

## MANAGING TOURISM

### Keeping heritage above the race for tourist dollars

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Once tourism becomes an industry and a commercial activity, profit becomes the driving factor in deciding which activity or cultural product, or type of performing arts, appeals most to consumers and the market. In this way, cultural treasures are transformed into commodities.



A tourist poses for a picture at the Grand Palace in Bangkok. Should our heritage be subsumed by the drive for ever higher numbers of visitors?

As long as something exists in the form of a cultural treasure, we can apply our own standards based on cultural excellence. But as soon as cultural heritage becomes a commodity that is exchanged - bought and sold - it becomes a product defined by what sells well or in great volumes, and what appeals most to the consumer. This is the inherent source of conflict in the tourism versus heritage protection debate.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) needs to be aware that what we promote as heritage belongs to all of society and is "social capital". If we are not careful and allow our heritage to become a tourism commodity, then market forces will be the determinant. The colourful variety being offered must appeal to visitors. The rhythm and pace will no longer be what they used to be. The form it takes will no longer be the same, but will be one that appeals to a larger market - an external market with high purchasing power.

Tourism may lead to cultural integration, and if we are not careful, this mixing of cultures can ultimately lead to cultural change to the extent that the original uniqueness is forever lost.

There is tremendous reliance on "selling the old" and we have not developed what is new to the same standard as the old. And the new that is being created is not as ornate and beautiful, or as worthy of admiration, as the old. But neither do we protect and preserve what we have. We let the old deteriorate, change and be modified.

The owners of this heritage in rural areas have no say in deciding which of their cultural treasures are to become tourism commodities - be it a chedi (stupa), wat (temple), bot (chapel) or an ancient city wall - because they have no control. All is decided, or not decided, by being left to the free-for-all, open market competition. In countries that have a successful track

record in protecting and preserving art and culture, they leave it to the locals, the real owners. Others can behold and appreciate but are not allowed to decide, change or modify anything. Local community involvement helps to guarantee artistic and cultural distinctiveness and the uniqueness of the various cultural treasures that form part of their lives and existence.

Do not be enamoured of growth statistics. Thailand attracts 16 million visitors a year. But part of the growth that takes place includes "costs" that one needs to pay for - the various components that are purchased in order to promote tourism. Many restaurants are part of overseas franchises. Visitors expect the same level of comfort they are accustomed to. As we go for visitor arrival numbers, we agree to having these restaurants and the import of various ingredients from abroad. Additionally, travellers fly in on foreign flag carriers and perhaps stay at hotels that are part of international chains. It is all part of an international network. Hence, in the final tally, what we end up with in terms of benefits for society and the economy are not all that significant.

It is better for us to go for quality tourism, a sophisticated form of tourism that values cultural experiences over pure consumerism or indulgence where the tourist sees, spends and departs, with little gained. This is what I believe we should be aware of and concerned about. And we must try our best to steer our tourism towards achieving a balance.

Everyone in Thailand needs to give serious thought to these considerations. We should not solely focus on growth rates because, in the end, if we leave it to market forces that arise out of competition and are only driven by profit, there will be nothing left. Nothing that international visitors will find appealing or of interest.

The TAT has to ensure that there is a system in place to manage tourism and see to it that it functions effectively. Furthermore, the TAT needs to ensure that standards are achieved. But at the same time, excessive management will result in a loss of diversity. Society needs to find a balance. The Ministry of Tourism and Sports needs to listen to the public at large - the people, cultural leaders, spiritual leaders, historians, academics, social anthropologists, sociologists, and art and culture experts.

In many countries, certainly in Thailand, many of the activities are being undertaken inside "silos". Whoever is responsible for tourism promotion does only that; those who oversee culture focus solely on culture; the same applies to town planning. We lack integration, coordination and linkage between the different elements and entities to ensure effective protection and preservation of what constitutes our heritage.

How to make everyone feel that it is one's individual duty and responsibility to be involved in heritage protection? We must encourage all sectors of society to feel they are involved as co-owners. These feelings of ownership and involvement are vital because anyone who does anything without trying to involve all sectors of society will not be successful and will not receive the needed support.

Therefore, we all must jointly consider what makes for "humane tourism". That is to say, tourism which takes into account mankind and humanity more than profits, more than volume and more than growth. Humane tourism should be about learning each other's values.

If we ask ourselves this question and respond by saying that from now on humane tourism in Thailand will cater to those who come in search of uniqueness and "Thainess", this is how everyone can become involved with, and contribute to, heritage protection and preservation, while not forgetting comfort, convenience, the various facilities and amenities that we are capable of offering. Thus tourists will still have the opportunity to experience, to savour the human touch of Thailand, its culture and society within the framework of Thai society. This increases the value of Thai tourism. This form of tourism will help preserve the diversity of the human race and will not lead to a world community. Consumer culture in this world will lead to uniformity across every culture and society, and everyone in this world. What an extremely boring world this would be.

We would run out of exoticism - from the word "exotic", meaning something distinctive, diverse and worthy of admiration because of its unique appeal. We, too, have much diversity but this is disappearing by the day. We are in great danger of losing this impressive diversity, and of being left without anything that is different or diverse. Therefore we should undertake studies and conduct research, and try to benchmark our efforts with those being undertaken worldwide and regionally.

Life is not all about materialism. It is not all about wealth and competition - the race to acquire worldly possessions, what we have in the bank accounts or our possessions and belongings. Life imbued with value is one that enables us to admire and appreciate diversity, both in terms of cultural heritage as well as history.

Values have changed, hence the material possessions we accumulate are not indicators that guarantee our happiness. Given that we are presented with the opportunity to immerse ourselves in our rich heritage, a legacy that has been passed on to us to cherish, protect and preserve, should we choose to sell any part of this, it must be done with awareness. It must be packaged with awareness of how best to present things to avoid any adverse impact.

We also need to ensure that growth is not the enemy of all that is beautiful, intriguing, valuable, fascinating and worthy of admiration. If we do not act with awareness, the balance cannot be maintained and we will be the losers.

Everything will then be decided for us by others, leaving us without individual identity. In my eyes, that is hardly the type of society that we Thais should be proud of.

I believe we should place far greater importance on the process of cross-cultural exchange and the exchange of values, of which tourism is a key part. How can Thais, Thai society and Thai culture successfully maintain a distinctive identity? What I mean is, to be able to speak Thai clearly - not that we are unable to speak other languages, but to be able to speak Thai well and to be ready to embrace Thai values, Thai culture and all that is good which society offers. Only then can we stand proud in the world community.

If we fail to do so, we will become just like everyone else, we will not be able to stand on our own two feet. We will lose the Thainess we all claim to be proud of.

This is not about resisting the forces of development, change and globalisation, but about being intelligent enough to withstand these pressures and preserve our integrity. This would be the best way forward for Thai society - and that should be the goal of Thai tourism.

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