Ecotourism in mainland Southeast Asia: Theory and practice

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Abstracts

Ecotourism has experienced rapid growth because of global concerns regarding sustainability. However, significant differences are observed between the theory and practice of ecotourism management, especially in Southeast Asian countries. This study reviews the management of ecotourism in five countries (Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) by comparing the theoretical definition with the practical operations in each country. The goal of this study is to investigate the cause of the gap between the theoretical definition and the practical operation of ecotourism. This study also addresses critical issues regarding national ecotourism policy and the practical implementation of ecotourism-based products in each country. This study would be of interest to national policymakers and researchers to study, plan, and improve their ecotourism development strategies.

The results suggest that the main reason for the gap in the ecotourism operations of these countries is the lack of communication and cooperation between policymakers and other tourism stakeholders. The government is significant in leading ecotourism development, and an official and national ecotourism strategy is required in planning and operating ecotourism. However, consistency in policy and the attitude of the government will increase the competitive power of ecotourism. The assistance of non-government organizations is not a long-term strategy for ecotourism development, and less-developed countries like Vietnam should attempt to use the resources of its administrative government system, similar to the Tambon Administrative Organization of Thailand, to develop a suitable policy for ecotourism management in the long-term.

Keywords Southeast Asian; national ecotourism strategy; community-based ecotourism; nongovernment organization.

1. Introduction

Ecotourism is a type of sustainable tourism that has experienced rapid growth in the background of global concern on sustainability (Weaver, 2001). Theoretically, ecotourism has promised to generate both economic returns and employment for the recipient country while also ensuring the protection of local environments and cultures. Ecotourism has been observed to help third world destinations, particularly in the Southeast Asian (SEA) region, find an answer to the classic deadlock: the need for profit from their tourism resources to earn foreign exchange without destroying those resources and thus compromising sustainability (Cater, 1993). However, a very real danger exists of
viewing ecotourism as the universal panacea (Cater, 1993; Orams, 1995). Given the difficulties in defining ecotourism and in measuring its outcome, the appeal of ecotourism has been increasingly tarnished (Mastny, 2001). Weaver (2011) and Scott (2011) conclude that the efforts of SEA to achieve sustainable tourism over the last 15 years have been slow and unimpressive. Furthermore, ecotourism reportedly faced many of the problems confronted by traditional tourism. For instance, ecotourists were criticized for consuming similar resources and producing similar wastes (Wall, 1997). Many scholars criticized ideal statements that affirm ecotourism as a practice that could mitigate all tourism troubles (Cater, 1993; Dodds & Joppe, 2005; Parnwell, 2009; Wall, 1997; Weaver, 2001). Indeed, growing evidence has demonstrated the negative effects of ecotourism around the world, which seem to indicate the nature of its usual business operations (Sirakaya, Sasidharan, & Sonmez, 1999; Wight, 1993) and ‘the difficulty of distinguishing between conventional tourism and ecotourism in Asian form is recognized’ (Cochrane, 2009, p.255). Generally, significant differences occur between the theory and practice of ecotourism.

Tourism is the largest and fastest growing industry in the world. Tourism 2020 Vision by the UNWTO forecasts that international arrivals are expected to reach nearly 1.6 billion by the year 2020. The SEA region is forecasted to experience record growth at rates of over 6.3% per year between 1995 and 2020, compared with the world average of 4.1%. By 2020, the regional arrival figure is projected to reach 136 million per annum (UNWTO, 2013). Local governments in developing countries usually consider tourism as a main mechanism to improve the local economy and the living standards of inhabitants (Ly, 2008; Tang & Jang, 2009). SEA uses tourism as a stage for the mainstays of the region’s economic development, especially since the Asian Economic Crisis in 1997. The natural environment and exotic oriental cultures are two major focal selling points of SEA to tourists. As Lew (2010) concluded, tourism cannot ignore the long-term nature of sustainability. The development of sustainable tourism is therefore necessary to address global warming issues and local economic crises, especially for a developing region such as SEA.

Hitchcock, King, and Parnwell (2009) stated that an expansion of studies on tourism in SEA have occurred during the past decade. However, the number of studies regarding ecotourism in this region remains limited (Chon, 2000; Hall & Page, 2000a; Hitchcock et al., 2009; Teo, Chang & Ho, 2001). Despite the increase of studies on ecotourism in SEA countries, most focus on the newly industrialized capitalist countries (especially Thailand and Malaysia). Tourism research studies on the new members of Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN), such as Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, are rare (Hitchcock et al., 2009).

This study reviews the development of ecotourism in five SEA countries, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The review will be based on the comparison between the theory and practice of ecotourism management in each country. The first objective is to find the cause of the gap between the theory and practice of ecotourism in the region. The second objective is to address critical issues regarding National Ecotourism Policy and the practical implementation of ecotourism-based products in each country.
2. The definition of ecotourism

In the more than two decades since the term ecotourism was first used in the English-speaking academic field by Romeril (1985), ecotourism has elicited significant attention within the tourism industry and literature (Weaver, 2005; Weaver & Lawton, 2007), sometimes appearing under the terms such as natural tourism (Boo, 1990; Ziffer, 1989) or ecological tourism (Ruschmann, 1992). Considering that ecotourism has been and will continue be important in tourism worldwide, the United Nations declared 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism (Deng, King & Bauer, 2002; Maclaren, 2002) and published the first issue of the *Journal of Ecotourism* in the same year (Weaver, 2005).

Certain important ecotourism definitions represent the leading idea of ecotourism. For example, the definition of ecotourism by the International Ecotourism Society in 1990 (TIES, 2013) is ‘responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people.’ The definition adopted by the Ecotourism Australia Association is ‘ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focuses on experiencing natural areas that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation’ (Ecotourism Australia, 2013). Despite considerable attention, an internationally agreed upon definition of ecotourism still does not exist (Deng, et al., 2002; Weaver, 2005). However, according to the conclusions of Blamey (1997; 2001) as well as Weaver and Lawton (2007), scholars have reached a near-consensus that ecotourism should satisfy three criteria. These include: (1) the attractions should be primarily nature-based; (2) tourist interaction with these attractions should focus on learning and education; and (3) experience and product management should follow principles and practices associated with environmental, socio-cultural, and economic sustainability ideas. Each criterion leaves sufficient room for interpretation and allows the industry to consider the appropriate application of each parameter (Weaver & Lawton, 2007). The conclusion of Blamey likely led to the development of different modes of ecotourism. For example, Weaver (2005) identified both a minimalist and comprehensive mode of ecotourism or a new theme in the literature characterized by attempts to expand the boundaries of ecotourism beyond its original pattern in the mid-1980s as a nature-based form of unconventional tourism. These involve the inclusion of recreational angling as a form of ecotourism (Holland, Ditton, & Graefe, 1998; Zwirn, Pinsky, & Rahr, 2005); the trophy hunting idea of Novelli, Barnes and Humavindu (2006); or Ryan and Saward’s (2004) considering the possibility that redesigned zoos are non-captive habitats that meet the criteria of ecotourism. Miller and Kale (1993) argued that all forms of tourism might be considered ecotourism, depending on the extent of human responsibility implemented. ‘Ecotourism can only be achieved when the behavior of destination managers, stakeholders, and tourists is ecologically, economically, and ethically responsible. Such behavior should adhere to criteria which have sustainability as their primary objective’ (Deng et al., 2002, p. 424). These previous discussions show that the definition of ecotourism is important in leading ecotourism. However, the interpretation and operation of ecotourism by authorities and operators in actual practice is its primary determining factor. To study the difference between the theory and practice of ecotourism in each country, the following parts investigate a specific revision to investigate whether SEA, as it is currently structured, actually achieves the primarily sustainability criteria of ecotourism.
3. Methodology

In order to establish comparability, the countries were selected based on two criteria: (1) geographical similarity and (2) tourism market comparability. Geographical similarity indicates that the selected countries have a similar approximated land area and topography. SEA consists of two geographic regions: mainland SEA and maritime SEA (Hall & Page, 2000b). The five countries in the maritime area (Brunei, East Timor, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore) do not pass the first criterion because the focus of this study is the mainland area. The second criterion indicates that the selected countries should have either a mature or a newly industrial economy with developing tourism markets. Only five countries satisfy this criterion: Thailand and Malaysia (mature markets), Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia (countries with recent economic development). The tourism industry of Myanmar (Burma), because of its late development compared with other countries in the region, is not included in this study.

The study process is explained as follows: first, the official definition or theory of ecotourism is based on the definition of the relevant authority in each country, such as the government, the national tourism board, or an ecotourism association. Second, how each country operates its ecotourism policy and ecotourism-products is reviewed based on case studies, official websites, or brochures as well as blogs from tourists who have participated in ecotourism activities. Finally, this study addresses two research objectives by drawing lessons learned from ecotourism development in each country.

4. Ecotourism in mainland Southeast Asia: theory and practice

4.1 Ecotourism in Malaysia

The Nation Ecotourism Plan is the result of a study commissioned by the Ministry of Culture, Arts, and Tourism in 1995 to assist the government in planning the potential development of ecotourism in Malaysia. It was accepted by the government a year later and remains valid (Ministry of Tourism Malaysia, 2013; Musa, 2000). Malaysia has adopted the definition of the World Conservation Union (IUCN) to guide the ecotourism management in the country. For Malaysia, Ecotourism is:

Environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features, both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations (National Ecotourism Plan Malaysia- Part 1, 1995, p. 2).

The Plan pointed out ‘Whether or not an activity qualifies to be called ecotourism depends on the way the activity is carried out, not so much on the type of activity per se.’ (National Ecotourism Plan Malaysia- Part 1, 1995, p. 3).
The role of government in leading ecotourism development include planning and coordinating funds to develop infrastructure in remote areas, sponsoring the cost of technical consultancy work in particular ecotourism destinations, and bridging joint efforts between various levels of government, the private sector, and the local communities to implement the ecotourism activities successfully (Daud, 2002). However, inconsistency in ecotourism policy and planning has delayed the growth of business. The Seventh and Eighth Malaysia Plans for tourism focused on ecotourism (The Star Online, 2008). However, in the Ninth and Tenth Malaysia Plans, the government increased its ecotourism and sustainable travel efforts by approving enormous budgets and projects compared with those in the Eighth Plan. However, the focus of tourism results was on health, education, and MICE tourism (Marker, Blanco, Lokanathan, & Verma, 2008). Consequently, the government promoted Malaysia as an ecotourism destination. However, this was conducted inconsistently, which might lead to confusion for ecotourists.

Ecotourism operators in Malaysia are divided into three main types. However, they do not share a similar interpretation of the definition of ecotourism. The first type is the community ecotourism cooperative, such as the Batu Puteh Community Ecotourism Cooperative. This type of ecotourism operator is set up to promote and develop ecotourism based on Agenda 21 of the Earth Summit in Rio 1991 and the Malaysia Ecotourism Plan in 1995 (MESCOT Initiative, 2013). Unfortunately, a second type of ecotourism operator exists in Malaysia. As reported by a tourist in Langkawi Island, an ‘ecotourism-based’ guide forced the tourist to feed eagles and pat monitor lizards. According to Dr. Reza Azmi from Wild Asia, this is exactly the type of tour operator tourists should avoid while travelling (Holiday in Malaysia, 2009). Locals without appropriate licenses usually run these operations but still identify themselves as ecotourism operators or imitators without supporting relevant principles and criteria. The final type of ecotourism operator usually possesses an international background, usually from developed countries such as the United Kingdom, other European nations, or Australia. They operate a wide range of ecotourism tours in Malaysia and around the world, strictly based on sustainable tourism ideas (Adventure Sports Holidays, 2013; Responsible Travel, 2013).

Lesson learned from Malaysia Ecotourism

The role of the government in leading the development of ecotourism is important, especially in the initial stage of the ecotourism cluster. However, consistency in policymaking and implementation is necessary for the development of ecotourism. Frustrated and unstable market segmentation will lead to a loss of ecotourists in significantly competitive environments. Moreover, with the participation of international ecotourism-based operators in ecotourism activities, local communities can learn new ideas regarding the operation of ecotourism. Although tourism revenue would not totally benefit locals, paying what is due for the learning process is worthwhile. Unfortunately, currently existing fraudulent home-stays and irresponsible ecotourism-based tour operators in the market confuses tourists and are negative examples for authentic ecotourism development in Malaysia (Malaysia.com, 2011).
The Malaysian tourism industry uses another useful tool to close the gap between the theory and practice of ecotourism by giving awards to the excellent operators with sustainable ecotourism products (Wild Asia, 2011). Moreover, certain regional and international conferences on ecotourism development are held, which could help raise awareness on the importance of ecotourism in industry development, such as The World Ecotourism Conference is a typical example (Discovery MICE, 2011). The gap between theory and practice of ecotourism remains in Malaysia. However, the spirit and idea of how to minimize this gap is a worthwhile lesson for most SEA countries. The idea of Malaysians themselves operating local tourism efforts could result in Malaysia becoming truly environmental.

4.2 Ecotourism in Thailand

The rapid development of international tourism in Thailand reached a massive scope during the 1980s and 1990s (Cohen, 2001). In the new millennium, the government has realized the potential of ecotourism for conserving the natural environment. The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has promoted ecotourism as a tool for biodiversity conservation and rural development (Hvenegaard & Dearden, 2002). A temporary ecotourism strategy was proclaimed during 1995 to 1996. The National Ecotourism Policy was prepared during the 1994 to 1998 period, and was approved and announced by the Cabinet in 1998 (Leksakundilok, 2004). The following definition of ecotourism has been used in the National Ecotourism Policy:

Ecotourism is responsible travel in areas containing natural resources that possess endemic characteristics and cultural or historical resources that are integrated into the area’s ecological system. Its purpose is to create an awareness among all concerned parties of the need for and the measures used to conserve ecosystems and as such is oriented towards community participation as well as the provision of a joint learning experience in sustainable tourism and environment management. (TISTR, 1997, p.8)

The several defining elements of ecotourism in Thailand are as follows: natural areas are the ideal destination for ecotourism, education and sustainability are emphasized, ecosystems are conserved, and the community participates in management. The Thai government also commits the same mistakes as those of the Malaysian government: they understand the importance of ecotourism as a major form of sustainable tourism development, but the focus of the Thai government on earning income from mass tourism has led to inconsistency in policy and planning. The Eighth and Ninth National Economic and Social Development Plans (NESDP) in 1997-2001 and 2002-2006, respectively, were the main driving forces and supporting factors for ecotourism development (Leksakundilok, 2004). In the Tenth NESDP (2007-2011), Thailand aimed to achieve a green and happy society, emphasizing the resolution of the economic crisis and human resource development issues via the use of sustainable natural resources and enhancing national competitiveness. However, the theme of the 11th NESDP (2012-2016) was to build a creative economy, focusing on green and creative production, a sufficient and moderate society, and a new social contract, in which people must be the center of development (Government of Thailand Ministry of Interior, 2010). The focus of NESDP in recent years has been...
more economics-based. After the National Ecotourism Action Plan in 2006, no updated plan for nationwide ecotourism development has been announced in Thailand.

Although policies and plans have been established to guide the development of ecotourism, all stakeholders tend to interpret ecotourism differently depending on their understanding, comprising different types of ecotourism-based products in actual practice. Local communities have become a main component of ecotourism in Thailand. Many actors have promoted the community involvement trend in ecotourism. The main actors consist of NGOs, private operators, the Tambon Administrative Organization (TAO), and local communities (Leksakundilok, 2004). TAO, which is the local government, is important in supporting local communities via tourism development and management. However, TAOs, which are composed of powerful local executives, do not appear to be interested in tourism and are sometimes in conflict with community activists. NGOs and local communities therefore trust informal groups as the true representatives for tourism development instead of TAOs (Leksakundilok, 2004). Conflicts between stakeholders regarding local community participation lead to certain types of ecotourism-based products with different features.

Government agencies are the biggest supporter for more than 75 percent of ecotourism-based products in Thailand communities (Krunthep Turakij, 2001; Pleumarom, 2001). Ecotourism-based products managed by NGOs are usually benefit local communities and the environment. NGOs emphasized the empowerment of locals when building ecotourism products. Although NGOs and private-managed operators account for only a quarter of community-based ecotourism in Thailand, their impact on ecotourism development should not be underestimated. Many tour operators mix ecotourism with adventure tourism (such as rafting, safari, jungle tour), soft adventure (kayaking, canoeing) or community culture tours without relation to nature (tribe visiting, local products shopping) (Leksakundilok, 2004). This misleading by private-managed operators has affected the understanding of tourists and some other stakeholders. However, truly responsible tourism operators exist, some of which were finalists in the Wild Asia Responsible Tourism Awards for 2008. These include the representative of the luxury and boutique accommodation category, the Six Senses Hideaway at Phang Nga; as well as that of the budget category, the Faasai Resort and Spa in Chanthaburi (Wild Asia, 2008).

Lesson learned from Thailand Ecotourism

Thailand essentially remains a mass tourism destination (Hitchcock et al., 2009). Since the application of the National Ecotourism Policy and National Ecotourism Action Plan in the past decade, because other forms of tourism (mass tourism) have more support in practice than ecotourism, different actors usually have dissimilar explanations and understandings of ecotourism. The current actions of NGOs in community development include empowering the local people in ecotourism operation, preserving natural and cultural resources, and improving education in daily management. These are exactly the main ideas of ecotourism defined in Thailand National Ecotourism Policy in 1997 (TISTR, 1997). The NGOs of Thailand seem to be performing the duties of the TAOs
sufficiently. The power and quantity of NGOs are limited. However, TAOs are in every village in the Thai territory and would give ecotourism development excessive support if they performed their duties properly.

Apart from international and professional private-owned ecotourism operators, the Thai tourism market has had unqualified ecotourism operators that mislead ecotourists and other stakeholders with their incorrect explanation of the definition of ecotourism. Simultaneously, certain awards given to the private-owned ecotourism-based operators of responsible locals bring a new hope for the future development of ecotourism in Thailand. Considering that Thailand is rich with protected area resources and is the most progressive country in terms of policy and planning for ecotourism development (Khanal & Babar, 2007), Thailand has potential to be a top ecotourism destination. However, improvements in its policy will make Thailand even more impressive.

4.3 Ecotourism in Cambodia

The tourism industry in Cambodia has experienced a period of frustrated development before total peace was set up in 1999. Tourism has been the largest industry since 2009 (U.S. Department of State, 2012). ‘Tourism in Cambodia must first and foremost be cultural tourism’ (Chau, 2000, p.1). While speedily maximizing the tourist city Angkor as a ‘cash cow’ of development, Cambodia also avoided turning it into a ‘commercial tourism’ destination (Chau, 2000, p.4). In the framework of Cambodian tourism development, the term ‘ecotourism’ is relatively new. The first Cambodia Community-Based Ecotourism Network (CCBEN) was established in 2002 to promote and support community-based ecotourism (CBET) (Chheang, 2008). Cambodia’s Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper from 2006 to 2010 included no clear guide on the management of ecotourism or CBET (The Royal Government of Cambodia, 2005) or even a confirmed official definition of ecotourism. According to Sok (2004), the government has given minimal attention to ecological protection of tourist sites. The only CBET (or ecotourism) definition is found on the Ministry of Tourism Cambodia website (2013a) within the promotion page for CBET in Cambodia:

Community-based ecotourism addresses the well-being of the community and the surrounding environment. While supporting local communities and improving livelihoods, the natural and cultural resources of the area are protected and conserved. Ecotourism is a type of sustainable tourism in which tourists experience, appreciate and enjoy the nature and culture of their destination. The negative impacts of tourism are minimized while an incentive for conserving natural and cultural features is provided.

CBET is equivalent to ecotourism in Cambodian tourism. Cambodia has a special mechanism in tourism development involving private sector participation at the national and sub-regional level in their tourism marketing board (Cuyvers, Soeng, Plasmans, & Bulcke, 2011; Khanal & Babar, 2007). This transparent mechanism has brought a new phenomenon to the development of ecotourism in this country. It also drew out certain kinds of ecotourism-based products that differ from neighboring countries. This can be observed via ecotourism-based product destinations introduced on the official
website of the Ministry of Tourism Cambodia, a trustworthy and official national ecotourism marketing tool (Ministry of Tourism Cambodia, 2013b).

In Cambodia, CBET products are almost entirely managed by NGOs. Governmental departments rarely join in their planning and management. CBET products normally receive financial and technical assistance from NGOs, its partners and donors, while the local community is responsible for operating and owning the products. For example, the Chi Phat CBET site located in Koh Kong province was established in 2007 by an environmental NGO called Wildlife Alliance. This NGO helps the community provide certain ecotourism-based services (i.e., home stays, trekking, mountain biking, boating, and bird-watching tours) and support the protection of the natural and cultural resources of the region, bring income to villagers, and train them in operations (Wildlife Alliance, 2013).

**Lesson learned from Cambodia ecotourism**

Due to political reasons, the Cambodian tourism industry began later than that of regionalist neighboring countries. Cambodia has chosen high quality, cultural tourism as the mainstay of national tourism development with its special World Heritage site, Angkor Wat (Winter, 2007), which also serves as a steady source of income. Ecotourism is not yet a concern of the Cambodian government. However, it is the concern of local and international NGOs.

In 2002, when the CCBEN was first established in Cambodia, it also brought new hope to the ecotourism development of Cambodia by the private and public cooperation mechanism. This cooperative mechanism also brought innovative and inclusive information that introduced ecotourism products in the Ministry of Tourism Cambodia website (Ministry of Tourism Cambodia, 2013b), which is rarely seen in the national tourism websites of other countries. The funding and assistance of NGOs in developing ecotourism cannot last long. As part of its long-term plan for CBET, the UNWTO is assisting Cambodia in formulating an ecotourism development plan (Khanal & Babar, 2007). Otherwise, this country needs a comprehensive strategy for the formation of a definition of ecotourism to facilitate the planning and policymaking of ecotourism at a national level. This is a necessary process that leads to successful ecotourism management.

**4.4 Ecotourism in Laos**

Located in Indochina, Laos also experienced frustrated development in its history (Schipani, 2002). With the assistance of international organizations and learning from some of the perceived mistakes of its Asian neighbors, the Laotian government has come to favor ecotourism development (Hall, 1997). Ecotourism is presently a significant topic in sustainable tourism and is now a top priority for the Laotian government, especially because this type of tourism is explicitly linked with poverty alleviation, which is the national target of Laos (UNDP & LNTA, 2006). At present, approximately 80% to 90% of all tourism activity is concentrated around short visits to the cultural centers of
Vientiane and Luang Prabang. The plan of the Laos tourism industry is to vary the tourism sector by developing new products and attractions across the country. Central to this aim is the development and promotion of Laos ecotourism. The National Ecotourism Strategy and Action Plan 2005-2010 was therefore announced to represent the vision and the guiding principles of ecotourism development in Laos (LNTA, 2005). In this action plan, the definition of ecotourism in Laos is defined as:

Tourism activity in rural and protected areas that minimized negative impacts and is directed towards the conservation of natural and cultural resources, rural socio-economic development and visitor understanding of, and appreciation for, the places they are visiting (LNTA, 2005, p. 10).

As stated in the action plan, the development of new ecotourism products, services, and destinations is a complicated process. Success will demand cooperation and coordination among public and private sector stakeholders.

Since the Laotian government began promoting ecotourism in the late 1990s (Hall, 1997), the private sector has joined them mainly by contributing tour operators, eco-accommodation, and handicrafts products. The private-sector operators are not the mainstream in ecotourism-based products in Laos, when compared with aid-agencies funds and the public sector. However, they present positive examples that fit the definition of ecotourism, such as the Green Discovery eco-tour company. Green Discovery was founded in 2000 as an Australian-Lao joint venture, and is committed to socially responsible travel and to the preservation of the natural beauty of Laos (Green Discovery, 2013). However, private-sector operators complain about a lack of visible output and tangible support from the Laos National Tourism Administration (LNTA) and the weak linkages between tourism businesses. These concerns have even received a degree of suspicion from the government (Harrison & Schipani, 2009).

The most renowned project involving aid agencies funded by and continuing cooperation with the ecotourism-based products of the public sector has been the UNESCO-LNTA Nam Ha Ecotourism Project (NHEP) in Luang Namtha Province. It retains its status as a role model for subsequent ecotourism development projects in areas of great cultural and natural richness in Laos (Lyttleton & Alcock, 2002; Suntikul, Bauer, & Song, 2009). It was recognized for the recent demonstration site of the National Ecotourism Strategy and Action Plan 2005-2010, prepared by LNTA with assistance from the Netherlands Development Organization (SNV). This highly successful initiative introduced the concept of ecotourism to Laos and received significant international acclaim and a UNDP award in recognition of its contribution towards poverty alleviation (LNTA, 2005).

Lesson learned from Laos ecotourism

The Laos tourism industry began in the late 1990s. However, it has become the top source of foreign exchange and poverty alleviation in the country, with two million tourist arrivals since 2009 (LNTA, 2009). This success is attributed to the comprehensive and updated tourism policy, law, and planning of the Laos government under the financial and technical assistance of international NGOs. With help
from aid agencies, especially from the Asia Development Bank and SNV, to develop CBET, Laos posses certain role models for further ecotourism development, such as the NHEP in Luang Namtha province, which established a tourism development cluster in a less developed province.

Laos cannot separate itself from the mainstream multi-country tours emerging in the region. Therefore, apart from the ecotourism development that is being prepared for the future, Laos is simultaneously developing cultural tourism as its basic support for its national tourism industry. A successful strategy for ecotourism development must prepare an integrated approach that includes not only knowledge on how to manage the role of CBET but also an understanding of the role of mainstream tourism in the country.

4.5 Ecotourism in Vietnam

The American embargo was lifted at the end of 1994, and Vietnam was accepted as a full member of the ASEAN in 1995 (Cooper, 2000). Vietnam tourism hence turned a new page in its development history. The tourism decree was announced in 1999. In 2005, the Parliament approved the Tourism Law to adjust the relationship of tourism in the macro field, which confirmed the importance of tourism industry in the country (VNAT, 2010). The tourism industry, especially ecotourism, is new for Vietnam under the doi moi policy compared with other ASEAN countries. In the Tourism Law valid from 1st of January 2006, the Vietnamese Parliament announced the first official definition of ecotourism as:

Ecotourism is one form of tourism based on nature, closely related with local culture, with the community participation to develop sustainability (Vietnam Parliament, 2005, p.3).

However, this definition is only an explanation for certain terms that refer to the tourism phenomenon that exists in Vietnam. This law did not include any clear ideas or guides on how ecotourism should be operated or principles to manage this new type of tourism (Vietnam Parliament, 2005). Moreover, the existing complexities of the juridical system have resulted in uncooperative ecotourism managerial strategies in Vietnam (Buckley, 2004).

In this undeveloped environment, certain types of ecotourism-based products exist in Vietnam. Classified based on the ownership of ecotourism sites, two types of ecotourism-based products have emerged. The first type is the public sector ecotourism-based product, such as national parks and nature reserve areas. The central government and/or local government (i.e., Provincial People’s Committee and/or national park management board) normally administer this kind of tourism destination. They also operate its daily management. The second type is the private sector ecotourism-based product, such as ecotourism resorts and ecotourism-based theme parks. This new type of ecotourism-based product originates from private naturalists who are interested in protecting and conserving special flora and fauna species in their own gardens or natural-related theme parks, which then develop in scope and improve certain ecotourism-based theme parks to attract ecotourists. Examples include Dam Sen Park at Ho Chi Minh City (Damsen Park, 2013) and Soc Trang Bat Pagoda (Le et al., 2009). These
types of ecotourism sites, however, mostly serve constructed tourism activities rather than nature- and local culture-related tourism activities.

**Lesson learned from Vietnam ecotourism**

Vietnam’s modern history has been one of constant political change, from French colonization to the Vietnam/America War and division to reunification, trade embargoes to subsequent reform. All of these changes have affected tourism development. In search of tourism revenue, the Vietnamese government has relinquished some aspects of centralized control. Therefore, the local authorities are highly autonomous. One Vietnam National Administration of Tourism’s document indicates that a lack of synergy in the planning and investment of different sectors and regions, overlapping powers of ownership, and authorization procedures would confuse and delay the development of tourism industry (Suntikul, 2010). Moreover, a roughly defined idea of ecotourism, without detailed guidelines and principles with regard this new kind of tourism product under the *doi moi* policy is another barrier that hinders the development of ecotourism (Vietnam Parliament, 2005).

Since *doi moi*, the role of government has been changing from being a provider to a regulator (Buckley, 2004; Elliott, 1997). However, macro-level interventions from the government that plan to optimize tourism resources are necessary, especially with regard to leading Vietnam ecotourism development. Without proper ecotourism law or a national ecotourism strategy like in other ASEAN countries, unqualified ecotourism-based products remain in Vietnam, such as ecotourism-based theme parks, which are only fabricated tourism activities with related natural-based resources. In Vietnam, therefore, the tourism industry needs a national ecotourism strategy and law to review management permissions in different regional levels.

5. **Conclusion**

Countries without a national ecotourism strategy or planning like Cambodia and Vietnam undoubtedly require comprehensive frameworks. Although Cambodia does not have any national plan for ecotourism development, its special transparent private and public cooperation mechanism assists in significantly improving the management of ecotourism products (Ministry of Tourism Cambodia, 2013b). However, its tourism administration need to empower certain private sector entities like NGOs, which would not be the case in certain top-down policy driven countries.

Launching a national ecotourism strategy is only the first step. The consistency of policy is required for ecotourism management, and frustrated and unstable market segmentation will lead to a loss of tourists in other more competitive areas. Moreover, the attitude of the government in conducting ecotourism is important. In Thailand, mass tourism has more support than ecotourism, which leads to different stakeholders having dissimilar explanations and understanding regarding ecotourism operations. Consequently, this confuses tourism actors and tourists. Consistency in national tourism
policy is necessary. However, the government cannot ignore mainstream national tourism. Thus, a successful strategy for ecotourism development must have an integrated approach, which not only includes knowledge and stability when managing the role of ecotourism but also understanding the role of mainstream tourism (Harrison & Schipani, 2009).

Using the assistance from the private sector (i.e., NGOs), the development of CBET is inevitable in less developed countries. However, the improvement of their resources will be the long-term strategy for sustainability. Conventionally, NGO is arguably a useful stakeholder in CBET development, because this kind of ecotourism-based product requires considerable technical and financial resources to support and operate. However, evidence from other studies indicates that NGOs are not always the best in conducting CBET development because NGOs are not by nature tourism businesses (Harrison & Schipani, 2009). Additionally, NGOs derive their budgets from their donors and are thus a limited resource. Therefore, not every country should rely on NGOs to develop ecotourism in its long-term strategy. They could use the existing and well-networked resources of the governmental administrative system, such as the TAOs in Thailand or the Social People Group in Vietnam, which are recognized as the representatives of the local community in tourism development, especially in CBET (Leksakundilok, 2004).

The gap between the theory and practice of ecotourism exists in every single country in mainland SEA. The main reason for the operational gap in ecotourism is the lack of communication and cooperation between policymakers and other tourism stakeholders. Ecotourism development requires the integrated cooperation between all main beneficiary stakeholders (the governments, the tourism industry, tourists, and local communities), due to their direct and indirect relationship to the environment, which may affect the implications of ecotourism (Cochrane, 2009). However, the role of government in choosing which method the country should follow in tourism development is significant. Therefore, they are the key to breaking the gap between the theoretical definition and practical operation of ecotourism.

This study has geographic restrictions in its data collection and analysis. In order to completely understand ecotourism development in the region, future research should collect first-hand data in more countries, including the maritime SEA countries.
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