




THAILAND THE GREATEST STORY

IN GLOBAL
TOURISM HISTORY

A 60TH ANNIVERSARY TRIBUTE TO
THE TOURISM AUTHORITY OF THAILAND

Key Developments

1997

- Tom Yam Kung financial crisis
 - Bangkok International Trade, Exhibition and Convention Centre opens 9 September
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SAMUI ISLAND'S SEARCH FOR "BALANCED DEVELOPMENT"



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ASIA-PACIFIC MINISTERS CONFERENCE ON TOURISM AND ENVIRONMENT, THE MALDIVES 17 FEBRUARY 1997

Mr Chairman, Distinguished delegates, Ladies and gentlemen.

I thank you for giving me the opportunity to address you today. I would like to thank the government of the Republic of Maldives for its wonderful and warm hospitality and the World Tourism Organisation for convening this meeting, with the valuable support of the UN Development Programme. I believe this meeting will pave the way for some major changes in the way the Asia-Pacific tourism industry relates to the significant environment problems it faces.

We in Thailand are known for having recorded some of the world's fastest growth rates in international visitor arrivals. I don't wish you to bore you with these figures. But let me just say that in 1996, we recorded 7.3 million visitor arrivals with foreign exchange earnings of US\$8.66 billion dollars. Tourism is now far by our largest foreign exchange earner.



The planning and management of sustainable tourism is a major challenge facing us. The main concern is finding a balance between generating economic return and preserving the environment. The two are not the enemies we have always assumed them to be. By turning our focus to the people and the society, we can release ourselves from the firm grip of economic reward and combine our efforts to create a society that is both economically and environmentally rich.

Sustainable tourism planning and management is a “hot market item” that is being studied and publicised extensively. Sustainable tourism products are growing in demand. However, sound planning and management does occur overnight. It requires a clear understanding of what the “main function” is. We have seen the problematic results of some destinations which have neglected to pay equal attention to all aspects of their tourism industry.

Sustenance of tourism sites invariably involves several government agencies at once. In Thailand, these include the Forestry Department, Fine Arts Department and Provincial Administration Authority, among others. These agencies must carefully and expertly plan the use of resources. The availability of infrastructure and readiness of the local community as well as the management has to be carefully considered. If these factors are not up to standard, the site should not be forced to serve tourists but rather wait until the time is right.

More importantly, all agencies concerned must do their best to reinforce the related laws and accelerate the implementation of a thoroughly examined tourism development plan. The performance of the private sector in the tourism business is also critical. In the Thai hotel business, we have started the Green Hotels Project which encourages Thai hotels to develop and improve environmental standards. Operators learn to conserve energy and water supplies and effective ways of using resources as well as train personnel accordingly. The TAT has provided training and information in hotel environmental management. Those who can raise the level of their hotel to a satisfactory standard are given awards.

In addition, the TAT has also launched a major national award scheme to recognise tourism businesses with outstanding contributions to the preservation of environment, culture and heritage. One of the objectives of this award is to arouse competition in qualitative management



among various related businesses. It is hoped that this award will encourage the conservation of nature as well as culture.

Government agencies must help by supervising and monitoring operators, making certain everyone complies with related requirements. It is up to the government to act as a guide in pointing tourism in a healthy direction. The government must, therefore, identify a standard method for monitoring and encouraging law reinforcement. It is also the government's responsibility to check that tourism services are implemented, co-ordinated, publicised and developed appropriately.

Education is half the battle. By utilising all forms of information and communication systems, we are able to create an awareness that assists in the conservation of the environment and culture. Promotion of quality service and information of the local ecological systems help to convey the message. Those people involved in business must be made to understand what can be done to improve and conserve the area.

Tourism services are important and the community within the area must participate. Training courses within the community will help them to understand their role in tourism. By harmonising these services with the surroundings, training personnel to be more environmentally aware, and promoting and reinforcing appropriate laws, the local community will come to understand the value of their environment and will be able to enjoy the benefits gained from tourism.

To demonstrate that we do not focus only on theory, I would like to share with you a case study of Koh Samui, one of the country's most popular resort islands, and we believe, a good example of sustainable tourism in Thailand.

The TAT is co-ordinating the implementation of about US\$7 million worth of projects to preserve the island's natural and scenic beauty and ensure that tourism remains a major source of livelihood for the island's 31,643 people.

Samui is Thailand's third largest island with an area of 230 sq. km. It is located in the middle part of the Gulf of Siam and about 50 kilometres northeast of Surat Thani Province. Once an important part of the ancient sea-trade route between Thailand and China, Samui today is popular with Thai and foreign tourists. It can be visited all year round and provides an alternative tourist resource, in terms of seasonality, for Phuket, the other notable resort island on the other side of the peninsular.

Samui's 27 tourist attractions include 17 beaches, three scenic hilltops and seven religious places. There are four cultural art and local activities centres, including seven coral reef spots. Other attractions include waterfalls, the phallic rock formations, a massive seated Buddha image and ancient local houses.

There are several exquisite islands in the neighbourhood, including the famous Ang Thong National Marine Park, consisting of 40 small impressive islands. Samui also has 2.3 million magnificent coconut trees along the beaches and throughout the island. Some are over 160 years old and over 35 metres tall. The healthy crop of coconuts they yield is picked not by people but by more than 160 monkeys which have been specially trained and registered. The monkey training centre is one of Samui's most outstanding tourist attractions.

More than 20,000 of Samui's registered residents are involved in tourism businesses. Though the main source of livelihood is growing coconuts, durian, rambutan, cocoa and rice, the highest income levels are earned in tourism which generated US\$344 million in 1995. It accounted for 52% of the island's GDP and induced 65.28% in job opportunities for locals.

In 1995, Samui was visited by 681,161 tourists, up 26.82 % over 1994. Of these, 25.42% were Thais and the rest foreigners with an average expenditure together of about 75 US dollars per person per day.

There was rapid expansion in both the quality and quantity of tourism services on the island. In 1995, there were 322 accommodations providing more than 8,000 rooms. There are also 30 restaurants, excluding those in the hotels, 30 souvenir shops, 11 tour agencies and 74 entertainment services.



Since tourism development of Samui began in 1980, tourism has yielded considerable benefits to the island. The local economy has advanced considerably due to increased revenue from tourism and more job opportunities. The average local income is US\$1,300 a month. Samui is estimated to be earning about US\$2 million in foreign currency per year.

The higher standard of living has given the local people more purchasing power and the facilities to gain more education and enjoy a better social life-style. Improved infrastructure for tourism development has also improved quality of life. For example, roads now link both tourist destinations and local communities. Water supply and sewage treatment systems have been improved and made more adequate and hygienic for the local population and tourists.

Reduced unemployment has also reduced the crime rate. Many unemployed or under-employed people have found associated jobs such as taxi or bus drivers for tourists. Adolescents who did not continue their education have become tour guides or hotel staff.

Tourism development has contributed to a more efficient use of natural resources. Many old wolfram mines and abandoned coconut farms which were completely exploited were turned into tourism resources and infrastructure such as the monkey training centre, tourist bungalows and restaurants.



While the locals generally feel the change in the environment from a natural one to a busy urban one, it has been accepted and has not created discontent about tourism.

However, rapid growth did take its toll. Development did become somewhat slipshod. Trespassing and take-overs of public utilised land in tourist attraction areas, such as marshes, beaches and mountains, occurred. There was no planning or appropriate standard for building construction, particularly concerning the blockage of access to public beaches.

Tourism businesses on Samui, especially medium and small scale, lacked good service standards, particularly service personnel skills. Most service businesses were not registered. Traffic accidents are still a regular occurrence among both local and foreign visitors, caused mainly by narrow roads, careless drivers, incomplete traffic signage and speed.

The major issue has been the environment. Collection and disposal of garbage is a major problem. There is still no community waste water treatment system. Local residence and tourism service entrepreneurs lack proper knowledge and understanding about sewage treatment and the environment.

An important reason for these problems seems to be the inefficiency of local administration. Basically Samui's local administration operates as "a municipality" which is of a small scale and cannot meet the rapid pace of tourism growth. While a large budget is needed to fund the development costs, only limited budget is designated because the allocation is still pegged to the size of the local population.

This means that government manpower was limited. Landuse and construction plans were never properly established, and local regulations never seriously implemented. Thus, investment in tourism was been direction-less. Land prices rose due to inappropriate speculation and the environmental quality of the sea and beaches was affected.

Furthermore, individual government projects were carried out non-harmoniously and inconsistently, leading to redundancy of work plans and budgetary losses.

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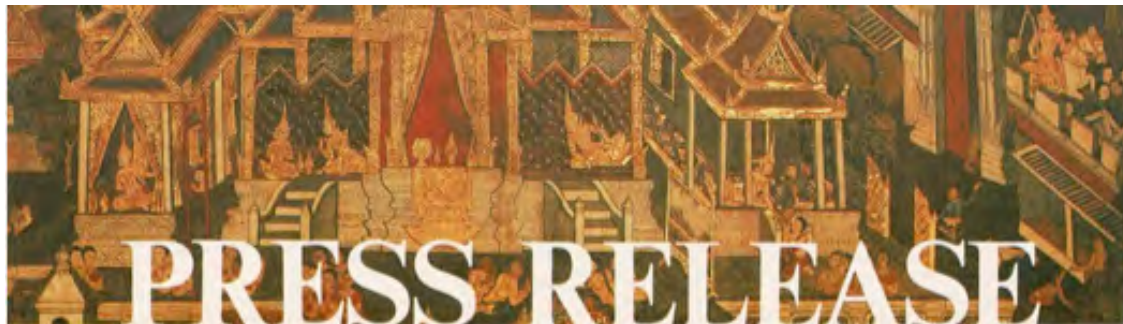
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Still, the TAT did several surveys and studies since 1980 to fashion a master plan for tourism development of Samui and to study its carrying capacity. However, implementation of the plans was unsatisfactory.

Finally, in 1995, the TAT set up "The Action Plan for Tourism Development of Samui under its Carrying Capacity." It emphasises projects that keep in mind the island's "carrying capacity" and on more grassroots participation by government agencies, local people and enterprises, and other concerned groups, both in the planning and execution stages.

The action plan covers four objectives:

- (+) First, to identify the physical, environmental and social carrying capacity of Samui.
- (+) Second, to provide measures for controlling the number of tourists, infrastructure and services within the limit, and without harming the environment.
- (+) Third, to be aware of the tourism situation and problems as well as future trends in order to proceed with the action plan for tourism development of Samui.



Systematic planning for Ko Samui set for implementation in 1992

A HISTORIC seminar was held recently to discuss the plan to introduce projects which will eventually help conserve the natural beauty of the well known resort island of Ko Samui while also providing it with modern infrastructures needed by both the residents and tourists.

Ko Samui, off the coast of Surat Thani Province, has long been known to travellers who enjoy a number of days relaxing on a tropical beach sipping coconut juice. However, unplanned and haphazard developments are now threatening to spoil exactly the ambience that tourists from all over the world have come to expect of Ko Samui.

So far, there have only been superficial studies carried out on the development of tourism on Ko Samui but which have never been properly coordinated or implemented.

While tourism on the island has been growing at a fast pace, the support infrastructures have not been keeping up with the pace while the development of public utilities such as tap water, electricity, roads and garbage treatment have been less than satisfactory.

The seminar on "blueprint for realistic plan for the development of tourism industry on Ko Samui" was held on June 15, 1990 at Surat Thani's Vang Tai Hotel in a bid to come to a workable solution to the existing problems.

Such a systematic development plan is urgently needed since the current haphazard growth of tourism infrastructure on the island with such a delicate natural and environmental balance may one day lead to the destruction of the very resources which made the island famous.

The seminar, which was attended by Tourism Authority of Thailand officials, representatives from other government agencies, businessmen and media representatives, discussed the working plan drawn up by the TAT for realistic development of Ko Samui.

On the agenda were 63 projects worth 345 million baht (US\$ 14 million) which may be implemented by 1992. With the emphasis on environmental conservation, the projects will involve the production of tap water, garbage and sewage disposal problems, the lack of public utilities, road construction and the problems concerning road safety.

With over 80 representatives from all the agencies directly involved in the livelihood of Ko Samui participating in the seminar, it is at least a good sign that future development of Ko Samui will finally be carried out in a systematic manner and thus ensure the bright future of this tropical island in the Gulf of Thailand where tourism is concerned.



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1980 - THAILAND CELEBRATES
10 YEARS OF TOURISM

(+) And eventually, to recommend appropriate schemes for implementation by relevant government agencies.

This was a great change over previous tourism development plans which in the past only provided management guidelines and recommendations for relevant organisations to follow. Moreover, regulatory guidelines were vague and there was lack of co-operation among the local people, business entrepreneurs and government officers.

Under the new action plan, TAT has placed special emphasis on the participation of local people. Several public hearing functions were held on Samui to publicise proposed projects and to comprehend the actual needs of the local population. The direction of tourism development came directly from the local people.

The TAT proposed two alternative images of Samui to the locals. First, a clean and pollution-free natural resource with scenic coconut plantations along the beaches, or second, an intensive tourism resource full of modern developments. The decision was the first image.

Thus, the TAT set in motion the “Sustainable Tourism Development Direction for Samui,” that balances economic growth with conservation of natural resources in order to maintain Samui for the next generation.

The action plan proposes seven main projects to oversee: Administration and Management of the development plans; Landuse and Community development; Infrastructures and Public Services; Tourism Services; Tourism Attractions; Environmental preservation and management; and other tourism areas.

It was the first time that a development plan and a government budgetary plan were perfectly integrated together. A total budget of 162 million baht was approved by the government to complete the projects in 1996 and 1997.

The TAT has formed a Sub Committee for Supervising the Action Plan on Tourism Development of Samui to manage the action plan. The committee will co-ordinate between the TAT, the local and regional organisations and the development agencies. The Sub-Committee consists of 32 members from both governmental and private organisations and its responsibility is to consider proposed projects in accordance with the action plan. We anticipate that this plan will become the foundation stone for local people to abide by if they wish to preserve the island’s beauty as per their own wishes.

In conclusion, tourism has substantially benefited the local people. However, the most important thing is maintaining a good balance in tourism development which needs to be effectively controlled and managed in the right direction. Over-development or rapid paced development could bring disaster to the island’s environment.

I thank you for your kind attention. And I will be happy to answer any questions.

WHAT VALUE ALL THESE TOURISM TERMS AND DEFINITIONS?



Mr. Pradech Phayakvichien

Deputy Governor for Planning and Development

**9TH PATA ADVENTURE TRAVEL &
ECOTOURISM CONFERENCE & MART
12-15 JANUARY 1997, KOTA KINABALU,
SABAH, MALAYSIA**

Thank you for inviting me to be here with you today. And thank you for allowing me a very sizeable 15 minutes to discuss one of the most complex subjects confronting the Asia-Pacific tourism industry: the management and sustainable development of tourism products. If I had ready-made answers to that question, and could impart them in 15 minutes, I assure you I would be a richer man than Bill Gates.

Anyhow, let me share with you a few thoughts about the Thai experience in the management of sustainable tourism products. Though we are considered to be well ahead of others in the development of our tourism industry, we still have a long way to go in the sustainable development of our tourism products. But we have to make a start. The development of ecotourism is a major policy plank in our 1996/97 tourism plan and I shall give you a few details of this in a few moments.

Thailand has considerable ecotourism potential, and we are gradually beginning to harness it. Take, for example, the Thungyai-Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife sanctuary, one of the four Unesco world heritage sites in Thailand. Stretching over 600,000 hectares along the Myanmar border, it is rich with species of almost all the forest formations of continental South-East Asia. Two other absolutely stunning national parks are the 161,000-acre Khao Sok National Park in South Thailand and the Khao Yai National park, at 2,168 square kilometres one of the largest in Thailand.

Having been personally to these parks, I can assure you that their beauty, peacefulness and richness in terms of flora and fauna is nothing but heaven.

Because most of our national parks are considerably off the beaten track, visiting them is very much for the die-hard nature enthusiasts but definitely worth a trip. Prior permission is required from the Royal Forestry Department which controls the parks but we will be more than happy to make arrangements. In fact, I would like to officially nominate Thailand as the venue of the 1998 or 1999 Adventure Travel Mart and Conference so that you can come and see these parks for yourself, and also see many of the emerging areas of our neighbouring countries in the Greater Mekong Sub region.

Thailand has a total of 83 national parks, including numerous marine parks in the Gulf of Thailand and Andaman Sea. Several of our companies have won awards for their ecotourism work. Many of our universities and institutes are very active in the field, along with groupings like the Bangkok Bird Club, World Wide Fund for Nature and the Siam Society.

It appears that the topics to be discussed throughout this conference focus mostly on local community and culture. I notice that the words “nature-based tourism” have been used to replace “ecotourism.” I remember that in the Pacific Asia Travel Association some time ago, there was another buzzword called Values-based Tourism. There have been long attempts at trying to “define” what all this means. Ladies and gentlemen, let’s keep things simple and in perspective. It matters not what you call it; a product that does not deliver on its promise of quality and value for money soon suffers one very quick fate: It goes bankrupt.

The theoretical aspect of ecotourism -- and forgive me for continuing to call it ecotourism (it is both shorter and equally expressive as nature-based tourism -- talks of the management of



tourism areas, education and communication with the local communities, the organisation of tourism activities, provision of proper tourism services and the management of the environment.

But let me say here, ladies and gentlemen, that ecotourism, indeed, any kind of tourism, cannot survive in isolation from government policies towards economic development at large. If a country is bent on totally exploiting its natural resources for the sake of national development, then it becomes all the more difficult to sell politicians in that government an ecotourism policy. So, perhaps the first thing needed at a macro-policy level is a broader government appreciation of the importance of culture, heritage and environmental preservation. Too often, governments in Asia pay far more attention to propping up their stock markets than to maintaining their forests and wildlife.

If the political will exists, the next thing we need is strong law enforcement. We can have all the zoning laws in the world but they will not be worth the paper they are written on unless someone enforces the law. In most parts of Asia, tourism ministries and authorities do not have law enforcement powers. We have to go to the police departments, the provincial officials or sometimes even the military to get them to enforce the laws. Sadly, these efforts are not entirely successful.

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I would like to stress that local community involvement is vital. Two years ago, when we developed a plan for tourism on Samui island, one of our most popular tourist resorts, we put a stark choice before the local people: Do you want tourism with high rise buildings or something that rises no higher than a coconut palm? They went for the latter and we are working through several committees to give them appropriate budgets and education programmes to ensure that they take care of their own backyard. We told them quite frankly why tourists come and how tourism benefits them. They realise that well. I must also admit that having only one small privately-owned airport on Samui island puts a natural cap on the island's tourism development. It is a sort of capacity-control that, rightly or wrongly, is good. I think we all agree that while the future age of double-decker aircraft carrying 700 people each will be good to boost bottom-line arrival numbers and bring down prices, it is quite a horrifying prospect when looked at from the perspective of managing sustainable tourism development.

In addition to the local people, I believe it is imperative to bring in the resources and knowledge of groupings like the World Wide Fund for Nature as well as universities. One of our universities, Srinakharinwirot, has recently established an Ecotourism Institute and is doing quite well in spreading the word through conferences and research papers. People, and particularly the media, tend to pay more attention when a message is transmitted by a university. They as well as non-governmental organisations have a crucial role to play as pressure groups to maintain



a check-and-balance function. They are also instrumental in providing global marketing links. As they are not driven entirely by profit-making considerations, they tend to be much more careful in the number of people they take and the places they take them to. We are also very pleased to be noticing a tremendous increase in consumer media interest. Yes, ecotourism stirs up considerable debate, but we believe that is good. A healthy debate is a vital part of any democratic process and the media's role in the preservation of the environment and culture is absolutely critical.

Thailand's ecotourism policy is driven by many factors. It is a major component of our desire to focus henceforth more on specialised, niche-market customer segments. We already have the numbers, and we believe the numbers will continue to come by dint of the sheer marketing force of our private sector and airlines. The TAT is focusing more on youth travel, women, elderly travellers and other segments who will play a leading role in shifting supply away from mass-market to niche-market travel. In future, you will hear much about the Greater Mekong Subregion, especially since PATA itself took the lead last year to organise the first Mekong Tourism Forum at the PATA conference in Thailand. This year, if all goes well, we are hoping to have the first motor-car caravan go up from Bangkok to Beijing, for the annual PATA conference there. That should open up quite a few new areas for ecotourism purposes.



1.2 Best Tourist Attraction, Cultural

- Sri Satchanalai Historical Park, Sukhothai
- Ban Nang Talung Suchat Subsin

Lastly, I would like to draw your attention to our recent Tourism Awards which we conferred for the first time last December. Unlike most awards, ours were given to recognise specific efforts by our private sector to preserve and conserve the tourism products. Thus, among the winners were the Sri Satchanalai Historical Park, Ramkhamhaeng National Park, and various hotels, tour operators and resorts that have focussed on small-is-beautiful type products. The 21-member judging panel was heavy with environmentalists and fine arts experts, along with representatives of various government departments overseeing environmental affairs, university professors, foundations and institutes. We think this is a landmark in regional tourism awards.

Ladies and gentlemen, ecotourism or nature-based tourism or whatever else we choose to call it, is clearly the path of the future. Global travellers are seeking solace in fresh air, clean water and natural surroundings -- all of which unfortunately are becoming rare commodities in an industrialising world. I believe ecotourism offers us a tremendous opportunity to preserve the beauty of God's earth. But we will have to fight for it, not just the tourism authorities or the tour operators or the local people but all of us combined. These treasures belong to all of us -- in reality, forests and seas know no boundaries and their contamination and destruction is a loss for all of humanity.

With that, ladies and gentlemen, I conclude my brief presentation. My congratulations to PATA for yet another successful conference and mart. Thank you for your attention.

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