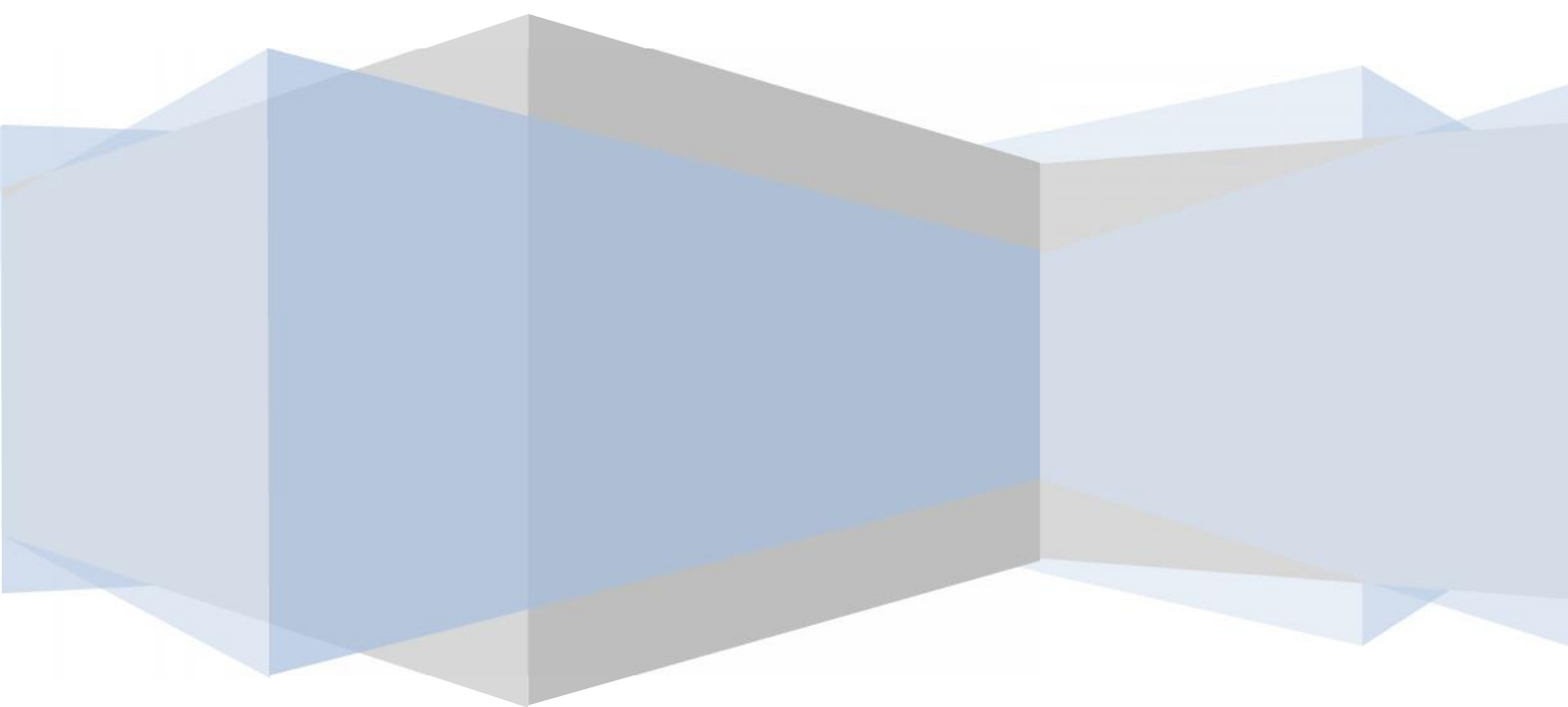


**Ecotourism in the  
National Park of Thailand  
Complete Report for  
National Research Council of Thailand  
Wiwik Mahdayani - Indonesia**



# **Ecotourism in the National Park of Thailand**

## **Executive Summary**

Tourism in Thailand is one of important sectors of the country. The number of visitors has multiplied since 1960 when Thailand was visited by 50 thousands international visitors. In line with tourism development in the country, Thailand applied ecotourism in managing tourism in the natural areas with protected or non-protected status.

In Thailand, a national park is a major nature-based tourism attraction dedicated to ecotourism. The fast growing development of national parks for tourism activities has created economic dependency on the part of the local people and the private sector involved in tourism. As a protected area, a national park encounters challenges in various forms: the irresponsible behavior of visitors, inadequate awareness of ecotourism goals of the private sector, and limited community participation. Few publications have set out to promote awareness and community-based service for ecotourism in the national parks, particularly among international visitors.

Within this context, the project was carried out with the overall objective of promoting ecotourism in Thailand's National Parks. Based on the assessment conducted under the project focused on selected national park, this paper provides a brief overview of ecotourism activities in Khao Yai National Park. The park selected is determined based on Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model that highlighted a destination's having "lifecycle stages" that include "exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, decline, or rejuvenation." A modification of Butler's destination evolution model outlined levels of sustainability, with sample cases on national parks. The evaluation on the "size of park, visitation numbers, and type of impact or threats" were basic indicators for positioning the parks within those stages. This evaluation combined with the publication *The National Parks of Thailand* published by Department of National Parks, Wildlife, and Plant Conservation, to determine national park's identification. Khao Yai National Park has entered "consolidation" stage. The park has a long history of receiving an overload of visitors, particularly during the peak season and Thailand's major holidays. This overload translates to increased threats and impacts on the environment due to activities within and around the park. Khao Yai National Park has transformed their surrounding resources for tourism development. High visitation numbers have increased facilities and infrastructure development, created job opportunities and small medium business ownerships among the locals.

The assessment to Khao Yai National Park reflects that community involvement to support ecotourism should be encouraged and promoted, and the private sector and park visitors need educational resources to increase their awareness of ecotourism goals. Their commitment to support ecotourism and promote responsible behavior is important to ensure the sustainability of ecotourism in the national parks. Therefore, it is crucial to use the ecotourism approach of promoting small and medium scale businesses owned by the local people.

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### **Background and Rationale**

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

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

Tourism in Thailand is one of important sectors of the country. The number of visitors has multiplied since 1960 when Thailand was visited by 50 thousands international visitors. The Ministry of Tourism and Sports (2013c) reported that over 22 million international visitors visited the Kingdom in 2012. This figure made Thailand the second major Southeast Asian country in terms of visitors generated. WTTC (2013) also reported that travel and tourism contributed 7.3% to Thailand's GDP, and created over two million jobs in 2012. In line with tourism development in the country, Thailand applied ecotourism in managing tourism in the natural areas with protected or non-protected status. ‘Visit Park Thailand 2000’ of the Royal Forest Department (RFD) was an initial official effort to open protected areas to tourism (ICEM 2003). This campaign was recognized as a response to the fast growing demand for nature-based tourism and the emerging trend of protected area development in Thailand. Infrastructure development has also increased to respond to this demand (Emphandhu and Chettamart 2003). In terms of ecotourism development, Thailand's national parks encounter various challenges such as appropriate design for ecotourism activities, the interpretation to fulfill the understanding of visitors, community support, and the comprehensive ecotourism promotion publications among visitors.

This paper provides a brief overview of ecotourism development in Khao Yai National Park as one of major nature-based tourism destination of Thailand. The assessment was conducted with the main objective of developing promotion publication for the ecotourism

sector at Thailand's National Parks. The park selected was determined based on Butler's (1980a) Tourism Area Life Cycle model that highlighted a destination's having "lifecycle stages" that include "exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, decline, or rejuvenation." A modification of Butler's destination evolution model (2006b) outlined levels of sustainability, with sample cases on national parks. The evaluation on the "size of park, visitation numbers, and type of impact or threats" were basic indicators for positioning the parks within those stages. Khao Yai National Park has entered "consolidation" stage. The park has a long history of receiving an overload of visitors, particularly during the peak season. This overload translates to increased threats and impacts on the environment due to visitation around and within the park.

### *The Protected Area System and Management in Thailand*

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

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

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

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

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

### *Challenges Facing the National Parks in Thailand*

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

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

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

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

### **Objective of research**

The objective of this study is to develop the awareness communication and marketing strategies of the ecotourism sector in Thailand's great National Parks and development of adequate tools for its implementation. An assessment in the national parks of Thailand was conducted with the main objective of developing promotion publication for the ecotourism sector at Thailand's National Parks.

### **Research methodology**

The *National Parks of Thailand* (2010b) published by DNP was used to determine national park's classification and area identification. The park was selected based on discussions with resource persons, references consultations, and a set of criteria includes (1) possess outstanding, rich ecosystems and biodiversity attractions; (2) provide accessibility and infrastructure; (3) provide economic development to the surrounding community; (4) offer education and learning experiences for visitors; (5) provide an opportunity for the private sector and the community to collaborate and promote tourism activities in the national park.

Due to the large coverage area of a national park, assessment included only the most accessible site(s) where tourism activities and stakeholders were present.

The project was carried out by using three methods: (1) desk study, (2) site visit/observation, and (3) interviews and consultation meetings. Site visits were conducted to observe the condition of the area and stakeholders in relation to national park. This method was applied to assess existing attractions, services and facilities, accessibility, education/interpretation, and the code of conduct within national park. Site visits/observations were conducted of the tourism sites at the national park with related hub cities/towns to identify travel patterns. Consultation meetings were carried out to obtain an overview of the stakeholders' roles and programs related to ecotourism activities within the national park. Stakeholders consulted were DNP, RFD, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, the Thai Ecotourism and Adventure Association (TEATA), the Department of Conservation-Kasetsart University, and the National Parks Association for Thailand (NPAT).

## **Research results**

The history of national parks in Thailand commenced when past Prime Minister General Sarit Tharanat paid an official visit to Thailand's northern area in 1959 (DNP 2006a). During his post-visit observation, he proposed to the cabinet the setting up of national parks in Thailand. This process was supported by conservationists Dr. Lekagul and Dr. Ruhle, who traveled around Thailand and provided recommendations on the national parks' establishment in several forest areas (Gray et al. 1994). Two years later, the law concerning natural resources protection, the National Park Act (1961), was approved. Thailand officially had its first national park, Khao Yai National Park. The establishment of the national parks provided a great opportunity for ecotourism development in the Kingdom. Churugsa (personal communication 2010) in Mahdayani (2011) highlighted that the Tourism Authority Thailand (TAT), a state enterprise which undertakes the international and domestic marketing mission, produced the National Ecotourism Action Plan 2002–2006 and the Thailand National Ecotourism Policy. A framework of ecotourism focusing on conservation and benefitting the local communities has been launched to support the ecotourism campaign and activities. TAT provides a strategic plan for promoting more ecotourism and green tourism products.

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

The national parks are major popular tourism destinations in Thailand. The national park is not only a favorite destination of international visitors, but also of Thai urban residents from big cities in Thailand, and nearby cities/towns who want to enjoy nature on weekends or long holidays. Tourism growth has convinced tour operators to promote national parks as primary destinations of their tours. By 2013, at least 44 % of tour operators in Southern Thailand offered tours to national parks. The rest of Thailand's tour operators also include national parks in their tour package. Khao Yai National Park, Doi Suthep-Pui National Park, Doi Inthanon National Park, Erawan National Park, Khao Sok National Park, are among popular destination for visitors coming with tour groups.

### *Khao Yai National Park*

Khao Yai National Park (KYNP) was established in 1962 and became the first national park in Thailand covering a total area of 2,168.75 km<sup>2</sup> (DNP 2006a). KYNP is located in four provinces of Thailand: Saraburi, Nakhon Nayok, Nakhon Ratchasima, and Prachinburi. Topography of the park varies with the highest peaks, Khao Rom, reaching about 1,351 meters

asl covering various habitats including dry evergreen forests, dry deciduous forest, tropical moist evergreen forest, and hill evergreen forest to grasslands. Therefore, KYNP has the important tropical forest ecosystems, which inhabit by at least 296 wildlife species including 31 mammal species, 221 bird species, 32 reptile species, and 12 amphibian species. Some of charismatic species can be found in KYNP are Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*), white-handed gibbons (*Hylobates lar*), pilated gibbons (*Hylobates pileatus*), tigers (*Panthera tigris*), gaur (*Bos gaurus*), and Great Hornbill (*Buceros bicornis*) (DNP 2006a). KYNP also provides important environmental services such as water for the region, e.g. Prachin Buri River, Nakhon Nayok River, Lam Ta Kong River, and Muak Lek Stream. KYNP declared as a UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site in July 2005 together with Thap Lan National Park, Pang Sida National Park, Ta Phraya National Park and Dong Yai Wildlife Sanctuary as a Dong Phrayayen Khao Yai - Forest Complex (DPKY-FC); and designated as ASEAN Heritage Park (AHP), regionally representative sites, in November 1984. The park has two main entrances: Pak Chong gate (210 km from Bangkok), Nakhon Ratchasima Province that leads to the headquarters, and Prachinburi Gate (202 km from Bangkok), Prachinburi Province.

The park is open all year around and provides a wide range of tourism activities for all types of visitors. During rainy season, some waterfalls are closed for the security reason. KYNP is one of the major tourism destinations in Thailand. It is easy to find tour operators/agents in Bangkok and Pak Chong that provide tours to the park. The tours at KYNP offers various activities for week-end and week-day visitors, ranging from camping, night safari, bicycling, bird watching, hiking/trekking at nature trails, and waterfalls walk.

As a world class national park, KYNP provides quality facilities to visitors. Visitor center provides both English and Thai brochures and comprehensive displays and interpretation about all aspects of the park. The center has meeting room, souvenir shop, toilet service and spacious parking lot where most of the tour groups start their activities. The welcoming staffs speak good English. The park provides relatively good interpretation and code of conduct for visitors at all major tourism attractions and accommodation in the park. The park also offers 5 nature trails with color marks to follow the trails. The most visited nature trail is a 3 km nature trail that can be reached by 1,5 – 2 hours walking from km 33 to Nong Pak Chi Observation tower. Other famous trails are Pha Kluay Mai Camp Site to Heo Suwat Waterfall which has 3 km long with 1,5 to 2 hours walking distance; Visitor center/Dong Tiew to Nong Pak Chi Observation Tower that has 5.4 km with more than 3 hours walking distance; Visitor center/Dong Tiew to Mo Sing To Observation Tower along 2.7 km with up to 2 hours walking distance; and Visitor Center/Kong Kaew to Heo Suwat Waterfall along 8 km with up to 5 hours walking distance, where the trail starts at behind the Visitor center. KYNP also has four main view points where the visitors enjoy beautiful scenery equipped with trail, shelter, and interpretation facilities: km 30 viewpoint, km 18 viewpoint, Khao Khiao viewpoint, and Pha Dio Dai view point.

The park is a core subject of discussion in print and online media. After *The Beach*, a Hollywood movie's scenes were taken at Heo Suwat waterfall, played around the world in 2000, the park reportedly began to generate even more visits. The park's popularity has attracted visitors and continued to increase from time to time. KYNP has visited by 41 thousands visitors in 1966; then over 140 thousands visitors in 1976; 1.251.259 visitors came in 2006; and the park received over 852 thousands visitors in 2012. The park was visited by average of over 800 thousands visitors every year, from 2003 to 2012. Both domestic and foreigners enjoy hiking, birdwatching, bicycling, night safari, visit waterfalls, view points and observation tower. Most domestic visitors come with big group of friends, school, company, family or couple and alone. Foreigners comprise small family (up to 4 persons), small group (2 - 4 persons), couple or alone. KYNP peak season period are during January, July, October, November, and December within a year. The highest visited time is New Year holiday. The high concentration of visitors during holidays in the KYNP can become paradoxical vis-à-vis the ecotourism purpose of a national park. As highlighted by Emphandu (personal

communication 2013), visitors are often not orientated on how to go around responsibly within a national park. Some visitors in KYNP sometimes feed the wildlife in the parks—as this is considered a kindness—though the code and conduct or interpretation boards are everywhere to inform the visitors for not doing this.

Small and medium business owned by locals can be found along Pak Chong and Wang Nam Khiao districts in the surrounding area of the park; ranging from restaurants, tour operators, small shops, to accommodation. Tour operators owned by locals at Pak Chong are among the top tour providers for visitors with foreigners as major market to visit the park. Most of tour operators offer hiking to nature trail, birdwatching and other wildlife watching at the park. Most of tours provide wildlife watching with minimal scientific explanation, as information given based on guides' experience. Due to the dynamic tourism activities for domestic and international visitors in the area, the small and medium business owned by locals relatively can compete with different target of market with the big investment services (e.g. accommodation or restaurants).

## Conclusions

In line with inevitable global tourism activities, increasing demand for international travels to national parks in Thailand has generated high visitation numbers like in the case of Khao Yai. KYNP has transformed their surrounding resources for tourism development.

Although the soaring development is going on within and around Khao Yai National Park, the park keeps generating the visitors for coming. High visitation numbers have increased facilities and infrastructure development, created job opportunities and small medium business ownerships among the locals, with the relatively fair opportunity to compete with bigger investments and higher capacity from outside of area within different target of market. The government and stakeholders should work together to prevent the “decline” stage of the destination and work on achieving its sustainability.

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

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