

Nature, the Environment, and Tourism

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1. Introduction

The growth of the tourism industry for many GMS countries has been most opportune in view of economic and political changes which have occurred in the region for the last two decades. Tourism represents an attractive and relatively soft means of promoting development. Nonetheless, receipts from tourism are susceptible to large fluctuations in income, inflation, exchange rates and unexpected events. Tourism is intrinsically bound to nature and the environment. Nature, however, is not always predictable, and can sometimes cause unexpected and disastrous impacts, as has been seen in the countries of the GMS recently. SARS and bird flu negatively affected tourism in a number of countries, and the unprecedented tsunami devastated beach resort tourism on the Andaman coast in southern Thailand.

This paper will begin with the examination of tourism income stability by using the tsunami incident on Thailand's Andaman coast a case study. It then will look at the Kra Canal project as an alternative development for Thailand. The fourth section will portray an overall picture of environmental degradation relating to tourism developments in GMS countries. The last section will highlight some of examples of sustainable tourism development practicing in the GMS.

2. The tsunami incident on Thailand's Andaman coast

Thailand's tourism income is susceptible to unexpected events. Unexpected events such as natural disaster and disease outbreaks have proven to be substantial factors affecting Thailand's tourism negatively in the short-term. During the period from April to June 2003, the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak had a negative impact on Thai economies. The receipts from tourism was 10 percent lower than expected (Sattarasat and Untong 2005). However, it must be emphasized that the tsunami of December 26, 2004 was a disaster that cannot be compared with the SARS outbreaks of 2003. Economists of Asian Development Bank have pointed out two important differences (Asian Development Bank 2005).

- 1) The disaster of December 26 is a one-time event that occurred in a short period of time and will probably not occur again in the near future. The SARS outbreaks, on the other hand were incidences whose development lasted months.

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