

Applying best practice ecotourism concepts to conservation in Thailand: A case study

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Abstract

The concept of ecotourism is not new to Thailand. There are numerous examples of its application and misapplication throughout the country. A working definition of ecotourism is presented based on accepted definitions and practical experiences in implementing an ecotourism approach.

Questions such as: “What is ecotourism?”, “How can we evaluate ecotourism efforts?”, and “What are the pitfalls of the ecotourism approach?” Are addressed explicitly. The authors include a list of measurable indicators for evaluating the success of such endeavors.

A case study is presented that details how one private company (Wild Watch Thailand) and one conservation research effort (The Thailand Hornbill Project) are working together to apply an ecotourism approach to achieving specific conservation goals.

A review of ecotourism

What is “ecotourism”?

Definitions of ecotourism vary but in practice it has come to refer to low impact nature based tourism that benefits local communities and facilitates nature conservation (Ashley and Roe 1998). The Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as, “responsible travel to natural areas, which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people” (Lindberg and Hawkins 1993). Although this definition includes the concepts of conservation and social benefits, it implies that the travel itself somehow leads to the benefit. In practice, translating visits to natural areas into conservation and social benefits is a very complex and challenging task.

A definition provided by the IUCN (The World Conservation Union) is longer but more fully sets ecotourism apart from other types of tourism:

“Environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying features – both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low visitor negative impacts and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations.” (Ceballos-Lascurain 1996).

Perhaps the most common misconception of ecotourism is the result of divorcing the term from its social and conservation implications and using it to describe virtually any activity that takes place in the natural environment or simply encompasses nature or ecology in some way. Thailand is no exception. Here, ecotourism has been used to describe everything from highly exploitative treks to ethnic villages to simple captive wildlife viewing at zoos. This misuse of the term has caused confusion for many groups that have a stake in the tourist industry and has resulted in many of the benefits of true ecotourism being intentionally or accidentally overlooked.

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Ecotourism: Potential and Pitfalls

As a growing portion of a rapidly growing global tourism market (Lindberg et al. 1998), ecotourism has the potential to be a powerful positive force if conceived and managed effectively. This, of course, is the central challenge for those involved in ecotourism endeavors.

Sometimes only a fraction of the money spent by ecotourists stays in the locality visited. Much money is spent on specialist items or skills from other localities or even abroad. While there appears to be less of this type of “leakage” with budget travelers, their overall level of expenditure is often low with only minimal impact to target communities. Even when income is retained within communities, the generation of multiplier effects in the local economy (e.g. whereby spin-off businesses are established) appears to be fairly limited. This lack of linkages is often due to barriers in the local economy, such as a lack of access to capital, limited business and marketing experience, a relatively high risk and long pay-back periods.

In some cases, the financial benefits of tourism within local communities are limited due to exploitation by tourism operators. Villagers lack the experience, market information and negotiating power to ensure a fair deal. In addition, while tourism can be a significant source of jobs for local communities, work is often seasonal and the types of jobs available for most in the community are often low skilled positions with limited earning potential. In addition, benefits may have a distinct demographic bias as some groups (e.g. young males) are often disproportionately employed.

One common problem is that ecotourism practitioners find themselves having to sacrifice elements of true ecotourism just to cover the costs of the operation. As with most investments, care must be taken in modeling all of the costs of establishing an ecotourism offering. In most cases, costs will only be covered after an initial (sometimes lengthy) effort of introducing the (sometimes new and confusing) concepts to local people and marketing the product or service.

In addition, the benefits of tourism often go to a small elite within a community who possess the skills, language capabilities or capital necessary to provide the required services. As such, an uneven distribution of benefits occurs. Displacement of activities that threaten conservation efforts (e.g. poaching or orchid collection) is a worthy aim, but the individuals that take part in these activities are often not the main beneficiaries of ecotourism. Experience has shown that effective ecotourism efforts ensure that benefits are widely received and that the link between the ecotourism activities and the income they generated are evident within local communities.

Many of Thailand’s natural areas are threatened or actively being degraded due to illegal hunting, the extraction of trees, bamboo, and other plants from the forest, cattle grazing, encroachment, and uncontrolled (often intentionally set) fires. Although some of these activities are orchestrated and controlled by influential individuals residing outside of the area, much of the destruction is driven by local poverty and a lack of more lucrative pursuits. Enforcement of existing laws is difficult given the limited capacity and resolve of enforcement agencies and many charged with enforcement look the other way. This is often due to the acknowledgement that those taking part have limited options and are merely “making ends meet” as best they can. From a conservation standpoint, many now agree that, in the absence of mechanisms to attach local benefits to the stewardship of these areas, conservation faces an uphill battle.

Although ecotourism can have benefits for local communities, it can also result in conflicts, both between residents of the company and within the local community itself. Within communities, there may be competition for the benefits of tourism where there is a disparity in the distribution of benefits. Such conflicts are likely to the greatest where powerful individuals are able to use their influence to take the lion’s share of tourism benefits.

Conflict may also occur with those carrying out illegal activities in the area visited. In such cases, local residents may associate the presence of tourists in the area with reduced access to forest products or increased (but unwanted) awareness of their illegal activities. Additionally, from safety standpoint, illegal activities may well present a danger to ecotourists.

Social and cultural disruption can be brought about directly by the ecotourists themselves. Loss of privacy and intrusion into daily life can be a serious problem and can result in resentment and ill feelings unless well managed. Carefully constructed policies and the education of company clients both have a significant role to play in reducing social disruption.

These and other advantages and disadvantages of ecotourism as a means for achieving local development, economic growth, and conservation are summarized in *Figure 1*.

Evaluating Ecotourism Efforts

Although the desired outcomes of ecotourism are relatively easy to state, evaluating actual cases is problematic due to the complex interconnectivity between social and conservation goals and the difficulty in measuring less tangible benefits such as skill development and local pride. It is, however, imperative that efforts are evaluated so that there is an opportunity to respond to issues before they become long-term problems for any of the stakeholders.

Critical to the evaluation process is an active process of involving stakeholders. For logistical and practical reasons this often requires working with individual representatives or representative bodies. If this is the case, it is important to assess the nature of this representation. A village council comprised strictly of older males may not necessarily be representative of the interests of all members of the community. On the other hand, imposing outside ideas on the representative process can have its own negative repercussions.

The IUCN definition of ecotourism (given above) implies several practical, measurable indicators for evaluating ecotourism that are presented as questions below. It is important to realize that the complexities of the benefits and potential costs of ecotourism defy the use of a single measuring stick. A thorough assessment requires close coordination with those affected and careful attention to conservation priorities. However, a “no” answer to any of the following is a strong indication that activities should be modified.

- Are the activities sustainable from an ecological perspective? (i.e. Is the natural area being utilized being enhanced or at least not being adversely impacted?)
- Are activities sustainable from an economic perspective?
- Are local communities benefiting (as defined by those communities) from the activities?

Case study: A collaborative project to support hornbill research and conservation at Budo Sungai-Padi National Park, Narathiwat, Thailand

Wild Watch Thailand

Wild Watch Thailand is a private venture providing high quality natural history field trips to a wide variety of participants from Thailand and abroad. Through “hands-on” experiences in the field, the use of expert guides, and linkages with other conservation and research groups, Wild Watch programs provide participants with an in-depth look at the natural history of Thailand and the region and in many cases, the opportunity to learn new skills.

The primary motivation in establishing Wild Watch Thailand is to secure measurable conservation benefits in the areas in which the company operates. In practical terms, this commitment is reflected in a policy to divert significant funds from participant fees to

conservation and rural development projects (described in greater detail below) and in the company's establishment of area operating plans—public documents created in partnership with other stakeholders that specify the nature and scope of the company's activities.

Wild Watch Thailand focuses primarily on two types of offerings. Natural History Field Trips are regularly run, short duration trips that provide clients with comfortable base camp locations and a high level of nature interpretation. Conservation Research Expeditions are longer duration trips that offer clients the opportunity to work with researchers on important conservation research projects throughout Thailand. Offerings include several other customized and scheduled programs throughout the year including birdwatching trips, nature photography training, wilderness medical training, and others.

Steps have been taken to ensure that Wild Watch's activities adhere to progressive operating standards in terms of social equity and cultural sensitivity. With its offices in a small village on the outskirts of Erawan National Park, the company draws much of its personnel needs from this and other communities surrounding the park. Compensation and benefits have been set to surpass other employment options available to most residents without throwing local economies out of balance. Sourcing products and services locally serves to maximize the benefit to these local communities while limiting leakage.

Specific aspects of Wild Watch's ecotourism strategy are described in greater detail below.

Generating funds for conservation and development

Wild Watch directs a significant portion of all client fees (10%) to a fund for conservation and rural development in Thailand. This fund will be divided roughly equally between conservation projects (and related research) and rural development undertakings. Preference will be given to projects that involve both elements of both. *Figure 2* illustrates the relationship of this fund to other elements of Wild Watch Thailand's operations.

While some of the conservation funds may be allocated to projects in which Wild Watch Thailand has no direct involvement, Wild Watch will work together with the research groups, NGO's and government agencies in many of the projects, providing project development input, project management assistance, and support of field activities by either the active involvement of clients or the work of full-time staff.

The Conservation & Rural Development Fund is administered by a small, independent steering committee consisting of experts in the field of conservation and rural development.

Local Community Benefits & Involvement

Considering the impact that bordering communities are having on protected areas in Thailand, Wild Watch considers the establishment of local alternatives a high priority. The company will aim to achieve this both in the way it conducts its operations and through the allocation of money from the Conservation and Rural Development Fund to programs specifically aimed at generating revenue for local communities.

Due to the nature of its offerings and the existing local labor pool, some of Wild Watch's staff is hired from outside of local communities. Beyond this, local residents are hired preferentially to fill positions. Where local residents are hired, Wild Watch Thailand pays wages of 50-100% above typical agricultural income. Although many of these jobs are part-time, salaries provide significant and needed supplementary income. As the activities of the company expand, more local guides may be employed on a permanent basis.

Those involved in activities with the highest impact on the area's natural ecosystems and their families are targeted for employment as a displacement of their activities will likely mean direct and immediate conservation benefits for the area.

Wild Watch Thailand works towards the creation of linkages between its activities and the local economy. Services such as food and beverages, transportation, equipment, etc. are sourced from local communities whenever possible. While the provision of certain services requires some level of capital or command of special skills, the production and provision of tourist merchandise offers opportunities to even the poorest in communities. For certain services, agreements will be established on an annual basis to provide local suppliers with predictable income streams and the confidence to invest in the necessary infrastructure.

Visitor Management

While ecotourism is increasingly perceived as an economic tool for conservation and local development, it will only be sustainable if operators and protected area managers carefully manage visitors and ensure that protection and conservation priorities can be upheld. Management of visitors to protected areas is essential in order to prevent overcrowding and adverse affects on the area's habitats and flora and fauna. To this end Wild Watch Thailand has established explicit and strict procedures with respect to all of its field activities. These guidelines are summarized in the Area Operating Plans described below.

Wild Watch Thailand limits group sizes both to reduce potential environmental impacts and enhance the experience for clients. In the case of field trips and conservation expeditions, client numbers are limited to eight individuals plus support staff. The frequency of excursions in specific areas is also limited.

The use of forest routes and campsites is carefully managed by Wild Watch Thailand to prevent adverse affects such as wildlife disturbance, erosion and impacts to vegetation. All wastes generated during field activities is packed out and disposed of at municipal facilities. Prior to all field excursions, clients receive a briefing and are provided with a copy of the guidelines described above.

Area Operating Plans and Local Community Agreements

Periodic review of Wild Watch's activities is a priority and the input of local residents, protected area managers, and other stakeholder is actively sought in this process.

To facilitate this, Wild Watch Thailand develops area-specific operating plans for the protected areas in which it operates. These are comprehensive public documents that foster transparency and participation by other stakeholders. Topics covered include:

- Overview of Wild Watch Thailand
- Overview of Erawan National Park (natural history, history of human interaction, and current management activities)
- Wild Watch Activities In and Around Erawan (routes and focal points, camp sites, numbers of visitors, vehicle use, specialized activities, drug and alcohol policy, and emergency response and evacuation procedures)
- Potential positive and negative impacts of Wild Watch's activities in Erawan (ecological, economic, and social)
- Working with Other Stakeholders (government agencies, local communities, NGOs, academic institutions, etc.)

The Thailand Hornbill Project

Acting as both the central coordination entity and the most active hornbill research and conservation effort in Thailand, the Thailand Hornbill Project links the efforts of researchers in several key hornbill areas in Thailand. Having first established a research program in Khao Yai National Park (in central-eastern Thailand) nearly 20 years ago, the project, based at Mahidol University, now carries out active, ongoing research at the Khao Yai site, in Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary in western Thailand, and at Budo Sungai-Padi National Park and Halabala Wildlife Sanctuary in southern Thailand.

Although collection of birds from nests is a threat at Khao Yai, Huai Kha Khaeng, and Halabala, the greater distance from nesting sites to local villages affords the hornbills at these sites a greater level of security than in Budo Sungai-Padi. Here, several villages have relatively easy access to nesting locations and collection activities have presented a major threat to these populations. Fortunately, the Thailand Hornbill Project has addressed the issue in a very direct and effective way—offering financial incentives and employment opportunities to local residents as a means of displacing collection activity. The project incorporates a participatory research and conservation approach that actively seeks the expertise of local residents and their cooperation in conducting surveys. Recognizing the need for sustainable mechanisms to ensure ongoing opportunities for local residents, the Thailand Hornbill Project fosters both public and private initiatives that can provide funding and other support for local development and conservation in the area.

The Budo Sungai-Padi Collaboration

Wild Watch Thailand has linked with the Thailand Hornbill Project to offer paying clients the opportunity to take part in the ongoing hornbill research and conservation efforts underway at Budo-Sungai Padi National Park. The collaboration aims to provide a unique and rewarding experience for clients and to capture funds and manpower to achieve research and conservation objectives—including efforts to involve local residents in an ongoing way.

Financial support by Wild Watch will be by way of direct contributions to the Thailand Hornbill Project (10 % of all client fees), employment of local residents as guides (Wild Watch covers all additional costs of safely guiding clients so as not to impinge on research staff's goals or timetables), payment to families and villages as part of an agreed-upon homestay arrangement, and the purchase of a variety of local goods and services including hotel accommodations, food, and transportation.

The experience of many researchers in hosting volunteers and coordinating their activities (as in projects offered by Earthwatch, for example) is that the logistical work required of the researcher or research team limits the amount of work that can be accomplished during the time that volunteers are with the project. Wild Watch seeks to address this issue by taking on most of the logistical work of managing a volunteer team and facilitating assistance to the research team as needed. It is expected that by serving as a coordinator of these activities, both researchers and clients' experiences will be enhanced. A formal memorandum of understanding that defines the specific roles and expectations of both Wild Watch and the Thailand Hornbill Project has been adopted and Wild Watch naturalists have begun working with Thailand Hornbill Project staff to ensure a high degree of coordination and project localization.

Participation will be offered in 2 week blocks with a limit of 8 clients at a time. Clients can participate for as many blocks as they desire. Accommodations will be a mix of local hotels (2 nights), Royal Forest Department accommodations, homestays at villages surrounding the park, and possibly forest camps. The itinerary for a typical 2 week offering is as follows:

Day 1: Arrival and introduction to the research project and local culture and customs
Day 2-4: Training in field techniques and review of work accomplished to date. Evenings spent learning about hornbill ecology and local conservation challenges.
Day 5-6: Clients split into 2-4 groups (depending on the number of participants) consisting of 2 clients, either 1 Wild Watch or 1 Hornbill Project ecologist, and at least 1 local research assistant/guide to carry out various fieldwork objectives (see below). Evening activities focus on identification and sketching of botanical collections and developing a GIS (Geographic Information System) database for the project.
Day 7: Relaxation day with opportunities for visiting local sites of cultural or natural interest.
Day 8-12: Rotating field work objectives (see below) in small groups. Evening activities focus on identification and sketching of botanical collections and developing and augmenting the GIS.
Day 13: Group activities focused on compilation, synthesis, and interpretation of data.
Day 14: Additional compilation, synthesis, and interpretation activities. Farewell dinner party.

In designing conservation expedition offerings, Wild Watch seeks projects whereby participants can contribute meaningfully to research activities rather than “watch from the sidelines”. The Thailand Hornbill Project has shown a commitment to this goal as well and activities have been chosen to maximize the “hands-on” element of the offering.

The current primary research goal is the collection of baseline information on the six species of hornbill found in the park. At this stage, work consists of documenting the timing of the well-defined stages of the breeding process, identifying the plants and animals that make up the birds’ diets, and exploring the role that hornbills have in the dynamics of the regions forests.

Wild Watch participants will work with Hornbill Project staff, local guides, and Wild Watch naturalists to undertake the following activities in the field (the mix of activities will depend on the hornbills breeding cycle at the time of any given offering):

1. Nest monitoring
2. Nest repair
3. Collection and identification of food items
4. The establishment of permanent forest study plots
5. GIS database enhancement

The first offering will be in July 2001 and it is the intention of both Wild Watch and the Hornbill project to involve clients on an ongoing basis so as to provide ongoing support for the conservation of hornbills in southern Thailand.

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Figure 1. Summary of potential benefits and limitations/ disadvantages of ecotourism. (adapted from Ashley and Roe 1998).

	Advantages	Limitations/ Disadvantages
Local development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Source of jobs • Additional community income • Enterprise opportunities • Opportunity to develop new skills • Diversify livelihoods • Speeds development of desired infrastructure • Source of local pride 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides only menial jobs • Limited spin-off opportunities • High level of leakage of funds out of the community • Limited investment in training • Inadequate distribution of intended benefits • Potential for conflict with existing local livelihood strategies. Risky investment • Infrastructure for tourists not residents • Local conflicts exacerbated • Control by outsiders • Disempowerment of residents • Cultural disruption
Economic growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ecotourism a growing industry • Steady prices (compared to traditional exports) • Job creation, spin-off enterprises, and multiplier effects • Attracts private investment • Economic diversification • Sustainable utilization of natural assets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volatile demand • High leakage out of the economy, few spin-offs • Private control, no partnerships • Over-dependence • Over-use of natural resources
Conservation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased local benefits from the health of local ecosystems justify the natural state as a land-use • Enhanced cultural values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits insufficient, narrowly distributed and not visibly linked to conservation • Capacity & other prerequisites lacking

Figure 2. Mechanism for Harnessing Support and Funding for Conservation and Rural Development in Thailand

