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Mekong Tourism – Model or Mockery?: A Case Study on 'Sustainable Tourism'

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CONTENTS

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION 1

2. TOURISM AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT 4

The GMS Tourism Programme 5

3. REAL-LIFE TOURISM TALES 10

(1) Mass 'Ecotourism' – Thai Style 10
(2) Golfers' Dream – Farmers Nightmare 13
(3) Culture Heritage for Sale – The Case of Angkor Wat 16
(4) 'A fascist Disneyland' – Tourism and Human Rights in Burma 18

4. THE QUESTION OF SUSTAINABILITY 21

Public Participation 27

ENDNOTES 31

REFERENCES 42

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The Mekong River basin area[1] with its peculiar history and great political, economic and social differences is a region in which many of the issues and problems associated with tourism development can be observed.

Until the 1980s, Thailand was the only country among the Mekong riparian states, which was fully integrated into the global capitalist system and had systematically developed a tourist industry to boost foreign exchange earnings, investment, as well as prestige in exchange for readily available cultural and natural resources. Over the last 20 years, tourist arrivals in Thailand have risen from one million to almost 10 million annually.

Other Mekong countries remained more or less isolated from the rest of Southeast Asia after the Second World War because of post-colonial turmoil, the emergence of different political systems and American anti-communist warfare in Indochina.

While Burma followed its own self-styled 'Burmese Path to Socialism', China – and later Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam - were part of the socialist block. Travel to, from and within these countries was restricted, and much of the poor tourism-related infrastructure dated back to colonial times.

With the collapse of the state socialist block in the late 1980s, all Mekong nations decided to reform their economies and boost tour-

ism as an industry in the hope to quickly catch up with the Asian 'newly industrialized countries'(NICs).

The growth of political and economic regionalism since the beginning of the 1990s has been vital for the emergence of several cooperation frameworks involving the Mekong Basin area, all of which prioritize the development of tourism and related infrastructure.

Clearly, the recent tourism expansion into the Mekong sub-region has not happened incidentally or inevitably, but is the result of political will and tremendous promotional efforts. However, there is a clear tension in the Mekong Basin area between the requirement to meet the needs of the vast majority of poor people and the prevailing policies of growth-driven economic development in the region.

A central question is whether benefits from tourism can actually 'trickle-down' and contribute to improve the living standard of disadvantaged social groups and indigenous peoples. Deprivation, uneven distribution of wealth, social inequalities and rapid depletion of natural resources, which set the stage for political, social, ethnic and ecological conflicts, feature prominently in Mekong countries and make tourism a highly insecure industry.

Thailand has often been described as a negative tourism model because reckless development has resulted in the environmental degradation of many places, exacerbated economic inequalities and contributed to undesirable changes in society, such as the proliferation of the sex industry, AIDS, drug abuse, gambling, crime and cultural erosion[2].

Official and industry leaders framing Mekong tourism development have acknowledged that the industry causes a plethora of problems and responded by incorporating the notions of 'sustainable tourism' in their policies and plans. They claim and maintain that with improved planning and management, past mistakes can

be avoided in new destinations.

Has a new era in tourism development begun that can reverse the negative trends so that Mekong neighbouring countries will be spared from a tourism onslaught as experienced in Thailand?

To answer this question, this paper first examines the regional tourism plans with a focus on the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) scheme initiated by the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

The following section presents case studies that suggest that destructive tourism projects persist and are spreading throughout the Mekong basin area despite the constant rhetoric of sustainable tourism or ecotourism.

The last part discusses the question of sustainability by taking into account some broader issues such as the impact of globalization and lessons learned from the Asian economic crisis.

It will be argued that the often ill-defined and reductionist sustainable tourism policies need to be replaced by holistic and people-centred development initiatives, if the goal is to work towards a sustainable future.

CHAPTER TWO

TOURISM AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Over the last decade, all Mekong countries, except China, have become members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This grouping has forged transborder economic cooperation programmes in the form of so-called 'growth triangles' with tourism development playing a prominent role. ASEAN even has its own Travel Association (ASEANTA) and declared 2002 as 'Visit ASEAN Year' under the theme 'ASEAN-Asia's Perfect 10 Paradise'[3].

In 1996, ASEAN also set up its own working group on Mekong Basin Development Cooperation, and the major proposal under this initiative is to create a regional rail network for freight and passenger traffic, linking Singapore with Yunnan via Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Phnom Penh, Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi[4].

The Mekong River Commission (MRC) under the auspices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has presented plans for the Mekong subregion, providing "for economic growth together with environmental protection and cultural enrichment", which includes tourism and related infrastructure development (MRC 1995).

Another initiative is the Quadrangle for Economic Cooperation (QEC) that emphasizes the improvement of land, water and air transport to promote tourism and trade. Formed in 1993 by a group of Thai business people and backed by influential Thai and Chi-

nese politicians, the investors promoting the QEC have been especially eager to win concessions and attract funds to build roads and to develop tourism projects in the border areas of Thailand, Laos, Burma and Yunnan. Their plans involve the establishment of hotels, resorts, casinos, shopping centres as well as 'model cultural villages' catering to adventurous 'ecotourists'[5].

However, the most prominent framework and prime mover of Mekong tourism is the ADB's GMS scheme.

The GMS Tourism Programme

Since formed in 1992, the GMS initiative has endorsed more than 100 development projects in the field of transport, energy, tourism, telecommunication, environment and human resource development. While seven priority projects are directly related to tourism, 34 projects pertain to road, railway, water and air transport and more than 50 to hydro-electricity generation.

The GMS tourism working group has successfully garnered support from governments, international development agencies, large industry associations and corporations to promote the subregion as a single tourism market (ADB 1996, PATA 2001).

Apart from the ADB, representatives of the six Mekong countries' national tourism organizations (NTOs), international tourism associations such as the World Tourism Organization (WTO), the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA), ASEANTA, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and specialized UN agencies, have been involved in the GMS scheme.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), which has eagerly marketed Thailand as a 'gateway' to other Mekong countries, has also played a key role in the programme. Since 1996, TAT's office in

Bangkok has accommodated the GMS tourism working group's secretariat known as the Agency for Coordinating Mekong Tourism Activities (AMTA)[6].

Thailand also hosted the first Mekong Tourism Forum (MTF) – an annual event initiated by the GMS tourism working group – on the occasion of PATA's annual conference in Pattaya in April 1996[7].

The MTF seeks possibilities to realize the 'Mekong Dream'– a concept designed by PATA to promote 'hassle-free' air and over-land travel between Mekong countries since lack of accessibility, insufficient provisions for safety and difficult immigration regulations are seen by the industry as the main obstacles to regional tourism growth (Chandler 1995).

In addition, to raise market awareness of the subregion's tourism resources, a worldwide campaign was launched at the MTF 1996 to promote 30 cultural and natural tourist sites as "Jewels of the Mekong."[8]

While working towards the removal of all barriers to travel in the Mekong Basin area – including physical, economic, organizational and legal barriers – that have so far discouraged foreign visitors and investors, the GMS initiative has emphasized 'sustainable development' and 'ecotourism' as worthy goals.

The 'Concept Plan for tourism development in the Greater Mekong Subregion 1999-2018s', outlines the GMS strategy for the next 20 years. The major goal is "to consolidate a 'Mekong' cultural tourism, ecotourism and adventure tourism network by linking destinations, circuits and routes" by the end of 2006.

By 2018, it anticipates the GMS region to be "one of the world's most important ecotourism and cultural tourism destinations" and "a safe, accessible and 'good value' (value for money) destination to experience the rich, natural, historical and the diverse cultural

heritage of the peoples and places along and adjacent to the Mekong/Lancang River[9]" (AMTA 1998).

Whereas ecotourism has nurtured notions of small-scale and controlled development, this plan aims at luring millions of additional international visitors to the Mekong subregion[10]. Moreover, the list of priority projects proposed in the study are in line with the ADB's GMS mega-infrastructure programme and reflect a heavy emphasis on improving transportation systems involving navigation, highway construction and air route expansion[11].

The study says, "In the long term, there will be emphasis on the creation of networks and gateways, transportation nodes and international standard facilities to accommodate all segments of the tourism market throughout the subregion" (AMTA 1998).

In other words, there will be a focus on ecotourism and other alternative tourism forms such as 'village tourism' as long as there are major bottlenecks in infrastructure, which restrict large-scale tourism. Once all gates have been thrown open and the necessary facilities are in place, the plan is to tout for all shades of tourism, which ultimately means a shift to the development of mainstream mass tourism.

Meanwhile, it is widely acknowledged that the majority of the Bank's projects not only fail to meet their standards but are responsible for severe impacts on local communities and the environment[12].

For instance, the ADB put forward a proposal in 1996 for conservation management in watershed areas, which involves the gradual relocation of some 60 million mountain people in the subregion. This massive resettlement programme has been legitimated with the claim that the wide-spread practice of shifting cultivation is a major cause for environmental destruction[13]. In addition, a countless number of people are likely to be displaced and lose their tra-

ditional livelihoods by the Bank's more than 50 large dam projects.

According to ADB's belief, in the name of 'development' and 'poverty reduction'[14], local communities should abandon their traditional self-reliant lifestyles and economic activities and turn to ecotourism as an alternative source of income in new locations. On the occasion of the 9th Ministerial Meeting of the GMS Economic Cooperation Programme in Manila in January 2000, Warren Evans, manager of the ADB's Environment Division, said, "We need to persuade hill communities that it's in their best interest to conserve rather than exploit natural resources by encouraging community participation in ventures such as ecotourism. They can discourage poachers and illegal loggers and operate sound tourist facilities"[15].

To introduce a comprehensive conservation programme that involves unprecedented mass evictions and inevitably degrades indigenous societies and cultures and then to offer tourism as compensation is certainly one of the deepest ironies manifested in the GMS scheme[16]. Much more so as tourism studies reveal that only a tiny proportion of tourism income actually reaches villagers.

For instance, Mingma Norbu Sherpa, a Nepalese representing the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) argued at the ADB's first 'propoor tourism' seminar that in many cases, tourism's benefits do not make it to a country's outer reaches, even though those areas bear the impact of tourism. He cited Nepal's famous trekking areas as an example, where local people receive only two per cent of the tourism revenue.[17]

Shivakumar, a development consultant based in Cambodia, concludes that the ADB and other donor agencies are primarily committed to creating a conducive environment for private corporations, rather than making a serious effort to lift weak and peripheral social groups out of poverty.

"In general, most projects developed by the donors, particularly the ADB and Japan, are capital-intensive while, at least in the short term, labour-intensive projects are needed in these nations to challenge poverty. They have not been able to propose a plan to combine simultaneously, in a balanced and mutually reinforcing manner, economic growth with welfare, empowerment, cultural renaissance, social transformation and sustainability. These observations lead one to conclude that reduction of poverty is not the priority of these projects..." (Shivakumar 1997, 11).

The examples in the next chapter will demonstrate how damaging tourism activities have proliferated throughout the Mekong subregion over the past decade and posed severe pressure on local people and the environment.

CHAPTER THREE

REAL-LIFE TOURISM TALES

(1) Mass 'Ecotourism' – Thai Style

During the 1970s and 1980s, the rapid growth of tourism in Thailand, particularly the upsurge of sex tourism, attracted severe criticism for its negative effects on Thai society.

"The impact of mass tourism in Thailand on the local people, their culture, natural resources and built environment has been substantial. Two striking effects of over-zealous profit-oriented tourism development efforts have been: (1) the disproportionate shift of capital to mass tourism-related construction and real estate developments at the expense of other sectors such as agriculture and small industry which are locally oriented, and (2) the promotion of over-consumption and excessive local resources with attendant new social and environmental pressures on local people and environments." (Pholpoke 1998)

Coinciding with government and industry efforts to diversify Thailand's tourism products and to shed its worsening image as a 'spoilt' destination, has been the growing interest in 'ecotourism'[18]. Acknowledging that tourism in the past had caused severe damages, Seree Wangpaichitr, the former TAT Governor, said in an interview with the Bangkok Post in June 1998: "Ecotourism is the heart of long-term tourism development."

He further argued that the mass tourism promotion by the TAT is not incompatible with ecotourism. "The strategy is to distribute

the mass of tourism to a great number of places so that resources will not be over-exploited while distributing the economic benefits to the wider public."[19]

Unfortunately, Thailand has longstanding experiences with the mismanagement of forests, beaches, marine areas and other natural assets, and many hotels, resorts and other facilities have encroached on officially 'protected areas'[20]. Repeated attempts by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) and the Royal Forestry Department to open up national parks to private tourism businesses have elicited great controversy. Since 1997, the RFD has worked on a proposal to grant leases to operators of illegal tourist facilities on resort islands – a highly disputed plan that is expected to be approved by the government in the near future[21].

Many observers were amazed, about the strong opposition by local residents and environmentalists against the filming of 20th Century Fox's movie 'The Beach', starring Leonardo DiCaprio, in Phi Phi Islands National Park in Southern Thailand in 1999, which involved profound landscape changes at Maya Bay. But the protest actions and the related lawsuit filed by local government agencies and citizens against the film company and authorities, who gave permission to 're-design' a part of the park, need to be seen in the context of the fierce struggle for the protection and enforcement for Thailand's national park laws.

Opponents repeatedly pointed out that 'The Beach' affair, which even led to an international boycott campaign against the Hollywood movie, was a precedence case, and the fight to save Maya Bay was not about just one island but about the fate of all parks in the country. The reason given by Thai officials to allow the controversial film project to go ahead was to boost the country's tourism industry and income for local communities. But critics have warned such incidents make a mockery of conservation efforts and the legal system and set a bad example that commercialism can override any other issue in Thailand[22].

Indeed, the situation is worsening. Under the pretext of ecotourism promotion, the RFD has recently implemented massive tourism-related infrastructure projects – some involving logging operations – in parks countrywide, funded with loans from the World Bank and Japan. The frenzied construction of roads, parking lots, visitor centres, bungalows, camp sites and nature trails neatly coincided with the RFD's 'Visit National Park Year 2000' aimed at attracting more than 20 million domestic and international tourists to the parks that year[23].

In Thailand, ecotourism development in nature reserves generally pursues without the involvement of surrounding local communities in decision-making and without adequate discussion on who owns the land and natural resources, how land should be used, where and how tourist facilities should be built, visitor volume or regulations on tourist conduct, all of which has created and aggravated ecological problems and conflict between the government, private industry and communities.

For instance, when the RFD proposed to increase the land area protected by national parks in northern Thailand a few years ago, some 10,000 people – primarily from ethnic minoritiy groups – rejected the RFD's plans to evict them from their lands and held street demonstrations in the city of Chiang Mai (Pleumarom 1997/98).

The social injustice inherent in 'tourism-cum-conservation' projects is evident as they stop the access to land and natural resources of one social group – poor villagers who have often inhabited the area for generations – and open these areas for other groups – investors and paying ecotourists[24].

Whenever the Thai economy is in trouble, the government resorts to tourism as a saviour. With agriculture and industry staggering in the 1980s, it seized on services and declared 1987 'Visit Thailand Year'.

Following the financial meltdown in 1997, the then government of Chuan Leekpai responded with an 'Amazing Thailand' promotional campaign. Facing a new economic downturn, the present government under Thaksin Shinawatra has vowed to boost foreign exchange earnings from tourism by 50 billion baht (US$1.1 billion) in 2001[25]. The target requires that the country attracts an additional 1.9 million foreign visitors. Under the new plan, many thousands of hitherto undeveloped villages are earmarked for 'community-based ecotourism' projects. Meanwhile, a well-formulated conservation policy to counter the impact of increased visitor volume and spatial expansion of tourism is conspicuously absent[26]. This suggests that the country's natural resources will further be sacrificed for short-term economic gains.

(2) Golfers' Dream – Farmers Nightmare

Since the late 1980s, golf has been aggressively promoted as a lucrative tourism business. Starting out from Thailand, the golf course boom spread into other Mekong countries causing immense environmental and social conflicts[27].

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, some 200 courses were built in Thailand. The construction of golf complexes – often involving other large-scale developments such as hotels, residential houses, shopping centres, entertainment facilities, power plants, access roads and even airports – came under heavy attack for environmental reasons. Many of the projects were accused of encroaching on parkland and driving off farmers from their land (Pleumarom 1994).

Golf courses require large stretches of land and replace biodiversity-rich wilderness areas and fertile agricultural lands. Another major concern is the enormous waste of water resources for such projects. According to the Mahidol University in Bangkok, the turf of an 18-hole international standard golf course consumes up to 6,500 cubic

meters of water per day which is equal to the daily household demand of 6,000 city residents or 60,000 villagers[28].

While scarce water reserves are being diverted to keep the courses green, nearby communities are suffering due to the lack of drinking and irrigation water. In addition, the excessive application of chemical fertilizers and pesticides necessary to maintain the courses covered with foreign grass species threatens to pollute air, soil, and water, and create health risks for both wildlife and humans. Alarming reports were published in the Thai media about caddies and green-keepers affected by acute chemical poisoning – e.g., headache, nausea, respiratory illnesses and skin diseases[29].

In the southern Lao province Champasak, Thai investors had plans to build a mega-resort project, including golf courses, hotels, casinos, a power station and an international airport, in a pristine area at the famous Lee Pee waterfalls on the Mekong River[30]. Although the developers promoted the resort as an 'ecotourism' venture, it was met with resistance by Lao and Thai environmentalists as well as local villagers because it would have involved deforestation, ecological disruption of the fragile Mekong river system, displacement of villagers, and probably undesirable social and cultural changes in nearby communities. Due to increasing public protests and financial difficulties, however, the controversial project was halted[31].

Vietnam has also built a number of golf courses to attract foreign tourists. Citizens protested when developers flattened a public forest in Thu Duc near Ho Chi Minh City for the construction of the Golf Vietnam Club[32].

The Thai developers of the King's Island Golf Resort at the Dong Mo dam reservoir near Hanoi built a golf course at the edge of the lake below the reservoir's spillway level without considering rising water levels during rainy season. During devastating floods in 1994, provincial officials allowed the release of large amounts of

water from the reservoir to save the golf resort, which resulted in the destruction of the rice crops in neighbouring farming areas[33].

Albeit a 1995 governmental decree that prohibited to convert more rice lands to other purposes, the South Korean conglomerate Daewoo, received an investment licence to build a golf course on rice fields at Kim No village on the outskirts of Hanoi[34]. Violence broke out at the construction site, when angry farmers, who had not been properly informed about the project, tried to stop an army unit from plowing up the land for the golf course[35].

In Cambodia, several golf course projects surfaced around Phnom Penh, near the Angkor Wat temple complex, and in Sihanoukville as part of the huge Naga Island casino resort proposed by a Malaysian company[36].

For the construction of the Singapore-financed Cambodian Country Club at the Bang Ta Yab Lake outside of Phnom Penh, the developer wanted to drain a large stretch of marshland and remove more than 450 families around the lake, mostly fruit and vegetable growers. But the villagers refused to leave and protested to the authorities, who treated them as illegal squatters and refused to compensate them[37].

Also in military-ruled Burma, golf courses have sprung up at tourist sites, including luxury golf-plus-casino resorts such as the Golden Paradise Resort near Tachilek in the Golden Triangle and the Andaman Club on Thathay Kyun Island in the South[38].

For the development of the Myanmar Golf Club in Rangoon, the army blockaded the site to scare off the people who had been living there for decades. When this failed, the government arrested one member of each family and sent them to jail. The remaining families were then moved against their will to a 'new town' far outside of the city[39].

(3) Cultural Heritage for Sale – The Case of Angkor Wat

In order to lure and entertain visitors, culture – as manifested in historical and religious sites, rituals, festivals, arts and crafts – has often been distorted unrecognizably in the process of being re-packaged as a tourist product. The famous 12th century Angkor temple complex at Siem Reap – the most sacred site and national symbol of Cambodia – is a glaring example as to how cultural heritage is no longer for local people to celebrate, but increasingly commoditized to lure foreign visitors.

With the Cambodian government aiming for one million foreigners a year to visit Angkor Wat, grave concerns have been raised that the temple area and its surroundings could be destroyed within a few years.

In 1995, UNESCO's World Heritage Committee even threatened to remove Angkor from the list of protected sites because Cambodian authorities had not met the necessary requirements such as adopting a cultural preservation law to deter the theft and smuggling of antiquities[40].

Thousands of invaluable artifacts have been stolen from the temple complex since it has opened up to tourists. The government has vowed to take precautionary measures to ensure protection zones at the historical and religious sites are respected. But this may not be enough to save Angkor due to inefficient bureaucracy, corruption and the absence of a functioning legislature and sufficient capacities to scrutinize, monitor and control projects.

Conservationists in and outside Cambodia were particularly appalled over the proposal for a US$20-million Angkor Wat high-tech sound-and-light show, saying it would turn the temples into a 'carnival-like attraction' or a 'Disney-like inane entertainment place'[41]. In 1995, the Malaysian YTL company claimed it would

promote "the biggest and best cultural event of its kind in the world".

The plan was to stage up to four performances per night, in which the temple as well as selected bas-relief carvings on its inner walls would be illuminated in colourful lights and voices in different languages be heard from loudspeakers. Opponents of the project voiced similar concerns like experts in Thailand, where such tourist shows at historical monuments have become commonplace and provoked debates because the use of massive floodlight and loudspeaker equipment speeds up the 'death' of the old, fragile buildings.

The YTL company also wanted to develop a 1,095-hectare site near the northwestern temples into a tourism zone including several luxury hotels, golf courses, a commercial centre, a hospital and other facilities – a project which was expected to attract more than US$1 billion investment[42].

In January 1996, even King Norodom Sihanouk voiced strong concern about the "commercialization" of Angkor and pressed for a review of YTL's plans for the light-and-sound show and hotel and the tourism complex in the area[43]. However, since Prime Minister Hun Sen's bloody coup against the co-prime minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh in July 1997 that resulted in a dramatic tourism slump in Cambodia, it has become quiet around YTL's Angkor show and accompanying developments.

Yet, in an all-out effort to revive the country's ruined tourism industry following the political turmoil, the government adopted in 1999 an 'open-skies' policy to increase international flights to Siem Reap, the gateway to the Angkor temples, and organized an extravagant 'Angkor 2000' millenium show[44]. Tourism officials' hopes that the combination of direct flights from overseas and spectacular promotional events will make Angkor part of an international 'must-see' itinerary appear to be realized.

In addition, the opening of new overland routes to Siem Reap from Thailand has attracted more visitors and investors to the area and fuelled the construction of more tourism facilities around Angkor[45]. As a result, renewed warnings of threats to the temples have been voiced in public, and there are growing worries that local people will be increasingly exposed to the typical ill-effects of tourism invasion[46].

(4) 'A Fascist Disneyland' – Tourism and Human Rights in Burma

The Burmese military government that has been condemned by the international community because of its gross human rights violations launched in 1996 an ambitious tourism promotion campaign 'Visit Myanmar (Burma) Year'[47]. The junta hoped to attract more than 250,000 foreign visitors to the country during 1996-97 to increase currency earnings and gain recognition in the international community after decades of isolation and a bloody military crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in 1988.

While Burmese tourism authorities and the industry stepped up promotion to sell the country as the 'Golden Land', critics increasingly delivered descriptions of Burma as a 'prison' for its citizens and a 'fascist Disneyland' for visitors' (Lawrence 2001).

Insisting that tourism cannot benefit a country, where people are denied basic rights, Burmese opposition groups and international human rights organizations have called for a tourism boycott to Burma. Democracy leader and Peace Nobel Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi has repeatedly urged foreign investors and tourists to stay away from the country until democratic reforms have been achieved[48].

The argument is that the income generated through tourism helps to sustain the oppressive regime and is spent on buying weapons

and expanding military action against its citizens. Since every foreign visitor entering the country has to purchase foreign exchange certificates equivalent to US$200, and many tourist facilities are state-owned, a considerable proportion of tourist dollars directly go into the junta's coffers. In addition, members of the military run their own tourism-related businesses or have formed joint ventures with private companies to increase their personal wealth and economic power.

The close links between the development of the tourist industry and human rights abuses have been well documented by official agencies such as the United Nations Human Rights Commission, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and Burmese and international civic groups[49].

Drawing on reports from Rangoon, Mandalay, Pagan, Taunggyi, Maymo and other places earmarked for tourism development, it is estimated that tens of thousands of families have been forcefully moved from their homes and land to pave the way for hotels, resorts and tourism-related infrastructure[50].

Most of the displaced people do not receive any compensation and have to resettle in areas which lack proper sanitation, electricity and water supply. Likewise deplorable, ordinary people have to provide forced and subhuman cheap labour to upgrade tourist sites and to build roads, railways and airports, in order to meet the increased transportation requirements for travel and tourism[51].

Burma's ethnic minorities, who have already suffered for decades under forced assimilation policies by the state, are now being lured away from their villages to serve as 'exotic' attractions in hotels or so-called 'model villages'[52]. In addition, thousands of Burmese women and girls, many of them from ethnic groups, have become victims of a burgeoning domestic sex trade and are being trafficked to Thailand to work as prostitutes[53].

That 'Visit Myanmar Year' turned out as a failure can be partly due to the success of the strong global movement against Burma tourism. Since 1997, tourist numbers have plummeted as a result of the Asian economic crises and increasing international sanctions against the country. During the fiscal year 1998-1999, Burma attracted merely 120,000 foreign visitors, less than half as many the junta had expected when it announced its 1996 tourism campaign[54]. Yet, Burmese officials remain optimistic and recently announced a new campaign aimed at increasing the number of tourists to Burma by 10 times to one million in 2001[55]!

CHAPTER 4

THE QUESTION OF SUSTAINABILITY

This critique of tourism policies and practices in the Mekong region reveals the vast gaps between 'sustainable tourism' as a theoretical ideal, what has been planned and what has been actually achieved. The grim realities as described in the various case studies leave serious doubts whether tourism development can be propelled towards more sustainability in the long term.

This is not to say that initiatives that have successfully managed to avoid major damages by fostering community-based and environmentally sound tourist activities do not exist. It also should not be denied that some tourism companies have taken positive voluntary measures to mitigate impacts such as pollution.

However, such 'success stories' are limited to a few micro-projects, and they have certainly not posed a real challenge to the status quo and considerably contributed to redirect the tourism industry as a whole.

A hard look at the overall situation leads to the conclusion that the policies pursued by governments, national tourism authorities and supranational bodies such as the ADB for the development of Mekong tourism have been those most suitable for promoting the industry rather than for the protection of the environment and the benefit of local communities.

Put simply, in the words of Wall, tourism promotion in Asia over the last years "has consumed massive amounts of capital and has failed to create a sustainable product. It appears that there has been an implicit belief that tourism development is about the construction of high quality hotels and that, once these are in place, all else will follow." (Wall 1998)

Indeed, little has been done to develop effective mechanisms to monitor and control developments aimed at curbing environmental degradation, social and cultural erosion and economic marginalization of the poor. Management plans, if there are any, are often ignored, and environmental, zoning and construction laws are not being properly enforced.

Many critical tourism-related issues – such as corruption, social vices, encroachment of public lands and diversion of natural resources, displacement of local and indigenous communities, and political suppression and human rights abuses – are typically neglected by tourism policy-makers and project managers. In the light of this, it is easy for critics to assert that 'sustainable tourism' in the Mekong region is little more than empty rhetoric and a public relations exercise to ward off public criticism[56].

What is it that makes it so difficult for tourism to deliver sustainable development, and why does there seem no prospect of significant positive change? Some explanations and aspects for further analysis will be provided in this last section.

First of all, sustainability itself is not a fixed and agreed term and, thus, subjected to interpretation. A number of tourism researchers have critiqued the concept and policies of sustainable tourism as insufficient and misleading.

"While [sustainable tourism] has drawn attention to the need to achieve a balance between business and environmental interests..., as a single-sector concept, it fails to acknowledge the intersectoral

competition for resources, the resolution of which is crucial for sustainable development" (Wall 1997).

Addressing the issues of power and vested interest, Mowforth and Munt note, "the principles of sustainable tourism are open to manipulation in the service of operators and others in the industry. That is not to say that the principles are not worthy of attention by all those in the industry; but it does suggest that the motives of those who apply them should also be scrutinized" (Mowforth/ Munt 1998).

Wheeller contends, " there are continual exhortations on the need to adopt a holistic approach to the subject of tourism development, planning and sustainability... A truly holistic approach would be one that embraces realism. Sustainable tourism unfortunately fails, at the practical level, even to acknowledge it" (Wheeller 1997).

In fact, the planning for 'sustainable tourism' in the Mekong region has largely remained a theoretical exercise without sufficiently taking into account the milieu, in which tourism evolves.

Therefore, Majone's argument is worth savouring: "A practical problem is not solved by offering a theoretical solution that does not take into consideration the limitations upon which the context imposes.

"Thus, it is quite misleading to employ ideal standards in evaluating or comparing alternative policy instruments; the standards must relate to the particular context in which the instruments are used. And because the context in which public policy is made includes values, norms, perceptions, and ideologies, technical considerations are insufficient as a criteria of choice." (cit. in Hall 1994)

It is also important to note that the concept of 'sustainable tourism' is deeply rooted in Western environmentalism that often takes the form of 'enlightenment' and is dependent on achieving a certain

level of prosperity and development. This, however, often appears to be at odds with the livelihood-based environmentalism in Southeast Asia and other parts of the Third World, where poor peasants and forest dwellers are struggling to defend and reclaim land and natural resources for economic and cultural survival (Hirsch/Warren 1998).

A better understanding of these contradictions may help to explain why many ecotourism projects based on Western conservation ideals are resisted by local people and fail.

What is also often ignored is that globalization has induced its own particular political dynamics in the region, which are to the detriment of the commitments to achieve sustainable development. In this context, Parnwell's study on how Mekong tourism has become part of the global race-to-the-bottom is instructive (Parnwell 1998).

Highlighting examples of human rights violations in Burma, sex tourism and the HIV/AIDS crisis in Thailand and the environmental impacts of golf tourism in the region, he argues "the impact of tourism depends crucially upon the ownership of regulatory power" and explains how transnational agencies and corporations work through and with influential local actors and institutions – what he calls 'conduits of capitalism'.

His conclusion is that regulation for the global tourism industry is taking precedence over the regulation of its development. As a result, local people, and especially the poor and marginalized, are exposed to greater political, social, economic and ecological insecurity (ibid.).

Since especially in poor countries tourism's economic viability is seen as a prime criterion for sustainability, the old question who actually benefits from tourism needs to be raised anew in the face of globalization and liberalization. Third World tourism is mainly

driven by foreign industry interests, and the economic gains for destination countries are often greatly over-estimated.

A 1990 study on Thailand by the Bangkok-based National Institute and Development Administration, for example, came up with disillusioning results: At least 60 per cent of tourism revenue, amounting to US$4 billion in 1989, had flown out of the country for the import of goods and services and as profits to foreign tourism corporations and other remittances (TDSC 1991/92).

A new study prepared by UNCTAD on 'The Sustainability of International Tourism in Developing Countries' presents even more alarming findings (UNCTAD 2001). It emphasizes that the economic, social and environmental sustainability of Third World countries' tourism industries is increasingly threatened by levels of financial 'leakages' that can easily reach 75 per cent and escalating "predatory practices and anti-competitive behaviour" of travel and tourism corporations mainly based in Europe and the United States.

The UNCTAD report further points out that the combined impact of these factors undermines the economic viability of local enterprises and the ability of countries to allocate necessary resources for environmental protection and sustainable development (ibid.). Under these conditions, the proclaimed goals of sustainable tourism to enhance local economic benefits and the preservation of natural and cultural resources are extremely difficult to achieve.

Important lessons regarding the fragility of the tourism industry can be learned from the Asian economic crisis that started in June 1997 with the financial meltdown in Thailand (Pleumarom 1998; Wall 1998).

It has shown how much tourism is part of the fickle global economy and an industry that undergoes boom-and-bust cycles with seri-

ous consequences for the stability of national and regional economies.

There is little doubt that the inflationary tourism policies in the Mekong subregion in the early 1990s greatly contributed to the 1997 'crash'. During the era of the so-called 'bubble economy', indiscriminate and unsustainable investments led to the rapid conversion of lands into opulent tourism resort complexes. With progressive economic liberalization, the tourism, real estate and construction industries boomed in all Mekong countries, backed by local banks and global speculative capital[57].

In the immediate aftermath of the economic slump, Asian tourism markets almost collapsed[58]. In Thailand, the currency devalued and major corporations – many of which had expanded into Mekong neighbouring countries – were exposed for having mismanaged their way into massive indebtedness. Many tourism developers went bankrupt or were forced to size down their projects. Particularly golf course and resort businesses, which had become a new symbol of globalized leisure and tourist lifestyle in Southeast Asian societies, experienced a dramatic downturn[59].

Many tourism-related infrastructure projects initiated by regional cooperation initiatives, including those of the ADB, were put on hold as resources were needed to strengthen Asian countries' financial systems[60]. In Thailand, for example, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the ADB granted a US$17 billion loan, which included a rigid Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP).

At that time, this author suggested that in environmental terms at least, the Asian crisis could be a blessing in disguise (Pleumarom 1998). As a result of decreasing numbers of travellers, for example, airlines closed unprofitable routes, sold aircraft and cancelled orders for new aircraft, and governments cut budgets for airport ex-

pansion and construction[61], which raised the prospect of less pollution and less damaging developments. Also the malaise of rampant land grabs, park encroachments and environmental degradation in relation to tourism projects no longer seemed as threatening as before because Asian developers were cash-strapped and retreated (ibid).

As it has turned out, however, not only have Mekong tourism promoters returned to 'business as usual' but governments in the region have made all-out efforts to compensate for the heavy debts, declining growth and decreasing foreign exchange reserves through even more rapacious resource extraction policies[62].

Thailand's present policy aimed at turning every corner of the country into a tourist site and excessively boosting the number of tourists is a case in point. Simultaneously, public and private investments in environmental programmes have significantly decreased because of the financial crunch.

Another question that should be asked is: Can tourism be sustainable in a region deeply affected by political instability, human rights problems and socio-economic crisis?

In the context of the preparations for 'Visit ASEAN Year 2002', for example, tourism officials admitted that the event could be seriously hampered by political turmoil and social unrest in Southeast Asian nations but at the same time tried to portray the problems as 'isolated incidents' to engender the notion of a 'carefree' holiday for consumers[63].

Richter writes: "Scarcity, deprivation, inequality, remnants of colonialism and the proxy wars of the superpowers set the stage for random violence, ethnic conflict, revolution, and even hostage taking... The very underdevelopment that exacerbates the resolution of political demands and frustrates economic aspirations is a po-

tential asset in attracting tourism. Thus we have a paradox: nations, which are veritable hellholes for most of their citizens are sold as 'unspoilt paradises' to outsiders" (Richter 1995).

Public Participation

The concept of 'sustainable tourism' implies a high degree of public participation in the process, and public participation implies that local communities will have a degree of control of the tourism development process (Hall 1994).

However, the well-sounding words of 'local participation' and 'community control' often sound incredible and even bizarre, when applied to destination countries without democracy and freedom like Burma.

And, "Can a few corporate giants substitute for popular participation?" asks Shivakumar (1997). As regards tourism planning and management, regional initiatives such as the ADB-led GMS tourism scheme overly rely on foreign consultants[64], who often have little knowledge of local situations, whereas "the type of subregional projects so far proposed defy the spirit of local participation and sustainable development to which most donors and multilateral institutions commit themselves..." (ibid).[65]

While in Mekong countries – particularly Burma, China, Vietnam and Laos – the possibilities for public participation are extremely weak, Thailand has at least a relatively well-established civic rights and environmental movement and a free press, and people can relatively openly question harmful developments and articulate their needs and aspirations.

Non-governmental organizations have also highlighted critical tourism issues for many years and pressed for holistic and people-

centred development policies that are not narrowly confined to tourism[66].

As outlined in the previous sections, major problems and conflicts have emerged because many rural and indigenous communities lost control of their land, natural and cultural resources and the political process as a result of 'top-down' tourism development. So one of the most urgent tasks ahead is to develop policies and tools to protect local people against uncontrolled and damaging tourism and to give them more power in development and conservation projects in general.

A number of grassroots-oriented organizations are already working in this direction and have put forward proposals aimed at tackling fundamental problems in development and natural resource management.

For instance, an alliance of civil society organizations and local community networks in Thailand has developed a 'People's Agenda' that calls for a comprehensive reform of government policies and urges policymakers to take the following actions:

- assert sovereignty over natural resources and not to relinquish control to transnational corporations;

- develop alternative economic systems based on the self-sufficiency of local communities, their use of natural resources and local knowledge systems;

- base its policies on natural resource management on a holistic view of nature and the diversity of natural ecosystems, cultures and knowledge systems;

- ensure local people's participation in drafting policies on the management of natural resources;

- guarantee as well as strengthen the rights of local communities to manage natural resources;

- support the efforts of local community networks towards sustainable management of natural resources and local economic development (Rajesh 2001).

Notably, the Agenda calls for a just and equitable land reform that favours small-scale farming communities and demands that "Foreign or Thai landowners must be prevented from accumulating and controlling large areas of cultivable lands for speculative or non-farming purposes" (ibid).

This proposal aimed to resolve the escalating land conflicts is crucial in relation to speculative investments in hotels, golf resorts and other land-consuming tourism-related developments that involve the expropriation of village commons, agricultural lands and natural areas, and, thus, increasing hardships for small-scale farming communities.

For the time being, however, there is little evidence that 'bottom-up' development alternatives like the 'People's Agenda', which are based on the principles of economic equity, social justice, cultural integrity and ecological sustainability, are being heeded in tourism development planning, even though such grassroots-oriented proposals could be the key to root out the causes of problems.

It probably needs more informed debate and public pressure to steer the tourism 'powers-that-be' towards a more holistic and people-centred approach and to persuade them to reorient their policies and practices accordingly.

As Teo and Chang aptly note, "... one should not underestimate the salience of local players in the global game. It is by them that the success or failure of tourism development is ultimately decided" (Teo/Chang 1998).

Endnotes

[1] The Mekong subregion comprises Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and Yunnan in Southern China

[2] As for the impacts of tourism in Thailand in general, see for example Meyer 1988; TDSC 1991/91; TEI 1994; Cohen 1996; various issues of *New Frontiers,* a bi-monthly news bulletin on tourism, development and environment in the Mekong Subregion.

[3] *Bangkok Post,* 'Visit ASEAN Year to be a Joint Effort', 15.1.2001

[4] *New Frontiers,* 'ASEAN's Mekong Group Gets Off to a Tentative Start', 2(6), June 1996

[5] *The Nation,* 'Yunnan Conference: Cooperating on Growth', 5.12.1995; *New Frontiers,* 'Linking Laos to the World', 1[6] October 1995; *The Nation,* 'Four countries square off on the banks of the mighty Mekong', 27.5.1997; *The Nation,* 'Businessmen want access to new markets', 28.7.1997

[6] AMTA publishes a quarterly newsletter and has recently launched a GMS tourism website www.visit-mekong.com.

[7] PATA is one of the world's most powerful business grouping dominated by the US private sector and has strongly influenced tourism policies in several South East Asian countries over the last four decades. It is comprised of around 2000 organizations involved in the travel and tourism industry worldwide, 84 of which are government promotion agencies, 61 airlines, 600 hotel businesses, 450 tour operators, 360 destination operators and corporations. In 1998, PATA relocated its headquarters from San Francisco to Bangkok to further underpin its interests in the region. For more information, see website www.pata.org.

[8] As "Jewels of the Mekong" are promoted in Burma: Rangoon (Shwedagon Pagoda), Kyaikhtiyo (Golden Rock), Mandalay (Mingun Pagoda), Taunggyi (Inle Lake), Pagan (Ananda Temple), in Cambodia: Angkor Wat, Phnom Penh and surroundings, Sihanoukville, Tonle Sap Lake, Ratanakiri; in China's Yunnan province: Kunming, Stone Forest, Xishuangbanna, Dali, Lijiang; in Laos: Luang Prabang, Champasak,

Vientiane, Xieng Khoung (Plain of Jars), Lak Sao; in Thailand: The Old Royal City (Rattanakosin Island-Bangkok, Ban Chiang, Prasat Hin Khao Phanom Rung Historical Park, Ubon Ratchathani Province, Chiang Rai Province; in Vietnam: Halong Bay, Hanoi City, Ninh Binh Province, Thua Thien Hue Quangnam-Danag Province (ADB 1996).

[9] Lancang is the Chinese name for the Mekong River.

[10] According to official statistics, the GMS received 14.1 million visitors in 2000, with Thailand having the biggest share of 67.76%; this was followed by Vietnam (15.14%), Yunnan (7.12%), Laos (5.22%), Cambodia (3.30%) and Burma (1.47%) (*AMTA Newsletter,* 'Visitor Arrivals to GMS Reach 14.1 Million in 2000', April 2001). The Concept Plans set a target of attracting an additional 2-2.5 million international tourists to the GMS by the end of 2006, and even higher growth rates are expected in the following years when more infrastructure projects will be completed (AMTA 1998).

[11] See also ADB 1996 and *The Nation,* 'Transport routes hold key to Mekong', 1.3.1996.

[12] To some extent, the ADB admits the failure of projects they have funded, even though internal evaluations by the Bank are considered as conservative in their conclusions (TERRA 2000). Walden Bello, Professor of Sociology and Public Administration at the University of the Philippines in Manila and Director of Focus on the Global South – a research program based at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok – refers to an assessment by ADB's Strategy and Policy Department, which says, "In most instances, operational performance was far short of projections." This was due to "weaknesses in project design, particularly where there was weak institutional capacity and there were inappropriate policies. Implementation of most projects tended to focus on completion of their physical infrastructure components rather than institutional development and support service components and policy reforms." Bello further cites an internal source as saying that "almost all forestry projects have failed", and only 36 per cent of projects in the Agriculture and Natural Resources Sector and 33 per cent in the Social Infrastructure Sector are rated "generally successful" (Bello 2000). At the ADB's 2001 annual meeting, Western donor countries and shareholders also stepped up pressure on the Bank to

refine its development policies, avoid duplication of work and not to waste scarce resources, according to a *Agence France Press* report of 12.5.2001.

[13] At a press conference in relation to ADB's second meeting of the GMS Working Group on the Environment in Bangkok in August 1996, Noritada Morita, then Director of the ADB's Programmes Department, defended the resettlement plan by saying, "We need to reduce the population of people in the mountainous areas and bring them back to normal life. They will have to settle in one place." (cit. in *The Nation*: 4.8.1996). Tourism industry representatives have also expressed the view that poor communities constitute the main obstacle to sustainable development. A recent article on Mekong tourism in PATA's Asian Hospitality Magazine claims, for example, "Due to extreme poverty in many parts of these emerging economies, local people neither understand nor really care about sustainable development. After having been left in the backwaters of the development process, their urge to get rich quick may clash with a long-term approach to the issue, with the destination paying the ultimate price." (PATA 2001).

[14] In accordance with the OECD's and World Bank's policies aimed at halving world poverty by the year 2015, the ADB has in recent years listed the alleviation of poverty as its 'over-arching' goal. In relation to its annual meeting in Honolulu in May 2001, it organized for the first time a seminar entitled 'Tourism and Poverty Reduction in Asia and the Pacific'. Statements by several Bank officials reveal that the ADB's 'new' pro-poor tourism strategy is actually based on the old 'trickle-down' concept; it proceeds on the assumption that tourism growth spurred by private-sector investment will boost job opportunities and the distribution of economic benefits, and will, thus, *eventually* bring about poverty alleviation and sustainable development. For more information on the ADB's pro-poor tourism seminar, see website http://www.adb.org, *New Frontiers,* 'ADB: Tourism as Tool in War Against Poverty', 7[2], March-April 2001]; Honolulu Advertiser, 'Poor Benefit Little from Tourism, Critics Contend, 9.5.2001.

[15] cit. in *New Frontiers*, 'GMS projects set to roll again', 6[1], January-February 2000

[16] For instance, Grainne Ryder, policy director of the Canadian organization Probe International said in an interview with *The Nation*, "For the ADB, the displacement of people means poverty reduction. The ADB first defines people as poor and as obstacles in their watershed and dam building plans, and so they must be moved; thereafter, jobs can be created as tourist guides, forest guards or even plantation workers" (cit. in *New Frontiers*, 'ADB's undemocratic structure and 'poverty reduction' rhetoric exposed," 6[3], May-June 2000).

[17] Cit. in *Honolulu Advertiser*, 'Poor Benefit Little from Tourism, Critics Contend', 9.5.2001. Research conducted in Northern Thailand confirm Sherpa's findings. Canadian anthropologist Jean Michaud observed in Ban Suay, a Hmong community in Chiang Mai village, that by stepping into the tourist business, some villagers had been able to upgrade their financial position dramatically. In total, however, only about three per cent of the tourist money remained in the village, the rest went to urban-based tour agencies and outside businessmen such as pick-up drivers or those organizing elephant rides or bamboo-rafting. Michaud also found that, "In most villagers opinions, from the moment tourism business was perceived to be a more risky one than anticipated, since some of the ingredients of traditional Hmong life inside households were becoming endangered by the increase both in tourist arrivals and further demand,...only those with nothing to lose would in such circumstances keep on" (Michaud 1993). A study by this author in a community of Daraang ethnic people in Chiang Mai has come to very similar results (Pleumarom 1997/98).

[18] The Thai government has been particularly sensitive to international media reports that portray Thailand as a centre of prostitution, drugs and AIDS and often countered such negative descriptions by arguing the country has other attractions than nightlife to offer. For instance, in relation to a recent government campaign to restore 'social order' in Bangkok, Interior Minister Purachai Plumsombun claimed that foreigners visit Thailand because they want to see 'natural beauty' and do not come for prostitutes or to take drugs. Questioning the Thai government's efforts to clean up notorious entertainment places, an article in the *Time* magazine predicted Bangkok would soon resume being a sex tourist's paradise. In response, Prime Minister Thaksin harshly criticized Time and urged the

public not to read magazines whose articles were not "constructive" to Thailand. (*The Nation*, 'PM lashes out at Time', 10.9.2001).

[19] cit. in *Bangkok Post*, 'In Charge of Tapping the Tourists', 29.6.1998.

[20] The Royal Forestry Department (RFD) that oversees 'protected areas' has been under constant attack by the Thai media, environmental organizations and academics for its incapability to properly manage ecosystems and natural resources; see for example the special issue of the *Thai Development Newsletter* on 'Natural Resource Management and The Poor in Thailand' (No.24,1994); *Watershed* 1[2] 1995/96 and Hirsch 1998.
According to Piyathip Pipithvanichtham of RFD's National Parks Division, major problems in parks are for example: unclear boundaries, lack of management plans and guidelines, inadequate staff, lack of resources for research and education and too many development projects. She emphasizes that while the budget system "allots very little money for conducting research projects of educational programmes within a park, most of the annual budget is for constructing buildings, paving roads, buying vehicles, hiring staff and paying administration costs." In relation to forest encroachment and conflicts between park officials and local residents, she explains that difficulties are "compounded by unscrupulous land developers such as resort and golf consortiums and politicians who use the issue to win votes... With no support from politicians and local authorities, these problems have stymied the RFD's efforts (Pipitvanichtham 1997).

[21] *New Frontiers*, 'Fight Against Park Encroachers Appears Lost', 6[4], July-August 2000.

[22] In a petition to the Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives, dated 12 January 1999, 41 Thai professors in Law said: "As professors of the law, we call on HE the Minister of Agriculture who is the person in charge according to the National Park Act..., to revoke the permission to film the motion picture named The Beach inside Nopparat Thara - Phi Phi Islands National Park as soon as possible and prosecute violators of the National Park Act, so that this case will set a standard and prevent similar events in other national parks, and to show the international community, which is following the news, that Thailand does not value money above righteousness; that Thailand, Thai people, Thai civil servants and Thai politi-

cians have dignity; that no foreign country or company, however much money it has, cannot buy Thai national parks, Thai righteousness and Thai law." For more information on 'The Beach' affair, see various issues of New Frontiers (1999-2000) and the website of Justice for Maya Bay International Alliance (JUMBIA) at http://www.uq.edu.au/~pgredde.

[23] *Asian Wall Street Journal* , 'Ecotourism Bulldozes Ahead', 30.6.2000; *The Nation*, 'National Parks Threatened by Tourist Tide', 14.5.2000; Tim-Team 2000.

[24] Krishna Ghimire of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) suggests that most official tourism-cum-conservation efforts in Thailand appear to have been concentrated primarily on "driving away" local people from protected areas. "The creation and management of protected areas has produced prolonged discontent in many locations, although many of the protests have tended to be short-lived and sporadic due to the lack of outside political support...Consequently, in Thailand today, many weaker social groups find themselves increasingly helpless and at the mercy of the RFD and the bureaucracy in Bangkok." (Ghimire 1991)

[25] *Bangkok Post*, 'Earnings Target Up Bt50 billion', 22.4.2001.

[26] *The Nation*, 'A Quick Fix is Not the Answer', 24.4.2001; *The Nation*, 'Tourism Plan Ignores Threats to the Environment', 25.5.2001.

[27] In the face of the unprecedented golf boom in Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries in the early 1990s, the environmental and social impacts of golf courses became a major theme in scientific studies, NGO publications, newspapers and magazines; see for example MOSTE 1993; *Asia Magazine*, 'Rough Justice', 15-17.4.1994, Pleumarom 1994; GAG'M Updates (1993-1996); *The Economist*, 'Golfonomics: Asia in the Rough', 20.12.1997-2.1.1998.

[28] Cit. in *Asia Magazine*, 15-17.4.1994.

[29] *The Nation*, 'The Hazards of Golf Course Chemicals', 25.2.1995.

[30] *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 'All this, Yours: Thai Developer Plans Controversial Resort in Laos', 16.6.1994; *The Nation*, 'Lao Resort Put to the Green Test', 3.2.1995; *Bangkok Post*, 'Work to Start This Month on $140-million Thai-Lao Resort', 4.4.1995.

[31] *The Nation*, 'World Bank Report Casts Shadow Over Resort Planned for Laos', 21.7.1995.

[32] *Manager Magazine*, 'Eighteen Holes & A Public Protest', October 1994.

[33] *The Nation*, 'VN Dabbles with a Huge Water Hazard', 10.2.1995.

[34] *Bangkok Post*, 'Daeha Golf Course Exempt from Decree on Rice Fields', 9.5.1995.

[35] *New Frontiers*, 'New Clashes Over Daewoo Golf Course', 3[1] January 1997.

[36] *The Business News*, 'Gambling Away Paradise Islands', 29.12.1994-11.1.1995; *The Nation*, 'Cambodia Gets into Swing of Golf Boom', 26.1.1996;

[37] *Phnom Penh Post*, 'Locals Ponder the Price of a Game of Golf', 20.10.-2.11.1995.

[38] *New Frontiers*, 'Golf Helps Swing Deals', 2[6] June 1996;

[39] *The Irrawaddy*, 'Going for the Green', 5[4-5] 1997.

[40] *New Frontiers*, 'Angkor Wat May Lose World Heritage Status', 1[6], October 1995.

[41] *Cambodia Daily*, 'Laser Spectacle to Beam Angkor to 21th Century', 10-12.11.1995; *Phnom Penh Post*, 'Angkor Secrets to be Lost in a Sound-and-Light Show Insult', 1-14.12.1995; *New Frontiers*, 'Development Plans for Angkor Wat 'Catastrophic'', 2[3] March 1996.

[42] *Cambodia Daily*, 'Siem Reap Development Zone: MOU Signed with Malaysians', 10-12.11.1995; *The Nation*, 'A Monumental Mistake', 6.3.1996.

[43] *Bangkok Post*, 'Sihanouk Questions ANGKOR Wat Plans', 30.1.1996.

[44] *New Frontiers*, 'Angkor in Focus', 6[1] January-February 2000; *New Frontiers*, 'Tourism Industry Gaining Steam, 6[2] March-April 2000; *The Nation*, 'Open Skies Bring Flocks of Tourists to Cambodia', 13.12.2000.

[45] *The Nation*, 'Siem Reap Hotel Boom', 28.3.00.

[46] Such concerns were raised, for example, by delegates of a World Tourism Organization Conference in Siem Reap in December 2000. On this occasion, Prime Minister Hun Sen declared: "The promotion of tourism without due consideration to the culture will lead to the culture being swallowed up by tourism." (cit. in *The Nation*, 'Striking a Balance', 16.12.2000)

[47] As for the debate on tourism and human rights in Burma and campaigns against 'Visit Myanmar Year', see for example, Sutcliffe 1994, Tim-Team 1994; NCGUB 1995; Pilger 1996; Parnwell 1998; various issues of *New Frontiers*, Burma Issues and The Irrawaddy; websites of the Free Burma Coalition http://www.freeburma.org and Tourism Concern http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk.

[48] In an interview with the Singapore-based satellite network Asia Business News in July 1996, Suu Kyi said: "We would like people to keep away during 'Visit Myanmar Year' as a symbol of solidarity with the movement for democracy in Burma." (cit. in *New Frontiers* 2[8], August 1996). Later, she told reporters: "Yes, my mind has not changed in any way. Tourists should come back to Burma at a time when it is a democratic society where people are secure – where there is justice, where there is rule of law." (cit. in *Burma News*, Spring 1997).

[49] In November 2000, the ILO decided to impose sanctions on Burma for its persistent use of forced labour. In addition, The UN General Assembly adopted a resolution in December 2000, condemning Burma for gross human rights violations, after the UN Human Rights Commission had released a report that deplored such abuses such as "extra-judicial, summary or arbitrary executions, enforced disappearances, rape, torture, inhuman treatment, mass arrests, forced labour including the use of children, forced relocation and denial of freedom of assembly, association,

expression and movement." In July 2001, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions concluded at a conference in Bangkok that contrary to the military government's claims, Burma "remains the world's biggest forced labour camp". *The Nation*, 'Report Accuses Burma Government of Indiscriminate Violence', 18.10.2000; *The Nation*, 'UN Accuses Junta of Rights Abuse', 6.12.2000; *The Nation*, 'US and EU Back Tough Stance on Forced Labour', 22.3.2001; *The Nation*, 'Burma Under Scrutiny Again Over Forced Labour', 15.5.2001; *The Nation*, 'Burma Remains 'World's Biggest Forced Labour Camp', 26.7.2001.

[50] See for example Sutcliffe 1994; Smith 1994; *Burma Issues*, 'Tourism Implosion', November 1996; Parnwell 1998.

[51] Sutcliffe 1994; Burma Peace Foundation 1995; Pilger 1996.

[52] *New Frontiers*, 'Welcome to Pine Country', 2[12], December 1996;

[53] Human Rights Watch 1994; various articles in *The Irrawaddys* special issue on 'Sex: The Forgotten Commodity', February 2001; *The Nation*, 'All Roads Leads to Misery', 9.4.2001.

[54] *New Frontiers*, 'Visit Myanmar Year 1996: Dead on Arrival', 2[10], October 1996; *New Frontiers*, 'Hitting Back at Tourism Boycott Campaigns', 6[5], Sept.-Oct. 2000.

[55] *The Nation*, 'Burma Vows One Million Tourists in 2001', 28.10.2000.

[56] In relation to ADB's GMS tourism scheme, for example, Wangpattana's comments are thought-provoking: "The power of the ADB's language of 'development' is best illustrated by the fact that its language is often adopted by the very critics that demand 'reform' of the Bank's policies and activities." Conscious of the flak it is taking from public voices for funding controversial mega-projects, "the Bank has cleverly incorporated 'poverty reduction' and 'socially and environmentally sustainable growth' in the agenda." (Wangpattana 2000).

[57] The structural problems that ushered Thailand into the financial and economic crisis are for example analysed in Phongpaichit P., Baker, C. 1998; Bello, W., Cunningham, S., Li Kheng Poh 1998; Laird 2000.

[58] *New Frontiers*, 'Grim Times for Asian Tourism', 4[1], Jan.-Feb. 1998.

[59] An article in *The Economist* (20.12.1997) says: "Many theories have been put forward to explain why the economic progress of Southeast Asia has so suddenly left the fairway: the forces of globalization; exclusive and unresponsive political systems; a pursuit of growth at the expense of everything else, including the environment and the livelihoods of the poor. The phenomenon of golf unites all these hypotheses...Golf courses, with their huge appetite for land and their dependence on ever-rising affluence, were among the most speculative investments. The bubble first burst in Japan, where more than 100 golf courses went bankrupt in the early 1990s and membership fees slumped to a fifth of their peak. In Thailand, three golf courses, once valued at the equivalent of US$200 million, were discreetly on the market in November [1997] for a mere US$18 million."

[60] *The Nation*, 'Bank Mulls Aid to Mekong Countries', 18.4.1999. Out of more than 100 approved projects, only 10 of the ADB-financed sub-regional infrastructure projects were completed or nearing completion by 2001 (PATA 2001).

[61] *New Frontiers*, 'Asian Air Travel Industry Fighting for Survival', 4[4]. July-Aug. 1998.

[62] Apart from giving tourism a new boost to bring more foreign exchange to Thailand, the government has also sought to promote other lucrative export products such as timber and prawns. Therefore, it has looked at reversing a logging ban imposed in the late eighties after parts of Thailand suffered devastating floods and mudslides, and there is also the plan to lift a 1998 ban on inland prawn farming, which was put in place after the practice destroyed 800,000 hectares of mangrove forests (Poonyarat 2001).

[63] *New Frontiers*, 'Visit ASEAN Campaign on the Roll', 7[1], Jan.-Feb. 2001.

[64] The original study for the tourism sector component of ADB's Regional Technical Assistance on Subregional Economic Cooperation (RETA 5535) was conducted by the American Lester Clark Tourism Resource Consultants in 1993 and 1994 (ADB 1994). Later, ADB's Tourism Working Group

commissioned a Japanese company, Pacific Consultants International Asia, to draft the Concept Plans for GMS tourism development (AMTA 1998).

[65] In an interview with Satoru Matsumo of the Japanese organization Mekong Watch, Touru Tatara, the Manager of the ADB Programme Department's GMS Unit, admitted the lack of people's participation in ADB's development projects. "Although participation has been claimed for a long time, the ADB has not really implemented it...We should spend more time and commit more resources [to civil society participation]. For example, we should avoid the style, in which we construct a road based on only the consultant's report."(cit. in *Watershed* 5[3] March-June 2000)

[66] Koson Srisang, who was the Executive Secretary of the Ecumenical Coalition on Third World Tourism from 1986 to 1992 in Bangkok, proposed that the search for solutions in Third World tourism should include a discussion of alternatives to tourism. "We should seek our own development rather than depending on tourism development... Where tourism is not yet there, forget about it. In fact, prevent it from coming in. And do something else as a way to develop our country, our communities and our people. Recognize the need for people's self-development. This is what I call an alternative **to** tourism; not alternative tourism." (Srisang 1991/92)

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MEKONG TOURISM – MODEL OR MOCKERY?: A CASE STUDY ON 'SUSTAINABLE TOURISM'

This paper first examines the regional tourism plans of the neighbouring countries of the Mekong Basin area, with a focus on the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) scheme initiated by the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

It presents case studies that suggest that destructive tourism projects persist and are spreading throughout the Mekong basin area despite the constant rhetoric of sustainable tourism or ecotourism; and in spite of the insistence by official and industry leaders framing Mekong tourism development that with improved planning and management, past mistakes can be avoided in new destinations.

It also discusses the question of sustainability by taking into account some broader issues such as the impact of globalization and lessons learned from the Asian economic crisis.

The paper argues that ill-defined and reductionist sustainable tourism policies need to be replaced by holistic and people-centred development initiatives, if the goal is to work towards a sustainable future.

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