

Sustainable Tourism Policies of the Governments in Indo-China (Thailand, Lao PDR and Vietnam)

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Abstract

This paper explores sustainable tourism policies of the governments in Indo-China, particularly Thailand, Laos PDR and Vietnam.

These policies are not unique to each country. In fact, they are significantly influenced by conceptions and policies of academics and of various organizations, for example, the UN, the WTO, ASEAN, PATA and GMS. The conceptions and policies of these bodies can be categorized and summarized as follows:

- (1) **Academics:** Academics emphasize thorough understanding of the definition of sustainable tourism and the consequences of tourism mismanagement. The idea of “partnership” is highly valued. In other words, the participation and involvement of government, private sector, local communities and NGOs is encouraged while planning and organizing tourism projects.
- (2) **Global Organization:** Policies of these organizations put great emphasis on environmental and cultural conservation. Local communities are encouraged to participate in planning and administering tourism projects. In addition, they are informed about criteria or means to evaluate tourism development plans proposed by both the government and private sectors. This is to ensure that the plans do not cause negative impact on the environment and local communities. At the same time, the plans will be economically and socially beneficial to the local communities, leading to a sustainable tourism industry.

(3) **Regional cooperation:**

There are two types of regional cooperation:

- 3.1 **Indirect regional tourism cooperation:** The cooperation between countries in the region is primarily concerned with economics. As the economics of these countries grow, their policies of sustainable tourism will be strengthened.
- 3.2 **Direct regional tourism cooperation:** By their cooperation, the countries in the region put great value on the importance of sustainable tourism. Their policies are similar to those of the academics and global organizations.

(4) **Government:** Sustainable tourism policies of each government differ.

- 1.1 **Thailand:** The Thai government’s policies draw upon the country’s economic development plan. In late 1980’s, when the country experienced an economic crisis, the government enthusiastically embraced and promoted eco-tourism. A decade later, however, its tourism policies were significantly influenced by the region’s policies. By 2000, its tourism policies were more influenced by conceptions and policies of academics and of global organizations.

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1.2 Laos: Because of the support from global tourism organizations, the government put greater emphasis on sustainable tourism than on its economic development.

1.3 Vietnam: The Vietnamese government has long been an advocate of sustainable tourism. It has tried to balance the dichotomy between sustainable and environmental conservation.

It is expected that insights into sustainable tourism policies of these countries will lead to the establishment of a network within the Indo-China. This will also lead to a “cluster of sustainable tourism policy” in the future.

Introduction

Amidst global economic uplifting competitiveness under the fascinating discourse of ‘development’, tourism is one of the essential tools different countries in each region use to achieve the goal of becoming ‘developed countries’.

In the 1920s the concept of tourism as a tool for economic uplifting was widely recognized, and thus ‘the theory of tourism’ was academically studied within the framework of the mass tourism type, which focuses on creating and consuming happiness as well as pleasure through travelling to a place different in culture, way of life and environment from one’s own. Such tourism type finally became mainstream tourism. However, the importance placed on mass tourism turned to be a cause of several negative effects. For instance, local people, as hosts, earned only small benefits from working in resorts or large hotels in the local communities. Moreover, local communities were dominated by means of refusal of local products and local food. Profits also usually fell in the hands of urban people. Plus, cultural space and way of life of local people were taken away due to the use of natural resources and culture for business (Fennell, 1999:7-10).

Such negative effects developed into antithesis that defined mass tourism concept in terms of tourism management. Not until the 1970s did Peter Holden (1984), Emanuel De Kadt (1990) and David A. Fennell (1999) introduce ‘alternative tourism’ as a new option distinct from ‘mass tourism’ in several ways as described below:

1. Preventing environment and ecology damage, and avoiding causes of negative effects on tourism development
2. Focusing on micro-level development such as tourism attraction development practiced by community organizations with minimal negative socio-cultural effects
3. Posing such a question as ‘Which communities earn benefits: urban or rural?’
4. Stressing cultural sustainability by educating tourists and tourism-related organizations to sincerely respect and conserve local culture.

In brief, the concept of ‘alternative tourism’ is sustainability-oriented tourism management.

Both mass tourism emerging in the 1920s and alternative tourism in the 1970s are widely accepted, although the former has been increasingly questioned, as megabuck income generation and tourism resource sustainability respectively. They then become standards for global tourism management. In addition, as World Tourism Organization (WTO) under United Nations (UN) and other international private organizations were established to support them, these two concepts rapidly spread all over the world, especially among the Third World countries which strive for modernization and thus embrace tourism as a key factor for the countries’ development.

Among such Third World countries, South East Asian countries are recognized as tourism sites abundant with exotic nature, environment and culture (Michael Hitchcock; Victor T. King; and Michael J.G. Parnwell, 1993:2), thus receiving increasing interests from tourists. Michael Hitchcock (1993:1), professor in South-East Asian Development Sociology at the University of Hull stated that ASEAN Member States, including such Indo-Chinese countries as Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam, regarded tourism as 'economic pillar'. It can therefore be inferred that tourism was introduced in this region in the 1990s and has been popular from that time on.

It is worth noting that the use of tourism as a tool for economic development as favored by each South East Asian country grows out of mass and alternative tourism concepts. Tourism management based on the two concepts is practiced in diverse manners. Some countries strictly adopt mass tourism concept while some take after alternative tourism and others combine both to make it most appropriate for their own politics, natural resources, economics, society and culture. Nonetheless, any form taken by any country can be reasoned in terms of tourism sustainability.

This article presents tourism management concepts of South East Asian countries as well as seeks to define, based on such concepts, the term 'sustainable tourism' as understood and interpreted by each country which definitely does not have its own individual, but academic-, world- and region- related concept. The presentation will be made through sample cases consisting of tourism management in Thailand, Lao PDR and Vietnam, which are South East Asian developing countries differing in politics, economic system, social structure and culture, despite their connecting borders and common emphasis on tourism as a tool for country development. As well, an alternative definition of 'sustainable tourism' encompassing those of the three countries is offered to encourage tourism cooperation in the future.

Academic concept: Sustainability is involvement.

The three major groups classified under the academic concept are as follows:

1. Sustainable tourism is balancing conservation with development.

Based on this concept, sustainable tourism is a representative of development which must balance fulfillment of economic, social and cultural needs with cooperation between people concerned and local people in learning processes and tourism planning. Awareness raising of nature and cultural identity conservation along with realization of negative environmental, social and cultural impacts is also highlighted. The following concepts are included under this group:

1.1 Alternative tourism gives emphasis to negative impacts on mass tourism development, village or community development, tourism-related benefits for local people, and prevention of local culture damage (Smith and William R. Eadington, 1992: 50-51).

1.2 Ecotourism concentrates on benefits for environment, economics and society without any impact on living conditions of local people, but with the latter required to participate in devising development strategies (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2541:5).

1.3 Sustainable tourism development defines sustainable tourism as tourism development aiming at responding to economic, social, cultural and aesthetic needs while preserving local nature and culture as long as possible with minimal impacts and long-lasting use (Kaewsuriya, 2547 A: website).

2. Tourism management for sustainability

Sustainable tourism, according to this concept, is regarded as tourism management for sustainability, pursuing the following strategies:

- 2.1 Awareness raising of management** including defining 'sustainable tourism', encouraging people to realize negative impacts caused by tourism and to learn how to properly use resources
- 2.2 Management planning processes** including involvement of all parties concerned in planning on visitor carrying capacity, environment and local wisdom preservation, infrastructure and facilities development, waste, water and pollution treatment, staff development, time-and-tourism site relationship, as well as budgets
- 2.3 Management** primarily practiced by local people including local employment, fair and transparent income sharing for local conservation, establishment of sustainability indicating criteria, provision of maps, guide books or brochures, signs and local guides
- 2.4 Management evaluation** including assessing the outcomes according to the criteria set in 2.3.

3. Sustainable tourism with a special focus on local people's involvement

This group gives importance to the locals' involvement in tourism planning and management for sustainability including the following factors:

- 3.1 Internal factors** consist of mutual agreement of local people on the use of community resources, fair profit-sharing, community and local organization strengthening, monitoring, community network for tourism management, marketing and public relations, tourism management organization development and tourism standard setting.
- 3.2 External factors** comprise support from government sectors in terms of policies, budgets, techniques, experts and education together with assistance of both government and private sectors in attaining regional and international tourism.

To conclude, the academic concept of sustainable tourism emphasizes understanding of the true meaning of the term itself as well as stresses management and potential problems caused by improper management. The most important factors in management are 'partnership' in planning and practices of government sectors, private sectors, local people, non-governmental organizations together with other parties concerned, and the tourists' understanding of the real sense of sustainable tourism.

Global organization concept: Sustainable tourism is a practice of sustainable development.

This concept comprises the following:

- 1. United Nation concept** gives special emphasis to the locals' involvement in cultural tourism and ecotourism planning and management. Such local participation will lead to human resource development, economic betterment, environment and culture management and tourists' satisfaction.
- 2. World Tourism Organization concept** emphasizes tourism management for sustainability in various aspects as follows:
 - 2.1 Cultural tourism management** including attracting quality tourists, impressing visitors with technologies, accommodations, food and lectures without negative impacts on cultural heritage, educating local people about tourism and human resource development, involving local people and organizations concerned in tourism management, providing financial

benefits for local people and fairly sharing them, enforcing protection laws and starting a fund for cultural heritage preservation out of a portion of benefits

2.2 Ecotourism management aiming to attract quality tourists, provide tourism that makes tourists both pleased and aware of ecosystem, organize tourism activities that do not affect environment, educate local people about tourism and human resource development, encourage local people to participate in management, provide financial benefits for local people and fairly share them, start a fund for nature and environment conservation out of a portion of benefits, and learn about ecotourism from other places

2.3 Tourism management ethics as seen from the formation of The World Committee on Tourism Ethics as well as the implementation of the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, including tourism management regarded as fostering understanding of and respect for societies and human beings, and tourism as a means of sustainable development, as profitable activities for community and the locals, and as economic development, the rights to travel, liberty of tourists' movements, rights of tourism-related workers and entrepreneurs, all contributing to tourism management for sustainability (World Tourism Organization, 1999: website).

It can be said that the World Tourism Organization concept is sustainable tourism practice that is influenced by United Nations in three different respects below:

1. Desire for environment, natural resource and local culture conservation
2. Response to tourists' needs with regard to biological and environmental study
3. Desire for involvement of the local people in tourism sites in management for mutual benefits and responsibility.

Regional cooperation concept: Sustainable tourism is the balance between investment and conservation.

This concept takes into consideration major regional tourism organizations such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA), and Greatest Mekong Sub-region (GMS) as elaborated below:

1. Association of South East Asian Nation concept

This concept is influenced by the cooperation of ASEAN Member States in economic, trade and investment development. Therefore, it places main emphasis on cooperation in such matters with tourism as part of it, and environment and culture conservation merely inserted there. The concepts included are as follows:

1.1 Tourism cooperation is of the two types explained below:

- 1.1.1 **Tourism industry cooperation** including cooperation in tourism policy implementation, competitiveness reduction, border-crossing facilitation, tourism advertising, marketing, training as well as opportunity provision for private sectors to participate in tourism management
- 1.1.2 **Sustainable tourism cooperation** including fostering cooperation between the government and the locals in tourism management for environment and culture conservation, raising tourists' awareness of the values of environment and culture of the visited countries, evaluating and following up the impacts of tourism on the community, culture and nature, using environmentally-friendly and nature-preserving technologies ,

and taking measures to prevent tourism-related abuse of local people.

- 1.2 **Cultural heritage conservation** concentrates on conservation of cultural heritage, relics, ruins, beliefs, visual arts, historical instruments, aesthetics, science, folk heritage or legends, traditions, tales, language, literature, handicrafts, folk arts, architect, performing arts, plays, local wisdom, fairy tales, customs, rituals, festivals and script heritage. The ASEAN Declaration on Cultural Heritage in 2002 required that ASEAN Member States be obliged to regionally cooperate in preventing the use of resources and cultural heritage for business or with the abuse of their honor, dignity and rights (Ministry of Information and Culture, 2002:7).

In conclusion, the ASEAN concept is based on tourism cooperation in the form of network tourism industry. In this regard, such tourism cooperation assumedly aims at becoming 'tourism industry network' rather than 'sustainable tourism network'. Although conservation and protection of ecosystem, environment, races and cultural heritage are emphasized, tourism management is not so outstanding.

2. Pacific Asia Travel Association concept

On the other hand, the concept of PATA, a regional tourism organization under WTO which was established in 1951 with the purpose of enhancing quality and value of tourism and travel in the Asia and Pacific region (PATA, 2004: website), focuses more on sustainable tourism and is more practical. This is evidenced by APEC/PATA Code for Sustainable Tourism and PATA Traveller's Code Sustaining Indigenous Cultures 2002 which stress conservation of natural environment, ecosystem and biological diversity as well as respect for and support of customs, traditions, cultures and way of life of local communities. Moreover, the community is given opportunities to take part in tourism development planning, environmental management application, support/assistance in tourism obligations to environment and culture, provision of education and knowledge of environment and culture for tourists and cooperation with other parties to sustain environment and culture (Kaewsuriya, 2547A: website).

3. Greatest Mekong Subregion concept

The GMS concept highlights cooperation in economic activities among the Mekong subregion countries, as summarized below:

3.1 Tourism cooperation for economic development is clearly reflected by the following:

- 3.1.1 The initiation of the project on economic cooperation development among 6 GMS countries (Cambodia, China, Myanmar, Lao PDR, Vietnam, Thailand) to promote tourism in 4 countries, and a survey project on cooperation in planning tourism development in Way province, Vietnam, assistance in feasibility study on investment, provision of training courses for tourism staff, establishment of the tourist center in Vientianne, long-term loan provision, technical assistance and support for infrastructures
- 3.1.2 Foreign Minister's Meeting on Economic Cooperation Strategy between Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Thailand on August 1, 2003 to discuss the pilot project on twin cities economic development or Sister Cities concept with emphasis

on the twin cities with potential for development to organize harmonized economic activities (Mukdahan-Sawannakhet)

- 3.1.3 Declaration of the years 2000-2009 to be the Decade of Greater Mekong Subregion Development Cooperation in resources and techniques aiming at helping Mekong countries to develop human resources, trade and investment, transportation and communication, tourism, poverty alleviation and social development.

3.2 Sustainable tourism development cooperation

This concept underlines tourism cooperation enhancement through tourism projects of various types such as ecotourism and cultural tourism with the shared goal set by of countries in the Subregion, as evidenced in the Strategy for GMS tourism development whose main objective is organization of ecotourism and cultural tourism in 2018. The projects included are 1) Promoting the Subregion as a Tourist Destination 2) Mekong Tourism Forum 3) Training the Trainers in the Basic Craft Skills of Tourism 4) Training Resource Managers in Conservation and Tourism 5) Mekong/Lancang River Tourism Planning Study and Special Report on the Facilitation of Travel to and Within the Greater Mekong Subregion and 6) Village-based Tourism (Leksakundilok, 2004:22).

The GMS concept obviously shows the blending of Subregion tourism cooperation for economic development among the Mekong countries with tourism management for nature, environment, society and culture preservation. Although the tourism village project has been organized to reduce poverty of the local people, it does not contribute to the locals' involvement in tourism management cooperation of the locals.

In sum, the regional concept is of two major groups:

1. **Indirect regional tourism cooperation group** including ASEAN and GMS that stress economic development under network cooperation in various aspects with tourism cooperation as part of it
2. **Direct regional tourism cooperation group** including only PATA that emphasizes sustainable tourism both in concept and in international management that correlate with conceptual, theoretical and global ideas. Not only will poverty be reduced but local people will also become more involved in management and tourists will be satisfied and educated.

Government concept

1. Thailand: Conservation and tourism industry development for sustainability

It is apparent that Thailand's concept has undergone some development. Since the late 1980s its sustainable tourism has been managed strictly for nature and environment conservation, as seen from united tourism policies and practices. However, such a concept was challenged in the next decade by the regional tourism industry management concept that primarily focuses on the use of nature, environment and culture as tourism supplies, by the establishment of regional economic cooperation network and by the declaration of Thailand as regional tourism hub. Accordingly, in the 2000s, the concept incorporating sustainable tourism with tourism industry emerged. As well, Thailand was influenced by both academic and Global Organization concepts whose major focuses are local people's participation and fair benefit sharing. It is believed to result in a new concept that integrates the use of nature, environment and culture as tourism supplies with awareness raising of conservation as well as local people's participation.

2. Lao PDR: Resource conservation for sustainability

The Lao PDR government gives specific emphasis to sustainable tourism management. They concentrate on high-value tourism, national culture and tradition preservation, conservation of diversity of natural resources for minorities' habitats, ecotourism network of government sectors, ecotourism operators and investors, local people's participation in tourism activity development and management, the use of tourism as a tool for rural development, and the enforcement of several environment and culture conservation laws. It is not uncommon that its concept is based on the Global Organization one because its tourism management has been assisted by a non-governmental organization, namely World conservation Union (IUCN) and organizations under the UN like United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Consequently, Lao PDR's concept still resembles the academic and Global Organization ones.

It can be concluded that the development concept and the sustainable tourism development concept involved in the sustainable tourism concept of Lao PDR are correlated. Despite the idea of using tourism as an economic and social development tool, the Lao PDR government emphasizes sustainable tourism development. Therefore, the relationship between economic development and sustainable tourism does exist.

Such a concept is in turn related with those at concept-, theory- and world-levels owing to the assistance in economic and social development of external organizations. Moreover, the implementation of the sustainable tourism project as tourism model clearly represents the Lao PDR's sustainable tourism concept.

3. Vietnam: Tourism industry development for sustainable tourism development

Vietnam's concept is interesting in that it could widely expand its economic and social system at about the same period as Lao PDR did. The two concepts involved are as follows:

3.1 Incorporation of sustainable tourism with tourism industry

This concept plays an important role in setting guidelines for sustainable tourism practices in Vietnam, which include existing and ongoing plans, strategies, policies and practices. Such a concept results from incorporation of sustainable tourism with tourism industry. Natural resources, cultural heritage and historical sites are tourism supplies that are publicized to attract tourists, thus bettering economic status. However, sustainable tourism management is carried out though its effectiveness is in doubt.

3.2 Sustainable tourism frame

Under this concept, special emphasis is put on conservation of nature, environment, and cultural heritage, practiced through laws issued by the Vietnamese government.

It is noticeable that the two concepts above are dichotomous but they cannot be exclusively separated. In other words, both benefit each other in terms of tourism management in Vietnam.

Conclusion

The following question is "As the Thai, Lao PDR and Vietnamese governments adopt their own unique sustainable tourism concepts derived from

academic, Global Organization and Regional Cooperation ones, how can the ‘cluster of sustainable tourism policy’ be attained?”

The answer does not simply concern the steps we would take to establish ‘regional sustainable tourism network’ because it seems that the attempt has been made through regional cooperation. Prior to answering the above question, the ones below must be taken into account:

1. Which interpretation of ‘sustainable tourism’ does the government of each Indo-Chinese country make: ideal tourism (anticipated one) or mainstream tourism (existing one)? And when the interpretation is realized, how is social and local cultural conservation incorporated with mass tourism?
2. Based on question 1, how can the ‘cluster of sustainable tourism policy’ be attained under differences in understanding and interpretation of the concept?
3. What is each country’s guideline for local participation? How can ‘regional population cooperation’ in natural resource, society and culture conservation be attained?
4. How will the government manage sustainable tourism so that all local people can earn some income under different political and economic conditions of the countries concerned?
5. What is the regional concept of ‘sustainable tourism’ as agreed upon by the countries concerned: economic sustain, social and cultural sustain, heritage sustain, natural resource and environment sustain, politics sustain, etc., or combination of all? If it is the last, how can sustainability of all respects be achieved under political, economic and social differences?
6. How can Indo-Chinese countries reciprocally cooperate in tourism development for sustainability with less assistance from socially- and culturally-different countries outside the region so that ‘Indo-Chinese sustainable tourism’ can truly represent genuine Indo-Chinese identity?

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