

Developing creative tourism on the basis of cultures of conservation

Abstract

The cultures and languages of Northeastern India provide potential for ties with ASEAN countries. In particular, tribal cultures in Northern India and in ASEAN shared similar traits of living in harmony with nature, and this reflects in rituals, traditions, music and folktales.

There are a number of academic works on traditional beliefs linking nature conservation, and many analyzed “sacred groves” which is Khasi’s concept and practices in the form of eco-consciousness for sustainable forest management. These works documented the relationship between communities and their forests and several made the analysis on folktales and other oral traditions. In addition, a number of works reflected development and modernization which usually comes with a threat to those conservation practices.

In Thailand and in Northeast India, there has not been academic works that integrate the three issues of 1) cultural concepts and real practices of nature/forest conservation and the change that comes with modernization, 2) participation and roles of younger generations in accepting the challenges of modernization, and 3) the development of creative and sustainable tourism. This present research aims at integrating the three issues and the realization of creative tourism as the potential development concept that will affirm conservation as well as creating income distribution.

This research focuses on tribal communities. In Meghalaya, the village that retains traditional livelihoods while adapting to new tourism is Mawlynnong. In publicizing village tourism, the name “the cleanest village in the world” is used. An important tourist attraction is Living Roots Bridge whose use is shared among several villages including Nohwet. Mawphlang is another village with a very large Sacred Grove. The three villages began to see tourism as their mainstay. While strict regulations and monitoring are not in place, villagers begin to see drinking tourists, loud groups, and waste left on walking paths. Apart from these villages, NEHU Department of Sociology also works in other villages as well.

As for the Thai cases, the research team have selected Pwo Karen communities that have conservation cultures especially those in Kaen Makrood Sub district, Ban Rai Distract, Uthai Thani Province. These Karen groups started to veer away from rotational farming or shifting cultivation to commercial crops. However, several agencies came in to support supplementary occupations

which are in line with forest conservation as the area is an important buffer zone with Huay Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary which is a Natural World Heritage Site. Cultural tourism began slowly and the communities grow more income generating crops like temperate fruits and vegetables. Peak tourism season is from December to January due to cooler weather and abundance of fruits and vegetables. Woven textiles and locally made souvenirs are more in demand so villagers need not migrate to work elsewhere. Adopting this new economy encourages villagers to plan ahead for planting appropriate crops and preparing for “tourism businesses”. In sum, this research project have tried to identify ways for creative tourism development that has the basis on nature and culture conservation concept and practices and with the emphasis on roles of youth and younger generations.

After the research team went to the area to survey and collect data about the history and local way of life, we found the way to develop creative tourism based on nature and culture through creating cultural learning route that tied various points of interest together. The team then mapped routes/points of interest for tourism in 3 main areas and created 1) Cultural route in the sacred forest of “Mo Ta Joi”, 2) Community route in E-Mad E-Sai community and, 3) Community and ethnobotany route in Khlong Salao community.

One of the activities in the project included preparing a training for community youth tour guides to encourage the young Karen to become more interested and take pride in their history and community. In the training session, they would be provided opportunities to express themselves, to tell stories about their own family and community, and have basic skill on cultural interpretation. The research team planned dates and details of the training activities with the local school already, but due to the spread of COVID-19, the training has been postponed indefinitely.

However, the project created published materials such as maps and small community guidebooks. These could be of use in community tourism, and in the future, for developing local curriculum and revitalizing Karen culture and traditions. As this project is a part of the larger project on “Language, Art, Culture and Society for Thailand India Relations”, although the research team were unable to travel to continue the research in Meghalaya due to COVID-19 outbreak, but the tools like guidebooks and maps, including lessons learned from the Karen Kaen Makrut community may serve as an example for Meghalaya Khasi communities. Since the Khasi also have the way of life that is closely tied to nature and the forests, the development of creative tourism on such culture of conservation may follow similar processes.

In addition to this research report, the research team also produced three separate guidebooks of cultural routes in Kaen Makrut and one guidebook as an example of what could be done in Khasi communities in Meghalaya. There are also 11 video clips and a Facebook page titled "Creative Tourism in Kaen Makrut" produced under this project. The idea of creating a Facebook page arose during the COVID-19 pandemic when the research team were unable to travel to the field. Online communication was experimented with local key informants and few young Karen. The research team proposed some activities that can be done in the village, such as making local handicrafts, making Karen traditional sweets and dishes, performing rituals related to the agricultural way of life, visiting local integrated farms, etc. The children were assigned to take photos and video clips and briefly describe the activities. Some of these young Karen are familiar with social media and simple video applications and could edit the clips themselves; but for the details of the content, they must consult with community elders. This fosters closer relationship between generations whereby the research team helps to bridge up and to guide appropriate questions for exploring these fading traditions.

The surge in several outbreaks of Covid prevented the team from following the research and travel plan, both in Kaen Makrut Sub-District and Meghalaya State. In Kaen Makrut, tourism went into a long halt. Even at the end of the research project (December 2021), tourism has not returned to its normal state. However, the results of this research project would provide some information for the development of creative tourism based on a culture of conservation, but this also requires continual future support from both the communities and various sectors.

Key Word: cultures of conservation, nature conservation, creative tourism, indigenous peoples, Karen communities