

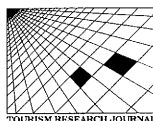
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## Ecotourism and Empowerment in Southern Thailand: Possibilities, Hurdles and Compromises

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# Ecotourism and Empowerment in Southern Thailand: Possibilities, Hurdles, and Compromises

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## ***Abstract***

*In addition to providing tourists with educational and nature-based travel experiences, ecotourism also carries the promise of encouraging empowerment and grassroots development in local communities throughout the developing world. This paper assesses ecotourism's contribution to such features of empowerment as local benefits, decision-making power, and control in communities located in and around the island of Phuket in southern Thailand. Although some ecotourism companies in Phuket provide extensive economic and social benefits for individuals and communities, such efforts have proven difficult due to the cultural and political circumstances of southern Thailand. Moreover, the creation of local benefits, the defining component of economic empowerment, has come at the cost of local initiation and control, key features of political empowerment. This tension between benefits and control characterizes ecotourism in Phuket, but rather than indicating an absolute failure to foster empowerment, it signals more fundamentally the incomplete, imperfect, and localized nature of both ecotourism and empowerment.*

**Keywords:** *Benefits, community development, control, ecotourism, empowerment, participation, Phuket, Thailand.*

## Introduction

In addition to promoting conventional, mass tourism as a source of much needed foreign exchange, many developing countries have also, since the late-1980s, attempted to tap into the burgeoning global demand for nature-based forms of travel known collectively as ecotourism (Cater, 1994; Honey, 1999; Weaver, 1998). As the number of companies offering - and the number of tourists wishing to participate in - ecotourism have mushroomed, the study of ecotourism has also exploded in the past two decades, resulting in multiple definitions of, and theoretical approaches to, ecotourism. In an early, and still popular, definition by the International Ecotourism Society, ecotourism was defined as "responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people" (Western, 1993: 8). Several scholars have examined the literature on ecotourism in order to identify common elements found in most definitions (Diamantis, 1999; Fennell, 1999; Page and Dowling, 2002). Although varying in terms of focus, detail, and scope, virtually all definitions feature three common elements: education, sustainability, and location (in 'natural areas') (Weaver, 2002). Beyond these three components, Fennell (2001) argues that, based on his content analysis of 85 definitions of ecotourism, the promotion of 'local benefits' is also a prominent theme, appearing in 48 percent of all definitions, and encompassing such concepts as community development, well-

being, welfare, local control, and revenue generation. Similarly, Wallace and Pierce (1996: 850) claim that for ecotourism to remain 'true,' it must feature the principles of both "early and long-term participation of local people in the decision-making process" and the direction of "economic and other benefits to local people that complement rather than overwhelm or replace traditional practices."

Aside from informing some definitions of ecotourism, the promotion of local benefits, participation, and decision-making power also relates more generally to the issue of community-based development. As the best-known example of 'alternative development,' community-based development strives to achieve social justice, democracy, and the equitable distribution of benefits and decision-making power among members of a local community (Macleod, 1997; Robinson, 1994). Community-based development attempts to increase a community's economic independence, which translates to political independence and autonomy (Lane, 1988). Most importantly, community-based development implies a 'bottom-up' strategy whereby the communities affected by development provide the impetus for, and dictate the nature of, development processes within their communities (Chambers, 1997; Friedmann, 1992; Stöhr and Taylor, 1981).

While the range of goals listed above all contribute to community-based development, they also more broadly facilitate the

empowerment of individuals and communities. Scheyvens (2002) argues that, in the context of tourism, the multidimensional nature of development is best captured when one takes into account four dimensions of empowerment. First, economic empowerment relates to lasting economic benefits for the community, whereby income is distributed equitably and widely, and a lack of capital, experience, or skills among individuals does not preclude participation in tourism. Second, psychological empowerment occurs when the self-esteem of community members is enhanced through outside recognition of that community's culture, resources, and knowledge. Third, social empowerment stems from tourism's ability to maintain or enhance community cohesion as individuals and families cooperate to build successful tourism ventures. Lastly, political empowerment is linked to the fair representation of disparate groups' interests and needs in the political structure of the community. Opportunities for a variety of community groups to voice opinions and to be represented on decision-making bodies also foster political empowerment. When viewed in terms of ethical, grassroots community development, ecotourism in its most benign form not only utilizes the natural environment in a sustainable manner, but also contributes to all or most of the components of empowerment listed above (Hawkins and Khan, 1998). As Scheyvens (2000:233) points out, "from a development perspective, ecotourism ventures should only be considered 'successful' if they promote

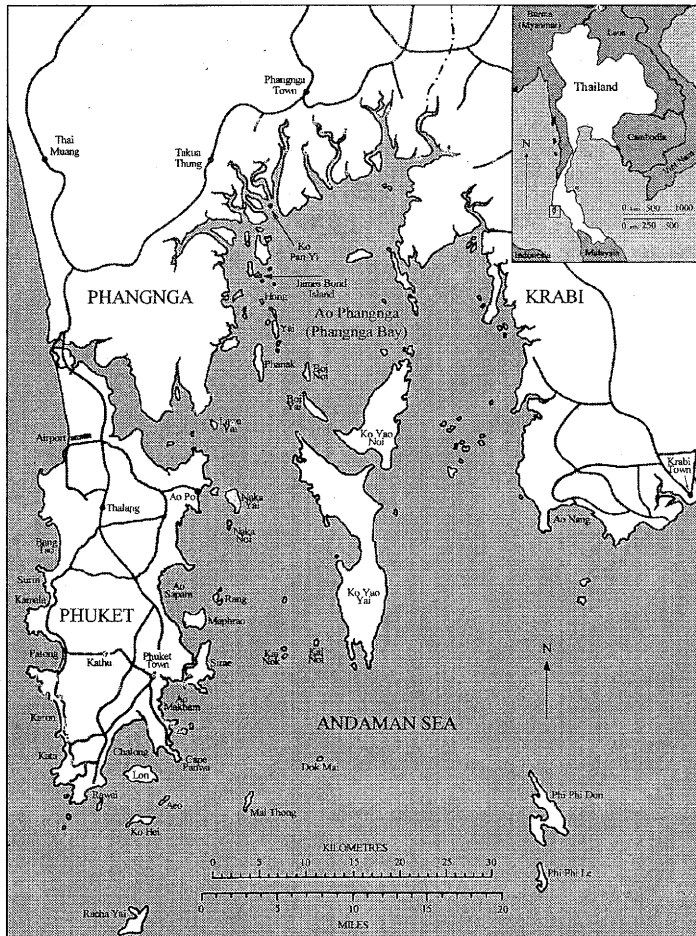
empowerment, with local communities having some measure of control over ecotourism development and sharing equitably in any benefits deriving therefrom." Thus, although failing in most cases to state so explicitly, proponents of a definition of ecotourism that incorporates the themes of benefits and control also, by implication, advocate the goal of empowerment.

The central question that this paper addresses is whether ecotourism contributes to the empowerment of individuals and communities in southern Thailand. In particular, this paper explores the ability of ecotourism to cultivate two fundamental measures of empowerment, namely equitable distribution of benefits, and local control over the initiation and direction of ecotourism. The research on which this paper is based took place over a total span of thirteen months from 1996 to 2001, and includes hundreds of surveys of, and formal interviews with, tourists, ecotourism guides, company owners and managers, government officials, local travel agents, tour company representatives, and national park volunteers. In southern Thailand, the principal location of this research was the island of Phuket and the surrounding provinces of Krabi and Phangnga (Figure 1).

Situated along Thailand's southwest coast, Phuket has attracted tourists for decades, and currently represents the country's most popular seaside resort destination. Using case study material from Phuket's most

prominent ecotourism company, this paper will argue that due to the cultural and political circumstances of southern Thailand,

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



the attainment of some aspects of empowerment such as local benefits depends on the abandonment of other principles such as local initiation and control.

In particular, although far from ideal in terms of political empowerment, the active role played by Western expatriates in the history and direction of ecotourism in Phuket has proven necessary and beneficial insofar as

the economic empowerment of locals is concerned. Contrary to those accounts of ecotourism and empowerment that posit universal, overly abstract formulas or sets of principles (Horwich et al., 1993; Lynn, 1992; McLaren 1998), the example of ecotourism in Phuket reveals the inherently-localized nature of both processes, and illustrates that empowerment is an incomplete and imperfect set of compromises in practice.

### **Mass tourism and ecotourism in southern Thailand**

From the very beginning of tourism's establishment in southern Thailand in the early-1970s, the province of Phuket has served as its

principal engine of growth. 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: 153).

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 (PCI, 1978), the newly revamped Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) 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 myriad 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. In the 1980s, Phuket stepped onto the international tourism stage, growing

from a little known tin mining and rubber region to an internationally renowned tourism destination (Uthoff, 1997). International tourist arrivals, which stood at approximately 20,000 in 1976, shot up precipitously during the 1980s, reaching 533,545 by 1989 (Ludwig, 1976: 23; TAT, 1997a). Along with encouraging greater transportation and communications connections to the rest of Thailand and beyond, this explosion in tourist arrivals fuelled a tremendous boom in hotel construction. The number of rooms in 1979 totaled 1,400, but by 1993, the number had risen to 17,426 (Cohen, 1982: 198; TAT, 1994: 56). The growing prominence of Phuket in the national tourism industry soon began to create a large, disproportionate share of accommodation establishments in southern Thailand. In particular, despite possessing less than 15 percent of Thailand's total population and land area, southern Thailand contained, by the mid-1990s, over 31 percent of all tourism accommodations (TAT, 1997b: 9).

Tourist arrivals in Phuket continued to grow steadily during the 1990s, and by 2001, international arrivals had reached 2.7 million, an increase of 8.6 percent from the year before. The large number of tourists visiting Phuket is not only stunning considering the island's small area (543 square kilometers) and population (250,000), but the 8.6 percent increase in 2001 indicates that Phuket has managed to overcome recent trends in the global tourism industry, which in 2001 suffered a 1.3 percent drop in tourist arrivals

(TAT, 2003a; 2003b). As the economic and social orientation of Phuket has shifted from agriculture and mining towards the service sector, employment patterns have also come to reflect the transition of Phuket from a backpacking stop to a resort destination. Between 1980 and 1990, the number of Phuket residents employed in the service sector rose by 133 percent (Government of Thailand, 1981: 141; 1991: 199). Further, the share occupied by service sector employees in the total workforce of Phuket rose from 19 percent in 1980 to 53 percent in 1999 (National Statistical Office, 2000: 12).

As one would expect, a 15-fold expansion in the number of tourists visiting Phuket in the 15 years between 1986 and 2001 dramatically altered the physical landscape and socio-economic character of the island (Pleumarom, 2001; Wong, 1995). In response to a latent tourist demand for cultural and natural authenticity, created in part by this rapid transformation of Phuket into a congested mass tourism resort area, several operators began, during the late-1980s, to offer cycling, trekking, rafting, kayaking, and other nature-oriented excursions to rainforest and marine locations in and around Phuket. Many tourism companies in Phuket currently offer nature-oriented diversions as part of their overall product range, but there are only approximately 20 ecotourism companies in Phuket, if ecotourism is taken to encompass such variables as education, sustainability, cultural sensitivity, conservation, and local

benefits (Diamantis 1999; Fennell 1999) rather than mere self-identification with the 'eco' label.

The pioneer of ecotourism in Phuket is *Sea Canoe*, a sea kayaking company that offers trips to Ao Phangnga Marine National Park, located immediately to the north and east of Phuket (see Figure 1). Sea Canoe takes advantage of the dramatic topography of Ao Phangnga, a shallow bay that features hundreds of limestone islands with cliffs that rise vertically to over 300 feet in elevation. Using inflatable kayaks, Sea Canoe navigates through caverns and cave passages in order to bring tourists into the open-air lagoons (or 'hongs,' the Thai word for 'room') located in the middle of some of the bay's islands. Sea Canoe has attracted considerable attention and acclaim, receiving several national and global awards for its efforts to promote sustainability, innovation, and ethical tourism (Neale, 1999). Because of its high profile, success, and stature as the first ecotourism company in Phuket, Sea Canoe represents a valuable case study for those interested in the daily practice and consequences of ecotourism in a developing country. Moreover, discussions of empowerment tend to remain generic, speculative, and formulaic in the absence of concrete case study evidence that can offer not only specific lessons but also opportunities to test the feasibility of engendering empowerment through ecotourism.

## **Ecotourism and economic empowerment**

Sea Canoe is the brainchild of John Gray, a Californian by birth who for most of the 1980s ran a sea kayaking company in Hawaii. Since 1985, Gray had travelled to Thailand on several occasions to participate in kayaking trips. In January 1989, Gray visited Phuket with the intention of exploring some nearby islands, and possibly even expanding his sea kayaking operation by bringing tourists from Hawaii to southern Thailand on kayaking expeditions. Upon returning to Hawaii one month later, Gray discovered that his American partners had sold off the business. Finding himself financially ruined, Gray decided to move to Thailand and start over from scratch. With two Thai partners, Gray formed Sea Canoe in late-1989 and began selling sea kayaking tours to Ao Phangnga from the travel desk of Le Meridien, one of Phuket's most exclusive hotels. Eventually, several other partners joined the company, the most important being Gray's Thai wife who holds the largest number of shares in Sea Canoe. By 1992, Sea Canoe had expanded rapidly, going from a company with 4 leaky inflatable kayaks and 700 baht (US\$16) in operating capital to one with 12 kayaks and 17 million baht (US\$395,800) in total revenue. Despite fluctuations in revenues, caused partially by the rapid proliferation of competitors in recent

years, Sea Canoe continues to spearhead the ecotourism niche of the overall industry in Phuket, and most importantly, still manages - in spite of the limitations discussed below - to provide a model of ethical tourism based on the delivery of economic benefits for local communities in Phuket and surrounding provinces.

The provision of economic benefits has formed a cornerstone of Sea Canoe's philosophical outlook and day-to-day policies since its very inception. Seeing firsthand the environmental and social damage caused by conventional mass tourism in Phuket, Gray envisioned forming an ecotourism company that could counter the prevailing paradigm found at the time among virtually all tourism businesses in southern Thailand. The overall contribution made by Sea Canoe towards empowerment and community development incorporates several areas, including employee salaries, payments to the owners of escort boats and transport vans, food purchases, training costs, advertising payments, and other operational costs. With the exception of specialized equipment, such as inflatable canoes manufactured in the United States, Sea Canoe spends over 98 percent of its total costs locally in Phuket or the neighbouring provinces of Krabi and Phangnga. In an average month, Sea Canoe contributes approximately 2 million baht (US\$46,000) to the local economy, with one-third going to payroll and roughly 400,000 baht (US\$9,300) going towards paying the owners of three contracted and two



'freelance' (i.e., part-time) escort boats. Over half of Sea Canoe's kayaking guides, and virtually all boat captains, deck hands, and on-board cooks, are native residents of Ko Yao, a set of two large islands just off the east coast of Phuket that are home to several poor Muslim fishing communities. While Sea Canoe avoids preferential hiring practices based on regional origin, the close proximity of Ko Yao, and other areas of Phangnga province, enhances the value of local guides to the company. In this way, Sea Canoe manages to ameliorate - while also remaining unaffected by - the seasonal migration that characterizes labour from other parts of Thailand, especially northeastern Thailand (Isaan).

The most significant economic contribution made by Sea Canoe involves direct salary payments, not only to full-time employees, including kayaking guides, office staff, and cooks, but also to boat captains, van drivers, and other 'freelance,' part-time staff. Sea Canoe employs between 45 and 60 full-time staff, depending on the season, and a total of close to 100 people receive wages or salaries from the company. This number may initially appear small in the context of the overall tourism industry, but considering that Sea Canoe has until very recently remained a medium-sized, locally-oriented tour operator, the total number of Thais employed, or at least benefiting indirectly from, Sea Canoe compares favourably to virtually all other tour companies in Phuket, as well as against many small- and medium-sized hotels. According to Horwath and

Horwath International (1989), 158 full-time jobs are created in Asia for every 100 hotel rooms. If extrapolated, these data indicate that the 45 to 60 full-time jobs created by Sea Canoe annually would require a hotel with between 28 and 38 rooms to provide the same number of jobs. While this falls below the average number of rooms in Phuket hotels (63), it remains roughly on par with a large number of small- and medium-sized establishments (TAT, 1991: 313). It is also important to remember that the average is brought up substantially by a handful of large hotels in Patong Beach and the Laguna Bay area that contain over 400 rooms.

In order to combat fluctuations in employment caused by the seasonality of tourism arrivals, Sea Canoe pays its employees a fixed income based on a small number of days, 10 in this case, per month. Since paying daily wages alone to guides would cause severe financial strain among many employees during the low season, Sea Canoe instead provides stable income while also rewarding work performed in excess of the 10-day minimum. Daily bonuses and tips, the latter of which in some cases can amount to half of one's regular salary, therefore augment the monthly salaries of kayaking guides, the largest single category of Sea Canoe employee. Among the various reasons for satisfaction among Sea Canoe employees, this stability of income, and the relatively few days required to earn it, represent major benefits and 'performance incentives' for full-time Sea Canoe employees.

Besides offering the security of a fixed,

guaranteed monthly income, Sea Canoe salaries remain comparatively attractive from both an occupational and regional perspective. Interviews with guides from the various Thai-owned, 'copycat' kayaking companies revealed a sizable discrepancy between Sea Canoe and competitor salaries. Lacking both medical insurance and training, the guides of copy companies earn less than half the salaries of Sea Canoe guides. As actual monetary amounts, Sea Canoe's base salaries resemble the medium to top end of earnings in other tourism-sector occupations, but more significantly, employment with Sea Canoe differs from the rigorous, often demoralizing nature of other jobs in Phuket. Restaurant employees, for example, must work for at least 9 hours a day, 6 days a week under strict supervision. Bearing in mind that Sea Canoe guides need only work for 10 days each month to earn their salaries, the relatively generous payroll contributions made by Sea Canoe appear especially attractive in comparison to other employment options available to Thais living and working in Phuket. However, to appreciate the effect of Sea Canoe on the economic lives of individual Thais, one must juxtapose the company's salaries against national and regional average per capita incomes. The starting salaries of regular guides exceed the average total income of Thais by over 3 times, and when wages and salaries are examined in isolation, guides make at least 7.8 times the national per capita average. The large proportion, and meager incomes, of agricultural labourers in Thailand keep average per capita incomes

depressed, but Sea Canoe salaries nonetheless remain 3 times higher than the average wage and salary earnings of the relatively well-paid group of clerical, sales, and services workers (National Statistical Office, 2001). Even cooks, the lowest paid of Sea Canoe's full-time employees, collect incomes between 2.4 and 4.7 times the average rate for clerical, sales, and services workers in Thailand and southern Thailand, respectively. Thus, the salaries paid by Sea Canoe not only exceed those of other kayaking companies and tourism employers in Phuket, but also provide a rare opportunity for local unskilled workers to earn incomes well above national and regional levels.

Salaries alone distinguish Sea Canoe as a generous employer, but the company also contributes to community economic development through its human resources program. Sea Canoe staff enjoy several benefits, including life insurance, disability allowances, and a full medical package where Sea Canoe matches government contributions to health coverage. Considering only a handful of private companies in Thailand provide medical benefits for workers, Sea Canoe stands alone among other tourism employers in Phuket in terms of employee welfare, covering in some cases off-the-job medical costs and even paying for emergency treatment of employee family members in need of assistance.

The cornerstone of Sea Canoe's human resource strategy centres on training programs aimed at enhancing the profes-

sional development and education of Sea Canoe staff. Sea Canoe spends over 500,000 baht (US\$11,600) annually on employee training, and guides personally receive 50,000 baht (US\$1,160) in training by the time they receive promotion to a lead guide position. Sea Canoe provides training in five areas. First, guides receive environmental education through a range of Thai- and English-language informational materials located at Sea Canoe's main office in Phuket Town. Guides augment this written information with informal, ongoing lessons on natural history, geology, flora, and fauna. Second, Sea Canoe organizes and pays for an annual week-long course in first-aid, cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR), and marine rescue, taught variously by local hospital staff, Navy personnel, or instructors from the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT). Third, Sea Canoe encourages language education among its entire full-time staff. The full costs of any lessons taken by Sea Canoe staff in languages other than English are reimbursed by the company, and this has created a multilingual staff proficient in German, Japanese, French, and Italian. Government certification is the fourth form of training provided, or in this case financed, by Sea Canoe. As with language training, Sea Canoe reimburses guides who take, and pass, an official TAT guide certification course. Due to a shortage of licensed tourism guides in Phuket, TAT guide certification remains a highly coveted achievement among Thais working in the tourism industry. In addition to receiving a salary increase, certified Sea Canoe guides

enhance their market value and thus create opportunities for even better tourism work in their post-Sea Canoe futures. Lastly, every guide participates in 2 to 3 day canoeing training sessions that are held annually to bring Sea Canoe guides up to skill levels set by the American Canoe Association (ACA).

The human resource programs provided by Sea Canoe for its employees surely benefit the company's bottom line by improving the quality, and therefore profitability, of its ecotourism product. However, they also promote the well being of Thai individuals. The benefits of working for Sea Canoe are especially significant, and carry great potential in bringing about empowerment, because the individuals affected in this case are often those members of Thai society, such as southern Muslim fishermen, who possess little education and thus enjoy few rewarding economic prospects. Notwithstanding most office staff and a few lead guides, the majority of Sea Canoe's 45 to 60 employees have attended school for only 7 to 9 years, with a large number leaving school after the state-sanctioned minimum of 6 years. (The Thai government recently extended the minimum to 9 years.) The poor educational backgrounds of most Thais working for Sea Canoe would normally serve to restrict employment options to demanding, low-paying work such as fishing, farming, or manual labour in either factories or tourism-oriented facilities such as hotels, restaurants, and shops. However, by giving

enjoyable, lucrative work opportunities to those straddling the bottom strata of Thailand's social and class pyramids, Sea Canoe has empowered many Thais whose lives would otherwise follow a different path.

### **Hurdles to the promotion of local benefits**

The discussion thus far of Sea Canoe's success in fostering empowerment through the endowment of generous benefits may perhaps give the impression that the company's efforts have been straightforward and painless. However, the widespread availability of benefits has not only come at the cost of local control, as addressed in the next section, but has also occurred despite the persistence of several obstacles faced by Sea Canoe over the years. At a general level, the problems encountered by Sea Canoe are common to grassroots attempts at autonomy, decentralized community development, and empowerment in Thailand, which often suffer from such constraints as funding shortages, conflicts with traditional Thai cultural systems and existing power structures, and cultural differences in the meanings of key terms such as 'self help' and 'public participation' (Pratt, 1993; Rigg, 1998; Verhagen, 1987). In having to overcome cumbersome social, economic, political, and environmental constraints to community participation in tourism, Thailand faces the same range of limits experienced by other developing countries (Tosun, 2000).

The biggest threat to Sea Canoe's financial viability - and therefore, to its ability to provide the benefits discussed above - is the emergence of 'copycat' competitor companies that charge far lower prices than Sea Canoe and steal away potential business by paying high under-the-table commissions to streetside travel agents in Phuket. Between 1989 and 1992, Sea Canoe was joined by only 3 other companies in Phuket's sea kayaking trade, but by 1999, the number shot up to a total of 20 companies, where it remains to this day. Former partners or employees established virtually every one of Sea Canoe's early competitors, and thus the locations and itineraries of most sea kayaking companies have replicated those of Sea Canoe.

Aside from cutting into Sea Canoe revenues, the lack of government regulation or monitoring, coupled with the cutthroat nature of Phuket's tourism industry, has resulted in low wages for employees of Sea Canoe's competitors, leading in turn to few economic benefits for local communities. Further, the corrupt practices of government officials and private operators hamper the ability of conscientious ecotourism operators such as Sea Canoe to promote an environmentally sustainable form of community development. Park rangers and other staff working in Ao Phangnga National Park claim to lack the necessary boats and even gasoline to pursue sea-kayaking companies that violate environmental laws or operate without an official Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) license. In light of the

financial windfall created by a 10 baht charge levied against every tourist entering Ao Phangnga, it is likely that most of this money fails to get past local Ao Phangnga staff and officials, the majority of whom are severely underpaid. Even in those rare cases when local officials possess a genuine concern for environmental issues, conflicting local interests and the lack of legal enforcement capabilities limit prospects for any tangible or practical solutions. The unethical business practices of 'copycat companies' - the owners of which have in the past initiated prohibited activities such as rock climbing in Ao Phangnga - also inhibit opportunities for inter-company cooperation and other such strategies aimed at overcoming the problems created by the free-for-all business climate of Phuket's tourism industry.

Many of the barriers confounding ecotourism's contribution to empowerment either stem from, or are exacerbated by, the predicaments associated with operating a business as a foreigner, and more importantly as a *farang* expatriate, in Thailand. (Any foreigner of European descent is known in Thailand as a *farang*.) Since *farang* founded, co-own, or continue to play some sort of management role in at least 15 of Phuket's approximately 20 ecotourism companies, the benefits and constraints experienced by *farang* entrepreneurs in Phuket have played a large role in shaping the origins and direction of ecotourism in southern Thailand. Gradual awareness of, and the ability to work within, the political

climate of southern Thailand allow some *farang* with no prior cultural or historical attachments to succeed in implementing ecotourism and community development, but a large number of other cultural constraints manage to frustrate even the most assimilated of Phuket's *farang* residents. The complex and multi-tiered cultural context embodied by Thai society presents difficulties at several levels, from superficial daily encounters to more protracted social relationships, and for *farang* running business ventures in Thailand, arrogance or sheer ignorance can magnify potential cultural misunderstandings.

As visible minorities with seemingly large amounts of money, *farang* in Thailand are moving targets for scam-artists, corrupt officials, and criminal leaders. Besides mysterious deaths and other suspicious crimes perpetrated against them, every *farang* ecotourism operator in Phuket has invariably suffered from incidents meant to generate fear or issue forceful reminders of a foreigner's outsider status in Thai society. Some operators have had tires on company transport vehicles slashed, while other *farang*-owned sightseeing tour companies have had boats purposely sunk by vandals. In Sea Canoe's case, the 'kidnapping' of 6 inflatable canoes in the early years of operation (the company's entire fleet at the time) required a hefty ransom before they could be returned. Due to the vulnerability that comes with tourist or temporary immigrant status, *farang* also face the constant threat of deportation,

which remains a key tactic of intimidation used by unscrupulous members of the local Thai community against certain farang operators.

Aside from various levels of corruption, the notorious underside of Thai society, and the mafia figures operating therein, represent a perpetual threat facing Sea Canoe. Mafia intimidation and death threats against Gray's life began as soon as the company offered daytrips into the *hongs* of Ao Phangnga. As with all other lucrative endeavours in Thailand, including to a certain extent tourism, the collection of edible birds' nests in southern Thailand falls under the control of powerful mafia figures who use intimidation and deadly force to dissuade poachers from illegally infringing on nest gathering territories (Summers and Valli, 1990). Within months of Sea Canoe's formation, local birds' nest gatherers began harassing guides and their passengers, and eventually the company's managers received an invitation in 1991 to a meeting in Ko Yao arranged by the central figure controlling Ao Phangnga's birds' nest trade. During the meeting, the birds' nest 'mafia don' threatened Gray and Sea Canoe's other owners and managers, and finally demanded 50 percent ownership of Sea Canoe. Refusing to back down, Sea Canoe faced, for the next two years, the constant intimidation of birds' nest guards who, equipped with shotguns and M-16s, would often turn up at the entrance of caves in longtail boats to demand that guides pay a fee for every *kaek* (guest). Despite well founded fears of being shot, Sea Canoe's

guides were instructed to refuse making such payments and were convinced by Gray that, regardless of the nasty disposition of some mafia figures, few would be foolish enough to shoot somebody in front of Western tourists. When the birds' nest concession changed hands in 2000, however, pressure was again applied on Sea Canoe and all other sea kayaking companies to pay an annual fee for access to the caves of Ao Phangnga's islands. Refusing once again to pay what it considered an extortion fee, Sea Canoe was threatened as in the past. This time, a price was paid for its stand against corruption. In particular, Sea Canoe's Thai operations manager was shot (but not killed) by would-be-assassins right outside the door of the Sea Canoe headquarters in Phuket Town. Although it was a Thai, and not a *farang*, that was shot that day, it was yet another example of the ways in which companies founded and operated by *farangs* in Phuket face perpetual threats by underground criminal figures.

Questions of *farang* vulnerability shape another hurdle facing ecotourism operators interested in empowerment: betrayal by indigenous partners. Enabling 'locals' to serve as partial owners and managers in a tourism company is a worthy goal, particularly when discussing local involvement, empowerment, and grassroots development. In practice, however, the periodically distasteful tactics associated with business everywhere mar the operations of Phuket-based ecotourism

companies. As with problems created by organized criminal figures, infighting and treachery have plagued most *farang*-initiated ecotourism operators. The embezzlement and betrayal that would ultimately define the relationship between John Gray and 'Eddy,' one of the two original Thai partners in Sea Canoe, remains the ultimate example of the ground-level difficulties encountered by small, independent *farang* entrepreneurs in Thailand. Gray met Eddy on his first trip to Thailand, where Eddy, a tour company representative, greeted Gray at the airport. Eventually, Gray formed Sea Canoe with Eddy and a fisherman from Ko Yao, who is currently managing director of Sea Canoe and originally met Gray while offering tours of Ao Phangnga on his long-tail boat.

Eddy, a Sino-Thai and Buddhist, created problems for Sea Canoe from the very beginning, treating the predominantly Muslim staff with contempt. Eddy aroused further suspicion and disappointment after failing the American Canoe Association (ACA) novice course three times in succession. In March of 1992, following just over 2 full years of operation, Gray noticed that despite possessing, in practice, minimal capital reserves, Sea Canoe's records indicated total revenues and expenditures of 17 and 12 million baht, respectively. After failing to account for the 5 million baht deficit (at that time, equivalent to US\$20,747), Eddy and his girlfriend, who was working as Sea Canoe's accountant, resigned and set off a chain reaction of events. Eddy demanded

that he be paid half of Sea Canoe's revenues despite only legally possessing a 19 percent share in the company. Gray refused to pay Eddy that amount, and soon thereafter, armed with the knowledge that Gray, like many *farang* expatriates, had overstayed his three-month tourist visa, Eddy encouraged a local immigration officer to make an arrest. However, Gray's Thai wife would eventually explain the situation to the immigration officer, and Eddy was told to collect his 19 percent share and drop the matter. After being brought to the governor of Phuket in order to issue a personal apology for overstaying his tourist visa, Gray was charged with just a misdemeanour and released.

Learning that Gray had escaped with a proverbial slap on the wrist, Eddy took the matter to the national immigration office in Bangkok, which immediately issued another arrest warrant for Gray, this time on a felony charge. Once again, a Thai ally (an office manager and small shareholder in Sea Canoe) came to Gray's rescue by speaking at length with the prosecution the day before trial so that Gray would eventually receive acquittal by having only to pay a fine of 4,000 baht (US\$94) and to leave the country for one day. Eddy went on to assist in the formation of Sea Canoe's first 'copycat' competitor, thereby sparking the pattern of unregulated expansion of kayaking companies that now characterizes the situation in Ao Phangnga. Although Sea Canoe's experience with an original local partner highlights the enormous practical

hurdles afflicting those *farang* ecotourism operators who attempt to implement community empowerment schemes in Thailand, it stands in practice as merely one example of many similar tales of embezzlement and betrayal not only in the history of Sea Canoe, but also in the experiences of other ecotourism companies in Thailand (see Kontogeorgopoulos, 1998).

### **Power, control, and the unavoidable trade-offs of empowerment**

In spite of having to overcome constant hurdles, Sea Canoe has nonetheless managed to promote the goal of economic empowerment by extending an extensive set of benefits to its employees, and therefore to Ko Yao and other local communities in which these employees reside. However, the example of Sea Canoe illustrates not only that some aspects of empowerment, such as local benefits, are indeed possible, but also more importantly that achievement of such gains in the southern Thai context are only likely when other components, namely local initiation and control, are sacrificed. In other words, Sea Canoe's ability to provide empowerment through benefits has depended largely on its willingness to maintain *farang* control over the management and direction of the company. The legal owners of Sea Canoe are all Thais, and southern Thais specifically, but legal ownership does not necessarily translate to control. As with virtually all ecotourism companies founded by *farang* expatriates in Phuket, the controlling influence and most of the important management positions in

Sea Canoe remain in the hands of foreigners, especially founder John Gray, who have made Thailand their permanent homes. Further, the majority shareholders in Sea Canoe have always been the Thai wives of Gray and other *farang* partners, thereby granting de facto control of the company to non-Thais.

Although proponents of empowerment would surely decry the lack of full local control over management and decisions, it is understandable that control in the expatriate ecotourism companies of Phuket rests in the hands of *farangs*. In particular, there would likely be no ecotourism at all in Phuket were it not for the efforts of *farang* expatriates to initiate and establish companies centered on the implementation of ecotourism principles. In 1989, when ecotourism was non-existent in the mass resort destination of Phuket, Gray founded Sea Canoe while another *farang* expatriate from England started Siam Safari, the island's first land-based ecotourism company. Soon thereafter, partly as a result of the success of Sea Canoe and *Siam Safari*, several other expatriates started their own ecotourism companies, and the *farang* flavor and roots of ecotourism in Phuket became firmly entrenched. Again, while the need for locals to initiate tourism projects and decide for themselves what form of tourism best suits their needs replicates a key condition found in theoretical prescriptions for ecotourism and empowerment (Akama, 1996), the



exogenous nature of the initiation of ecotourism in Phuket is both predictable and even preferable. It is predictable because, beginning in the 1980s, foreign tourists in Phuket and expatriates wishing to relocate in Thailand noticed and despaired of the obvious social and environmental damage caused by unregulated tourism growth in the more popular beaches of Phuket. Wishing to remain in Thailand and help alleviate some of the damage caused by tourism, a handful of *farang* expatriates decided to merge their interests and start ecotourism companies.

*Farang* initiation is also preferable insofar as empowerment is concerned because had 'locals' initiated the first ecotourism companies, the result - if evidence from the rest of Thailand, including the southern region is a guide - would be businesses run by Thai elites that pay low wages, focus mostly on profits and customer turnover, worry little about environmental conservation, and most importantly, provide few economic benefits for their employees. Ecotourism as an idea or type of business was for the most part unknown in southern Thailand at the time, despite existing in northern Thailand for decades in the form of 'hilltribe' trekking (Cohen, 1989; Dearden and Harron, 1994). It is, therefore, unlikely that ecotourism, and the benefits and empowerment that it has promoted, would exist today were it not for the individual *farang* expatriates that established companies in Phuket in the late-1980s and early-1990s.

The *farang* origins of ecotourism in Phuket do not, of course, preclude locals from enjoying control over the ultimate ecotourism product. However, *farang* control persisted in Phuket's ecotourism industry long after the establishment of the first companies, and only recently have locals begun to take over the reins of Phuket's ecotourism industry by establishing companies of their own. Just as the initiation of ecotourism in Phuket by foreigners rather than locals was predictable and preferable, so too has *farang* control assisted in the delivery of benefits to locals. There are two reasons why *farang* influence in the ecotourism sector of southern Thailand - and *farang* control of individual companies such as Sea Canoe - have proven helpful in fostering empowerment through benefits, even in spite of the difficulties discussed above that stem from *farang* initiation and management. First, as one-time 'Western' tourists themselves, Phuket's ecotourism *farang* expatriates understand the tastes, preferences, and expectations of those to whom ecotourism in Phuket appeals, namely tourists from 'Western' countries in Oceania, North America, and Europe. Further, the marketing, accounting, and even technological skills (for example, Internet and computer experience) of foreign-initiated ecotourism companies greatly facilitated initial entry into Phuket's tourism industry. An understanding of the ecotourist clientele, coupled with the possession of necessary skills and training, not only gave *farangs* an immediate advantage in the budding ecotourism trade, but also heightened the

chances that early ecotourism companies in Phuket would survive, and therefore acquire the financial means and long-term viability needed to provide extensive benefits to employees and local communities.

The second reason why *farang* control has been necessary to overcome obstacles to providing benefits relates to the status position of foreigners, in particular *farangs*, in Thai society. As Klausner (1982: 325-26) notes, "well defined hierarchical obligations and responsibilities associated with one's relative position on the ladder of status, power, rank and seniority form the mold within which Thai behaviour is severely restricted." Rather than serving merely as one of many important axes of social stratification in Thai society, status defines one's behaviour and identity:

It takes but little time observing Thai behaviour to become adept at perceiving who is superior and who is inferior. The representation of self tends to include displaying the whole set of one's social arsenal, and such assets should not be hidden. Even in the most casual encounters, people probe to discover the other person's social rank and, consequently, their relative social distance. What [sic] does he work? To what groups does he belong? What rank does he hold? Is he rich or poor? Has he studied and where? His age, his relatives, his group, and his income: all that should be known so that both parties can place each other according to rank and position (Mulder, 1990: 48).

Not all 'Westerners' enjoy high status in Thai society, but male *farang* entrepreneurs for the most part occupy a high position on the Thai status ladder. While not entirely preventing death threats or acts of sabotage,

the high status, and especially high local and national visibility, of John Gray has allowed Sea Canoe to pursue policies that would be nearly impossible for locals to pursue since the majority of Sea Canoe's staff are affiliated with a Muslim minority that rarely enjoys superior status within mainstream Siamese society. Empowerment of the poorest and most marginalized members of society represents one of the key principles of community-based ecotourism, but in southern Thailand, rigid hierarchies of status and the power differences that stem from low status positions greatly complicate efforts to promote 'bottom up' empowerment within marginalized communities (Rigg, 1991). Thus, rather than simply marking the absence of 'true' community development, *farang* control in southern Thailand's ecotourism industry instead represents one important way in which empowerment can be achieved in communities lacking business skills, status, and political power.

There are many ways in which the high status of *farang* ecotourism pioneers in Phuket has translated into specific victories in the battle to provide benefits through ecotourism. Mafia intimidation and death threats, for example, would surely have intensified the longer that Sea Canoe operated in Ao Phangnga, but between the early-1990s and 2000, such intimidation ceased. Using his political connections to, and personal relationships with, prominent locals, Gray arranged for Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, a prominent and respected member of Thailand's royal family, to take

an overnight trip with Sea Canoe in 1993. During the Princess's trip, the leader of Ao Phangnga's birds' nest syndicate refused to end, even temporarily, his intimidation of Sea Canoe, but this backfired because such acts of intimidation greatly upset the Princess, and therefore violated the strict taboo in Thai society against showing disrespect towards the royal family. Problems with underground criminal figures came to an end at that point, and would not resurface until nearly 10 years later. Had Sea Canoe been founded and run by southern Thailand's poor Muslim fishermen instead of a *farang* with connections and high status, not only would a trip by the Princess remain highly unlikely, but death threats would also certainly have materialized into more actual attacks, thereby rendering the continuation and growth of the company extremely difficult.

Similarly, the locals employed and empowered by Sea Canoe would also find it difficult to confront the shady Thai owners of some sea kayaking 'copycats' now operating in Ao Phangnga. Since the owners of most 'copycat' operations are, by necessity, members of the Thai elite - which possesses the connections and capital required to form an ecotourism company - reporting or complaining about violations of law is difficult when company owners are connected to powerful political figures and the financial stakes are high, as they are in Phuket's tourism industry. For example, when it was discovered by Sea Canoe that one of the first 'copycat' companies was taking tourists on illegal rock-climbing

expeditions on the protected limestone cliffs of Ao Phangnga's islands, paying illegal under-the-table commissions to travel agents, and allowing guides to break off stalactites in caves for souvenirs, a Thai Sea Canoe manager complained to local tourism and national park officials. After being assaulted and arrested on fabricated trespassing charges, this manager nonetheless persisted, but it ultimately took the direct pleading of Gray and Sea Canoe's *farang* managers to local officials for the unethical, illegal actions to stop. Again, as with the tale of mafia intimidation, *farang* control did not entirely eliminate problems related to local corruption and power politics, but it did allow the company to bend without breaking. Instead of serving only as hindrances, therefore, the *farang* orientation and management of Sea Canoe, on balance, have proven necessary in bestowing such components of economic empowerment as rewarding employment, high wages, job security, and human resource benefits.

## Conclusion

Autonomy, control, ownership, and material well being all form crucial components of economic and political empowerment, goals achieved only rarely through conventional mass tourism in the developing world (Gonsalves, 1995). Community-based ecotourism, by contrast, carries the promise of delivering economic benefits and justice to locals while also promoting environmental conservation (Cater and Lowman, 1994; Gauthier, 1993; Sheyvens, 1999). Although

there exist in practice many examples of ecotourism's failure to fulfill its potential (Campbell, 1999, Hall and Butler, 1995; Ioannides, 1995; Ross and Wall, 1999), the example of ecotourism in southern Thailand illustrates that specific companies can indeed empower local individuals and communities. However, the southern Thai case study also highlights the imperfect nature of empowerment. In particular, the economic and social benefits gained by employees of Sea Canoe have come at the price of full local initiation of, and control over, ecotourism in the area. Despite the various problems associated with initiating and directing an ecotourism company as a *farang* in Thailand, the success of Sea Canoe - not to mention of a handful of other operators in Phuket not discussed in this paper - points to the necessity, however unexpected or distasteful, of compromising on the political goals of local initiation and control in order to achieve other, equally valuable aspects of empowerment such as the creation of long-term financial benefits for locals.

A key lesson to be learned from ecotourism in southern Thailand therefore centers on the difference between *community-based* and *community-oriented* forms of ecotourism. Bearing in mind the numerous requirements of participation in international tourism, it is clear that the overall goals of community development, in southern Thailand at least, are on the whole best served by generous, financially successful operators that happen also to feature a

strong orientation toward, and commitment to, members of those local communities hosting ecotourism in the first place. Whether these operators are Thais by birth or by current residence proves irrelevant if the goal remains the provision of local benefits. The complications and hurdles facing ecotourism operators in southern Thailand also imply that, perhaps, the best one can hope for in terms of local development is a *community-oriented* company, such as Sea Canoe, that strives to involve and empower individuals in a meaningful and lasting manner, despite not technically serving as a *community-based* venture where initiation and control derive their roots locally.

The tension that exists in Phuket between benefits and control may appear at first to contradict the overall principles of empowerment, but just because some facets of empowerment are achieved without, or even at the expense of, other facets does not necessarily strip ecotourism in Phuket of its positive role in community development. Further, the trade-off between benefits and control is not confined to the case of Sea Canoe alone. When one examines eco-tourism in Phuket as a whole, and focuses specifically on Thai-owned companies rather than those initiated or directed by *farangs*, compromises are just as evident. In particular, locally-owned and initiated ecotourism companies - most of which are labeled disparagingly by *farangs* as 'copycats' - feature the local control and decision-making power so important to

proponents of political empowerment. However, this control is not only problematic because it is elite, rather than poor or marginalized, members of Thai society who enjoy the fruits of ownership, but initiation and control come at the cost of benefits. The research on which this paper is based found that, although providing employment to locals, Phuket's Thai-owned ecotourism companies offer much lower pay, and far fewer economic and social benefits, for its employees than does Sea Canoe. In addition, Thai-operated ecotourism operators in southern Thailand exploit both labour and environmental resources, exacerbate income and social inequalities within local communities, and reveal a predilection for short-term profit maximization. The ability of many Thai-operated companies to provide steady benefits is also undermined by their lack of necessary global connections and an insufficient knowledge of 'Western' tourist tastes and business conventions, both of which serve to curtail opportunities for long-term financial viability.

This paper offers several pertinent lessons for those interested in ecotourism and empowerment. First, unlike universal, 'ten-step' formulas for tourism and empowerment (Brandon, 1993; Honey, 1999; Whelan, 1991), this study verifies the complexity, dynamism, and heterogeneity of efforts to bring about empowerment through community-based ecotourism in developing countries (Belsky, 1999). A lack of geographic specificity and local context, while meant to convey a sense of analytical

versatility, render such universal formulas peripheral to an adequate empirical comprehension of how ecotourism interacts with empowerment in southern Thailand. Rather than stemming from the mere implementation of philanthropic beliefs, the example of ecotourism in Phuket elucidates the need to rethink conventional approaches, the majority of which either ignore or downplay ground-level variations, patterns, and inconsistencies. Tourism-related community development in southern Thailand comprises more than simply introducing tourism to a community, empowering 'the locals,' or distributing benefits through community leaders. Ecotourism operators must overcome countless political, social, and cultural obstacles, and an accurate prescription for success in southern Thailand would include keeping in check mafia intimidation, working through various levels of corruption and inadequate government support, dealing with longstanding issues of racial, religious, and even regional prejudice, and, finally, minimizing internal sabotage and treachery on the parts of unscrupulous partners.

Second, the dominant role played by foreign multinational corporations in the tourism industries of developing countries is a persistent and frequent complaint among those interested in the political economy of mass tourism (Britton, 1982; Mowforth and Munt, 1998; Pleumarom, 1994). However, decrying the *farang* roots of ecotourism in Phuket simply because they signal 'foreign control' is simplistic. Aside from having

proven beneficial for certain aspects of individual and community empowerment, the 'foreigners' that initiated ecotourism in Phuket are, in many ways, 'locals' themselves. Every single one of the *farangs* that started ecotourism companies now lives permanently in Thailand, having in most cases married, and started families, locally. Moreover, many of these *farangs* speak fluent Thai and have made great efforts to assimilate into Thai culture. While Phuket's *farang* ecotourism entrepreneurs will always be considered outsiders in mainstream Thai society, they remain locals by virtue of residence, orientation, and future plans. Hence, the history and structural features of ecotourism in Phuket complicate the straightforward distinction, made in many discussions of tourism, between 'local' and 'foreign,' whereby the latter is always undesirable and the former is always assumed to include only those born into a particular ethnic, religious, or geographical community.

Lastly, the experiences of ecotourism companies initiated by both *farangs* and Thais make it clear that economic empowerment is in practice messy, incomplete, and characterized by inevitable trade-offs. Whether local control is sacrificed in order to achieve benefits, as it is in Sea Canoe, or comes only at the cost of benefits, as with Thai-initiated operators, it is clear that achieving the *entire* package associated with empowerment is extremely difficult in southern Thailand. Although normative models of either community

participation in tourism (France, 1997; Pretty, 1995) or tourism's role in promoting empowerment (Scheyvens, 2002; Timothy, 2002) would likely exclude ecotourism in Phuket because of its failure to provide both benefits and control simultaneously, the attainment of empowerment should not be seen as an 'either or' goal, where only the full and complete implementation of principles qualifies as success. In southern Thailand, the most successful cases such as Sea Canoe represent, at best, imperfect examples of empowerment, whereby certain goals are achieved only by compromising others. Nevertheless, despite accepting the inevitability of having to compromise on certain principles, ecotourism companies in Phuket still manage to improve the well being of local communities and nurture equitable and 'bottom-up' forms of development.

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