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**Ecotourism and Community-based Ecotourism in
the Mekong Region**

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AMTA	Agency of Coordinating Mekong Tourism Activities
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asia Nations
ASEANTA	ASEAN Tourism Association
Baht, Bt	Thai currency (Baht)
bn	billion
BOI	Board of Investment (Thailand)
CBET	Community-based Ecotourism
CBT	Community-based Tourism
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (USA)
DRIVE	Developing Remote Indigenous Villager Education.
ESCAP	Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific
ET	Ecotourism
ETTs	ecotourism triangles
FITs	Free and Independent Travelers
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GMS	Greater Mekong Subregion
H&S	Hotel and other similar establishments
IMC	Interim Mekong Committee
ITDR	Institute for Tourism Development Research (Vietnam)
IUCN	The World Conservation Union
km	kilometer(s)
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LNTA	National Tourism Authority of the Lao PDR
m	million
m.	meter(s)
MC	Mekong Committee
MOT	Ministry of Tourism of Kingdom of Cambodia
MPI	The Ministry of Planning and Investment (Vietnam)
MRC	Mekong River Commission
n.d.	no date
n.a.	not available
NBCAs	National Biodiversity Conservation Areas (Laos)
NGOs	Non-governmental Organisations
NP	national park
NPD	National Park, Wildlife and Plants Department (Thailand)
NTA	national tourism authority
NTO	national tourism organisation
PA	Protected Areas
PATA	Pacific Asia Travel Association
RFD	the Royal Forestry Department (Thailand)
RECOFTC	The Regional Community Forest Training Center (based in Thailand)
REST	Responsible Ecological Social Tour Project (Thailand)
RTP	Rethinking Tourism Project
sq.km	square kilometer(s)
ST	Sustainable Tourism
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
SUNV	joint program of UNV/United Nation Volunteers and SNV/Netherlands Development Organisation
TAT	Tourism Authority of Thailand
TDRI	Thailand Development Research Institute

TEATA	Thai Ecotourism and Adventure Travel Association
TES	The Ecotourism Society
TIES	The International Ecotourism Society
TISTR	Thailand Institute of Scientific and Technological Research
TOT	Tourism Organization of Thailand (the former name of TAT)
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNEP	United Nations Environmental Program
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
US\$	American Dollar
VFR	Visiting Friends & Relatives
VNAT	Vietnam National Administration of Tourism
WTO	World Tourism Organization



Karen ecotourist village - surrounded by a wildlife sanctuary - northwest Thailand. (Source: Anucha Leksakundilok)



Group of ecotourists with local guide camping in dry riverbed, northeast Thailand. (Source: Anucha Leksakundilok)



Tourists joining in village cultural performance in central-west Thailand. (Source: Anucha Leksakundilok)

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has been strongly promoted in the Mekong Region, particularly since the socialist and communist countries there transformed to market-based economies; economies that have only recently opened the door to private sector investment in tourism, services and other sectors. In contrast, Thailand has promoted tourism for a much longer period of time within an open economic framework. Even though Thailand is a regional leader in tourism development, the country has faced many problems and impacts from such development. Solutions to these problems have been found in both mainstream and alternative approaches. Increased cooperation among Mekong countries allows them to learn from one another's experiences, particularly from Thailand, both in terms of success and failure. In the era of sustainable development, alternative and sustainable tourism have become a greater concern for tourism policy makers in this region. Nevertheless, the economic benefits of tourism continue to be the most significant driving force in most countries.

The Asian financial crisis in 1997 affected investment and travel to and within Asia. It affected tourism, both inbound and outbound. In response to this crisis, Thailand, for example, has promoted tourism through campaigns such as 'Thai travel in Thailand' for domestic and 'Amazing Thailand' for international tourists. The crisis has had ambivalent results for the main direction of Thai tourism policy. On the one hand, it would appear to be a good time for sustainable tourism, with a rethinking and adjustment of the development process, particularly through ecotourism that supports the self-reliance economic campaign for rural communities. On the other hand, economic recovery and the need to earn foreign currency have encouraged a reversion on the part of government to focus on conventional tourism promotion.

This situation was further hit by global crises at the beginning of the 21st century, which include the post 9/11 events, war in Afghanistan, war in Iraq and SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome). These have affected travel and leisure in many places around the world including the Mekong Region. The number of international tourists has been reduced. Many service providers face a critical time for investment. This has stimulated Thailand to promote measures and activities that could attract tourists. Many controversial projects have been proposed, such as Emerald Triangle Tourism Development, Ko Chang Development, and the Regal Casino initiative. This may exacerbate unsustainable tourism development in the country.

Ecotourism (ET) is a form of sustainable tourism and Community-based Ecotourism (CBET) is ecotourism where local communities are the main actors. Some see ecotourism itself as a contradiction in terms. Others simply misunderstand and misapply the concept, leading to many critical problems. Ecotourism promotion in rural communities in Thailand is still a focus of many agencies, both governmental and NGO, and some private sector operators.

Other Mekong countries have also been developing tourism and ecotourism for economic reasons, while being aware of the impacts of such development. Most governments and almost all tourism development projects are still following conventional paths of tourism in which mass tourism is still playing the major role for tourism income. The rhetoric of ET and CBET has also been adopted at the forefront of tourism development policy. Ecotourism development is, however, starting at a very small scale and with limitations regarding participatory process. Again, experience from Thailand has shown significant limitations in management and marketing of ecotourism, reducing its role in fostering a more sustainable tourism approach overall. Most ecotourist attractions are located in Protected Areas (PA), which limit the accessibility of local people to manage and control it.

This working paper examines Ecotourism and Community-based Tourism practices of each country in the Region. Learning from the experiences of some countries, especially Thailand, could be beneficial for the others. The aims of this paper are to gather information about ET/CBET in Mekong countries, their experi-

ences in developing and managing ET/CBET, the lessons learned from those experiences and to make some observations and recommendations for ET/CBET development in the future.

2. THE MEKONG REGION AND COOPERATION

2.1 The Mekong Region

The Mekong Region is one of the important regions in the world, comprising the six countries through which the Mekong River passes. Those are the Kingdom of Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), Union of Myanmar (Burma), the Kingdom of Thailand, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and Yunnan Province in the People's Republic of China. The countries of the Region are geographically, politically, socially and economically differentiated and unequal in development. This Region is a vast area of enormous wealth and variety of natural resources, including a rich agricultural base — timber, fisheries, minerals and energy in the form of hydropower and coal reserves. Forest in the Mekong Region has a significant importance in terms of providing subsistence to rural communities in the form of food, medicinal plants, fuel wood, and other non-timber products. As a natural attraction it has the potential to contribute to tourism.

Furthermore, the Region is an area of great ethnic diversity, although the dominant ethnic group in each country comprises 66-90% of the total and strongly controls the country. Even though ethnic minorities are of high concern by the central government, ethnic problems exist, for example discrimination in terms of rights, land tenure, culture, citizenship and lack of access to services. These problems, however, may also occur in many rural and poverty-stricken areas of the majority ethnic group. One of the government policies of most countries, at least in the last decade, is the promotion of rural communities and minority cultures for tourism, particularly ecotourism.

The economies of the countries are diverse due to historical differentiation and division within the Region. Total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita is low in almost of the countries except Thailand and Myanmar¹. The level of poverty, classified by the percentage of people's income under the poverty line, indicates that Lao, Vietnam and Cambodia are the poorest in the Region². Subsistence agriculture accounts for the major sector in Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar while, Thailand and Vietnam earn the biggest income in the services sector, and Yunnan is dominated by the industrial sector. GDP from the services sector in Myanmar is at the same level as agriculture. Even though the majority of the Thai population is employed in the agriculture sector, Thailand has a very low GDP from agriculture and people remain poor in the rural areas. This is reflected in unbalanced development between primary and secondary/tertiary sectors. Like Thailand, the majority of the workforce of all countries is found in the agriculture sector. Vietnam is a poor, densely populated country that has an unemployment rate up to 25% of its workforce. (see data at CIA 2002a, b, c, d, e, f, g; WTO 1999)

The collapse of Socialist and Communist states in many part of the world, including the Mekong Region, in the 1980s had changed the attitudes and policies of the Socialist countries to reform their economic structures. The Mekong River, as a dividing line during the Cold War and now as a resources for cooperation, has engendered a sense of optimism by many development players in the region to realised the potential of the Basin (Kaosa-ard, *et al.* 1998). Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia have joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the mid-late 1990s. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has supported co-operation among the Mekong countries. The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) development program was initiated in 1992 and the Mekong River Commission (MRC) was re-formed in 1995. (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam are members of MRC). The period was the economic boom

when many Thai investors, including tourism entrepreneurs, were eager to invest in other countries in the Region. Thailand has promoted itself as a gateway to the Mekong Region for investors and tourists. Unfortunately, “the financial crisis affecting most of Asian countries has necessitated a reappraisal of tourism forecasts, re-orientation of tourism policy and marketing and effort to unravel the multifaceted effects of meltdown as manifested through inbound and outbound tourism” (Pookong and King 1999:17).

The Six countries have differences in political development. Thailand is the only country that has never had Socialist or Communist administration. Thailand seems to be the most democratic country, although the democratic structure is still quite fragile. Myanmar (Burma) began a partial transition to socialism after independence, then turned to isolationism and has been ruled by the military regime since 1988. China, Laos and Vietnam remain official communist states and began decentralising control, carrying out economic reform and encouraging private enterprise at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s. Cambodia, after the end of civil violence, political infighting and national elections in 1998, has reestablished political stability under the constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia (1993). These differences are not a barrier to cooperation and a close relationship among these states can establish through economic reformation.

The close relationships and the greater openness of most countries have led to more participation in development, particularly in resource and environmental management. Many stakeholders, including civil society and international organisations are involved. International aid agencies and NGOs are working in the Region in order to help the government, directly and indirectly, to improve socio-economic development as well as the environmental situation. However, there are some contradictions in direction and process of development.

The Mekong countries are gradually shifting from subsistence farming to more diversified economies, to more open, market-based systems, which the people are experiencing as rapid change and improvement to their living conditions. As Thailand’s economic development has been strongly geared to export oriented industrialisation since the 1960s, it has experienced a greater level of natural resources exploitation and industrialisation. At the same time, Thailand has more experience in natural resource management (Hirsch and Cheong 1996:36). The skills in natural resource management in Thailand could contribute significantly to overall management in the Region.

The economic crisis in Asia in 1997 affected the economy of the Mekong countries and there is a need for them to be revived. Currencies lost their value and growth declined. Even though things have stabilised, all governments have to work hard to achieve economic recovery. Thailand, for example, entered a recovery stage in 1999, expanding 4.2% and grew about the same amount in 2000, largely due to strong exports - which increased about 20% in 2000. An ailing financial sector and the slow pace of corporate debt restructuring, combined with a softening of global demand, is likely to slow its growth in 2001 (CIA 2002f). The long-term development of the economy after decades of war remains a daunting challenge. In all the Mekong countries, there is a lack of education, productive skills, and basic infrastructure, particularly in the poverty-ridden countryside.

Tourism is a sector that all countries want to promote in order to raise foreign currency to help with their balance of payments, particularly after the 1997 crisis. It is a fast growing industry, with arrivals up 26-118% per year. Launching tourism promotion years i.e. Amazing Thailand Years in 1998-1999 plus 2000, the Visit Laos Year in 1999-2000, Visit Indochina Year 2001, Visit Myanmar Year in 1996, and Visit Bangkok Year 2002 was initiative to boost tourist numbers. Ecotourism and sustainability have received scant attention in these promotions over the last five years.

Many tourism operators have been interested in ecotourism development, which has spread globally particularly after the World Congress at Rio de Janeiro in 1992. They geared up to invest in destination

areas in developing countries including those in the Mekong Region. At the same time, many community developers, conservationists and NGOs have been concerned about the impact of ecotourism promotion. Thai's National Ecotourism Development Policy, proclaimed in 1998, is practiced in many parts of Thailand, and the pilot projects of the ADB's Village-based Tourism have influenced the direction of ecotourism and Community-based Tourism in this Region. The ecotourism concept tended to promote tourism at the community or village level in order to help reduce the incidence of rural poverty (MRC 1997), and to sustain resources use in conservation areas. However, it has been argued that "damaging tourism activities have proliferated throughout the Mekong Region over the past decade and posed severe pressure on local people and the environment" (Pleumarom 2001:9).

2.2 Cooperation bodies

Some countries in the Mekong Region have long cooperated with each other. In 1957 the Mekong Committee (MC) was formed for cooperation among four countries in the Lower Basin (Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam). The Indicative Basin Plan was established in 1970. In 1978 the Interim Mekong Committee (IMC) was established with three countries (but without Cambodia), but little activity occurred until the revision of Indicative Plan in 1987 (Hirsch and Cheong 1996; Kaosa-ard, *et al.* 1998; MRC and Kristensen 2003). However, cooperation did not achieve much progress due to the war situation and the political and economic re-orientations in the Region. In 1995, The Mekong River Commission (MRC) was created when Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam signed the 'Agreement on Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin', for managing and developing water and related resources of the Lower Mekong Basin. The emerging of this new cooperation has a significant for the Region.

The change of name [from MC to MRC] reflects that the Mekong River Commission is essentially a new organisation with a broader mandate for cooperation in areas including (but not limited to) flood management and mitigation, fisheries, agriculture, navigation, tourism, and consultation regarding water use and diversions. (MRC 2003a)

In 1992, with the assistance of the ADB, the six countries entered into a program of regional economic cooperation, designed to enhance economic relations among them. The first conference on Subregional Economic Co-operation was held at ADB Headquarter in Manila, during 21-22 October 1992 (BOI 1996). There were four other conferences to follow up on economic co-operation until 1995, when issues were elevated to the ministerial level.

2.3 Cooperation programs

The Annual Ministerial Conference and the Development Plans sponsored by the ADB for social and economic cooperation among six countries propose at least six significant sectors to make use of the potential of the Mekong River for sustainable development. The program has contributed to the development of infrastructure to enable the development and sharing of the resource base, and promote the free flow of goods and people in the Region. It has also led to the international recognition of the region as a growth area (ADB 2002a). The six sectors are hydropower development, agriculture and irrigation, fisheries, navigation, flood regulation, and tourism (ADB 2002a; Kaosa-ard, *et al.* 1998).

The ADB also provided technical assistance programs to promote the regional economic cooperation in the GMS. Programs and projects for seven priority sectors were initially considered. Those sectors are transport, energy, telecommunications, environment, human resources development, trade and investment, and tourism. Sector studies or master plans, which were completed in 1994-1995, were proposed around

100 subregional projects and initiatives in the forgoing sectors. Five projects were identified for tourism development (ADB 1996). During the first stage of cooperation tourism was of low priority. However, the ADB Study which proposed a transportation link within the Region, found that recreation and aesthetic value could be achieved. The 'Tourism Development in the GMS' was launched in 1998. One of the projects was 'Village-based Tourism Project', which was instigated at the community level.

Programs and projects selected were those on which the countries could collaborate, on which the regional consultative process could be reinforced, and on which the interest of international donors and investors, including the private sectors could be mobilised. The countries established an institutional framework in order to ensure effective project implementation and to sustain cooperation. They set up working groups and forums to discuss and recommend approaches to issues affecting both the 'hardware' and the 'software' aspects of implementation. A ministerial body coordinates regional cooperation and provides overall policy guidance and support. The ADB takes on the roles as facilitator (ADB 1996).

The MRC runs three categories of cooperation programs that facilitate joint planning and development between the four member countries in a way that looks at the river basin as an ecological whole (MRC 2003b). The first category is Core Program that consists of Basin Development Plan, Water Utilisation and Environment. The second is Support Program that is a capacity-building program. The last is Sector Program that consists of Flood Management and Mitigation; Agriculture, Irrigation and Forestry; Fisheries; Water Resources and Hydrology; Navigation; and Tourism Programs (MRC and Kristensen 2003). A tourism program was being developed during 2002-2003. The overall objective "is to promote tourism within the Mekong River Basin in a balanced manner, which also ensures necessary protection of the environment against adverse effects of tourism" (Ibid.:65). The Environment Program is the most related to tourism and will generate data, information and knowledge for decision-making in a way that balances economic development and environmental conservation. The Navigation Program is another one that may be of benefit to tourism along the Mekong River.

Sustainable tourism has been promoted and is supposed to develop along with other economic and infrastructure development by the cooperation of all countries with support from international organisations and donors. The cooperation development programs showed the contradiction of programs and projects, which on the one hand are trying to carry out development through mega- and macro- projects, while on the other hand wish to conserve resources, the environment and grassroots identities. This contradiction is clearly shown in tourism and related development programs.

2.4 Tourism cooperation

Tourism cooperation takes place in the riparian countries and plays a significant role in the economic development of the region. The MRC cooperates with two other countries (Myanmar and Yunnan), with the support of the ADB and other international bodies, working on the planning and implementation of tourism development programs and projects. Those international bodies are the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific (ESCAP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), the World Tourism Organization (WTO) and the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA). The tourism working group meeting and the annual meeting of responsible people from all the Mekong countries is always held before, during and after the Annual Subregional Economic Cooperation in the GMS meeting. Normally, representatives from the national tourism organisations (NTOs) of Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, as well as representatives of ESCAP, ADB and PATA, participated in the meetings. The meetings concerned cooperation, programs and projects, and other matters. The Agency of Coordinating Mekong Tourism Activities (AMTA), which was established in 1997 as the secretariat of the tourism working

group, also attended the meetings and has been a mechanism to follow up the agreed tourism projects under the supervision of the tourism working group (Phayakvichien 2002). Representatives of various public and private sector organisations involved in tourism attended the meeting as observers.

There are two regional cooperation frameworks that are expected to enhance inter-regional tourism. The first is 'Great Wonders of Suwannaphumi'. This body resulted from an agreement by the ministries of Foreign Affairs of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Thailand, which later included Vietnam. The initiative will promote products that combine the tourist attractions of the five countries. The second is 'Mekong-Ganga Cooperation', which was established in 2000 at the first meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Ministers of Tourism of India and the above five countries of the Mekong Region. The NTOs of these six countries have finalised plans to initiate marketing promotional links between the Mekong and the Ganga rivers (ADB 2002b).

There is also tourism cooperation between individual countries resulting from GMS cooperation or country to country negotiation. Cooperation includes the study and planning, marketing, capacity building, training etc. One example is the way the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) assisted the Lao National Tourism Authority (LNTA) and the Cambodia NTO in studying and planning several tourism development plans.

3. TOURISM IN THE MEKONG REGION

The six countries of the region are very similar in their natural environments and cultural features. Most areas are located in the tropical zone that people have their life closely relation to the Mekong and other rivers. Buddhist culture and river culture are reflected in everyday life and in the man-made environment. The many ethnic groups in the region are created diversity of culture. The richness of Mekong civilisation has become an attractive tourist resource.

3.1 National tourism development

The region receives the greatest share of tourists in Southeast Asia. However, not all the Mekong countries share in the growth in number of visitors. Thailand seems to be the only country that experienced continuous tourism growth continuously developing a tourism industry and integrity its economy within global capitalism for more than four decades. This is because Thailand has had the most social, economic and politics stability in the past and has had the opportunity to develop tourist infrastructures. During the Cold War period and their rule by socialist and communist parties after 1975, China, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia imposed strict controls over the lives of their people and over the movement of foreigners. Meanwhile, Myanmar (Burma) has been a closed socialist country since the 1960s and has been under a military regime since 1990. However, China gradually introduced market-oriented reforms and decentralized economic decision making in 1978. Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia became more open and took up membership of ASEAN in 1995 - 1998. Tourism in this region has been growing more and more in the last few years. The cooperation among six countries since 1992 and the tourism planning for the GMS in 1998 are expected to boost tourism to one of the region's major forms of economic development. Thailand, as the major tourist destination, took the major role in supporting and distributing the tourism development to the region. The Asian Economic Meltdown in 1997, however, affected most countries' economies including their tourism sectors. Even though economic growth has slowed, tourism still plays a major role in economic restoration.

There were 10,529,028 tourists visiting the region in 1996. About 68.31% or 7,192,145 were visitors to Thailand and 15.26% or 1,607,155 were visitors to Vietnam. The rest (less than 1 million) went to other

countries. The number of tourists has increased albeit at a fluctuating rate from 7,142,291 in 1993 to 15,122,335 in 2001. Growth rates increased sharply during the first two years and then slowed. The lowest rate (3.20%) was in 1997, due to the economic crisis. Tourist numbers and growth rate are shown in **Table 1** and **Figure 1**. In 2001, Thailand still makes the main contribution (67.57% or 10,132,509 visitors), however, due to large increase in the other countries Thailand share has become lower (68.31% in 1996) (see **Figure 2**).

In terms of revenue (**Table 2** and **Figure 3**) the region had an income from tourism, excluding international airfares, of over US\$6.562 billion in 1998. Thailand is the biggest earner with about 90.43% of the total (or US\$5,934 billion).

Increases in the number of tourists, services and revenue of riparian countries clearly shows the positive economic benefit of tourism development. However, in reality there are a number of negative impacts on the economy, socio-culture and the environment. These include environmental degradation of tourism resources, exacerbated economic inequalities and contribution to undesirable social changes such as the proliferation of sex tourism, AIDS, drug abuse, gambling, crime and cultural erosion. (see Pleumarom 2002:2 and more in Chon 2000; Cohen 1996; Kaosa-ard 1998; Pleumarom 2001; Theerapappisit 2003; Zhang 2001).

Tourism development and markets in the Mekong countries will now be summarised.

Thailand

Thailand is the most successful tourism development country in the Mekong Region. Tourism became one of the first economic sectors to earn foreign exchange with an income of US\$7.664million and the number international tourists about 6.952 million persons in 1995 (WTO 2001a). This increased rapidly at an average of 7.4% per year from 1995-1999. General economic growth was damaged after the economic crisis in 1997. However, the tourism sector in Thailand was little affected and was able to help revive the country's economy. The growth of tourism still increases in terms of the number of tourists and revenue in Thai Baht. However, revenue has dropped in US dollar terms, so that Thailand earned a foreign exchange of about US\$6.695million from the total international tourists of about 8.651 million persons in 1999 (WTO 2001a). Therefore, the Thai government has strongly supported the investment in and promotion of this sector and has agreed to promote tourism at the community level. Tourism development of Thailand could be a lesson on both how to conduct tourism and how to deal with its impacts in the region.

Tourism in Thailand is growing very fast. International tourists visiting Thailand almost doubled from 5,298,860 in 1990 to 10,132,509 in 2001. Revenue from international tourists almost tripled from Bt110.572bn (US\$4.333bn)³ in 1990 to Bt229.047bn (US\$5.045bn) in 2001. It increased every year from Bt190.765bn (US\$7.665bn) in 1995 to Bt253.018bn (US\$6.825bn) in 1999, at a rate of about 8.16% per year (**Table 2**). The 'Amazing Thailand Year' campaign (1998-1999 and extended to 2000) is one of the main reasons that tourist numbers increased dramatically during 1998-2000 at the rate of 7.53%, 10.50%, and 11.64% respectively. Another reason is the relaxation of immigration regulations for tourists from the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, and Malaysia and for tourists over 55 years old.

Domestically, there were about 53.65m person-trips within Thailand in 1999, compared with 52.26m person-trips in 1995. However, the number of trip slightly increased in 1996 but decreased by two years after. This may be due to the economic crisis in 1997 when companies in financial, industrial and commercial sectors were down sizing their businesses, many employees were losing their jobs and the campaign of economising on expense was being heavily promoted.

Thai tourism has been promoted since about 1936 (TAT 1996:163). The policy changed its aims towards

Table 1 Tourists visiting the Mekong Region

Year	Thailand		Cambodia		Laos		Myanmar		Vietnam		Yunnan		Total	
	Number	Growth (%)	Number	Growth (%)	Number	Growth (%)	Number	Growth (%)	Number	Growth (%)	Number	Growth (%)	Number	Growth (%)
1993	5,760,533		118,183		102,946		154,982		600,438		405,209		7,142,291	
1994	6,166,496	7.05	176,617	49.44	146,155	41.97	185,244	19.53	1,018,244	69.58	522,059	28.84	8,214,815	15.02
1995	6,951,566	12.73	219,680	24.38	346,460	137.05	202,476	9.30	1,351,296	32.71	596,942	14.34	9,668,420	17.69
1996	7,192,145	3.46	260,489	18.58	403,000	16.32	314,139	55.15	1,607,155	18.93	752,100	25.99	10,529,028	8.90
1997	7,221,345	0.41	218,843	-15.99	463,200	14.94	491,000	56.30	1,715,637	6.75	756,050	0.53	10,866,075	3.20
1998	7,764,930	7.53	575,000	162.75	500,200	7.99	478,000	-2.65	1,520,128	-11.40	760,000	0.52	11,598,258	6.74
1999	8,580,332	10.50	644,000	12.00	614,278	22.81	434,000	-9.21	1,781,754	17.21	1,040,000	36.84	13,094,364	12.90
2000	9,578,826	11.64	455,808	-29.22	596,286	-2.93	447,495	3.11	2,140,100	20.11	1,000,000	-3.85	14,218,515	8.58
2001	10,132,509	5.78	534,589	28.01	534,198	-10.41	460,989	3.02	2,330,050	8.88	1,130,000	13.00	15,122,335	6.64

Source: From a variety of sources adjusted to synchronise with each other. Those are: Bwa 2000; Chon 2000:91; LNAT 2000; Ming 2000; MOT 2001; n.a. 2002; NTA 2000; Sohom 2000; TAT 2000; TISTR 1998; VNAT 2002; WTO 1999, 2001a, b.

Note: There are some different in the recording system.

- The number for Cambodia 1933-1997 are air entries only, while from 1998-2001 land entries and boat were included, but the number for 2000 and 2001 were counted from January-November only.
- The number of tourist for Vietnam and Yunnan in 2000 and 2001 are for air entries only.
- The number tourist for Laos and Myanmar included day visitors at border checkpoints.
- Author estimated the number for Yunnan in 1997 and Myanmar in 2000, in order to see trends.

Table 2 Revenue and accommodation in the Mekong Region, 1993-2001.

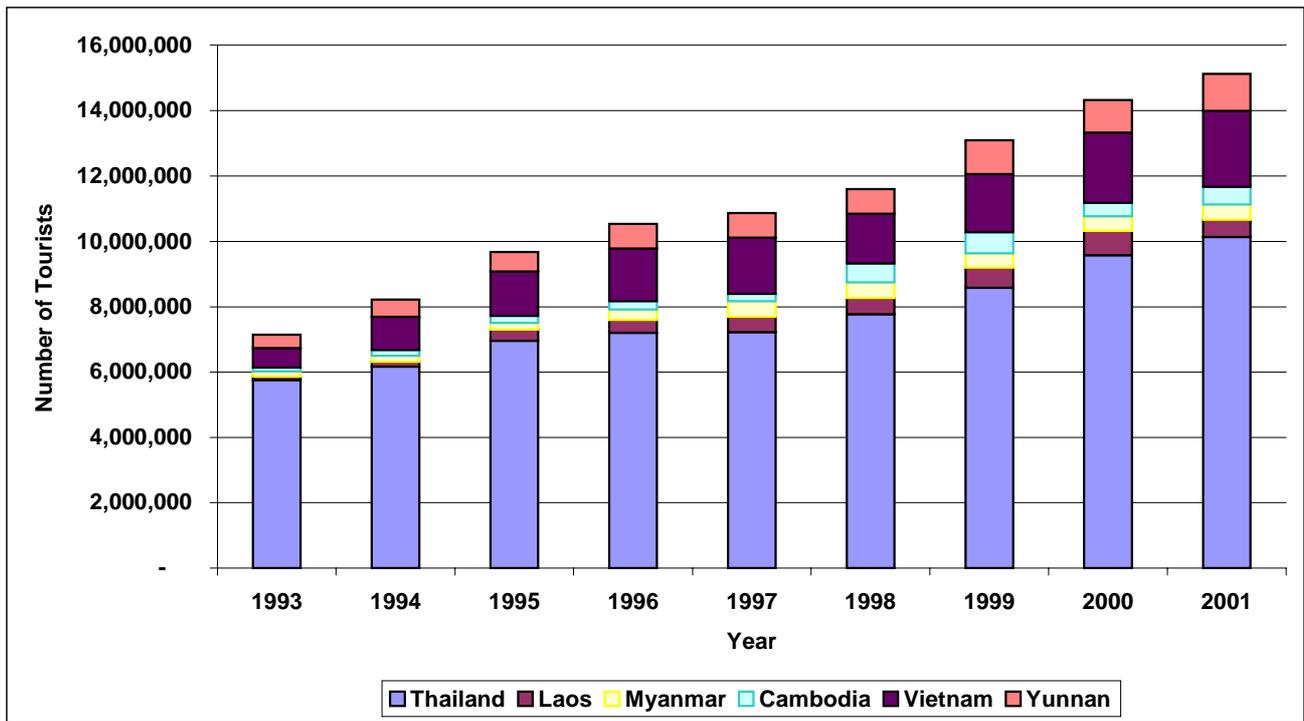
Year		1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Ratio1998
Revenue											
Thailand	(US\$ m)	5,014	5,762	7,664	8,664	7,048	5,934	6,695	6,540	6,722	90.43
Cambodia	(US\$ m)	48	88	100	118	143	166	190	650		2.53
Lao	(US\$ m)	6	8	25	44	73	80	97	114		1.22
Myanmar	(US\$ m)	19	24	38	33	24	35	35		85	0.53
Vietnam	(US\$ m)						86	[97]	1,300		1.31
Yunnan	(US\$ m)						261.03	350.33		311	3.98
Total	(US\$ m)	5,087	5,882	7,827	8,859	7,288	6,301	7,367			100.00
Number of Rooms											
Thailand	H&S	212,389	246,113	230,273	244,011	249,098	279,070	279,943			65.56
Cambodia	H&S	3,892	4,294	5,408	6,397	6,385	8,385	9,106	[8,756]		2.13
Laos	H&S	2,050	2,682	3,345	3,701	4,108	5,019	5,544	7,333	8,797	1.30
Myanmar	H&S	2,163	6,213	7,615	11,916	13,338	14,891	14,706			3.44
Vietnam	H&S	33,570	42,000	50,000	55,600	56,000	60,300	63,580	[55,760]	72,504	14.89
Yunnan	H&S							54,007			12.65
Total	H&S	254,064	301,302	296,641	321,625	328,929	367,665	426,886			100.00

Source: 1993-1999: WTO 1999, 2001a (except Yunnan)

1998-1999 of Yunnan: China NTA, 2000

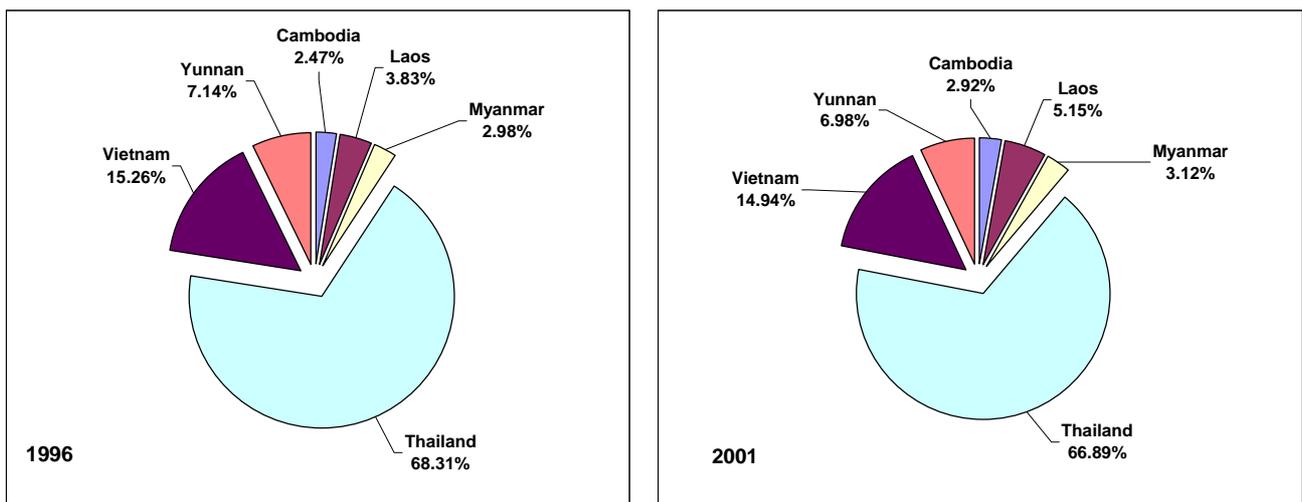
2000-2001: NTOs of each country

Note: H&S means Hotel and similar establishments



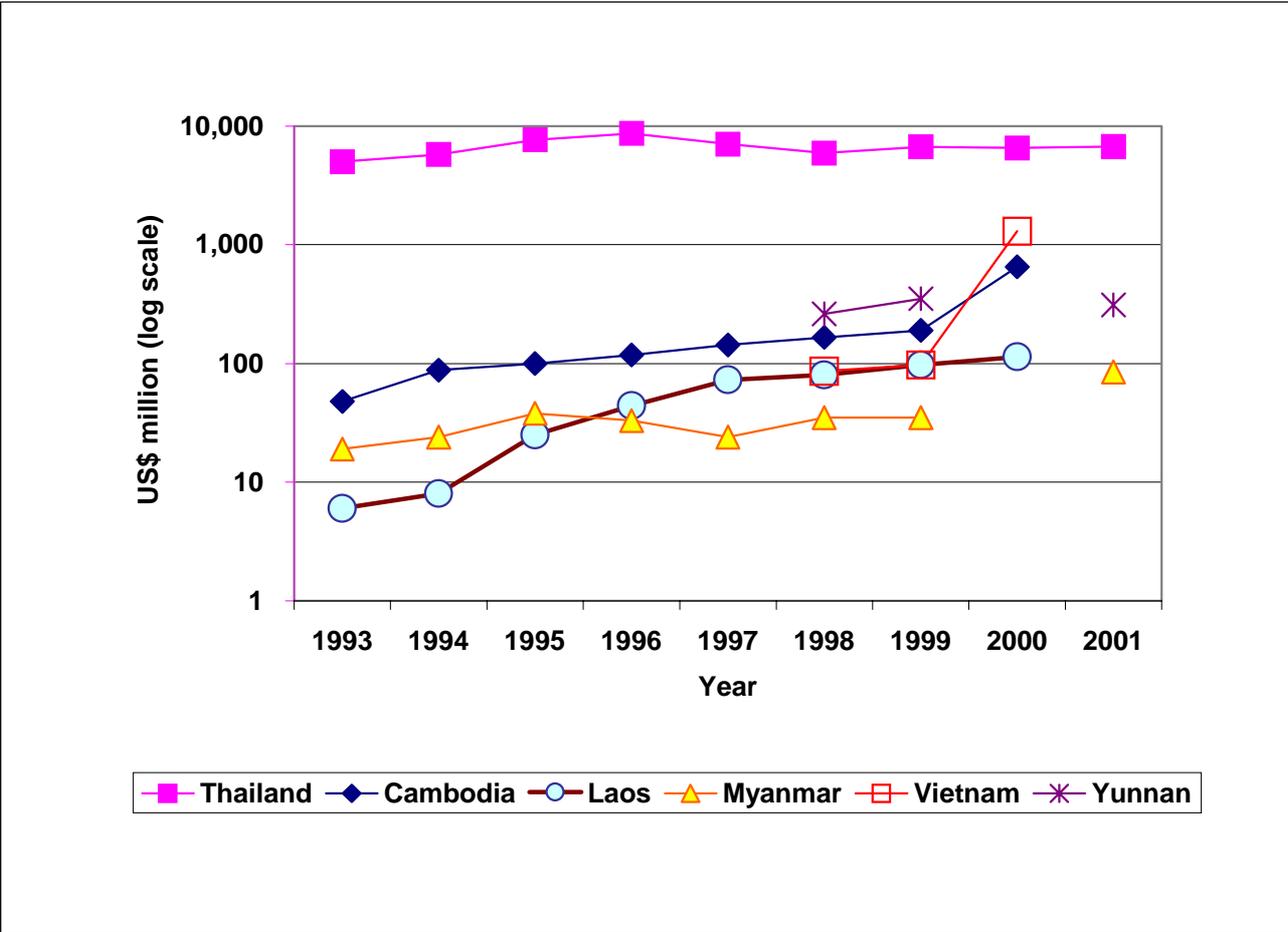
Source: See Table 1

Figure 1 Number of tourists in the Mekong Region comparing countries.



Source: Table 1

Figure 2 Share of visitors in the Mekong Region comparing countries, 1996 and 2001.



Source: See Table 2

Figure 3 Revenue from Tourism of Mekong Region countries

developing sustainable tourism and quality marketing programs around the 1990s so as to preserve tourism areas and to attract quality tourists to visit the country and to stay longer. This was due to local and global pressures of environmental conservation paradigm. This was included a National Ecotourism Policy, which was officially proclaimed in 1998. Ecotourism development in Thailand has progressed from year to year. However, most tourism activities still rely on mainstream tourism.

Vietnam

The national tourism administration agency of Vietnam was set up in 1960 with various names and under different ministries. The recent one is Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (VNAT). Vietnam's tourism remained underdeveloped during the war. After long isolation, Vietnam became a member of WTO in 1981 and of PATA in 1989. The WTO reported that only 7,000 foreign tourists traveled to Vietnam in 1989 compared to about 25,000 tourists who traveled to Laos in the same year, many of whom were engaged in government missions or aid programs (Rafferty 1993:443). The Vietnamese government, interested in attracting tourists, began granting visas to organised tours in 1989 then a small stream of tourists begun to flow to Vietnam (Ibid.).

The government policy of *Doi Moi*, which was introduced during the sixth Party Congress in 1986 and encourages new arrangements for investment, opens interesting perspectives for the development of tourism in Vietnam. Vietnam was moved from a non-existent to an 'embryonic' stage of tourism development. The campaign of 'Visit Vietnam Years' in 1990 was a big step that created more awareness of the role of tourism amongst the Vietnamese people (Jansen-Verbeke and Go 1995).

In 1991, a tourism development master plan for the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was published by the WTO in collaboration with the United Nations (UN) development plan. The plan indicated four poles or regions that offers substantial market potential for tourism development i.e. Hanoi-Ha Long-Dien Bien Phu, the historic site of Hue-Da Nang, Nha Trang-Dalat, and Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) and surrounding area. The plan had short-term and long-term recommendations. In the short-term (1991-1995), the plan recommended that Vietnam rearranges its tourism organisational structure, define and plan priority tourist regions, build 2,500 new hotel rooms and upgrade 4,800 rooms. In the second stage (1996-2000) it recommended Vietnam to strengthen tourist market activities, build a further 8,200 hotel rooms, industrialise tourist business, and improve transport facilities. This plan expected the number of foreign tourist to increase to 500,000 in 1995 and to about 1.5 million per year by 2000 and that this would generate about 28,700 additional jobs in the tourism industry. (see Jansen-Verbeke and Go 1995)

The number of international tourists who visit Vietnam each year reached a million in 1994 and has increased dramatically every year since, except during the Asian economic crisis in 1997, when the growth rate dropped. However, tourism had recovered by 1999 and continues to grow. A report of VNAT stated that in 2001 tourism was generating revenue of around US\$1.3 bn (VNAT 2002). The rate was more than 14 times that of 1998 when it was about US\$86 m (WTO 2001b:96). This may be due to the different means of counting income from tourism.

Visitors from East Asia and the Pacific were the main market for Vietnam (68.06% in 1999) but their share is gradually decreasing (from 70.97% in 1996) due to the increase in visitors from the Americas and Europe (WTO 2001a).

As with other countries where tourism development is rapid, Vietnam faces a question of sustainability in development, "which caters to the mass recreational tourist market [and] can place the indigenous culture and even the economic benefit at risk" (Anon cited in Jansen-Verbeke and Go 1995:320). Actually, ethnic minority communities in Vietnam have benefited from tourism development through employment opportuni-

ties and infrastructure development. Mountainous tourism presented 5,475 direct participants in 1995 and increased to 5,802 in 1996 including thousand indirect one (Luong and Binh 2001). However, negative impacts remain, including environmental pollution and degradation; intrusion of unhealthy culture, social problems such as drug taking, gambling and prostitution (Ibid.).

The State Steering Committee for Tourism headed by a Deputy Prime Minister is one of the main actors coordinating the agencies concerned with sustainable tourism development. The Tourism Development Strategy to 2010 is in the final stage of formulation. This will ensure that tourism development in Vietnam is a 'spearhead sector in the economy' and will develop "in line with cultural and ecological tourism while preserving and full realising cultural identity, good traditions and customs of Vietnamese people" (WTO 2001b:97).

Cambodia

Cambodians are very proud of their rich cultural heritage, particularly Angkor Wat, which is one of the Eight Wonders of the World. The Khmer Civilisation left lots of architectural and archeological sites to be explored by researchers and tourists. Tourism was strongly promoted and developed by Prince Sihanouk during 1950s as means to improve the deteriorating economy, but it was interrupted by the cold war following the coup d'etat by Lon Nol in 1970 and the victory of the terror-regime of Pol Pot in 1975–1978. Thus, during the cold and civil wars it appeared no tourism existed and ever after that period very few destinations were accessible.

Nowadays, through strenuous government effort and foreign aid, Cambodia is one of the fastest growing tourist destinations. Tourism reemerged under the Vietnam-back government, after Heng Samrin signed a contract with Vietnamese State Travel in 1986. Foreign visitors during the war were US and South Vietnamese soldiers and war journalists (late 1960s - early 1970s), experts from Vietnam and socialist countries, humanitarian aid agency personnel and some journalists (early 1980s) (see more in Krell 1990:7-9). There was some local travel in the form of bringing agricultural products to the markets, visiting friends and relative, pilgrimages to temples and holy sites, beach recreation. In 1998 the government paid much attention to tourism by setting up the General Department of Tourism directly under the Council of Ministers. Tourism was given a greater importance, "in order not to only earn more foreign exchange but also to expose the Kampuchean [Cambodian] situation to the world. In addition, it is hoped that expanding tourism improves the country's image in the non-communist world and breaks through the isolation imposed by the 'west' " (Ibid.:43).

From 1962-1968 Cambodia received 174,574 foreign tourists at an annual increasing rate of 12.56%. Compared with neighboring countries, the figure is still low, for example Thailand received 337,262 tourists in 1968. Most tourists came from North America (30%), China (27%), France (17%) and Japan plus Australia (14%). Tourism in Cambodia grew very quickly, particularly after a 1993 election organised by the United Nations. The number of tourists increases 21.3% per annum on average (from 118,183 in 1993 to 218,843 in 1997); in 1994 there was an increase of 49.44 % ever (WTO 1999).

The number of tourists visiting Cambodia is low compared with Thailand and Vietnam, and is only about 3.54% of the region. The number of international tourists dramatically increased in 1993-1996 but decreased in 1997 due to the Asian economic crisis. Since 1998 records had included day-tripper and tourists entering Cambodia overland. Thus the number again increased in 1998-1999, then decreased to very low in 2000 and increased again in 2001. These fluctuations may due to the unsystematic nature of the record system and political problems.

Laos

One of the poorest countries in the world, Laos was engaged in the war like Cambodia and Vietnam during the 1950s-70s. In 1986 Laos undertook important reforms to introduce a market-based economy. This led to the adoption of an 'open door policy' for external economic relations in 1990. It also opened up the country to international tourism. Tourism has become important for its contribution to social and economic development. In 1995 the Lao National Assembly identified the tourism industry as one of the nation's eight priority development areas. Since 1991 the revenue from the tourism industry has increased dramatically and tourism has quickly become a major export industry of the Laos. It earned US\$73.3 million in 1997, and was the nation's third largest source of export revenue (Yamauchi and Lee 1999:1). Becoming a member of ASEAN in 1997 helped Laos cooperate with its neighbors and gain benefit from socio-economic development in the region.

The Laos government is very much concerned with tourism development. To further promote international tourism, it launched the 'Visit Laos Years 1999-2000'. Infrastructure and services improvement has been added to the program. The removal of travelling restrictions within the country in 1994 and visa relaxation since 1997, helped the tourist industry to grow. The Lao National Tourism Authority (LNTA) was assisted by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to prepare the National Tourism Master Plan in 1997-1998. LNTA also got support from TAT to do a Provincial Masterplan of Champasak and Luang Phrabang during 1994-1997. The ecotourism strategy formulation and human resource development has been supported by UNDP. Broad guidelines for ecotourism development and two projects in co-operation with international partners at Luang Nam Ha and Nam Kan/Nam Nga have been established. Laos has also received assistance from other countries, such as the 'Joint Project Formulation Study Team on Tourism Development in the Lao People's Democratic Republic' under the Japan-Singapore Partnership Program for the 21st Century (Lao Embassy U.S.A. 1999).

The tourist promoters are planning the development of tourist attractions in every province with a heavy concentration on environmental and heritage sites. All main attractions in Vientiane city have been refurbished such as That Luang Stupa, Wat Phakeo, That Luang and Sisaket, as well as at Patusay (Victory Gate). Dongsay National Park (at Km 15 village on National Route 13 South) and Phoukhaokhouay National Park are earmarked as ecotourism sites. The Nam Ngum reservoir in Vientiane province, Tha Pha Bat temple area in Borikhamsay province, Vang Vieng, Xieng Khuang, Luang Namtha and Houaphan provinces are attracting many tourists. LNTA, thus, considers not only promotion but also undertakes investigation to maximise site attractions without spoiling the environment (Lao Embassy U.S.A. 2001).

The declaration of the historic capital of Luang Phrabang as a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 1995 has help Laos to be known and has attracted more tourists from around the world. The Laos government has been very concerned about the preservation of the country's cultural, historical and natural heritage, as has supported this concern by the Presidential Decree on the Preservation of Cultural, Historical and Natural Heritage of June 1997. The Decree aims to safeguard national heritage. The legislation states that tourism services may not be established within archeological and natural sites and seeks to protect and promote Lao cultural and traditional values in the tourism sector by limiting the negative impacts of foreign culture.

The number of tourists visiting Laos has been increasing dramatically: 102,946 in 1993, 403,000 in 1996 and 737,208 in 2000. Most of the tourists originated from East Asia and the Pacific. The revenue from tourism gradually increased from US\$2.25m in 1991 to US\$6.28m in 1994, and then increased dramatically to US\$73.3m in 1997 and US\$113.9m in 2000 (Lao NTA). Fifty-five per cent of the tourism industry revenue during 1997 was derived from international tourists who accounted for 19.2 per cent of total tourist arrivals (Yamauchi and Lee 1999:1).

Similar to Cambodia, Laos has a small number of international tourists, but their number has been increasing rapidly since the opening of the country to tourism (from 102,946 in 1993 to 346,460 in 1995). The total rate of increase remained high (16.68%) during 1999-2000. Luckily, Laos was little affected by the economic crisis, and international tourists continued to increase, particularly overnight tourists, while same-day tourists declined in 1997 and then rose again.

The record for 10 months in 2001 showed that more than half the visitors to Laos were from Thailand (56.06%), most were same-day visitors at the borders, followed by visitors from Vietnam (12.60%). The other tourist origins are China (6.21%), USA & Canada (4.05%), France (3.19%), Japan (2.42%) and UK (2.33%). Entering Laos via Thailand is the most popular and convenient way, while only 10.8% (1999) used air transportation. Most tourists visited Laos for leisure, recreation and holidays up to 70% (1998) while 28.0% came for business and professional purposes.

Myanmar

Myanmar is a country with a rich cultural heritage that could be attractive tourists. However, the closed economy and tight central planning of its socialist government over the past three decades as well as political instability has been a barrier to tourists visiting the country. Myanmar remains a poor Asian country where living standards for the majority have not improved over the past decade.

Government policy in the 1990s aimed at revitalizing the economy after three decades of tight central planning. Private activity markedly increased in the early to mid-1990s, but began to decline in recent years due to frustration with the business environment and political pressure from western nations (CIA 2002b).

As part of economic reform a foreign investment law was promulgated in November 1988, encouraging foreign and local investors to realise investment opportunities in the hotel and tourism industry. In 1992 the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism was formed and a high level Tourism Development and Management Committee was set up in 1994. The committee resolved in the first meeting to designate 1996 as the 'Visit Myanmar Year'. Foreign investment in hotel development has been promoted and "up to now [2000] a total of (41) hotel/ Commercial Complex projects have been signed with foreign investors for the total amount of US\$1.18 billion" (Bwa 2000:37-38).

The number of tourists has fluctuated. It increased from 153,982 in 1993 to 314,139 in 1996 and to 491,000 in 1997, then dropped to 478,000 in 1998, and 434,000 in 1999 due to the situation around border check points. The number of tourists passing through Yangon Airport has gradually increased.

Myanmar has the least tourists in the Mekong Region. This may due to a lack of facilities and political problems affecting tourist travel to Myanmar. In 2001 there were only 204,862 international overnight tourists visiting Myanmar, who arrived at Yangon International Airport, a decline in numbers from 2000. There were another 256,127 same-day visitors, mainly Thai and some Chinese, arriving at the border.

In 2001 overnight visitors from Taiwan were top of the list with 13%, followed by Japan, Thailand, Americas, China, France, Malaysia, Germany, Singapore UK of about 10%, 9%, 8%, 8%, 6%, 5.5%, 5.5%, 4.8%, and 4% respectively. Those from ASEAN countries accounted for 19% of total arrivals. Leisure tourists accounted for about 60% of overnight tourists. Number of business travelers and those visiting friends and relatives (VFR) were 18% and 22% respectively. Tourists travelling in package groups made up 36% and foreign independent travelers (FITs) accounted for 25%.

Yunnan

Yunnan is a country with rich tourist attractions: highland plateau landscape, snow-covered mountains and canyons, various ethnic cultures and unique micro-climates. Yunnan, like other provinces in China, is influenced by the changing government policy on tourism, which began with the planned economy in 1949 and includes the transition to a market-oriented economy in the last decade. Chinese tourism policies have experienced several significant adjustments under leaders from Mao Ze-dung to Deng Xiao-ping to Jiang Ze-ming.

In order to eradicate regional inequality, Chairman Mao promoted a slogan of 'growing grain everywhere' under communist party rule. Agriculture and industry were regarded as a passport to national prosperity after the trauma of wars and natural disasters. Tourism was not mentioned in the development strategies and only a limited number of selected foreign visitors could visit China. Tourism served political process only up to 1978, when tourism policy first appeared in Deng's reversal of regional development designated the 'coast-led' strategy. The role of tourism was to be a way of earning foreign currency. After Deng's reversal the Chinese government was the owner and major player in China's tourism industry (Zhang 2001).

The growth pole strategies pushed the national economy toward rapid growth and created regional gaps among different part of the country. Then in 1995, Jiang Ze-ming shifted the investment focus from the east-coast area to the inland provinces. The Ninth Five-Year Plan (1996-2000) explicitly stipulated that "uneven regional development is to be corrected rather than tolerated" (Fan, 1997 cited in Zhang 2001:391). This policy was of benefit to Yunnan, particularly when the Silk Road Journey in Western China was promoted.

Tourism in Yunnan though the encouragement of the central government has boomed since 1978, with rapid growth in visitor arrivals and revenues, and the establishment of hotels, travel agencies and tourist bureaus particularly in the 1980s. By the first half of the 1990s, Yunnan had established a tourism product and services, with investment concentrated on "one center, three tourist routes, four places, five areas, six products, and nine key projects" (Yunnan Tourism Bureau, 1998 cited in Zhang 2001:391).

Yunnan has developed transportation within the province and connections to other provinces and neighboring countries. Those include: railways; highways that will link up Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand; navigation lines and wharves for goods and passengers, particularly along the Mekong River; and airports. Yunnan has also initiated foreign investment projects in sectors such as infrastructure, agriculture and biological resources, minerals, tourism resources and environmental protection. In the tourism sector there is a wish to develop national and provincial tourists destinations and scenic spots along with the construction of related facilities and recreation facilities in vacation zones (china.org.cn 2002).

Tourism is a part of tertiary industry that is contributing more and more to the China's economy, and has become a new force boosting the country's economic growth. From 1996 to 2000 China earned US\$14.1 billion and Yuan283.1 billion (US\$34.2 billion⁴) from tourism (People's Daily 2000a). This sector is significant to Yunnan too, which registered an added value of Yuan50 billion (US\$6.04 billion) in 1999 or a 10 percent increase from 1998. It surpassed the secondary industry for the first time in terms of contribution to the provincial economy. In 1999, Yunnan received more than 38 million Chinese and foreign tourists and got Yuan20.5 billion (US\$2.48 billion) revenue from tourism, accounting for 10 percent of the provincial GDP (People's Daily 2000b). Tourism in Yunnan involved participation by and profit to many stakeholders, including collective-, individual- and private-run enterprise.

Over 60 percent of tourism-related holiday villages, shops, transportation enterprises and restaurants are run by collective or private enterprises which made investments of over 10 billion Yuan

[US\$4.39 billion]. Nearly all the ethnic families living in or around scenic areas are taking part in the development of tourist industry and selling self-made tourist commodities while displaying the culture and customs of the nationalities. (People's Daily 2000b).

In 1995 the capital of Yunnan, Kunming, attracted 397,562 international tourists and got receipts up to US\$77.28 million (Yuan641.49 million) while the whole province got Yuan1,077.03 million (US\$130.08 million). The second largest area that attracted international tourists was Baoshan receiving 47,756 tourists, followed by Honghe (37,517), Dali (37,264), Lijiang (30,518), and Xishuangbanna (23,600) (Zhang 2001:392).

3.2 GMS tourism development programs

The programs

Since the beginning of GMS cooperation, tourism has been promoted as one of the six key socio-economic cooperation sectors that can utilise the potential of the Mekong River for sustainable development. Tourism is also one of the seven priority sectors for Subregional economic cooperation that received technical assistance from the ADB when its master plans were completed in 1994. The strategy for GMS tourism development for the next 20 years forecast that the GMS will be one of the world's most important ecotourism and cultural tourism destinations by 2018 (AMTA 1998 cited in Pleumarom 2002:2). Seven programs were initially proposed in 1994. These are:

- 1) Promoting the Subregion as a Tourist Destination
- 2) Subregional Tourism Forum
- 3) Training the Trainers in the Basic Craft Skills of Tourism
- 4) Training Resource Managers in Conservation and Tourism
- 5) Mekong/Lanchang River Tourism Planning Study
- 6) Study on Facilitation of Travel to and within the Greater Mekong Subregion
- 7) A study on GMS North-South Tourism flow
- 8) Village-based Tourism

Most of the programs are subjected to develop at regional level and in a large scale, but there are also small-scale village-based tourism programs that intended to be a model for community tourism development. ESCAP, ADB, WTO, UNESCO, UNEP, PATA and MRC have been collaborating to implement these eight priority tourism projects for the GMS (Tamakawa 1999).

It should be noted that there are other related sector projects proposed that would benefit tourism development. For example: road transportation development projects both within countries and linking countries; port and river navigation improvement projects; airport improvement and air routes establishment; human resources development; and telecommunications improvement.

Village based tourism

A tourism development program that is of concern in this paper is Village-based Tourism. The ADB's assessment study drew attention to the potential of village-based tourism throughout the region and proposed a site in each country for implementation of a pilot projects for village tourism development. The idea of a 'GMS Network for Ecotourism' has been mooted as a way to share experiences and expertise. While village-based tourism is claimed to be a part of ecotourism development in ADB programs, different approaches may be required by other agencies in other countries.

The selected villages for the pilot projects are Hat Bai (Weaving Village) at Chiang Khong District, Chiang Rai Province, Thailand; Pak Beng, Pak Bang District, Oudomxai Province, Lao PDR.; Koh Dach, upstream of Phnom Penh, Cambodia; and Hung Phong Village, Giong Trom District, Ben Tre Province, Vietnam. It should be noted that Myanmar NTO has had difficulty to committing any resources to this project.

According to the '12th meeting of the Working Group on Tourism on the GMS Tourism Sector' held in 30 March -1 April 2001, in Kunming, the situation reports for Hat Bai, Pak Bang and Hung Phong have been completed, while the survey of Koh Dach is planned. It is proposed that a meeting of stakeholders will be held to help communities devise initial action plans (ADB 2002b). The selected villages are to be developed with a top-down approach because they were initiated by NTO of each country, which are less concerned about participation of local people. The results of a study of Hat Bai by Theerapappisit (2003) show some constraints and problems of such a process of the development: limited local understanding of village-based tourism development; the potential loss of local knowledge of the unique pattern of *Tai Lue* weaving; tension among local weaving shops' and conflicts of interest among different groups in the public and private sectors. An attitude change of local residents is one of the causes of tension and conflict. This situation is caused by a top-down policy of tourism development at the village level, from which we need to learn some lessons for other village-based tourism development.

4. ECOTOURISM IN THE MEKONG REGION

Ecotourism has been adopted in the region by governments, international agencies, NGOs and private operators and these may have different concepts of and purposes for such development. In order to understand this phenomenon, the general philosophy and concept of ecotourism will be discussed. The introduction and adaptation of each country and the implementation of the specific concept of Community-based Ecotourism will also be explored in this section.

4.1 The ecotourism concept

What is ecotourism?

Ecotourism, basically, is one form of the responsible tourism and an integral part of sustainable tourism (ST) development, which was declared as a global strategy at the World Summit at Rio De Janeiro in 1992. According to Butler (1993:29), sustainable tourism could be taken as tourism:

which is developed and maintained in an area (community, environment) in such a manner and at such a scale that it remains viable over an indefinite period and does not degrade or alter the environment (human and physical) in which it exists to such a degree that it prohibits the successful development and wellbeing of other activities and processes

The concept of sustainable tourism has focused on the management of an entire tourism industry in order to bring it in to line with the global trend towards sustainable development. It covers every element of tourism, in other words it is acknowledged that 'all tourism should be sustainable tourism' (Dowling 1995:88). This leads to the conclusion that the tourism industry must ensure that tourist visits will be maintained and tourism resources will retain their attractiveness indefinitely. Tourism service transactions should be profitable but considerable investments will be necessary on a regular basis to maintain or upgrade the services to meet the demands of a tourism market that is becoming more and more sophisticated and discriminating. There must be no (or only minimal) adverse environmental, social and cultural impacts. All this must be

achieved through managing the industry on the basis of the principles of sustainable development.

During the 1980s many forms of alternative tourism were introduced in order to cope with the social and environmental impacts of tourism. Ecotourism, in some sense, was included as one of the alternative form of tourism that seemed to be acceptable to the tourism industry. The term 'ecotourism' has been debated and discussed again and again in almost all meetings and conferences. Since 1986, there have probably been more than 50 definitions or explanations of ecotourism. The similarity or difference of those definitions depends on the overall concept of tourism development, the perspective of the definers and the purpose of its application. Cabellos-Lascurian who was credited as the first person explicitly to use the term in late 1980s (Orams 1995:4), defined ecotourism as:.

traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objectives 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 area... (Cabellos-Lascurian 1987 cited in Boo 1990:xiv)

One of the often-quoted definitions was by The Ecotourism Society (TES) (now is The International Ecotourism Association (TIES)) in the United States. TES defined ecotourism around 1995 as "responsible travel to the nature areas which conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people." (TES n.d.; TIES 2002).

As all definitions are debatable this led to some arguments about the style of management especially when it come to dealing with public or common resources. Many developing countries follow ecotourism concepts that have been defined in the West, not only for promoting sustainable development, but also to access a niche in the global tourism market. The objectives of pushing ecotourism into the development process are related to the specific goal of each development actor. For example, when it is used for marketing promotion ecotourism covers all kind of activities dealing with nature, both active (i.e. adventure) and passive (nature viewing, bush walking etc.) activities. To promote rural development, ecotourism focuses on culture, no matter whether related to nature or not. Environmentalists must consider conserving the environment.

The term "Ecotourism" is a contradictory one that originates from 'ecology' plus 'tourism'. Its application is therefore limited. Budowski (1976) observed and Higham and Luck (2002) confirmed that the relationship between tourism development and environmental conservation may be one of symbiosis, coexistence or conflict. The important of symbiosis or coexistence and conflict in things is acceptable. As Mao (1937) stated that "The law of contradiction in things, that is, the law of the unity of opposite, is the basic law of materialist dialectics". Thus ET as sub-set of sustainable development must integrated the conservation and development concept in holistic manner that means all components must be linked, compromised and balanced to each other (Pra Dhammapitaka 2000:68). However, Pra Dhammapitaka (Ibid.:95,174,178) suggested that to make it successful we have to add a third factor – the human factor – linking ecology and economy in a balance way. His suggestion covers 'wisdom, 'ethic' and 'mental qualities' for human development. This is the Middle Way (*Majjhima patipada*) to get any development to be successful.

Elements and characteristics of ecotourism

Most definitions of ecotourism point out that ecotourism is dealing with natural resources, has to be responsibly managed, must provide education, need to satisfy tourists and must not neglect the local people. (see Allcock 1994; Boo 1990; Buckley 1995; Dowling 1995; Fennell, David A. 1999; Orams 1995; TES n.d.; TIES 2002; Wearing and Neil 1999; Western 1993). These key characteristics or elements of ecotourism have been considered. Those are nature-based or ecological-based tourism, environmental education-based tourism and sustainably managed tourism. However, many authors add other key compo-

nents to the concept of ecotourism in order to stress certain elements such as community participation-based tourism (TISTR 1997), conservation supporting tourism (Buckley 1995), provision of local and regional benefits (Allcock 1994).

Natural resources, particularly Protected Areas such as National Park and Wildlife Sanctuaries, are the main ecotourism attraction areas. While cultural elements may be one source of ecotourist attraction, they are controversial in their contribution to ecotourism. Thailand Institute of Scientific and Technological Research or TISTR's definition (TISTR 1997) included the 'cultural or historical resources that are integrated into the area's ecological system' in the destination. This is consistent with 'any accompanying cultural features' mentioned by Cabellos-Lascurian (Scheyvens 2000) and 'indigenous cultures' by Lawrence *et al* (1997). Hawaii Ecotourism Association's definition (1999) included culture-based tourism as a component of the destination area. Tyler and Dangerfield (1999) included 'an element of social and cultural interest'. Sirakaya *et al* (1999) pointed at 'undisturbed and under visited areas of immense of natural beauty, and cultural and historical importance', but Honey (1999) still focused on 'fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas'.

In many countries, especially developing countries, the participation and the benefit to local populations has appeared as the main objective of ecotourism, even though it could be just one component in sustainable development and all forms of tourism should be concerned about it. Many tourism actors, particularly the community developers, concluded that all forms of tourism that are related to community are ecotourism. This due to the paradigm of sustainable development that give a priority to local or host communities to both receive benefits and the right to manage ecotourism. This practice has led to a diversion of the original ecotourism conceptual framework. In many countries, some tour operators and lodge owners added local involvement in order to be appreciated by tourists (Wall 1997) who were seeking participatory ecotourism. From this point of view, community participation seems likely to be the only key element that has been taken into consideration by community developers. Many of them expect that local community empowerment can reduce the impact and increase the benefit to local people.

Ecotourism arguments

Ecotourism is a rather new and controversial concept in tourism development. Different disciplines and different stakeholders who have different interests in tourism development may have different ideas about its practice. Both scholars and agencies concerned have established principles and practices for ecotourism, along with management strategies and guidelines for stakeholders. In general, all stakeholders seem to agree with the notion of ecotourism despite many contentious issues. It is a challenge practitioners to demonstrate ecotourism's potential for environmental and social development, as questions remain: Is it a new tool for wealthy countries and wealthy individuals to consume resources?; Is it too narrow a concept to help solve the impact of tourism? Is it too complex and so difficult to implement?

At the conceptual level ecotourism has emerged to replace conventional tourism, particularly mass tourism with its negative impact on the natural environment. However, it should be pointed out that ecotourism may have its own serious faults despite appearances. Some argue that not all types of ecotourism are sustainable and that it has potential to be 'environmentally disruptive' (TISTR 1997; Wall 1997) or create impacts on both natural environment and indigenous peoples (RTP 2002). Ecotourism requires an opening up of new biodiversity-rich areas for so-called tourism-cum-conservation projects that it will be added to the multi-dimensional impacts of mass tourism (Pleumarom 2000b).

In terms of management, there are some issues of concern such as carrying capacity, local benefits and biopiracy. A limit on the number of tourists and awareness of carrying capacity of destination areas is one of the important parts of practice. Ecotourism prefers small numbers of tourists, but because in many cases,

control and monitoring of the carrying capacities of target areas is often difficult, undesirable ‘Eco-Terrorism’ (Vagt-Andersen 1997) may be the result. Even though many ecotourism developers support the idea of local participation or local benefit, it often appears that tour operators, professional planners and academics may be more focused on profit instead. Some argue that ecotourism is a new form of ecological imperialism (Cater, E. 2001; Cater, Erlet and Lowman 1994), by the first world over the third world or by dominant groups over rural communities. ‘Biopiracy’ (Pleumarom 1999) is another impact that may be experienced with the development of ecotourism in developing countries.

Some NGOs do not believe that ecotourism can contribute to a more equitable distribution of tourism income and a reduction of poverty. They feel that ecotourism is not different from conventional tourism, which often disrupts and distorts the structures of local economies, because ecotourism cannot thrive apart from the mass travel and tourism industry (Third World Network, *et al.* 2000). They are also afraid that third world governments often “promote all forms of rural and nature tourism as ecotourism, while frameworks to effectively scrutinize, monitor and control development are poorly developed or non-existent” (Pleumarom 2000a).

Most of these critiques are pessimistic about ecotourism based on past experiences of tourism and on some early ecotourism practices. Nevertheless all stakeholders and practitioners should take these arguments into account in order to keep ecotourism development inline with its original concept. Ecotourism may fail in some cases and succeed in others. The actual practice of ecotourism may diverge from its ideals depending on the particular situation. It should be note that, the ethic of ecotourism management is one main factors governing success or failure.

4.2 The introduction of ecotourism in the Mekong Region

Ecotourism adoption

Tourism development experiences in the Region have demonstrated the important role of tourism in economic and social development, a role which has, however, both positive and negative impacts.

Tourism in this Region has long been experienced as cultural tourism because of the extensive cultural and historical heritage (including ethnic culture) on hand. Natural tourism, particularly the rainforest and coastal areas, is also of interest for tourists. Tourism not only helps countries to earn foreign income but also helps raise their identities in the eyes of the world. However, there are some problems due to improper management of income distribution and impact protection. The majority of the income benefits business sectors and transnational corporations, which dominate tourism, rather than local people. Many resource areas, including the social and cultural fabric of host communities face degradation following the impact of tourism. These are the main concern of many stakeholders, particularly social developers (both NGOs and some government agencies) in recent times.

Alternative tourism including ecotourism has been introduces the Region during the last two decades. The emergence of ecotourism, on the one hand, is reflected in changes in the world tourism market, and on the other hand, has been used as a tool for environment conservation. For new tourism industry countries like Laos and Cambodia, ecotourism is seen as a better option for tourism development than conventional or mass tourism. The idea is that ecotourism is the appropriate alternative tourism for dealing with the impacts of tourism, particularly in natural settings. However, in practice, the need for foreign currency is influencing the policies and plans of tourism development in all countries, leading to dependency on an old fashion type of tourism. Experiences of tourism in Thailand that involve the integration and balance of many types of tourism, including alternative tourism like ecotourism, are of benefit to all countries.

Ecotourism has become a buzzword used by all stakeholders in their activities, regardless of whether it is actually being instituted. Because the region is rich in cultural and ethnic heritage, ecotourism promotion is often mixed and integrated with conventional tourist attractions. Many natural resources e.g. National Park and Wildlife Sanctuary etc. are promoted as ecotourism for both a local and international interests. These resources are mostly managed by government agencies, while the concept of local participation in tourism development has been recognised.

Thailand is country that has most rapidly adapted ecotourism to the tourism industry since 1995, and ecotourism is going very well in the sense of acceptability of all stakeholders and community development. The other countries accept ecotourism as one segment in their development of tourism for a global market in the late 1990s. The experiences of Thailand show a significant change in ecotourism practice towards development of community-run tourism. Community organisations play a major role in tourism management, particularly the attractive places and activities that communities can access and manage. In this regard, the term 'Community-based Tourism (CBT)' was used in order to avoid confusion with the term 'ecotourism'. Sometimes the terms a 'Community-based Ecotourism (CBET)' is used to cover both concepts of tourism in the community. However, ecotourism is still using as a means of communication when referring to responsible and sustainable tourism.

Ecotourism has been incorporated into regional development, particularly in 'Mekong/Lanchang Tourism Development Plans'. Laos and Cambodia have been envisaged as playing an important role in ecotourism. An independent report entitled 'Ecotourism in the Greater Mekong Subregion' was submitted to the ADB in 1999 (Mattsson 1999). It reviewed ecotourism in each GMS country and proposed 'ecotourism triangles' (ETTs) for ecotourism development. It also proposed cultural heritage sites as having considerable potential for nature-related ecotourism. However, it warned that it "can be a valuable asset to a developing ecotourism industry but care is needed to ensure that tourism does not adversely affect the lives of local people, to their detriment and that of sustained tourism" (Ibid.:2).

Resources and potential

Mattsson's report (1999) explained that potential for ecotourism in the region is found in five areas: biodiversity and landscapes, protected areas, the Mekong River and waterways, history and culture, and human diversity. This region is diverse in biological and landscape features. There are about 551 protected areas. Some 300 mammals, 1,000 birds, 400 reptiles, 100 amphibians and at least 25,000 higher plants are found in the Mekong countries. There are many types of forest, ranging from deciduous woods to evergreen rainforest, including mangrove forests and mountain coniferous forest. About 1,200 species of fishes have been recorded in the Mekong River and waterways. Many species are endangered on the World Conservation Union's (IUCN) list the categories of threat. However, this biodiversity is unlikely offer the same wildlife spectacles as Africa.

The Mekong River and its tributaries have many species of fish and different landscapes along their riverbanks. During some seasons the Mekong River can be navigated from Yunnan to Laos, but many rapids make navigation difficult. However, many rapids also can be the scenic attractive places for tourism, for example, Khong Falls in Laos.

The Region is rich in historical and cultural resources. There are many structures and monuments from past civilisations which have been declared World Heritage sites, such as Pagan, Angkor Wat, Sukhothai and Ayuthaya. The Region contains many ethnic groups: about 135 in Myanmar, 68 in Laos, 54 in Vietnam, 26 in Yunnan, 20 in Thailand and 10 in Cambodia (Ibid.).

These resources can help generate income for their countries at both macro and micro levels. Normally a

large proportion of the income benefited only a small group of investors and operators. However, according to Mattsson (1999), local financial profit is a principle feature of ecotourism. There is opportunity for local benefit from craftwork, serving as guides and porters, provision of animal transportation (elephants, horses, bullock cart) and vehicles and accommodation.

4.3 Ecotourism in the Mekong Region countries

National policies and plans, including those for the development of ecotourism, are vary from country to country in accordance with development progress. Thailand is the leader in ecotourism development in the Region, while Vietnam and Yunnan are growing fast. Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar are strongly promoting ecotourism in the development process. Their policies and plans for tourism development under the supervision of foreign aid programs suggest making ecotourism the major form of tourism development in order to avoid the negative impacts of conventional tourism. However, this development may conflict with the main aim of developing tourism in order to earn foreign currency for national development.

Thailand

Ecotourism has been operating in Thailand since 1994-1995 first under the name of '*Kanthongthiao Choeng Anurak*', which means conservation tourism, and since 1998 also under the name of '*Kanthongthiao Choeng Niwet*', which means ecological tourism. Both terms are still in use to refer to ecotourism and conservation tourism. Three main forces led to ecotourism: the demand for environmental and resource conservation, the need for human development based on grassroots participation; and the demand of the tourism market for educational experiences related to the environment (TISTR 1997). Social and environmental movements expressed these at research seminars and in research studies and through critiques and comments on mainstream tourism.

The National Ecotourism Policy was determined during 1996-1997, by Thailand Institute of Scientific and Technological Research (TISTR) that supported by TAT, based on research, surveys, and discussion among stakeholders, including public and private sectors, academics and NGOs. These study's results in an ecotourism definition for the Thai context, the formulation of National Ecotourism Policy, strategies and action programs and basic information for development. The policy offered a common understanding and framework for action for the various organizations and individuals involved in ecotourism. Even though there were many arguments and disagreements during the formation of the policy, all stakeholders agreed that Thailand needed some guidelines for tourism development. Another outcome was the establishment of an ecotourism association called 'Thai Ecotourism and Adventure Travel Association' (TEATA) in 1997. In addition, many government agencies and NGOs who have responsibility for community development incorporated ecotourism into their tasks in order to build new activities and sources of income for local people, particularly in rural areas.

In 1998, the National Ecotourism Policy was officially proclaimed and followed by the National Ecotourism Action Plan 2002-2006 in 2001. However, even though all stakeholders are recognised in the national policy, few of them learn and use the policy as a guideline for their practice. They may learn and use from other experiences and create ecotourism tools to suit the organisations' objectives. The Action Plan, thus, may only be of benefit to TAT and government agencies concerned about government requests for a budget.

Many organisations and individuals in Thailand participate in ecotourism at different levels and use different concepts due to differences in understanding of ecotourism concepts and applications. Ecotourism practice in Thailand may be classified into four categories: Adherence to the concept and idea of ecotourism particularly nature-based tourism management, such as the national parks and environmentalists. Focus on

local community development and management by mostly NGOs, community developers and some government agencies. Intention to push the ecotourism development process into all forms of tourism this is proposed by some scholars, TAT and some entrepreneurs. Use element of the ecotourism to support their business or activity image, these are mostly tour operators, investors, some media and government agencies. It should be noted however, actors often tend to pick and choose across the four categories

Stakeholders involved in ecotourism range from government agencies to NGOs, private sectors and local people. TAT and other governmental agencies such as the Community Development Department, Hill Tribe Welfare Division, Department of Public Welfare, Department of Agriculture Extension as well as many academic institutions have promoted numerous villages and trained villagers to serve at tourist destinations. Villagers supply tourists with places of attraction and basic services. Meanwhile, the National Park, Wildlife and Plants Department (NPD), the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (formally was a division under the Royal Forestry Department: RFD) have planned that all destinations in protected areas⁵ be ecotourism destinations. Many tour operators and lodge owners promote ecotourism in their tour programs through ensuring local involvement for appreciative tourists. NGOs encourage communities to take on ecotourism as a means of exercising control over the development of their communities instead of just responding to external forces as they had done in the past. However, all stakeholders including local people have had very little experience in managing this form of tourism and its varying objectives. This is creating confusion in its implementation with considerably different practices and outcomes showing up in the last few years.

Vietnam

Vietnam's tourism development master plan was published in 1991. It indicated four regions for development: Hanoi-Ha Long- Dien Bien Phu, the historic site of Hue-Da Nang, Nha Trang-Dalat, Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) and surrounding areas. This master plan focused on infrastructure requirements, education and tourism marketing. The concept of 'Tourism by Train' was introduced in order to disperse tourism over the country with low infrastructure cost and minimal environmental impact. Rail links with China and Cambodia were proposed. Ecotourism has potential to develop within these regions, particularly at the terrestrial (mountain climbing and rafting) and marine (boating and recreational fishing) environments in the central region (Dowling 2000). Vietnamese government is committed to sustainable development in tourism, limited resources and knowledge, and the urgent need to earn foreign exchange may make achievement difficult (Ibid.).

In 1999 a workshop on 'Development of a National Ecotourism Strategy for Vietnam' in Hanoi was held and sponsored by VNAT, IUCN and ESCAP. The workshop brought together a variety of stakeholders to share ideas about policy development for ecotourism. It succeeded in outlining a framework for the development of a national ecotourism strategy. By contrast, "It is worth nothing that advertising by the Vietnamese government and government-run tourism agencies at the large international tourism trade show in Hong Kong, held at the same time, did not reflect and ecotourism theme" (Fennell, D.A., *et al.* 2001:468). A pilot project called 'Support to Sustainable Tourism in Sa Pa District, Lao Cai Province' run by IUCN in collaboration with SNV (The Dutch Development Organisation) was an outcome of the workshop and probably one of the most ecotourism oriented projects in Vietnam. For Vietnam it was a pioneer project which promoted community participation and conservation (Lam 2002). Later a Sustainable Tourism Project Phase II was implemented by the Institute for Tourism Development Research (ITDR) and targetted both ITDR and VNAT with a range of capacity building activities (Koeman 1999).

The establishment of 'The Ha Long Bay Eco-museum' is an example of using a World Heritage Site to support ecotourism in Vietnam. According to the Ha-Long Bay Department (2001) "Eco-museum will assist visitors to understand the various features of the Bay. It will provide them with a number of walks

and tours, guided and self-guided, to explore the rich diversity of the local heritage”.

Protected Areas (PA)⁶ are one of the targets of ecotourism. The legal framework for tourism and ecotourism in PA has been established but there is not yet an institutional framework (MPI and UNDP 2002). Even Vietnam has revised the Tourism Master Plan that includes specific guidelines for tourism in national parks and for ecotourism. However, there are number of worrisome issues such as a strategy for ensuring tourism benefits for local communities and for balancing the potential costs and benefits of mass domestic tourism and the attributes which tourists come to experience.

Laos

The National Tourism Development Plan of Laos, which was prepared by a UNDP consultant in 1999, recommended the promotion of a niche market to include ‘special interest tourism’ (e.g. bird-watching, butterflies, orchids, weaving and Buddhist culture) and ‘adventure tourism’ (Schwettmann 2001). Such a market aims to optimise otherwise limited marketing opportunities and to highlight the quality of Laotian historical, culture and environmental attractions (ibid.). This form of tourism can be of benefit to the country while tourism infrastructure is still in its infancy.

Ecotourism initiatives in Laos since 1999 mainly focus on National Biodiversity Conservation Areas (NBCAs)⁷ and adjacent communities. The first officially approved ecotourism project in Laos was launched in Luang Namtha Province under the title of ‘Nam Ha Eco-tourism Development Project’. This project LNTA was working in collaboration with UNESCO and funded by the New Zealand government (Schipani and Sipaseuth 2002; Schwettmann 2001). Nam Ha is one of Laos’ 20 NBCAs. The ‘Forespace Ecotourism Project’ in the Nam Kan/Nam Nga Protected area is another project in cooperation with UNESCO (Yamauchi and Lee 1999). Similar programs in Suvannakhet, Khammouane and Luang Prabang Provinces are initiated by SUNV (joint program of UNV/United Nation Volunteers and SNV/ Netherlands Development Organisation) (SUNV n.d.). Other areas are being encouraged to follow the project lead particularly Phou Khao Khouay National Park, north of Vientiane.

The Lao government has established broad guidelines for development focussed on capacity management, sustainable use of resources, respect for cultural and natural diversity, and the involvement of local communities in decision-making (Yamauchi and Lee 1999).

Ecotourism in Laos is in it’s infancy but has established a firm base for future development. Nam Ha has provided a good model for ecotourism development in Laos (Lyttleton and Allcock 2002), where cash income has so far been distributed among villagers. Negative impact are small but could increase over the long term. Thus careful attention and appropriate capacity building is needed for the following phase. However, there are arguments about the influx of tourists, economic benefits from tourism and infrastructure development which suggest that, if these are badly managed, may turn ecotourism into mainstream mass tourism.

Cambodia

Cambodia has not yet implemented a n ecotourism development plan even though ecotourism is under consideration. However, tourism development in the protected areas has been promoted. Seven national parks, 9 wildlife sanctuaries, 3 protected landscapes, and 3 multiple-use management areas were designated in 1993 and covered an area of 3,327,200 ha or 19% of the country⁸. Kulen National Park, Kirirom National Park and Bokor National Park, including Preah Sihanouk or ‘Ream’ National Park and Tonle Sap Biosphere Reserve, are considered as attractive tourist sites, particularly for ecotourism (Chamroeun 2000), due to the growing desire to escape the pressures of urban life.

These areas and the management of ecotourism are under the responsibility of the Ministry of Environment. However, the ministry has not been ready to control and support such development due to financial problems with infrastructure and services development and the need for a legal framework and institutional capacity building (ibid.). However, the ministry is concerned about a participatory planning and implementation process and is engaged in building the capacity of both its staff and local communities living near national parks.

The Cambodian government is considering giving high priority to the tourism development especially ecotourism, of the remote Ratanakiri and Mondulakiri Provinces, adjacent to the Vietnamese border. With the assistance of TAT and the consultation of TISTR from Thailand, the 'Master Plan for Tourism Development of Ratanakiri and Mondulakiri Provinces, Cambodia' (TISTR [2001]) was formulated in 1999-2000. The main objectives of the Plan are to develop natural resources and cultural environment for ecotourism, and promote appropriate markets, infrastructure and services. The management process is required to be developed in a sustainable and participatory way. However, the project manager of the Provincial Rural Development Committee and DRIVE⁹ tourism training project, based in Ratanakiri, stated that tourism "offers both an opportunity and threat to communities. If the management and capacity building are not pursued with vigour, opportunities will be lost and significant damage will be done" (Brown 2002). Some problems are starting to surface such as, benefits going to a small group of people while communities are excluded, environmental damage, sex tourism and the push to have indigenous people kept poor while performing for tourists (Ibid.). There are, nevertheless, two projects actively supporting community capacity-building in the field of ecotourism. These are the Yeak Loam Lake protected area project¹⁰ and the DRIVE English and Tourism Skills Training project¹¹.

Myanmar

There is no such strong policy and implementation of ecotourism in Myanmar. Ecotourism policy is not emphasised separately from conventional development policy. The Visitor's Guide published by the Ministry of Hotels & Tourism (2000) has recommended ecotourism sites including wildlife parks and sanctuaries, which feature the country's diverse flora and fauna¹². Myanmar has the richest biodiversity in Asia after Indonesia (Henning and Myint 2002) and this may help to promote ecotourism. However, limited knowledge and shortage of international funding, mean that Myanmar is not adequately protecting its natural environment. Yet, "ecotourism has a great deal of potential for contributing support to biodiversity, protected areas (including their ecological integrity and expansion), and community support for ecotourism-related activities" (ibid.).

Ecotourism is included in all tourism promotion and marketing. Adventure tourism, ecotourism and special interest tour products have been promoted in addition to tourism to the historical sites of Bagan and Mandalay (n.a. 2002). Mountain climbing, trekking to hill tribe villages and scuba diving are new adventure activities related to ecotourism.

Yunnan

Yunnan is encouraging the promotion of ecotourism even though it is a small part of the whole tourism development effort. Yunnan has identified priority areas for ecotourism, including five ecotourism zones and eight ecocultural tourism routes (WTO 2002). Cultural and ecological resources¹³ in the province have been promoted as ecotourism products. For example, Xishuangbanna, which is rich in biological and ethnic diversity, has integrated biological and cultural heritage protection with ecotourism. Another active project is the Nature Conservancy's Yunnan Great Rivers Project, which mainly focuses in the Northwest of Yunnan. The project is working with local villages to create community-based ecotourism opportunities in the region. The first to be targeted areas are in Lashihai Watershed, a lake in Lijiang County, and

Meilixueshan, a Tibetan holy mountain in Deqin County (Bullock 2002). The project is promoting 'Green Tourism' which supports both sustainable mass tourism and ecotourism. The ecotourism strategic plan, in particular, emphasised on community-based ecotourism, visitor management and information services.

Conclusion

Ecotourism development in the Mekong Region is at an early stage but is advancing steadily. Thailand is the most progressive country in terms of policy and planning with good cooperation among all stakeholders, although, in practice, there are some problems adhering to guidelines. Other countries have also managed to integrate ecotourism with mainstream tourism and to use it to support economic development. There are also a number of ecotourism development projects in all countries, with national and international support.

It is clear that there are two main kinds of ecotourism in the Region. The first is ecotourism in protected areas, which are mostly controlled and managed by government agencies, particularly national parks. The main concept here is for using ecotourism as a tool for biological and cultural heritage conservation. This practice is concerned with the conservation of natural resources and allows visitors to visit some locations. However, there are many cases of improper and low quality management that may harm the environment. In the case of Thailand, the majority of the NP officers have the perception that PA can be protected only by responsible agencies, even though environmental degradation can often be seen in location under their control. To solve such problems, they give concessions or permission for private investors to develop tourist areas, while ignoring or denying local involvement in planning, management and monitoring of ecotourism in PA. Local participation, if any, is restricted to only allowing people to become workers or vendors. Chayant Wattanaphuti, a Chiangmai University academic, commented that RFD¹⁴ has used the phrase 'public participation' as a tool to promote tourism in forest areas. He also suggests that villagers should be given a chance to share their ideas and if RFD wants them to be self-reliant it should listen to them (Nation 1998).

The second kind of ecotourism is that which is involved with community development support. The aim is to increase local income, local integrity, self-management and the reduction of tourism impact on the community. This kind has dominated tourism development in many local community areas under the titled of 'Community-based Ecotourism (CBET)'.

However, promoting ecotourism in PA and in local communities is controversial, since ecotourism is a contradiction in terms and may be interpreted in different ways. Ecotourism, as with other forms of tourism, may impact on the environment, society and culture in three ways. Those are the impact of ecotourism itself, if it is badly managed; the impact from other forms of tourism that come along or have close links with ecotourism projects; and the impact from irresponsible activities in the name of ecotourism. Thus, in order to promote ecotourism in the region, a proper management process and the participation of local people have to be guaranteed.

4.4 Community-based ecotourism (CBET) in the Mekong Region

The CBET concept

One of the main concerns of ecotourism is the level of community participation in its activities, which include development planning, decision making and control. The participation of local people is not easy due to the fact that tourism is heavily reliant on the market and resources, such as national parks are mostly under government control. For local communities to a significant role in development there needs to be more effort put into management knowledge, negotiation with other stakeholders and outside support.

In reality, many communities have access to natural resources that can be used to attract ecotourism. They also have a wealth of cultural resources. Thus, community tourism can access a wide range of resources that locals are able to manage and interact with. Tourism managed by the community is called 'Community-based Tourism' (CBT). If that CBT is managed applying ecotourism concepts then it is called 'Community-based Ecotourism' (CBET). According to Sproule (1998:235), CBE[T] refers to

ecotourism enterprises that are owned and managed by the community. Furthermore, CBE[T] implies that a community is taking care of its natural resources in order to gain income through operating a tourism enterprise and using that income to better the lives of its members. Hence, CBE[T] involves conservation, business enterprise and community development.

CBET as ET at the community level: the case of Thailand

Some tourists prefer to visit the rural communities in the Region because they are interested in natural and cultural resources. Rural areas are always surrounded by or in close proximity to forests or coastal areas, which are connected to the people's way of life. Local wisdom is related mainly to farming, the collection of wild products, fisheries, religious and spiritual interactions. Thus local people are familiar with the tourist attractions and their related activities, and are able to interpret them for tourists.

Research exploring local participation in ecotourism in Thailand, which surveyed 31 communities and focussed in particular on four selected rural communities, result in some significant conclusion about ecotourism in rural communities. Preliminary finding were that local communities have become involved in tourism development by running businesses under the auspices of local institutions (Leksakundilok 2001). This is the new paradigm for community tourism development that offers more benefit to local communities and is more concerned with encouraging local effort. Local people serve tourists as guides, porters, food providers and accommodation in forms of homestay. All these services used to be served only by private operators from outside. Community ecotourism organisations have been established in many communities in order to take responsibility for this new activity (Ibid.).

Another good experience was summarised from the meeting of eighty communities across Thailand at the Regional Community Forestry Training Center for Asia and the Pacific (RECOFTC) in Bangkok on 28-29 January 2002. The summary was presented at The 'Regional Conference on Community Based Ecotourism in Southeast Asia', held in Chiang Mai Thailand, during 3-7 March 2002. It showed both the progress and the limitations or constraints of this new practice (REST and Buchan 2002). This could be a lesson for other countries in the Region.

Development at community level is initiated for many reasons and by both external and internal forces. Tourist visits without any local control have led to negative impacts on community members in the past. In many cases tourists, including tour guides, visited communities without any knowledge of the way of life and culture of the people, and this caused misunderstanding or even the conflict. These experiences forced local people to search for the opportunities for greater involvement. The government agenda to improve local economies is another external force upon many communities. Internal factors are the needs of communities to use tourism as a tool for conservation of natural and cultural heritage, and to increase the participation among community members.

There are many aims of CBET that arise from the issues, problems and needs of local communities. These are: tools for conservation; development of a quality of life; increasing knowledge, awareness and understanding of local problems; bringing communities together; opening up an opportunities for exchange of knowledge with outsiders; and provision of supplementary income for individuals and community development funds.

Communities have initiated a number of activities for tourists: forest walking, rafting and paddling boats, camping in the bush, bird and other animal watching, bicycle riding, joining in community activities such as farming and religious rituals. Historic sites, local museums and the local performances are cultural attractions that are included in programs. 'Homestay' seems to be the main activity that has been promoted in the majority of communities, taking advantage of local hospitality and earning direct income. Homestay includes the provision of meals and tours by the host.

There are some environmental benefits from CBET, such as creating awareness and developing management skills, encouraging environmental planning and managing environmental problems; in some case the government allows the local community and tourists to be the 'eyes and ears' for the environment protection. If communities take pride in and know the value of their traditions and culture, then wisdom and local knowledge can be transferred from generation to generation. Working together, cooperation with government and private agencies, close contact with tourists and improving quality of life and infrastructure are the social benefits gained from CBET. Of course, there is also an economic benefit through increasing the income of individuals and through community funding.

However, there are some negative impacts and constraints that need to be considered. As the number of tourists has been lower than expected, time may be waste and some disappointment may occur. Some attractive locations may become degraded due to lack of community management skills. In addition, aiming to create supplementary income may cause a cultural through commodification of local customs and styles of living. Conflict may occur because of different management styles and interests.

The meeting at RECOFTC recommended that community organisation should develop tourism management skills and improve their ability to coordinate with other agencies, commence local research, combine local knowledge with local curriculum, establish CBET networking among themselves and link with others. They proposed the government to accept the rights of local communities in natural resource and tourism management, develop a tourism master plan, accept the local representatives at all levels of the development process. Funding from governmental agencies is needed to support local tourism development programs (REST and Buchan 2002).

Although the above indicates positive aspects of development, some Thai communities face difficulties over issues power relationships with government sectors responsible for such things as land rights and hill tribe citizenship. Other issues of concern are uncontrolled tourism promotion in remote area and illegal activities accompanying ecotourism, such as drugs and prostitution.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ET and CBET development in the Mekong Region are in their early stages and clear outcomes may not be apparent. The experience of Thailand is that there are both benefits and constraints. However, there is not yet any critique of the impacts of ET and CBET development. Many impacts that have been critiqued and discussed here or elsewhere are due to poor management or other forms of tourism that happened to come along with what is termed ET or CBET. Some critiques have pessimistically predicted from past experiences of conventional tourism development that ecotourism will follow the same paths. This, of course, does not mean that ET or CBET is free from causing any impacts. However, the risk of impacts is always greater when development focuses mainly on economic benefit and neglects environmental and social dimensions. This is a risk of commodifying nature and culture (community identity) when stressing a resource's authenticity, exoticity, pristineness, rarity and remoteness as ecotourist selling points. It is therefore *important to adhere closely the concepts and guidelines of ecotourism development.*

The experiences of Thailand and some other Mekong countries exemplify how local people deal with ecotourism. They show that a top-down development approach, with limited community participation cannot benefit the overall community, but on the contrary creates imbalances and uneven development. It is clear that *empowerment of communities in controlling their resources and services will help them to develop their knowledge and management skills to cope with this new community business*. For this reason, government and the wider society should accept the right of local people to participate in planning, decision making and managing natural resources including ecotourism. This includes their right of access to public property, their right to say 'yes' or 'no', their right to self-determination and cultural sovereignty, their right to control and maintain their resources (UNEP 2003; WTO-UNEP 2002). Nevertheless, cooperation with government and private agencies is necessary for improving management skills, marketing capability and networking and other support on CBET development (REST and Buchan 2002).

Thus, all the Mekong countries, the cooperation bodies and donors should *reconsider ways of improving the process of ET or CBET promotion and take more care over possible impacts not only on the environment, but on the social and cultural fabric of local communities, particularly ethnic minorities in remote areas*. Developing the local economy is necessary, but the equitable distribution of income and local rights to participate, manage and receive benefits from the development is no less important a consideration. Government agencies and other stakeholders in each Mekong country should identify and classify tourism resources according to whether the ET or CBET destined. Rehabilitation of degraded attractions should be the top of agenda for strengthening the rights of local communities to determined their own development (Phayakvichien 2002; Pleumarom 2002). Capacity building infrastructure for local people and other related personnel such as the community development workers should be established.

Last but not least, it should be kept in mind that the complexity of developing ecotourism may result in either success or failure particularly in terms of helping socio-economic and cultural development. Consideration should be given to all *aspects that influence development, including management of ethical issues*.

NOTES

¹ Total Gross Domestic Product (GDP), purchasing power parity, of the region was approximately US\$678.62 billion in 2000 (1998 for Yunnan). Lao is the lowest (US\$9 billion) and Thailand is the highest (US\$413 billion) GDP makers. GDP per capita rank from US\$300-2,800, for and average of US\$1,499.09, which Cambodia, Vietnam, Lao and Yunnan are the lowest countries (US\$ 300, 320, 400 and 544 respectively). Myanmar and Thailand are much higher than those countries (US\$2,800 and 2,000).

² Lao, Vietnam and Cambodia have high percentage of people income under the poverty line about 46.1%, 37% and 36% respectively.

³ Comparisons between Thai Currency (Baht) and US\$ used in this report varies according to the fluctuation of the exchange rate particularly after the economic crisis in 1997. The transaction rates obtained from Bangkok Bank Public Co.Ltd are as follows:

up to 1996:US\$1 = Bt25.52	early 1997:US\$1 = Bt25.98 (30 June 1997)
late 1997:US\$1 = Bt39.89 (5 November 1997)	1998:US\$1 = Bt42.85 (30 June 1998)
1999:US\$1 = Bt37.07 (30 June 1999)	2000:US\$1 = Bt39.35 (30 June 2000)
2001:US\$1 = Bt45.40 (27 June 2001)	2002:US\$1 = Bt41.77 (28 June 2002)

(<http://www.bangkokbank.com/Bangkok+Bank/Personal+Banking/Foreign+Exchange/FX+Rates/default.htm>)

⁴Yuan is a Chinese currency. US\$1 is equal to 8.28 China Yuan Renminbi. (ALS International at http://www.universitylanguage.com/cgi-bin/currency/curr_conv_search.cgi)

⁵ PA in Thailand covers the area of 15.2 % of the country. It comprises of 64 national parks, 18 national marine parks, 42 wildlife sanctuaries, 66 forest parks and 49 no-hunting areas and at least 42 wetlands (Mattsson 1999)

⁶ Vietnam has 10 national parks, 52 natural reserves, 18 species/habitat reserves and 22 protected landscape. These cover 22,690 sq.km or 6.8% of the country. There are 25 wetlands including the Mekong Delta, which is the largest one (Mattsson 1999).

⁷ Lao has 20 NBCAs covers 29,030 sq.km or 12.3% of the country. It expect another 11 areas to be included as NBCAs (Mattsson 1999).

⁸ Mattsson (1999) indicated 10 wildlife sanctuaries and the total covered areas is 34,023 sq.km or 18.8% of the country.

⁹ DRIVE = Developing Remote Indigenous Villager Education.

¹⁰ Supported by the International Development Research Centre (Canada)/Partnership for local Governance.

¹¹ Supported by the Australian Government through the Australian Embassy in Phnom Pehn

¹² Myanmar has 2 national parks, 1 marine national park, 19 wildlife sanctuaries, 6 bird sanctuaries, 1 wildlife park, 1 mountain park, and 1 elephant range. These cover 14,160 sq.km or 2.1% of the country (Mattsson 1999). The other two wildlife Sanctuaries, which cover the total area of 9,813.47 sq.km, have been proposed.

¹³ Yunnan has 111 nature reserves and 26 forest parks, which cover 20,004 sq.km or 5.0% of the prov-

ince (Mattsson 1999).

¹⁴ RFD, the Royal Forestry Department, was in charge of all forest areas in the country for over 100 years. In 2003 the Natural Conservation Bureau, which was responsible for protected areas management, was transferred to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE), under the name of National Park, Wildlife and Plants Conservation (NPD).

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