

# Community-Based Ecotourism in Phuket and Ao Phangnga, Thailand: Partial Victories and Bittersweet Remedies

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By encouraging both ecological sustainability and grassroots development, community-based ecotourism offers hope that the environmental sensitivity and responsibility promoted by ecotourism can also serve the political, economic, and social interests of host communities. However, due to the difficulties of implementing community-based ecotourism in practice, success stories remain rare. This paper explores the feasibility of community-based ecotourism in Phuket and Ao Phangnga in southern Thailand. Using the region's oldest ecotourism company as its case study, this paper argues that community-based ecotourism in southern Thailand is only partially successful, and requires four tradeoffs: success and survival at the expense of ecotourism's spatial isolation and structural independence; local employment and benefits at the expense of local initiation and control; social status and mobility at the expense of social cohesion and harmony; and incipient environmentalism at the expense of ecological sustainability. Despite these tradeoffs, the benefits of ecotourism in Phuket still outweigh the costs in terms of community development.

**Key words:** Ao Phangnga, community-based ecotourism, community development, Phuket, Thailand, tradeoffs

## Introduction

Reflecting both a growing concern about the impacts of mass tourism, and a budding demand among tourists for novel experiences, the recent emergence of ecotourism worldwide has encouraged the transformation, or at least improvement, of the global tourism industry. Though ecotourism, in theory, stands apart from mass, conventional tourism by its small scale, sustainable activities, and greater local involvement, ecotourism, in practice, often falls short in promoting the interests of host communities throughout the developing world (Campbell, 1999; Cochrane, 1996). In an attempt to differentiate between forms of ecotourism that advance the needs and concerns of local communities, and those that simply take place in natural areas, several researchers have begun to employ the term 'community-based ecotourism' (Belsky, 1999; Fitton, 1996; Timothy & White, 1999). Recognising a 'need to promote both the quality of life of people and the conservation of resources' (Scheyvens, 1999: 246), community-based ecotourism can be defined as 'a form of ecotourism where the local community has substantial control over, and involvement in, its development and management, and a major proportion of the benefits remain within the community'

(WWF, 2001: 2). Despite potential limitations – including problems associated with defining the 'local' community, overcoming existing inequalities, and gaining community consensus – community-based tourism offers the possibility of greater local control and participation (Murphy, 1985).

The roots or underlying principles of community-based ecotourism derive from the concept of community development, a small-scale, locally oriented, and holistic approach to economic growth and social change (Horwich *et al.*, 1993; Lynn, 1992; Woodley, 1993). Community development encompasses several goals. Politically, it encourages autonomy, sovereignty, decision-making power, local participation, and community control over the initiation and direction of development projects (Timothy, 1999). In economic terms, community development cultivates sustainable and rewarding employment that is made available to all members of a community. Further, economic benefits are distributed widely and equitably, while remaining in the hands of locals rather than of outside individuals or corporations (Khan, 1997; Wallace & Pierce, 1996). The cultural value of community development stems from the emphasis placed on local traditions and values. Moreover, the social cohesion, harmony, and cooperation that it enables enhance individual self-reliance, pride and hope for the future (Ross & Wall, 1999). Lastly, community development encourages conservation, environmental education, and the sustainable use of natural resources (de Haas, 2002; Vincent & Thompson, 2002). In short, community-based ecotourism strives to merge the sustainability and conservation essential to ecotourism with the benefits, control, involvement, and welfare that underpin community development.

The primary locations of the research on which this paper is based were the island province of Phuket on Thailand's southwest coast, and Ao Phangnga Marine National Park, a 400 square kilometre bay that straddles Phuket and the neighbouring provinces of Phangnga and Krabi (Figure 1).

Phuket has for centuries featured a high relative level of economic wealth due to its natural resources in tin, rubber and oil palm (Uthoff, 1997). The growth of international tourism in recent decades has extended Phuket's economic advantage over other provinces of Thailand, making it the wealthiest province in southern Thailand and among the top 10 in the entire country (Alpha Research, 2002: 280). Beginning in the early 1980s, the tourism industry of Phuket expanded rapidly, with international tourist arrivals growing at an average rate of 18% per year during the 1990s and reaching 2.7 million by 2001 (TAT, 2003).

Phuket is currently a typical mass tourism resort destination, and features the crowded beaches, pollution, high-rise hotels, and water shortages associated with many other resort spots in the tropical world (McLaren, 1998). Because of this reputation, Phuket is not normally associated with ecotourism. However, just as the problems associated with tourism's unchecked growth have created a perception that Phuket is becoming 'ruined' (Pleumarom, 1993; Rakkit, 1992; Viviano, 2002), there has at the same time developed a demand among tourists in Phuket for authentic and diversionary travel activities. This, in turn, has led to the establishment of companies offering nature-oriented tours. In 1989, an American expatriate named John Gray, along with two Thai partners, founded *Sea Canoe*, the first marine ecotourism company in southern Thailand. Sea Canoe operates sea-kayaking daytrips in Ao Phangnga, where tourists are brought aboard 'escort boats' to a number of small islands and then transported by guides

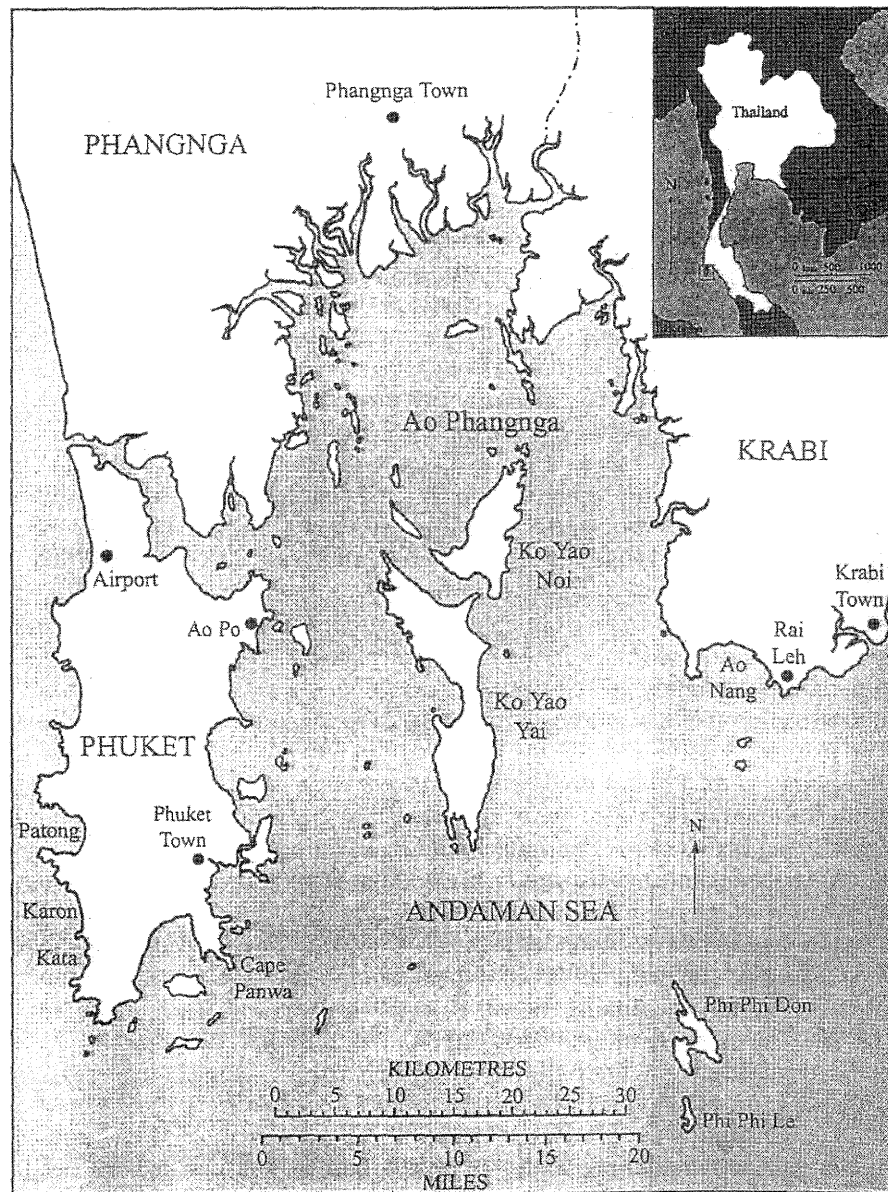


Figure 1 The provinces of Phuket, Phangnga, and Krabi in southern Thailand

into caves aboard inflatable kayaks. In recognition of its efforts to promote community-based ecotourism, the company is mentioned in a number of 'responsible travel' guides (Mann, 2002; Neale, 1999) and has received several national and global accolades, including a British Airways Tourism for Tomorrow Award, a Best Tour Programme Award from the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), and a Gold Environment Award from the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA).

This paper explores the successes and failures of community-based ecotourism in southern Thailand. Although some research was conducted with other ecotourism companies in Phuket, this paper draws on examples from Sea Canoe because, being the oldest and most renowned ecotourism company in Thailand, it offers an ideal opportunity to study the features of community-based ecotourism. The research on which this paper is based began as doctoral research in 1996 (see Kontogeorgopoulos, 1998a), and was bolstered by two subsequent visits in 1999 and 2001. In total, I conducted 13 months of fieldwork and gathered qualitative data during extensive face-to-face interviews. In particular, I conducted taped and untaped semi-structured interviews with 27 Sea Canoe customers, 22 Sea Canoe guides, Sea Canoe's founder and 5 of its managers, and 6 owners and 3 managers from other Phuket-based ecotourism companies. In addition to interview data, participant-observation conducted during a total of 36 trips with Sea Canoe and 7 trips with other ecotourism companies also produced data.

Using Sea Canoe as its case study, this paper argues that successful community-based ecotourism in southern Thailand is indeed possible, but is far from straightforward or comprehensive. In particular, this paper explores the tradeoffs that are necessary to provide such features of community-based ecotourism as local employment and benefits, social status and mobility, and environmentalism. Such tradeoffs, while associated more with the contextual circumstances of southern Thailand than to anything intrinsic to the principles of ecotourism, prove necessary for the achievement of at least partial success in bringing about community development in southern Thailand.

### Practical Success at the Expense of Spatial Isolation and Structural Independence

Scholars, practitioners, and international agencies have defined ecotourism in several ways, ranging from abstract sets of philosophical principles at one end of the spectrum (Botrill & Pearce, 1995; Ivanko, 1996) to detailed checklists and guidelines on how to 'do' ecotourism right at the other end (Goodwin, 2002; Whelan, 1991). Although ecotourism encompasses a diverse array of variables, the location in which ecotourism occurs remains the most important (Fennell, 2001). Terms used to describe ecotourism locations almost always imply a 'natural' state, and include words such as undervisited (Sirakaya *et al.*, 1999), pristine (Honey, 1999), protected (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996), relatively undeveloped (Ziffer, 1989), wild (Kearsley, 1997), uncontaminated (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1988), and relatively undisturbed (Boyd *et al.*, 1994; Wallace & Pierce, 1996). Since conventional mass tourism usually conjures up images of crowded locations in heavily modified landscapes, ecotourism by definition exists in locations separate and distant from areas of mass tourist concentrations.

It is undeniable that for most people working in the field of ecotourism, not to mention for most self-identified ecotourists, pristine landscapes lacking signs of human habitation or modification represent ideal locations for ecotourism. Conversely, mass tourism resort locations such as Phuket would surely appear unlikely, even unable, to feature any activities or companies that could accurately be described as ecotourism. In practice, however, the experiences of

ecotourism companies in southern Thailand demonstrate that rather than taking place in locations far from mass tourism, ecotourism must instead tolerate spatial and structural coexistence with mass tourism in order to survive and succeed (Dowling, 2000; Weaver, 2002).

Ecotourism companies in Phuket such as Sea Canoe utilise several connections to the existing conventional tourism industry. For example, mass tourism provides a guaranteed pool of tourists into which ecotourism companies can tap. Rising environmental consciousness in wealthy countries, coupled with a growing demand among mass tourists for novel and authentic diversionary excursions, has translated into growth rates for ecotourism that exceed 10% worldwide compared to just 4% for international tourism as a whole (Amaro, 1999: 16). As is the case with other destinations in the developing world (Cater, 1994; Weaver, 1998), the burgeoning demand in recent years for nature-based travel experiences has led to the proliferation in southern Thailand of companies that offer ecotourism to quintessentially mass tourists.

In addition to using mass tourism marketing channels for exposure, Phuket's ecotourism companies benefit from the close proximity of Phuket's beachside resorts to Ao Phangnga Marine National Park, a visually dramatic landscape featuring islands with sheer cliffs that rise to 300 metres (980 feet) above sea level. Erosion caused by waves, rain and sea currents has carved out large caves, long cavern passages, and open-air lagoons known as *hongs*, the Thai word for 'room'. The seemingly pristine nature of Ao Phangnga, especially inside the *hongs*, makes a great impression on mass tourists who otherwise spend most of their vacation in crowded and familiar settings such as hotels, restaurants, beaches, pool decks, or entertainment and shopping venues. The distance between Patong Beach, the most developed resort area of Phuket, and Phanak Island, located to the northeast of Phuket in Ao Phangnga and visited by Sea Canoe and all other kayaking companies, is only 35 kilometres (22 miles). Since the physical proximity between crowded areas and locations of natural beauty greatly facilitates the transportation of tourists to Ao Phangnga on a daily basis, it is logical for ecotourism companies to operate in (or at least close to) the urban and seaside mass tourism destinations of southern Thailand.

Sea Canoe has cultivated close business relationships with the intermediaries of the mass tourism industry. Rather than only drawing on independent 'walk-in' business, Sea Canoe instead generates business in a manner that is more conventionally associated with mass tourism. In particular, by negotiating contracts with a number of multinational tour operators, Sea Canoe and a handful of other ecotourism companies assure that their trips are sold by tour representatives based in Phuket. When tourists meet with tour representatives to receive suggestions for possible daytrip excursions, ecotourism trips are offered alongside other options related to physical recreation, leisure, entertainment, sightseeing or shopping. Hence, the mass tourism intermediaries that control the flow of tourists from source country to destination carry great influence in deciding which, and how many, tourists participate in the trips of ecotourism companies in Phuket.

Advocates of an exclusive, or 'hard', form of ecotourism (Fennell, 1999; Laarman & Durst, 1993) would likely consider the purposeful structural connections made by ecotourism companies to mass tourism in Phuket as polluting and

corrupting, or at the very least indicative of a less rigorous, 'soft' version of ecotourism, but Sea Canoe has survived precisely because of such connections and overlaps. Further, when assessed according to empirical observations, rather than normative or romantic notions of where 'real' ecotourism should take place, the activities of Sea Canoe demonstrate that the company promotes the principles underpinning virtually all definitions of ecotourism, including environmental education, low-impact tourist activities, ecological conservation, ethical management and local orientation (Diamantis, 1999; Fennell, 1999).

Education of both tourist and employee underpins most aspects of Sea Canoe's operations. While the vast majority of customers that I interviewed stated that they chose a Sea Canoe trip for reasons other than education, many admitted at the end of the trip that they had gained a bolstered geographical knowledge of the area, as well as a heightened sense of environmental appreciation and awareness. Most passengers glance, even if only fleetingly, at the written material provided on the escort boats, but as with the verbal presentations, the emphasis placed by Sea Canoe on 'subtle education' and learning serves to project the image of a form of tourism centred on learning, self-improvement, and environmental awareness.

Sea Canoe carefully monitors overall tourist numbers in order to limit the social and environmental impacts of their activities. The low carrying capacity, and to a lesser degree the national park status, of Ao Phangnga greatly constrain the number of customers that Sea Canoe, and other sea-based ecotourism companies, can bring into the area. Operating in a fixed number of caves, and in a fixed amount of space, sea kayaking companies must compete fiercely with one another to bring tourists to the exact same caves and lagoons. For this reason, Sea Canoe rarely handles more than 64 passengers per day, even during peak periods of the high tourist season.

Sea Canoe contributes to environmental conservation efforts in Phuket in several ways. In response to Sea Canoe's environmental lobbying efforts, the regional TAT office in Phuket has placed life-jacket instructional signs in various tourism sites around the island. Sea Canoe pays a local resident of Ao Po, the launching point for all of Sea Canoe's trips, over 30,000 baht (\$686) annually to maintain the cleanliness of the pier. Until recently, Sea Canoe also provided funds and volunteered the labour of one guide to the Gibbon Rehabilitation Project, located at Bang Pae Waterfall in the northeast corner of Phuket. Now over a decade old, this project rehabilitates white-handed gibbons that are taken forcefully from their mothers and then put on display in bars and on the streets of Phuket's prominent tourist areas. Assistance for the project comes from the Thai government, which allocates land to the project, volunteers, who pay to participate in the project, and local businesses such as Sea Canoe, which provide financing by sponsoring 'rehabilitation stage cages'.

In short, Sea Canoe qualifies as an ecotourism operation, and despite whether or not it would count as a 'pure' or 'hard' form of ecotourism, Sea Canoe nevertheless follows through on its self-description as an ecotourism venture. On the other hand, Sea Canoe has deliberately avoided seeking the spatial isolation and structural independence from mass tourism assumed in stringent definitions of ecotourism. Practical success in fostering community-based ecotourism in

Phuket has therefore come at the expense of the spatial isolation and structural independence implied in more exclusive notions of ecotourism.

### Local Employment and Benefits at the Expense of Local Initiation and Control

In the late 1960s and 1970s, a growing number of scholars began to criticise the overarching economic nature of development measures, and proposed instead a greater focus on 'human development' (Adelman & Morris, 1973; Albin, 1978; Goulet, 1971; O'Shea, 1974; Seers, 1969). These critiques over time led to an emphasis within community development on 'core measures' such as health, education, and employment that is meaningful and economically viable. Accordingly, a key feature of community-based ecotourism is the creation of rewarding, sustainable, and relatively well-paid employment (Scheyvens, 2000). Closely associated with this idea of generous employment opportunities is the need to generate benefits for local residents and the communities in which they reside (Goodwin, 1996). Sea Canoe provides locals with jobs that are remunerated well in comparison both to other workers in the tourism industry and to workers in other economic sectors. Sea Canoe guides earn incomes that overall exceed the average total income of Thais by over three times. Further, when wages and salaries are examined separately from other sources of income, guides earn at least 7.8 times the national per capita average. Even the wages of cooks, the lowest paid of Sea Canoe's full-time employees, are 2.4 and 4.7 greater than the average rate for clerical, sales, and services workers in Thailand and southern Thailand, respectively (National Statistical Office, 1999: 20).

Sea Canoe employs 45 to 60 people full time (depending on the season), a number that would require, in Asia, a hotel with close to 40 rooms in order to replicate (Horwath and Horwath International, 1989: 122). Most importantly insofar as community development is concerned, the majority of Sea Canoe employees lack technical skills and possess fewer than six years of formal education. It is also worth noting that most of the guides working for Sea Canoe and other ecotourism companies in Phuket belong to the ethnic-Malay Muslim minority of Thailand, a traditionally marginalised group that features high rates of illiteracy and poverty (Che Man, 1990). Malay Muslims make up approximately one-quarter of the population of the three provinces of Phuket, Phangnga and Krabi and have traditionally remained concentrated in low-paid agricultural work. Gray, along with every manager of Sea Canoe with whom I spoke, affirmed a policy of preferring locals in hiring decisions. By deliberately hiring local residents with few other prospects other than fishing, farming or rubber tapping, Sea Canoe has attempted to 'put the last first' which, according to Robert Chambers (1983), is a goal that typifies ethical and community-based forms of development.

Through its employment policies, Sea Canoe promotes two other basic needs associated with community development: health and education. Sea Canoe offers life insurance, disability allowances, and full medical coverage, all of which are rare benefits for tourism employees in Thailand. Locals who work for Sea Canoe also receive educational benefits in the form of training programmes. Sea Canoe spends over 500,000 baht (US\$11,600) annually on employee training,

with 'lead guides' each receiving 50,000 baht (US\$1,160) in training. Sea Canoe pays for training in several areas, including instruction in non-English languages, government guide training for licensing, paddle training that leads to American Canoe Association (ACA) certification, and formal classroom and informal on-the-job instruction on the natural history, geology, flora, and fauna of southern Thailand.

The income and benefits associated with Sea Canoe employment reward individuals first and foremost, but communities in Phuket and neighbouring provinces also profit from the presence of ecotourism in the region. In addition to employee salaries, Sea Canoe contributes to community development through payments to the owners of escort boats and transport vans, food purchases, and advertising payments to local media outlets. Sea Canoe also contributes to environmental conservation by investing in local clean-up projects and lobbying local officials to enforce environmental laws. Contrary to large-scale, capital-intensive forms of mass tourism that require money to be spent, and therefore leaked out of, local economies, ecotourism in Phuket features deep linkages to local and regional communities. Sea Canoe spends over 98% of its total costs in Phuket or the neighbouring provinces of Krabi and Phangnga, and contributes approximately 2 million baht (US\$46,000) each month to the economies of these three provinces. Along with fostering decentralised community development, Sea Canoe encourages the use of 'appropriate technology'. In his landmark study entitled *Small is Beautiful* in 1973, E.F. Schumacher argues for the need to find and utilise an 'intermediate' level of technology appropriate to the needs and resources of each community. Since the geographical constraints of navigating into the open-air lagoons of Ao Phangnga leave operators with little choice but to use inflatable kayaks rather than motorised vessels, the technology used by all marine ecotourism companies in Phuket is, by necessity, appropriate and intermediate.

To counter the seasonality, and therefore instability and insecurity, common to tourism-related employment (Bar-On, 1999), Sea Canoe pays its staff a guaranteed salary every month, regardless of how many days (beyond a minimum of 10) that are worked. After working 10 days in one month, guides receive a daily bonus for every day that they work. Because it offers stable, rewarding employment with good benefits, training, and opportunities for on-the-job skill acquisition, Sea Canoe features rates of employee turnover that are low in comparison to other areas of tourism employment. For instance, only 65 to 70% of hotel and guesthouse workers in Phuket and Ko Samui (southern Thailand's second most popular resort destination) stay with the same employer for more than one year (Kontogeorgopoulos, 1998b: 325). By contrast, 80 to 90% of Sea Canoe guides remain with the company for over a year, and roughly half the guides stay for more than five years. For those guides who do eventually leave Sea Canoe, most do so under harmonious circumstances, and often move up the income and management chain because of the experience gained while working at Sea Canoe.

In southern Thailand, foreign initiation and management of ecotourism represent the negative tradeoffs associated with the successful provision of local employment and benefits. While limited in number, examples from throughout the developing world indicate that it is possible to provide employment and

benefits at the same time as allowing full local control over the initiation and development of ecotourism (Honey, 1999). However, due to the particular cultural, social, and political circumstances of southern Thailand, ecotourism would not have commenced, nor would it have flourished in its initial years, without the involvement of foreign expatriates who have made Thailand their permanent homes. Known as *farangs*, the Thai word for foreigners of European descent, these expatriates have been crucial in constructing a form of ecotourism that provides opportunities and benefits for individuals and communities in and around Phuket.

Although contradicting one of the central tenets of community-based ecotourism, the *farang* initiation of sea kayaking and trekking companies in Phuket in the late-1980s and early-1990s is understandable. In the 15 years between 1985 and 2000, tourism in Phuket expanded at a breathtaking pace, with international arrivals growing 15-fold. The obvious crowding and pollution of popular beaches in Phuket that resulted from such rapid tourism growth became a concern for environmentally-minded tourists who longed for a more 'authentic' and sustainable tourism industry. The *farang* expatriates that founded ecotourism companies in Phuket all visited Thailand originally as tourists themselves, and in response to the environmental damage and social change caused by conventional tourism, these expatriates decided to initiate companies that could offer an alternative, more responsible approach to tourism. As a result, *farangs* founded at least 15 of the 20 ecotourism companies currently operating in Phuket.

Considering that *farangs* initiated the first ecotourism companies, it is no surprise that control over the direction of ecotourism would also rest with *farangs*. While it is true that the legal owners of Sea Canoe and other *farang*-initiated ecotourism companies are all Thais, and southern Thais specifically, the controlling influence and many of the important management positions in companies founded by expatriates in Thailand still remain in the hands of *farangs*. This is because the majority owners or shareholders of companies such as Sea Canoe are often the Thai wives of *farang* founders, so although ownership is technically 'local', it is neither distributed widely within the community nor a sign of exclusive indigenous control. However, several caveats vitiate the idea that this non-Thai control is necessarily harmful. Management positions in Sea Canoe and the other *farang*-initiated ecotourism companies of Phuket are divided between *farang* expatriates and Thais, and while *farangs* enjoy a great deal of decision-making power, on balance more Thais than *farangs* serve as managers. Further, the successful implementation of most of the principles of community-based ecotourism in Phuket challenges the assumption that foreign involvement always and automatically thwarts the interests of local communities (Britton, 1982; McLaren, 1998).

*Farang* control has led to positive results for local economic development. As mentioned in the previous section, financial survival and long-term viability are essential determinants of the success of community-based ecotourism. Many of Phuket's ecotourism *farangs* were once entrepreneurs elsewhere, and combined with their original roles in Thailand as tourists, this experience has given them an advantage in a tourism industry characterised, in Phuket, by market saturation and ruthless competition. Moreover, *farangs* are positioned well to cater to the

tastes, expectations, and preferences of the 'Western' tourists who form the bulk of ecotourism customers in Thailand. Other than possessing business skills, and cultural familiarity with tourists, *farangs* also take advantage of their favourable status positions in Thai society to promote policies or practices that would be nearly impossible for locals with poor status positions to promote. In the case of Sea Canoe, for example, the high status and local and national visibility of John Gray have allowed the company to address local mafia intimidation, the corruption of local tourism and national park officials, and the illegal or unethical practices of several of Sea Canoe's competitors (Shepherd, 2002). Due to the power differences that stem from status hierarchies in Thai society, Sea Canoe's Thai employees – the majority of which belong to a Muslim minority that possesses low status within mainstream Siamese society – are less willing or able to address certain problems as directly and forcefully as some *farangs* have done. Hence, for locals and communities in southern Thailand lacking business skills, status, and political power, *farang* control of ecotourism in Phuket has facilitated the financial survival of companies dedicated to the creation of high-paying, rewarding, stable, and secure employment for locals. For this reason, *farang* initiation and shared control, although not entirely ideal in theory, are useful and necessary tradeoffs for the local employment and benefits associated with community-based ecotourism.

### Social Status and Mobility at the Expense of Social Cohesion and Harmony

Due to the great value placed on behavioural continuity, predictability and conformity in Thai society, individuals must recognise, and act according to, their place in well-defined social hierarchies (Connolly, 2001; Klausner, 1982). One's relative status, power, seniority and rank thus dictate individual behaviour in Thai society (Mulder, 2000). Although issues such as hope, self-esteem and status are, with rare exceptions (Scheyvens, 1999), neglected in discussions of ecotourism, they are essential to analyses of community development in Thailand. In creating opportunities for generous, secure and stable employment, ecotourism companies such as Sea Canoe have bolstered the economic prospects and status positions of individual workers. As mentioned already, many of Sea Canoe's employees belong to an ethnic and religious minority that lacks wealth and status. More specifically, over half of Sea Canoe's employees are native residents of Ko Yao, a set of two large islands just off the east coast of Phuket that host several poor Muslim fishing villages (see Figure 1). Working for Sea Canoe not only enhances status, but also allows guides to suspend or reverse normal patterns of stratification. Psychologically, the casual and egalitarian atmosphere aboard Sea Canoe escort boats frees Thai guides from rigid social norms. Since the Thai system of status differentiation binds those with little education, money, or religious merit to strict, often subordinate, codes of conduct, the temporary suspension of these social rules in the company of tourists supplies a breath of fresh air for Sea Canoe's guides who, one after the other, expressed to me in interviews their enjoyment of the chance to interact with wealthier and usually better educated foreigners in ways made impossible within Thailand's unyielding social structure.



Enhanced income and status translate into hope and social mobility for Sea Canoe guides. Many guides enter the tourism labour market from primary occupations, most notably fishing in Ao Phangnga or rubber tapping and farming in Phangnga or Krabi provinces. As nomads drifting from fishing or agriculture to hotel and restaurant work in Phuket, and ultimately to jobs such as kayaking for Sea Canoe, Thai guides take perpetual steps up the ladder of tourism employment, boosting their wages along the way. Most guides view their tenure with Sea Canoe as transitional, whereby opportunities are gained to improve English language skills, receive training, and acquire experience in dealing with tourists. In addition to the transitional, progressive nature of Sea Canoe employment, the financial latitude created by Sea Canoe's generous salary structure allows guides to make significant lifestyle changes, such as marriage, child-bearing, and other manifestations of 'settling down' that, in Thai society, depend heavily on the financial situation of the male suitor. Many guides wed soon after joining Sea Canoe, and some even purchase homes, a rare luxury among Thais living in urban or tourist areas such as Phuket. Sea Canoe thus represents both a window of opportunity within the tourism industry generally, and a platform from which Thais with poor educational backgrounds, diminished status, and limited opportunities for economic prosperity can pursue social mobility and initiate positive changes to their overall circumstances.

Along with improving status and cultivating hope among individuals, community-based ecotourism is supposed to encourage community cohesion and harmony (Foucat, 2002). However, rather than simultaneously fostering social status and social mobility, on the one hand, and social cohesion and harmony, on the other, ecotourism in Phuket has instead made possible the former only at the expense of the latter. As Fabricius (2001) and Mansperger (1995) indicate, progressive social or cultural change that stems from tourism often has the ultimate effect of creating intergenerational, gender, or ethnic conflicts in communities where the status quo is disrupted. The history of ecotourism in southern Thailand confirms this observation. In particular, the financial success, and high regional and national profile, of Sea Canoe have caused resentment among some local residents. Despite contributing to many facets of community development, and exhibiting a strong local orientation, Sea Canoe is nevertheless perceived by many Thais in Phuket as a '*farang* company' since it was established by an American expatriate (albeit with two Thai partners). This perception is one reason – besides higher under-the-table commissions – that some travel agents in Phuket steer tourists towards Thai-founded and owned kayaking companies instead of towards Sea Canoe, despite the latter's better overall reputation and safety record (Shepherd, 2002). In interviews conducted with the owners of other sea kayaking companies, I discovered that the success enjoyed by Sea Canoe, a '*farang* company', has also provoked resentment among the Thai owners and employees of Sea Canoe's competitors.

The ultimate consequences of the resentment caused by Sea Canoe's success include several incidents that have served to undermine community cohesion and unity. For example, the number of sea kayaking companies has exploded in recent years, leading to an intense, and at times nasty, relationship between Sea Canoe and the staff and owners of its competitors. In addition to shouting matches and even physical confrontations between guides from rival companies,

the owners of sea kayaking 'copycats' (as they are disparagingly labelled by critics) have in the past colluded against Sea Canoe by, among other things, excluding it from regional kayaking organisations and accusing Sea Canoe of illegally employing *farangs* as temporary guides. Death threats made against Sea Canoe employees, while a persistent problem since the founding of the company in 1989, have in recent years been carried through. In 2000, when the royal concession for the collection of lucrative birds' nests in Ao Phangnga changed hands, all sea kayaking companies were told to pay an entrance fee for every passenger entering the caves and lagoons of Ao Phangnga. After Sea Canoe refused to pay what it considered an extortion fee, its Thai operations manager was shot (but not killed) in front of the Sea Canoe headquarters in Phuket Town. The treacherous nature of the tourism industry in southern Thailand makes such stories unsurprising, but at the very least, incidents like these highlight the negative tradeoffs associated with Sea Canoe's success, itself the major reason behind the ability of individual employees to enhance their social status, prospects, and prestige.

### Fun, Freedom, and Incipient Environmentalism at the Expense of Ecological Sustainability

By introducing an immediate and potentially lucrative source of revenue, the growth of ecotourism throughout the developing world has acted as an incentive for communities to protect and preserve natural areas (Salam *et al.*, 2000; Sekercioglu, 2002; Yamagiwa, 2003). While the overall environmental record of ecotourism companies in southern Thailand is mixed, Sea Canoe employees clearly understand the negative implications of further environmental degradation of marine tourism destinations throughout southern Thailand. By personally receiving, and subsequently preaching to customers, the environmental message advocated by John Gray and the company's *farang* managers, the Thai guides of Sea Canoe have come to realise the importance of maintaining those aesthetic and natural qualities that attract tourists to Ao Phangnga. In particular, insecurity regarding future employment in an area of potential environmental desecration represents the key way in which the financial benefits of ecotourism motivate guides to preserve the resources upon which ecotourism is based. In the words of one guide who has worked with Sea Canoe for over 10 years,

When I worked with tourists, I learned more and thought more about the environment, about nature, about *tamachat* (nature). When I have more education in my mind, I believe that nature can make a better life. Before, when I was young or when I stayed on the island [Ko Yao], I only thought about it a little bit. I thought more about how I can get better food. I wanted to do everything to make my life better and I didn't care as much about nature. I thought about money first but now I've started to think more about the environment and the future. If the environment in Ao Phangnga is bad, then tourists might stop coming to visit, and there will be no jobs for us.

In addition to fears concerning future job security, more immediate monetary interests, especially the garnering of tips from tourists, also serve a fundamental

role in building environmental appreciation. Tips represent an important supplement to regular wages and daily bonuses, and can account for up to 40% of a guide's total monthly earnings. The suspense created at the conclusion of a daytrip by the uncertainty of earning a tip greatly shapes the behaviour of guides, and since one's level of knowledge and ability to describe elements of the natural environment to passengers in English are perceived as contributing factors to enhanced tips, most guides engage in a constant effort to improve their environmental knowledge. Tips thus act as an immediate financial incentive for guides to develop environmental knowledge and appreciation.

Incipient environmentalism is clearly evident in the attitudes and actions of Sea Canoe guides, many of whom frequently conveyed to me, during both interviews and casual conversations, their desire to work for Sea Canoe as long as possible. This desire contributes to environmentalism because, as the earlier quotation from a guide illustrates, a concern for conservation occurs naturally the longer one works for Sea Canoe. Further, the ecological deterioration of Ao Phangnga is considered a threat to the survival of Sea Canoe, and therefore to the quality jobs that it has created. The common perception among Thais in Phuket that Sea Canoe is a good company for which to work stems from the principles of *sanuk* (fun) and *itsara* (freedom), two words mentioned constantly by Sea Canoe guides when asked to describe their jobs.

Sea Canoe ensures that its staff eats a good quality, and variety, of food on board, and many guides actually prefer coming to work over staying at home since, as one guide puts it:

At home you must buy food, pay for gasoline, pay for whiskey, pay for women (laughter). At work, I eat good food, see my friends, and make money. It [work] is like a holiday, *sabai sabai* [happy, peaceful] and *sanuk*, so why stay at home?

In recognition of the company's role in the everyday well-being of its staff, Sea Canoe managers look the other way at the end of each two week period, just before payday, as some guides come aboard escort boats, despite not working that day, in order to eat for free. Further, as John Gray points out, Sea Canoe has attempted to provide its employees with a measure of freedom uncommon to other areas of tourism employment:

I purposely rejected the 'three-hundred and ten rules approach.' The tyrannical regime of hotels is just ridiculous. Guides are big boys, they don't need to be told when to cut their hair or how to behave every single minute of the day.

Freedom and happiness are two subjective measures, among many, that have come to form the basis of recent attempts to steer development theory away from purely quantitative or economic approaches. For instance, the economist Amartya Sen (2000: xii) argues that development 'consists of the removal of various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency'. Similarly, philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2000) believes that successful development enables the full realisation of 'central human capabilities' such as bodily health, emotions, freedom of

affiliation, imagination, and the ability to laugh, play, and enjoy recreational activities.

Advocates of a 'capabilities' approach to development – the principles of which could be said to form the philosophical and ethical foundations of community-based ecotourism – would certainly endorse the creation of opportunities for locals to pursue ecotourism livelihoods in settings characterised by freedom and enjoyment. Having come from tedious agricultural, hotel, or restaurant employment, most Sea Canoe guides appreciate the *sanuk* atmosphere created aboard escort boats by the playfulness and congeniality of customers. By having to work only 10 days each month to earn a base salary, Sea Canoe guides enjoy an easy pace and relaxed expectations. The possibility and even expectation of *sanuk* on a daily basis help, in turn, to create a workplace environment free of coercion, pressure, or mundane routine. Reflecting upon former work experience, many guides contrast the casual, flexible, and free atmosphere at Sea Canoe against the restrictive set of rules and regulations found in hotel and restaurant work. Sea Canoe guides keep casual time schedules, interact with tourists in a non-subservient and casual manner, and meet company 'uniform' requirements simply by wearing shorts and an official Sea Canoe t-shirt. Most enjoyable to the majority of guides is the absence of management and supervision during the daytrips. Seen more as peers than supervisors, 'lead guides' represent the only form of management on Sea Canoe daytrips, and the lack of perpetual assessment and surveillance come as psychological weights lifted off the shoulders of Thais accustomed to more stifling and unpleasant paid work in the tourism industry.

Though *itsara* and *sanuk* are beneficial consequences of Sea Canoe's efforts, the company's success has inadvertently compromised the long-term ecological sustainability of Ao Phangnga. By pioneering a form of tourism previously unknown in this region of Thailand, Sea Canoe has demonstrated to local residents the viability of ecotourism and the economic value of tapping into the existing natural resources of an area. At the same time, however, Sea Canoe's lucrative exploitation of Ao Phangnga's resources has encouraged a rapid increase in the number of operators bringing tourists into the caves and lagoons of the bay's most visited islands, in particular Hong and Phanak (see Figure 1). Between 1989 and 1996, Sea Canoe was joined by three other companies, all of which were started by former partners or employees. By 1999, just one decade since the establishment of ecotourism in Phuket, these three 'spinoff' companies had split into several smaller ventures, and combined with the addition of completely unrelated operators, the total of number of sea kayaking companies climbed roughly to 20, where it has remained since that time.

The high number of kayaks found in formerly pristine caves and *hongs* presents a problem in and of itself, but this is compounded by the harmful practices of Sea Canoe's competitors (Vannisse, 1996). Whereas Sea Canoe imposes a limit of 16 passengers per escort boat, competitors carry up to 30 people on their escort boats. Due to their use of inexpensive equipment and their reluctance to limit overall tourist numbers, the safety records of 'copycat' companies are spotty. Overcrowding and sloppy attention to safety led to tragedy in early-1997, when a guide from one of Sea Canoe's early competitors was dragged under a boat and killed by its propeller (see Mecir, 2000). Besides unnecessarily crowding narrow

caves and *hongs*, 'copycat' guides engage in behaviour, according to Sea Canoe managers and guides, that has in recent years forced wildlife to flee those regions of small Ao Phangnga limestone islands, such as coastlines and open lagoons, that play host to an increasing numbers of tourists. Further, as I discovered during trips with several of Sea Canoe's competitors, limited English skills and the absence of training mean that the majority of 'copycat' guides are able to provide only scant environmental information to their passengers. Under normal circumstances, competition between rival companies is to be expected, and could even encourage innovation and lower prices for tourists. In Phuket, though, it has damaged the very environmental resources used to attract tourists to this area in the first place. Competition has led to negative environmental tradeoffs because, aside from a lack of industry standards or licensing requirements, minimal governmental involvement has allowed the unfettered free market to dictate the number of companies operating in a protected national park. Whether it is the absence of enforcement capabilities among Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) officials, or the unwillingness of the National Parks Department to clamp down on illegal operators or activities, government corruption and apathy have exacerbated the environmental degradation caused by shoddy industry practices.

The unregulated expansion of sea kayaking in Ao Phangnga may ultimately, and ironically, jeopardise ecotourism employment, an important catalyst for local environmental consciousness and the only factor mitigating the otherwise adverse ecological changes wrought by tourism. Fortunately, the collective impact of sea kayaking is held in check by the fixed amount of space inside caves, the limited number of islands containing accessible caves, and spatial constraints that make it impossible to get motorised vessels inside the lagoons. However, the growing perception among travel agents, tourists, and tour representatives that Ao Phangnga is overcrowded, and becoming 'spoiled', may soon force tourism industry intermediaries to drop sea kayaking excursions from their standard package of daytrip offerings. This potential loss of jobs would hurt the tourism industry of Phuket in general, and more importantly in terms of community-based ecotourism, would also reduce the availability of rewarding, well-paid, and enjoyable sources of livelihood. In sum, Sea Canoe's success, and the incipient environmentalism that it has prompted, has been made possible only by endangering the ecological sustainability of Ao Phangnga and the long-term survival of ecotourism in the area. While fun and freedom are by no means necessary tradeoffs, in theory, for ecological sustainability, *itsara* and *sanuk* are crucial ingredients behind Sea Canoe's rapid growth and the imitation that followed, which itself has become the biggest threat to the region's ecology. For this reason, in the southern Thai context at least, the success spawned by fun, freedom, and other rewarding aspects of Sea Canoe employment, has led to unavoidable environmental tradeoffs.

## Conclusion

Community-based ecotourism offers hope that the environmental sensitivity and responsibility promoted by ecotourism can also simultaneously serve the political, economic, social, and environmental interests of host communities.

Contrary to the dearth of successful examples from the developing world (Mowforth & Munt, 1998), the case study of Sea Canoe illustrates that the goals of community-based are both valuable and attainable. However, as in many other tourism destinations in the developing world (Griffin & Boele, 1996; Long & Wall, 1996; Tosun, 2000), implementation of these goals remains incomplete and patchy, and the achievement of one principle of community-based ecotourism in southern Thailand almost always necessitates a tradeoff related to another. Even though Sea Canoe and other ecotourism companies in Phuket have had to accept the inevitability, and therefore necessity, of such tradeoffs, the positive consequences of ecotourism in Phuket still offset the potentially harmful compromises insofar as community development is concerned.

This paper makes three contributions to the study of community-based ecotourism. First, the complexities and hurdles created by the cultural, social, and political circumstances of southern Thailand point to a need to move beyond universal, formulaic approaches to development and ecotourism. Out of a genuine desire to cultivate better forms of tourism around the world, several authors have devised guidelines for communities, tourists, entrepreneurs, and agencies hoping to encourage greater community involvement in ecotourism (Brandon, 1993; Honey, 1999). While helpful, such guidelines can establish unrealistic expectations since local realities often intervene to complicate even the best intentioned of efforts (Hinch, 1998; Timothy, 2002; Tosun, 2001). Universal 'how-to' lists for community-based ecotourism are largely inapplicable in southern Thailand, and the patterns associated with ecotourism in other parts of the country (for example, trekking in northern Thailand) do not necessarily apply to ecotourism in southern Thailand due to different geographical, cultural, and historical contexts. Considering the ethnic and religious stratification of southern Thai society, the laissez-faire business climate of southern Thailand's established tourism industry, and the lack of government enforcement of environmental laws, what has emerged in Phuket is a 'best possible' rather purely normative or ideal form of community-based ecotourism. Nevertheless, though its victories may be partial, and its remedies bittersweet, community-based ecotourism in Phuket is still a huge improvement on what has come before it.

Second, Ao Phangnga suffers from the classic dilemma afflicting many other popular ecotourism destinations whereby areas of natural beauty tend to attract levels of visitation that in time spoil that beauty (Cater, 1997; Lück, 2002; Weinberg *et al.*, 2002). With few market or government checks on the expansion of tourism in Phuket, the steady ecological decline of Ao Phangnga is unavoidable. But in a location where power structures, government corruption, and a cut-throat tourism industry would normally make community-based ecotourism nearly impossible, Sea Canoe has greatly improved the lives of its employees, thereby perhaps rendering certain environmental tradeoffs worthwhile. Looking back retrospectively on Sea Canoe's formation and subsequent success, John Gray feels guilt and ambivalence about further opening up Ao Phangnga to commercial forms of tourism. While the thousands of tourists participating in scenic tours of Ao Phangnga have secured tourism's place in the region for at least two decades, the form of ecotourism practised by Sea Canoe brought tourists, for the first time, to islands and *hongs* previously untouched or even unknown by local residents. Gray and the managers of Sea Canoe in many



ways justify the commercialisation of *hongs* by claiming that other, less responsible operators would eventually have come along and exposed the *hongs* had Sea Canoe not done it first. Though this may be true, one could argue that it would perhaps have been better environmentally, if not economically, for Ao Phangnga's ecological health had Sea Canoe not established ecotourism in this area at all.

The final lesson to be drawn from the example of ecotourism in Phuket relates to empowerment, a cornerstone of many calls for community-based ecotourism (Gauthier, 1993; Scheyvens, 2002; Timothy, 2002). France (1997: 149) defines empowerment as a process 'through which individuals, households, local groups, communities, regions and nations shape their own lives and the kind of society in which they live'. Observed through the prism of economic, political, psychological, and social empowerment (Scheyvens, 1999), ecotourism in Phuket reveals the same necessity for tradeoffs outlined throughout this paper. Sea Canoe's creation of benefits and rewarding employment signals the achievement of economic empowerment, but the lack of full local initiation of, and control over, ecotourism in Phuket also indicates a failure to achieve political empowerment. On the other hand, Sea Canoe's presence in southern Thailand has promoted psychological empowerment, which enhances the hope, optimism, status, and self-esteem of individual community members. Yet, the success that has enabled this psychological empowerment has also undermined social empowerment by threatening community cohesion and engendering community competition and conflict. The relationship between community-based ecotourism and empowerment in southern Thailand is therefore complex and incomplete, and the economic and psychological empowerment of individuals is accomplished only by forfeiting certain elements of the political and social empowerment of communities.

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