

Poverty Alleviation through Community-based Ecotourism in the Trans-boundary Protected Areas: The Emerald Triangle Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The announcement of the "Pakse Declaration on Tourism in the Emerald Triangle" in August 2003 by the governments of Thailand, Laos and Cambodia emphasizing the development of sustainable tourism activities in the Emerald Triangle, the area where the international boundaries are shared, has raised various concerns such as how these three neighbouring countries develop border tourism when several boundary disputes remain unresolved. The main aim of this paper is to describe tourism activities in the trans-boundary protected area, via case studies of three communities, one in each country: Tmatboey in Cambodia, Kiet Ngong in Laos and Pha Chan in Thailand. Data were collected over the period of October 2008 to February 2010 from field trips and interviews with various tourism stakeholders (such as village representatives and key local policy-makers in each community). Results reveal that the development of tourism activities in order to follow sustainable tourism approaches via Community-based Ecotourism, as a means of poverty alleviation has yet to make much progress. Some visible steps have been taken in all three study communities, with well-established Community-based Ecotourism activities, practicing of environmental protections being practiced, and direct and indirect income streams from tourism are generated and divided among community's members. However, these activities are the result of the community initiatives in responding to the tremendous changes in tourism trends rather than due to the introduction of government policies. The lack of knowledge networks and resources has made it hard for the community's members to use tourism activities to improve the economic development of their communities. This calls for the help and tight cooperation of all three governments to formulate poverty-alleviation strategies with a clearer purpose, since tourism development of this special trans-border protected area requires core strategies which have been agreed by all parties.

KEYWORDS: *Poverty Alleviation, Community-based Ecotourism, Trans-boundary Protected Areas, The Emerald Triangle.*

INTRODUCTION

The Greater Mekong Subregion (the GMS) comprises Cambodia, the People's Republic of China, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. Most areas are located in the tropical zone that people have their life closely related to the Mekong river, with the same historical background, cultural landscapes and biodiversity. The abundance of Mekong culture has become an attractive tourist resource (Asian Development Bank: ADB, 2008). On the other hand, the population of GMS is 320 million, and approximately 80 million are the poor (Sunderlin, 2004). They make a living on less than \$1 per day or under the poverty line (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific: ESCAP, 2004) and also lacks of basic needs such as health, education and sanitation (United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development: UNCSO, 1999). In recent years, tourism has been increasingly recognized for its expansion nature support. A higher percentage of

employment and can be particularly relevant in remote areas (World Tourism Organization: WTO, 2002). In the GMS, tourism has been included as the 11th flagship program under the 10 years of strategic framework approved by the GMS leaders in 2002 (ADB, 2004). Moreover, the GMS leaders had set up new tourism paradigm related poverty alleviation (UN, 2007). According to the statement, tourism should be a major source of securing the biodiversity in the GMS and playing a major role in the poverty alleviation (WTO, 2005).

Poverty alleviation through tourism is defined as tourism that generates net benefits for the poor, not only economic benefits, but also creating positive socio-cultural and environmental benefits to the poor (Ashley, 2001). Additionally, it became an essential condition for environmental conservation and sustainable development, besides being a protected area, where the poor live (United Nations World Tourism Organization Sustainable Tourism for Elimination Poverty Programme: UNWTO ST-EP, 2008).

In the CLT countries comprising of Cambodia, Laos and Thailand, the prime ministers of each country signed an agreement in 2003 to formulate a development tourism master plan for the Emerald Triangle, the adjacent tri-border that covering seven provinces of the three countries (Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office, 2004). At the same time, the World Tourism Organization fielded a mission in 2004 to formulate an Emerald Triangle project for the development and promotion of tourism (WTO, 2004). The tourism agreement of the Emerald Triangle has an official name called "*Pakse Declaration on Tourism Cooperation in the Emerald Triangle*" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand: MFA, 2003). According to the agreement, Community-based Ecotourism (CBET) was identified as a focused agenda for the pilot regional tourism project, covering ten protected areas, where ethnic minorities live and poverty is prevalent (ADB, 2008).

The main focus of this study is to discuss the new paradigm of tourism made by local people in the Emerald Triangle, as the area has become more relevant to tourism development than mass tourism. Besides, this study intends to present an existing of tourism in the transboundary protected areas, analyze the multi-dimensional roles of tourism agreement related with CBET and the poor. Ultimately, identify CBET and their implications on poverty alleviation in the Emerald Triangle.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The significance of the problem arises from the intended goal of trying to quantify the CLT countries tourism agreement effects in the Emerald Triangle and their contribution towards poverty alleviation. In so doing, the study sheds light on what CBET can do to maximize nature conservation benefits and minimize poverty. The specific objectives of the study included attempts to:

- (i) To present an existing of tourism in the trans-boundary protected areas in the Emerald Triangle.
- (ii) To analyze the roles of tourism agreement in the Emerald Triangle towards CBET and the poor.

To identify CBET and their implications on poverty alleviation in the Emerald Triangle.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection Instruments

This study makes use of the knowledge and experience derived from fieldwork, was conducted from October 2008 to February 2010 based around the CLT countries. Particularly the three communities in the trans-boundary protected areas. A combination of study methods was used in order to determine the various views and gathered information including:

- (i) Documentation: This involved various types of documents from government agencies, private sector and NGOs were collecting information and data from existing reports on tourism.

- (ii) Historical profile: A historical profile compares trends in activities throughout the community’s history, highlighting the relative importance of various productive activities over time and the memories of people living within the areas.
- (iii) Key informant interviews: With questions prepared in advance and using semi-structured interviews with key informants, baseline data is collected on socio-economic issues, forest use, hunting, fishing, wildlife habitat, changes to their well-being before and after CBET implementation, impacts, culture, and nature resources. Key informants of the area of the study were randomly selected for interview, taking into consideration those living near and far away from the center.

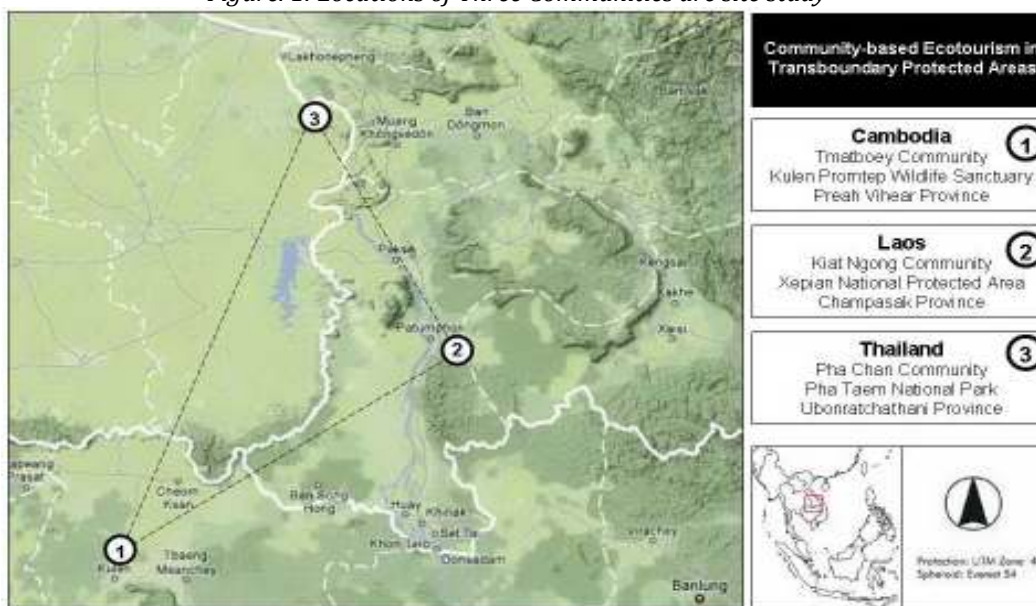
Study Areas

Selecting areas of study obtained from a field survey conducted in the Emerald Triangle which has been covered three countries, seven provinces and ten protected areas. From the field survey, the only information found is three forest communities have set up their tourism committee, the selecting areas are:

- (i) Tmatboey community, Kulen Promtep Wildlife Sanctuary, Preah Vihear Province, Cambodia.
- (ii) Kiet Ngong community, Xepian National Protected Area, Champasak Province, Laos.
- (iii) Pha Chan community, Pha Taem National Park, Ubonratchathani Province, Thailand.

All these are community attractions located in transboundary protected areas in the CLT countries or under Pakse Declaration on Tourism Cooperation in the Emerald Triangle. [Refer to Figure 1]

Figure. 1: Locations of Three Communities are site study



Data Analysis

Both primary and secondary data were collected including a review of earlier studies on CBET in sites study. Secondary information was supplemented with primary data obtained through interviews. The data provided in each location were undertaken by study method “content analysis” based upon interviews and participant observation. The data will be put into the interpretation process. The result from study can be applied and represented the linkages between CBET agenda such as the secure of transboundary protected areas, tourism agreement, the benefit to the poor and CBET implemented in the area.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tourism in the trans-boundary protected areas of the Emerald Triangle

The CLT countries have trans-boundary issues affecting the environment such as trans-boundary nature and cultural resources (Mekong Institute foundation, 2005). For that reason the CLT countries have played sustainable tourism cooperation; the participating countries have assisted in shaping the Pakse Declaration on Tourism Cooperation in the Emerald Triangle (MFA, 2004). The intergovernmental agreed stepped in to enhance trans-boundary cooperation and support tourism activities in the surroundings (Ramachandran, 2008). The finding of area study in this research focused in remote community in the protected areas involved in tourism development by running their businesses under the auspices of local committees. From the result of finding, there are three outstanding communities operated CBET initiatives, these three cases are:

Tmatboey Community: the CBET was settled in 2004 supported by the Ministry of Environment of Cambodia and the Wildlife Conservation Society's Cambodia Program. Tmatboey located in Kulen Promtep Wildlife Sanctuary in Preah Vihear province, northern Cambodia (The Wildlife Conservation Society: WCS, 2008). Tmatboey is a remote forest community of 203 families, some of them from the Kui minority (Sam Veasna Center for Wildlife Conservation: SVC. 2008). Tmatboey represents a new Cambodia's CBET destinations are not yet well known to international tourists. The community was identified both due to the unique wildlife species present and because a genuine tourism demand from birdwatchers was known to exist for visiting the critically endangered birds present. Besides destinations represent untapped resources as well as diverse ecosystems, the area is significant for Ibises watching and observation.

Kiet Ngong Community: the CBET was settled approximately in 2003 supported by The World Wildlife Fund for Nature: WWF. Kiet Ngong located in Xepian National Protected Area in Champasak province, southern Laos (Mekong Tourism Development Project, 2008). Kiet Ngong is a remote forest community of Lao Loum minority (lowland Lao) approximately 150 households (WWF, 2009). Kiat Ngong has long history of elephant capture and domesticated Elephants are still used as a mode of transport between villagers. Major attractions include Phou Asa Mountain, with its ancient stone temple ruins of Vat Phou Asa, and the expansive Kiet Ngong wetlands, excellent for bird watching.

Pha Chan Community: the CBET was settled approximately in 2003 supported by The Thailand Research Fund: TRF. Pha Chan located in the overlapped of Pha Taem National Park, a cultural landscapes with prehistorical issue in the northeast Thailand. Pha Chan is a remote forest community of Tai-Lao minority, approximately 180 households and the primary source is agriculture (TRF, 2009). The natural and agricultural landscape has been surrounded by the Mekong river setting. There are several significant tourism attractions such as the large rock outcrop namely "Sao Chaliang Yai" also called "Stones Pillar" it is a stone formations are the result of natural sculpturing. The evidence of prehistoric cultures can be found in "Tham Long" where there are prehistoric wooden coffin placed under the bizarre rock outcrop. Besides, another popular tourism activity is boat sightseeing in order to appreciate the atmosphere of Mekong scenery.

All of three communities are included important ecological-based, cultural landscapes and rural community. The tourism activities of three cases are conformed to the tourism trend surveyed in the GMS, found that most of tourists prefer to visit the rural community in the region because they are interested in natural and cultural resources (United Nations Development Programme: UNDP, 2008). On the other hand, although the area has been considered a good destination for tourism since the early 20th century but poverty is still widespread in the areas (ESCAP, 2007).

The roles of tourism agreement in the Emerald Triangle towards CBET and the poor The adjacent border of the CLT countries have areas of particularly poor

people with over 20 million living below the poverty line, especially in the high incidence of seven provinces of the Emerald Triangle (ADB, 2008). Regard to trans-boundary areas problems, it is an issue which single government cannot effectively handle and a regional cooperation is a must in this area. It is therefore proposed to develop a regional tool to manage the trans-boundary movement. In the seven provinces of the Emerald Triangle, poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation are both fundamental of tourism policy agendas (WCS, 2006). The intergovernmental consider tourism initiative as one of the most ideal driving forces for many projects (The Netherlands Development Organization: SNV, 2008). One outstanding project called "Pakse Declaration on Tourism in the Emerald Triangle"

The agreement is to improve cooperation between its members and support of the socio-economic, environmental development that implemented under two schemes which are tourism development and poverty alleviation (Roe, 2004). According to the statement, the intergovernmental of the agreement to establish a joint working group to formulate on tourism cooperation by the end of 2003. Designated geographical parameters of the triangle namely north-western Cambodia (Preah Vihear, Odor Meanchey and Stung Treng) southern Laos (Champasak and Salavanh) and northeast Thailand (Ubonratchathani and Sisaket) a discussed tourism cooperation activities in order to achieve the following objectives:

- To enhance tourism activities along the border.
- To promote cross-border facilitation tourism and ease travel into and within the three countries through border checkpoints.
- To develop and promote tourism attractions in the Emerald Triangle area.
- To enhance cooperation between public and private sectors of member countries, especially at the local level.

Pakse Declaration on Tourism in the Emerald Triangle selected CBET for poverty alleviation. Putting the local communities as the majority is the main act, then promoting rural people to develop tourism for economic reasons (ESCAP, 2005), also focusing on decreasing numbers of people living in extreme poverty or living on less than \$1 per day (Goodwin, 2004). According to the statement, CBET used in the Emerald Triangle involves targeting the poor in each step of the process to protect natural resources, preserve cultural traditions, created on-going employment and well-being.

CBET and their Implications on poverty in the Emerald Triangle

This study investigated the role of tourism in poverty alleviation in three cases of the Emerald Triangle with a marginal land setting. All three cases have key informants provided adequate information that was utilized in this study. From the interview, CBET implications on poverty in the three cases showed:

Tmatboey Community: An average income of villagers between \$12 and \$40 a month from rice farming. Over 90 individuals or 10 percent of community inhabitants were involved in providing tourism services. In 2009, approximately of 30 individuals were employed on a part-time permanent basis as guide, cooks and guesthouse managers. These individuals each received an average of \$20 per month (during November to April). The community received more than \$8,000 total in service payment, this income has been used to fund community development including agricultural support and built a new community guesthouse complex that can be charge higher prices and capture greater revenue from tourism. In the conservation dimension, the population of nesting White-shouldered Ibis has increased from a single pair in 2002 to the current approximately 4-6 pairs. Besides, tourist

visits directly demonstrate the value of wildlife to Tmatboey both through donations to a community development fund and through individual payments for services, such as food, drink, local guides, cooks and accommodation. Each tourist is required to donate \$30 to the community if they see Giant or White-shouldered Ibis and \$15 if they do not. All tourism activities in the community are managed by the locally elected community committee.

Kiet Ngong Community: An average income of villagers is between \$15 and \$45 a month from rice farming and cattle farming. Over 70 individuals or more than 12 percent of community inhabitants were involved in providing tourism services. In 2009, 25 individuals were employed on a part-time permanent basis as guide, driver and home stays managers. These individuals each received an average of \$30 per month (during October to April) and the community received more than \$6,500 total in service payment. This income has been used to community development fund including, religion support, road improvements and domesticated elephant support.

Pha Chan Community: An average income of villagers is between \$65 and \$100 a month from rice farming and fishing. Over 120 individuals or 20 percent of community inhabitants were involved in providing tourism services. In 2009, 20 individuals were employed on a part-time permanent basis as guide and boat driver. These individuals each received an average of \$40 per month (during September to May), and the community received more than \$10,000 total in service payment. This income has been used to fund community development including irrigation system support and fishery fund. Moreover, Pha Chan used CBET to support struggle to claim a community forest that overlapped with the Pha Taem National Park, for conservation and utilization of community forest resource.

Data above, indicated of the three cases, are an example of how poverty alleviation through CBET relevant for remote community in transboundary protected areas of the Emerald Triangle. Moreover, the three cases showed three pillars of CBET attractions in the Emerald Triangle are as follows:

- (i) Nature: wild animals; birds; plants; land forms; scenery.
- (ii) Culture: ethnic minorities; role of religion; history and legend; community and their lifestyles.
- (iii) Heritage: archaeology; artefacts and evidence of the prehistory; heritage structure.

The result show that CBET benefits will fall not only to the tourism industry itself, but also to the people at the grassroots level. Tourism activities are considered a secondary job to supplement household income and agriculture which is still dominant in tourism households, providing approximately 80 percent of total household earnings. CBET activities in each community produce direct and indirect benefits for conservation and local people who receive substantial financial benefits from tour developed by community committee. It's estimated that each day one visitor can spend about \$3 to \$10 in each community (day visitors would buy food and beverages from various stalls run by the local people). Besides, home stays in three cases can be helped enhance participants' income and improve their livelihood. It's estimated that in high season, the three communities will be get an extra income earned each month is about \$50 to \$100. In fact, tourism in the three cases is strong only in some months, such as the end of the year and early in the year. (5-7 months during the cool-dry period). Although CBET in the three cases are seemed to be stronger but the obstacles are appear. From the interview, the current obstacle and impact to CBET development in Tmatboey arise from the international political conflict between Cambodia and Thailand in case of Preah Vihear Temple. Kiat Ngong is a limited access of the poor to the GMS tourism market, inadequate knowledge about English language and service skill at local level. Pha Chan need for commercial viability for their tourism product in term of value and price. According to the statement, this study found that the three cases cannot play tourism stand alone, their need for marketing support is indispensable. Perhaps basic tourism skill training is required, including pricing issues and the access to affordable credit is also very

important. Moreover, from the informal interviews, local people in all three cases desire CBET as an opportunity to encourage their community, hope of better direct and indirect employment opportunities.

DISCUSSION

The approaches discussed in three cases are all founded on the general assumption that it is possible simultaneously to achieve two pillars, consist of biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation. The evidence from three cases showed CBET bring benefits not only income. In addition, CBET bring the awareness rising of biodiversity conservation to all three cases such as the fund for protected Ibises in Tmatboey, the fund for domesticated elephant support in Kiat Ngong and the fund for conservation and utilization of community forest resource in Pha Chan. So, this study suggest that until analysts and policy makers begin to think much more precisely on exactly which aspects of biodiversity and poverty are addressed by their favourite approaches. In the Emerald Triangle, these are not easy tasks as each country tends to mind their own business without coordination and is not driven by a people-focused agenda. Finally, it must be remembered that the main beneficiaries from better public service management are the local people. When public service management can be improved, it is a win-win strategy benefiting both the public and tourists.

CONCLUSION

Since sustainable tourism concept operates in the GMS, it can be an important tool to affect poverty at the national, local urban and rural levels. Especially, the CLT countries involve the integration and balance of many types of tourism, including alternative tourism like CBET, are of benefit to the CLT countries particularly the Emerald Triangle. CBET has become a platform used by all stakeholders in their activities. Because the region is rich in cultural and ethnic heritage, CBET promotion is often mixed and integrated with conventional tourist attractions. Many natural resources e.g. National Park, Wildlife Sanctuary and National Protected Areas in the Emerald Triangle can include revenue from CBET, direct and indirect payments for conservation, development schemes, employment, secured land tenure and protection of resources from external threats. Related all three cases are promoted as CBET for both a local and international interests. Although, protected areas are mostly managed by government agencies, but the local participation in tourism development has been appear and recognized. CBET development in the Emerald Triangle. Kiat Ngong is the most progressive community in terms of tourism policy and protected areas planning with good cooperation among all stakeholders. Tmatboey and Pha Chan have also managed to integrate CBET with mainstream tourism and to use it to support economic reason. Despite considerable tourism growth, exploring the full tourism potential of the Emerald Triangle is still challenging task. Several critical factors have been noted as constraints for the progress of poverty alleviation through CBET: (a) limited access of the poor to the tourism market; (b) lack of commercial viability for their product in term of value and price; (c) weak marketing capability; (d) lack of intergovernmental suitable policy framework and (e) inadequate knowledge about tourism and service skill, managing and implementing at local level. The Emerald Triangle policy-relevant should make a mixed paradigm for trans-boundary agenda. It also needs to focus on the dynamics of the relationship between various measures of poverty and biodiversity, and how these dynamics are affected by macro-social and political variables such as education, demographic change, levels of unemployment, technological change among others and enhance CBET network among forest community in the Emerald Triangle.

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