

TOURISM IN THAILAND: PATTERNS, TRENDS, AND LIMITATIONS

NICK KONTOGEOURGOPOULOS

Department of Comparative Sociology, University of Puget Sound,
1500 North Warner Street, Tacoma, WA 98416

As Thailand's greatest source of foreign exchange revenue, international tourism plays an increasingly powerful role in connecting Thailand to regional and global networks. Thailand has received tourists for much of the 20th century but has only recently experienced an explosion in arrivals and revenues, which in 1996 exceeded 7 million tourists and US\$8.7 billion, respectively. Although the economic benefits of tourism have considerably mitigated Thailand's balance-of-payments shortcomings, unfettered and poorly planned tourism growth has also created several social and environmental dilemmas. This article examines some of these dilemmas in light of historical patterns of growth and contemporary trends in the Thai tourism industry. By focusing on the experiences of Phuket, Thailand's premier resort destination, this article demonstrates that despite the financial bonanza most often associated with tourism development, persistent local resistance testifies to the complexity and conflict surrounding continued tourism expansion. The future success and viability of tourism in Thailand will essentially hinge upon the ability of Thai government planners and tourism industry representatives to balance the perpetual quest for profit maximization with broader issues of quality and sustainability.

Tourism impacts Sustainable tourism Southern Thailand Phuket

Thailand has long captured the imaginations of international travelers, but despite hosting a steady stream of foreign visitors throughout the past century, it is only quite recently that Thailand has begun to finally emerge as a critical player in the expanding regional tourism industry of Southeast Asia. From humble origins, the tourism industry in Thailand grew rapidly following the Vietnam War, and has now blossomed into "one of the touristically most developed countries in the Third World" (Cohen, 1996, p. 1). By 1996, Thailand represented the 11th largest international tourism earner, and was surpassed among Asian states

only by Hong Kong and China (Waters, 1996). Similarly, with over 7 million annual tourism arrivals, Thailand receives the second largest number of tourists in Southeast Asia (after Malaysia), and the fourth largest number in the broad East Asia/Pacific region (World Tourism Organization [WTO], 1997). Aside from its increasingly pertinent role within Asian-Pacific tourism markets, Thailand also provides an ideal case study in which to explore several key tourism issues. The numerous problems associated with uncontrolled mass tourism development find frequent expression throughout Thailand where overcrowding,

pollution, and short-sighted planning have degraded formerly "pristine" coastal resort destinations.

Thailand's tourism industry also exemplifies the global travel trend towards enhanced diversity of attractions and activities. The four Ss of tourism—sun, sea, sand, and sex—remain significant in Thailand, but face growing competition from tourism based on cultural attractions, natural resources, and urban-based activities such as shopping and entertainment. Assessing Thailand's experience with international tourism offers many avenues of policy research, and provides clues and warnings for other emerging Asian tourism destinations. In this article, secondary data and tourism statistics are reviewed in order to examine both Thailand's incorporation into the global tourism industry and the importance of tourism to the local economy of Southern Thailand. By examining some environmental consequences of tourism, as well as exploring local resistance to tourism expansion, this article argues that despite its enormous economic significance, tourism remains a site of contestation and conflict as different players attempt to stake a claim on the material and social rewards of tourism development. After highlighting the extensive environmental problems associated with tourism development in Thailand, this article concludes with a brief discussion concerning the contradictions of Thailand's current drive to balance sustainability with continued tourism growth.

Historical Growth and Incorporation

Government and private agencies market Thailand as a late arrival on the international tourism scene, but the country has in fact received visitors for much of the 20th century. During the second half of the 19th century, the widespread "modernization" reforms of King Mongkut (Rama IV) and, then, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) laid the foundations for international tourism in Thailand. Open-door economic policies led to the construction of Western-oriented hotels and tour activities, and the extensive travels of Chulalongkorn throughout Europe infused tourism with symbolic value and legitimacy within the country. Royal holidays to the seaside resort town of Hua Hin

along the Gulf of Siam coast, and the construction of a Royal Palace there in the early 1900s also provided a boost to the domestic tourism industry as Thai elites began traveling to Hua Hin and elsewhere. Although international tourist arrivals remained low until the 1960s, a steady stream of arrivals nonetheless laid the foundation for future tourism growth. By the 1930s, for example, Bangkok served as a port of call for many round-the-world cruises, playing host to five cruise liners per year, each containing at least 500 passengers (Meyer, 1988). The majority of overseas tourists from the 1930s until the late 1950s were British and French citizens passing through Thailand en route to colonial possessions just beyond Thailand's borders. However, following the devastation brought to Europe during the Second World War, American travelers came to eventually surpass Europeans as the principal source of tourism. Together, British and American tourists in 1957 represented 59% of all overseas visitors to Thailand, with Americans making up over half of that figure (Tourist Organization of Thailand [TOT], 1961).

The establishment and growth of tourism as a regulated, organized industry began only during the regime of Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat (1957–63). In line with World Bank-inspired development policies, Sarit opened the economy to foreign investment and encouraged tourism growth in order to bolster foreign exchange reserves. In addition to providing tax holidays and other investment incentives to local and foreign tourism operators, the Sarit government invested heavily in infrastructure, resulting in vast improvements in road construction, water and electric power supply, banking, trading, communications, and government services (Meyer, 1988). Infrastructural achievements stimulated the service sector—the fastest growing sector during Sarit's administration—and would later prove crucial to the development of a mass tourism industry. In 1960, Sarit established the Tourist Organization of Thailand (TOT) to oversee tourism advertising and promotion. Having worked to improve access to tourist sites through enhanced infrastructure, Sarit and the TOT hoped to strengthen Thailand's international image by encouraging, through laws and public statements, the safety, cleanliness, and pro-

priety of Thai society. Sarit provided the institutional and organizational framework for international tourism in Thailand. It was the Vietnam War, however, that would forever change the nature and scope of the industry.

The decade from 1965 and 1975 brought enormous social and economic changes to several parts of Thailand due to the large presence of American troops. Besides pumping large amounts of military and economic aid into Thailand, the US established military bases throughout the country, particularly in northern and northeastern Thailand. The American military presence spurred both a construction boom and a proliferation of restaurants, bars, nightclubs, and other services catering to American GIs. Between 1966 and 1974, 321,800 American GIs were stationed in military bases throughout Thailand (Meyer, 1988). Another 310,392 GIs visited Thailand during this period on Rest and Recreation (R&R) trips taken as diversions from the fighting in Vietnam. Between 1966 and 1970, American GIs on R&R trips spent over \$78 million, or 38% of the total expenditures of all overseas visitors in Thailand (TOT, 1975). The American military presence in Thailand brought three major changes to the tourism industry. First, it not only led to a direct increase in foreign visits through R&R trips taken by American soldiers, but it also popularized tourism via international media images, leading indirectly to an increase in visits by (mostly male) travelers from the US and elsewhere (Cohen, 1996).

Second, it provided the stimulus for incipient tourism development. In particular, as businesses and services grew to meet the leisure demands of American GIs, the infrastructural foundations for future mass tourism development were laid across the country, especially in Bangkok. Third, as Cohen (1996) outlined, tourism activities associated with GIs on R&R vacations, as well as those of the thousands of American troops stationed permanently in Thailand, strongly shaped the international image of Thailand, while simultaneously, and consequently, attracting a certain type of tourist from the mid-1960s onwards. Specifically, touristic images of Thailand as a mystical, *exotic* kingdom associated with cultural attractions were, after the 1960s, complemented by images of Thailand as an *erotic* destination associated with more

mundane sexual and recreational pursuits. The modern sex trade in Thailand thus blossomed during this period of American military involvement. The number of prostitutes in Thailand mushroomed from an estimated 20,000 in 1957 to 400,000 in 1964, by which time the US had already established seven bases in the country (Gay, 1985). Thus, incipient demand for an enlarged foreign-oriented prostitution industry came with the arrival and establishment of American military personnel and bases in the mid-1960s. The tourism industry has perpetuated the sex trade in Thailand by successfully filling the void left by the departure of American troops from Thailand in the mid-1970s. Tourism marketing in Thailand continues to combine the exotic and the erotic, as Thai women are implicitly—and on occasion explicitly—represented as embodiments of both characteristics (Truong, 1990). Although the Thai government and tourism industry have in recent years tried to divert attention away from sex tourism, large groups of men continue to travel to Bangkok, Pattaya, and Phuket for the services of male and female prostitutes, many of whom are children (Johnson, 1994). Thailand's touristic image was significantly altered as a result of the American military presence during the 1960s and early 1970s, but one should bear in mind that marketing represents merely one of several ways in which the contemporary tourism industry took shape as a result of, and in response to, the Vietnam War.

Contemporary Economic Patterns

Taking a broad look at recent trends in the tourism industry in Thailand, Cohen (1996) identified four directions of change. First, the recent explosion in tourist arrivals has led to the *massification* of the industry, whereby tourist transportation and communication networks were expanded, accommodation facilities were improved and upgraded, and specialized tourism-oriented services multiplied. Second, the *dispersion* of tourism from its highly centralized origins in Bangkok to other parts of the country has created a north-south "tourism axis" stretching from Phuket in the south to Chiang Mai in the north. From these regional poles, tourism continues to spread into ever more "remote" areas including Chiang Rai and the

“Golden Triangle” in the north, and the provinces of Phangnga, Krabi, and Songkhla in the south. Third, tourism in Thailand has experienced *heterogeneization* in several areas, including the national origin of tourists, the variety of tourist attractions and amenities, and the quality and range of touristic facilities and services. Lastly, the past decade has witnessed the *regionalization* of Thailand as a tourism destination. Whereas in previous years Thailand remained fairly remote or isolated within global tourism channels, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) and private companies have made considerable attempts in recent years to build connections to the tourism industries in neighboring or nearby countries such as Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Thailand thus currently lies at the center of, and provides the majority of momentum for, the emerging regional tourism industry of mainland Southeast Asia (Cohen, 1996).

The accelerated growth of tourism in Thailand over the past several decades has occurred within the context of general tourism expansion on the global and regional scales. International tourism has grown globally from 25.3 million tourists and US\$2.1 billion in revenue receipts in 1950 to 592 million and US\$423 billion in 1996, respectively (WTO, 1997). At the regional level, tourism-receiving countries in East Asia and the Pacific—which includes the Southeast Asian subregion—accounted in 1996 for 89.8 million international tourist arrivals and US\$82.2 billion in international tourism receipts. In Southeast Asia alone, arrivals and revenues grew dramatically from 10.1 million and US\$5 billion in 1985, to 30.5 million and US\$31.1 billion in 1996 (WTO, 1997). The rapid growth of international tourism in East Asia and the Pacific is reflected in the total market share possessed by the region. The world share of international tourist arrivals occupied by East Asia and the Pacific rose from 3.9% in 1975 to 15.2% in 1996 (WTO, 1997). Further, the region’s share of international tourism revenues rose during the same period from 5.3% to 19.4%. The precipitous growth of tourism in East Asia and the Pacific—representing by far the highest rates of growth in the world—has fueled tourism development in Thailand and Southeast Asia generally, which, as a subregion, has consistently accounted for close to 40% of regional arrivals and revenues from in-

ternational tourism (WTO, 1994). (Due to the original timing of this article, these figures do not take into account the recent financial crisis in Asia.)

Based on room nights, Thailand is Asia’s leading tourism destination (Waters, 1996). International tourism revenues in Thailand have grown from US\$8 million in 1960 to US\$8.7 billion in 1996, with arrivals increasing from 81,000 to 7,192,145 (Fig. 1). Tourism development in Thailand has proceeded swiftly, particularly in the last 20 years, surpassing even the already high rates experienced by the world in general. Between 1985 and 1995, international tourist arrivals to Thailand increased by 185% compared to 72% for the world as a whole (WTO, 1997). Similarly, tourism revenues in Thailand have skyrocketed by 503% between 1985 and 1995, a rate of increase that is more than double the world rate of 234% over the same period. Contrary to earlier patterns of heavy royal or state guidance, the success of Thailand’s tourism industry during the past 15 years has rested largely on the initiative taken by the Thai private sector working in tandem with a supportive, but essentially noninterfering, government. The most recent tourism boom began with the highly successful 1987 promotional campaign “Visit Thailand Year,” which marked the auspicious 60th birthday of King Bhumibol, and resulted in a 24% increase in tourist arrivals (Chon, Singh, & Mikula, 1993). Despite a decline in tourist arrivals in 1991, caused primarily by the Gulf War, the industry soon recovered and continues to this day to expand rapidly.

Traditionally, travelers from the US and Western Europe (Britain and France in particular) made up the majority of tourist arrivals in Thailand. This began to change in the mid-1970s, however, as tourists from Japan and other countries in Asia—including South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan—came eventually to form the dominant group of tourists in Thailand. By 1996, tourists from Asia represented two thirds (66.5%) of all arrivals in Thailand, followed distantly by Europe (22.3%), Oceania (3.5%), the Americas (5.3%), and Africa (0.66%) (Tourism Authority of Thailand [TAT], 1997a). The largest individual markets for tourist arrivals in 1996 were Malaysia (14.6% of all tourist arrivals), Japan (13.0%), Ko-

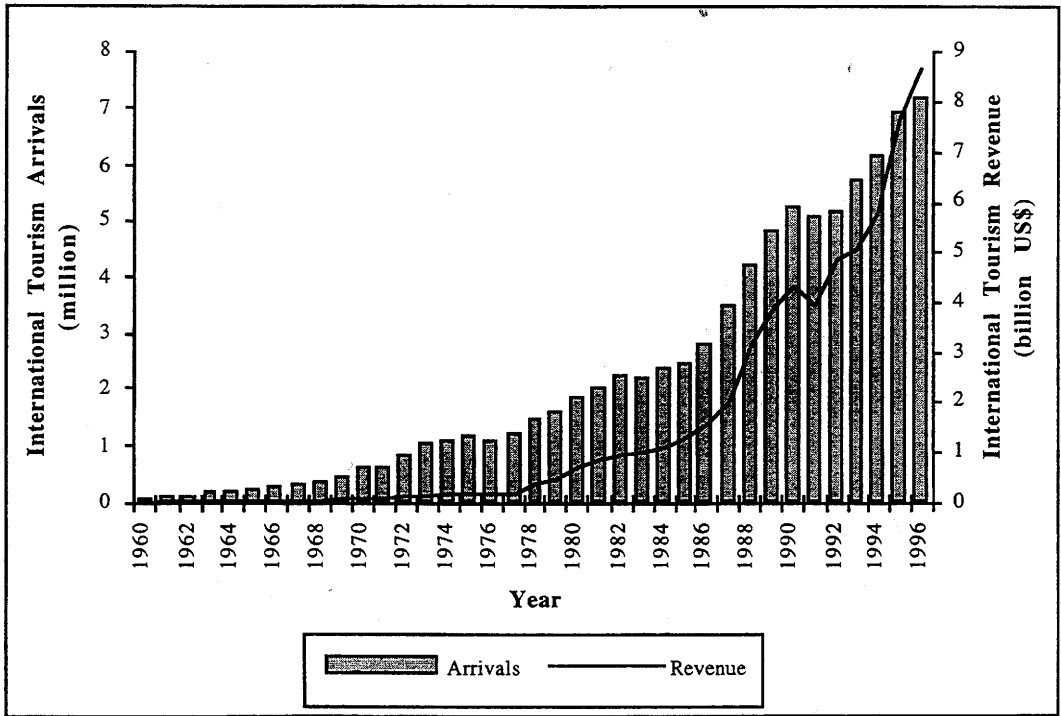


Figure 1. International tourism arrivals and revenue in Thailand, 1960-1996. Source: Tourism Authority of Thailand (1997a, p. 1).

area (6.8%), China (6.4%), and Taiwan (6.2%). Although arrivals from Asia remain much greater than from any other region, the short average length of stay for Asian tourists (5.7 days) lies well below the average (8.2 days), and is significantly below the rate for European tourists (12.9 days). Thus, despite traveling in ever-increasing numbers, the financial impact of Asian tourists, although significant in absolute terms, is proportionally low due to short trip durations.

The economic impact of international tourism in Thailand has been tremendous. Since becoming Thailand's top foreign exchange earner for the first time in 1982, tourism has increasingly outpaced all other export items, earning 32.8% more in 1996 than computers and computer parts, the next leading export (TAT, 1997a). The garnering of foreign exchange becomes especially crucial in assuaging the balance-of-payment deficits found in most developing countries. In the case of Thailand, the economic benefits of tourism appear most obvious when examining tourism's contribu-

tion to alleviating the national trade deficit: Thailand's trade balance (total value of exports minus total value of imports) in 1996 was a deficit of 417.6 billion baht (approximately US\$16.5 billion) (TAT, 1997a). The balance of international tourist trade, however, has weighed considerably in Thailand's favor. In particular, a tourism trade surplus of 113.7 billion baht (US\$4.5 billion) was recorded for 1996, thus allowing a reduction of the overall balance-of-trade deficit by an entire 27.2% (TAT, 1997a).

Environmental Degradation

Despite the enormously beneficial economic consequences of tourism development in Thailand, tourism incorporation and expansion have also engendered several detrimental changes. Although tourism constitutes merely one of myriad dimensions of change in contemporary Thailand, the inappropriate demands, excessive numbers, and short-sighted planning associated with the tourism

industry in Thailand have contributed to a steadily worsening environmental situation caused primarily by reckless, unfettered economic growth. Competition for natural resources between agriculture, industry, housing, and tourism since the mid-1980s has led to several environmental problems: carbon monoxide, particle matter, and lead levels in Bangkok are all at least twice the acceptable maximum levels; polluting elements in the Chao Phraya River, 32% of which are accounted for by restaurants, markets, and hotels, have lowered the dissolved oxygen content to nearly zero; deforestation rates in Thailand, the highest in Asia after Nepal, have reduced forest cover to under 30% while creating water shortages around deforested watersheds; and intense competition for, and extraction of, water has allowed sea water to seep into wells 20 km from the coast (Handley, 1991).

Extensive tourism-related environmental problems in Thailand remain spatially concentrated. In places of high tourist densities, the generation of waste products, particularly in areas ill-equipped to meet the infrastructural requirements of additional visitors, has led to tangible tourism-induced pollution. The eastern seaside resort of Pattaya, for example, grew from a fishing village with one hotel in 1970 to an "ecological disaster" area housing 266 hotels in 1990 (Wallace, 1990). Proper sewerage treatment and adequate access to fresh water did not receive sufficient attention from planners in the incipient stages of tourism, thus fostering unchecked tourism growth and an absence of pollution controls. Pattaya continues to suffer from fresh water shortages and infrastructural deficiencies, the latter of which allow raw sewerage to flow directly into the Gulf of Thailand via open storm drains. Water shortages, sewerage treatment difficulties, and water pollution also severely afflict other seaside resort areas in Southern Thailand such as Hua Hin, Phuket, and Ko Samui (Parnwell, 1993). Specific tourist activities also place heavy pressure on the natural resource base. In particular, the increasing popularity of golf in Thailand has meant the spread of tourism-induced environmental pollution—formerly confined to mostly the coastline—to more remote parts of the interior (Kelly, 1991). Golf courses damage the environment by poisoning the countryside with fertilizer runoff, diverting desperately needed wa-

ter from surrounding areas, and driving farmers off scarce agricultural land (Cohen, 1995; Pleum-arom, 1994).

It should be noted that whereas tourism has often contributed to Thailand's environmental problems, it has also acted as an agent of preservation in some instances. Once tourism is established in an area of natural beauty, the economic rewards of tourism development serve as incentives for local residents to maintain the area's natural environment. Tourism thus serves to protect areas heavily dependent on the industry for economic survival. The burning down of a tantalum plant on Phuket in July 1986 provides a prime example of tourism-inspired environmental protection. Tantalum is a rare, heat-resilient metal used for such things as missile warheads, electronic components, and nuclear reactors. In the 1980s, the Thai Tantalum Industry Corporation (TTIC), a joint Thai-Malay venture, built a plant on the outskirts of Phuket Town, making it only the world's fifth, and Asia's first, tantalum-producing plant ("Thailand: Degradation and Development," 1988). The tremendous importance of tourism to Phuket's employment and economic well-being gave rise to fears that hydrofluoric acid, a poisonous chemical used to produce tantalum, would pollute the air and water, thereby harming the island's touristic image (Sachs, 1988). The failure of the Thai government to address the concerns of local residents led to a riot in which US\$28 million worth of damage was done to the plant. In addition to placing stress on environmental resources, therefore, tourism can also provide the incipient impetus for environmental concern, as in Phuket's case where this concern ultimately led to the protection of the environment from a potentially hazardous tantalum plant.

Tourism in Southern Thailand

The recent expansion of the tourism industry in Thailand has occurred in a spatially uneven manner, with Bangkok and Southern Thailand absorbing the majority of tourist growth. Unstable world commodity prices and the national sectoral transition occurring in Thailand—from an agricultural to a manufacturing and service-based economy—has in recent years endowed tourism with enormous significance and potential as a regenerative

force within regional economies. In several provinces of Southern Thailand, tourism has stepped into a context where tin mining has all but collapsed as an industry, and where the importance and value of rubber farming continues to decline (Traisawasdichai, 1991). Moreover, other important export items, particularly farmed shrimp, place great stress on the natural environment, and thus may perhaps prove unsustainable over the long run. Faced with changing economic conditions and necessities, the Thai government has therefore utilized the vast natural attractions of Southern Thailand to implement a national tourism strategy aimed at rapidly increasing international arrivals and foreign exchange earnings.

Tourism development in Southern Thailand has traditionally—and continues to be—centered on Phuket, marketed as the “Pearl of the Andaman” by both public agencies and private tourism operators (Fig. 2). Although small groups of foreign and (mostly) domestic tourists began to visit Phuket as early as the late 1960s, it was not until 1974 that Phuket was identified as a potential mass tourism destination:

Our appraisal of the resources of South Thailand has led us to support to TOT's [Tourist Organization of Thailand] conclusion that Phuket should be the primary focus for developing international tourism in the region. It has a wide ranging appeal based on the greatest concentration of attractions and recreational possibilities in the region, including the scenic attractions of its own coasts and neighbouring islands. (Huntington Technical Services, 1974, p. 153)

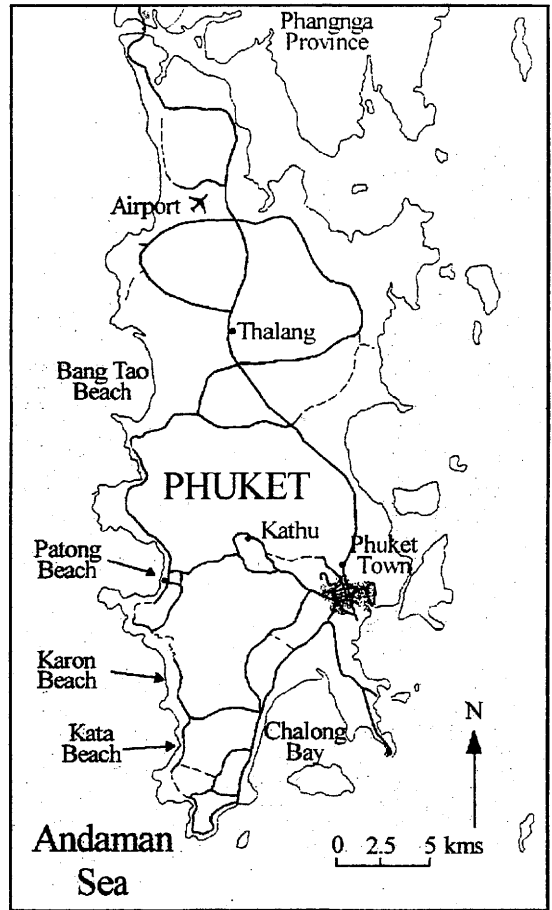


Figure 2. Phuket Island.

The mid to late 1970s saw the further development of Phuket as a future site for large-scale tourism investment. In 1976, Phuket was identified as a major tourism resort destination in the National Plan of Tourism Development (TOT, 1976). Following a major tourism feasibility study for Southern Thailand completed in 1978 (Pacific Consultants International [PCI], 1978), the newly revamped Tourism Authority drafted, in 1979, a comprehensive tourism development plan for Phuket (TAT, 1979). During the same year, the government built an international airport in Phuket, thereby facilitating the rapid subsequent intensification of tourism in Phuket and surrounding areas.

The various planning reports and studies produced during the 1970s began to bear fruit in the following decade as tourism growth accelerated at rates far greater than those envisaged by even the most optimistic projections. It was indeed during the 1980s that Phuket stepped onto the international tourism stage, growing from a little known tin mining and rubber region with a few thousand predominantly hippie, drifter tourists to an internationally renowned tourism destination servicing a thriving and complex mass tourism industry. International tourist arrivals, which stood at approximately 20,000 in 1976, shot up precipitously during the 1980s, reaching 533,545 by 1989 (Ludwig, 1976; TAT, 1997b). Along with encouraging

greater transportation and communications connections to the rest of Thailand and beyond, this explosion in tourist arrivals fueled a tremendous boom in hotel construction. The total number of rooms in 1979 amounted to 1,400, two thirds of which were located in Phuket Town (Cohen, 1982). By 1989, the number of rooms had risen to 9,914 while increased demand for beach tourism drove Phuket Town's share of total rooms down to just 23% (TAT, 1991).

The quick pace of tourism development, and the short time in which it occurred, greatly altered the physical landscape and socioeconomic character of the island. High-rise hotels and condominiums began to dominate the architectural landscape, turning the more popular beaches into small urban areas (Siriphan, 1993). The economic profile of the island also changed swiftly as the economic and social orientation shifted from agriculture and mining towards the service sector. Between 1980 and 1990, the number of Phuket residents employed in the service sector rose from 10,522 to 24,550, an increase of 133% (Government of Thailand, 1981, 1991). Further, the share occupied by service sector employees in the total workforce rose during the same period from 19% to 30%. By 1990, hotels and restaurants had become the largest single source of jobs in Phuket, employing 15,968 workers, or nearly one fifth of the island's *total* workforce (Government of Thailand, 1991).

The significance of tourism-related employment lay not only with the sheer extension of available jobs, however, but also with the higher pay associated with service sector employment (Table 1). Service sector workers in Thailand possess the highest rates of wealth, as measured by

the percentage of all workers belonging to the top income categories, and furthermore feature the lowest rates of poverty. In addition to boosting employment opportunities, tourism also began to produce increasingly substantial amounts of revenue. In 1990 alone, Phuket's earnings from international tourism totaled approximately US\$245 million, with this figure rising dramatically in the following years to reach US\$984 million by 1996 (TAT, 1997b). This revenue was, and still is, especially valuable because it produces the foreign exchange necessary to alleviate Thailand's balance-of-payments deficit. At the local scale, tourism had by 1991 completely eclipsed other sectors of Phuket's economy, producing 4.9 times the value of agriculture and 2.6 times the value of secondary sector activities (Phuket Provincial Statistical Office, 1995). Overall, tourism revenue as a percentage of Phuket's gross provincial product (GPP) reached 50.2% in 1991, and by 1993 tourism was producing nearly twice the value (192%) of the entire economy of Phuket (Alpha Research and Manager Information Services, 1995; TAT, 1997b).

In the span of just one decade, then, tourism had become an integral component of local life in Phuket, determining, and responding to, the economic, social, and political circumstances of the region through complex, dialectical relationships. In the late 1980s, recognizing the potential for both opportunities and limitations associated with future tourism growth, the Thai government commissioned the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to produce a comprehensive tourism plan for Southern Thailand (JICA, 1989). The study recognizes three tourism "clusters" based in Phuket, Surat Thani, and Songkhla/Hat Yai, and

Table 1
Income Inequality in Thailand by Economic Sector, 1994

Source of Employment	Below 18,000 Baht Annual Income (US\$714)	Above 120,000 Baht Annual Income (US\$4,762)
Agriculture, forestry, hunting, and fishing	78.7%	0.6%
Manufacturing	15.2%	5.5%
Commerce	22.9%	8.8%
Services	12.2%	14.5%
Average (all sectors)	49.6%	4.5%

Source: National Statistical Office (1995, pp. 76-77).

makes several specific recommendations. First, it identifies beaches and cultural/historical sites as the region's key attractions. Second, it recommends the development of historical sites in Phuket to diversify the tourism product and provide variety for beach-based tourists. Third, it calls strongly for a long-term environmental management program for Phuket in order to avoid future environmental degradation, as well as to offset the damage that had already been caused by a decade of frantic tourism growth. Lastly, the report outlines in great detail the transportation links to nearby provinces necessary for the development of a "Greater Phuket" tourism region. Other than the environmental management proposal, the key recommendations of the JICA study critically influenced future tourism development in Phuket, successfully prescribing or forecasting many of the tourism trends and patterns occurring today.

The feverish pace of tourism development has continued well into the 1990s. International tourist arrivals in Phuket between 1990 and 1996 rose by 114% from 752,463 to 1,612,635 (TAT, 1997b). Phuket has not only seen a steady and swift increase in tourist arrivals, but has also consistently increased its share of the overall tourism market in Thailand. In 1983, the proportion of all foreign tourists in Thailand who visited Phuket stood at only 4% (Doosadee, 1994). By 1990, this had increased to 14%, climbing even further in subsequent years to reach 22% in 1996 (TAT, 1997b). Besides transforming the nature of the island itself, Phuket's burgeoning tourism industry has also ignited a similar magnification of tourism in Southern Thailand generally. As mentioned earlier, peripheral regions of Thailand beyond Bangkok and surrounding provinces had received scant tourist attention until only recently. The past two decades have witnessed the reversal of this trend, creating a nationwide north-south tourism corridor. In Southern Thailand, this is demonstrated by rapid expansion in the hotel accommodation sector, where, between 1987 and 1996, the number of establishments and rooms expanded by 85% and 131%, respectively (TAT, 1992, 1997a). The current prominence of Southern Thailand in the national tourism industry is reflected in its large, disproportionate share of accommodation establishments. Despite possessing less than 15% of

Thailand's total population and land area, Southern Thailand contains over 31% of all tourism accommodations (TAT, 1997a). Coupled with the ongoing diffusion of tourism to less developed destinations throughout Southern Thailand, the enhanced infrastructural capabilities of well-developed tourism sites such as Phuket have fostered the growing integration of Southern Thailand into domestic and global tourism networks.

As the 21st century approaches, particular contemporary trends will prove instrumental in shaping the future of tourism development in Phuket and the surrounding area. First, the composition of tourists has increasingly favored international over domestic tourists: between 1991 and 1996, foreign tourists increased their share of the total tourist market in Phuket from 50.6% to 71.4% (TAT, 1997b). Although the Thai government is strongly promoting domestic tourism to minimize foreign exchange leakage, it is likely to continue boosting international tourism in Phuket due to its greater income and employment-generating potential—the TAT estimates that it takes 73 domestic, but only 9 *foreign*, tourists to create one job in Thailand (Hindle, 1987). Second, as tourist arrivals continue to climb, the tourism industry in Phuket will sustain the current expansion of tourism into Phangnga and Krabi, the two provinces adjacent to Phuket. Although the number of tourists visiting Phangnga and Krabi remains low compared to Phuket, it will inevitably rise as tourism operators seek out new, "untouched" locations in the immediate vicinity.

Third, the maturation of Phuket's tourism industry will lead to the further diversification of tourist activities, as well as to the simultaneous development of both natural and "contrived" attractions (Cohen, 1996). Further, the balance between the two will depend chiefly on how quickly the tourist market shifts from Europe, which currently provides over 60% of all tourists in Phuket, to Asia, whose tourists generally prefer "contrived" attractions such as shopping, theme parks, open zoos, and entertainment facilities ("Southern provinces report," 1996). Lastly, and related to the growing diversification of attractions, Phuket will increasingly steer away from tourism based strictly on beach-based recreation and instead incorporate such activities as nature-based excur-

sions and business travel. In 1995, Phuket hosted 407 international conventions, the largest number outside of Bangkok, and will likely remain a center for business and incentive tourism due to its natural setting, tourist attractions, developed infrastructure, and convenient transportation access (Klangsombut, 1996). Tourism based on the traditional "sun, sea, and sand" formula remains, and will remain into the near future, Phuket's top priority, but growing diversity and complexity will inevitably change the context of local tourism development.

Voices of Resistance

Tourism development in Phuket has proceeded rapidly, fostering great economic and social change for local residents. These changes and dislocations have, by and large, been met with majority approval, but have not, however, gone entirely unchallenged. Despite, or rather in addition to, the largely beneficial economic changes related to tourism growth, several detrimental patterns have also emerged during the past two decades of tourism expansion. Foremost among these changes is the significant environmental damage caused by unchecked growth in tourist numbers and accommodation facilities. Aside from the sheer aesthetic impact of altered visual landscapes, tourism in Phuket has placed enormous stress on a number of specific resources, including fresh water, coral, and land. As a fairly small island, Phuket lacks abundant sources of fresh water. This remains manageable with a small local population, but becomes a severe problem when the *total* population, including tourists, more than doubles within the span of a few years as it did in Phuket during the 1980s. International tourism facilities typically demand rates of water consumption much higher than local usage, particularly because upscale tourism often features immense gardens, large numbers of tourists, and activities, such as golfing, that require enormous daily amounts of water (Handley, 1990). Moreover, water shortages are further magnified by the timing of the peak tourist season, which corresponds to those months when rainfall is at its lowest, namely November to February. The inopportune timing of the tourist season is especially detrimental in times of diminished precip-

itation, such as the early 1990s when three consecutive years of poor rainfall drained Phuket's principal reservoir to only 6% of its capacity (Poetikit, 1992).

Vast tracts of pristine coral once surrounded Phuket and other coastal areas of Southern Thailand. Although representing only one of several sources of stress, mass marine tourism has greatly contributed to the destruction of coral, particularly in areas of high tourist concentrations. The proliferation of boats transporting and providing sight-seeing for tourists has caused direct damage to coral by increasing the number of anchors falling on the ocean floor. Coupled with anchoring, which damages a square meter of coral each time an anchor is dropped, oil spills, garbage, and snorkelers standing on coral also kill marine creatures living in the calcium structures that form coral (Inchukul, 1997). Land is yet another resource increasingly threatened by tourism development. Because coastal areas face obvious spatial limitations, land becomes a scarce commodity in the rush to build accommodations and other tourist facilities. As tourism expands, therefore, already denuded forest and mangrove resources endure further encroachment while hillsides are depleted of their top soil as large amounts of land fill are transferred to tourist projects along the coast (Lertkittisuk, 1992). Further, the sudden increase in Phuket's population in the 1980s soon outpaced local infrastructural capabilities, resulting in raw sewerage being pumped into the ocean and piles of garbage being dumped and remaining uncollected in areas beyond the immediate gaze of tourists (DuPont, 1992). The clean, translucent sea water that serves as Phuket's fundamental touristic resource perpetually suffers from untreated sewage, and most recently has become turbid due to soil erosion from the wide coastal roads that surround Phuket (Eamwivatkit, 1997). Hence, although tourists directly and indirectly tax the natural resources of Phuket, it is local residents who ultimately carry the greatest burden through higher costs of living and various forms of pollution.

Tourism development in Phuket has also carried social consequences. With growing tourist numbers has also come greater crowding and pressure on local residents to cope with ever-increasing numbers of foreigners: by 1990, there were, at

any given time, as many foreigners on Phuket as permanent residents, and over the course of the entire year, foreign tourists outnumbered local residents by more than seven times (Doosadee, 1994). The majority of Phuket's population has, in one way or another, benefited from tourism development, but the benefits have proven greater for some than for others. Local landowners, and the urban Sino-Thai elite of the island in particular, have gained the most from tourism's meteoric expansion, and have dominated the industry since the early 1970s by providing the majority of incipient capital for accommodation facilities and tourist services (Cohen, 1982). Conversely, residents with little capital or land holdings find themselves increasingly marginalized from ownership opportunities as the tourism industry upgrades and expands (Ing K, 1988). The proliferation of brothels, massage parlors, and "girlie bars" in the popular beaches of Phuket has also exacerbated a range of social problems ranging from crime and prostitution to AIDS and child pornography.

The various strains tolerated by local residents have essentially posed a minimal threat to the continued expansion of tourism. However, problems associated with the tourism industry itself as well as with certain characteristics of local life could potentially limit future growth. Along with the numerous environmental changes described above, the overcrowding that inevitably results from tourism intensification adversely affects the attractiveness of Phuket as a holiday destination. The discrepancy between the touristic image of paradise, on the one hand, and the reality of pollution and urbanization of beach towns, on the other, thus grows wider and undermines the very basis of tourism in the area (Cohen, 1996). In order to preserve an ideal touristic image, tour operators and travel agencies in Phuket have consistently ignored, or at least downplayed, several features of local life that run counter to that image. Just as tourism growth has led to an increase in the number of boats, the sheer volume of vehicular traffic on Phuket's limited roads has created dangerous driving conditions. Between January and April 1996, there were a total of 52 traffic deaths in Phuket ("New Road Accident," 1996). When extrapolated to an annual death rate per 100,000 people, this figure becomes 72.2; compared to the na-

tional rate of 20.1, this figure clearly substantiates Phuket's infamous reputation for traffic accidents (Alpha Research and Manager Information Services, 1995).

Traffic accidents are not the only source of violent death for tourists, however. Several male tourists involved in the drug or prostitution trade die every year under "mysterious circumstances," and the high number of tourist drownings, reaching up to 100 per year, reflects the dire absence of adequate life-saving facilities in Phuket (Vannisse, 1996a). The morbid underside of tourism in Phuket poses a persistent hazard to Phuket's international image, but remains largely concealed because "persistent rumour has it that anyone raising the matter with the obvious intent of making the scandal public, is likely to incite the wrath of the Phuket 'Mafia,' who regard any criticism that could affect their multi-million dollar-a-year business as a serious threat to their profit margins" (Vannisse, 1996b, p. A5). Finally, although the small, but highly visible, Muslim separatist movement in Southern Thailand has by and large avoided tourist targets, *occasional* incidents such as bomb blasts in or near tourist resort areas nevertheless contradict and imperil the idyllic image of Southern Thailand marketed to tourists ("Security Boosted for Tourists," 1996).

Local reactions to the manifold changes brought by unregulated tourism have generally ranged from mild apathy to wild excitement, but not all Thais have embraced tourism development with open arms. Although dissent against tourism development remains limited to a handful of academics and activists, a number of local and national groups have begun to rally against tourism, claiming that it benefits foreigners and wealthy Thais at the expense of disadvantaged locals (Rattachumpoth, 1992). Based in Bangkok, the Ecumenical Coalition on Third World Tourism (ECTWT) represents the most famous of these organizations, and has, since its formation in 1982, published several books and films critical of mass tourism (O'Grady, 1994; Srisang, 1988), as well as a regular newsletter known as *Contours*. Another recently formed organization, the Tourism Investigation and Monitoring Team, produces *new frontiers* [sic], a monthly collection of regional newspaper articles related to tourism, develop-

ment, and environment issues in the Mekong sub-region. The adversarial indigenous stance towards tourism is best captured in *Thailand for Sale*, a film produced by Thai writer "Ing K" (1991). The film, which to this day remains banned in Thailand, offers a highly critical examination of tourism in Phuket, arguing that Thais have sold out their natural environment and traditional social values in pursuit of tourism. With shots of "girlie bars" in the background, the film's narrator states:

As one current saying goes, the Thais are the nicest people money can buy. To the tourists, it does seem that everything and everybody is for sale. Nothing is sacred, not trees, not temples, and certainly not the law, which can be tailor made to suit business needs. . . . As tourists, you can help to keep your paradise and our land intact. Come as a guest in our home, not as a demanding customer. We are real people here. We're not a backdrop for your holiday. (Ing K, 1991)

By entirely ignoring the underlying economic incentives driving tourism development, the film betrays its extreme bias and tendency to romanticize "premodern" life. Nonetheless, it provides a salient reminder of the high stakes, and polarized positions, associated with tourism development in Thailand.

Conclusion: The Rhetoric of Sustainability

Recognizing the social and environmental limitations of past tourism development, the government of Thailand has in recent years embarked on an extensive and ambitious program of sustainable tourism development and environmental preservation. Sustainability based on carefully planned ecotourism projects forms the cornerstone of Thailand's most recent national tourism master plan, released in March 1997. Produced by the Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI) on behalf of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), the master plan allocates over 3 billion baht annually to three areas: environmental rehabilitation and protection, expansion of ecotourism infrastructure, and income generation for local communities. In addition to this financial support, the government has set up an ecotourism training center in the northeastern province of Nakhon Ratchasima worth 120 million baht. This training facility comprises several components, including a study cen-

ter, "ecolodges," and recreational space, and aims at providing Thai citizens and tourism industry personnel with a multifaceted education centered around conservation and ecotourism training. Finally, in 1996, the TAT awarded its first annual Thailand Tourism Awards to companies that promote natural and cultural conservation through sustainable tourism projects. With close to 100 applications in six areas of competition, the Thailand Tourism Awards demonstrated both the swelling popularity of the ecotourism catchword and the tourism industry's enthusiasm over the profit potential of the green label.

It would appear that tourism planners and industry representatives seem well positioned, and well intentioned, to stem the tide of environmental degradation found in tourism destinations throughout Thailand. In *practice*, however, the tourism industry in Thailand continues to develop in a highly unsustainable manner. When the policies and practices of the Thai government and tourism industry are scrutinized, the recent fascination with sustainable tourism development reveals more the operation of a marketing tool and euphemistic rhetorical device than any serious adherence to the principles of sustainability. During the mid-1980s, the TAT attempted to open up Thailand's national parks to tourism, but retreated in the face of widespread opposition. Despite this controversy, the TAT currently plans to develop ecotourism sites within protected areas, including national parks, by selecting areas with touristic potential and granting tourist licenses to such groups as the Forest Industry Organization, which due to the 1989 logging ban, find themselves with shrinking sources of revenue (Hongthong & Tangwisutijit, 1997). Further, the recently announced "Amazing Thailand" campaign firmly evinces Thailand's lack of commitment to sustainable tourism. The Amazing Thailand campaign will run from January 1, 1998 to December 31, 1999, and will emphasize shopping, adventure tours, the "Thai Food for the World" exhibition, sporting events, conventions, and cultural demonstrations. By setting a target of 17 million tourists for 1998 and 1999, the Amazing Thailand campaign seeks to greatly magnify the size and scope of the tourism industry, while at the same time, the Thai government continues to argue paradoxically for the need for carefully

monitored, small-scale, and sustainable tourism development. The future health, viability, and sustainability of Thailand's tourism industry will therefore depend largely on how this discrepancy between perpetual growth and sustainability plays itself out in both policy and practice. Although not the focus of this article, the question of sustainability provides interesting avenues for future research and will continue to dictate the nature of tourism development in Thailand into the next century.

References

- Alpha Research and Manager Information Services. (1995). *Thailand in figures 1995-1996* (3rd ed.). Bangkok: Author.
- Chon, K-S., Singh, A., & Mikula, J. (1993). Thailand's tourism and hotel industry. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 34(3), 43-49.
- Cohen, E. (1982). Marginal paradises: Bungalow tourism on the islands of southern Thailand. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 9(2), 189-228.
- Cohen, E. (1995). Golf in Thailand: From sport to business. *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, 32(3), 1-17.
- Cohen, E. (1996). *Thai tourism: Hill tribes, islands, and open-ended prostitution*. Bangkok: White Lotus.
- Doosadee Thaitakoo. (1994). Phuket: Urban conservation versus tourism. In M. Askew & W. Logan (Eds.), *Cultural identity and urban change in Southeast Asia*. Geelong, Australia: Deakin University Press.
- DuPont, P. (1992, September 28). Trouble in paradise. *The Nation*, pp. B5, B8.
- Eamwivatkit, W. (1997, May 17). Soil erosion sullies Phuket sea water. *The Nation*. Available: <http://203.155.106.9/news/NewsDetails.IDC?newsid=12159>
- Gay, J. (1985, February). The 'patriotic' prostitute. *The Progressive*, 34-36.
- Government of Thailand. (1981). *1980 Population and housing census, changwat Phuket*. Bangkok: National Statistical Office.
- Government of Thailand. (1991). *1990 Population and housing census, changwat Phuket*. Bangkok: National Statistical Office.
- Handley, P. (1990, April 12). Thais join the club. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 42.
- Handley, P. (1991, September 19). Victims of success. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 44.
- Hindle, P. (1987, October 31). Thailand: A recipe that still tastes good. *The Economist*, Survey Thailand Section, 1-20.
- Hongthong, P., & Tangwisutjit, N. (1997). Forest land faces threat from tourism. Available: <http://203.155.106.9/news/NewsDetails.IDC?newsid=3918>
- Huntington Technical Services. (1974). *South Thailand regional planning study*. London: Author.
- Inchukul, K. (1997, March 17). Anchors do the damage. *Bangkok Post*. Available: http://www.samart.co.th/bkk-post/news/BParchive/BP970317/1703_news13.html
- Ing K. (1988, May 17). One person's paradise is another's hell. *The Nation*, Focus section.
- Ing K. (1991). *Thailand for sale* (videorecording). Bangkok: Small World Productions.
- Japan International Cooperation Agency. (1989). *The study on potential tourism development for the southern region of Thailand*. Bangkok: Tourism Authority of Thailand.
- Johnson, L. (1994, August 1). Tourists seeking sun, sea and child sex. *The Nation*, p. A7.
- Kelly, N. (1991, July 18). Counting the cost. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Focus Thailand section, 44.
- Klangsombut, Y. (1996, August 29). Big top boosts Phuket's appeal. *Bangkok Post*, Horizons section, p. 3.
- Lertkittisuk, P. (1992, January 26). A tourism disaster in the making. *Bangkok Post*, p. 8.
- Ludwig, H. (1976, May/June). Environmentalism and Phuket: A case study. *Sawaddi*, 14-17, 22-25.
- Meyer, W. (1988). *Beyond the mask*. Saarbrücken, Germany/Fort Lauderdale, FL: Verlag Breitenbach.
- National Statistical Office. (1995). *Statistical yearbook Thailand* (number 42). Bangkok: Author.
- New road accident and death statistics unveiled. (1996, June, 5). *Phuket Gazette*.
- O'Grady, R. (1994). *The hordes of locusts: A new look at tourism*. Bangkok: Ecumenical Coalition on Third World Tourism.
- Pacific Consultants International. (1978). *Masterplan and feasibility study: Tourism development of Phuket*. Tokyo: Author.
- Parnwell, M. (1993). Environmental issues and tourism in Thailand. In M. Hitchcock, V. King, & M. Parnwell (Eds.), *Tourism in south-east Asia*. London: Routledge.
- Phuket Provincial Statistical Office. (1995). *Statistical reports of changwat, 1994*. Phuket: Author.
- Pleumarom, A. (1994). Sport and environment: Thailand's golf boom reviewed. *Thailand Environment Institute Quarterly Environment Journal*, 2(4), 47-61.
- Poetikit, C. (1992, March 2). Phuket residents face severe water shortage. *The Nation*, p. A2.
- Rattachumpoth, R. (1992, December). Phuket: Holiday paradise where locals are banned. *Contours*, 5(8), 13-15.
- Sachs, D. (1988, September/October). Local heroes. *Sierra*, 78-81.
- Security boosted for tourists in south after bomb found. (1996, July 25), *Bankok Post*, p. 1.
- Siriphan, S. (1993, April 29). Patong beach: Tell it like it is. *Bangkok Post*, Horizon section, pp. 1-2.
- Southern provinces report on trends and developments in tourism. (1996, May 3). *Phuket Gazette*.
- Srisang, K. (1988). *Tourism: An ecumenical concern*. Bangkok: Ecumenical Coalition on Third World Tourism.
- Thailand: Degradation and development in a resource-rich land. (1988). *Environment*, 30(1), 11-32.
- Tourism Authority of Thailand. (1979). *Masterplan and feasibility study: Tourism development of Phuket*. Bangkok: Author.

- Tourism Authority of Thailand. (1991). *Rai shue rong ram lae jam nuan hong nai prathet Thai Bi 2534 [A list of hotels and number of rooms in Thailand, 1991]*. Bangkok: Author.
- Tourism Authority of Thailand. (1992). *Statistical report 1991*. Bangkok: Author.
- Tourism Authority of Thailand. (1997a). *Statistical report 1996*. Bangkok: Author.
- Tourism Authority of Thailand. (1997). *Internal documents from statistics and research division*. Bangkok: Author.
- Tourist Organization of Thailand. (1961). *Tourism in Thailand*. Bangkok: Author.
- Tourist Organization of Thailand. (1975). *Statistical report of visitors to Thailand*. Bangkok: Author.
- Tourist Organization of Thailand. (1976). *National plan on tourism development*. Bangkok: Author.
- Traisawasdichai, M. (1991, March 21). The rape of a southern belle. *The Nation*, pp. C1-C2.
- Truong, T-D. (1990). *Sex, money and morality: Prostitution and tourism in southeast Asia*. London: Zed Books.
- Vannisse, M. (1996a, August 30). On 'paradise island Phuket' hell reigns supreme on the beaches and roads. *Thailand Times*, p. A5.
- Vannisse, M. (1996b, August 23). The politics of drowning in Phuket. *Thailand Times*, p. A5.
- Wallace, C. (1990, January 19). Trouble oozes in Thailand paradise. *Los Angeles Times*, pp. A17-A18.
- Waters, S. (1996). *The big picture: Travel industry world yearbook* (Vol. 40). New York: Child & Waters Inc.
- World Tourism Organization. (1994). *Yearbook of tourism statistics*. Madrid: Author.
- World Tourism Organization. (1997). *Tourism highlights 1996*. Madrid: Author.