

การรับรู้ถึงผลกระทบของการท่องเที่ยวต่อชุมชนชนบท  
ใน แขวงหลวงน้ำทา แขวงหลวงพระบาง แขวงคำม่วน และ  
แขวงจำปาศักดิ์ ในสาธารณรัฐประชาธิปไตยประชาชนลาว  
**Perceptions of the Impacts of Tourism among  
Rural Communities in Luang Namtha, Luang Prabang,  
Khammouane and Champasak, Lao PDR**

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## บทคัดย่อ

จำนวนนักท่องเที่ยวนาชาติที่มาเยือนสาธารณรัฐประชาธิปไตยประชาชนลาว ใน พ.ศ. 2551 มีจำนวนถึง 1.73 ล้านคน ซึ่งสร้างรายได้ร้าว 275 ล้านเหรียญสหรัฐอเมริกา ตามอัตราแลกเปลี่ยน และได้สร้างงานให้ท้องถิ่นถึง 17,000 งาน ดังนั้นจึงมีการส่งเสริม การท่องเที่ยวในฐานะที่เป็นกลไกหลักของการเริ่มต้นดิบโดยทางเศรษฐกิจของประเทศ กิจกรรม การท่องเที่ยวหลักส่วนใหญ่ของสาธารณรัฐประชาธิปไตยประชาชนลาวเป็นการท่องเที่ยวสถานที่ทางธรรมชาติ วัฒนธรรม และประวัติศาสตร์ในเมืองหลวงเวียงจันทน์ และแหล่งมรดกโลกที่ได้รับการคัดเลือกโดยองค์กรยูเนสโก คือเมืองหลวงพระบาง และปราสาทหินวัดพู และสิ่งก่อสร้าง ใกล้เคียงในแขวงจำปาศักดิ์ แต่การจัด “การท่องเที่ยวโดยชุมชน” ไปตามหมู่บ้านชุมชนชาติ พันธุ์ต่างๆ ก็เป็นที่นิยมมากเช่นกัน โปรแกรมการท่องเที่ยวในแบบหลังนี้เริ่มขึ้นในช่วง พ.ศ. 2547 ถึง พ.ศ. 2550 ในลักษณะโครงการสาธิตที่ได้รับการพิจารณาจัดขึ้นโดยรัฐบาลด้วยความร่วมมือ จากผู้ประกอบการการท่องเที่ยวและองค์กรความร่วมมือด้านการพัฒนาระหว่างประเทศ คือ องค์กรการศึกษา วิทยาศาสตร์ และวัฒนธรรมแห่งสหประชาชาติ (ยูเนสโก) และ ธนาคารเพื่อการ พัฒนาเอเชีย (เอดีบี) การส่งเสริมการท่องเที่ยวโดยชุมชน ซึ่งเป็นการท่องเที่ยวที่มีการวางแผน และจัดการโดยคนในท้องถิ่นเป็นหนึ่งในกลยุทธ์หลักของสาธารณรัฐประชาธิปไตยประชาชนลาว เพื่อช่วยกระจายรายได้ทางเศรษฐกิจจากการท่องเที่ยวไปยังพื้นที่ชนบทต่างๆ การศึกษา เพื่อทำความเข้าใจเกี่ยวกับความพึงพอใจของครัวเรือนในชนบทต่อการท่องเที่ยวโดยชุมชน

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และประเมินการรับรู้ของพากເຂາຕ່ອຜລກະທບຈາກການທອງເຖິງໄວ ໄດ້ດໍາເນີນການໃນເດືອນທັນວາຄມ ພ.ສ. 2550 ໂດຍການໃຊ້ການສໍາວົງຈາກດ້ວຍຢ່າງຂ້ອມລ 391 ຄຣອບຄຣວິທ່າຄ້ຍອູ່ໃນ 12 ໄມງົບ້ານ ທີ່ເຂົ້າຮ່ວມໂຄງການພັດທະນາການທອງເຖິງໄວສຸ່ນໜ້າໂທງ ບທຄວາມນີ້ເສັນອັພການສໍາວົງແລະຕຶກໝາປ້ຈັຍ ທີ່ອຈານມີສ່ວນທຳໄໝມີຄວາມແດກດ່າງຍ່າດັ່ງສໍາຄັນ ໃນຄຣອບຄຣວິຂອງກລຸ່ມໜາຕິພັນໜີ ລາວ ຂມ່ງ ມັງ ແລະ ລາວເຖິງ ຕ່ອກຮັບຮູ້ຄື່ງຜລກະທບຂອງການທອງເຖິງໄວຕ່ອງໜີ່ມີໜຸ່ມໜຸ່ນຂອງພາກເຂາ

**ສໍາຄັນ:** ການທອງເຖິງໄວ ການເຈົ້າມີເຕີບໄຕທາງເຫຼືອມູກົງ ຜູ່ມີໜຸ່ມໜຸ່ນໜີ່ສາມາດແຮ້ປະຫົບໄຕຍ ປະຊານລາວ

## Abstract

The number of international tourist arrivals to Lao PDR in 2008 reached 1.73 million, generating approximately US\$ 275 million in foreign exchange and 17,000 domestic jobs, thus firmly establishing tourism as one of the country's main engines of economic growth. The majority of Lao PDR's tourism activity is centered on natural, cultural and historic attractions in Vientiane Capital and UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Luang Prabang and Vat Phou-Champasak. Nevertheless, organized "community-based" tours to rural ethnic villages are also very popular. Many of the latter programs began between 2003 and 2007 as demonstration projects deliberately established by the government in cooperation with tour operators and international development partners such as UNESCO and the Asian Development Bank. Promotion of community-based tourism that is planned and managed by local people is one of Lao PDR's main strategies to help spread the economic benefits of tourism to rural areas. To better understand rural households' satisfaction with community-based tourism and gauge their perception of tourism's impacts, a study was carried out in December, 2007. A standard survey was administered to a sample of 391 families living in 12 villages that participated in the Mekong Tourism Development Project. This article presents the results of the survey and explores some of the factors that may have contributed to substantial variation in ethnic Lao, Khmu, Hmong and Lanten families' perceptions of how tourism is impacting their communities.

**Keywords:** tourism, economic growth, ethnic communities, Lao PDR

## Introduction

Between 1990 and 2008 annual tourist arrivals to the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) increased from 14,400 to 1,736,787 (Lao National Tourism Administration [LNTA], 2008: 5). In 2008 tourism revenue reached US\$ 275.5 million and was the country's second largest source of foreign exchange following mineral exports which generated US\$ 801.9 million (LNTA, 2008: 18). Tourism is also a major employer in Lao PDR. The industry supports 17,000 full-time jobs and provides indirect employment for an additional 167,000 people (LNTA, 2009a: 16). While growth appears quite spectacular when viewed from a national perspective, the benefits of tourism remain highly concentrated in Vientiane Capital and the UNESCO World Heritage Sites of Luang Prabang and Vat Phou-Champasak. For example, of the 1.73 million arrivals recorded nationally in 2008 more than half visited Vientiane Capital, with Luang Prabang and Champasak counting 344,029 and 220,214 visitors, respectively. In south-central Savannakhet province, arrivals more than doubled to 474,826 between 2006 and 2008. The main attraction here is the Savan Vegas casino operation in Savannakhet town that draws about 4,000-5,000 clients per week, mainly from neighboring Thailand (Schipani, 2009). Indeed, Lao PDR's single largest source market is Thailand, with 891,448 Thai accounting for 51% of total visitation (LNTA, 2008: 15). Thai and regional tourists, including citizens of China and Viet Nam, are mainly on 1-2 day package tours or quickly transiting Lao PDR to reach established leisure destinations in central Viet Nam, southern China or northern Thailand. Long-haul visitors from North America and Europe are primarily independent travelers who make up about 14% of total visitation. This long-haul market is typically interested in nature- and culture-based activities, especially visits

to ethnic villages, trekking and excursions to waterfalls and caves (LNTA, 2009b: 12). Although long-haul visitors make up a modest share of total arrivals, they are a priority market because of comparatively high average daily spending (US\$ 60 per day) and long length of stay (6.5 days). In comparison, Thai visitors who enter Lao PDR with a passport typically stay for only 1 or 2 nights and spend on average US\$ 52 per day. Regional day-trippers from China and Viet Nam are the lowest yielding market, spending on average a paltry US\$ 12 each visit (LNTA, 2008: 7).

The Lao PDR's first tourism master plan sought to limit international visitation to small groups and "top-of-the-range clientele" (LNTA, 1990: i). This policy persisted into the early 1990s when the former director general of the Lao National Tourism Authority affirmed that Lao PDR wished to avoid mass tourism and promote package tours to small groups of upper-market tourists (United Nations, 1996: 37). By the late 1990s there was a sharp upward shift in both regional and long-haul arrivals due to rigorous promotion of mainstream tourism and introduction of convenient visa-on-arrival privileges for most nationalities. The "small group only" policy was officially revised in the National Tourism Strategy 2006-2020 (LNTA, 2005: 16) which calls for 3 million arrivals by 2020 and construction of 25,000 hotel rooms, and emphasizes both development of participatory ecotourism in rural areas and mass-market regional tourism.

Notwithstanding this policy revision, the government continues to emphasize that tourism, in particular community-based tourism (CBT), should be used as a tool for poverty reduction and socio-economic development (GoL, 2004: 104, 2006: 17). The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Tourism Sector Strategy (TSS) endorsed by GMS countries in 2006 aims to "promote the GMS as a single destination, ensure tourism contributes to poverty

reduction, minimize the adverse impacts of tourism, empower women, and develop tourism products and services that distribute the benefits of tourism more widely" (ADB, 2005: 22). Lao PDR's adoption of the GMS TSS further reinforces the government's commitment to creating an inclusive, sustainable and equitable tourism industry, albeit one that is larger and more regionally integrated than those envisioned in previous policy statements.

Harrison & Schipani (2007: 194-230) describe a number of programs that international development partners are supporting to promote sustainable tourism in Lao PDR. Among the most widely known is the Nam Ha Ecotourism Project in Luang Namtha (UNESCO, 1999; 2003). This innovative demonstration project began in 1999 and was the first to show that CBT could generate substantial financial benefits for local people in Lao PDR and help finance protected area management (Lyttleton & Allcock, 2002: 4-7). Following the initial success of Nam Ha, the LNTA launched the Mekong Tourism Development Project (MTDP) in 2003 with the intention of expanding CBT to alleviate poverty, improve tourism access infrastructure, protect the environment and cultural heritage, and strengthen regional cooperation in the tourism sector (ADB, 2002). Both Nam Ha and MTDP empowered local people to take the lead in operations and management of CBT by investing in tourism-related skills training, gender and ethnic participation programs, marketing, networking and small- scale infrastructure.

Financial benefits of the Nam Ha Project and MTDP have been well documented (Gudajur, et al., 2008: 17-24; LNTAc, 2008: 22-27, 46) and researchers have written widely about tourism's positive and negative impacts on culture and the environment in the Greater Mekong Subregion (Cohen, 2001: 113-144; Schipani, 2008: 49-62; Hoi An Center for Monuments Management and Preservation: 47-63; Parnwell, 2009: 236-253). On the other

hand, published reports about the perception of tourism's impacts among rural households in Lao PDR are scarce. This article aims to redress this knowledge gap and identify reasons why some communities seem to adapt better than others to this new rural enterprise.

## **Methodology**

Standard questionnaires were administered to a sample of 391 households in 12 villages that received CBT development assistance ranging from 1-3 years. Data collection took place in Luang Namtha, Luang Prabang, Khammouane and Champasak provinces during December 2007. Survey questions were designed to collect information on ethnicity, livelihoods, tourist visitation and income, as well as household perceptions of tourism's impacts on social cohesion, culture and the environment. Total tourism revenue was estimated by adding all reported household tourism income and cross-checking with aggregate revenue estimates obtained during focus group interviews with village authorities. Communities included in the study were mainly involved in providing food and beverages, transportation, accommodation and guide services to long-haul international visitors from Europe and North America. Interviewers consisted of trained staff employed by the Lao National Tourism Administration and Provincial Tourism Departments who were familiar with the local language and cultural context. Prior to conducting field work, interviewers were provided with an orientation to the questionnaires and instructed on how to record information in a standardized format. Survey data were later codified and analyzed using the SPSS software package for Windows. In the few cases where heads of household were not available, another adult member of the family was interviewed.

## Results

Select demographic information on the study population is shown in Table 1. This data indicates that households are practicing agriculture as their main livelihood activity except in Ngoi Kao where tourism is a major employer and revenue generator. All households report very low non-tourism income of between 1.5 and 5 million Lao kip or about US\$ 176-588 per annum<sup>2</sup>. While limited income is not unusual for subsistence farmers living in underdeveloped rural areas, these households are particularly cash poor. Most earn less than the per-capita 2007 Gross National Income equivalent of US\$ 580 (ADB, 2008: 2).

Aggregate tourism revenue in each village varies considerably, ranging from 2 million to 2.3 billion kip. Ngoi Kao, a lowland Lao community situated on the picturesque Nam Ou River in Luang Prabang province, has by far the largest tourism industry of any village surveyed. Here 10,900 visitors spent approximately 2.3 billion kip (US\$ 270,000) on food and beverages, accommodation, river transport and excursions. Elephant rides and nature walks in Kiet Ngong were the second-highest earner, generating 142 million kip. Special features there include well-organized mahouts, community-owned lodging beside a large protected wetland and a cooperative guide service.

In terms of revenue per visitor, Ngoi Kao is again the highest earner, followed by Ta Ong where visitation is low but revenue per visitor quite high. Ta Ong provides food, accommodation and guides for overnight trekking tours into the Xe Pian National Protected Area. Conversely, the remote ethnic Hmong and Lanten villages of Sam Yot and Nam Korn in Luang Namtha were able to offer only limited guiding services to 40-50 visitors and reported per-visitor revenue of between 9,000 - 55,00 kip.

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<sup>2</sup> 8,500 Lao Kip = 1 USD

**Table 1** Select demographic information - Mekong Tourism Development Project target communities, 2007

Village	Ethnic Group	Population (n)	No. Families	No. Families Interviewed	Main Occupation	Estimated non-Tourism Annual Income per Family (kip)*	Tourist Arrivals in 2007 (n)	Total Tourism Revenue in 2007 (K)	Mean Tourism Revenue/Family (K)	Revenue per tourist arrival (K)	Ratio of visitors to population
Sam Yot	Hmong	173	24	21	Swidden Rice, Livestock	4.5 m	431	3.9 m	162,500	9,048	2.5
Nam Korn	Lantaen	210	36	24	Swidden Rice, Livestock	1.5 m	40	2.2 m	61,111	55,000	0.2
Domxay	Khmu	253	57	41	Swidden Rice, Rubber	5.0 m	347	5 m	87,719	14,409	1.4
Ngoi Kao	Lao	751	138	31	Paddy rice, Tourism	5.0 m	10,900	2.3 billion	16,666,667	211,009	14.5
Long Lao	Hmong	630	93	40	Swidden Rice, Corn, Sesame	3.6 m	600	1.8 m	19,355	3,000	1.0
Kiew Kan	Khmu	236	41	32	Swidden Rice, Livestock	3.6 m	113	7.6 m	170,732	61,946	0.5
Konglor	Lao	1,025	97	47	Paddy rice, Tobacco	3 m	500	40 m	412,371	80,000	0.5
Na Kang Xang	Lao	310	57	42	Paddy Rice, Merchants	4 m	5,300	100 m	1,734,386	18,867	17.1
Phonthong	Lao	87	18	12	Paddy Rice, Vegetables	1.5 m	50	2 m	111,111	40,000	0.6
Kiet Ngong	Lao	957	205	38	Paddy Rice, Livestock	5 m	3,694	142 m	692,683	38,440	3.9
Don Daeng	Lao	757	109	33	Paddy Rice, Fishing	3.5 m	128	9.5 m	87,156	74,218	0.2
Ta Ong	Lave	243	51	30	Paddy Rice, Mawa Nuts	3 m	32	3.3 m	64,706	103,125	0.1
--	5 ethnic groups	5,623	926	391	--	3.6 m	--	1,845	218 m	--	118,215
											(mean)

n = number; m = million; \* 1 US\$ = 8,500 Lao kip in 2009; k = Lao kip

Table 2 summarizes household responses to a standard set of 10 questions about tourism-related impacts in the communities surveyed. Shaded boxes in the table highlight perceived negative impacts. Shaded boxes also reflect the percentage of households not satisfied with how much they earn from tourism. Responses to question 10 show that the general feeling towards tourism in this sample of households is very positive despite modest financial benefits and some moderate negative impacts on culture, the environment and social cohesion. It is noteworthy that Meuang Ngoi is the village with the highest visitation and tourism revenue but also the one where the local population perceives the most negative impacts to be occurring. A desire to earn more from tourism in all villages is not unexpected from a population with very low cash income; households would presumably like to earn more from agriculture and other livelihood activities as well.

## **Discussion**

One reason for the elevated incidence of perceived negative impacts in Ngoi Kao could be the high number of visitors in proportion to the local population. Horn and Simmons (2002: 133-143) have compared destinations with high and low tourist-to-resident ratios and found that lower ratios are associated with fewer negative impacts. Ngoi Kao also has many guesthouses and restaurants in the village core, an area that was purely residential until the arrival of tourists around 2001. Though Na Kang Xang has a higher tourist-to-resident ratio than Ngoi Kao, visitation is structured very differently in the two villages. Na Kang Xang receives mainly domestic visitors who come to see the 229 Buddha images inside Tham Pha Fa Cave located about 1 km from the village's residential quarter. They typically spend 3 hours or less on site. In Ngoi Kao, the village itself is the attraction and visitors stay for 1-3 nights in close proximity to the local population. It is curious that Kiew Kan, which is a stopover for trekking tours originating in Ngoi Kao, has a low number of visitors but does report a comparatively high percentage of problems.

**Table 2** Percentage of households that identified tourism-related impacts in their community, 2007

		Percentage of families that responded "yes" to the question				
		1. Do you think the behavior of tourists is rude or offensive?	2. Do you feel tired or bored with seeing tourists?	3. Do you think that tourists come to your village too often?	4. Do you feel uncomfortable with tourists taking photographs?	5. Have you ever seen tourism causing conflicts between families in the village?
		0	0	0	6%	0
Community	Ta Ong (Lave)	0	0	3%	0	0
	Don Daeng (Lao)	0	0	0	0	0
	Kiet Ngong (Lao)	0	0	0	0	0
	Phonthong (Lao)	0	0	0	0	0
	Na Kang Xang (Lao)	0	0	19%	0	5%
	Konglor (Lao)	0	0	19%	0	0
	Kiew Kan (Khamu)	0	0	10%	0	0
	Long Lao (Hmong)	0	0	6%	0	0
	Ngoi Kao (Lao)	0	0	19%	0	0
	Dornxay (khmu)	0	0	2%	0	0
Nam Korn (Lanten)	Nam Korn (Lanten)	0	0	9%	0	0
	Sam Yot (Hmong)	29%	25%	15%	56%	0
		VH = 100%	VH = 100%	VH = 94%	VH = 94%	VH = 100%
		MH = 6%	MH = 100%	MH = 100%	MH = 100%	MH = 100%

VH = very happy; MH = mostly happy

Another reason for the high level of perceived negative impacts in Ngoi Kao may be that tourists “discovered” the village before it was properly prepared to manage an influx of visitors. By contrast, Na Kang Xang and all other villages in the study participated in substantial training and capacity building prior to sustained tourist visitation. Preparatory activities, including tourism awareness seminars, establishment of tourism management committees, study tours and tourism and hospitality management training, appear to have helped the communities steer clear of many problems reported in Ngoi Kao. It is not difficult to envision the cultural misunderstandings and negative environmental impacts caused by thousands of young, independent tourists descending on a rural village of subsistence farmers who are unprepared to deal with them.

## **Conclusion**

As far as the author knows, this is the first multi-province study aimed at documenting the perception of tourism’s impacts among rural households in Lao PDR. Its findings suggest that rural households are generally satisfied with tourism in their communities, but require adequate preparation prior to the arrival of large numbers of tourists to minimize negative impacts on culture, the environment and social cohesion. The government, development partners and the private sector should therefore seek to balance investment in the physical infrastructure needed to facilitate tourism access in rural areas with social investments in capacity building, education and training. A balanced approach is especially relevant in light of the new National Tourism Strategy, which targets 3 million international arrivals by 2020. The situation in Ngoi Kao serves as one example of the pitfalls of rapid tourism expansion in areas without adequate preparation.

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## **Disclaimer**

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