

COMMUNITY BASED TOURISM AND THE RESPONSIBLE ECOLOGICAL SOCIAL TOURS PROJECT (REST), THAILAND

Imagine Thailand. What comes to mind? For many, Thailand now conjures up images of slick sun, sea and sand holidays, bargain shopping and fine cuisine

Far away from glossy brochures, however, a growing number of small-scale Community based tourism (CBT) programs have been developed by rural community groups. In small communities resting among Thailand's mountains, rice fields, orchards and islands, local hosts and their guests are meeting as friends: sharing life, learning and laughter in the living heart of Thailand...

Community based Tourism in Thailand

Thailand, with a rich tapestry of landscapes, peoples and traditions has been an increasingly popular destination for nature and cultural tourists for over 2 decades. During this period, infrastructure and transportation have continuously improved, making remote areas safer and more accessible. Meanwhile, tourists have become more adventurous, traveling further and in ever-greater numbers. This has resulted in an explosion of tourism activities located in and around local Thai communities.

Tourism has the capacity to create income and opportunity for rural Thai people. Tourists are often enchanted by their experiences and can't wait to return. Despite this promising mix, however, rural village tourism has often delivered more impacts than benefits to Thai communities. Tourism activities developed in and around Thai villages have often occurred without significant local participation. Often, the profits generated by tourism flow past local people. Meanwhile, tourism frequently puts great pressures on local natural resources, traditional cultures and social structures.

Not only 'mass-tourism' has been disappointing for hosts and guests. Far too often, tourists have eagerly crossed the world on 'small-group' cultural tours with promises of 'authentic local interaction', only to find their tour leaders assuming hero roles: acting like museum curators who diligently explain every facet of local life, while the real community members look on from the outside, reduced to the status of exhibits.

These impacts catalyzed the search for new, gentler models of rural tourism which would generate greater benefits for Thai people and their environments. One model which has emerged is **Community based Tourism**. Thai CBT models have some differences. However, broadly speaking, they share the following core elements:

- CBT activities and services have been developed through a 'bottom up' process, engaging a broad range of local community members;
- Local people are empowered to define and represent their own communities, and also to direct how tourism should benefit them;
- CBT is managed by a formal community group rather than individuals;
- CBT projects support community development, and try to balance the goals of economic, environmental, social, and cultural sustainability;
- Activities are based on local natural, cultural and human resources;

- CBT is a bridge for hosts and guests to share their knowledge and experience: creating respect for their cultures and the environment;
- CBT is active and proactive – it's a lot of fun for hosts and guests!

What do you actually do on a CBT Tour?

CBT programs are 'hands-on' explorations of local life, guided by local community members. Local people chose activities by identifying the defining elements of their lives that they want to share. Programs usually run for between a day and a week. Guests join together in typical activities; enjoy cultural exchange; and experience nature and the relationships between the natural environment and the community. Guests may have the opportunity to stay in local homes with Thai families; cook and eat local food; try their hands at fishing, farming, natural dying and weaving; trek through the jungle; or learn about a community's unique history and achievements:

How Do Local Communities benefit from CBT?

To be considered successful, CBT must deliver benefits to the economic, social environmental and cultural health of participating communities. Benefits include:

- Community skills development: planning, cooperation, reaching consensus, communication, management, accounting and 'green product' production;
- An advocacy platform for local rural cultures and traditional practices;
- Increased awareness and commitment to maintain the balance between healthy environments and healthy communities among hosts and guests;
- 'Community Funds:' assisting community and environmental projects;
- Additional income – Community based Tourism has contributed up to a 10% increase in the yearly income of participating community members;
- CBT is also a vibrant forum for cultural expression, and cross-cultural exchange which has boosted the self-confidence of local people

The CBT Development Cycle: Product Development and Marketing

The CBT development cycle, successfully linking CBT hosts to guests, can be divided into 2 core areas of ***CBT Product Development*** and ***CBT Marketing***.

Significant preparation is required to develop CBT 'products'. REST's '***participatory process***' includes introducing the idea of CBT to a community; assessing local needs and opportunities together with local people; establishing a formal CBT group; facilitating a community vision for CBT and setting goals. Later, CBT groups work together to plan, develop and manage CBT programs, and staff choose roles and receive training, (e.g.: local guides and arts and crafts experts or 'homestay' hosts).

As communities develop experience of tourism and welcoming visitors, they return to their original products to better 'fine-tune' them to their guests' needs. CBT groups also use tools like 'Activity and Homestay Rotation,' 'Community Funds,' and 'Codes of Conduct' to ensure that the benefits from CBT are spread and impacts are limited.

Participatory CBT Marketing is even more challenging, requiring community members to work with sophisticated partners including tour operators and the government. Effective marketing requires skills which local people often lack, such as knowledge and understanding of the tourism industry; understanding of the unique selling points of their products; a clear idea of CBT markets and how to reach them;

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negotiation skills and English. At least, CBT groups must be able to formalize prices and tour programs, and develop information materials. Communities wishing to work with pre-booked groups also need solid management and coordination systems.

CBT Process – Also a Unique Selling Point

The participatory CBT development process is also at the heart of CBT products and marketing. There are many other established brands of village tourism which visit local communities. In Thailand, these include Ecotourism, Homestay, Agrotourism and Adventure tourism. Many of these models also explicitly claim to deliver benefits to local communities. ***However, only the CBT development process formally guarantees community members roles as actors in defining their own ‘well-being’ and gives them the tools to direct how tourism should reach this goal.***

In practice, this means that local people feel a sense of ownership and involvement in CBT activities which is more developed than other kinds of village tourism. Guests experience this commitment directly through the enthusiasm, warmth, and hospitality of their hosts, and the greater authenticity of their experiences. A developed sense of ownership also motivates many CBT club members to control the negative impacts of tourism. Guests also experience this directly through ‘Community Funds’, ‘Codes of Conduct’, and other tangible efforts to ensure that local CBT projects are sustainable.

What is the state of development of Thai CBT Projects?

Currently, over 40 rural Thai communities have been assisted to develop CBT. These projects have often developed in isolation from one another. Thus, different CBT groups have experienced different successes and challenges. Many CBT groups have successfully developed a CBT Group and management system, services and activities. Some projects have successfully attracted independent ‘walk in’ tourists. A small number of projects have had some success linking with local tour operators, academics and government agencies to organize tours and study tours. However, few projects have yet been successfully and consistently linked with CBT markets.

As a rough indicator, Thai CBT projects can be divided into 3 stages of development:

- ***Stage 3: Ready to Link with Advanced Markets*** (tour operators, etc)

These projects are well managed and experienced. The local CBT group has clear goals for CBT development and marketing; one or more fixed products; set prices; and informative promotional materials. Staff are well trained with clear roles and responsibilities, and experience delivering CBT services to different markets. The CBT group has also worked with outside partners (e.g.: government, tour operators, academics) and are able to discuss, evaluate, compromise and adapt their services.

- ***Stage 2: Requiring Greater Experience / Training***

These projects have developed CBT management systems, but have little direct experience with tourists. They have established goals for CBT development, a set program with rough prices; and some information. However, they are unclear about marketing their products. Local staff have been trained, and have clear roles and responsibilities but lack experience and expertise. These CBT groups have worked with few partners and are inexperienced evaluating or adapting their services.

- ***Stage 1: Requiring Fundamental Training***

These projects are new and inexperienced. A CBT group has been formed, and has set basic goals for CBT product development. There is enthusiasm to clarify the roles of members, strengthen management, and develop clear CBT programs. The CBT

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group has identified CBT activities, but they have not developed a clear program or reliable prices. So far there are no information materials. Staff require clarification of roles and basic training, and have no experience working with tourists or partners.

Participatory CBT Marketing – How to do it in practice?

The majority of Thai CBT projects are currently at stage 2, however, a small number of projects are much better developed, and are ready to link with advanced markets. In practice, it is difficult to facilitate community participation in CBT marketing. REST are working to make CBT marketing more participatory, through initiatives including:

- Empowering local communities to define their own marketing messages: All original programs are based on 'our good things': elements of local culture and nature, and special groups and individuals which the CBT group identifies, feels proud of and chooses to share with their guests.
- CBT Marketing Training: to assist community members to understand how guests arrive in the community; different channels of communication and distribution; and the opportunities and risks associated with them.
- Participatory Marketing Planning: to allow community members to decide what kind of tourists, in what numbers, and how often they want to host, and participate in choosing the strategies to attract these guests. However – in practice this requires compromise, even within the best partnerships.
- Participatory feedback: between CBT club members and guests, tour guides, tour leaders, and tour operators (both national and international). This leads to informed, 'optimum power balanced' product development.

Participatory CBT Marketing – Why?

Finding guests is often considered to be the responsibility of the private sector and government. Certainly, for rural communities, marketing is usually an alien concept, removed from their daily lives. So, why should communities participate in marketing?

The core goals of REST's CBT model are community development, cultural exchange and sustainable natural resource management. However, like any form of tourism, if CBT is badly managed it can cause negative impacts. This risk is increased by the fact that important tourism stakeholders often focus solely on increasing income through tourist volume. The Thai government are currently not actively supporting CBT. In fact they often choose to promote CBT aggressively under alternative brands, leading to increasing numbers of inappropriate guests.

Despite the challenges and practical limitations to community participation, marketing remains a crucial leverage point to influence the balance between economic, social and environmental goals. Communities and the impacts of tourism are 'out of sight and out of mind' for the vast majority of tour operators and marketers. While local community members may not have the most to gain from tourism, they certainly have the most to lose. Through marketing, CBT groups can proactively 'target' the 'right guests', while keeping volume within sustainable environmental and socio-cultural limits. ***Marketing determines the sustainability of CBT as a development tool.***

Who are the Guests? – REST’s Experience

REST are a small organization, without the capacity or funds to systematically test every CBT market and provide solid statistical details about the nationalities and quantities of ‘CBT Guests.’ We have ‘tested the water’ with many different markets, and are sure that there are many different groups of CBT guests with great potential:

- **Cultural Eco-explorers:** Independent travelers, especially aged 35-60 contact REST regularly. They are distinguished by active interest in nature and cultural exchange. They often travel in couples and with their families.
- **Students:** Our experience is that students enjoy CBT very much and CBT communities enjoy hosting study tours more than any other kind of tour. This is because students really come to learn, not only to have fun. Students ask a lot of questions and are enthusiastic about the answers. The community members feel proud that they have been considered interesting enough for students to cross the world to study their community or surroundings.
- **Expatriates:** Many expatriates living in Bangkok would like their families to experience more of the ‘real Thailand.’ REST have put together presentations for expatriate organisations like embassies and language centers. This was fairly successful, and there is certainly room to develop this market more.
- **Volunteers:** Unquestionably, especially since the tsunami there has been a marked increase in the number of volunteer requests. Many new ‘voluntour’ operators have emerged within the past 18 months, focusing on 3 day to 3 month volunteer placements. CBT sites are well positioned for this market.

Who are the Best Partners for CBT?

In REST’s experience, the ‘ideal’ partners for CBT projects include ‘responsible’ or ‘green’ small group, cultural tour operators; and academic and youth study tours.

REST and our partner communities have worked together extremely productively with *Intrepid Travel* and *Go Bush!* (Australia); *Hauser Excursion* (Germany); *Sawasdee Reizen* (The Netherlands) and several universities, colleges, schools and youth groups. These partners have actively sought to support the principles of CBT; they have been prepared to distribute orientation materials to manage guests’ expectations and integrate REST’s input into tour leader training. They book far enough in advance to keep coordination relatively simple for hosts, and in sufficient numbers for guests to share chartered transport and thus keep trip prices down.

REST are currently working to try and increase tour operator visits to partner communities for participatory feedback, and developing joint lessons learned.

CBT Consumer Demand: Trends

No global initiative currently exists for gathering data on CBT markets, and there is great debate over the size of the market and also the extent of the ‘green market gap.’¹ However, there has been market research into nature and wildlife travel, as

¹ Megan Epler Wood’s fascinating report “The Green Market Gap” (available free at www.eplerwood.com) explores the “large gap between consumer concern and behaviour.” The report “*Community Based Tourism and The Responsible Ecological Social Tours Project (REST), Thailand – An Introduction*”. Prepared by Ms. Jaranya Daengnoi, REST Manager, and Mr. Peter Richards, REST Marketing Manager, February, 2006.

well as surveys of consumer attitudes towards ethical and responsible tourism. This research indicates that consumer demand for culturally and environmentally sensitive tourism products, which deliver tangible benefits to local communities, is growing.

Nature travel is estimated to be the world's fastest growing tourism sector, increasing between 10% and 30% per year. In 2000, the WTO estimated that by 2020, 20% of a forecasted 1,560 million tourists would be nature tourists. In 2002, this figure was revised to a more modest 4.5% of outbound, long-haul tourists. However, By 2005, organizations such as the UK TOTEM Tourism Marketing are predicting that a 20% market share could already have been reached by 2006, with an estimated 170 million 'green' tourists supporting a 150 billion USD global 'green tourism' industry.

REST's direct experience, working for a decade to link partner CBT communities with 'responsible tourists' and sustainable tourism operators indicates that demand for responsible, authentic interaction with local communities is growing. This trend is supported by the research of organizations such as the UK web-based Responsible Travel company, ResponsibleTravel.com. In their 2004 "Had Enough" market survey, Responsible Travel. Com reported that 88% of respondents stated: "Tour operators should be more responsible to the environment and culture and benefit local people."

Demographic trends in women's travel preferences, combined with significant changes in Thai travel arrivals also bode well for sustainable tourism and CBT.

Data analysis shows that women are far more interested in environmentally and socially responsible holidays than men. In August 2005, Responsible Travel.Com analyzed their trip booking data and found that 75% of their bookings for 'responsible' holidays were made by women. This trend is also supported by the Australian company, Intrepid Travel, who actively market their products as 'Responsible Travel.' On average, women account for between 60 and 70% of Intrepid Travel's customers. According to Diethelm Travel, The number of women travelers to Thailand is growing dramatically, up from 38% in 1995 to 43% in 2004, and set to move up to 50%.

Megan Epler Wood's research into the American 'Cultural Creatives' market also indicates that women are taking the lead with at least 60% of green purchasing.

Markets for Thai CBT: The Case For Europe?

European markets seem to offer excellent opportunities to promote Thai CBT.

Good potential markets for CBT include the UK, Germany and The Netherlands. The UK and Germany are Thailand's most important European markets. In 2004, 628,679 Brits and 438,238 Germans visited Thailand (Immigration Bureau, Thailand). In 2002, Thailand was the 2nd most popular developing country (DC) destination for Brits, and the 5th most popular DC destination for Germans. According to "EU Long Haul Market Survey, 2005", compiled by CBI, (The Dutch Center for Promoting Imports from Developing Countries), the UK market is increasingly focused on fair trade, ethical travel choices and sustainability. Germans are interested in local culture, looking for exciting experiences, willing to try new things and environmentally aware.

The Netherlands, although a smaller market, also offers many exciting opportunities to promote Thai CBT. Thailand was the Netherlands's 3rd most popular DC destination in 2002, with over 148,000 trips. The Netherlands is distinguished by

shows that estimates of green market demand are often based on information about consumer attitudes rather than consumer behaviour, and resulting market projections could be as far as 90% off the mark. "*Community Based Tourism and The Responsible Ecological Social Tours Project 6 (REST), Thailand – An Introduction*". Prepared by Ms. Jaranya Daengnoi, REST Manager, and Mr. Peter Richards, REST Marketing Manager, February, 2006.

proactive, cross-sectoral support for green travel and concern for the environment. These trends are complemented by growing demand for niche tourism products; an active interest in how other people live; and a dynamic population who enjoy an average 2.9 holidays per person, per year, 48% of which are spent abroad!

Promotional Channels

REST are developing our own promotional capacity, and due to limited resources have not been able to explore expensive promotional channels. Experience includes:

- Tourism fairs: these are the most effective form of promotion, as you can survey and contact multiple tour operators relatively inexpensively. REST have attended the ITB, Reispavillon, World Travel Mart and Vakantiebeurs. Pre-fair marketing, strong presentation, and good follow up are essential.
- Our Website: so far this has been more successful as an information than promotion tool, however, we are developing our experience in web marketing.
- Sustainable tourism sites: sites like Responsibletravel.com and ECOCLUB have generated interest in REST's CBT programs. (apr 2 enquiries per week).
- Word of Mouth: apr. 30% of REST enquiries are generated through W.o.M.
- Guidebooks and articles: REST usually don't promote in guide books, because it's impossible to control the numbers of guests which is very risky. However, we do promote in Tourism Concern's Good Alternative Travel Guide. Journalists frequently write articles about REST sites. This hasn't noticeably increased enquiries, but our partners on site (especially Koh Yao Noi) have reported that 2-3 weeks after an article they receive more guests.
- Conferences and awards: Attending conferences is effective marketing for 'CBT know-how' - training and consultancy services. The Conservation International and National Geographic Traveler World Legacy Award, received by REST in 2002 has been mentioned by many of our guests.

Significant Challenges faced by Thai CBT Communities:

These issues have emerged as consistent challenges faced by CBT Groups:

- **Coordinating Necessary Training:** CBT groups and staff in many communities require further training to make their services more professional.
- **Developing Participatory CBT Standards:** There is currently no mutually accepted set of standards for Thai CBT products. This is an obstacle for projects that want to link with tour operators. Another challenge is to ensure multi-stakeholder participation in the development of CBT standards, so that they reflect the participatory principles of CBT and are considered 'fair to all.'
- **Developing a Recognized CBT Brand:** Significant investments of money and time are required to develop and maintain CBT. This means that CBT is often more expensive than comparable tourism products. Recognition of the integrity of the CBT brand is essential if it is to stand out from the competition.
- **Marketing CBT and Setting Volume Goals / Limits:** CBT practitioners are rural people without the knowledge, skills and resources to plan and implement marketing activities. This reduces their influence over the type and volume of their guests. Some groups are struggling to attract guests; while visitor volume in other communities is exceeding the capacity of CBT groups to manage. A greater risk is that the volume of visitors could exceed 'Carrying Capacities': causing negative impacts to local cultures and environments.

- **Increasing Volume and Product Diversity for Tour Operators:** Similarly, the 'Carrying Capacities' of CBT projects are often lower than the passenger volumes that tour operators require to run their trips. Low volume increases costs for tour operators. In addition, CBT projects are now promoted individually. Tour operators prefer to choose from a broad spread of products.
- **Catalyzing Support from Thai Tour Operators:** Thai tour operators have the experience and the capacity to integrate CBT into their programs for domestic and international guests. However, due to limited demand and stiff price competition they have so far shown little interest in marketing Thai CBT.
- **Ensuring Good Coordination and Communication:** Coordination and communication are essential elements of success in the tourism industry, where logistical arrangements can change by the hour, and expectations must be met! In particular, international tour operators and youth group study-trip coordinators require professional coordination, often in English. Most CBT project staff do not use English well enough to coordinate with these partners.
- **Developing Greater Thai Government Support for CBT:** Overall, the Thai government have been disinterested in supporting CBT. Where CBT projects have been promoted, they have been presented under a variety of alternative brands, both with and without the consent of CBT group members. This 're-branding' of CBT has confused some group members, and has contributed towards inappropriate numbers and types of tourists arriving in the villages.
- **Differentiation from 'Homestay':** Homestay with a local family is one CBT service, and an idea which has become very popular in Thailand. Focusing on 'product before process' the government have promoted 'Homestays' instead of CBT. Subsequently, Homestays have replaced or even compete with CBT projects in some areas. Frequently, Homestays have been developed in local communities without using tools to spread tourism benefits and limit impacts. If CBT projects continue to be presented as Homestay, than their reputation among consumers will be influenced by the standards of the Homestay brand.

Recommendations to Support Community based Tourism

- **Develop National CBT Networks and Coordinating Organizations:**

More than 40 CBT projects have been developed by rural Thai communities. Neighboring countries like Lao PDR, Cambodia, Vietnam are quickly developing CBT projects. Discussions with tour operators show that demand for 'authentic' village products, which protect the environment and offer tangible benefits to local communities is growing. However, working alone, it is difficult for projects to be successful. Challenges include low access to markets, inconsistent standards, limited carrying capacity Vs volume demands, coordination and communication, and low government support. There is a clear need for **national level CBT Networks and coordinating organizations** to represent CBT communities, coordinate product development and staff training, and manage links with inbound / outbound industry.

- **National / International CBT Brand and Participatory Standards:**

There is no accepted set of standards for Thai CBT products. This is an obstacle for projects that want to link with tour operators. Another challenge is to ensure multi-stakeholder participation in the development of CBT standards, so that they reflect the participatory principles of CBT and are considered 'fair to all.' Significant investments of money and time are required to develop and maintain CBT. This

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means that CBT is often more expensive than comparable tourism products. Development of a CBT brand is essential if it is to stand out from the competition, and successfully lobby for government support (attendance at tourism fairs, etc).

Who are REST?

Responsible Ecological Social Tours Project (REST) is a Thai NGO that was established in 1994 by the Thai Volunteer Service (TVS) in response to the negative impacts that mass tourism development had brought upon Thai cultures, society and the environment. Incorporated in 2000, REST assists local community members to work together and develop small-scale Community based Tourism (CBT) models which support community development, and limit the negative impacts of tourism.

REST were the first Thai organization to begin developing CBT, in Koh Yao Noi island, Pang Nga province, over 11 years ago. To date, REST have assisted over 20 local Thai communities to develop CBT programs appropriate to their contrasting physical and socio-cultural environments. REST work together with our partner communities to explore how CBT could improve or preserve their quality of life, based on the principles of healthy environments, societies, cultures and economies.

REST have extensive experience providing training and support at every stage of CBT development. At community level, our expertise includes CBT feasibility studies; needs assessment; group building; participatory planning and development of CBT services; and monitoring and evaluation. At national and international levels, we assist partner communities by marketing their products. In addition, REST deliver range of professional Training for Trainers (ToT) programs and CBT consultancy services to national and international government offices and NGO's; and we work together closely with academics, media, and partners in the business sector.

National government bodies that REST have provided training and consultancy for include the Thai Research Fund; the Thai Department of Fisheries; The Thai Hill tribe Welfare Department; and the Thai National Park Service. We have provided CBT training to government representatives from Vietnam, Lao PDR, Cambodia, China, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Belize. Other organizations that we have worked with include the EU, UNDP, ADB, AIDB and SNV, the Netherlands Development Organization.

Our work has been recognized by our role as organizers of the '*International Year of Ecotourism Regional Conference, 2002*', and as winners of National Geographic and Conservation International's '*World Legacy Award for Destination Stewardship*.'

REST Project Evolution:

REST believe that Community based Tourism has the potential to be an effective development tool, supporting the environment and quality of life for hosts and guests. We intend to focus on catalyzing increased support for CBT Principles, Processes and Products at community, district, provincial, national and international levels. We believe that the most effective way to do this is by facilitating the development of a national Thai CBT Network Organization to link partner communities with selected Responsible Travel partners in the travel industry. In the longer term, REST hope to develop into a formal, national or regional Community Based Tourism institution.

Post-Script: CBT Post-Tsunami

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During 2005, REST worked with the ILO and an alliance of national NGO partners to assist 3 southern Thai communities who were affected by the tsunami to develop community based tourism programs. In December, we organized the first pilot tour to these communities, which was very successful. Local community members were pleased to receive guests, and very keen to share their amazing stories of survival and solidarity following the tragedy. For more information, please contact REST.

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<http://www.totemtourismmarketing.org>

WWW.ECOCLUB.COM

National Immigration Bureau, Bangkok, Thailand

Plus extensive discussion with tourists and international and Thai tour operators

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