

Community-based ecotourism as a tool for rural development and nature conservation: Lessons from protected areas in Laos

Kiengkay Ounmany, National University of Laos; University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Austria

Christina Winkler, Vienna University of Technology, Austria

Andreas Muhar, University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Austria; University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Austria

Marianne Penker, University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Austria; University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Austria

Abstract

Ecotourism has been regarded as a tool for socioeconomic development and promoting conservation of cultural and natural resources (Goodwin, 2002). The governments of many developing countries including Lao PDR are focusing attention on the development of ecotourism in rural areas, particularly in protected areas in the hope that it will create employment opportunities and raise income for local people (LNTA, 2005). Ecotourism is also expected to contribute financial resources for conservation activities (Gössling, 1999). However, the findings from previous research indicate that local communities receive minimal benefits from tourism. Furthermore, the distribution of the benefits is unequal among tourism stakeholders (He et al., 2008). In some cases, ecotourism activities exacerbate environmental degradation in protected areas (Ballantyne & Pickering, 2011).

Our study aims to shed lights on ecotourism as a tool for rural development and the contribution of the sector to safeguard fragile ecosystems by specifically looking at benefit and burden sharing between the various stakeholder groups within and outside the community. The research was conducted in three villages in the Nam Ha National Protected Area (NHNPA), Luang Namtha Province and in two villages, located in the vicinity of the Phou Khao Khouai National Protected Area (PKKNPA), Bolikhamsay Province. The two provinces are located in northern and central Laos respectively.

Ecotourism development in Luang Namtha was based on a top-down approach (Phommavong, 2011), in which the development was initiated by international development agencies. The Lao National Tourism Administration (LNTA) collaborated with the UNESCO Regional Office in Bangkok and funding partners; in October 1999 they launched the Nam Ha Ecotourism Project (NHEP) as the first community-based ecotourism project in Laos. A number of stakeholder groups have been actively involved in the ecotourism development, including the donor organizations, the Luang Namtha Department of Information, Culture and Tourism, NHNPA, and communities at the provincial and village levels. Following the success of NHEP, the model was replicated in Ban Na and Ban Hathkhai, located in the vicinity of the southern part of PKKNPA. Between 2003 and 2004, LNTA was working with foreign development organizations to develop tourism activities in the two villages. The project assisted in setting up a local guide association and a homestay programme in addition to small-scale infrastructure development and technical matters. The tourism activities include village homestay, trekking inside PKKNPA, camping, kayaking, biking etc.

Mixed case study research methods were applied in the study. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected using the techniques such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, life

history interviews, questionnaire surveys, and stakeholder seminars. During the three-year-research period, nine semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with tourism experts from donor organizations, national and provincial tourism authorities and an ecotourism operator. Additionally, 17 semi-structured interviews and 38 life history interviews were conducted with local people at the provincial and village levels. To draw tourist perspective, problem-centered semi-structured interviews were conducted with 52 western tourists, who took part in ecotourism activities in the two NPAs. To gain deeper insights, 228 questionnaire surveys were conducted in the two study areas. Two stakeholder seminars were organized in the two study areas, to receive feedback from the communities to the findings and to develop solutions.

Content analysis was applied to analyse qualitative data, whereas quantitative data were treated applying statistical methods. The preliminary results indicate that ecotourism activities play a significant role in economic development and nature conservation in the two studies areas. In Luang Namtha, the sector creates employment and trading opportunities for local people in the province and NHNPA; however, the benefits are unevenly distributed. Actors at the provincial level (tour operators, provincial tour guides) take a major share of benefits from tourism in comparison to actors from the communities inside NHNPA (local guides, farmers, cooks...). This is explained by better access to education and economic opportunities. At the village level, tourism revenue is merely enough for, according to the respondents, buying "chilies and salt". Nevertheless, even small economic benefits create significant impacts due to the fact that tourism is one of the few economic opportunities for the communities.

In the second study area, direct economic benefits from tourism are confined only to a small number of families, who work in tourism as local guides, homestay hosts, and providers of transport services.

To spread benefits indirectly to other all community members, "village revolving funds" have been installed at both sites, which receive revenues from tourism. They serve as a microfinance scheme and provide money for community developments such as improving education, healthcare and infrastructure.

As far as tourists are concerned, the biophysical conditions of the areas can satisfy tourists' demand. Nevertheless, service quality requires substantial improvement, particularly English language skills of service personnel who are working in tourism sectors. In addition, the tourists voice concern over the benefits distribution and negative impacts to the local communities.

Apart from contributing financial resources for the NPA management, ecotourism has raised environmental awareness among local people. Several respondents confirm that forest resources have been protected to a certain extent, thanks to the development of ecotourism. Nonetheless illegal activities such as logging, hunting and protected area encroachment are prevalent in the two studied areas.

In both study areas, ecotourism is being acknowledged as a certain additional income source; however, it only generates a marginal income for the local communities within the protected areas. Thus it seems that ecotourism in its current form is not able to compete with other, more environmentally destructive land uses such as logging, slash and burn agriculture, and particularly rubber plantation. Given that economic benefit constitutes an incentive for nature conservation, ecotourism as a tool for nature conservation might be difficult to realize in the long run.

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