



Ecotourism and Community Development in Southern Thailand

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Ecotourism is the fastest growing segment of tourism, itself the fastest growing industry in the world. The World Resources Institute estimates that nature-based tourism currently expands by approximately 10 to 30 percent annually, compared to only four percent for tourism overall. Although there exists a dizzying array of definitions for ecotourism, the most commonly accepted and cited definition derives from a set of principles outlined by the Ecotourism Society, an international, non-profit organization dedicated to making tourism a viable tool for conservation and sustainable development: Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people. Ecotourism thus embodies and integrates several principles: ecological sustainability, ethical and responsible tourist behaviour, community-based development, and nature-based travel experiences.

Hoping to assess the links between ecotourism and community-based development in a specific location, I spent five months in 1996 conducting research with Jaidee Kayak, an ecotourism company based in Phuket, Thailand. (Individual and company

names have been changed for the sake of anonymity.) Jaidee Kayak was founded in 1989 by Erik Fidel, an American conservationist who wished to develop sustainable business opportunities with local residents interested in conservation, natural history, and adventure tourism. Jaidee Kayak offers day trips to Phangnga Bay, where tourists are taken into open-air lagoons (*hongs*) via cave passages that are filled and emptied of water as sea tides ebb and flow. Jaidee Kayak has several owners, the majority of whom are locally-based Thais. Nearly fifty Thais work for Jaidee Kayak full-time, and several more work indirectly as part-time drivers, boat captains, freelance guides, and chefs. Due to its commitment to ecological principles, Jaidee Kayak has received numerous awards, including a British Airways Tourism for Tomorrow Award and a Green Globe Achievement Award.

In addition to examining the various contributions to community development made by Jaidee Kayak, I was interested in determining how interactions between specific local circumstances and global tourism "flows" combined to produce a place-specific ecotourism industry. Ecotourism has experienced tremendous growth recently in Thailand, not only in terms of visitors, but also in the level of private and

government rhetoric concerning "sustainable development." Many tour companies in Thailand have been quick to capitalize on the green marketing label associated with ecotourism, and in 1995 the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) even published a set of national policies and guidelines. In 1996, the TAT also inaugurated a series of ecotourism awards given to responsible and successful ecotourism operators throughout Thailand. Southern Thailand, and Phuket especially, have provided the focus for the ecotourism boom in Thailand. Several nationally-acclaimed companies operate in and around Phuket, and the private sector has utilized the mass markets and marketing channels of the Phuket tourism industry to promote environmentally-friendly and nature-oriented travel excursions.

In attempting to outline the connection between tourism and development, ecotourism proponents commonly list several ingredients that prove critical for the successful implementation of community-based tourism projects. Typically, these "ten-step" guides list the following strategies, among many: empower the local community; create local stakeholders; link benefits to conservation; distribute benefits equitably; and involve community

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leaders. While these altruistic principles are laudable in theory, the absence of place-specific context strips them of empirical relevance. In particular, the case of Jaidee Kayak proves, more than anything, that local circumstances carry a much greater influence on the development of ecotourism than aspatial formulae based on the euphemistic desires of mostly "Western" academics and alternative tourists. Jaidee Kayak has had to work through several specific circumstances in order to survive and promote their goals of sustainable ecotourism and community

development.

First, educating and empowering a community is of course highly desirable, but in Phuket, this has proven very difficult. In only its second full year of operation, Jaidee Kayak's original Thai partners turned against Erik Fidel and attempted to have him, and another foreign manager, arrested for fabricated visa violations. Over the course of the first two years of business, Jaidee Kayak lost over one million *Baht* (US\$50,000) due to embezzlement by the original partners. Other foreign ecotourism company owners have also commonly experienced similar fates, thereby demonstrating that simply walking into and "empowering" a community often proves difficult in practice. Further, local disparities *vis-a-vis* the national government are difficult to overcome and tourism, while occasionally providing income to poor areas, cannot simply erase entrenched problems of economic and social disparity.

Second, Jaidee Kayak has had to overcome problems with local "underground" figures, who make it difficult for ecotourism companies to do unhindered business, particularly if financial success becomes obvious. The owners of Jaidee Kayak have continually received threats, and their expensive inflatable canoes were even "kidnapped" once by local mafia leaders who returned them only after Jaidee Kayak paid a large ransom amount. However, when a member of Thailand's royal family participated on a Jaidee Kayak trip in 1994, the company freed itself of the mafia problem due to the tremendous respect commanded by the Thai royal family.

Third, Jaidee Kayak's competitors pay illegal, under-the-table commissions to travel agents in Phuket who then purposely steer tourists toward those particular companies, even in cases where tourists specifically inquire about Jaidee Kayak. The company has worked

around this problem by forging links to powerful local figures in the tourism industry, including the governor of the TAT office in Phuket.

A more accurate list of successful ecotourism ingredients in Thailand would therefore include such unlikely items as working with local government figures, addressing government and individual corruption, dealing with threats of death and arrest, and intimidating the local mafia. Jaidee Kayak demonstrates that local circumstances play an enormous role in shaping how the industry develops, and forces us to reassess the utility of aspatial ecotourism policies and guidelines. By using local Thai solutions and "playing the local game," Jaidee Kayak is beginning to foster community development in a unique and place-specific manner.

Rather than attempt to apply vague and euphemistic guidelines to highly disparate and heterogeneous destinations, tourists and tourism scholars need to discover the empirical realities that determine how the global flow of ecotourism is negotiated at the local level. In addition, we need to rethink what sustainable tourism means in these specific contexts. In Phuket, successful community-based tourism as practised by Jaidee Kayak implies a more general and realistic assessment of economic development. In particular, Jaidee Kayak combines conventional development concepts such as fiscal responsibility with community development ideals like local control and equitable income distribution. Most importantly, Jaidee Kayak, and ecotourism in Phuket generally, demonstrate that *local* circumstances and conditions unquestionably represent the largest determinant of success for *global* ecotourism. □

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