

## Power Relations in Tourism and Environmental Transformation in Bang Saen, Thailand

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### Abstract

This paper investigates how historical changes in power relations in tourism have transformed the environment in Bang Saen, Chonburi Province, Thailand and suggests a proper power relations model for achieving sustainable tourism development. In-depth interviews, photography analysis, and document surveys were conducted. The researcher found that power relations in the development of tourism can determine the way in which natural and cultural assets, which function as the center of tourism, are transformed.

The paper concludes that if all stakeholders desire the continuation of tourism in Bang Saen in the long-term and, with it, economic, political, and social development, those stakeholders who hold political and social influence should share power with other stakeholders in order to: co-manage natural and cultural assets in the host societies; allow all stakeholders to participate in the decision-making process in tourism development policies, strategies, and plans; and develop tourism in such a way that reproduces nature, strengthens social relationships, and inherits local knowledge, which are key natural, social, and human capitals.

*Key words:* Power relation/ Environmental transformation/ Sustainable tourism development

### 1. Introduction

This paper is a part of my Ph.D. research that is currently under way, and it explores environmental transformations in Bang Saen from 1943 – 2010. Since the late twentieth century, the tourism industry has been explosively growing and becoming one of the largest industries in the world (UN, 1999; Neto, 2003). The number of international tourist arrivals was 25 million in 1950 and increased to 903 million in 2007, or about 36 times (UNWTO, 2008). Global significance of the industry is well acknowledged as one of the largest generators of wealth, employment, and capital investment. The industry accounts for 11% of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), 8% of the world's jobs, and 9% of all capital investment (UNEP, 2002). Sustainability has become key challenge in the industry.

If the industry is well managed, it can spread prosperity, but if it is not well managed, it can be potential threats to the environment and host societies (UNEP and WTO, 2005). The World Tourism Organization (WTO) (1997) defined sustainable tourism as tourism development '*meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems*'.

The motive power of capitalism is the endless quest for profits (Harvey, 1985). The environment transformed by investment of capitalists seeking greater profits largely disturbs securing such a symbiotic relationship between the environment and tourism development. Natural and cultural

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assets, functions as the center of tourism, are created and destroyed by capitalists seeking greater profits. Investment is an engine for the massive growth of the industry. Capitalists increasingly invest in telecommunication, transportation, and accommodations to cater for an increasing number of visitors; as a result, it destroys natural and cultural assets (Mitchell, 1998). While capitalists exploit natural and cultural assets for greater profits; they hardly touch on the sustainment of natural and cultural assets on which the creation of profits depends. When natural and cultural assets in host societies are largely disturbed by tourism development, it must create new asset, which can attract more visitors so as to sustain the creation of profits. However, sustaining tourism by creative destruction and destructive creation of natural and cultural assets will one day reach the tipping point, and the industry will be collapsed. Therefore, the stakeholders must develop tourism in the way which natural and cultural assets sustain.

## 2. Methodology

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews, photography analysis, and document survey. First, the researcher made in-depth interviews with 15 key informants who are directly and indirectly engaged in tourism in Bang Saen. They are local people, members of municipality council, business leaders, community leaders, and recyclable waste collection leaders. The researcher identified passages of text and applied labels to them that indicate thematic ideas. Second, photography analysis was conducted. The researcher received old photographs from Saensuk municipality and a local person engaging in a photography studio in Bang Saen. The researcher also took pictures of

current Bang Saen. Old photographs were compared with current ones to analyze how Bang Saen has changed. The researcher described analytical ideas found in the comparison of photographs. Third, the researcher reviewed existing documents on a history of Bang Saen, politics in Bang Saen, and publications of the municipality. The researcher found the documents from the central library and teachers in Burapha University and a community leader during in-depth interview. The researcher used text data from the documents to support findings from the analysis of interviews and photographs.

## 3. Results

### *3.1 A brief history of power relations in tourism and environmental transformation in Bang Saen*

Power relations in tourism development determine the way in which natural and cultural assets in Bang Saen are transformed. Environmental transformation in Bang Saen can be divided into two distinct periods. According to old local people, Bang Saen was a quiet fishing village until the environment was transformed by tourism development in 1943. Bang Saen beach bristled with a variety of trees and plants, for example, saman, ebony trees, pine trees, coconut trees, sugar palms, and beach morning glories. Bang Saen beach area was a grazing land used for feeding domestic animals such as pigs, buffalos, cows, chickens, and ducks. The land was owned by the central government. The buffalo and cows were living assistants used for conveyance and cultivation. Khao Sam Muk hill was a sacred place respected by the local people and bristled with trees and mangroves (Saensuk municipality, 2010). Monkeys and snakes lived in there. Leam Tan bristled with jungle. Wonnapa beach was a community of

fishermen. Farmlands unfolded inland and the local people raised rice, sugar palm trees, coconut trees, and cassava. Fishermen caught fish and brought to the Nong Mon market. They could sell or exchange marine products with farm products. Their living conditions were rather self-sufficient.

Environmental transformation in the first period was started when Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsonggram (3rd and 8th Prime Minister of Thailand) initiated the project of bungalow construction in 1943 in the northwest side of Bang Saen, which included in Khao Sam Muk hill, Bang Saen beach, and Leam Tan. Later the development of seaside resort was taken over by Field Marshal Sarit

Thanarat (11th Prime Minister of Thailand). They destroyed previous beach scenery for grazing land and created a seaside resort for general Thai public, and hence they built a variety of things for visitors; the Prime Minister's residence; guesthouses for Thai government officials; new roads; bungalows; bars; parking areas; sidewalk; and beach coconut trees scenery. Environmental transformation in the second period (1988 – present) was started when Somchai Khunpluem, better known as 'Kamnan Po', was elected to the mayor of Saensuk municipality in 1988 and announced the improvement of the city to rebuild Bang Saen as a popular tourist destination again. Table 1 shows visitor numbers and tourism revenue in Bang Saen during two periods.

**Table 1** Visitor numbers and tourism revenue in Bang Saen

Year	The number of visitor	Tourism revenue (million Baht)
1978	1,023,434	810.56
1989	1,374,360	1415.59
1991	1,624,200	1823.49
1998	1,016,081	1,362.45
2008	1,433,236	2,494.25

Source: TAT, 2008; National Environmental Board, 1978; Jiemsripong, 1998

Note: The number of visitor in 1978 was calculated by the author and it was based on data shown in National Environmental Board's report published in 1978.

Tourism revenue in 1978, 1989 and 1991 were calculated by the author and it was based on inflation rate of 3%.

He transformed the seaside resort into a modern tourism city through companies that belong to him and his followers, and as result, the number of visitors was 1,023,434 in 1978 and increased to 1,433,236 in 2008, while tourism revenue was 810.56 million baht in 1978 and increased to 2,494.25 in 2008. Him and his followers could reap benefits and gain profit, and hence their economic, political and social power also grew with the development of Bang Saen. His followers include his family, relatives, the municipality councilors, beach vendors, the local people, etc.

However, benefits and profits were unequally shared, and hence those powers. He pushed forward the development all over Bang Saen to attract more visitors, and hence more benefits and profits for him and the local people, which were gained by construction of new roads, development of real estate, renovation of the scenery, and reorganization of beach vendors. The number of international visitors, who have more purchasing power, also has increased from 3,130 in 1997 to 51,217 in 2007, or about 16 times (TAT, 2008).

### ***3.2 Domination of the military dictators and environmental transformation in the first period***

The reason why Plaek Pibulsonggram built his residence and guesthouse for Thai government officials and initiated the project of seaside resort construction in Bang Saen was to avoid involvement in the Imperial Japanese army during the Second World War. Moreover Bang Saen was convenient place for him, because Sukhumvit road leading to the Sattahip Naval Base had already arrived at Bang Saen in 1940. However, he moved to Phetchabun province when the Imperial Japanese army came and anchored in the vicinity of this area. After he moved out, the seaside resort fell into a slump until Sarit Thanarat appeared in Bang Saen, because visitors were mostly the government officials and servicemen. The creation of a seaside resort greatly transformed physical and social environment in Bang Saen. Plaek Pibulsonggram opened up and purchased land from the local people and developed 113 rai (approximately 0.18 square kilometer) of land area in Khao Sam Muk hill for the Prime Minister's residence and guesthouses for Thai government officials. His followers also built houses in the vicinity of the area including Field Marshal Phin Choonhavan (1891 – 1973). He made the road from Khao Sam Muk hill to Bang Saen beach, a pier made by concrete (6 meter width, two sidewalks, 50 meter long), parking area, and restaurant in Leam Tan in 1954. The restaurant was exclusive to Thai government officials and special guests. Later on Sarit Thanarat built the Prime Minister's residence and guesthouses for Thai government officials and special guests in Leam Tan in 1960. He changed what he thinks not good. He was obsessed

about cleanliness on the surface of society as evidence of an achieved standard of civilization (Peleggi 1996). For example, he changed scenery by relocating bungalows to zoning area, planting coconut trees with regularity and building a promenade along Bang Saen beach; therefore the beach looks more organized seaside resort. The government exploited 556 rai (approximately 0.89 square kilometers) of land area along Bang Saen beach for the seaside resort. The Department of Public and Municipal Works planned and built the seaside resort including Bang Saen beach hotel, bungalows, bars, sidewalk, roads, and parking area. The seaside resort was enlarged and renovated several times by changing the administration authority, because the Saen Samran Company, the first public organization responsible for the management of the seaside resort, did not go well; therefore the responsibility for the management was handed over to several government offices, for example, the Treasury Department (1952), the Government Lottery Office (1960), and the Tourism Organization of Thailand, later the Tourism Authority of Thailand (1964) (Mahakhan, 2009).

The influx of visitors into Bang Saen associated with creation of the seaside resort offered alternative source of income to the local people and transformed lifestyle. The local entrepreneurs emerged and started to make use of the situation for doing tourism-related business, for example, pleasure boat, beach chair business, food stalls, etc. for seeking profits. Fishing boats were remodeled into pleasure boats by installing seats for passengers. Fishermen engaged in fishery during weekday, while they engaged in pleasure boat business during weekend. Peasants became commercial farmers and common fishermen became commercial fishermen (Limpanat, 2002). The economic growth of Bang Saen attracted migrant workers and economic migrants from

Northeastern part of Thailand and neighboring areas. While tourism improved economic status of Bang Saen to some extent, it created environmental problems, for example waste and wastewater problem, noise pollution, traffic jam, land use problem and slum formation (National Environmental Board, 1978). When Plaek Pibulsonggram and Sarit Thanarat initiated the project of seaside resort construction, they did not establish a mechanism of tourism development and management in Bang Saen. The seaside resort was just created for them, the governmental officials, and Thai general public. The local people seized new opportunities for seeking greater profits, therefore new tourism-related business was created and visitors became prey to them. Plaek Pibulsonggram and Sarit Thanarat were not interested in seeking profits but interested in building their own seaside resort in their convenient place, probably because they were not capitalists but servicemen. In 1976, Pramarn Adireksarn, the vice prime minister of Thailand, announced for improvement of Bang Saen beach, because the beach environment was deteriorated and became improper place for recreation (National Environmental Board, 1978). Bang Saen was sukapiban (sanitary district), local government system in Thailand, and it could only provide and maintain basic sanitary services to the communities for example water supply, waste disposal, sewage and drainage, and revenues were inadequate and unequally distributed from the central government (Pas-Ong, n.d.). Therefore, sukapiban Saensuk didn't have enough financial and human capital to address the problems.

### ***3.3 Domination of the local leader and environmental transformation in the second period***

Sukapiban Saensuk was administratively upgraded into thesaban (municipality) Saensuk in 1988. According to the interviewees, tourism in Bang Saen was in a slump until Somchai Khunpluem was elected to the first mayor of Saensuk municipality in 1988. The new mayor, Somchai Khunpluem, therefore announced the improvement of the city to rebuild Bang Saen as a popular tourist destination again. The inactive seaside resort was transformed into the modern lively tourism city. He developed Bang Saen by making the best use of patron-client relations. The patron-client relationship is pervasive in Thai society. The client gives services and other kinds of support in return for protection from the patron. The client uses the influence of patron on his benefits, occasional favors and financial support (Mortimer, 1987). He made firm patron-client relations by sharing profits between him and his followers. He was able to acquire budgets from the central government and provincial government by sending his first son, Sonthaya Khunpluem, to Member of the House of Representatives of Thailand for various projects relating to tourism development in Bang Saen, and initiated projects through his, his family's, and his followers' companies. When he could not wait for budgets from the central government, he sometimes spent his money to initiate some projects. He and his followers could gain profits from the projects, because they owned construction companies to carter for the development (Praditsilp and Tinbangdew, 2008). They developed infrastructure all over Bang Saen that local people can benefit, and created employment through tourism development in Bang Saen. Therefore, they could make a fortune while the local people could make a living. He could take possession of economic, political

and social power, and tourism became source of those powers.

Bang Saen beach, Leam Tan, Khao Sam Muk hill, and Wonnapa beach were greatly renovated. Many lands in Bang Saen were bought by him and his followers before prices rose, because they knew that new development projects are coming. Roads which reach those attractions were expanded or newly constructed, and Bang Saen became more accessible to visitors. Hotels, condos, student dormitories, restaurants, house

and lot, shopping mall, restaurants, etc. were constructed on such land. On the Bang Saen beach, beach vendors were organized; slum was removed; large and small hotels, tourist information center, Saensuk municipality office building were built; dirt road was paved and expanded into four lanes road, which has parking lots in both sides. beach morning glory was removed; tall coconut trees were cut down and short ones were more planted; and the beach was densely occupied with beach chairs, parcels, food stalls, and souvenir shops (Figure 1).

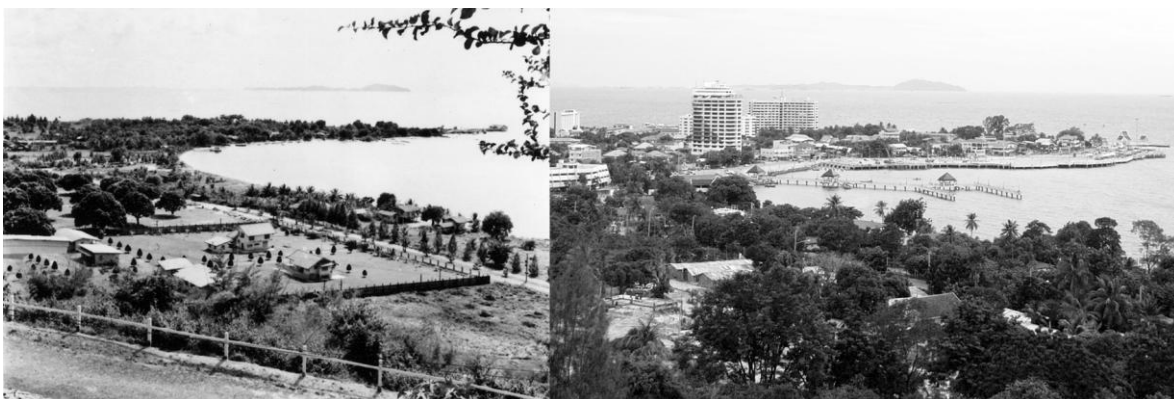


**Figure 1** Bang Saen beach

*Source:* Left – Damrong Wiwatanason (1952) and Right – Daichi Iwase (2010)

Leam Tan was covered by jungles and had characteristics of craggy coast. It has been gradually reclaimed. New road, piers, monument of tourism city, high rise

condos, parking area, kiosks, seafood restaurants, and Thai-style open pavilions were constructed. Currently extension works of the road is underway (Figure 2).



**Figure 2** Leam Tan

*Source:* Left – Saensuk municipality (1943) and Right – Daichi Iwase (2010)

Khao Sam Muk hill has been gradually transformed from a sacred place among local people in Bang Saen into a recreation area for tourists, which consists

of monkeys' open-zoo, Public Park, observatory, seafood restaurants, high rise condos, and hotels. New road around the hill was also constructed (Figure 3).



**Figure 3** Khao Sam Muk hill

Source: Left – Damrong Wiwatanason (1950) and Right – Daichi Iwase (2010)

Wonnapa beach has been transformed from a community of fishermen into a recreation area for tourists and Burapha University students. Public Park, which consists of exercise

equipments, promenade with breakwater, hotels, bars; restaurants, luxury condos and student dormitories were constructed. Currently Wonnapa beach is one of the areas that is being heavily invested (Figure 4).



**Figure 4** The Wonnapa beach

Source: Left – Saensuk municipality (1950's) and Right – Daichi Iwase (2010)

A variety of tourism-related business was emerged in order to gain profits from the increase number of visitors induced by tourism development.

The local people created a variety of business for example, beach chair, recreation tube, grilled chicken, food stand, souvenir, shower room, rent-a-bike, banana boat, child's toys,

seafood restaurant, coffee shop, hotel, rental room, souvenir photo shoot, Thai massage, laundry, etc. They densely occupied space in tourist attractions and utilized natural and cultural assets. The local people approved of the way Somchai Khunpluem develops the city, because the development offered many opportunities for the local people to make a living, which attracted more migrant workers and economic migrants. However environmental problems still continue to exist, because the problems were addressed by the way which removes symptom rather than the causes. For example, waste problems were addressed by purchasing more land for landfill and waste collection vehicles rather than implementing 3Rs programs - Reduce, Reuse and Recycle, and traffic jam was addressed by making more roads and parking area for visitors rather than making cycling and walking holiday destination or car-free destination. Moreover new environmental problems were also added for example, overcrowded beach, aesthetic (or visual) pollution, and beach erosion.

The environment is transformed by destroying natural and cultural assets and creating new man-made assets in order to attract more tourists; and hence more profits. The development by destroying the assets and creating new assets deprives an opportunity of the stakeholders to continue to create profits from tourism in the long-term. Once economic development depends on the increase number of visitors, a destination needs to keep increasing number of visitors at any cost in order to maintain the current economic level, otherwise economy at the destination is in a slump, and many people lose their jobs. Recently Bang Saen has started to sell popular culture for example, Bang Saen Speed

Festival, Bang Saen World Reggae, etc. instead of natural and cultural assets that Bang Saen has. Sailboats were replaced by speedboats, scooter boats, and boats, which have engine. Even the current mayor tries to revive old style sailboats in a tourism promotion event but those who have local knowledge and can sail are disappearing. Weak social relationship among the local people and strong patron - client relationship are also observed and are obstacle to the local people to co-manage natural and cultural assets.

#### **4. Discussion**

While the accumulations of capital depend on tourism, tourism depends on natural and cultural assets in host societies. Hence, tourism development must be sustainable to sustain the accumulations of capital to some extent; therefore tourism should be developed in way which reproduces nature, strengthens social relationship and inherits local knowledge. Those are necessary capital to sustain natural and cultural assets in host societies. The researcher found that power relations in the tourism development determine a way in which natural and cultural assets are transformed. The finding is associated with the creative destruction model, which explains the process of evolution in tourist destinations in five stages; early commodification, advanced commodification, early-destruction, advanced destruction, and post destruction (Mitchell, 1998). Mitchell and Coghill (2000) found that if profit-motivated capitalists are accompanied by those who work on preservation and protection of tourist attractions, the evolution of tourist destinations to the next stage may be avoided. Furthermore Mitchell and Coghill (2000) found that if local people continue to show their concerns, and the government is



receptive to the concerns, the evolution of tourist destinations to the next stage may be avoided. It is obvious that tourism in Bang Saen has been developed towards post destruction. Therefore, if all stakeholders desire to continue tourism in Bang Saen in the long-term, and hence economic, political and social power; the stakeholders who have political and social power should share those powers with other stakeholders in order to co-manage natural and cultural assets in host societies; make them participate in decision making in tourism development policy, strategies and plan; and develop tourism in a way which tourism reproduces nature, strengthens social relationship and inherits local knowledge. What mechanism should be and how the stakeholders should play roles and take responsibilities for sustainable tourism development must be further studied.

## 5. Conclusions

Power relations in the first period are characterized by dictatorship. The environment of seaside resort in the first period was created by destroying the idyllic environment. Tourism-related business was a byproduct of the creation of seaside resort, and as a result, the local entrepreneurs emerged. Power relations in the second period are characterized by patron-client relations. The environment of modern tourism city in the second period was created by destroying the seaside resort. The local entrepreneurs have developed tourism in Bang Saen for seeking profits, and become the source of economic, political and social power. The endless quest for profits among the local stakeholders greatly destroyed natural and cultural assets that function as the center of tourism. This paper concluded that if all stakeholders desire to continue tourism

in Bang Saen in the long-term, and hence economic, political and social power; the stakeholders who have political and social power should share those powers with other stakeholders in order to co-manage natural and cultural assets in host societies; make them participate in decision making in tourism development policy, strategies and plan; and develop tourism in a way which tourism reproduces nature, strengthens social relationship and inherits local knowledge. Those are key natural, social and human capital for maintaining natural and cultural assets.

## 6. Acknowledgements

I owe my deepest gratitude to Assistant Professor Sittipong Dilokwanich Ph.D. and Mr. Paul Edward Watson who supported the development of paper and presentation for ICENR 2010. This research work is partially supported by Research Assistantship scholarship from the Faculty of Graduate Studies, Mahidol University Academic Year 2010.

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