

# *new frontiers*

## **Briefing on Tourism, Development and Environment Issues in the Mekong Subregion**

**Vol. 6, No. 2**

**March-April 2000**

### **THE REGION**

#### **READY FOR ANTI-ADB PROTESTS**

[Bangkok Post: 7.4.00; The Nation: 12.4.00; 15.4.00] - FROM Seattle to Davos and recently in Washington D.C., NGOs and people's organizations are taking to the streets to protest against globalization and foreign lending policies. In the region, similar demonstrations have taken place, last February at the UNCTAD conference in Bangkok for example.

Activists plan to organize major rallies again, when the Manila-based Asian Development Bank (ADB) holds its annual meeting in Chiang Mai on 4-9 May. Ironically, the ADB meeting coincides with the first anniversary of a peaceful gathering of ethnic people to demand their right to Thai citizenship and access to their community forests. The demonstration was violently broken up at the order of Chiang Mai Governor Pravit Sihsobhon. Notably, Pravit is the key organizer of the ADB conference and will host a dinner to welcome hundreds of ADB dignitaries and participants.

For months, NGOs and grassroots social movements have been preparing anti-ADB campaigns. They are planning to hold a people's forum in Chiang Mai ahead of the ADB meeting to showcase examples of ADB-supported projects in Thailand and neighbouring Mekong countries that are socially and environmentally harmful. In addition, outdoor public rallies will be organized to draw public attention to the controversial financial and economic policies of the ADB.

Vitoon Permpongsacharoen, coordinator of Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance (TERRA), pointed out that ADB's strategy of financing regional development projects destroys the potential to develop other initiatives.

Tourism development, which constitutes a significant component of the ADB's Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) scheme, is a case in point. Apart from funding numerous tourism-related mega-infrastructure that severely affect natural resources and people, the ADB suggests that local communities should abandon their traditional economic activities based on self-reliance and self-sufficiency and turn to tourism as an alternative source of income. This policy particularly affects indigenous peoples who have been persistently made responsible for deforestation and other illicit activities. The ADB's plan is to remove 60 million highlanders in the region from their homeland and involve them in eco-tourism projects in new locations (see also *new frontiers* 6[1]).

Srisuwan Kuankachorn, coordinator of the Project for Ecological Recovery noted that while ADB-funded infrastructure projects, such as roads and dams, remained dominant in the less developed Mekong countries, other more complicated financing strategies were also gradually undermining Thailand's sovereignty in its decision-making process.

Activists described ADP loan schemes as a "big mistake" when they recently met to discuss the various crisis-management measures and reform programmes linked to the more than US\$1.2 billion Thailand has borrowed from the ADB since the outbreak of the 1997 financial crisis. They suggested that the ADB as well as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) had bullied crisis-stricken countries into accepting harsh and unfavourable conditions attached to the loans. The failure by the ADB and government agencies to let members of the public participate in fixing loan conditions from the outset had resulted in a series of misguided policy-reform strategies that entailed unnecessary huge debts on the country while delivering little positive outcome. "The ADB's approach in pushing reform is to privatize or sell off the country's state enterprises and public-health and educational systems," said Somkiat Pongpaiboon of the Rajabhat Institute of Nakhorn Ratchasima. He added that the ADB attempted to transform Thailand into an economy that fitted into the global free-market system and was prone to exploitation by rich countries. ❖

### **COMMENTARY**

#### **ADB'S BURMA-VIETNAM ROAD A FANTASY**

*The following is edited from an article by tourism analyst **Don Ross** [Bangkok Post: 20.4.00]*

At the Mekong Tourism Forum held in Phnom Penh in early April, the ADB outlined details of what it terms its pre-investment study for an east-west highway system linking a small coastal town on the west coast of Burma to Danang in Vietnam. Known as the East-West Corridor, the highway network could hypothetically cut days of shipping times from the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea. If ADB bankers close their eyes, they might see convoys of container trucks leaving the port at Moulmein in Burma for the 1,500-km trip to Danang. Diesel fumes would fade away as the ADB vision zoomed in on tourism.

Villages along the route would prosper from the tour buses that ferry international tourists through four countries on the corridor route. Village-based tourism would take root, perhaps in the now inhospitable mountains that separate Burma from Thailand or on Highway 9 that passes through unspoiled regions of Laos.

The ADB is ready to finance a study of the corridor to assemble data on whether there is a pot of gold at the end of the highway. In theory, a highway network linking the coastal towns of Burma and Vietnam would open up a travel opportunity. "Corridor" is probably the right word. Fine, if you are a trucker in the fast lane to Danang, but sad if you are an onlooker cut off from your neighbours by a highway. Once the link was in place, factories would appear, creating an urban corridor with endless lines of shophouses separated by red-light districts.

Unfortunately, the ADB dream adopts today's rustic images and paints in a highway with families motoring through the Mekong region. They pass by fields and through villages selling handicrafts and fruits. That's fine in the pre-investment study, but once the dollars have transformed into highways, the picture-book images disappear.

There are other cautionary points. While the roads in Thailand are up to scratch from Mae Sot to Mukdahan, the route through Burma is impassable during the rainy season. A highway through the mountains from Mae Sot to Moulmein is still years away. It runs through a region torn by strife and security woes. At least two attempts to run four-wheel-drive caravans to promote the idea of overland travel failed on this route last year. Moving people and cargo across three borders would involve a unique set of problems relating to immigration and customs. Also the ADB would have to convince the authorities to ease regulations controlling transport.

A country road by definition, the route presents one of the last few adventures for overland travellers. Travellers claim there are still wild elephants and tigers in the remote areas between Laos and Vietnam. Their territory is now the focus of an ADB dream. For the country folk and the wildlife of this unspoiled region, the prospect of the east-west corridor is the stuff of nightmares. To them it's a shame that the only dreams city bankers nurture, focus on a dollar at nature's expense. ❖

## MEKONG RIVER PACT SEALED

[The Nation: 20.4.00] - FOUR Mekong riparian states have sealed an historic pact to open a navigation route along the upper reaches of the 4,200km-long Mekong River. The agreement was signed in Burma's Tachilek, opposite Thailand's Chiang Rai province, by transport ministers from China, Burma, Laos and Thailand. It will allow commercial navigation covering 786km from Simao in China's Yunnan province, via Luang Prabang in Laos to Chiang Khong in Thailand.

The new transport route is expected to increase the flow of goods and people and promote tourism in the region, where land transport is still limited by inept infrastructure. China stands to gain most from the river route's potential as it will open up land-locked Yunnan to its southern neighbours. Thailand and Laos hope to benefit from a tourism boom by opening this largely untapped river attraction.

The navigation pact only won final approval at a meeting in Rangoon in March, after being stalled for six years because of differences over navigation safety, immigration procedures, and environmental impacts. Laos initially feared that the agreement to facilitate navigation could have serious impact on the river's flow. Burma was also not cooperative during the negotiations because of the small gains expected for the country and the high security risks in its narcotic and insurgency-plagued area in Shan State, through which the Mekong flows. ❖

## BURMA

### PAGAN ILLUSTRATES TOURISM'S DARK SIDE

*Pagan rates among the world's wonders. Located in central Burma, it is 42 square kilometres of pagodas, temples and monasteries dating back almost 1,000 years. Between 1044 and 1287, 5000 places of Buddhist worship were built here and most remain standing to bear witness to the richness of Burma's religious and cultural heritage. But while the ancient site looks like paradise, its residents have been facing incredible hardship under the present military regime. In 1990, Pagan's more than 5,000 inhabitants were forcefully moved to an arid wasteland some 20 miles away. The eviction was part of a major effort to turn Pagan into a tourist attraction. Recently **Patrick Mc Dowell** of Associated Press revisited Pagan and found the place had considerably declined due to infrastructure being built for visitors. The following is edited from his report [The Nation: 26.2.00].*

How long does it take for paradise to be lost. In the case of Pagan, about five years. Coming to Pagan once felt like discovering a lost civilization. But like so many remote places hit by the modern tourism industry, sublime desolation has been replaced by the tacky.

When I first came to Pagan in 1993, fewer than 2,000 people lived there, working at archaeological sites or serving a trickle of tourists. They were served by a few small hotels and guesthouses. Cars were rare. Visitors could hire a horse and trap with a driver doubling as a guide. In 1999, I returned. The temples remained, but much of what made Pagan unique was gone.

Burma's rulers tried in the mid-1990s to capitalize on the beauty of their country, like many a nation before them. They promoted a "Visit Myanmar (Burma) Year" (VMY) that they hoped would bring a flood of tourists and money. Pagan was the centrepiece. Millions of dollars were spent to bring the infrastructure up to levels that could accommodate tour groups arriving in air-conditioned buses and chartered aeroplanes.

Today, most visitors arrive by road. No longer rutted dirt and tarmac, but a well-paved, four-lane expressway, wide enough for four buses to pass each other. Some horse carts remain, but they have to pull over for the now omnipresent cars, vans, trucks and motorcycles.

There is an 18-hole golf course and dozens of hotels and guesthouses, most of them empty. Pools, air-conditioning and satellite TV. Restaurants serving Burmese, Chinese, Thai and Western food.

The temples? They remain incomparable beautiful, but the sense of centuries of abandonment is gone. Hundreds are now topped by lights. Many structures have been overlaid with gold leaf, a popular veneration for newer temples around Burma but incongruous with Pagan. Most jarringly, scores of temples are draped with coloured strings of lights like Christmas trees.

"The temples and pagodas have been restored mostly with donations from the public," says Aung Kyaing Oo, director of Pagan's archaeology department. "The donors have ideas." Some are the regime's top generals. ❖

## **KHUN SA'S BASE TO BECOME TOURIST RESORT**

[The Irrawaddy: March 2000; The Nation: 29.2.00; 4.3.00; Bangkok Post: 29.3.00] - BURMA'S ruling generals plan to turn Ho Mong, the former base of heroin kingpin and warlord Khun Sa, into a tourist resort. "Arrangements are being made to develop tourism in Ho Mong, which has the potential to become a tourist destination," the official *Myanmar News Agency* recently quoted powerful military intelligence chief Lt-Gen Khin Nyunt saying.

Ho Mong, in northeast Burma, just 12 kilometres from the Thai border, was formerly the stronghold of Khun Sa, wanted in the United States for heroin trafficking. The drug lord and his Mong Tai army officially surrendered to the Burmese generals in 1996, but Rangoon has since then rejected US extradition calls, arguing no treaty exists with Washington. Khun Sa reportedly quit the drug trade and has invested his drug money in various businesses approved by the Burmese authorities, including hotels and tourist transportation.

In February, one of his close aides said Khun Sa had plans to return to Ho Mong in April. The news spread after Khin Nyunt visited Khun Sa who has been allowed to live free in Rangoon. A government spokesperson denied the report, however, saying Khun Sa would not move back to Ho Mong.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of ethnic Wa opium growers have moved from their homes near the Chinese border to the area around Ho Mong, where a number of development projects are underway. Thai narcotics officials have repeatedly expressed concern that the resettlement scheme was aimed to shift drug production closer to Thailand.

Lt-Gen Khin Nyunt visited Ho Mong in March to inspect the progress of development schemes. Government officials from 12 ministries followed up his initiative and a team of engineers was also sent to examine a dam there. The dam was built by Khun Sa in 1992 to produce electricity and store water for farming. About 800 drums of asphalt were delivered to the area to pave a 30-km road from the town to the Salween river. A source at the border said the development of Ho Mong was in response to a proposal put forward by Khun Sa before he surrendered to the junta four years ago. ❖

## **CENTRAL SELLS FLOATING HOTEL TO UK COMPANY**

[Bangkok Post: 31.3.00] - THAILAND'S Central Hotels and Resorts Plc (Centel) has finally found a buyer for its money-losing hotel property in Burma, after nearly two years of searching. The company recently closed a deal with UK-based Intership Co for the 133-room Central Floating Hotel in Rangoon, for US\$4.5 million.

Under the deal, Intership will lease the hotel for US\$3,200 a day, and after three years, the outstanding balance of about US\$1 million will be paid up in full, said Centel executive vice-president Gerd Steeb. Intership plans to move the hotel ship to Singapore for renovations before relocating it to East Timor.

Centel's floating hotel had been running in the red since it was opened in 1994. "We will profit from the sale of the hotel and profits will be written back on the balance sheet," said Mr Steeb. Centel bought the hotel in 1994 for US\$5.6 million. The company now operates 11 hotels and resorts in Thailand and two properties in Nepal and Bangladesh. Despite the sale, Centel still has a presence in Burma through the joint operation of Hotel Equatorial Rangoon, with the Hotel Equatorial network. ❖

# **CAMBODIA**

## **TOURISM INDUSTRY GAINING STEAM**

[Bangkok Post: 10.4.00; The Nation: 30.3.00; 5.4.00] - CAMBODIA'S tourism industry has recovered well, according to tourism analysts. Its 41% increase in total visitor arrivals by air in 1999 (to 262,907) was the highest in the Asia-Pacific region. This was the result of two very significant decisions that removed critical bottlenecks to tourism growth: A visa-on-arrival facility and an open-sky policy to Siem Reap.

At the Greater Mekong Subregion Tourism Forum held in Phnom Penh beginning of April, Cambodian tourism officials were optimistic that growth would continue to gain steam. Bangkok Airways inaugurated additional flights from U-Tapao to Phnom Penh and Sukhothai to Siem Reap, adding to its already growing list of unique connections, such as Phuket to Siem Reap. Phnom Penh and Siem Reap are now both air-linked to major regional capitals including Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Singapore, Hong Kong, Ho Chi Minh City by several dozen flights a day.

To accommodate the visitor influx, Cambodia is on a hotel-building binge. Presently, the country has 220 hotels with 8,756 rooms. Of these, 113 hotels (5,466 rooms) are in Phnom Penh, 28 (1,242 rooms) in Siem Reap and 37 (970 rooms) in Sihanoukville. Under construction are another nine foreign-invested hotels with 2,405 rooms and registered capital of US\$53 million. Applications for a further 17 hotels have been approved. These involve 4,607 rooms and capital of US\$139 million. About 176 guesthouses are also in the pipeline.

As more roads are developed and border checkpoints open, visas on arrival will be expanded accordingly. Pending road developments include the highway from Bangkok to Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh City highway. By 2003, the Japanese government, the Asian Development Bank and World Bank will have poured about US\$305 million into highways, bridges, waterways and port development in Cambodia. Another US\$13.8 million is being spent on expanding Pochentong airport at Phnom Penh.

Tourism Minister Veng Sereyvuth said these hard infrastructure projects will invariably need to be buttressed by soft ones, such as environmental regulations and marketing strategies. Environmental regulation enforcement is weak in the face of poverty and corruption that are destroying forests at an alarming rate, and which will only worsen once the road construction is complete. The pillaging of religious and cultural artefacts from the country's more than 1,000 temples is continuing.

Another question is the extent to which Angkor can take the visitor numbers. Today, it is estimated to be receiving 800 to 1,000 people a day, but Veng maintained that up to two or three times that number would not be a problem, if it is managed right. He noted the ministry had worked hard to ensure that the entire area is properly zoned to control construction, laws to keep hotel heights lower than the trees are strictly enforced. Other ministry officials also expressed concern about the environmental impact on the fragile Angkor temples resulting from increased aircraft landings at nearby Siem Reap airport.

Representatives of the tourism industry have also warned of growing complaints related to security, crime, prostitution, overcharging and rip-offs in Cambodia. This has prompted the government to take some decisive action over the last year. As a result of several crackdowns aimed at increasing security, the country's violent crime rate has dropped more than 10 per cent, according to recently released official statistics. For example, Prime Minister Hun Sen launched a firearms buy-back programme last year that collected nearly 65,000 weapons. In Phnom Penh, 67 gambling houses were closed. More recently, the government has been holding high-profile drug crackdowns and also pledged to combat the flourishing child-sex trade to end its image as a safe destination for paedophiles.

However, a bid by the Interior and Foreign ministries to curtail the visa-on-arrival facility on the grounds that it was worsening transnational crime failed because of Tourism Minister Veng's strong opposition. "I told them, 'Fighting crime is your job. You can't make the good visitors suffer, who just want to come and see the country,'" Veng said. ❖

## **OUTCRY OVER BORDER CASINO**

[The Nation: 10.4.00; 14.4.00; 19.4.00; Bangkok Post: 13.4.00] - THE construction of a casino complex in Poi Pet has resulted in the change of the border line between Cambodia's Banteay Meanchay province and at Aranyaprathet of Thailand's Sa Kaew province. The casino owner started construction in October last year, piling soil on to the Cambodian bank of the Khlong Leuk canal, which forms a natural boundary demarcation between the two countries. This caused the bank to be five meters higher than before, and a large amount of soil was unloaded into the canal, leading to a change of Khlong Leuk's water flow. Despite protests from Thailand, Cambodia's provincial authorities turned a blind eye to the conflict, giving rise to speculation the casino owners had powerful political connections.

Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, who eventually visited the site beginning on 9 April, urged Thais to protest against the intrusion of the casino and instructed Sa Kaew's governor to put up a sign to prohibit people from crossing the border to gamble in the controversial facility, which is reportedly owned by a group of Cambodian and Thai businessmen. As pressure mounted, Cambodia's prime minister Hun Sen stepped in and ordered the casino owner to restore the site to its original condition. It was also agreed that a Thai-Cambodian team of officials should observe the restoration to ensure that the requirements were properly met.

As a result of the conflict, Prasong Soonsiri, a security adviser to the prime minister, warned Thai politicians and businessmen not to get involved in casinos located in neighbouring countries. "I want to warn people that it is the wrong way to invest. To invest in these types of overseas businesses is wasting money. Thai politicians should not have anything to do with casinos," he said. ❖

## **THAILAND**

### **CONTROVERSY PEAKS AS 'THE BEACH' OPENS**

[Bangkok Post; The Nation; Khao Sod (in Thai); Insider Information] - AT the Thailand premiere of 'The Beach' in Bangkok on 7 March, environmentalists and local residents from Krabi and other provinces in Southern Thailand gathered in front of the cinema to call for a boycott of the movie that was made in violation of Thailand's national park and environmental laws. In a mock show, a member of the Artists Group for Democracy and the Environment imitated 'The Beach' star Leonardo DiCaprio, who apologized to the public and called for a film boycott before staging a ritualistic hara kiri. On 10 March, citizens groups and academics from Southern Thailand held a protest in front of a shopping centre in Haad Yai, urging moviegoers to refrain from watching the film. Four days later, Phuket and Krabi residents demonstrated

again in front of two cinemas in Phuket calling on the public to follow national and international initiatives for a film boycott. In view of the protest, the operator of one Phuket cinema decided to cancel the screening of 'The Beach'.

Meanwhile, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox and their supporters, who launched special promotional campaigns and distributed free tickets to attract movie fans to 'The Beach, claimed the boycott calls had failed and the film was doing well in Thailand. Then, however, a spokesperson for Fox's Thailand office revealed that the film would not even gross US\$1 million before it ended its run at local theatres.

Shortly before the opening of 'The Beach', the Parliament House Committee on Religion, Arts and Culture urged the movie be withdrawn, arguing that it portrays Buddhism in a negative way and gives the impression that Thailand is a haven for casual sex and drugs. Not enough, there were also complaints about the compact disc of the movie soundtrack, distributed by Fox and Warner Brothers Thailand. The back cover of the CD showed DiCaprio and other leading actors standing right above a Buddha image, which is perceived as deeply insulting to all Buddhists. As a result, an official of the Religious Affairs Department requested to investigate the issue and said he would file complaints with the police to take action against the CD publisher.

'The Beach' has also fueled discussions about the new breed of backpacker tourists and their drive for going off the beaten path to do what they want - like the bunch of Westerners featured in the movie. Their indulgence in full-moon parties with sex and drugs in foreign places like Goa and Koh Phangan was highlighted as just one blatant example.

These young middle class travellers are increasingly criticized for lounging 'wasted' in exotic surroundings of Thailand's tropical islands and hill tribe villages with no real interest in cross-cultural communication with local people. Guy Redden pointed out the imperialistic aspects of this behaviour, arguing in a commentary in *The Nation* "Alex Garland's Novel 'The Beach' and the way it was made into a film, both provide clues as to how much such values of freedom continue to be used by Westerners as ways of legitimizing anti-social cultural and economic practices."

Those who believe that new forms of tourism might be ethical and environmentally sound alternatives to the conventional mass tourism, should look at the realities in destinations. In this context, Hugh Janowitz's words are also worth savoring: "In creating this venerable institution of hemp-fibre, non-pesticide bug repellents and dog-eared Lonely Planet guidebooks we've...spawned a few ugly stepchildren, including one un-eco-tourism-like subculture: The Beach Raver... This irony is why I'm suggesting that the title of Anti-Eco-Tourist go to the ravers rather than, say, the pale, fat, sex tourists in Pattaya. Those guys ... have always been around. But the international raver crowd is a new invention, and one that shares a common demographic source with the polite, conscientious, phrase-book using backpackers that the popular media seems to think we all are."

Some commentators have argued that Lonely Planet - the backpackers' 'bible', which has become a multi-million dollar business - has a responsibility as more and more pristine beaches and other places are opened up for tourism and quickly turn into 'Paradise Lost'. But Joe Cummings, the author of Lonely Planet's Thailand guide has staunchly defended himself against such ideas. "Can I preserve a beach by not writing about it?" he retorted in a recent *Bangkok Metro Magazine* article. "If I were the only person writing guidebooks to Thailand, it might be possible, but in a field crowded with competing guides, it's highly unlikely."

Pravit Rajanaphruk of *The Nation* opined, "It is this kind of logic...which is used by Cummings that I am questioning. What would we make of a man who buys a virgin girl for sex and, upon being questioned, simply says: 'If I didn't do it, someone else would'." (see also 'Opinion').

Alex Garland, the author of 'The Beach' novel, was also questioned for using a similar logic. Although expressing worries about problematic tourism impacts on Thailand resulting from his book and the movie, Garland considered this merely as a drop in the ocean "next to the effects a guidebook can have on those places." He also claimed he had nothing to do with the filming of 'The Beach' and has thus conveniently disassociated himself from any possible blame for ruining Maya Beach. Nevertheless, Garland is likely to substantially boost his already significant earnings from his first novel with a new edition of 'The Beach' book that has been promoted by Fox in relation to the opening of the film.

In the midst of the heated tourism debates surrounding 'The Beach', the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) closed Maya Beach for tourists on 1 April, saying the beach needed environmental restoration. The local administration and tourism entrepreneurs have voiced anger over the decision that was made without consulting concerned local parties. Somsal Kittithorakul, chairman of the Krabi Provincial Administration Organization, noted that by closing Maya Beach, the RFD had tacitly admitted that the beach's environment had deteriorated because of the film production. "Maya Beach certainly needs to be restored. But a hasty move to close it in the middle of the tourist season will only hurt tour operators and local villagers," he said. The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) and Fox, who have been running a joint campaign to promote "Leonardo's beach" as a tourist attraction, have remained silent over the sudden closure.

There are also concerns that there is more behind RFD's move to deny access to Maya Beach. Given that forestry officials already made attempts last year to put up buildings at Maya against the will of local people, Somsak warned the RFD against construction on the beach under the pretext of a preservation programme, saying that any buildings would alter the beach scenery forever. ❖

[Note: For background information and updates on 'The Beach' controversy, visit the website of Justice for Maya Bay International Alliance (JUMBIA): [www.uq.edu.au/~pggredde/](http://www.uq.edu.au/~pggredde/).]

OPINION

## LONELY PLANET UNDER FIRE

***Ing Kanjanavit pinpoints claims put forward by Lonely Planet author Joe Cummings in relation to The Beach affair and argues his word can not be trusted.***

***[A shortened version of this paper was published as a letter in The Nation: 28.3.00.]***

Joe Cummings' protestations of innocence over his part in (The Beach) saga merit a comment. Let me quote from 'Travel through Fact and Fiction to a Beach Utopia in Thailand', a piece by Mr Cummings which appeared in the *International Herald Tribune* (IHT: 8.2.00), just in time to greet the opening of The Beach in the US. Joe Cummings writes: "When Bangkok protesters charged that the film company's use of Ao Maya on Ko Phi Phi Le island would turn it into an environmental wasteland, I had a good laugh." Phi Phi was ruined already, he says, so what's the fuss? Besides, "During its first week on Phi Phi Le, the film crew removed an estimated 3 to 4 tons of rubbish. Bangkok protesters offered no hard evidence to support their claims of devastation. Experts who visited the bay both before and after filming agreed that Ao Maya looked better than ever. Nevertheless, the opening of the film this week in the United States is likely to rekindle activism, perhaps accompanied by a movement to boycott the film. I can hardly wait to attend the film's Bangkok premiere..."

In other words, along with the compulsory self-congratulatory "3 tons of trash picked up" line, Cummings spouted the official Fox propaganda: that the film was picked on by xenophobic Thais; that environmentalists never cared a damn about Phi Phi before the arrival of DiCaprio; that protesters are all from Bangkok; and that there is no "hard evidence" of environmental damage.

As a guidebook writer and local resident, Cummings lives off Thailand. He can hardly claim ignorance. His gross distortion of facts can only be seen by us as a deliberate act, especially when combined with the glaring omission of a major fact, namely the court case filed against Fox and the Thai central government and bureaucracy by individual local people as well as the Krabi Provincial Administration Organization and the Ao Nang Tambon Administration Organisation. Given that it is a democratic and environmental milestone made possible by the New Constitution, with all the attendant political pressure against the plaintiffs and their legal representatives from the Law Society of Thailand, the Court would not have accepted this historic case for trial had there been no "hard evidence" which Mr Cummings says has not been offered.

*The Nation* itself has run many graphic 'before, during and after' photos, showing the bulldozing of sand dunes and severe erosion of Maya beach, with trees—yes, trees—being washed away. Clearly, The Beach controversy has never been a question of "he said, she said". It's all there explicitly for all to see, which is why the Beach side has resorted to personal attacks and other means to distort and complicate the simple truth.

At the Bangkok premiere of *The Beach*, which I protested and Mr Cummings attended as a party guest, Mr Cummings claimed that the reason he did not mention the ongoing trial was that he'd written the story a year ago, and that the newspaper had asked him for it. This does not make sense, as the trial began over a year ago, before filming began, yet in his piece Cummings mentioned "experts" who checked out Maya AFTER filming and pronounced it better than ever. He also admitted that he was aware of other hotly contested environmental conflicts in the same national park (as he should be, since at least once I have personally left protest leaflets for him during a travel writers' conference in a Bangkok hotel, in the mistaken belief that Lonely Planet was on our side.) So it is odd that he should have implied that no attempt has ever been made to save these islands from becoming "a trash heap." As for his excuse that the story was an old one that he happened to toss to the IHT without updating when the paper asked him for it, Thomas Crampton, the *Tribune* local correspondent, told me that Mr Cummings had given him the story and he had merely passed it on.

When asked, Mr Cummings denied that Lonely Planet and himself have ever worked for *The Beach* as a consultant. If so, he is giving them a generous free ride, causing considerable damage to his own credibility and Lonely Planet's "caring guidebook" image.

For the record, conflicts between environmentalists and the forces for the commercialization of Thai national parks began in December 1985 with the Doi Suthep Cable Car controversy, which ended in a victory (so far) for the environmentalists. Public conflicts over the Nopparat Thara - Phi Phi Islands national park began in March 1989, over the ItalThai tunnel and Paradise Cove Hotel project. Other high-profile campaigns include the Poda island land scandal and the Dusit Rayavadee hotel in Ao Phra Nang.

The unwavering focus of all these protests has always been a legal one: the preservation of the integrity of the National Park Act of 1962. People like Mr Cummings may see only the "trash heap" and shanty town of Phi Phi Don. To comprehend the true picture and the enormity of our unequal struggle, you must realize that it is not just the question of what you see, but also what you DON'T see. If we had not raised the alarm repeatedly over these past 15 years, every time the government proposed to open up the park law to accommodate commercial exploitation, what you'd see on Phi Phi Don would not be shacks but the highrises of Pattaya. Every undeveloped island, every untouched beach you see in the sea of Krabi has a story behind it. They have stayed that way because people have fought to protect the law that's supposed to protect them.

Of course, nothing can be stopped any more, now that a group of filmmakers have been allowed to get away with re-landscaping a high profile national park beach to fit a movie script. With the aid of DiCaprio's celebrity, pending the outcome of the trial, the commercializing forces have won the national park tug of war. All the battles we have won are all for nothing now. In practice, the National Park Protection Act no longer seems to exist. Although they have not succeeded in changing the law, the Thai government and the privatising forces have evidently decided to just ignore the law's existence. Since the bulldozing of Maya, park "leases" are being given without recourse to law, more brazenly than ever.

[Note: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox's official 'The Beach' website in UK, [www.virgin.net/thebeach/thailand.html](http://www.virgin.net/thebeach/thailand.html), promotes the filming locations in Thailand as tourist destinations and refers to "a GUIDE to the rest of the delights of this amazing country", namely Lonely Planet.]

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***In a recent letter to the Lonely Planet's main office in Australia, Helen McDonnell and Laura Workman from Ireland deplored the guidebook company for misrepresentation of hill tribe communities and its ill-guided policy to promote trekking tourism in Northern Thailand. The author of the respective Thailand guide is Joe Cummings. [Akha Heriatage Foundation: <<http://www.akha.com/guestbook.htm>>]***

We have used your book a lot over the years. We are now in South East Asia, Mae Sai, Chiang Rai, Thailand. We found your blurb on the hill tribes in Thailand to be inaccurate and encouraging the exploitation of the hill tribe people via trekking. This is highly disappointing since it would appear that Lonely Planet goes to length to pride itself on being right on and country people friendly. The reason why we know this is because we got involved in a project in Chiang Rai Province, and compared to what is in the book the reality for the hill tribe is very different and your book is mostly in error.

It would appear from the amount of type space that you delegate in your book to the trekking business, that you are

obviously encouraging the use of this highly exploitative industry in Thailand. This trekking business is very large, run by Thais, can't be run without hill tribe "targets", but most of the money is pocketed by taxi drivers, van drivers, hotels, guesthouses and guides. Few guides are hill tribe, and if so they just get in the same game and their own villages benefit very little.

The tourists themselves get told mostly fiction on the part of the guides, much of it disgusting ridicule or attempts to eroticize hill tribe women like they are some kind of wild sexual animals that will hump stones given the chance. In reality, the hill tribe get zip money while being blamed for everything, used in every photo promoting tourism brochure via the famous "breast feeding momma" kind of photos.

They are heavily penalized for smoking opium which was introduced by the British while offered no aid by the British. They are not readily given ID cards, allowed to travel, or paid fairly for their labor. Their land is taken away because they are designated as official squatters even though they may have been on that parcel of land for more than 100 years. These people are abused and mistreated and given much prejudice. They receive poor if little medical care.

(The) forestry (department) is planting thousands of rai (1 rai=1,600 sqm) of non-native specie pine all over the mountains, blaming hill tribe, which you advocate exploiting, for the deforestation. Meanwhile, if population in the mountains is an issue, why are more and more low land residents being allowed to relocate to the mountains, while all this land is being taken from the hill tribes, such that they don't even have enough to grow their rice. You can't get much more economical than only taking enough from the environment to grow rice as compared to wasteful societies such as the one your book comes from.

Yet, trekking to these hill tribe communities makes no less than millions of dollars for people who are not hill tribe. You are promoting this practice, and we will do everything in our power to slam your books.

## **ECO-TOURISM: PASSPORT TO DESTRUCTION OF NATIONAL PARKS**

[Bangkok Post: 30.3.00; 12.4.00; Khao Sod: 29.2.00; The Nation: 12.4.00; Insider Information] - IN an attempt to boost the eco-tourism industry, the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) announced that this year, the year 2000, will be "Visit National Parks Year". To be successful, the standard of facilities and services within the 136 land and marine national parks must be improved, concerned officials say. One quick way to make that happen comes from an initiative by Pongpol Adireksarn, a former minister overseeing the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) and, more recently, agriculture minister overseeing the RFD (He was removed from his post during a cabinet reshuffle in April). The plan is to allow state enterprises, such as the Forest Industry Organization (FIO) and the TAT - to take care of the accommodation and service businesses in parks.

The plan has however been met with criticism because of justifiable fears the designated state enterprises might subcontract work to private companies who, with legal access, might then exploit natural resources, leading to further destruction of the country's national parks. Yet, regulations to enable state enterprises to do business in parks have been drawn up and are now in the final stage. So far, nobody other than officials involved in designing them have seen the regulations.

Pongpol, the originator of the idea, explained from his perspective why the upgrading of services in parks to international standards was necessary: "Ever since I was minister to the Prime Office overseeing the TAT, I've received complaints from both Thai and foreign tourists about the lack of facilities at our national parks, especially about toilets. Visitors have to travel long hours before they arrive at a park and often the first thing they ask for is clean and convenient toilets. But understandably they're disappointed by what we have to offer. And as a result, many have said they not only would never come back again, they would tell others about their terrible experiences - which is not good since our country is in dire need of foreign currencies." As a reminder, for this reason, toilet construction at Thailand's tourist destinations has been a priority of the World Bank's social investment programme (SIP) that was actually meant to help cushion the severe social impacts of the economic crisis!

Forestry chief Plodprasop Suraswadee tried to soothe critics of the plan by saying that it was not correct to talk about a "transfer" of service work to state enterprises. "The Forestry Department never thinks of transferring service jobs - be it restaurants, gift shops or accommodations - to anybody. However, we always welcome help and useful advice," he said. Denying there will be subcontracting, Plodprasop suggested, however, that in the long run, it may be possible that private companies are allowed to run services in national parks. Furthermore, Plodprasop revealed that apart from the planned involvement of state enterprises, the RFD had its own plans to improve service facilities. "Last year, we got a budget of Bt 700 million (US\$18.4 million) from the SIP. This year, it's likely that we'll get a loan of Bt 10 billion (US\$263.1 million) from the OECF (Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund of Japan), and we'll be able to do a lot of improvements with this money."

Kaewsan Atibodhi, a law lecturer at Bangkok's Thammasat University and newly elected senator, is highly critical of RFD's initiative. "This plan involves lots of investment and construction, which seems to go against the original purpose of national parks, which are supposed to be preserved for public relaxation and education," he said. Referring to the fact that the new regulations are still unavailable for public scrutiny, he called for a public hearing before approval by the agriculture ministry, saying "If the regulations are carefully written with the public benefit in mind, that's good news. On the other hand, if they suck, I'll use my constitutional right as a citizen to sue everybody concerned."

Environmentalists agree that the RFD has an abysmal record in protecting nature reserves and allows activities that clearly violate the country's national parks and environmental laws (see also Ing K.'s story in 'Opinion'). Controversial projects abound: the leasing of vast forests for eucalyptus and pine plantations; new approvals of mining concessions in parks; the continued ripping up of mangrove forests and wetlands to turn them into shrimp farms; the increased building of new roads, parking lots and even helipads; the mushrooming of resorts and other tourist facilities.

"It's amazing how the Forestry Department never lacks fresh ideas to exploit the forests. But every time a new mess emerges, we get bogged down in detail and lose sight of the big picture," recently complained Sanitsuda Ekachai,

assistant editor of the *Bangkok Post*, adding, "To be fair, the (RFD) does not operate in a political vacuum. It comes under pressure from all sides to carve up our precious forests for the benefit of big players in politics, business, the military and other state agencies... The department likes to project itself as a lone, victimized hero holding back forest encroachers. But the image bell rings. The record says it all. It bullies powerless villagers and buckles before political and business elites."

Observers, who have first-hand insight into ongoing national park projects, confirm that developments in the name of eco-tourism are in reality against the ethos of eco-tourism, if not outright destructive. For instance, Khao Yai - Thailand's first National Park established in 1962 and an outstanding attraction for domestic and international tourists and researchers - has already a well-developed tourist infrastructure and a large amount of accommodation, much of it built in the last 4-5 years. With funding from the OECF's SIP, park officials put forward a comprehensive management plan for environmental improvements and education in the park, which was shelved, however, due to pressure from the powerful RFD headquarters. Instead, the new priorities are on servicing VIP visitors and additional building of luxurious lodges and other accommodation, a riverside restaurant and a campsite in the style of a Western trailer or caravan site - all in the central park area that is particularly vulnerable in ecological terms. It would appear that national park visitors come to enjoy nature; so it is unconscionable that buildings will be equipped with air-condition, high-tech multi-vision and sound systems. "Associated increases in costs will deter the poorer members of Thai society from visiting Khao Yai," said one source, who does not want to be named. "National parks are for all people. Is not spending so much on VIPs an abuse of the park and the RFD's role as the protector of national parks for the people of Thailand?"

Importantly, much of the money wasted for this extravaganza comes from foreign loans that taxpayers have to pay back with interest. And Khao Yai is by no means an exception. Reports about the frenzied construction of new hotels, resorts and VIP villas in national parks in Phuket, Krabi, Kanchanaburi and elsewhere have been mounting, adding to the manifold environmental conflicts in this country. Beginning of April, a group of 100 angry villagers seized a RFD bulldozer and trunks of trees felled by the department's officials to stop illegal tourism developments in Khao Sok National Park in Surat Thani province. Park officials planned to spend Bt14 million (US\$368,421) on constructing a 1,000sqm parking lot, an 800m road, 10 toilets and concrete stairs to a pier in the park. A member of the Surat Thani Provincial Administration, who led the protest action, said RFD officials had broken the law by cutting 169 large trees with diameters of between 100 and 200cm.

On top of all that, residents of Satun province are alarmed about another Hollywood film project in Koh Tarutao National Park, which is an Asian Heritage Site. They fear that the history of the illegal filming of 'The Beach' on Phi Phi Leh is likely to repeat itself. The shooting of the movie, based on the novel "The Pirates of Tarutao" written by former Agriculture Minister Pongpol, may cause environmental damages because it involves the plan to erect structures in imitation of a jail in the national park at the cost of Bt24 million (US\$631,578). As with 'The Beach', the supporters of the new film production argue, the project will create jobs and bring in "big money" through tourism.

In conclusion, the RFD still seems to believe that it must contribute to fill national coffers at any cost. For this reason, it allows commercial interests to override any environmental and legal concerns put forward by the public. The obsession with eco-tourism as a money-spinner is a glaring example. However, there is growing awareness that the RFD can not act as if it owns the country's national parks. Sanitsuda's call may therefore be heeded more than before: "Check the constitution! The (RFD) must rethink its organizational philosophy. With less than 20 per cent of the country still forested, conservation must be its top priority. Otherwise, its existence no longer has any legitimacy." ❖