1998: 26) to alternative concepts in order to continue to attract a portion of global travellers who have incorporated their environmental activism into their holiday plans. It is therefore the practice of tourism that must be greened and not just the language used by the industry for self-promotion (Honey 1999, Scheyvens 2002). The ultimate goal of the ecotourism movement is to instil sustainable practices in the entire tourism industry (Blamey 2001). Mowforth and Munt (1998) argue that sustainability, as it is applied to tourism, however, has as much to do with ensuring the continued growth of the tourism industry through the preservation of the tourist playgrounds of First World middle-class tourists as with seeking to preserve the natural and cultural environments of tourist destinations (Mowforth and Munt 1998: 37)

With the rise of environmentalism, there is no doubt that the marketplace itself has been forced to become more environmentally sensitive in its approach to products and services in order to cater to green consumers (Page and Dowling

2002). Some commentators suggest that the popularity of ecotourism and other sustainable tourism alternatives reflects a rising global environmental consciousness and a growing concern for the quality of life of communities around the planet (Lew 1998: 92). A shift from a concern for the communities' well being as opposed to that of the industry is what distinguishes new forms of tourism from more conventional forms (Weaver 1998). According to Wearing and Neil (1999), this is more than a simple trend or fad within the tourism industry but rather is reflected in a wider shift in Western society in the ways in which human beings perceive and interact with the natural environment.

### **Criticisms of Ecotourism**

Although ecotourism seeks to promote holidays that are economically, socially, culturally, and environmentally sustainable, it has not escaped criticism, in theory and in practice. One of the main criticisms of ecotourism is that many of its proponents assume that there will be little to no disruption in areas and communities where ecotourism is practiced (Weaver 1998). Although ecotourism is generally practiced on a small scale, the experience usually occurs over a longer period of time and is more in-depth in that tourists often stay in the homes of community members whom they visit and have an opportunity to intrude into the more private spheres of community life (Weaver 1998). As Butler (1990, cited in Blamey 2001: 18) has argued, "tourism which places tourists in local homes, even when they are culturally sympathetic, and not desiring a change in local behaviour, is much more likely to result in changes in local behaviour in the long run than is a larger number of tourists in more conventional tourist ghettos,

where contact with locals is limited.” He further suggests that all forms of tourism function to some degree as agents for change and so the goal is to try to achieve gradual and positive change for the community (Weaver 1998).

Ecotourism has also been criticized for ignoring the reality that local elites often tend to appropriate the tools of development for their own ends (Weaver 1998). There is also the possibility that increases in revenue for those community members who participate in tourism may simply result in substituting one group of elite with another. Wheeler (1994b, cited in Weaver 1998: 22-23) argues that an inherent feature of all forms of tourism, including ecotourism, is exploitation in the sense that the tourists are motivated by seeking a satisfying experience, the communities by extracting maximum economic benefits and a company by the desire for short-term profits.

The United Nations designated 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism (IYE) and launched a promotional year sponsored by the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) and the World Tourism Organization (WTO).<sup>18</sup> With the recognition of the importance of the global tourism industry, the goals of the IYE were to share experiences and ideas of how to achieve sustainable development and environmental conservation through the application of the principles of Agenda 21 to the tourism sector.<sup>19</sup> A number of regional conferences were held in the year leading up to the World Ecotourism Summit in Quebec in May 2002. The IYE, however, generated serious criticism

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<sup>18</sup> For more information on the IYE see the UNEPs website at <http://www.uneptie.org/pc/tourism/ecotourism/activities.htm> or the WTOs website at <http://www.world-tourism.org/sustainable/IYE-Main-Menu.htm>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.uneptie.org/pc/tourism/ecotourism/ie.htm>

from ethnic and indigenous minority groups and community representatives who felt they had little meaningful participation in these conferences.

While IYE has generated a number of forums for projects, academics, international programs, and experts to reflect upon, there have been few opportunities for community representatives to actively participate and raise their own concerns (Meeting Conclusions, Southeast Asia Regional Meeting 2002:1).

Likewise, a statement from a small group of community representatives gathered at the Southeast Asia Regional Meeting on Community-based Ecotourism held in Chiang Mai, Thailand, commented:

We felt that the conference was focused upon and designed around the profitability of the tourism industry and very minimal on the issues and concerns affecting us who already host and/or being eyed as host to tourism, giving us the impression that we, the community people, are one of the commodities of the market' (Statement on the Process of the Regional Meeting on Community-Based Ecotourism in Southeast Asia held in Chiang Mai, Thailand, 3-7 March 2002: 15)

These are, perhaps, one of the most scathing criticisms aimed at the ecotourism industry. First, indigenous and minority communities are already expressing concern that they represent little more than a commodity for the tourism industry supporting notions that what is primarily being sustained by ecotourism is the continued expansion of the tourism industry at the expense of the local natural and cultural environments it purports to be able to protect. Second, if ecotourism is to realize its goals of achieving sustainable development and environmental conservation then local people must be included in all dialogues on the present and the future of the industry, particularly in the global

conferences put on by those hailing ecotourism as a roadmap to sustainable development and environmental conservation.

## **Summary**

What contributes to the popularity of ecotourism is that the concept successfully combines two phenomena that have emerged since World War Two, large-scale travel and the environmental movement (Weaver 1998). The international tourism industry has recorded astounding growth rates since the Second World War with some 763 million people joining the ranks of global tourists in year 2004 (World Tourism Organization 2005) compared with 25 million in 1950. The largest industry in the world (Wood 1997), both in terms of the movement of people and as an economic activity, tourism accounts for 10% of global employment (Honey 1999) and plays a vital role in the economies of many countries, including Thailand. But this massive growth has not come without consequences. Degraded and polluted natural environments, social and cultural decay of tourist areas, and spatial inequality (the uneven distribution of income) are but a few of the negative effects of tourism development in several countries.

As a response to the mounting criticisms of the tourism industry, ecotourism emerged in the early 1980s along with several other supposedly sustainable alternatives. With roots in the environmental movement that sprung up in the West as part of the wider counter cultural movements of the 1960s, and shaped by the global environmental rhetoric and strategy of sustainable development, ecotourism promises to correct adverse damage caused by the

industry while earning funds for conservation, providing jobs for local communities and educating tourists and hosts alike about environmental issues.

A number of authors are sceptical about the promises made by ecotourism and wonder if it is not just a friendly façade that allows for continued exploitation by the tourism industry (Scheyvens 2002). On the other hand:

As David Nicholson-Lord puts it 'the world, clearly, is not going to stop taking holidays – but equally clearly we can no longer afford to ignore the consequences. And if one of the major culprits has been the industrialization of travel, a genuinely post-industrial tourism, with the emphasis on people and places rather than products and profits, could turn out to be significantly more planet-friendly' (Honey 1999: 83)

As Honey (1999: 25) also reminds us: "Although ecotourism is indeed rare, often misdefined, and usually imperfect, it is still in its infancy, not on its deathbed". What is clear in the discussions on ecotourism is that its evolution is ongoing (Page and Dowling 2002). If all of ecotourism's principles can be realized including local participation and control over tourism development, conservation of the natural environment and the sustainable management of natural resources, and when it offers rewarding, environmentally educative experiences for tourists, it can be an excellent example of sustainable development in practice (Scheyvens 2002: 80).

## **Chapter 4: Community-Based Ecotourism in Thailand**

What an ugly invention is tourism! One of the most baleful of all industries! It has reduced the world to a vast playground, a Disneyland without borders. Soon thousands of these new invaders, soldiers of the empire of consumerism, will land, and with their insatiable cameras and camcorders they will scrape away the last of the natural magic which is still everywhere in this country.  
-Tiziano Terzani (1998)

Thailand has enjoyed ongoing success as a tourist destination. Its image overseas has been that of “an exotic, enchanted kingdom in the Orient” (Cohen 1996: 2, Cohen 2001: 156) and this has undoubtedly contributed to its popularity. With soft white sandy beaches and limestone cliffs and caves in the south, and rugged mountains populated with colourful highland minority groups in the North, Thailand is blessed with many natural and cultural wonders. Thailand is a country where ancient mysticisms blend seamlessly into the contemporary world, where Buddhist traditions are infused with animist beliefs. A land of diversity and epicurean delights, Thailand has much to offer to the global traveler.

Tourism in Thailand has experienced relatively steady growth since the 1960s when the tourism industry became more formalized and was officially incorporated into the country’s overall economic development strategy (Cohen 1996: 2). Two decades later the tourism industry outpaced all others and became the number one foreign exchange earner, a position it continues to occupy (Hitchcock, King, and Parnwell 1993: 1, Weaver 1998: 165). According to the



Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) the country received some 9.87 million tourists in the year 2001 and the industry is forecasting continued growth. Regionally, "Southeast Asia recorded a growth rate of 15.7 per cent compared to the world's average of 9.3 per cent between 1980 and 1995" (Teo, Chang, and Ho 2001: 2). As a well-developed tourist destination, Thailand's tourism industry is optimistic it can continue to capture much of the international tourism market by serving as a major hub for travel to other destinations, such as Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar, which have as recently as the 1990s opened their doors to burgeoning tourist flows (Cohen 1996). While Thailand actively supports the expansion of the tourism industry in neighbouring countries, the growth in popularity of these relatively untouched and undeveloped tourist destinations presents a new marketing challenge for Thailand, whose tourist industry has suffered many negative effects, such as polluted and overcrowded tourist areas, as it evolved in tandem with the overall economic development of the country. Consequently, Thailand has sought to clean up some of its popular tourist activities, such as trekking, and green its image. It has, like many other countries, jumped onto the alternative and ecotourism bandwagons, at least rhetorically.

### **Thailand's Economic Miracle**

Several sweeping changes began reshaping Thailand's northern landscapes in the late 1950s with dramatic effects on its ethnic minority groups and natural environment. Prior to the 1960s, Thailand was an overwhelmingly agrarian country with ninety per cent of its population engaged in agriculture, which

provided for roughly half of the country's national income (Krongkaew 1995: 3). In 1960, when industrialization in Thailand formally began (Krongkaew 1995), agriculture was the most important sector of the economy (Tonguthai 1987: 185, cited in Parnwell and Arghiros 1996:19). Economic growth in Thailand from roughly the 1950s through the 1970s was supported primarily through a pattern of Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI),<sup>20</sup> the expansion of the agricultural sector, and the export of primary goods. During the same period, and due to its geopolitical position, Thailand was the recipient of large amounts of United States aid and military expenditures from the involvement of the United States in Vietnam (Falkus 1995, Hussey 1993: 15)

In its first economic development plan in 1961, under the direction of the nation's Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) (Dixon 1996), the government made sizeable investments in developing the country's overall infrastructure (Isager 2001). The Tourism Organization of Thailand, renamed the Tourism Authority of Thailand in 1979, was created, and for the first time foreign investment in the country's tourism industry was promoted (Cohen 1996: 2). Improvement in transportation and communications networks, largely driven and financed by the United States to assist the movement of its military goods and personnel to peripheral areas of the country, particularly in the Northeast, opened up new agricultural areas, facilitated commercial trade, increased access to markets, and allowed for tourist penetration into previously remote and

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<sup>20</sup> Import Substitution Industrialization is a strategy that "called for increasing production of manufactured goods for domestic consumption to nurture national markets. This would decrease external dependency and heighten self-sufficiency; absorb surplus labor, especially from the traditional agricultural sector; reduce balance-of-payments problems; foster more advanced stages of industrialization; and establish linkages with related sectors to encourage economic diversification." (Brohman 1996: 53)

outlying areas of the country (Dixon 1996, Isager 2001). These investments in infrastructural development facilitated a cash crop boom along the upland frontier and rapid deforestation occurred in the North to clear land for the farming of new agricultural products for markets in Europe and the United States (Isager 2000: 107).<sup>21</sup>

This growth in the country's agricultural sector was supported by the growth of the tourism industry and remittances sent home from overseas workers, both of which provided a cushion for the Thai economy during the international economic instability of the 1970s (Dixon 1996). Between 1970 and 1980 manufacturing grew at a rate twice that of the agricultural sector (Tonguthai 1987: 185, cited in Parnwell and Arghiros 1996:19) and continued the export-led growth which began near the end of the 1960s and came to dominate industrialization in Thailand throughout the 1980s (Falkus 1995). During the 1980s Thailand shifted from being primarily an exporter of agricultural goods to manufacturing and tourism (Phongpaichit and Baker 2002: 156). "In 1986, for the first time, exports of manufactured products exceeded those of agricultural produce" (Falkus 1991: 59, cited in Parnwell and Arghiros 1996:19).

Thailand's abundant labour force made it an attractive destination for foreign investment (Falkus 1995: 27) and benefited from the spread of industrialization that had provided impetus to economic growth in other Asia-Pacific countries since the 1970s (Dixon 1996, Falkus 1995). Once the country's manufacturing-based exports were established, initially through textiles and later

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<sup>21</sup> Isager (2000: 109) further comments "in Northern Thailand, 68 per cent of the land was forested in 1961. In 1976, the figure was 60 per cent, and by 1978 - only two years later - it had dropped till 56 per cent".

with electronic products, growth in the sector was accelerated through investments from Japan, Taiwan and South Korea, which, as a result of losing their competitive advantages through cheap labour in their own countries sought to invest in labour-intensive manufacturing operations in other countries in the region (Dixon 1996). The manufacturing sector was further supported through the promotion and expansion of the country's tourism industry (Dixon 1996: 30). The government offered incentives for the construction of tourist-related facilities during the 1980s, and increased the promotion budget of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (Phongpaichit and Baker 2002). "Arrivals grew from around one million a year in the mid-1970s to around 2.5 million by the mid 1980s. The government-promoted "Visit Thailand Year" in 1987 proved to be a phenomenal success boosting arrivals to the country by 24 per cent in one year and contributing to the doubling of the rate over the rest of the decade (Phongpaichit and Baker 2002). This was also key in boosting tourist revenues from US\$1 billion in 1985 to US\$3 billion in 1988 (Dixon 1996: 42). The growth in tourism reinforced the rapid rate of economic development in Thailand, while its political stability promoted it as an investment "hot spot" (Dixon 1996: 42) well in to the 1990s.

Thailand's economic and industrial development since the 1960s has been associated with diversification, relatively little state intervention, deregulation, liberalization, and outward oriented development (Dixon 1996, Falkus 1995, Krongkaew 1995), and the growth of the tourism industry. While the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) did provide several national development plans from 1961 onwards, Dixon (1996: 43) suggests "it is perhaps

not unfair to characterise Thai development from the late 1950s onwards as the product of limited state intervention, with little overall co-ordination and direction, and weak and generally ineffective planning mechanisms at all levels.”

Due to its rapid and largely unplanned development, Thailand’s natural environment has suffered all sorts of damage including deforestation, salinization, depletion of natural resources, loss of fertile land and pollution (Falkus 1995, Krongkaew 1995).

### **The Highland Minorities**

Of the twenty-three different ethnic groups living in Northern Thailand only ten are officially recognized and categorized as hill tribes (Dearden 1991, Gravers 2001). The six most popular among tourists, and those that have received the most interest from the Thai government as well as the trekking companies, are the Karen, Lahu, Lisu, Hmong, Mien, and Akha (Cohen 1996, Dearden 1991).<sup>22</sup> With origins in Tibet, Burma, and southern China, many of these minority ethnic groups migrated to Northern Thailand during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Isager 2001), although some came to the region as recently as thirty years ago. The hill tribe population can be most easily distinguished from one another by their traditional style of dress. They were principally practitioners of swidden agriculture, growing dry mountain rice

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<sup>22</sup> Although the hill tribes are the most popular of the highland minorities for tourists, there are a number of other ethnic minority communities who also receive tourists, such as the Chinese Haw and the Shan or Tai Yai. This thesis uses the term highland minority to refer to all non-Thai ethnic groups unless I am making a specific reference to one of the categorized hill tribe groups.

and vegetables; raising poultry, pigs, and buffalo; hunting; and foraging for foods and medicines in the jungle (Cohen 1996).

Although the hill tribes are frequently referred to as ‘untouched’, ‘primitive’, or ‘still living in their own culture and civilization’ in tourist promotional material,<sup>23</sup> they have a history of contact and trade, and more recently, intervention and conflict with government authorities, state apparatuses, and the dominant Thai majority.

The clearing of land to support economic growth in the country through agriculture in the late 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, had devastating effects on the hill tribes. The clearing of land for the production of cash crops created a tremendous increase in the number of agricultural areas under production in the northern regions, changing patterns of land ownership and creating a new rural elite, which consisted mainly of ethnic Thais (Isager 2000: 109). It was also during this time that the state embarked on a nation-building campaign: “that is, make everybody speak the same national language and learn the same things at school, make them share the same religious values and knowledge, make them adhere to the same norms and communicate through the same (national) media and symbols” (Isager 2000: 109). This process had an obvious impact on the hill tribes, who were characterized as “anti-modern and anti-national”, “culturally different and inferior” (Isager 2000: 109). Much of this legacy lingers today in the attitudes of the majority of the Thai population. One tour operator stated

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<sup>23</sup> Erik Cohen (1996: 34-35) writes “in the case of hill tribe trekking in Northern Thailand the staging of the tribes is virtually exclusively communicative...through their rhetoric, to convince the authenticity-seeking tourists that the tribal villages they are about to visit are indeed as “primitive and remote” as the tourists expect them to be, despite their progressive incorporation into the Thai national ecological and administrative system.”

that “Thais and Thai Government [have a] bad attitude to hill tribe people, [they] view hill tribe people as aliens using the resources of Thailand – engrained feeling – don’t consider them to be mainstream citizenship, very discriminatory” (TO1, interview, 01/17/2003, Chiang Rai).<sup>24</sup> With the destruction of much of the forestland in Northern Thailand following the rapid economic development of the country, the competition for access to resources spawned new resentment towards the hill tribes who receive much of the blame for the destruction of the forests and watersheds in the North.

## **Tourism Development**

Much of the tourism industry in Thailand originally was concentrated in and around Bangkok, but with infrastructural development following the general economic development of the country, and an increase in the number of tourists, tourism spread to more outlying areas of the country (Cohen 1996). With the inauguration of international airports in Chiang Mai in the North and Phuket in the South, a North-to-South axis developed (Cohen 1996: 5-7) diffusing tourists from these new hubs to their surrounding areas, which, in the northern regions includes the neighbouring provinces of Chiang Rai and Mae Hong Son, where many of the treks take place.

The initial boost to the tourism industry in Thailand was the Vietnam War and the stationing of some 40,000 American service men, which has had profound and lasting effects on the country’s image as a tourist destination.

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<sup>24</sup> For the purposes of citation, ET refers to Ecotourists, TO to Tour Operators, T to Conventional Trekking Tourists, and H to Hosts. For further information on these groups please refer to Appendix 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10.

First, it is from this period (roughly the mid 1950s to mid 1970s), owing to the growth in tourist-oriented prostitution, that Bangkok earned its reputation as the “Brothel of Asia” (Cohen 1996: 3, Cohen 2001:157), while Thailand then became known for its ‘erotic’ as well as its ‘exotic’ appeal (Cohen 1996), a distinction the country has been trying to downplay while continuing to promote its ‘exotic’ side.<sup>25</sup> Second, following the development of the economically successful, yet socially and environmentally destructive expansion of the seaside resort of Pattaya – a once-tiny fishing village that was discovered and then turned into a virtual “playground” for American soldiers on R & R (Rest and Recreation) – new resorts were created along Thailand’s coastline that set the foundations for “the emergence of Thailand as a major vacationing destination” (Cohen 1996: 3). Today, many resorts line the beaches of Thailand’s extensive coastal areas.

Initially, a top-down approach directed the tourist industry with developments emerging from government policies and plans. The spontaneity of growth in tourism inverted this process as many entrepreneurs started their own tourist-related businesses, such as guesthouses and restaurants, that catered to an increasingly diversified tourist market, as well as trekking and tour companies, of which there were more than 250 listed in the city of Chiang Mai by 1999 (Tourism Authority of Thailand 1999).

In contrast to the GI period, during the Vietnam War, where the bulk of international tourists were from the United States (Cohen 1996: 8), Thailand now

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<sup>25</sup> Erik Cohen notes “this emphasis is most concisely expressed in the slogan “Thailand – the Most Exotic Country in Asia”, heading some tourist brochures published by the TAT, and in the name of a TAT newsheet, “Exotic Thailand”” (Cohen 1996: 2; Cohen 2001: 158). Cohen further elaborates on the dual faces of the ‘erotic’ and the ‘exotic’ sides of the countries, see Cohen (1996:2-4).



enjoys a much more diversified tourist market. Recent figures show that most international tourists come from East Asia and Europe, with fewer arrivals from the Americas, Oceania, South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa (TAT 2000a, cited in Kaae and Toftkaer 2001: 179).

## **Trekking Tourism**

Trekking tours to hill tribe villages emerged in Northern Thailand in the 1970s and consisted of mainly “drifter” (Cohen 1996: 7) or “explorer-type” (Dearden 1991: 402) tourists who sought to get away from the well-established tourist routes and into some of the more remote areas. Many tourists would simply walk into a village and spend a few days living and working with their hosts (Cohen 1996, Dearden 1991). A few tour companies taking small groups of tourists on overnight excursions followed this trend (Dearden 1991). Trekking soon became a common stomping ground for mass tourism. “The trekking market has been transformed from an estimated 90% young backpacker clientele in the mid-1980s to only about 50% in the mid-1990s, with older, more conventional tourists accounting for most of the difference” (Petry 1996, cited in Weaver 1998: 169). A standard trek consists of a one-day tour, two days-one night, three days-two nights, or four days–three nights and often includes an elephant ride and bamboo rafting. Northern highland minority communities now accommodate over 100,000 trekkers annually (Dearden 1991: 400).

Initially, the guides would penetrate the villages by talking with the headman who usually allowed the visitors to tour the village and use cooking and sleeping facilities – normally the headman’s house – as a gesture of hospitality

(Dearden 1991). As the number of trekkers swelled, cash transactions began to dominate the village visits (ibid.). Often one or two families in the village prospered from hosting tourists and this inevitably altered relationships between villagers. All but one of the eco-tour providers interviewed cited this as a major problem within the mainstream trekking industry. One operator guide explains:

One impact [is that they do] not share [any] income, [tourists] visit everyone but [all the] income goes to one family, [it] impacts everybody [when] tourists [are] talking till one in the morning, smoking or drinking a lot (TO3, interview, 03/05/2003, Mae Hong Son)

Another ecotour operator recounted a story to me about a village in Mae Klong and said it serves as a warning to other villages that wish to operate tourism activities in their communities about some of the unintended consequences of tourism development. According to the tale, there is a tree in the village that glows at night with fireflies. The village headman brought in ecotourists to see the swarms of fireflies around the tree. None of the villagers were involved in the tours except the headman who refused to share any of the income generated from the ecotourists with the community. The rest of the village complained about the noise made by tourists who stayed up late at night singing songs and drinking alcohol until the early hours of the morning. It was disruptive to villagers who would normally go to sleep very early so they could rise before sun up and start their daily routines. Tourists also caused pollution in the village as they left behind bottles, cans, and other forms of garbage. The complaints of the villagers were ignored. In order to deal with the problem, the villagers cut down the tree to discourage tourists from visiting. According to the tour operator, this story

illustrates what can happen when those affected by tourism development are not a part of the tourism decision-making process and not compensated for the activities taking place in their communities (TO2, interview, 03/04/2003, Mae Hong Son)

While trekking tourism in Northern Thailand grew out of visits to hill tribe villages, with alluring images of colourful peoples and unchanging, still pristine cultures, much, if not all, of the decision-making and planning for such tourism was done without consultation with the hill tribes, who ended up without any active involvement in the process (Dearden 1991, Dearden and Harron 1994, Weaver 1998). There are several cases where villagers were not even consulted by trekking guides before bringing tourists to their communities (Kaae and Toftkaer 2001). One trekker, commenting on her visit to a hill tribe village, explains:

I would have liked the villagers to be more involved. You don't have a spokesperson from the villagers. It seems like the villagers are sat [sic] and they don't seem to have any part of it (T3, interview, 01/28/2003, Chiang Mai).

Commodified by the tourism industry, highland minority groups are not treated as real people by the trekking industry, but as a product sold to tourists as part of a package that often includes activities such as rafting and riding elephants.<sup>26</sup>

Hill tribe villages are simply one stop on the itinerary and "tourists are brought to view them as they would any other natural or historical sight" (Cohen 1996: 75).

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<sup>26</sup> Cohen (1996: 16) explains that elephant rides and bamboo rafting were added as features to the treks to supplement the adventure component of the trek and distract from "the declining attractiveness of the tribes and the mountain environment" due to years of state interference, deforestation, increased contact with mainstream Thai society and competition as the number of companies offering jungle treks increased.

This objectification of these highland minority people depersonalizes the encounter for both the tourists and villagers who become objects to gaze at (Urry 1990) and to photograph.

A woman sits lighting the bong, this is how she earns money, nice scene to photograph, hill tribes squatting smoking bamboo water pipes, nice clothes. She lights it every time someone walks up (TO1, interview, 01/17/2003, Chiang Rai).

This brief encounter typically ends with the woman's outstretched palm. More often villagers try to sell souvenirs, weavings, and other trinkets to visitors turning villages into tourist flea markets (TO1, interview, 01/17/2003, Chiang Rai). Tourists, who often report feeling harassed during their brief stay in the villages, also learn very little about the minority highland groups they are visiting. "You don't learn anything about their culture. They don't have time to teach you, they are so busy trying to sell you stuff" (TO1, interview, 01/17/2003, Chiang Rai). Even though it is the idea of experiencing the lifestyles and cultures of these people that attracts tourists to the villages, Wearing and Neil (1999: 73), observe "opportunities for visitors to interact with and experience their cultures and lifestyles are often limited, while the opportunities that are provided for tourists often trivialize or exploit those involved and the communities they represent."

During the overnight village stays on conventional treks, tourists often sit around a campfire, drink alcohol, and listen to the guides tell stories or lead the group in games. One trekker, commenting on nighttime village activities, said:

We played games, almost like it was set up, too set up for me. Like we have a load of tourists lets see if we can make fools of them, very clever. I felt it was a bit put up I think... I kept thinking there were more important things we could be learning. Someone asked what

meat do they [hill tribes] eat? The guide replied chicken, cow, pig...and dog! 'Oh!' from the group, so there was shock value as well (T3, interview, 01/28/2003, Chiang Mai).

This is a common line for guides<sup>27</sup> who usually know very little about the people they are representing. By simply offering up sensational tidbits, they do little to educate tourists about the cultures they are visiting, let alone inform them about the broader issues facing rural communities following the rapid modernization of the country. Their comments serve to shock and excite tourists while instilling a quality of exoticism and remoteness to the highland minority populations. Cohen (1996) refers to this as communicative staging, a strategy used by guides to shape the perceptions of the highland minorities and hence the experiences of the tourists.<sup>28</sup>

Although many of these treks are also billed as jungle tours, the jungle or forest has a minor role in the trekking tour; it is something you just hike through (Cohen 1996). Guides do not instruct tourists about village ecology. There is no explanation of the various uses of the forest or its products by villagers, nor any interpretation of the flora or fauna of an area. Tourists regularly leave behind their garbage and do not pack out what they pack in.

Trekking tourism in Northern Thailand since the 1970s has proven to be a profitable business for trekking and tour operators. As there is little or no participation by the communities in these processes and activities, few of the benefits have trickled down to the villagers. Conversely, they put up with routine

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<sup>27</sup> For a more in-depth analysis on the role of guides see Cohen (1996).

<sup>28</sup> Cohen (1996: 17) further comments that "while the less experienced trekkers, or those who are less eager for authenticity, may be fairly happy with their encounter with the hill tribes, the more experienced or authenticity-seeking tourists are ever more repulsed by the gap between image and reality and by the routinized character of contemporary hill tribe tours."

late-night disturbances as tourists drink, sing, and play games around a fire. Villagers also suffer from pollution as tourists urinate and defecate in inappropriate places in their villages, fields, and forest. Tourists often damage the local ecology as they trample on and pick vegetation. Competition between villagers to host tourists and to sell souvenirs to them has proven disruptive to internal social relations, particularly when only one or two families prosper. Highland minority communities further suffer from the continued degradation of their culture and lifestyles through derogatory representations of them made by guides, who refer to them as primitive and uncivilized. This arrangement is also unfair to tourists who, infantilized through games and entertainment, learn little about the peoples and natural environment of the areas they are visiting.

To take advantage of a growing market composed of ecotourists who were interested in an alternative, educative encounter with highland minority communities, a number of local NGOs operating in Northern Thailand have adopted community-based ecotourism projects as part of their broader development and sustainable natural resource management strategies. The Project for Recovery of Life and Culture (PRLC), Responsible Ecological Social Tours Project (REST) and the Population and Community Development Association are NGOs that have established alternative tourism models by working closely with villagers to develop and implement sustainable tourism in their communities.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> There are a handful of NGOs in Northern Thailand that have incorporated ecotourism into their development and natural resource management strategies. Other than those mentioned, Natural Focus and DAPA Tours operating in Chiang Rai deserve mention.

## Ban Huay Hee

The Karen<sup>30</sup> village of Huay Hee<sup>31</sup> is located in the province of Mae Hong Son, 26 kilometres southwest of the city of Mae Hong Son, in Doi Pui National Park. The village has been in its location for 172 years and is comprised of 25 households with a population of 196. All of the families in Huay Hee (see Fig. 3)



**Figure 3: Ban Huay Hee**

are Christian except one, and the church plays a central role in the life of the community.<sup>32</sup> The villagers grow upland mountain rice through a process of shifting cultivation on a seven-to-ten year cycle, allowing the land to lay fallow for long periods of time between cultivation. This rotational cycle has been

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<sup>30</sup> The term Karen, developed by outsiders, is used to describe peoples with “several different but related cultural and language group with distinct identities” (Hayami and Darlington 2000: 138). The major sub-groups of Karen include the Sgaw, Pwo, Pa-O, Kayah, Padong, and Kayaw (Schliesinger 2000). For more information on the Karen see (Hayami and Darlington 2000: 138), Lewis and Lewis (1984), and Schliesinger (2000).

<sup>31</sup> Huay Hee is also often spelled ‘Huai Hee’

<sup>32</sup> From the Responsible Ecological Social Tours Project brochure on Ban Huay Hee.

shortened to five to seven years due to a reduction in the land available for use by the community and encouragement by outside authorities (H3, interview, 02/04/2003, Mae Hong Son). The villagers also grow vegetables, collect forest products and raise poultry and pigs.

There are many cultural and natural attractions that draw tourists to the area, which is known for its beautiful mountain setting, high biodiversity, and the wild orchids that grow throughout the park. As the village is located off of a main road that takes tourists through the park and back to the city of Chiang Mai, tourism was prevalent in the community long before a community-based tourism project was established. The villagers were concerned that the tourists coming through were destroying the natural environment often picking the wild orchids that grew in the cool mountain setting. The villagers had no means of communicating with the tourists and wished to share information with them in regards to the local forest and cultures they were observing and in some instances destroying. This, along with the possibility of wider community benefits, provided incentive to undertake a community-based ecotourism project in the village.

The community-based tourism project in Ban Huay Hee (see Fig. 4) has been in operation for nearly five years and was started by the Responsible Ecological Social Tours Project (REST) and the Project for Recovery of Life and Culture (PRLC), an NGO operating in the Pai area in the province of Mae Hong Son. PRLC is part of the North Net Foundation, a network of community-based development organizations working in Thailand's five Northern provinces. Its aims are to "improve environmental sustainability and quality of life of the people



in Mae Hong Son” by engaging in projects that help to strengthen local communities and foster networking between them, increase the participation of villagers in the management of local natural resources and encourage self-reliance. REST is a grassroots Thai NGO that promotes community-based tourism as a strategy to raise public awareness about local community efforts to achieve environmental conservation and sustainable development and promote cross-cultural experiences and understanding between tourists, rural and urban Thais and other rural community groups.<sup>33</sup>



Figure 4: Village and activities map in tourism centre in Ban Huay Hee.

Activities that ecotourists undertake in Huay Hee include a variety of natural and cultural attractions depending on the type of excursion chosen by the ecotourists. Upon arrival in the village, tourists are taken to the tourist centre, which has a large painted map of the village and surrounding forest, mountain,

<sup>33</sup> This information was taken from Meeting Conclusions, Southeast Asia Regional Meeting (2002: 2). For more information on REST see <http://www.rest.or.th/default.asp>

and agricultural areas so they can acquaint themselves with their new surroundings. It is in this centre that tourists are introduced to their hosts and begin to learn about the local culture and lifestyle of the Karen people (see Fig. 5).



**Figure 5: Villager explains Karen swidden agricultural practices to ecotourists.**

As part of the village tours, ecotourists are taken to the agricultural areas and shown where and how the Karen practice their traditional rotational swidden agriculture that allows them to grow mountain rice and more than 30 kinds of vegetables while ensuring a full natural recovery between uses. Ecotourists are taken on a trek up Doi Pui Mountain and introduced to the natural environment surrounding the village. They are provided with information on the different

kinds of forest environments they trek through, the flora and fauna such as the wild orchids that grow in the area, and the various medicinal uses and herbal properties of forest products gathered by the villagers. Traditional weaving, rice pounding, Karen architecture, food, song, dance, and daily life activities are just a few of the activities that are shared with the ecotourists who then spend a night with a host family in the village (see Fig. 6).



**Figure 6: Weaving in Ban Huay Hee.**

All families in Ban Huay Hee have a member in the ecotourism club and all host ecotourists. Hosting is done on a queuing system so that everyone shares equally in the income generated through this activity. Of the money generated from the ecotours 80% of the income from hosting stays with the family, 15% goes to the ecotourism club, and the remaining five per cent goes into a community development fund (TO2, interview, 03/04/2003, Mae Hong Son).

Several committees have been set up to manage tourism in the community including finance, security and public relations.

Ban Huay Hee is a well-known ecotourism project in Thailand. Hailed as a success, it has attracted the interest of other community and NGO groups who wish to add these types of activities to their missions and strategies.

JorKoe Ecotreks, a non-profit trekking and tour co-operative, was established in conjunction with the PRLC to promote its community-based ecotourism projects, such as the one operating in Ban Huay Hee. JorKoe means “traveller with a long vision” (Project for Recovery of Life and Culture, no date) in the Karen language and expresses their aim of fostering long-term sustainable tourism activities. JorKoe Ecotreks came under the policies of the PRLC in its first year but has since been handed over to its shareholders. Of the 200 shares that make up the cooperative, 101 are reserved for the communities who participate in the ecotourism projects while 99 shares have been allocated to guides and other interested individuals (TO2, interview, 03/04/2003, Mae Hong Son and TO3, interview, 03/05/2003, Mae Hong Son). One community which has purchased shares in JorKoe Ecotreks is Ban Mae Lana, a village which also hosts its ecotourists.

### **Ban Mae Lana**

The village of Ban Mae Lana is a Shan, or Tai Yai, village located in the north of the province of Mae Hong Son, roughly 13 kilometres from the Burmese border. The Shan, or Tai Yai, are not a hill tribe group, but are ethnically related to the Tai Mao (Schliesinger 2001) and migrated to the area from the Shan State

in Burma.<sup>34</sup> Surrounded by mountains, the village of Mae Lana rests in the bottom of a valley (see Fig. 7) and is close to two Black Lahu<sup>35</sup> villages, Ban Bokrai, and Ban Jabo. The area surrounding the village is home to several caves, the most notable of these being Mae Lana cave, the longest cave in Southeast Asia. While the caves were never an important part of Shan or Lahu culture, they do represent one of the major tourist attractions in the area and draw tourists into the villages.<sup>36</sup>



**Figure 7: Agricultural lands in Ban Mae Lana.**

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<sup>34</sup> Schliesinger (2001: 144) comments, “the ancient homeland of the Tai Yai is Muang Mao...from Muang Mao several migrating Tai Mao groups spread out to occupy the area between the Salween and the Mekong rivers, established a number of principalities and became the dominant rulers of the western part of the Shan states.” For more information on the Tai Yai see Lewis and Lewis (1984) and Milne (1910).

<sup>35</sup> The Black Lahu, or Lahu Na, are a subgroup of the Lahu, which also includes, Red Lahu (Lahu Nyi), Yellow Lahu (Lahu Shi), White Lahu (Lahu Hpu) and Lahu Shehle (Schliesinger 2000). For more information on the Lahu see Schliesinger (2000) and Walker (1983).

<sup>36</sup> A dispute has arisen over the caves located in and around Ban Mae Lana, Bokrai and Jabo. Some individuals insist that tourists should be led through the caves by experts only and not local village guides as they typically do not understand the geological sensitivity of the area and may inadvertently allow tourists to destroy the caves as they venture in and through them. Furthermore, the fire and smoke from torches carried in to light the tourists’ way will cause damage over time. A further concern surrounds whether the run-off and manure from pig farming is also damaging the caves.

There are approximately 135 families in the village of Mae Lana with a population of more than 1,000. The village land covers more than 3,000 rai or approximately 1,600 square meters and includes the surrounding agricultural areas.<sup>37</sup> While the villagers all have title to their lands, the area surrounding the village is under the auspices of the Thai government as a protected forest, so their utilization of it is limited. The villagers raise pigs, and grow rice, corn and a number of vegetables. They hunt and forage for products in the forest from which they draw many of their traditional medicines. Ban Mae Lana is a Buddhist community and a large temple sits near the entrance to the village, with the houses spread out on either side. The village still has a traditional practicing shaman or medicine man. There is an elementary school in the village, which also accommodates children from outside the community.

The Shan group I interviewed maintained that they were traditionally nomadic<sup>38</sup> and built their houses out of bamboo and wood to last roughly four to five years (see Fig. 8). They suggested that they moved due to infertile agricultural lands and always built their villages near a river. They now build their houses out of concrete as permanent residences, although some of the bamboo dwellings still exist within the village. During the village tour, ecotourists are taken to both types of dwellings.

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<sup>37</sup> This information was taken from a presentation during an ecotrek, January 11-12, 2003.

<sup>38</sup> According to Schliesinger (2001) the Shan (Tai Yai) are not nomadic people but rather live in small, permanent and well-maintained villages. This is in contrast to the village presentation where the community representatives explained that they were traditionally nomadic people.



**Figure 8: Traditional Shan bamboo house.**

The activities open to tourists in Ban Mae Lana include an introduction to Shan way of life and a tour of the village (see Fig. 9) and its agricultural areas, a visit with the shaman, an herbal sauna, a tour of the temple, introductions to flora and fauna of the region, and an explication of the uses of non-chemical fertilizers made in the community. Visitors are also often taken to see local caves and the wild orchids that grow in the forest surrounding the village.



**Figure 9: Villager demonstrates how traditional rice crackers are made.**

The community-based ecotourism project has been running in Ban Mae Lana for approximately three years and the enthusiasm and excitement of the villagers involved is still obvious. Not all villagers in Ban Mae Lana participate in tourism activities, and this may prove to cause some disputes between villagers down the road as tourism becomes more developed and certain families prosper with its growth.

### **Ban Lorcha – An Akha Village**

The Population and Community Development Association (PDA) is one of the largest NGOs in Thailand, with seventeen branches throughout the country, including the northern city of Chiang Rai (Population and Community Development Association 2001). The initial activities of the organization centred around the promotion of family planning and contraception.<sup>39</sup> Elaborating on this, it has since diversified its activities to include broader community development goals including provision of some health care services, job training, relief supplies, and some basic infrastructural facilities such as water systems for villagers. As a big segment of Thailand's hill tribe population resides in the province, Chiang Rai is the only one that has a large program specifically for hill tribes. The PDA operates the Hill Tribe Museum and Education Centre where tourists are given an introduction to the hill tribe populations and offered extensive information about their arrival in Thailand, the architecture of their homes, their cultural traditions, farming practices, including opium production,

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<sup>39</sup> PDA is most popularly known by their *Cabbages and Condoms* restaurants and campaign slogans.



and their more recent encounters with mainstream Thai society and government agencies.

In the late 1990s, the director of PDA Chiang Rai, Dr. Songnam Ritwana, saw the need to integrate tourism into its broader community development strategies and “support the preservation of cultural islands” (Population and Community Development Association 2001). After developing an alternative tourism model for hill tribe communities, the PDA looked for villages to undertake the project based on accessibility, the potential volume of traffic, the potential of the village to attract tourists, and the willingness and readiness of villagers to participate in an ecotourism project. As Ban Lorcha (see Fig. 10) already received many tourists and fit the rest of the initial criteria, it was chosen to undertake the project.

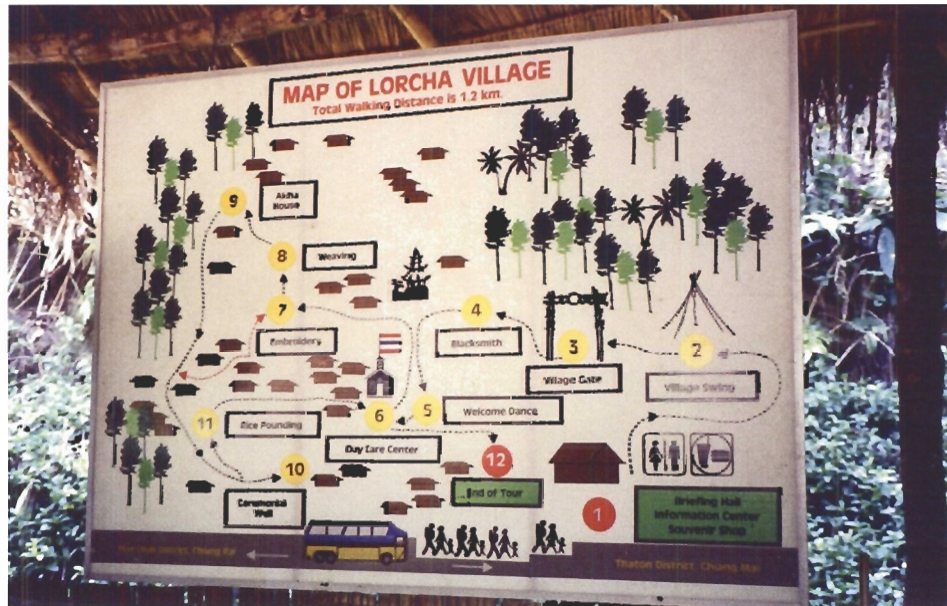


Figure 10: Map of Ban Lorcha in the visitor’s welcome centre.

The PDA conducted several meetings with the villagers regarding the potential of having a community-based ecotourism project in their community. At every stage the villagers played a major role in developing the project, deciding how to share the benefits from tourism and assigning tasks to those involved in working with the tourists (TO1, interview, 01/17/2003, Chiang Rai).

In the Akha<sup>40</sup> village of Lorcha there is a pool of thirty-six villagers who share the duties associated with tourism (TO1, interview, 01/17/2003, Chiang Rai). Eight persons go on duty in any one day and can only work a certain number of days in a row. No more than one family member can participate in the tourism activities. At the end of the year the profits are distributed to members of the community including orphans and those who have no other means of earning an income. The entrance fee to the village is 40 Baht, roughly \$1 U.S., which entitles tourists to walk through the village accompanied by one of the village hosts. The village tour starts with tourists observing a welcome dance (see Fig. 11) performed by village members before they move on to look at blacksmithing, weaving, rice pounding, embroidery, the Akha swing,<sup>41</sup> a ceremonial well, traditional Akha games, and other aspects of Akha life that generally remain hidden from the tourists' gaze. At all of these well demarcated tourist stops, there are poster boards offering explanations to tourists in both

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<sup>40</sup> Several scholars cite China as the original homeland of the Akha, who today live in southwest China, Burma, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand (Kammerer 2000: 37). There are four sub-groups of Akha, the U-Lo, Loimi, Phami and Puli (Schliesinger 2000: 176). For more information on the Akha see Alting Von Geusau (1983), Goodman (1996) and Schliesinger (2000).

<sup>41</sup> The Swing Festival, held in the month of August or September and last four days, plays an important role in the ritual life of the Akha (Goodman 1996, Schliesinger 2000). It is also referred to Women's New Year (Goodman 1996) and the festival marks the entrance of the women in to maidenhood (Schliesinger 2000). Although the origins of the Swing festival are unknown to most Akha, it remains one of the most important rituals in Akha life, see Goodman (1996) and Schliesinger (2000).

Thai and English. It is a more personalized educative encounter designed to make the tourists feel more like guests as they walk through the village.



**Figure 11: Villagers perform a welcome dance for tourists.**

PDA provided villagers with initial training in bookkeeping and accounting and loaned funds to the village so they could improve some of their physical infrastructure such as toilet facilities and build graded trails to better accommodate the tourists.

## **Perceptions of Tourism Before and After CBET**

The main principles of ecotourism call for the benefits from tourism to rest mainly in the hands of the communities in which tourist activities take place and that the community has a major role in the planning and implementation of tourism activities. This is clearly one of the aims of the CBET projects established by the PRLC and the PDA. Ban Mae Lana, Ban Huay Hee, and Ban Lorcha all have direct participation in the processes that bring tourists through their communities and retain the bulk of the funds that are harvested through tourism activities.

The villagers interviewed expressed happiness to have tourists visit prior to implementing the community-based tourism project. The visits allowed some, albeit limited, contact with foreigners, and the villagers could periodically sell goods to the tourists earning them a small amount of income. Some villagers did identify problems that arose with tourist activity in the village. First, in the past the residents would often have to compete with one another to host or guide the tourists, setting the stage for antagonistic relationships between villagers. When a problem did arise regarding tourists, they had no mechanism or support network for sharing and airing their grievances. Tourists were also blamed for damaging the local environment by picking flowers and plants and leaving garbage in and around the village.

Once the projects were established, the villagers unanimously expressed much greater satisfaction with tourism activities in their villages and identified a number of benefits to having undertaken the management and control of tourism. They said that they now have a means of airing and sharing concerns

that arise from the presence of tourists via a forum for exchanging ideas and insights. As they no longer compete with each other for access to the tourists, they feel much more satisfied and comfortable with tourist arrivals in the village. The guidelines established by the ecotour club ensure that a queuing system is in place for host families, who rotate and share the duties related to tourism activities. The guidelines also ensure that host families are receiving a standard amount of revenue from having tourists in their homes. Guiding is also on a queuing system. Most villagers commented that they were excited about the cooperation among villagers that was now taking place in the communities. Part of this knowledge sharing involves understanding the needs and desires of the tourists and how to take care of them. While there are still some tourists who arrive and do not follow the guidelines, most villagers perceived the tourists to be genuinely interested in learning about their way of life.

### **Economic Benefits**

Unlike extractive industries, such as mining or forestry, ecotourism is thought to represent an opportunity to conserve the natural base while using it for economic activities (Honey 1999). It is in this sense that ecotourism is seen to represent the balanced, ideal approach to sustainable development.

All of the villagers who are members of the ecotour club identified tourism as a major source of income. The revenues generated from tourism remain in the community and are not siphoned away by tour operators or trekking guides. A percentage of the revenues generated through ecotourism is placed into a

community development fund that is used to finance the ecotour club and local initiatives including health, education, and conservation efforts.

## **Social and Cultural Benefits**

Numerous social and cultural benefits can be identified from community-based tourism projects. There has been an increase in pride among community members as they have begun to value what tourists come to see. This was one of the most noted social and cultural benefits of community-based ecotourism. One ecotour provider commented that he had witnessed major changes in the attitudes of the villagers who “are no longer ashamed, but proud, to wear their colourful traditional costume” (TO1, interview, 01/17/2003, Chiang Rai). Traditional weaving techniques have been revived in the village of Lorcha, with one elder returning to the loom to help educate tourists about the Akha’s traditional way of life and to show how their dress is made. Weaving has now been picked up by other members in the community who previously showed little interest. Traditional Akha games have also been revived, and the young are now learning many aspects of their own culture that were left by the wayside as the people tried to modernize.

Villagers also noted the importance of the transmission of cultural values to younger members of the community, while taking charge of how they are represented to tourists. By interacting directly with the tourists, the villagers are given the opportunity to speak for themselves, telling their own stories to the tourists. They also noted that they were curious to learn about the lives of the

tourists and the countries they came from. The villagers saw their interactions with the tourists as their interactions with the global community.

Empowerment is understood as a process “through which individuals, households, local groups, communities, regions and nations shape their own lives and the kind of society in which they live” (France 1997c: 149, cited in Scheyvens 2002: 59). The direct participation of villagers in preparing, planning, and executing an ecotourism operation within the village empowers the members by allowing them to develop skills that bring them onto a more level playing field with the dominant Thai population and government officials. With skills and confidence developed through ecotourism ventures, there exists the potential for villagers to go on to employment opportunities in the wider regions in which they live, such as guiding in the national park system. Wearing and Neil (1999: 8) suggest that “ecotourism can also provide local people the opportunity to learn about and use the area and attractions that tourists come to visit.”

## **Networking**

Both ban Huay Hee and Ban Mae Lana form part of a wider network of villages that are being drawn into the trekking loops (see Fig. 12). Ban Huay Hee is surrounded by other Karen villages, Nam Hoo and Huay Goong, and Ban Mae Lana by Black Lahu villages, Jabo, and Bokrai. JorKoe Ecotreks has sought to minimize the damage by tourists and to regulate the number of tourists who enter villages by encouraging surrounding villages in the same area to operate

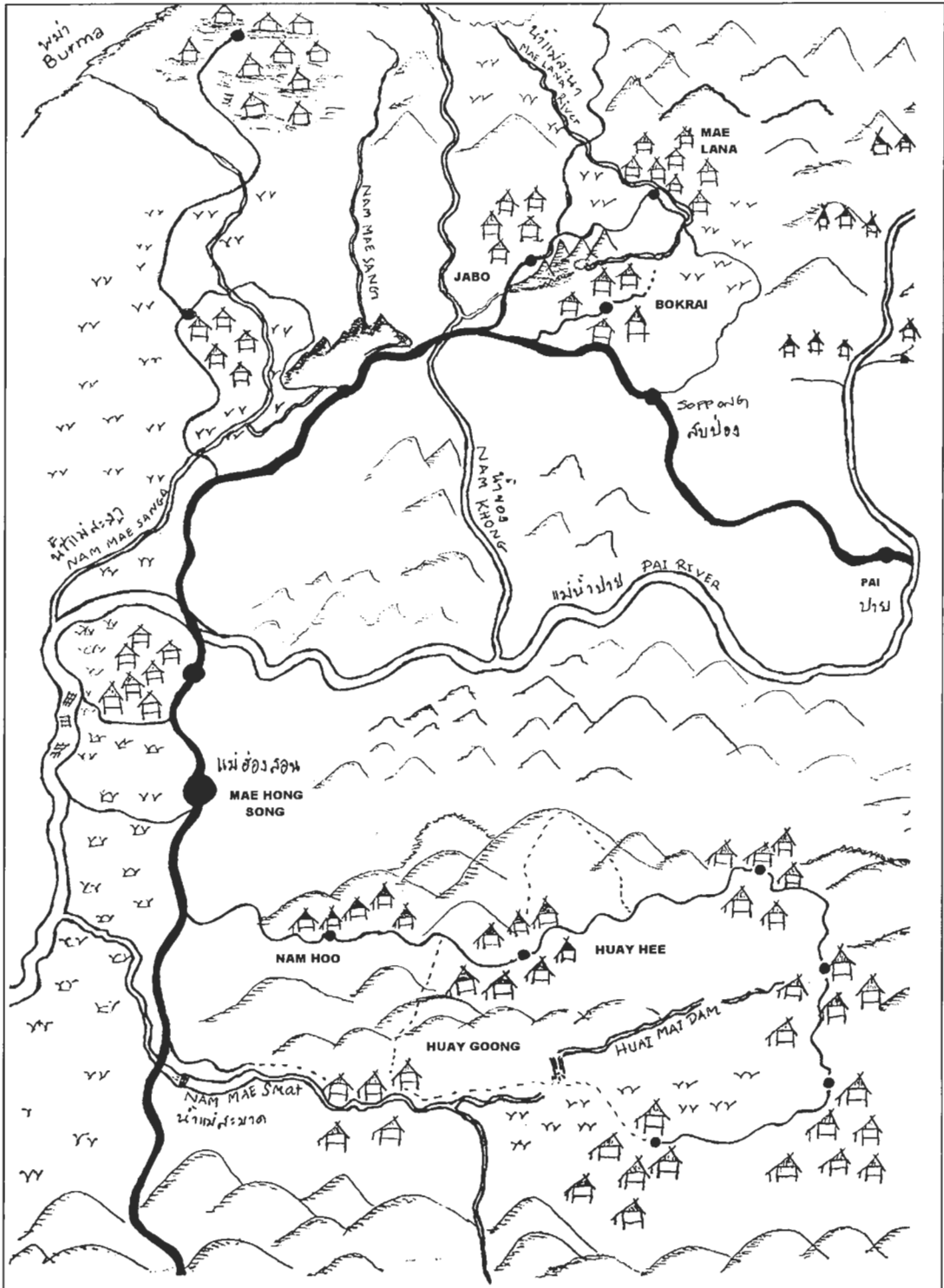


Figure 12: Map showing trekking networks.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Based on Project for Recovery of Life and Culture Brochure (no date).



ecotourism activities. These villages form networks and share the income generated through tourism and trekking activities while spreading out the demands placed on communities by tourists, which otherwise could become centralized in one locale. It also allows the villages visited to maintain their daily operations, such as farming practices, so that they do not abandon their lifestyle but rather add income to it that allows it to grow, develop and change according to the standards set by the villagers. The networks also allow the villagers to make alliances with other communities and villages, which they use to lobby and oppose government decisions that affect these communities.

### **Codes of Ethics and Guidelines**

“As with sustainable tourism, various ecotourism concerns are attempting to pre-empt negative impacts within destinations by formulating and popularizing codes of ethics and guidelines that will provide an appropriate framework for the behaviour of tourists, tour operators and resource managers” (Weaver 1998: 28). The ecotour club members in each community have established their own sets of guidelines that inform tourists on their expected standard of behaviour. These guidelines outline all the costs associated with food, lodging, and guiding while in the village. A number of these signs can be seen in the village (see Fig. 13), usually near the entrance so tourists who simply enter a village on their own and not with a tour or trekking group can choose to work with the community villagers by understanding that a formal tourist structure is in place in that community.



**Figure 13: Guidelines for visitors to Ban Huay Hee.**

## **Potential Problems**

While the ecotour club provides a general framework in which tourism is to take place and a mechanism for monitoring the distribution of tourist revenues within the village, some problems may still arise. It is always possible with this type of activity to simply replace the current power structure with a new controlling elite (Brohman 1996). As Cohen (1984: 387) notes “The specific political consequences of tourism have only received scant attention. It appears that tourism gives rise to new kinds of political interests and leads to a pluralization of local power, new political offices, and new types of leaders who

often compete with traditional leadership”. In the village of Huay Hee, this can be minimized as all families have a representative on the tourism committee. In a village like Ban Mae Lana, however, a small portion of villagers relative to the total population are members of the ecotour club. The redistribution of income within the village, if the principles of ecotourism are met, should trickle down to those who are not directly involved in tourism activities. In the long term, it remains to be seen if this can be done successfully.

What was lacking in the ecotourism projects I surveyed was any sort of dispute resolution mechanism for the communities. While my stay in the villages was much too short to be able to adequately understand and comment on problems that may be underlying the projects, I did get the sense that not everything is as perfect as is being portrayed. I became aware of some disputes arising between villagers over money in Ban Huay Hee, where it was also reported that villagers are concerned over the ongoing loss of the natural fauna, specifically concerning the orchids.

## **Summary**

The projects in Ban Huay Hee, Ban Mae Lana, and Ban Lorcha generally can be seen as successful examples of community-based ecotourism projects. Trekking tourism to hill tribe and other ethnic minority communities is a lucrative industry and all of the revenue generated through the ecotourism activities stays in the villages where tourism takes place: “Instead of leaving behind just footprints they [tourists] leave a few baht as well” (TO1, interview, 01/17/2003, Chiang Rai).

Rather than villagers having to try to get a piece of the pie by aggressively selling handicrafts to the tourists, degrading themselves and often harassing the tourists as they do so, they have been given the opportunity to plan and direct the tourist flows in their communities. In the past, visits to these minority highland villages were not always very pleasant for anyone in the tourism equation. In contrast, tourists now visiting these villages say they feel like they were welcomed into the different communities as opposed to the conventional trekkers who often reported feeling intrusive and like 'voyeurs'. One ecotourist, Tracy, reported being "overwhelmed with knowledge" (ET7, interview, 01/25/2003, Chiang Mai) underscoring that "the involvement of local communities not only benefits the community and the environment but also improves the quality of the tourist experience" (Page and Dowling 200: 67). Finally, no longer are these communities subject to continued degradation through derogatory representations made of them by guides and transmitted to tourists, but are proud to tell their own stories.

As the ecotour projects in these villages mature, they will have much to tell about the success or failure of ecotourism's long-term promises. In the meantime, they represent an opportunity for marginalized communities to contest their position in the wider society and strive for a future of self-determination. However, in the context of a country with a strong Neoliberal orientation and one that continues to pursue an outward-oriented development strategy with heavy emphasis on earnings from the tourism sector, it is unlikely that ecotourism in Northern Thailand will succeed in reshaping the entire Northern trekking industry.

## Chapter 5: Ecotourists

New forms of tourism, often called alternative, emerged not only as part of a backlash against the problems that became associated with mass tourism but also as a result of the post-modern consumption habits of the global flows of tourists from the West. While the modernizing era produced the package tour and the mass tourist, post-modern environmentally conscious societies of the West produce the diversified niche markets and the ecotourist.

Page and Dowling (2002: 30) suggest “ecotourism is not so much a ‘word’ but a philosophy which has evolved from the environmental consciousness of the 1960s to be included in what is now a way of life for many people.” Many ecotourists come from the 30 million Americans who belong to environmental organizations (Honey 1999). Mowforth and Munt (1998, 2003) wonder whether these tourists are merely “trendies on the trail” or “egotourists” out to acquire the social and cultural capital that accompanies this alternative form of travel.

Unlike tourist typologies that have been well established by authors such as Erik Cohen (1996) and Valene Smith (1989), the categorization of ecotourists is still in its infancy. This is due, in part, to the difficulty in determining what does and does not constitute ecotourism and the fact that ecotourism activities are wide ranging. There are, however, some broad generalizations that have been made about ecotourists.

Generally speaking, they are said to be physically active, educated professionals, from thirty-one to fifty years of age (Honey 1999: 65), who are well-traveled individuals seeking small groups and more personalized itineraries with an explicit focus on information and learning (Wearing and Neil 1999: 121). They are interested in the natural environment in its own right (Mowforth and Munt 2003, Wearing and Neil 1999) and can afford this more expensive form of travel (Mowforth and Munt 2003). Many of these broad generalizations fit the bulk of the ecotourists I interviewed in Northern Thailand. Of the ecotourists surveyed, all came from the core industrialized nations of the First World, namely the United States, the United Kingdom, and Western Europe, while one ecotourist was Japanese. They were almost equally divided in gender and ranged in age from twenty-two to fifty- three years with roughly half in their twenties. Seventy per cent of respondents cited this as their first ecotourism experience although all were well-travelled individuals. The bulk of the ecotourists also had professional careers.

Even though their basic demographics fit the established generalizations, we must look deeper to find out more about their motivations for choosing ecotourism. What kinds of experiences are they looking for and what did they expect to find on their journeys? What sorts of environmental and cultural baggage did they carry with them when selecting and undertaking their excursions?

## What is Ecotourism?

The ecotourists interviewed in Thailand characterize a wide-ranging spectrum of global green travelers. Some expressed deep environmental concerns, displayed a well-articulated environmental consciousness, and were able to give precise definitions of what they considered ecotourism. Others were new to 'eco' ideas and concepts and were curious to see how they played out within the tourism setting.

Hiroko, a 23-year-old female from Japan, with an extensive travel history, had no idea what ecotourism meant, commenting "I wouldn't be able to come up with eco in Tokyo, I had no idea what kind of trip would be considered eco... so I wanted to see it" (ET5, interview, 12/29/2002, Chiang Mai).<sup>43</sup> She speculated that eco meant "something related to nature, utilizing nature for our living," (ET5, e-mail questionnaire 01/16/2003) but was not entirely sure how this would be put into practice. Sara, similarly, was interested in seeing how ecotourism would play out in the context of community-based tourism. Sara is from the United Kingdom, 28 years old with an M.A. in Human Rights and works for a NGO that deals with refugee issues. She was in Chiang Mai as a participant in an international conference on refugees and said simply that while she was there she "wanted to see people" and learn something about the areas she was visiting, but it was "more about the method of doing that" (ET12, interview, 01/15/2003, Chiang Mai). She chose ecotourism on a recommendation from a friend who works for Tourism Concern, a well-known organization in the United Kingdom

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<sup>43</sup> Again for the purposes of citation, ET refers to Ecotourists, TO to Tour Operators, T to Conventional Trekking Tourists, and H to Hosts. For further information, please refer to Appendix 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10.

promoting sustainable tourism practices. Sara also said that while she was sceptical of ecotourism, its core concepts fit well with her own personal morals and so she wanted to see for herself if it really does work.

Several of the other ecotourists surveyed said that this was not the first time they engaged in ecotourism activities, although there was some confusion around what actually constitutes ecotourism. Jake, a 47-year-old computer consultant with an MBA in information systems from New York City, commented that he had previously been on two other excursions that he would classify as ecotourism. The first of his eco excursions took place in Peru, where he spent “three days in a jungle lodge up the Amazon” on a trip that he describes as “run by a group cooperating with [the] Indian population” (ET1, interview, 02/04/2003, Mae Hong Son). His second ecotour took place in Brazil where he stayed at a lodge in Pantanal, a huge wetland and wildlife area, about which he says simply “I guess it falls under that category,” (ET1, interview, 02/04/2003, Mae Hong Son) although he did not provide any details of the activities he took part in during his ecotour.

This was the first time that Tracy, a 22-year-old student from England, had taken part in what she referred to as organized ecotourism, remarking that she had been “trekking in the Alps four or five times...holidays that I would classify myself as ecotourism” (ET7, interview, 01/25/2003, Chiang Mai). Tracy thought her treks met the basic tenets of ecotourism as “we didn’t do any harm at all, we didn’t interfere with the people” (ET7, interview, 01/25/2003, Chiang Mai). Leslie, a 33-year-old GIS Coordinator from British Columbia, Canada, likewise links her past trekking and hiking experiences to ecotourism. Leslie is



an experienced hiker having completed several treks in Peru and New Zealand before coming to Thailand. She says that these “have occurred in the interest of ecotourism” (ET10, interview, 03/03/2003, Mae Hong Son) but were, like Tracy’s, self-organized. Andy, a 42-year-old IT consultant from England, is also an experienced hiker, although he suggested that this particular trip was the first time he engaged in ecotourism. His expectations of ecotourism were cultivated from his previous trekking experience. He suggests that for a trip to be considered eco “there was the general feeling that you don’t spoil the ecology, that you don’t leave litter, that you don’t tamper with anything, that you just leave your footprint, and so I assumed it would be very much more along those lines” (ET2, interview, 01/20/2003, Chiang Mai). Melanie, a 37-year-old project manager from England, also suggested that this was not the first time that she had engaged in ecotourism. She said that she had previously participated in an Earthwatch expedition and contends that depending on one’s definition this may qualify as ecotourism, although they “make it clear that they are volunteer working expeditions and not holidays” (ET8, e-mail questionnaire, 02/10/2003).

The confusion around what constitutes ecotourism is illustrated in the ecotourists’ statements about their previous travel experience. What lies at the heart of all these excursions is a focus on the natural environment, although the activities undertaken were vastly different. There were questions as to whether self-organized tours qualified as ecotourism, particularly if they otherwise fulfilled the principles of an eco experience. The lack of a precise definition of ecotourism to clearly distinguish this type of travel from other alternative and nature-based travel is part of a lingering problem with the concept (as discussed

in Chapter 3). Although vastly different experiences were all categorized under the umbrella of ecotourism, it was generally perceived by those interviewed as a more responsible form of travel that was less socially, culturally, and environmentally intrusive and destructive for host destinations. Melanie defined her expectations of ecotourism this way:

It would be respectful and not exploitative of the environment (including people) and would successfully balance the competing demands of strangers visiting an area with those of the locale. That (if applicable) money from my trip would go to the people whom we visit. That those people would have a say in how the trip was run (or run it) and it would not merely be voyeurism. That we would be told about the flora and fauna we saw including local folklore and uses (ET8, e-mail questionnaire, 02/10/2003).

Melanie's definition highlights the core elements of ecotourism, that it is nature-based, educational, and sustainable. When asked why she chose ecotourism as a form of travel Melanie replied:

I believe that in order to protect the natural environment and human culture, it is key that we consider our individual impact in all aspects of our lives. This is never more important than when we travel to areas that are under threat and/or hold particular environmental value (ET8, e-mail questionnaire, 02/10/2003).

### **What Products Did They Choose and Why**

As Milne (1998: 43) has argued, "there is still relatively little information on why individuals choose certain types of ecotourism products over others."

Considering the plethora of trekking and tour companies in Chiang Mai offering some kind of eco experience, I asked the ecotourists why it was that they chose the tour operators they did. The philosophy of the company proved to be one of the primary reasons. Other factors included the number of people in the group,

the perceived level of commercialization of the village to be visited, and that the trek would have a low level of cultural and environmental impact. Considerations regarding litter were also cited by a handful of ecotourists as being an important element of their choice. Several of the ecotourists took it upon themselves to carry out any garbage, such as water bottles, that they used during their ecotour.

Amy said that she almost left the area without going on a trek after visiting numerous tour companies and being put off by what they were trying to sell her.

She chose JorKoe Ecotreks because:

The company seemed much more interested in the communities' needs as compared to the other tour operators and less concerned with its own pocketbook. Other tour operators seemed to inflate prices in order to pocket more money (ET11, e-mail questionnaire, 04/15/2003).

Concern for the well-being of the host community was expressed by several ecotourists who suggested they wanted to give something back by paying the people directly for their experiences in the villages or by donating money to a local community project. Leslie, who was traveling with Amy throughout Thailand, echoed a similar concern for the well-being of the host community:

[I] chose to go with this company because they were interested in sustaining the hill tribe communities. After discussing the trek with the organizer, it was clear that not only did the company want to ensure sustainability but also ensure that the people received the majority of the benefits from tourism. i.e. tourism dollars (ET10, interview, 03/03/2003, Mae Hong Son).

For Andy: "It was about a small group going to a village that didn't normally see tourists on a regular basis, that we knew it could be a different type of experience" (ET2, interview, 01/20/2003, Chiang Mai). Almost all of the ecotourists were in search of a more personalized experience, something

alternative to mass tourism, and expressed a desire for small group excursions. This carried certain perceived advantages when it came to visiting a village as it was felt that smaller groups allowed for a greater interaction between hosts and guests with a focus on learning about the peoples and natural environments being visited. Ecotourists were concerned about the noise levels of large groups, both in the villages and as they trekked through the jungle. In the villages, it was hard to hear and understand the information that was being presented to a large group of tourists, while the noise levels of a dozen people walking through the forest would potentially scare away any birds or wild animals that might be spotted.

### **Visiting Highland Villages**

A number of the ecotourists I interviewed were looking for “the direct experience of the place” (ET1, interview, 02/04/2003, Mae Hong Son) and wanted to visit an area that was still ‘untouched’ and ‘authentic’, which meant one that was not commercialized, overrun by tourists and polluted by Western cultural influences. The idea that ecotourism was better able to provide a more authentic experience by getting off the beaten track was expressed by a few ecotourists. Authentic experiences were those that not only took tourists to pristine, remote, and untouched destinations, but also ones that afforded the tourists an opportunity to engage and interact in a meaningful way with their hosts by learning about local culture and natural environments as well as to learn something about the broader issues facing the community rather than offering a mere photo opportunity in a contrived tourist setting. Jake said he was

interested in trekking to the villages to get “an idea of something alien to most ways of life I’ve seen” (ET1, interview, 02/04/2003, Mae Hong Son). He said he chose ecotourism as it afforded him the opportunity to “go to a place where this kind of thing exists” (ET1, interview, 02/04/2003, Mae Hong Son). Bob “wanted to see how people live, survive, see the communities,” but “didn’t want to go anywhere commercialized, we wanted to see how it was, untouched” (ET4, interview, 12/29/2002, Chiang Mai). These statements by the ecotourists illustrate that authenticity is equated with the traditional, while the inauthentic is represented by the modern, a potentially false dichotomy that has been questioned by authors such as Meethan (2001). Erik Cohen (1996), for example, argues that authenticity is negotiated and relies on a series of value-laden judgments that are made based on the values and perceptions of the tourist while in the tourist setting. Nonetheless, ecotourism has been successful in marketing its products as combining pristine natural environments with exotic peoples still living in their natural setting (McLaren 1998).

Hiroko said she had interests in visiting hill tribe communities as “they still live in the traditional life style” and were “so different from Japan” (ET5, e-mail questionnaire 01/16/2003). She did, however, have some reservations about it. “I didn’t want to join the normal commercialized trekking” (ET5, e-mail questionnaire 01/16/2003). Hiroko talked about how she had seen a documentary on Thailand’s trekking industry, which illustrated the destruction this type of activity can wreak on the villages visited by tourists. The documentary explained that they moved “people from one village to another to set up a tourist village” and “talked about an old lady who just wanted to go home

to her village where she was born and people just told her it changed but no one would tell her why” (ET5, e-mail questionnaire 01/16/2003). Hiroko expressed that she was deeply saddened by this account and did not want to take part in any form of travel that had such drastic consequences for the hosts (ET5, e-mail questionnaire 01/16/2003).

Tracy also said that part of her motivation for taking the ecotour was to see the hill tribe populations, although she too expressed some reservations stating: “I am intrigued and I’m interested in finding out more, but I don’t know about going to see them cause I feel like, cause it’s a bit like I am going to the zoo and staring at people” (ET7, interview, 01/25/2003, Chiang Mai). Melanie, likewise, echoed similar concerns, saying:

I also felt uncomfortable about just going to 'see' hill tribes - this sounds like all that would happen is that a bunch of tourists gawk at people in strange costumes (particularly say for the Padaung people) as opposed to perhaps learn something about their way of life and give them the opportunity to feel proud of their culture (ET8, e-mail questionnaire, 02/10/2003).

The Padaung,<sup>44</sup> or long-neck Karen, are one of the more exotic hill tribe communities living in Northern Thailand. The appearance of the women and young girls, with rings placed around their necks to elongate them, draw thousands of tourists a year. Like many of the other highland minority villages open to tourists, the living conditions of these communities are often degraded, there is little interaction between tourists and hosts, and much of the money from tourism finds its way into business coffers rather than the pockets of villagers.

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<sup>44</sup> Also referred to as Padong or Kayan, see Schliesinger (2000) for more information.

It was partly for this reason that Sara, with knowledge of some of the issues faced by the ethnic minorities in Northern Thailand, admitted that while she wanted to see the people of Thailand, “the hill tribe issue made me more apprehensive” (ET12, interview, 01/15/2003, Chiang Mai). Similarly, Sandy, who had participated in a regular trek to hill tribe villages before taking part in the ecotour, reported some anxiety at the fact that she would again be visiting hill tribe communities:

I was a bit put off from the first trek, five hill tribes in one day, I felt quite distressed about it. I wish we hadn't been to the villages, it was rubbish, didn't feel like we should be there (ET6, interview, 01/20/2003, Chiang Mai).

Sandy further commented that rather than learning about the natural and cultural environments of the trekking areas she visited, “the first guide just kept entertaining us really” (ET6, interview, 01/20/2003, Chiang Mai). Several of the ecotourists placed a high value on the educative aspects of ecotourism and expressed a desire for meaningful interaction with the communities with a focus on learning about the host culture, customs and lifestyle without causing disruption to daily village routines. Explicit knowledge of the natural surroundings, the flora and fauna of the region was expected in order to understand the life-worlds of the villagers. Several of the ecotourists noted that they felt they were more likely to have positive, interactive and educative experience by participating in ecotourism than through conventional tourist encounters.

## Were Their Expectations Met?

All of the ecotourists surveyed were generally satisfied with their ecotours or treks, with Andy proclaiming that he was “absolutely privileged to see what we’ve seen” (ET2, interview, 01/20/2003, Chiang Mai). Sandy reported that she was “quite satisfied we had low impact on the place” (ET6, interview, 01/20/2003, Chiang Mai). Sara, who initially was sceptical about the practice of ecotourism, commented:

All the hang ups, baggage, about the rich Western tourist, the way I over-intellectualized melted away during the chat over lunch and I could just enjoy being with them for two days. It wasn’t just wanting to see how they lived, it was nice just spending time with them for two days. (ET12, interview, 01/15/2003, Chiang Mai)

There was only one ecotourist, Leslie, who reported some unease regarding her experience. She explains, “on some levels, the idea of having villagers cater to Westerners was expressed within debriefing of the trek. This idea was not only the opposite to my expectations, but also distasteful” (ET10, interview, 03/03/2003, Mae Hong Son). In this particular instance, the trek was part of a pilot tour to two villages that were initiating ecotourism activities and linking up with an already established ecotourism village to form a wider regional trekking network. Upon completion of the three-day trek, a debriefing took place to help the villagers evaluate the pilot tour and plan for future engagements with ecotourists. Assembled in the room were village representatives from three villages,<sup>45</sup> and all of the participants in the pilot tour that included a handful of journalists, representatives from the Tourism Authority of Thailand, the

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<sup>45</sup> This pilot tour took place in the communities of Ban Mae Lana, a Shan village, Ban Bokrai, and Ban Jabo, Black Lahu villages, in the province of Mae Hong Son.



ecotourists, NGO workers from the area, and tour company staff. When villagers asked what they could do to improve their tours, a recommendation from the floor suggested they cater to perceived Western tastes, particularly in the area of cuisine, by offering meals that were not common to village communities but that may be more palatable to Western taste buds. This prompted heated debate among the ecotourists who, like Leslie, were vociferous in their dismay at this suggestion and others like it. As Helleiner (1997, cited in Page and Dowling 2002: 29) argued: "Operations are often tempted to maximize the comfort level of the ecotourists at the expense of the element of adventure". Ecotourists responded by commenting that they wished to have the villages function as normal, cook and eat their traditional foods and maintain their daily routines. This was part of the genuine and authentic village experience ecotourists were seeking and was more important than their comfort levels.

While there was general satisfaction among the ecotourists I interviewed, many did report on things that they would have liked to do or learn during their excursions. Ecotourists want a lot of information on the people and areas they visit and those ecotourists I interviewed were no exception. Leslie said she would have liked to have been more involved in daily tasks of her host family, such as helping them cook and take care of livestock (ET10, interview, 03/03/2003, Mae Hong Son). Andy suggested he would have liked to spend more time in the local school, although he noted: "Well, if you spend too long with them then you're changing, spoiling what you have actually come to see, you're changing people, distracting people...you wanted them to get on with their lives" (ET2, interview, 01/20/2003, Chiang Mai). Sara noted that she "would have liked to tour the

temple [but] wasn't sure if it would be too intrusive" (ET12, interview, 01/15/2003, Chiang Mai). According to Sara, her ecotour "was un-staged so they picked out what they thought was important to show us, fertilizer, rice crackers, the rest was people inviting us in" (ET12, interview, 01/15/2003, Chiang Mai). During the village tour, a number of villagers who were not participating in the villages' ecotourism operations, as well as many villagers who were members of the eco-club, invited tourists into their homes in order to have an opportunity to meet the tourists and share their views on the natural and cultural environments of the community. They often asked questions to the ecotourists about their lives at home.

Amy, like several other ecotourists expressed a desire to have "more opportunities to ask questions back and forth with translators" (ET11, e-mail questionnaire 04/15/2003). This was a common response with several ecotourists suggesting that the most frustrating aspect of their journeys was the inability to communicate effectively with their hosts. During Tracy's ecotour, in the village of Ban Mae Lana, there were several opportunities for the ecotourists to engage in direct conversation and cultural exchange with their hosts. Upon their arrival in the village, the ecotourists assembled in one of the host's houses to meet their host families and members of the community's eco-club while having lunch. During this initial meeting, the ecotourists were given some basic information on the village they would be staying in, its population, the geographical and natural landscapes that shaped the village and information on the community's religious background. The ecotourists were also given an

outline of what kinds of activities they would be undertaking during their stay in the village.

The second opportunity for open discussion came in the evening following the village tour. This was an opportunity for all parties involved in the trek to sit down together and debrief after a day of touring through the village and surrounding fields and forests. This allowed all the ecotourists to ask questions of their hosts about the day's activities and satiate their desire for knowledge about the community and its people. Having this type of open forum also proved to be an important avenue for the host community to share information regarding their ways of life, their struggles with the government over natural resource allocation and use, and the desire of the villagers to set up a community forest in order to achieve stewardship and rights over their lands that surround their communities.

Tracy reported being very impressed with her guide, noting that although he gave background information on Northern Thailand and some basic information on the ethnic group that was going to be visited by the ecotourists, once they arrived in the village his role simply became that of an interpreter (ET7, interview, 01/25/2003, Chiang Mai). This allowed the villagers to lead the ecotourists through their own community both showing and telling them about those aspects of their life that they felt were important to share. Tracy commented that after the ecotour "[I felt] completely overwhelmed with everything that I experienced. More than I expected" (ET7, interview, 01/25/2003, Chiang Mai).

Mona, a lecturer in Anthropology and Psychology in England, had also attended the conference on refugees. She commented that, based on this experience, her perceptions of community-based tourism were “quite positive” (ET13, interview, 01/12/2003, Mae Hong Son). She also said that ecotourists generally are “people interested in understanding culture, interesting people [go on these treks and ask] interesting questions” (ET13, interview, 01/12/2003, Mae Hong Son). For Mona “this information was very useful” (ET13, interview, 01/12/2003, Mae Hong Son) and helped her to gain greater firsthand insight into the problems faced by the highland minorities with their increasing integration into both the Thai state and the global economy.

### **What Impact Did Their Experiences Have on Them?**

There is relatively little literature that assesses the impact of ecotourism on the tourists who participate in this kind of travel (Stronza 2001).<sup>46</sup> Haenn (1994, cited in Page and Dowling 2002: 30) suggests that: “Ecotourism does not change tourists but has merely allowed them to maintain different expectations while travelling.” While this is perhaps true for those environmentally conscious ecotourists, ecotourism feeds off the wider tourism industry and, as such, a number of soft ecotourists who are new to its philosophy often undertakes its activities. Hiroko, having grown up in Tokyo, said that during her trek she often felt lost in nature, unsure of what to do or how to appreciate it, how to use it for her daily living (ET5, e-mail questionnaire 01/16/2003). Blamey (2001: 10) explains:

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<sup>46</sup> The timeline for this research did not permit an in-depth and long-term impact assessment but rather immediate, post tour reflections and reactions.

Ecotourism affords tourists the opportunity to engage with and learn about the natural environment in ways that may not be possible in their everyday lives and as such has the potential to turn them into individuals deeply concerned and connected to environmental issues and concerns.

This proved true for Hiroko, who displayed the greatest transformation after the ecotour. She explains:

After the trip, I came to think that we have to respect and coexist with nature, both preserving and utilizing it in the way we don't destroy, sustainable nature-human relationship. I will join some environmental NGO! Joining demonstrations, read newsletter and broaden my knowledge at first to get to know what I can do... I've been trying to open up my eyes to the nature and environment issues cause I think my sense of value has been changed since I had the eco trekking (ET5, e-mail questionnaire 01/16/2003).

While the impact was not so deeply transformative for other ecotourists, Sandy, who is from England, did note that as a result of having taken part in both a conventional trek and an eco one, she would put more thought into tours she chooses in the future: “[It] raised my awareness, I think even when I go home with national parks” (ET6, interview, 01/20/2003, Chiang Mai). This is one of the goals of the educative role of ecotourism, that it will foster increased appreciation and awareness of the natural and cultural environments of tourist areas such that these experiences will cause greater reflection and attention towards sustainable practices in all areas of daily life.

## **Nature and the Environment**

When asked their views of nature and the environment, most ecotourists said that they see human beings as being an interconnected part of nature (see Fig. 14). Many held an ecocentric perspective. Art's view was that “they are both

so interconnected, as are we, to make the distinction arbitrary” (ET3, e-mail questionnaire, 02/07/2003). When ecotourists did draw a distinction between nature and the environment they did so by separating those things that were produced by human beings and those things that were naturally occurring. As Leslie explains:

Environment is anything surrounding you, be it industrialized or rainforest. Nature is more specific to the natural environment. What happens in the environment we don't have control over, although we destroy it. Even in the industrialized environment, the rats would be the natural part, the living creatures, all living things (ET10, interview, 03/03/2003, Mae Hong Son).

She further explained that she distinguished between the two:

Only in an urban setting, in that where I live and work is an environment, however everything wilderness is both nature and environment. Wilderness is what sustains life, therefore it is everyone's living environment, however it is nature that provides that environment (ET10, interview, 03/03/2003, Mae Hong Son).



**Figure 14:** A village guide explains how to get hair dye from a plant in the forest to an ecotourist.

The ecotour highlighted the growing alienation individuals feel from the natural world in many Western societies. Most of the ecotourists I interviewed lived in urban centres, and, thus, nature is not a prominent feature of their everyday lives but is something they have to make a conscious effort to see or experience, usually during weekends. After the ecotour, Andy said: "I realized how cocooned we are from the environment. [I am more] aware of going to the supermarket to buy meat, they kill chickens, pigs, and we prefer to look the other way" (ET2, interview, 01/20/2003, Chiang Mai). Sara likewise commented: "They don't go to the supermarket to get their food, they grow it themselves. It's logical, and I don't mean that in a negative way, it's just an obvious, natural way of being" (ET12, interview, 01/15/2003, Chiang Mai). The ecotourists also perceived the relationship between villagers and the natural environment as being harmonious.

Tracy suggests:

Some people are living in harmony with nature and part of the cycle of life. They are at one with the environment around them and vice versa. The relationship between humans and nature [in Western society] seems to be [to] take and never give back (ET7, interview, 01/25/2003, Chiang Mai).

The image of the primitive living in harmony with the natural environment is part of longstanding myth that underpins notions of modern Western environmentalism. Milton (1996) refers to it as the myth of the primitive ecological wisdom. She explains:

The understanding that non-industrial peoples possess a kind of primitive ecological wisdom is widely held within industrial society (Rayner 1989) and has a prominent place in environmentalist thought. It is part of civilized humanity's image of the noble savage (Peoples and Bailey 1988), part of the romantic tradition which

idealizes the natural, and from which some of the values central to environmentalism are derived....In accordance with the romantic tradition of idealizing the natural, the most ecologically sound ways of living are assumed to be those that conform most closely to what is seen as a natural existence. In turn, the most natural ways of living are assumed to be those that appear to transform the environment the least, that leave it as close as possible to its raw state—hunter-gatherers seen as the archetypal primitive environmentalist (Milton 1996: 109).

There is also the common myth that these non-Western societies are representative of earlier phases of human development. “[It is] also interesting for Westerners to rediscover what was part of our background” (ET13, interview, 01/12/2003, Mae Hong Son). Andy lamented that he “can’t help thinking the way people live in the villages will disappear” (ET2, interview, 01/20/2003, Chiang Mai) while Bob suggested: “You just don’t want it to change” (ET4, interview, 12/29/2002, Chiang Mai). Westerners carry around all sorts of romantic myths and ideas about their history and relationship to the natural environment. The alienation modern individuals feel compels them to look for authentic experiences in societies in other parts of the world (McCannell 1976). The tourist industry capitalizes on this longing by commodifying pristine natural and exotic cultural environments and selling them to ecotourists in the name of ecological conservation and cultural preservation. Meethan (2001: 65) states:

Underpinned by the notion that other cultures need preserving from the onslaught of a totalising modernity and that their authenticity is under threat, such forms of romanticizing nature and the primitive may in fact simply consign the less developed economies to the status of an eco- or cultural theme park for the developed world.

Several of the ecotourists also began to reflect on whether it was ethical to travel to hill tribe communities. Sandy commented “seeing the hill tribes, is it right



really? Makes us question things” (ET6, interview, 01/20/2003, Chiang Mai).

Sara, who was already apprehensive about going to a hill tribe village, said that when she arrived in the village and was told that as an invited guest she would be gaining access to the backstage areas of life, she grew even more apprehensive: “You can see every aspect of [their] daily lives. Do I want to see that? Wow, I don’t want to view every aspect” (ET12, interview, 01/15/2003, Chiang Mai).

Sara said this to some of the other ecotourists in the group during the bus ride back to Mae Hong Son. This provoked conversations among the ecotourists as to whether we would allow tourists to walk around our neighbourhoods and into our homes, our backyards, our schools, temples or churches. The privileges afforded to Western tourists left a bit of an uneasy feeling with some of the ecotourists.

Hiroko was concerned that perhaps the exchange between hosts and guest was a little lop-sided where the guests derived a greater benefit from the experience. She explains:

As for me, since I got to know their life-style, religion and their utilization of nature, which has broadened my mind a lot, it was a great opportunity. But as for them, I am not sure if the contact with us, people from the modern life, was good for them or not...might destroy some traditional ideas? (ET5, e-mail questionnaire 01/16/2003)

Tracy was another participant who was worried about her impact in spreading modernizing values and capitalist wants on the village: “I think it’s a shame we come to visit their villages with our nice rucksacks, shoes and trek clothes and they see us as something they want to be” (ET7, interview, 01/25/2003, Chiang Mai). Tracy said that she was concerned about the spread of Western values and

material lifestyles, that it erodes local culture. Tourism is only one medium through which different localities have been invaded by global peoples, products, and processes. As Andy comments: "Seems like a remote village where I think only one house had a TV. and maybe a radio but you think of it as a remote village and you still pick up the vibe that they know about [English football star] David Beckham" (ET2, interview, 01/20/2003, Chiang Mai). In comparing his way of life with that of his host community, Andy further remarked, "We have far more possessions, why do we need them?" (ET2, interview, 01/20/2003, Chiang Mai). He explained that the ecotour caused him to reflect on and question Western material consumer culture and lifestyles.

## **Summary**

The language of environmentalism is as diversified as the issues and peoples it represents. Ecotourism, as but one manifestation of global transcultural environmental discourse, produces a similarly wide range of ecotourists to populate this burgeoning category of global travellers. You can be light or dark green, a deep or shallow ecologist, ecocentric, anthropocentric, technocentric, conservationist, preservationist, and the list goes on. The ecotourists interviewed in Northern Thailand represent this wide spectrum of green travelers. Some could articulate the philosophical underpinning to their views on the environment while others were new to eco ideas and concepts and were curious to see how these new ideas played out within the tourism industry. Not all ecotourists completely believed outright that they were participating in some form of tourism that was socially, culturally and environmentally sensitive,

but wanted to discover for themselves if ecotourism could live up to its promises. This journey was in part to discover whether the rhetoric surrounding ecotourism was more than just fancy new packaging.

Several authors have argued that a celebration of the small scale and alternative is a continuation of the extension of the commodity system where “the mass markets of Fordism are disaggregated into segments or niches or lifestyle segments” (Meethan 2001: 70). Are they more savvy consumers (McLaren 1998), making ethically sound choices showing real concern for the social, cultural and environment impacts of their vacations? Or are they simply products themselves of the post-modern societies from which they hail taking their environmental activism and ideology with them on their global holidays? Authors such as Mowforth and Munt (1998, 2003) are skeptical about the benefits of alternative tourism and suggest that what is being primarily sustained is the domination of Western ideas and lifestyles.

Nonetheless, an overwhelming majority of the ecotourists that I had contact with expressed genuine concern regarding their impact on the human and natural environments in the areas they visited wishing to make it as negligible as possible. Many said they expected that ecotourism would be carried out in a responsible manner, one that minimized tourism’s negative effects by showing respect for the people and the natural surroundings of the area visited. Janice commented that: “[I] was conscious of my impact on the environment...and wish to minimize any detrimental consequences of my visit” (ET9, e-mail questionnaire, 02/10/2003). As a way of minimizing their own ecological footprints, a few of the ecotourists stated that they expected litter,

usually in the form of water bottles, to be removed from the villages and a few of the tourists took it upon themselves to carry out their own garbage.

Several of the ecotourists interviewed said that they were generally concerned about the commercialization of Thailand's hill tribe communities through trekking activities. Almost all were interested in seeing minority populations, although it was not necessarily the sole reason they had chosen to go to the area. They expressed a desire for smaller groups of ecotourists. This carried certain perceived advantages when it came to visiting a village where the ecotourists felt like guests of the village rather than part of a tourist swarm. Several of the tourists expressed a desire for meaningful interaction with the communities with a focus on learning about the host culture, customs and lifestyle without causing disruption to daily village routines. Explicit knowledge of the natural surroundings, the flora and fauna or the region, was expected in order to understand the life-worlds of the villagers. A small portion of the ecotourists stated that they wished to "put something back" in the form of a donation to a local project or that their tourism dollars would go directly to the hosts. Only one mentioned being interested in whether the community had a say in the process or that the community would run the trek themselves.

As Scheyvens (2002) has noted, when local people actively participate in tourism ventures and tourists show respect for and interest in the natural and cultural environments of the community, the experience can be empowering for locals:

What I was most pleased about was the villagers were so proud to show us around their community, that what they had was special and something they can teach other people about. They were so

welcoming and keen, or proud, to show off their self sufficient community which they, and I, realize is something that everyone can learn from” (ET7, interview, 01/25/2003, Chiang Mai).

All of the ecotourists interviewed were satisfied with their ecotours in Northern Thailand. While the definition of ecotourism was elusive, all of the participants in ecotourism that I interviewed expected to have an experience that was respectful of the people and environment, that focused on learning, and that contributed towards a sustainable future for the community or area they were visiting. Sara, who wanted to see how the concept of ecotourism would be put into practice, after her ecotour, said simply: “JorKoe really have got it right” (ET12, interview, 01/15/2003, Chiang Mai).

## Chapter 6: Conclusions

This thesis set out to explore whether ecotourism, as a project predicated fundamentally on Western environmentalism and the commodification of nature and culture, can ever be closely compatible with local aspirations for community-based development. This chapter summarizes my findings.

I began Chapter Two by exploring Appadurai's theory on the global cultural economy, which suggests that globalization is leading to increased global cultural diversity due a growth in hybrid cultural forms. According to Appadurai (1996), media and migration, through their joint effects on the work of the imagination, are having fundamental impacts on the project of self-making and the construction of everyday lives.

I drew on Appadurai's concept of 'scape' to map out the socially and culturally constructed landscapes through which tourists and hosts perceive and engage in ecotourism. I used these landscapes to identify what kinds of perspectives coloured and shaped expectations regarding the possibilities of what ecotourism has to offer and showed how the tourism industry draws on notions of authenticity to construct the world's minority cultural groups as exotic peoples whose lifestyle can be experienced by tourists.

In Chapter Three, I focused on the historical antecedents of the concept of ecotourism, namely the growth in large-scale travel and the environmental movement, before looking at what is currently the most fashionable of the

alternative tourist trends, ecotourism. The tourism industry was initially promoted as an important tool for economic development and several developing countries were encouraged by global institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to include tourism as part of their overall development strategies. As a 'soft' or non-extractive industry, tourism promised to capitalize on the natural and cultural wealth of destination areas requiring little initial investment. Tourism was championed as a means of diversifying the economy, earning valuable foreign exchange dollars, providing income and employment opportunities that would raise the standards of living of host populations. Contrary to these projections, however, the negative effects of the tourism industry outweighed its promised benefits and several tourist destinations, including Thailand, suffered from many problems including degraded and polluted natural environments, resource depletion, social and cultural decay of tourist areas and the spread of diseases such as AIDS.

The rise of environmentalism called into question decades of development and put pressure on governments and industry alike to adopt cleaner and greener products and processes. The first United Nations Conference on the Environment in 1972 called for a global environmental management strategy to protect the worlds remaining natural resources, while formalizing the linkage between development and environment, where economic development retained a position of priority. The work of the United Nations popularized and promoted the idea of sustainable development, a concept whose rhetorical use has proved more widespread than its practice.

As a result of the criticisms being launched at the tourism industry for its negative social, cultural and environmental impacts on destination areas, and to put into practice the concept of sustainable development, some tour operators began to offer alternative travel experiences that were promoted as respecting the social, cultural and environmental integrity of the tourist destination. Ecotourism is but one of these alternative strategies, and currently the most popular.

While there are several variations in the definition and practice of ecotourism, the three main elements, which represent the essence of the concept, are that it is nature-based, educative and sustainable. Along with these three principles, community-based ecotourism initiatives also aim to ensure that local people are actively involved in all aspects of tourism development, from planning and financial management to directing and guiding ecotourism activities in their communities. It was these principles that were used to evaluate community-based ecotourism operations in Northern Thailand, the case studies of this thesis.

Chapter Four began with a look at Thailand, a country that has experienced some of the highest rates of economic growth in the world in the last 30 years. The success of the country's rapid economic development has been heavily dependent on its tourism sector, the most valuable foreign exchange earner for the country. The tourism industry in the North of Thailand is dependent on its trekking industry, where a visit to one or several hill tribe communities is the centrepiece. The communities visited by tourists have suffered all sorts of negative social, cultural and environmental impacts while receiving only peripheral economic benefits. Although they attract thousands of tourists each year, the hill tribe population and other highland minority



communities continue to receive harsh treatment by the government and are looked down upon by the majority of Thais. The CBET operations I studied during the course of this research aim to build respect for highland communities among the Thai population while restoring a sense of cultural pride in the community members. All of the villagers surveyed reported that since the community-based tourism operations began, local people have taken a renewed interest in their traditions reviving some of their customary games, songs and dances. One reason several villagers gave as to why they wanted to be involved in ecotourism was to preserve some of their cultural traditions and pass them on to the next generation. Hosts definitely were eager and proud to share their cultural traditions and knowledge with ecotourists as they introduced them to their lifestyles and communities. Ecotourism, in this way, also provides an avenue to educate village youth about local cultural practices while providing meaning full employment within the village.

An increase in pride was also a result of a growing sense of empowerment felt by several of the villagers. The ownership and management of tourism operations by the community has also shifted control to the hands of local people who now receive the bulk of the economic benefits. This research shows that when host communities have positive engagements with tourism, the experience can be rewarding for local people. Other villages in Thailand's North are now trying to establish ecotourism operations using the models established in Huay Hee and Mae Lana. In this way, community-based ecotourism is slowly changing the way that trekking activities are carried out in hill tribe villages.

The findings of this research, then, support notions that where local people actively participate in tourism operations the experience of both host and guest is greatly enriched. One of the major differences between regular trekking tourism and community-based ecotourism in Northern Thailand is the participation of local peoples. The level of interaction, education and exchange between the ecotourists and the hosts was far greater than those of the tourists who engaged in regular trekking activities. There proved to be genuine interaction between the ecotourists, hosts and the other members of the community in the CBET operations in a setting that provided ecotourists with the opportunity to learn about the local natural environment and cultural groups they were visiting. The hosts walked the ecotourists around the community while providing explanations of the flora and fauna, farming practices and customary relationships to the land. The hosts also provided interpretation of the cultural environments of the village, from the changing architecture of village houses to how globalization, television and MTV are influencing clothing styles of community members. By contrast, in regular trekking activities, guides, who often know very little about the different hill tribe groups, lead tourists through various villages. Rather than providing information on the peoples and areas being visited, they were reported to be little more than entertainment for the tourists, who learned very little, if anything, about the local forests and its uses or about the lives and struggles of the cultural groups they were visiting.

The ecotours were also successful in imparting some environmental awareness and raising interest and consciousness of environmental issues among tourists. One of the goals of the educative aspect of ecotourism is to learn about

the natural environment and gain an understanding of it such that it inspires individuals to want to conserve it. Hiroko said she had been introduced to new ways of thinking about nature and her role in its conservation by her trekking experience (ET5, e-mail questionnaire 01/16/2003). While she was the only ecotourist who went through a wholesale transformation of consciousness, nearly all of the ecotourists surveyed suggested that the trek they went on had some effects on them. Most were reminded of how much they enjoy nature-based activities, while, for others, ecotourism reaffirmed their beliefs that the natural and cultural resources of our planet are worthy of protection.

An assessment of the community-based ecotourism operations in Northern Thailand, on the basis of the core elements of a nature-based, educative experience that involves the active participation of the hosts and is satisfying for the ecotourists, suggests that the operations studied are successful examples of community-based ecotourism in practice. At the time of the research, however, all of the ecotour projects were relatively new and so it is difficult to predict whether or not they will meet the broader goals of the community and prove to be sustainable in the long term. It is this issue of sustainability, at both the global and the local levels, that makes me question the long-term benefits of embracing ecotourism as an ideal form of low-impact development in practice.

While alternative forms of travel are presented in contrast to conventional or mass tourism, both forms are inextricably intertwined. The wider tourist system is integral to the functioning of alternative tourism. In Northern Thailand, as elsewhere, the infrastructure provided by mass tourism supports the community-based operations. As the trekking and tourism industry in Thailand

continues to attract new tourists who are interested in viewing the planet's few remaining traditional cultural groups, increasing numbers of tourists will be heading into the villages ensuring mounting pressure on the natural environments and resources of the communities. The village of Huay Hee is already seeing the results of its success and growing numbers of tourists are visiting the village each year. This has prompted the expansion of ecotourism in the area to two villages close by. With ecotourism embedded in the wider tourist system from which many of its participants are drawn, it remains to be seen how long communities in some of these remote and natural environments will be able to avoid swarms of tourists, particularly as the industry continues to grow.

As tourism is now the largest industry in the world, I echo the concerns of authors such as Fernandez (1994 cited in Mowforth and Munt 1998) who suggest that through ecotourism and other alternatives, the industry has merely tried to reinvent a new purpose for itself – economic development alongside the conservation of the natural and cultural resources of the planet. This leads to questions about what is actually being sustained through new forms of tourism such as ecotourism. Are we simply sustaining the expansion and growth of tourism development by ensuring a continued supply of global eco and cultural theme parks for the privileged Western traveller (Meethan 2001)? Or does ecotourism represent a genuine departure from other forms of economic exploitation?

On the one hand, Honey (1999) has argued that ecotourism is being praised as giving value to the natural world by providing an economic justification for its conservation. Although ecotourism has emerged over the last

20 years, it is, in fact, not a new concept. The linking of tourism to the environment in the name of conservation efforts was first realized over 100 years ago, most clearly manifest in the development of the national park system in the US (Hall 1998). This makes me sceptical as to whether or not there is anything really new about ecotourism. The conventional tourist system shapes tourists' notions of authenticity and authentic experiences through the construction of the "exotic other" that can be enjoyed and experienced by tourists. Ecotourism relies on these established notions to cater to tourist desires for authenticity by packaging opportunities to view exotic others in their natural setting.

Ecotourism, like the conventional system that supports it, is predicated on the marketing of culture and the natural environment. As was shown in Chapter Three, criticisms of ecotourism are coming from the hosts themselves, who feel that they are still struggling to find their voice in the international ecotourism arena and, rather, reported feeling that their concerns were marginalized in discussions that focused more heavily on the profitability of the tourism industry. Who owns the cultural heritage of the people and communities who are being offered as commodities in the tourism and alternative tourism industries and markets? Cultures are every day being constructed and reconstructed, not only to carve out difference in an increasingly globalized world, and in some cases to resist being culturally devoured by dominant groups both within and beyond the nation, but also to maintain uniqueness and attractiveness to the tourism industry. Are these cultural groups, and their traditions, simply being reified as objects for consumption in the global marketplace? As a main component of ecotourism is affording local peoples the opportunity to represent and speak for

themselves, who, from within the cultural group, decides what cultural components should be shared with tourists? Who, in essence, speaks for these ethnic groups? Ecotourism operators, whether local or global, are taking on the role of cultural broker, socially constructing everyday lives of individuals to sell in the global marketplace alongside natural environments. This leaves me with the feeling that ecotourism offers mostly short-term benefits for the people who undertake ecotourism activities.

Ecotourism is simply one debate in a much larger and ongoing discussion on the nature of sustainable development. Although I am still sceptical as to whether community-based ecotourism, and ecotourism in general, can put into practice all of its principles, I would suggest that if my experiences studying CBET in Northern Thailand are indicative of ecotourism initiatives elsewhere, then this form of alternative travel has much to celebrate. Ecotourism operations are, by definition, unlikely to find large-scale success and fundamentally alter global processes, but, as this research has shown, the greatest impacts of this type of travel are at the local level, in the positive change it can have on the everyday lives of the people who practice it. As such, I would argue that community-based ecotourism is, at the very least, an ideal worth working towards.

## **Appendices**

## **Appendix 1: Ecotourists and Mass Tourists**

I used the following appendix as a template to interview ecotourists and regular trekking tourists:

- 1) Demographics: age, gender, religion, occupation, education
- 2) Travel history
- 3) Is this the first time you have participated in an ecotour?
- 4) Why did you choose this form of travel?
- 5) Why did you choose to go with this company, or to this community?
- 6) What were your expectations of ecotourism?
- 7) Were your expectations met?
- 8) What would you have liked to see or do?
- 9) Were you interested in seeing the hill tribes?
- 10) What did you think of your contact with them?
- 11) What are your views on the human-nature relationship?
- 12) Who or what helped shaped your views on nature?
- 13) What is the role of nature in your everyday life?
- 14) Do you distinguish between nature and the environment?
- 15) How are each defined?
- 16) Are you involved with any environmental groups, issues, causes? What is your involvement?
- 17) How has your ecotour impacted you?
- 18) Has it changed your attitudes towards the hill tribe populations you encountered?
- 19) Has it changed your attitudes towards the environment?
- 20) Will your ecotour change your behaviours towards the environment once you are home? How?



## **Appendix 2: NGO – Tourism Operators Questionnaire**

- 1) What is the location of the village?
- 2) How long has the village been in that location?
- 3) How many households make up the village? What is the population of the village?
- 4) Who owns or controls the land of the village?
- 5) Do the villagers hold citizenship cards?
- 6) What are the traditional uses of the local environment?
- 7) How does the community organize itself spatially vis-à-vis tourism?
- 8) What lands and traditional sites are open to tourists?
- 9) How is the community organized administratively vis-à-vis tourism?
- 10) Who from the community is involved in ecotourism and who is not?
- 11) How are the tourist sites constructed?
- 12) What about the attraction, destination is 'eco'?
- 13) How long has the community been involved in ecotourism?
- 14) What are the incentives/motivations for the community to be involved in ecotourism?
- 15) Do you believe it will help protect culture, the environment? How?
- 16) Who did the community receive support from to run the ecotourism?
- 17) How often do tourists visit the village?
- 18) Was there tourism in the community before the ecotourism project began?
- 19) What was the interaction like between tourists and villagers?
- 20) How did you feel about tourism in the community before the community-based projects?
- 21) Has the level of interaction changed with the ecotourism project?
- 22) How do you feel about tourism in this community now?
- 23) What are your perceptions of the people who consume your tours?
- 24) What do you hope the tourists who visit your community get out of their visit to your community?
- 25) What do you hope to get out of it?
- 26) What do you like about tourism? What do you not like?

### **Appendix 3: Community Questionnaire**

- 1) Are you involved in tourism? In what way?
- 2) Was there tourism in the community before the ecotourism project began?
- 3) What was the interaction like between tourists and villagers?
- 4) How did you feel about tourism in your community at that time?
- 5) Has the level of interaction changed with the ecotourism project?
- 6) How do you feel about tourism in your community now?
- 7) What are your perceptions of the people who participate in your tours?
- 8) What types of things do you want to show tourists?
- 9) What do you hope the tourists who visit your community get out of their visit to your community?
- 10) What do you hope to get out of it?
- 11) What do you like about tourism?
- 12) What do you not like?

## **Appendix 4: Information Sheet for Tourism Operators**

My name is Deena Rubuliak and I am a graduate student in Anthropology from Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada. I am in Northern Thailand doing fieldwork towards my Master's degree on the topic of ecotourism. The working title of my thesis is "Seeing the People Through The Trees: Ecotourism in Northern Thailand". The focus of my research is on the impacts of ecotourism on the tourists who choose it as a form of travel. I am also looking to speak to the providers of ecotours/ecotourism to understand their perspectives and motivations for engaging in this growing phenomenon.

To that end I would like to speak to a few members of your tourism/trekking company as well as get information on what kind of tours are provided, the number of tourists who choose your tours for their treks/sightseeing, and what kind of tours are most popular with your clients. I am also interested in learning about how your company understands the link between ecotourism and sustainable community development.

The hallmark of the anthropological endeavour is participant observation, whereby the researcher or observer actively participates in the events they are studying. I would therefore also like to do one, or a couple, of tours with your company. I believe that this will provide me with a more holistic understanding of the organization, the clients you serve and the communities, if any, you visit.

I understand the sensitivity in working with tourists as well as issues of ethics and confidentiality. As I would like to interview tourists upon completion of a tour, I would only do so once I have informed consent, which stipulates that they understand the nature of my research and give their consent to being interviewed. I would not pressure tourists into interviews and will only talk with those tourists who are interested in talking with me.

If I can offer any further information in regards to my research interests, please do not hesitate to contact me at my e-mail address [dlr@sfu.ca](mailto:dlr@sfu.ca).

Sincerely,  
Deena Rubuliak

MA Candidate  
Sociology and Anthropology  
Simon Fraser University  
Burnaby, BC, Canada  
E-mail: [dlr@sfu.ca](mailto:dlr@sfu.ca)

## **Appendix 5: Informed Consent Form**

I have been asked by Deena Rubuliak to answer questions about my participation in ecotourism as part of her Master's degree studies at Simon Fraser University.

I understand that any information disclosed during the interview will be kept strictly confidential by the interviewer.

I understand I can withdraw at any time.

I understand I can obtain copies of the research.

I have been given contact information for the Senior Supervisor, Dr. Marilyn Gates, and the Department Chair (Acting), Dr. Michael Kenny.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### **Contact Information**

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## Appendix 6: Interviews – Ecotourists

Ecotourist 1(ET 1)	Pseudonym: Jake
<p>Jake is a 47-year-old male from New York, U.S.A. He is a computer consultant and holds an MBA in information systems. His travel history includes trips to Peru, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Brazil, Mexico, Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, Canada, almost every Western European country except Spain. On this trip he was travelling through Thailand, Vietnam and Laos.</p>	
Ecotourist 2 (ET 2)	Pseudonym: Andy
<p>Andy is a 42-year-old IT Consultant from England. Andy says he normally takes three week holidays to far-off places such as Venezuela, Peru, Vietnam, Cambodia, Borneo, Kenya, Tanzania, Morocco, India, China and also enjoys visiting areas close to home.</p>	
Ecotourist 3 (ET 3)	Pseudonym: Art
<p>Art is a 22-year-old male from San Francisco, U.S.A. holding a Bachelor's degree. He has previously travelled in Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Canada, Japan, Thailand, and throughout the contiguous U.S.A.</p>	
Ecotourist 4 (ET 4)	Pseudonym: Rob
<p>Rob is a 53-year-old from England. He is retired from the British Navy. He has travelled to Cuba, Malaysia, Singapore, and Goa in India.</p>	
Ecotourist 5 (ET 5)	Pseudonym: Hiroko
<p>Hiroko is a 23-year-old female from Japan. She holds a Bachelor's degree. Her previous travel experiences include backpacking trips in most of the European countries, Portugal, Spain, France, Switzerland, Germany, Holland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Australia, India, a road trip in the U.S.A. and recently South Korea.</p>	
Ecotourist 6 (ET 6)	Pseudonym: San
<p>Sandy is a 38-year-old nurse from England. She holds a B.Sc. in Nursing. Sandy's travel history includes package tours through southern France, Zimbabwe, Europe, Morocco, UK, India Hong Kong, China and, on this trip she was visiting Thailand.</p>	

Ecotourist 7 (ET 7)	Pseudonym: Tracy
<p>Tracy is a 22-year-old female from England with a Bachelor's degree. Her travel history includes trips all over England, France, Germany, Czech Republic, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Austria, Norway, Holland. She has been trekking in the Alps four or five times and was now spending three months in Thailand.</p>	
Ecotourist 8 (ET 8)	Pseudonym: Melanie
<p>Melanie is a 37-year-old, female from England who currently works as a Project Manager. She generally takes six weeks holiday a year. Over the past few years, Melanie generally splits her vacation time between taking part in Earthwatch Expeditions and taking trips to the U.S.A. (sightseeing but not package). She has also spends her vacation time in European cities such as Paris and Prague.</p>	
Ecotourist 9 (ET 9)	Pseudonym: Janice
<p>Janice is a 39-year-old female from England. She holds an M.Sc. and currently works as an Environmental Consultant. Janice has an extensive travel history with a-round-the-world trip which lasted five months, and included stops in Nepal, Thailand, Cambodia, Bali, Australia, New Zealand, USA and Canada. She has visited friends in South Africa and trekked in Morocco. She has been to most Western European countries, including Iceland.</p>	
Ecotourist 10 (ET 10)	Pseudonym: Leslie
<p>Leslie is a 33-year-old female from British Columbia, Canada who works as a GIS Coordinator. Her travel experience includes spent five weeks travelling in Peru where she completed two treks. She has also spent six weeks travelling in New Zealand where she successfully completed three treks/hikes.</p>	
Ecotourist 11 (ET 11)	Pseudonym: Amy
<p>Amy is a 29-year-old female from the U.S.A. She holds an M.A. and works as a writer/graphic designer. Her travel history includes living in Peru, and traveling with family and friends in China, India, Kenya, Morocco, Europe, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, Mexico, Canada, USA, and now Thailand</p>	
Ecotourist 12 (ET 12)	Pseudonym: Sara
<p>Sara is a 28-year-old female from England. She holds an M.A. in Human Rights and works for an NGO which focuses on domestic U.K. refugee issues. Sara spent one year in Cuba and had been back several times since. She has also travelled to Mexico, Guatemala, Zimbabwe and extensively through Europe.</p>	
Ecotourist 13 (ET 13)	Pseudonym: Mona
<p>Mona is a 39-year-old female from Italy who currently lives in England. She has a Ph.D. in Cross-cultural Psychology and is a lecturer in Psychology and Anthropology.</p>	

## Appendix 7: Interviews Standard Trekking Tours

Tourist 1 (T1)	Pseudonym: Joanna
<p>Joanna is a 29-year-old female from Ireland who works as a pharmacologist in a mental health hospital. This was her first time in Thailand, although she has travelled in Eastern Europe, Poland, Czech Republic Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Austria, France (summer with family, backpacking in the South) and around the U.K.</p>	
Tourist 2 (T2)	Pseudonym: Ron
<p>Ron is a 46-year-old male. Ron is a jewellery retailer from England with two years of military education as a tank crewman and with the cavalry regiment. Ron said he has travelled a little with the army going to Canada, America, Cypress, Ireland. He has also visited Germany, France, Holland, and Kenya for holidays. On this trip he was visiting Thailand.</p>	
Tourist 3 (T3)	Pseudonym: Christine
<p>Christine is a 45-year-old female from the U.K. She is a jewellery retailer and a former manager of the London YMCA. Christine says she started travelling when she was 24 and spent two years in Holland and has also visited , Spain, France, Portugal and Kenya. This was not her first time travelling in Thailand</p>	
Tourist 4 (T4)	Pseudonym: Melissa
<p>Melissa is a 30-year-old female was born in Germany although she is currently living in Dublin, Ireland. While she has traveled in New Zealand, Hong Kong, Europe (both East and West), this is her first time traveling in South East Asia.</p>	

## Appendix 8: Interviews in Ban Huay Hee

Huay Hee 1 (H1) Pseudonym: Isat

Isat is a 27-year-old female who says she hosts tourists about once a month. She thinks that it is good that tourists come to learn about her way of life while allowing her to earn some income from to support her family. She suggested that tourism is better in the community now than it was before when villagers were still very shy and afraid to talk with the tourists. She also stated that tourism is one means that the villagers have of passing down their cultural traditions to the younger members of the community. When villagers show tourists Karen dancing, traditional music or weaving, Isat hopes this will inspire the younger generation to learn about their own past.

Huay Hee 2 (H2) Pseudonym: Wheedee

Wheedee, who is now 33 years old, says she has been involved with tourism for about three years. She says she hosts about twice a month, although there are times when no tourists come to the village. Before the tourism project, Wheedee said she was afraid of the tourists as she was not able to communicate with them and there was no interaction. Now that she understands why tourists are coming to the village and what they are coming to see, she no longer feels intimidated. Having never attended school, Wheedee says she is happy to have tourists come, befriend her, and teach her about the outside world. Tourists sometimes buy weavings and clothes from her and she uses that money to help support her family. When tourists donate to the village, the money goes towards helping villagers pay for medicines and receive medical treatment. Wheedee is happy to have tourists visit her village, to explain her way of life to them while learning a little bit about theirs.

Huay Hee 3 (H3) Pseudonym: Satu

Satu, a 47-year-old male, is a guide in the village and said he has been working with tourists for about five years. He says he hosts tourists about twice a month, although some months it can be three or four times. Before the tourism project, Satu reported not feeling very comfortable with tourists as he could not communicate with them about the culture and lifestyle. Satu explained that the tourism project allowed villagers to take control of tourism in their community and affords all families the opportunity to benefit financially. Satu enjoys showing tourists about his way of life, Karen dancing, chanting, weaving and the Karen system of forest management. Tourism also benefits the community in that it provides an avenue for the elders to teach the younger generation about the traditional Karen way of life.



Huay Hee 4 (H4) Pseudonym: Nomuwa

A 40-year-old female, Nomuwa has been involved in tourism for five years. She says she hosts tourists about four times a year. Before the tourism project, Nomuwa was not sure why tourists came to the village and did not know what they wanted to see or do. The tourism club provided the support needed to learn how to host the tourists and guide them through the village and community areas. Nomuwa would like tourists to learn about the way of life of the Karen people, how they dye cotton, grow food, use herbs and forest products when visiting her village. Nomuwa would like the tourists to teach some of their language to the villagers and hopes they buy some clothes or weavings allowing her to earn a little extra income. While she is still a bit disconcerted that she cannot speak to the tourists, she explains that she gives them a big smile so that they know they are welcome.

Huay Hee 5 (H5) Pseudonym: Ane

Ane is a 36-year-old male who has been involved in tourism for about five years hosting tourists about twice a month. Ane suggests there are two kinds of tourists: those that come and want to study the Karen way of life and those who simply want to come for a visit. Ane enjoys teaching tourists about Karen weaving, herbal medicine, how to take care of the forests and their agricultural plantations. Before the tourism project, Ane explains that tourists would come to the village and ask for food and directions to get to the mountain where they often destroyed or damaged the flora and fauna without learning anything about the culture and way of life of the local inhabitants. The villagers responded by setting up the tourism group to help regulate the tourists activities. Given derogatory representations of the Hill tribe groups, Ane said he wanted tourists to come and learn for themselves about the Karen people and their way of life.

Huay Hee 6 (H6) Pseudonym: Sari

Sari is a 30-year-old male whose brother is a member of the tourism club. His family hosts about three times a year. While he reported being happy when he first saw tourists coming to the village, he thinks it is better now that the villagers are in control of the project. He is happy to exchange his cultural knowledge for a little bit of income.

Huay Hee 7 (H7) Pseudonym SENCHAI

A 36-year-old male, SENCHAI is a guide in his village who hosts about four times a year. SENCHAI explained that because the village is located so close to Doi Pui, tourists visiting the area often left trash behind and damaged the environment so they did not like tourists very much. Since the establishment of the project, the villagers have a number of rules that the tourists are expected to follow and the villagers feel comfortable in enforcing them. Although he still finds it difficult to communicate with the tourists, he is happy that they are coming to visit his community. He believes that tourists will leave his village with good memories of the Karen people.

Huay Hee 8 (H8) Pseudonym: JOILOI

JOILOI is a 40-year-old male who has been working with tourists for about five years. He says he hosts tourists about twice a year. JOILOI said he was always happy to see the tourists coming to his village although he is more comfortable since the community established a tourism project. He wants tourists to come and learn about the Karen way of life noting that the Karen are often depicted as backward and like "animals". He wants tourists to come find out for themselves what the Karen eat, how they manage their fields, their weavings and all other aspects of Karen culture and lifestyle. His only concern was that he still cannot speak to them, but noted that he enjoys giving the tourists a big smile to make them feel welcome.

## Appendix 9: Interviews in Ban Mae Lana

Mae Lana 1 (H9)	Pseudonym: Saksit
<p>Saksit is a 28-year-old male who has completed a high school education. Saksit is one of the guides working in the village and takes ecotourists to see the caves in the area. His family is also a host family.</p>	
Mae Lana 2 (H10)	Pseudonym: Nangma
<p>Nangma is a 52-year-old female and is not a member of the village's ecotour club. She has stated that she would like to be but has not been able to attend the required meetings in order to qualify for membership in the club due to her responsibilities in working in her fields and around the house. She believes that it is good to have tourists visit the community as it provides villagers with an opportunity to sell something to the tourists who visit her village so that they have an opportunity to earn some extra income. She said that she was not entirely sure what it is that draws tourists to her village, or what it is they wish to learn when they come, but that she is generally happy to see them.</p>	
Mae Lana 3 (H11)	Pseudonym: Passan
<p>Passan is a 53-year-old male and is a member of the ecotour club in the village. His family hosts tourists, cooks for them and finds firewood. While he says he is happy to receive tourists in his village, the situation is much better since starting the ecotour club as the village now has guidelines to follow with respect to tourism that keeps villagers from arguing and fighting with each other. Passan wants the tourists to learn about the kinds of foods the villagers eat, their knowledge of the forest and trees in the area and their way of life.</p>	
Mae Lana 4 (H12)	Pseudonym: Deng
<p>Deng is a 30-year-old female who has completed a high school education. Deng is involved in the ecotourism club, she hosts tourists at her home, cooks for them and takes them on village tours. Because of the eco-club, Deng says she has been given instruction and information on how to take care of tourists adding that things are better since the community took control of tourism. The eco-club allows villagers to share their experiences of working and hosting tourists with one another. Deng was interested in showing tourists who visit her village the way of life of the community. She was also interested in learning what life was like for the tourists, and more generally, outside of the village.</p>	

Mae Lana 5 (H13)

Pseudonym: Ancheli

Ancheli is a 30-year-old female who says she is involved in ecotourism in the village and is a homestay family. Ancheli is happy with the ecotourism project in her village, noting that while tourists came to the village before there was little opportunity for villagers to benefit economically from tourism. She was interested in showing her way of life and culture to the tourists, such as weaving, and Tai Yai architecture. She wanted tourists to see boys in the village becoming monks.

Mae Lana 6 (H14)

Pseudonym: Anon

Anon is a 40-year-old female who is not a member of the ecotourism club. While she is not involved in tourism in any direct way, she thinks it is good that tourists come to see her village allowing families like hers to earn some extra income by selling things to tourists. She would like them to see what she grows in her fields and how hard it is. She would like to talk to the tourists and have an opportunity to ask them questions about their home countries.

Mae Lana 7 (H15)

Pseudonym Chun

A 46-year-old male, Chun is not involved in the ecotour club in his village. He had heard a lot about foreigners but rarely saw any, so he was happy to have them visit the village.

Mae Lana 8 (H16)

Pseudonym: Nayee

Nayee is a 27-year-old male and is a member of a family, which belongs to the ecotourism club and provides homestay services to tourists in the village. Nayee reports that he is happy with the ecotourism project as it brought a management plan for tourism to the villagers and allowed the villagers to work together. He is interested in teaching tourists about the way of life of the Tai Yai people and the caves that are near the community.

Mae Lana 9 (H17)

Pseudonym Lawan

Lawan, a 29-year-old female, said her father was the first to join the eco-club and she followed. She is a homestay family in the village and her father acts as a guide. She is happier with tourism in her village since the ecotourism project as it allows some coordination between villagers to host the tourists who can gain some income from these activities. Lawan said she thinks tourism is good as villagers sometimes forget their own cultural traditions. When tourists come to visit the village and learn about their way of life, villagers are encouraged to retain some of their past cultural traditions. This helps villagers educate the children as they hear and learn from the stories being told to tourists.

## Appendix 10: Interviews With Tour Operators and Guides

Tour Operator 1 (TO 1)	Pseudonym: John	Chiang Rai
<p>John is originally from the Philippines and has several years experience living in Thailand and working with the Population and Community Development Association in Chiang Rai where he now makes his home base.</p>		
Tour Operator 2 (TO 2)	Pseudonym: Jan	Mae Hong Son
<p>Jan is a Thai national who studied Anthropology in university. She currently works with JorKoe Ecotreks. Jan coordinates ecotour activities and works with the communities who are involved in the ecotourism projects</p>		
Tour Operator 3 (TO 3)	Pseudonym: Prasad	Mae Hong Son
<p>Prasad works both as a guide and as a tour operator. He had previous experience working in a guesthouse that sold conventional trekking tours. He said he saw first hand the destruction caused by the tourism industry and now works to promote the community-based alternatives.</p>		
Tour Operator 4 (TO 4)	Pseudonym: Jod	Mae Hong Son
<p>Jod is a guide for some of the tour operators who take ecotourists in to some of the highland minority communities. He has a long history of working with several environmental groups and says that he helped initiate many of the community-based projects that are currently in operation in Northern Thailand.</p>		
Tour Operator 5 (TO5)	Pseudonym: Nam	Chiang Mai
<p>Nam currently owns and runs an alternative tour operation in Chiang Mai. She has several years of experience working with ecotourists and offers a variety of tours, from trekking expeditions to bird watching jungle tours. Nam suggests that several of the conventional trekking outfits operating out of Chiang Mai mislead tourists as to where they are being taken in order to sell tours. Many of Nam's clients are people who are interested in the natural environment. While she acknowledges that all forms of tourism have an impact on the environment, her goal is to minimize the impact on the natural and cultural environments of the areas where she takes clients</p>		

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