

Ecotourism in the National Parks of Southern Thailand

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Ecotourism, which was introduced in the 1990s, is defined as “responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people” (TIES 1993). Ceballos-Lascurain (1991) further defined ecotourism as “traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas.”

Ecotourism offers various approaches to travel in different ways from conventional tourism activities such as nature interpretation to educate visitors, interaction with the local community, and active experiences for visitors. Ecotourism is expected to encourage more responsible behavior and social responsibility towards the environment and local people, both the destination and the visitors. One key point of ecotourism is to maintain the sustainability of a destination in terms of visitation and quality. This means receiving economic benefits while maintaining environment conservation and preserving the local culture. Ecotourism has increased the attention on and demand for nature-based destinations; particularly of protected areas.

Tourism in Thailand is one of important sectors of the country. The number of visitors has multiplied since 1960 when Thailand was visited by 50 thousands international visitors. The Ministry of Tourism and Sports (2013c) reported that over 22 million international visitors visited the Kingdom in 2012. This figure made Thailand the second major Southeast Asian country in terms of visitors generated. WTTC (2013) also reported that travel and tourism contributed 7.3% to Thailand’s GDP, and created over two million jobs in 2012.

In line with tourism development in the country, Thailand applied ecotourism in

managing tourism in the natural areas with protected or non-protected status. ‘Visit Park Thailand 2000’ of the Royal Forest Department (RFD) was an initial official effort to open protected areas to tourism (ICEM 2003). This campaign was recognized as a response to the fast growing demand for nature-based tourism and the emerging trend of protected area development in Thailand. Infrastructure development has also increased to respond to this demand (Emphandhu and Chettamart 2003). In terms of ecotourism development, Thailand’s national parks encounter various challenges such as appropriate design for ecotourism activities, the interpretation to fulfill the understanding of visitors, community support, and the comprehensive ecotourism promotion publications among visitors.

This paper provides a brief overview of ecotourism development in the national parks of Southern Thailand—one of the regions in the Kingdom where tourism activities are most concentrated. An assessment of eighteen national parks was conducted with the main objective of developing awareness communication and promotion publication for the ecotourism sector at Thailand’s National Parks. The discussion in this paper is limited to three national parks: Hat Noppharat Tara-Mu Koh Phi Phi, Khao Sok, and Khao Luang, because space limitation makes it is not possible to present all eighteen national parks. The parks selected for discussion were determined based on Butler’s (1980a) Tourism Area Life Cycle model that highlighted a destination’s having “lifecycle stages” that include “exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, decline, or rejuvenation.” A modification of Butler’s destination evolution model (2006b) outlined levels of sustainability, with sample cases on national parks. The evaluation on the “size of park, visitation numbers, and type of impact or threats” were basic indicators for positioning the parks within those stages.

Hat Noppharat Tara-Mu Koh Phi Phi National Park has entered “consolidation” and nearly “stagnation” stages. The park has a long history of receiving an overload of visitors, particularly during the peak season. This overload translates to increased threats and impacts on the environment due to overdevelopment around and within the park. Khao Sok National Park is positioned at the “development” stage as park visitations continue to increase each year, and present economic dynamics within the area. Khao Luang National Park is at the “exploration and involvement” stages, as its location is out of the common tourism route in Southern Thailand. The park receives a high number of Thai visitors during weekends but the presence of international visitors is limited.

The Protected Area System and Management in Thailand

Royal Forest Department (RFD) was established in 1896 with the main purpose of controlling forest products. However, the function of conservation was not included. The protected area system in the Kingdom was initiated upon the approval of the Wildlife Preservation and Protection Act (1960, amended in 1992) and the National Parks Act (1961, amended in 1992) (RFD 2012b).

Following the National Park Act’s enactment, which authorized the creation and protection of national parks, the section under RFD, which administered this act was renamed the National Park Division in 1972. A restructuring reform within the Thailand government in 2002 had implications on RFD. It was subsequently divided into three departments: RFD, Department of National Parks, Wildlife, and Plant Conservation (DNP), Department of Marine and Coastal Resources (DMC), and 75 Provincial Natural Resources and Environment Offices across the country, currently under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (RFD 2009a). RFD is in charge of managing the forest resources of non-protected areas, while DNP is responsible for managing the protected areas.

Chettamart (2003) states that protected areas in the Kingdom were established based on “management objectives, ecosystem, size, and condition”. By 2012, the protected areas system in Thailand included 127 national parks (terrestrial and marine), 111 forest parks, 58 wildlife sanctuaries, and 60 non-hunting areas. To date, Thailand’s protected areas cover 20.6% of the country’s area; the national parks occupy over 59% of the total protected area and over 35% of the wildlife sanctuaries (DNP 2013c).

According to the National Parks Act of 1961, in the Royal Thai Government (2004), a national park is defined as “any land or natural feature which is of interest to be maintained with a view to preserving it for the benefit of public education and pleasure, with the provision that such land is not owned or legally possessed by any person other than a public body.” Furthermore, DNP (2006a) defines a national park as “an area that contains natural resource of ecological importance or unique beauty such as beautiful scenery, waterfall, caves, and mountains, or flora and fauna of special importance”, is established for basic functions including the “preservation of biodiversity and ecosystems; research and education; recreation and tourism.”

As for definitions and functions, the national park provides comprehensive resources for the following purposes: the preservation of biodiversity and the ecosystem; and the provision of recreation, tourism, and education for visitors.

Challenges Facing the National Parks in Thailand

Global tourism patterns have brought attention to traveling in search of experience and values in certain destinations, including Thailand. As major nature-based tourism attractions, Thailand’s national parks encounter challenging external factors that influence the rapid growth of tourism development within the area. During the last ten years, the number of visitors to Thailand’s national parks fluctuated and forced the parks, particularly those with high numbers of visitors, to provide

facilities and infrastructure ranging from the most basic to the highest level. Chettamart (2003) highlighted that major national parks have produced management plans as guidelines for managing zones for conservation, education/research, and recreation in response to visitor management and land use concerns. One of the implications of national parks development for tourism activities is the creation of economic dependency on the part of the local people and the private sector.

Emphandu (personal communication 2013) identified three major challenges facing Thailand's national parks. The first, controlling the impact of the high number of Thai visitors during long weekends. This condition does not include international visitors to the parks. The impact also comes from the visitors' irresponsible behavior within a national park: some visitors fail to realize that when they enter a protected area, there are set rules different from those in non-protected natural areas. This condition is aggravated by the lack of awareness on the part of the front-liner private sector to inform the visitors during their tourism activity. The second challenge is community involvement in tourism activities in the national parks. The obstacle to this involvement comes from the national park policy itself, as internal management does not need the involvement of any of the stakeholders, other than national park authority itself. There are some community members with the power and capacity to be involved or to work as a ranger; but some need more capacity building. The community itself has the opportunity to provide some services, e.g., tour service, boat service, food and lodging to visitors, but it is rare to find a higher level of community involvement in the park. The third challenge lies in the fact that many national parks in Thailand lack quality interpretation and media to promote the resources in the park. Chettamart (personal communication 2012) also highlighted the lack of awareness and promotional materials for international visitors on Thailand's national parks. English publications on national parks are relatively old and limited.

The responsible stakeholder who produces materials, increase awareness, and promotion publications on national parks in Thailand would be the DNP. Those publications released every year cover all national parks throughout the Kingdom. DNP supports each of the major national parks in producing its own publications, e.g., brochures, booklets, and small books. Publications in the Thai language offer comprehensive information and high quality presentations. They provide information regarding the park's resources, code of conduct, and pictures to encourage Thai visitors to visit the national parks. DNP also comes out with a bilingual English-Thai trimester newsletter. However, most of the few existing English publications are no longer up to date and provide lower quality information compared to their Thai language versions. DNP and the national parks' technical units are not allowed to make a profit from their publications. Therefore, the publications' distribution is limited and the publications are not available to the broader general public.

Methods

During the initial phase, the work plan included a list of national parks throughout Thailand. After a series of discussions with resource persons, the original work plan was revised to cover the southern part of Thailand only. This revision was carried out due to time, distance, and budget constraints.

Following the adjustment, the research area was limited to 18 national parks (both marine and terrestrial) in Southern Thailand. The *National Parks of Thailand* (2010b) published by DNP was used to determine which national parks would be classified into the Southern area. The parks were selected based on discussions with resource persons, references consultations, and a set of criteria includes (1) possess outstanding, rich ecosystems and biodiversity attractions; (2) provide accessibility and infrastructure; (3) provide economic development to the surrounding community; (4) offer education and learning experiences for

visitors; (5) provide an opportunity for the private sector and the community to collaborate and promote tourism activities in the national park.

The selected national parks were as follows: Khao Sam Roi Yot, Kui Buri, Lam Nam Kra Buri, Ngao, Khao Sok, Khao Lak-Namru, Si Phangnga, Ao Phangga, Mu Koh Ang Thong, Sirinart, Mo Koh Similan, Mo Koh Surin, Khao Luang, Hat Noppharat Thara-Mu Koh Phi hi, Khao Phanom Benca, Thanbook Khoranee, Mu Koh Lanta, and Tarutao. Due to the large coverage area of each national park, assessment included only the most accessible site(s) where tourism activities and stakeholders were present.

The project was carried out by using three methods: (1) desk study, (2) site visit/observation, and (3) interviews and consultation meetings. Site visits were conducted to observe the condition of the area and stakeholders in relation to national parks. This method was applied to assess existing and potential attractions, services and facilities, accessibility, education/interpretation, and the code of conduct within national parks. Site visits/observations were conducted of the tourism sites at the 18 national parks with related hub cities/towns to identify travel patterns. Consultation meetings were carried out to obtain an overview of the stakeholders' roles and programs related to ecotourism activities within the national parks. Stakeholders consulted were DNP, RFD, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, the Thai Ecotourism and Adventure Association (TEATA), the Department of Conservation-Kasetsart University, and the National Parks Association for Thailand (NPAT). During the site visits, random informal interviews were conducted with the superintendent of the parks, the research division staff, the visitor center staff, park rangers, visitors, and tour operators/agents selling tour packages to selected national parks. One hundred tour operator programs at selected national parks were observed and interviewed during the project. Their promotional media and brochures were reviewed to get information on their tourism activities in the parks. In order to obtain an overview of the publications' notes regarding national parks, at

least four English publications (three of them were old publications) and 50 Thai language publications (books, booklets, newsletters, and brochures) produced by DNP and the technical units of national parks were reviewed.

Besides providing tourism related information, e.g., tourism attractions, community-based services, and practicalities; the results of this project should provide information on biodiversity, education, and a code of conduct to reinforce awareness of national parks resources. Data collected through assessment converted into a manuscript and a photo series, and written in separate work with this paper.

Ecotourism in the national parks of Southern Thailand

The history of national parks in Thailand commenced when past Prime Minister General Sarit Tharanat paid an official visit to Thailand's northern area in 1959 (DNP 2006a). During his post-visit observation, he proposed to the cabinet the setting up of national parks in Thailand. This process was supported by conservationists Dr. Lekagul and Dr. Ruhle, who traveled around Thailand and provided recommendations on the national parks' establishment in several forest areas (Gray et al. 1994). Two years later, the law concerning natural resources protection, the National Park Act (1961), was approved. Thailand officially had its first national park, Khao Yai National Park, in 1962 covering a total area of 2,168,75 km² (DNP 2006a).

The establishment of the national parks provided a great opportunity for ecotourism development in the Kingdom. Churugsa (personal communication 2010) in Mahdayani (2011) highlighted that the Tourism Authority Thailand (TAT), a state enterprise which undertakes the international and domestic marketing mission, produced the National Ecotourism Action Plan 2002–2006 and the Thailand National Ecotourism Policy. A framework of ecotourism focusing on conservation and benefitting the local communities has been launched to support the ecotourism

campaign and activities. TAT provides a strategic plan for promoting more ecotourism and green tourism products.

In the last ten years, Thailand’s national parks visitation showed a crucial trend. All of Thailand’s national parks succeeded in attracting over 14 million visitors to come in 2003. Doi Suthep-Pui National Park, for example, received over 4 million visitors within the same year. Khao Yai National Park was visited by over 1 million visitors in 2006. The growing demand for nature-based tourism resulted in over 9.9 million visitors’ coming to Thailand’s national parks in 2012 (DNP 2013c).

Tourism growth in the South has convinced tour operators to promote national parks as primary destinations of their tours. By 2013, at least 44 % of tour operators in Southern Thailand offered tours to national parks. According to the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (2013a), the reports of all tour operators in the South yielded as follow: 51 % of the tour operators were run in Phuket Province—one of the major tourism destinations in Thailand, 17% were based in Krabi Province (including Krabi, Mu Koh Lanta, and Koh Phi Phi), and 16 % worked in Phangnga Province (Khao Lak and its surrounding areas).

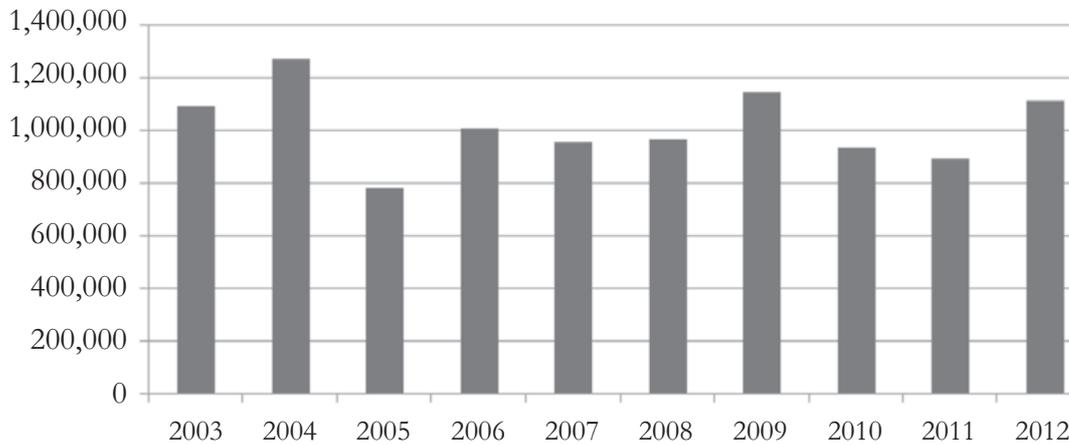


Figure 1: Number of Visitors to 18 the National Parks in Southern Thailand 2003 - 2012
(Source: Department of National Parks, Wildlife, and Plant Conservation of Thailand, 2013)

The national parks of Southern Thailand are major popular tourism destinations. Ao Phangnga, Khao Sok, and Hat Noppharat Thara-Mu Koh Phi Phi are the most visited national parks in the area. All eighteen national parks assessed in this project were visited by an average of over one million visitors every year from 2003 to 2012 (DNP 2013c). Visitor figures represented Thai, foreigners, and students (both Thai and foreigners). The national park is not only a favorite destination of international visitors, but also of Thai urban residents from big cities in Thailand, and nearby cities/towns who want to enjoy nature on weekends or long holidays.

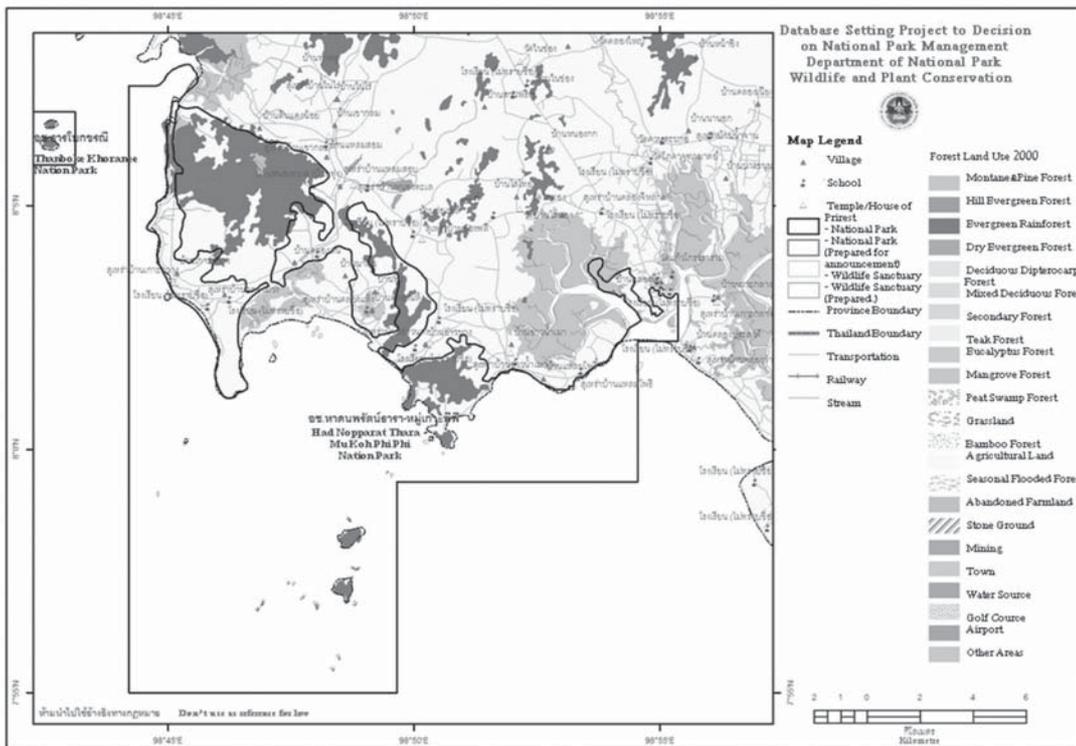
Prachumpai and Duangkamol (personal communication 2013) said that collaborations with local tour operators/agents in Southern Thailand constitute an issue for some Bangkok-based operators. Khao Sok National Park is the most highly possible destination promoted by tour operators in Bangkok.

However, tourism in Southern Thailand has characteristics different from tourism in the rest of the country. In the south, primary resources for tourism attractions depend on nature. Coastal and inland communities, for their part, present a limited cultural heritage and manifestations compared to other areas in Thailand.

Hat Noppharat Tara-Mu Koh Phi Phi National Park

In Krabi Province, the Hat Noppharat Tara-Mu Koh Phi Phi National Park was established in 1983 on an area measuring 387.90 km² (DNP 2010b). The topography of the park represents the highest peaks of limestone mountains Khao Hang Nak, reaching about 498 meters asl, covering habitats of corals and various beaches. The park is home to a variety of marine life, among them rare mammals like the Malayan dolphin, the rough-toothed dolphin, and various birds. The park comprises islands and the coastal area of Krabi mainland. Koh Phi Phi Don is the only inhabited island in the park. Mu Koh Phi Phi can be reached by boat and is located halfway, some 42 km from Krabi and 48 km from Phuket. The gate is located at the mainland, Hat Noppharat. It leads to headquarters and a boat pier 177 km from Phuket and 18 km from the center of Krabi town. As the park comprises islands, another gate is located at

Maya Bay, where the visitors and boat trips should pay the entrance fee. Various transport vehicles serve the destinations, from long-tailed boats, to speedboats, and big ferries.



Map 1: Hat Noppharat Tara-Mu Koh Phi Phi National Park
 (Source: Department of National Parks, Wildlife, and Plant Conservation of Thailand, 2013)

The park is open all year around and provides a wide range of tourism activities for all types of visitors. It is easy to find tour operators/agents in Bangkok, Phuket, Krabi, and Khao Lak that provide tours to the park. Mu Koh Phi Phi is one of the major tourism destinations in Thailand. The tours offer island hopping from Maya Bay at Phi Phi Le, to the Viking cave, Mu Koh Poda, as well as activities like snorkeling, diving, tubing on the sea, sailing to enjoy the sunset, barbeque on the beach, sightseeing, and night parties.

Visitor centers at Hat Noppharat and Susan Hoi (freshwater shells cemetery beach) present limited displays of the tourism attractions in the park. The visitors may also not pay attention to the presence of the information center, as it is not well located. Sufficient interpretation and a code of conduct are not available at the tourism



Photo 1: Line of boats at Koh Phi Phi Don



Photo 2: Visitors' luggage on the ferry during peak season

sites in the park. Privately owned services like accommodations, restaurants/food stalls, tour agents, dive shops, and transport are available at Koh Phi Phi Don, Ao Nang, Ao Railey, and around the area. The high concentration of tourism at the park has created services related to tourism and all visitors' needs, both in the mainland and in Koh Phi Phi Don. Although the rate of accommodations at Koh Phi Phi Don and the mainland triples during the peak season, the number of visitors remains high.

The park is a core subject of discussion in print and online media. After *The Beach*, a Hollywood movie's scenes were taken at Maya Bay, played around the world in 2000, the park reportedly began to generate even more intensive visits. The park was visited by over 100 thousands visitors every year, from 2003 to 2012. However, the visits slightly decreased to just over 77 thousands visitors in 2005 (DNP 2013c), a year after the tsunami hit the coastal area at Andaman Sea. The visitation numbers rose again in the following years. Most visitors concentrate on Ao Nang and Koh Phi Phi Don. Based on observations, it is believed that over 1,000 visitors arrive everyday both at the park's mainland and islands, particularly during the peak season from November to March. During this period, hundreds of boats from Phuket and Krabi sail to Maya Bay, bringing groups who wish to go around and enjoy the activities at Koh Phi Phi Le, or stay at Koh Phi Phi Don. It is not easy to create a mechanism to count how many people enter the park because except at Susan Hoi and Maya Bay, the visitors can access the park's area without paying for a ticket. Moreover, tour operators might also not report how many visitors come with their boats to the park authority. Mass visitors at the park evoke the issue of environmental sustainability in relation to supporting ecotourism in the area. The high concentration of visitors can become paradoxical vis-à-vis the ecotourism purpose of a national park. As highlighted by Emphandu (personal communication 2013), visitors are often not orientated on how to go around responsibly

within a national park. Some tours sometimes encourage the visitors to feed the fishes, to take or stand on the corals. Further, based on observations and random interviews at these areas, most visitors do not even realize they are entering a national park.

It is rare to find local people involved in big businesses. Instead, small and medium business owned by locals can be found both at the mainland and Koh Phi Phi Don, ranging from restaurants to simple accommodations. Most locals work as boat men or low level staff at accommodations, as tour agents, owners or employees in small restaurants, at souvenir shops as makers or sellers, or as providers of other services to visitors.

Khao Sok National Park

Khao Sok National Park (KSNP) was established in 1980 with a total area 738.74 km² (DNP 2010b) at Suratthani Province. The major topography of the park represents an evergreen forest, rainforest, and limestone mountains with the highest peaks reaching about 960 meters asl. KSNP is home to one of the largest flower species *Rafflesia Kerrii* and various wildlife habitats including the Asian elephant, boar, and clouded leopard.

KSNP is surrounded by four protected areas: Klong Nakha and Klong Saeng Wildlife Sanctuaries; Si Phangnga and Klong Phanom National Parks. Two main entrances of the park are the Khlong Sok gate which leads to the headquarters and the gate at Ban Ta Khun which leads to the boat pier needed to enter Chiao Lan Lake at Rajaprabha dam.

KSNP has a spectacular limestone landscape as background of Rajaprabha dam that forms a 165 km² artificial lake. Called Chiao Lan, the lake is one of the park's major attractions. However, the dam construction has caused at least 237 animal species to disappear, although the Electricity

Generating Authority of Thailand funded wildlife rescue operations thereafter (Henley 2011).

It is easy to find tour operators in Bangkok, Phuket, and Khao Lak providing tour packages to the park. The tour packages offer activities including elephant trekking, bamboo rafting, jungle walk, canoeing, caving, night safari, and boat rides to the limestone formation promoted as Thailand's Guilin. One can also stay overnight in a bamboo raft house along the lake.



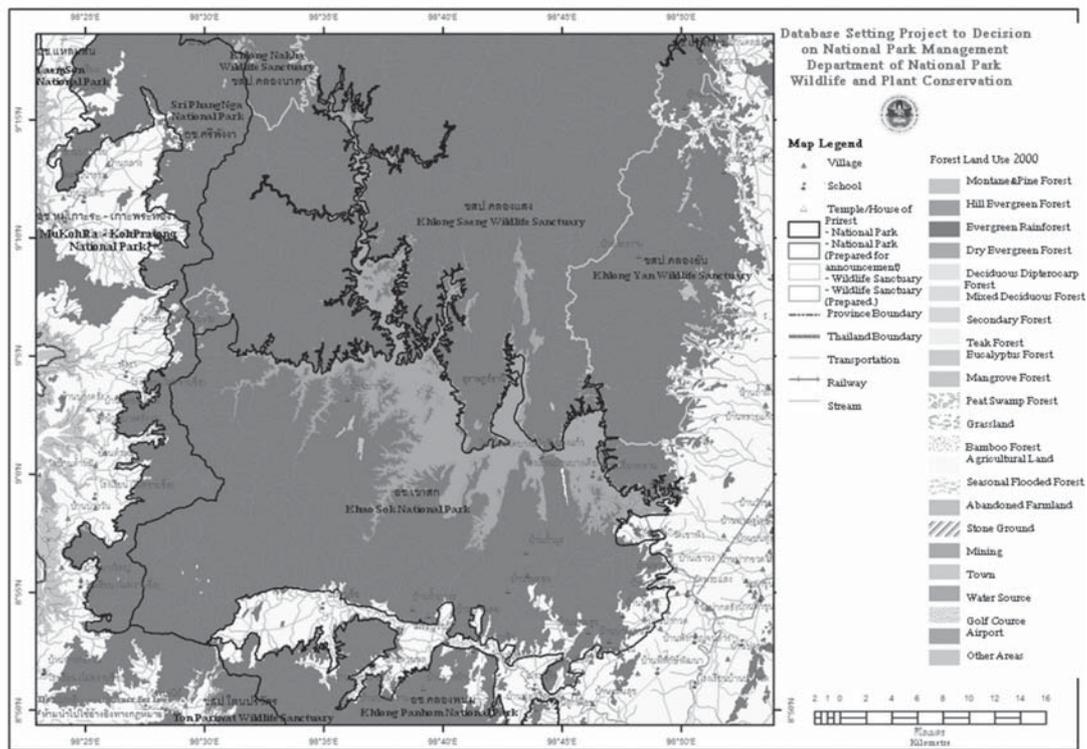
Photo 3: Signages at Hat Noppharat Tara



Photo 4: Local people provides water supplies at Koh Phi Phi Don



The visitor center at the headquarters has interesting displays and information, mostly in the Thai language. An informative brochure in English is provided for visitors. Good English speaking and informative staff at the visitor center welcome the visitors and explain the various features of the park. Nature trails are well marked and self-guide interpretation boards can be found along the hiking route to the waterfalls. A board informs tourists about the park attractions and a copy of code of the conduct is available near the headquarters. Visitors can stay overnight at the park's bungalow on the lakeside and at the raft houses in the ranger stations. Privately owned services like accommodations, restaurants and food stalls, tour operators with guides, and transport are available along the border of the park around Khlong Sok. At the pier that facilitates entrance to the lake, a boat charter, food stalls, and souvenir shops are available to visitors. Privately owned raft houses for visitors are scattered along the lakeside.



Map 2: Khao Sok National Park
(Source: Department of National Parks, Wildlife, and Plant Conservation of Thailand, 2013)



Photo 5: Self-guided interpretation along the biking Trail



Photo 6: Code of conduct at the park

The number of visitors in KSNP has significantly increased in the last ten years. From 2003 to 2012, the park had 80 thousand visitors per year. KSNP registered the most number in 2012 at over 120 thousand visitors. Thai visitors go to KNSP to picnic at the headquarters area of the Khlong Sok gate. Most foreigners take the hiking trail to see the six major waterfalls that can be accessed from there: Wing hin, Bang Hua Raed, Bang Lab Nam, Tharn sawan, Ton Kloï, and Sip et Chan. These waterfalls are usually visited together with the Wang Yao and Tang Nam gorge along the hiking trail. Chiao Lan Lake at Rajaprabha dam is the favorite destination of Thai and international visitors. Most Thai visitors go on a day trip by boat to have lunch buffets at one of the raft house restaurants, and then continue their sightseeing trip over the lake to the limestone formation known as Thailand's Guilin. Foreign visitors sometimes spend the night at the raft house and go canoeing, caving, night hiking, and sightseeing

at the lake. Most foreign visitors who spend the night there undertake other activities at both the Khlong Sok gate and Chiao Lan Lake.

Job creation and business ownership opportunities for the locals remain small. It is hard to find locals involved in higher scale businesses and a higher level workforce. Most local people are hired as staff at accommodations and as local guides. Some run their small-scale business lodges, stores, and restaurants. Still others are tour agents, or offer transport and other services at the park's boundary nearby Khlong Sok gate. At the gate of Chiao Lan Lake, the local people are either boat men, souvenir and small food stalls sellers, or raft house owners.



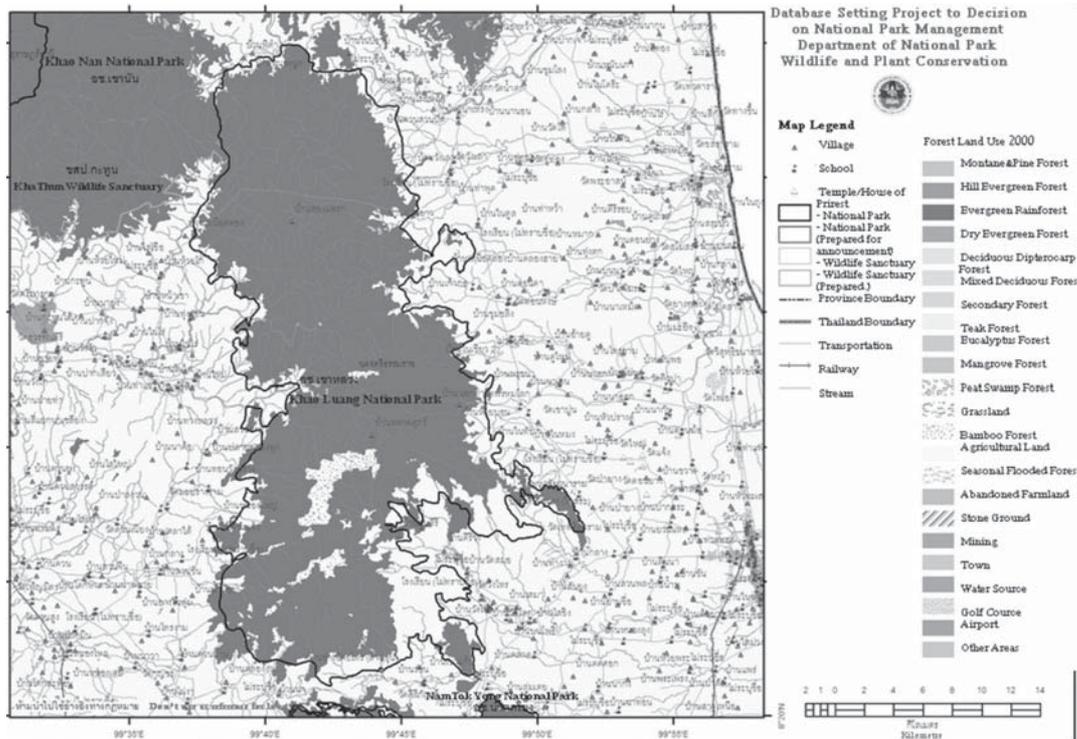
Photo 7: Visitors inside Khao Sok forest



Photo 8: Women preparing lunch buffet for visitors

Khao Luang National Park

Khao Luang National Park (KLNP) established in 1974 with a total area 570 km² (DNP 2010b) is located at Nakhon si Thammarat Province. The topography of the park includes the highest peaks reaching about 1,835 meters asl, covering various habitats including hill evergreen forest, tropical evergreen forest, moist evergreen forest, and lower mountain forest. KLNP is claimed as the green roof of Southern Thailand. The data in the visitor center at KLNP at the time of the research in 2013 showed the park to be home to 256 bird species and over 300 orchid species (DNP 2010b). Nakhon si Thammarat is located 788 km from Bangkok, 336 km from Phuket, and 180 km from Krabi. The park has three main entrances: Karom gate (30 km from Nakhon si Thammarat) where the headquarters are located, Phrom Lok gate (23 km), and Krung Ching gate (62 km). KLNP is not public transport-friendly. Most Thai visitors



Map 3: Khao Luang National Park
(Source: Department of National Parks, Wildlife, and Plant Conservation of Thailand, 2013)



Photo 9: Hiking trail to Krung Ching Waterfall

use their private vehicles to go to the park. The foreign visitors need to hail a *songtaew* (a local mini bus, a covered pick-up truck) from Nakhon si Thammarat.

The tourist attractions at KLNP are open all year around except for the peak of Khao Luang, which is closed during the rainy season. KLNP is a destination for special interest visitors like birdwatchers or wildlife photographers. Its five major tourism attractions include Karom Waterfall, Phrom Lok Waterfall, Krung Ching Waterfall, the summit of Khao Luang, and Khiriwong Village. There is a 3.7 km nature trail to the Krung Ching waterfall which has birds and plant species as major tourism attraction. The peak of Khao Luang is for serious hikers as the trail entails four days of hiking to accomplish. It is hard to find a tour operator selling a tour package to the park from Bangkok, Phuket, Krabi, or Khao Lak. Tours to Khao Luang's Peak are promoted by local people at Khiriwong Village—one of the entrances for accessing Khao Luang summit. However, it remains difficult for foreign visitors to arrange their trip directly with the community because of communications obstacles and the paucity of information. The Chiang Mai-based Community-based Tourism Institute (CBTI) facilitates community-based tours at Phrom Lok village. Visitors and tour operators can contact CBTI to arrange their trip to the Phrom Lok waterfall, a village tour, a biking tour, or a climb to the peak of Khao Luang.

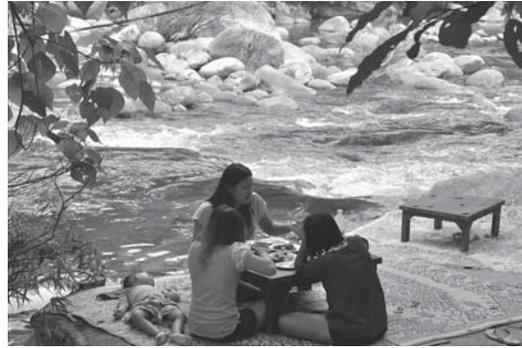


Photo 10: Local visitors at Khiriwong Village

The visitor centers at KLNP provide limited information on conservation and the park's resources. The visitor center at Krung Ching provides information and pictures on bird species. Some information is presented in the Thai language without translation. The nature trail to Krung Ching waterfall provides limited self-guided interpretations along the trail in the Thai language. The walking path at Karom and Phrom Lok and the nature trail at Krung Ching have symbols of the code of conduct for visitors.

KLNP was visited by over 100 thousand visitors annually from 2003 to 2012. The park registered the highest number with over 220 thousands visitors in 2006. Majority of the visitors at the park are Thais. Khiriwong Village, located at the border of the park, is a favorite place for Thai visitors during weekends because it is where they get to enjoy local fruits, cool weather conditions, and a picnic by the riverbank. Khiriwong was hit by a series of natural disasters and serious floods between 1962 and 1988 thus, transforming the community into a self-reliant one (Tantiwiranond et al. 2010).

There is no tourism related service available around the three gates. All services are provided inside the national park. The nearest service is available at Nakhon si Thammarat town. Visitors should do an advance reservation to join the tour with the Phrom Lok community, or go to Khao

Luang peak with the Khiriwong community. The local people at Khiriwong village run small scale restaurants, food stalls, and fruit stands.

Conclusion

In line with inevitable global tourism activities, increasing demand for international travels to national parks in Thailand has generated high visitation numbers like in the case of Mu Koh Phi Phi-Hat Noppharat Tara and Khao Sok. Both national parks have transformed their surrounding resources for tourism development.

Although natural degradation and soaring development are going on within and around the park, the visitors keep coming to Mu Koh Phi Phi-Hat Noppharat Tara. As most visitors on and offline have concluded, Mu Koh Phi Phi is a must visit destination, at least once. High visitation numbers have increased facilities and infrastructure development, created job opportunities and small business ownerships among the locals, though they cannot compete with bigger investments and higher capacity from outside. The government and stakeholders should work together to prevent the “decline” stage of the destination and work on achieving its sustainability. However, the parks need a recovery phase in terms of social and environmental sustainability in the long run.

Khao Sok National Park has entered the development stage as a rising destination. It is becoming the most popular destination among tour operators, groups, or independent visitors. The diversity of tourism attractions in the area provides a wide range of activities for visitors, and encourages long stays and repeaters. The park is now one of the core subjects of discussion among most international visitors to Southern Thailand. That will lead to higher development in the area to accommodate the needs of visitors, as seen around Khlong Sok and Ban Ta Khun. Since the park has been enjoying growing visitor numbers, how to maintain the environment and social sustainability is a challenging question.

Khao Luang National Park, with Khiriwong village at the park’s boundary, is Thailand’s most famous local people’s sample case for conservation efforts. However, it is still off the international visitors’ radar since its location is out of Southern Thailand’s tourism route. The park attracts special interest visitors, groups of students, and Thais. The lower number of international visitors in the area has resulted in the surfacing of fewer service providers, compared to other sample park cases. Facilities and infrastructure usually develop based on the needs of a park’s visitors, in this case, Thai visitors during weekends and groups of students. Services, facilities, and infrastructure are often basic when a remote destination receives domestic visitors only.

Community involvement is important to efforts to provide the services needed in support of ecotourism. Therefore, it is crucial to use the ecotourism approach of promoting small and medium scale businesses owned by the local people. Both the private sector and park visitors also play major roles in controlling the impact of tourism on national parks. They should encourage the right balance between environmental conservation and tourism-related economic benefits for the local people. The visitors and the private sector need educational resources to increase their awareness of ecotourism goals, and to help them prepare for their visit. Although several national parks provide interpretation facilities to enhance the visitors’ experiences and encourage education to minimize the negative impacts of tourism, more support is essential. Since visitors and the private sector are the center of ecotourism activities, their responsible behavior and support are crucial to ensuring the sustainability of a destination. If promotion publication achieves its main purposes, the major beneficiaries will be the community, the private sector, government, and also the visitors.

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