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## **TOWARDS A SOUTHEAST ASIAN MODEL OF RESORT-BASED “MASS ECOTOURISM”: EVIDENCE FROM PHUKET, THAILAND AND BALI, INDONESIA**

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*This paper examines the history of, and current practices associated with, “mass ecotourism” in the long-established resort destinations of Phuket, Thailand and Bali, Indonesia. Using examples from each island’s original mass ecotourism companies, this paper argues that, contrary to approaches that tend to universalize the concept, ecotourism remains highly anchored to local or regional context. In the case of resort areas of Southeast Asia, it derives its origins and ongoing success to fundamental links to conventional mass tourism. A symbiotic relationship between mass tourism and ecotourism has allowed companies in Phuket and Bali to promote such ecotourism principles as conservation, ethical management, and environmental education by tapping into the markets, marketing channels, and business networks of conventional mass tourism. This mass-eco synthesis, coupled with other historical and structural parallels between mass ecotourism in Phuket and Bali, characterizes a Southeast Asian model of ecotourism centered on established resort destinations.*

*Mass ecotourism, ecotourism, Phuket, Bali.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

When most people, even those knowledgeable about Southeast Asia, hear the words Phuket and Bali, probably the last thing that comes to mind is “ecotourism.” As two of the most renowned and long-established mass tourism resort destinations of the region, Phuket and Bali have earned reputations for many things. These include beaches, high-rise hotels, and entertainment in Phuket’s case, and surfing, stunning natural landscapes, and cultural and religious traditions in the case of Bali. Both islands, however, possess a range of natural resources that make it possible to engage in ecotourism activities such as rafting, cycling, canoeing, and trekking. Meanwhile, both islands have potentials for ecotourism companies to thrive, principally by tapping into an increasing desire among mass tourists for novel, adventurous, and natural experiences. Several critics have insinuated that Phuket (Cohen, 1996; Rakkit, 1992) and Bali (Dalton, 1997; Rea, 1995; Reader, 1998) have become “ruined,” or at least too “touristy” for small-scale, authentic, or sustainable forms of tourism. However, the evidence presented in this paper indicates that this view is inaccurate. One exception to this dismissive view is provided by David Weaver (2002) who, in the context of a discussion on Asian ecotourism, recognizes the similarities between Phuket and Bali, placing both in a common “rainforest and reef soft ecotourism” zone. This zone features concentrations of conventional tourists that visit beach resort areas and international gateways, but seek diversionary day-only trips to more “natural” terrestrial or marine locations.

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This paper expands on Weaver's discussion, and looks in detail at how ecotourism operators in this "rainforest and reef" region operate in practice. In addition to demonstrating the parallels between ecotourism activities in Phuket and Bali, this paper will argue that the histories and experiences of the four original, and most successful, ecotourism companies on both islands call into serious question three common assumptions regarding ecotourism. First, several authors believe that in order to stand a chance of surviving as a tangible, and more benevolent, form of tourism, ecotourism must exist in spatial isolation from its mass counterpart. Whether it takes place in areas that are natural (Boyd & Butler, 1996), protected (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996), undervisited (Sirakaya *et al.*, 1999), pristine (Honey, 1999), wild (Kearsley, 1997), relatively undeveloped (Ziffer, 1989), uncontaminated (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1988), or relatively undisturbed (Boyd *et al.*, 1994; Wallace & Pierce, 1996), ecotourism (as it is almost universally defined) excludes mass tourism. This is because of the assumption that mass tourism is, by necessity, found in areas with high concentrations of people, infrastructure, and other examples of human modifications of the natural landscape. However, contrary to these predictions, ecotourism has flourished in Phuket and Bali in the past decade largely because of the proximity of national parks or pockets of natural resources to locations featuring high concentrations of mass tourists. Thus, ecotourism in Phuket and Bali has emerged *out of*, not in complete opposition to, the established packaged tourism industry.

Second, Butler (1992), Cohen (1987), and Pearce (1989), among others, have argued that "alternative" tourism, of which ecotourism is the prime example, often paves the eventual way for mass tourism. This unilinear relationship between alternative forms of tourism, such as ecotourism, and mass tourism, whereby the former presages the latter, is contradicted in Phuket and Bali. The locations of where the four original ecotourism operators, and their successors, emerged long after, rather than before, the establishment of mass tourism. It is true that, in previous decades, small groups of travelers first introduced Phuket and Bali to an international audience, and therefore encouraged the eventual development of mass tourism in the 1960s and beyond. However, the very recent arrival of another form of "alternative tourism," namely ecotourism, illustrates both a potential structural dependence on mass tourism in Southeast Asia, and a reason to challenge the universal applicability of conventional temporal assumptions regarding the timing of ecotourism (it should be noted that several other tourism areas, including the Cairns region of North Queensland in Australia, have also experienced similar transitions to alternative tourism).

The third assumption common to many discussions of ecotourism is the belief that "genuine" (Honey, 1999) or "true" (Burton, 1998) ecotourism promotes the same set of principles in all parts of the world. Therefore, in practice, ecotourism features, or at least *should* feature, universal characteristics that ensure success (Brandon, 1993; McLaren, 1998). The examples of Phuket and Bali demonstrate instead that there exist varied, often unexpected, and most importantly *localized*, forms of ecotourism throughout the world. In the case of mature resort destinations of Southeast Asia, the pattern seems to stem from a symbiotic relationship between mass tourism and ecotourism. This is whereby the markets and networks of the former are utilized to foster education, ethical management, conservation, and other such principles of the latter. For this reason, the form or model of ecotourism found in Phuket and Bali is best labeled *mass ecotourism* due to the close and symbiotic relationship between two forms

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of tourism commonly perceived as diametric opposites. Despite the use, by several authors (Diamantis, 1999; Honey, 1999; Mastny, 2001; Pleumarom, 2001), of “mass ecotourism” as a term for a stripped-down or shallow type of ecotourism, the term is used in this paper since it best embodies the practice and spirit of ecotourism in traditionally-mass tourism enclaves such as Phuket and Bali.

### METHODS

This paper is based on the findings of fieldwork research in southern Thailand and Bali conducted for a cumulative total of thirteen months between 1996 and 2001. Originally, the focus of this research centered on Phuket and southern Thailand alone (see Kontogeorgopoulos, 1998). Soon it is expanded to Bali after it became evident that ecotourism in the two popular resort destinations shared many historical, operational, and philosophical similarities. This paper incorporates original data that include over one hundred formal interviews with tourists, ecotourism guides, company owners and managers, provincial and regency-level government tourism officials, tour company representatives, local travel agents, and national park volunteers working in Phuket, the neighboring provinces of Krabi and Phangnga, and Bali. Two-hundred and ninety self-administered surveys were also completed by the customers of Phuket-based ecotourism companies; the results of these surveys were used to develop interview questions and to gather basic demographic data.

In order to illustrate the similarities and parallels in the functioning and history of mass ecotourism in Phuket and Bali, this paper focuses on the four original companies that initiated mass ecotourism on both islands. In addition to providing the model for virtually all of the many subsequent mass ecotourism imitators that have emerged recently in both Phuket and Bali, these four companies receive a large percentage of mass ecotourist customers and exemplify the overlap of mass tourism and ecotourism that seems to characterize popular resort destinations in Southeast Asia. In Phuket, the two largest, most successful, and most internationally and domestically renowned companies are *Sea Canoe* and *Siam Safari*. *Sea Canoe* brings tourists to Ao Phangnga National Park, located in the shallow bay that surrounds the northeastern coast of Phuket, and gives them the opportunity to enter, by means of inflatable kayaks, open-air lagoons (*hongs*) via cave passages that are filled and emptied of water as sea tides ebb and flow. *Siam Safari* offers mass tourists “eco-nature tours” that include elephant hill treks, river canoeing, mountain biking, and nature trail walking. In addition to participating in a fixed nature-oriented tour, all *Siam Safari* customers visit the company’s “nature compound” located on a 35-acre plot of land located on Phuket’s southeast coast.

In Bali, the two original, and to this day most prominent, mass ecotourism companies are *Bali Adventure Tours* and *Sobek Bali Utama*. *Bali Adventure Tours* offers a huge variety of tours, including rainforest treks, cycling trips through the rural heart of Bali, white water rafting, and such quintessentially “adventure travel” experiences as tandem paragliding and helicopter tours. Like *Bali Adventure Tours*, *Sobek* also markets itself primarily as an adventure travel company and features the almost exact same set of trekking, cycling, and rafting trips. With its past association with Mountain Sobek, a long established American adventure company conducting tours on every continent, *Sobek Bali Utama* enjoys name recognition and along with *Bali Adventure Tours*, captures a significant share of the mass ecotourist market on the island. Taken together,

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the four companies described above will be referred collectively as the “original four” throughout this paper.

Although the primary reason for comparing Phuket and Bali relates, in this paper at least, to their contribution to a distinctly Southeast Asia model of “mass ecotourism,” the two represent logical comparative case studies for several other reasons. First, both are small islands and share geographical features such as tropical monsoon climates, mountainous interior regions, and a number of long beaches that lend themselves well to development as mass tourism zones. Second, Phuket and Bali are the most important tourism destinations in their respective countries, and tourism in both islands has historically provided (and continues to do so) valuable foreign exchange for the federal state. Third, the marketing strategies utilized on both islands are similarly evocative. Phuket is depicted as the “Pearl of the Andaman” while Bali is sold to tourists as a “living museum” found amidst a tropical paradise. Fourth, the number of international tourists visiting both islands has greatly increased since the 1970s, reaching, by 2000, 2.4 million in Phuket (TAT, 2002) and 1.4 million in Bali (BTA, 2002). Fifth, as a result of such rapid growth, critics of mass tourism in Southeast Asia point to Phuket (Viviano, 2002; Wong, 1995) and Bali (Knight *et al.*, 1997; Ostrom, 2000) as two of the most obvious places to observe the social, cultural, and environmental damage caused by rapid tourism growth. Finally, it is perhaps unsurprising that groups and individuals hoping to make political statements by attacking Westerners in Southeast Asia have reportedly chosen Phuket and Bali as the locations best suited for this purpose (Bonner, 2002; Mydans and Bradsher, 2002), although only the latter has thus far suffered the consequences of an actual incident.

### **HISTORICAL AND STRUCTURAL PATTERNS OF MASS ECOTOURISM**

The histories of mass ecotourism in Phuket and Bali overlap in several ways. All four original mass ecotourism operators began operations in 1989. In the thirteen years since then, the companies have not only experienced similar patterns of growth and incorporation into existing tourism networks, but the mass ecotourism industries of Phuket and Bali, or at least the nature-oriented niches of the overall tourism industries of the region, have featured parallel developments and patterns of evolution whereby slow initial expansion was preceded by rapid growth and finally by stabilization in recent years.

In Phuket, Sea Canoe and Siam Safari were both, by 1996, joined by close to ten competitors who, hoping to replicate the success of the two companies, decided to enter the mass ecotourism market. The very first companies that were established as rivals to Sea Canoe and Siam Safari were founded by former Thai partners or employees who utilized the knowledge that they had gained while setting up and running the original companies. The founders of these initial imitators not only stole away staff (and in some cases money) for their new ventures, but also left under acrimonious circumstances. By 1999, as existing “copycat” companies splintered into several smaller operations, and several others joined the picture as completely new ventures, the number of mass ecotourism companies inspired by the initial success of Sea Canoe and Siam Safari eventually skyrocketed to nearly forty.

The number of Balinese companies that emerged in the first few years following the establishment of Bali Adventure Tours and Sobek in 1989 remained low. As in Phuket,

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the emergence of the first mass ecotourism imitators in Bali stemmed either from the departure of former employees, or the entry of unaffiliated local companies hoping to cash in on the new “adventure travel” market segment pried open by Bali Adventure Tours and Sobek. Between 1989 and 1994, a small handful of operators joined the two original companies in offering rafting trips on the Ayung River, but in 1994, government authorities announced a “one river, one company” policy that shut down Bali Adventure Tours for two years (since Sobek was officially the first rafting company established on the Ayung River). Ironically, it is proved ineffective in limiting the number of rafting companies operating in Bali since this ban on multiple rafting companies on one river was enforced in an inconsistent and deliberately capricious manner by local tourism officials. By the time the “one river, one company” policy died a quiet death in 1996, there were already twelve rafting and adventure travel companies. Currently, roughly fifteen companies offer rafting and other mass ecotourism activities in Bali.

As creative and successful imitators, the majority of “copycat” operators follow in almost exact detail, the itineraries, marketing styles, and logistical arrangements of Sea Canoe and Siam Safari in Phuket and Bali Adventure Tours and Sobek in Bali. As the numbers indicate, mass ecotourism has witnessed a similar *relative* pattern of expansion in Phuket and Bali. Further, although the current discrepancy in the *absolute* number of mass ecotourism companies seems at first incomparable, the numbers conceal the full story. In particular, Phuket’s mass ecotourism operators fall into two categories. First, *sea-based* ecotourism companies, such as Sea Canoe, operate in marine environments such as Ao Phangnga National Park and offer kayaking and cave exploration within the many limestone islands of Ao Phangnga. Second, Siam Safari and other *land-based* companies utilize the terrestrial resources of Phuket and surrounding provinces by offering activities such as trekking, mountain biking, camping, birding, elephant riding, river canoeing, and rafting. Phuket’s approximately forty mass ecotourism operators are almost evenly divided between the land-based and sea-based categories. This indicates that each discrete mass ecotourism “branch” or market segment in Phuket, at current levels of international tourist arrivals, can bear only twenty or so companies. Because mass ecotourism activities in Bali take place almost exclusively in the island’s mountainous interior, there exists only one branch of ecotourism in Bali. As with each branch of mass ecotourism in Phuket, Balinese land-based mass ecotourism is able to absorb a relatively small number of companies, in this case fifteen. Thus, with the number of companies per mass ecotourism segment in both Phuket and Bali stabilized at between fifteen and twenty, one finds similar ratios of mass ecotourism companies per overall tourist arrivals. One company for every 60,000 tourists in Phuket. One company for every 90,000 tourists in Bali.

Aside from sharing similarities in historical development, current ratios of companies to tourists, and structural links to the mass tourism industry (which is discussed in the subsequent section), the mass ecotourism segments of Phuket and Bali share in common characteristics. These include business hierarchies, ownership and management patterns, contributions to the financial health of local communities, and hurdles faced in the struggle to survive as viable companies. Sea Canoe and Siam Safari are by far the most prominent mass ecotourism companies in Phuket, and in the face of fierce competition, still manage to remain on top of the mass ecotourism hierarchy. Forming a second tier just below Sea Canoe and Siam Safari are those ten companies that emerged as the first “copycats” in the late-1980s and early-1990s. Third-tier mass

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ecotourism companies represent those cases where the original imitators splintered into subsequent, often smaller and more loosely managed, companies. The final tier of operators in terms of size, success, and prominence are fly-by-night companies that run relatively few tours and often offer sea kayaking or trekking tours as just two possibilities among many possible tourist activities, including shopping, entertainment, or sightseeing excursions.

The multiple-tiered structure of mass ecotourism in Phuket is similar in Bali, where Bali Adventure Tours and Sobek clearly occupy the top position. For example, Sobek handles more than 100,000 customers per year, while Bali Adventure Tours, according to its director, accounted for eighty percent of the rafting market between 1990 and 1994 and currently enjoys the highest level of marketing exposure throughout the island (*Bali Echo*, 2001: 41). However, the delineation between the different tiers is less marked in Bali due partly to more rigorous licensing standards and the “one river, one company” policy, and because of the expansion of mass ecotourism in Bali was held in check for several years. Government intervention, coupled with a slightly slower rate of growth in tourist arrivals in Bali compared to Phuket, allowed Sobek, and Bali Adventure Tours before 1994 and then again after 1996, to remain in a dominant position relative to competitors for a longer period of time than Sea Canoe and Siam Safari. As a result both of this domination by the two leaders, and the delayed expansion of mass ecotourism in Bali, there is less differentiation among the eighteen lower-tier companies in Bali than there is among the sea- and land-based mass ecotourism companies of Phuket.

The four mass ecotourism pioneers of Phuket and Bali feature very similar patterns of ownership and management. In particular, all four were founded by American, English, or Australian male expatriates who had either lived for many years in Thailand and Indonesia, or decided to move to these countries permanently. Further, in three cases, the expatriate founders married Thai or Balinese women, who in turn became majority shareholders or partners in the new mass ecotourism ventures. All four companies feature a mixture of local, national, and foreign ownership. This extends to the management structure as well, where locals from southern Thailand and Bali manage such tasks as marketing, operations, sales, human resources, and accounting with expatriates from Europe, Japan, and North America. Because of the high stakes associated with the tourism industry, and the coincidental timing of the establishment of all four companies, it is unsurprising, but worth noting nevertheless, that in Phuket, the original founders of Sea Canoe and Siam Safari in Phuket keep alive a business rivalry and certain amount of interpersonal hostility. In Bali, the founders and directors of Bali Adventure Tours and Sobek continually vie for recognition as the first to conceive of the idea of rafting on the Ayung River, and the managing director of Bali Adventure Tours is especially resentful of the previous “one river, one company” that in effect worked to the advantage of Sobek and subsequent mass ecotourism companies.

In theory, tourism is a potential mechanism for distributing revenues to areas traditionally marginalized by conventional economic development (Williams, 1998). It is true that Phuket and Bali have traditionally enjoyed high relative levels of wealth compared to other regions of Thailand and Indonesia. Respectively, mass ecotourism facilitates a more equitable *regional* distribution of revenues to areas in southern Thailand and to undervisited parts of Bali. Compared to the 2.4 million international tourists that visited Phuket in 2000, the neighbouring provinces of Phangnga and Krabi

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received only 140,000 and 530,000 tourists, respectively (TAT, 2002). Thus, by bringing tourists to Ao Phangnga and in some cases to parts of Krabi province, Sea Canoe, Siam Safari, and the thirty-eight other mass ecotourism companies based in this area help to introduce tourists to poorer provinces located adjacent to the wealthy resort province of Phuket.

Due to the larger size of Bali, inequitable distribution of tourist arrivals and revenues relates more to regencies within the province of Bali than to separate national provinces, per se. According to I Gusti Oka Darmawan, Chief of the Badung Regency Tourism Office, sixty-six percent of all accommodations in Bali are located in Badung Regency. Forty-five percent of all tourists in Bali stay in Badung, the regency that runs north-south through the middle of the island and contains such areas of high tourist concentrations as Kuta, Legian, and the Nusa Dua beach resort area of the Bukit Peninsula. By bringing tourists from crowded and overdeveloped areas to more remote parts of the island, the mass ecotourism companies in Bali, particularly large operators such as Bali Adventure Tours and Sobek, spread economic benefits to parts of the island. The parts that, despite possessing relatively pristine natural landscapes, suffer from the dearth of tourist visitation that stems from their remote locations and lack of tourism facilities.

Finally, the four original mass ecotourism companies have faced remarkably similar hurdles during the past thirteen years. There are inter- and intra-company betrayals and the embezzlement of profits by partners or even, in one case, the brother-in-law of a controlling partner. In addition, every company has experienced veiled threats or actual violence perpetrated against it by disaffected local residents or members of organized crime rings. Sea Canoe has especially suffered from such problems, beginning with early and recurrent death threats made to the expatriate founder. Then, the problems and culminate in 2000 with the attempted assassination of the company's Thai operations manager, who paid the price for the company's refusal to pay extortion money to the collectors of lucrative birds' nests in Ao Phangnga. In recent years, villagers living along the Ayung River in Bali who felt that requisite funds were not being paid by the companies using the river for rafting trips have, on several occasions, blocked access to the lower reaches of the river by felling trees along the riverbanks.

Inaction and a lack of transparency on the part of local and national government officials, combined with a perceived unwillingness to enforce strict standards, have also created problems for mass ecotourism companies, particularly those, like the four pioneers profiled in this paper, for whom abiding by laws and self-imposed industry safety and service standards is both ethical and reasonable from a purely business-oriented standpoint. The ecological threats to the future growth of mass ecotourism represent the final set of hurdles. In particular, enclosed lagoons, small tracts of rainforest, and short rivers are geographically-confined areas, and thus mass ecotourist activities are concentrated in locations that can only sustain a small number of people at once. Unscrupulous second- and third-tier companies that fail to promote conservation education or environmentally-friendly tourist behaviour also threaten the long term viability of the “original four”. This is because damage caused by too many, and in many cases irresponsible, companies has already, according to some observers (Mecir, 2000; Shepherd, 2002), pushed mass ecotourism in Phuket and Bali beyond the ecological and social carrying capacities of the areas in which such activities take place.

## THE SYNTHESIS OF MASS TOURISM AND ECOTOURISM

The discussion thus far has illustrated the many historical and structural similarities between the activities of mass ecotourism operators in Phuket and Bali. The greatest similarity of all, and the one that illustrates most directly a form of tourism unique to established resort areas in Southeast Asia, is the manner in which these companies meld together elements of both mass tourism and ecotourism. Thereby allowing, in practice, a clear synthesis of the two supposedly discrete tourism categories. As stated in the introduction, proponents of “genuine,” “real,” or “true” ecotourism often assume that in order to live up to its potential, ecotourism must remain in theoretical and practical isolation from mass tourism. The kind of tourism which is reviled and also dismissed as having nothing to contribute to the principles of ecotourism or sustainable tourism generally. However, the four original ecotourism companies of Phuket and Bali contradict such assumptions, and demonstrate instead that “mass” and “eco” are not necessarily incompatible. In particular, mass ecotourism in Phuket and Bali does not resemble in style or location a purist form of ecotourism envisioned by proponents of an exclusive and rigidly defined approach. However, that does not mean that the principles of ecotourism cannot be implemented in, or near, areas of mass tourist concentrations.

In assessing whether the companies discussed in this paper are indeed engaged in ecotourism, it is useful to examine how closely they adhere to even the most stringent definitions of ecotourism. One such definition comes from Fennell (1999: 43), who after thoroughly surveying the vast literature on ecotourism and integrating the most common elements, proposed the following definition:

A sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism that focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, and which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive, and locally oriented (control, benefits, and scale). It typically occurs in natural areas, and should contribute to the conservation or preservation of such areas.

As will be outlined below, mass ecotourism companies of Phuket and Bali feature deep structural and conceptual links to mass tourism. However, they nevertheless still manage in practice to promote every single feature of the comprehensive definition of ecotourism given above.

First, the activities of mass ecotourism companies in Phuket and Bali, most notably the “original four,” are low-impact and non-consumptive. Although not always true in the case of lower-tiered operators, tourists participating in daytrips are prevented from consumptive activities such as fishing, hunting, or collecting shells, plants, or other nature souvenirs. Further, the owners, managers, and staff of these companies pay great attention to the notion of environmental and social carrying capacity, which encourages limits and therefore sustainable and low-impact ecotourism experiences. Interestingly, the most important strategy in promoting a sense of personal attention, flexibility, and freedom from large numbers of tourists is also what ensures that ecotourism remains sustainable and low-impact. These include the relatively small, and strictly-monitored, tour group size characteristic of all Balinese and Phuket

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ecotourism companies. For example, each Siam Safari trip allows a maximum of only eight passengers, but the half-day schedule of most itineraries can safely accommodate up to one hundred passengers per day since staggered tour schedules allow different groups to come to the Siam Safari nature compound at different times of the day, and thus depart with a feeling of isolation and intimacy. Hence, in addition to sustaining the interest of mass tourists through this small-scale and personalized approach, Siam Safari also ensures the sustainability of the activity itself, since the environmental damage done to the nature compound and surrounding jungle is minimized by strictly controlling overall tourist numbers.

Second, customers and employees of the “original four” experience and learn about nature in a sustained and effective manner. Mass tourists staying in built-up resort areas enjoy the opportunity to have spontaneous and novel experiences based on brief encounters with the natural landscapes and wildlife of southern Thailand and Bali. However, these ecotourism companies do more than just provide experiences in nature: a clear educational component is also visible in mass ecotourism excursions. Tourists are encouraged to learn about nature, even if it is through fleeting, and often entertainment-oriented, experiences. Such as, through the “nature game” of Sea Canoe - where the customer to guess the most correct answers regarding the natural history, flora, and fauna of Ao Phangnga wins a company video worth \$US30 - or through the detailed environmental information received from the well-trained guides of Bali Adventure Tours and Sobek. Siam Safari especially promotes education, environmental awareness, and responsibility among its passengers by providing ample opportunity to learn about elephants, Thailand’s natural history, and local vegetation. At the company’s 35-acre nature compound, all Siam Safari customers see posters featuring a large variety of environmental information, including ways in which to help protect Thailand’s environment through such initiatives as the Elephant Help Project (EHP). In short, although it is true that the majority of mass ecotourists in Phuket and Bali are likely motivated for reasons other than education, that does not necessarily mean that they do not acquire a heightened sense of environmental appreciation and awareness.

In addition to promoting the environmental education of tourists, the “original four” also pay much attention, and devote considerable funds, to the educational improvement of their Thai and Indonesian employees. Sea Canoe guides receive environmental education through an extensive range of Thai- and English-language informational materials located at Sea Canoe’s main office. Further, Sea Canoe guides augment this written information with informal lessons on natural history and geology, while four hours of weekly classroom instruction required of all Siam Safari guides serve to inculcate a sense of education and environmental awareness among staff. Sobek trains its guides for at least six months, and like Sea Canoe and Siam Safari, employs respected naturalists to lead staff training seminars. Sobek’s staff come to appreciate the value of acquiring a form of knowledge that leads both to a higher level of environmental appreciation and to the tips that this produces from grateful and impressed tourists. This is conducted through “point-of-interest” training that allows guides to learn about environmental issues relevant to the specific ecosystems in which tours are conducted.

Third, mass ecotourism in Phuket and Bali is ethically-managed and locally-oriented.

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Ethical considerations inform the non-consumptive and educational nature of the experiences offered to tourists, and the labor practices of all four original mass ecotourism companies produce considerable benefits for locals. Sea Canoe, for example, pays its guides, cooks, and drivers - the vast majority of which have no more than a grade six education - more than twice the wage level found at other sea kayaking companies in southern Thailand, and three times more than the national average wage and salary earnings of the relatively well-paid group of clerical, sales, and services workers (National Statistical Office, 2001). Guides working for Bali Adventure Tours earn similarly high wages amounting to between twenty-five and fifty percent more than the average hotel employee in Bali. Although this figure could not be checked against available data, since it was provided by the managing director of the company, guides confirmed during private conversations that their total earnings, which include tips, far exceed the level of earnings experienced in former livelihoods such as farming, or in other occupations in the tourism industry. It is also standard practice among the “original four” to pay their employees a guaranteed year-round monthly salary, which not only allows locals to pursue supplemental sources of income during slow periods, but also goes a long way in mitigating the seasonality of pay associated with tourism employment in tropical destinations.

The staff of mass ecotourism companies come from many regions of Thailand and Indonesia. But, there are deliberate and ultimately successful efforts by the “original four” to provide employment opportunities for local residents of southern Thailand and Bali, specifically. Many such locals are poorly educated and have few, if any, prospects of finding rewarding and well-paying jobs. Over half of Sea Canoe’s kayaking guides, and virtually all boat captains, deck hands, and on-board cooks, are native residents of Ko Yao Yai, a large island just off the east coast of Phuket that hosts several small Muslim fishing communities. Similarly, Siam Safari employs mostly local residents and reaches beyond southern Thailand for workers only in the case of elephant handlers (*mahouts*). Thus, a fun and relatively-unsupervised workplace atmosphere, creates a rewarding and ethical working environment for the hundreds of local residents working for the original mass ecotourism companies of Phuket and Bali. This is combined with an extensive set of benefits that includes health, dental, and life insurance, disability allowances, and free language and computer training. In terms of keeping ecotourism local in scale, it should also be noted that all forty ecotourism companies in Phuket, and all fifteen in Bali, are independently owned and operated. Further, all “original four” companies spend at least ninety percent of costs locally, thereby minimizing financial leakages.

Fourth, although not remote, pristine, or untouched by human influence, the locations in which mass ecotourism activities on both islands occur include the following natural areas: Ao Phangnga, a marine national park; tracts of rain forest found throughout Phuket in inland areas; and, in Bali, jungles and rivers that lend themselves well to rafting, including the Ayung, the Unda, the Telagawaja, and the Saba rivers. Despite the proximity of these locations to more urbanized and crowded settings, they nonetheless remain “natural areas,” the geological and geographical resources of which serve as the underlying basis of mass ecotourism.

Lastly, mass ecotourism in Phuket and Bali contributes to environmental conservation. For example, Siam Safari has invested considerable resources in wildlife conservation

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in Thailand, raising several thousands of dollars for various conservation projects and building many daytrips around the issue of elephant protection. In 1998, Siam Safari teamed up with Dusit Laguna, a five-star hotel located in the upmarket Laguna area of northwestern Phuket, to form the Elephant Help Project (EHP). The money raised for EHP pays for educational campaigns on the problems faced by elephants throughout Thailand, a veterinarian specializing in the treatment of elephants, a mobile clinic that conducts regular health checks on Phuket's elephants, and medical supplies needed to treat sick or injured elephants. Because of EHP, and the demand for elephant trekking caused directly by Siam Safari's success, the number of elephants in Phuket has grown from roughly 12 in 1994 to nearly 200 in 2001. Sea Canoe also contributes to environmental conservation in Phuket by, among other things, paying a local resident of Ao Po (the launching point for all of Sea Canoe's trips) to maintain the cleanliness of the pier and surrounding area. In addition, it is providing funds and volunteer labor to the Gibbon Rehabilitation Project, which aims to rehabilitate white-handed gibbons that are taken forcefully from their mothers and then put on display in prominent tourist areas of Phuket. In Bali, Bali Adventure Tours and Sobek both organize campaigns, or pay subcontractors, to collect rubbish along the Ayung River and in the villages through which it flows. Sobek works with local schools on conservation projects and educational sessions on recycling, while Bali Adventure Tours works in tandem with the owners of the Elephant Safari Park, the Bali Bird Park, and the Bali Reptile Park to bring attention to the conservation of the wildlife that these companies seek to protect. Like Siam Safari, Bali Adventure Tours channels tourist donations to a group dedicated to improving the lives of elephants, in this case the endangered Sumatran Elephant. Conservation is even a personal issue for the managing director of Bali Adventure Tours, who has himself over the past seven years planted over 100,000 mangrove trees behind the company's headquarters in Pesangaran.

Having outlined the ways in which the daily practices of the “original four” adhere to the principles of ecotourism, the discussion will now turn attention to the symbiotic relationship between mass tourism and ecotourism in Phuket and Bali. In many ways, the largest reason for the collective success of Sea Canoe, Siam Safari, Bali Adventure Tours, and Sobek relates to their ability and willingness to foster connections to the existing conventional tourism industry and many things that this industry encompasses, from packaged tourists and marketing networks to integrated resort areas and multinational tour operators. Thus, although ecotourist in practice and definition, the “original four” created the paradigm for, and continue to provide the best examples of, localized versions of ecotourism best described as *mass* in terms of clientele, marketing, spatial connections, and nature of operations.

The customers of the “original four” are mass tourists by almost any objective measure. The vast majority stay in four- and five-star hotels, visit Phuket and Bali either en route to another destination or on short package holidays, and arrange virtually all aspects of their vacations, including daytrips with mass ecotourism operators, through global wholesalers, tour operators, travel agents, and other intermediaries of the mass tourism industry. Large mass tourism markets in Phuket and Bali, and especially those segments that increasingly desire novel, authentic, exciting, and nature-oriented experiences, laid unexplored and untapped until the “original four” and their imitators came along in the late-1980s and early-1990s to satisfy such tourist demands. In Phuket, many mass ecotourism customers stay in the

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Laguna Bay complex of five-star hotels in northwestern Phuket, a tourist zone that few would guess houses a huge and readily-available pool of potential ecotourists. Further, for more than a decade, Siam Safari has organized short trips for customers of a company long associated with quintessential mass, packaged tourism, namely Club Méditerranée, which is located in a large parcel of land on the east coast of Phuket. Similarly, over ninety percent of the customers of both Bali Adventure Tours and Sobek are package tourists, and even among those who purchase a daytrip through street-side vendors (thereby cutting out the original package tour operator), virtually all arrive in Bali as part of a mass tourism holiday package.

The marketing efforts of the “original four” utilize existing mass tourism networks. Creative, eye-catching, and innovative advertisements are placed in several mass tourism outlets, including travel magazines, travel industry exhibitions, annual tourism conferences, and local brochures, newspapers, and magazines. In addition to being featured in a large number of travel shows and documentaries, Sea Canoe has successfully negotiated with major Asian and Pacific airlines to include sea kayaking information during in-flight video presentations, and Siam Safari organized a fashion show in Bangkok to raise money for the Asian Elephant Foundation of Thailand. All four companies have been featured in travel shows and documentaries, and all maintain sophisticated web sites that are easy for tourists to find on the internet, especially since many mainstream tourism informational and promotional sites feature links to the companies’ internet home pages. Name recognition is high among all travel agents, tour operators, and hotels, but in case tourists fail to hear from their tour representatives or read in travel magazines about Sea Canoe and Siam Safari in Phuket, or Bali Adventure Tours and Sobek in Bali, a large number of prominent billboards along tourist routes and in tourist enclaves, especially airports, makes it difficult for the marketing efforts of the “original four” not to be noticed by a large number of mass tourists. For example, among the first things that tourists see when arriving in Bali’s Ngurah Rai Airport is a large advertisement for Bali Adventure Tours placed just on the other side of the Customs and Immigration counter.

As mentioned already, the areas in which mass ecotourism in Phuket and Bali takes place are “natural,” but their close proximity to locations of high concentrations of mass tourists counters the belief that the further away from mass tourism, the better for those attempting to promote “real” ecotourism. Without the small physical distances between mass tourism areas, such as the east coast of Phuket and Kuta Beach and Nusa Dua in southern Bali, on the one hand, and areas of natural beauty and relative solitude, such as Ao Phangnga and the lakes, rivers, and mountains of central Bali, on the other, it would prove difficult to attract mass tourists on daytrips, since time, convenience, comfort, and familiarity are all factors in determining whether a package tourist on a short holiday is willing to participate in a trip organized by a mass ecotourism company. Small distances facilitate the transportation of customers from mass tourist destinations to “natural areas,” thereby allowing companies to more easily tap into mass tourism markets that remain crucial for the financial success of ecotourism ventures.

The most important and obvious link between mass tourism and ecotourism is the nature and structure of daily operations. The “original four” of Phuket and Bali have survived and grown largely because of their ability to tie the logistics of their daily

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operations to the business networks and infrastructure of the existing mass tourism industry. Since virtually all tourists in Phuket and Bali arrive as part of a package holiday, global tour operators and travel agents – both in the tourists’ countries and in the destinations themselves - are the channels through which tourist activities are organized and tourist business generated. When tourists purchase a package holiday from multinational tour operators, they are also given the option, upon arrival at their destination, of selecting from a wide range of local daytrip options that are purchased separately through tour representatives. Sea- and land-based ecotourism daytrips in Phuket, and rafting, cycling, and trekking tours in Bali, represent a fraction of the many excursion options available to tourists. Foreign tour operators purchase their packages from travel wholesalers or “ground handlers” based in Thailand and Indonesia, and they, in turn, assemble packages comprised of contracts with various local companies, including tour operators and hotels. The representatives of foreign tour companies deal directly with tourists in Phuket and Bali, and in weekly meetings with tourists, tour reps provide information and also present a range of daytrip options. Thus, through direct purchasing and marketing links, foreign mass tourism intermediaries, and their representatives, generate the bulk of daily business for mass ecotourism companies.

The founders of the “original four” acknowledge that integration, however partial, into the well-developed infrastructure of mass tourism is crucial for survival. Sea Canoe sold its first trips out of Le Meridien, one of Phuket’s most exclusive five-star hotels, and received marketing and transportation support from Diethelm, the largest tour wholesaler operating in Thailand. The flow of transactions from foreign tourists, to international tourism intermediaries, and finally to mass ecotourism companies illustrates the necessity of building links to global or regional tour operators. For this reason, of the roughly fifteen tour wholesalers operating in Phuket, Sea Canoe has signed major contracts with ten whereas Siam Safari conducts business with six. When asked about the level of his company’s integration into mass tourism, the managing director of Bali Adventure Tours stated that it “relies completely on mass tourism.” In a similar vein, Sobek’s sales manager described the company as “essentially a mass tourism operation,” adding that every country and community must decide for itself what ecotourism means.

In sum, the overall success or failure of individual mass ecotourism ventures depends most directly on the degree of incorporation into mass tourism infrastructural and logistical networks. Therefore, in established resort areas in Southeast Asia such as Phuket and Bali, where mass tourism intermediaries are firmly established and dominate the market, ecotourism companies that make the most of deep structural links to mass channels of capital, marketing, and tourist distribution ultimately enjoy the greatest prospects for financial success.

### **CONCLUSION**

Contrary to common assumptions regarding the necessity of spatial isolation, the temporal development of ecotourism in relation to mass tourism, and the universality of definitions and assessments of ecotourism, this paper has demonstrated that ecotourism exists first and foremost as complex and imperfect localized versions of an ideal. In the case of beach resort destinations in Southeast Asia, ecotourism relies on

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deep structural links to the existing mass tourism industry. Although Phuket and Bali are just two such resort destinations in the region, their experiences with ecotourism prove telling since they not only represent the most prominent non-urban mass tourism sites in the region, but are also home to the four original mass ecotourism companies that have ultimately served as forerunners for resort-based ecotourism in Southeast Asia.

The “mass” component of mass ecotourism in Southeast Asia derives from the profile of the customers participating in the trips of the “original four,” the nature of marketing strategies pursued by these companies, the spatial proximity of ecotourism zones to areas of mass tourist concentrations, and the multiple ways in which business is conducted through traditional mass tourism networks, especially multinational intermediaries such as tour operators, travel agents, and airlines. These connections to mass tourism do not, however, disqualify the “original four,” not to mention some of their imitators, from participating in ecotourism since they follow every one of the following characteristics of ecotourism: low-impact and non-consumptive; educational; ethical and locally-oriented; located in natural areas; and dedicated to environmental conservation. Other than illustrating the importance of local context in assessing the possibility of syncretic forms of ecotourism, the examples of Phuket and Bali demonstrate that it is possible to combine the fun, predictability, efficiency, and economies of scale associated with mass tourism with the worthy principles of ecotourism.

Weaver (2002) correctly conjoins Phuket and Bali into a larger “rainforest and reef” region that features soft, diversionary ecotourism experiences for mostly mass tourists staying in resort areas. This paper has outlined the specific ways in which this ecotourism zone operates in practice by examining the daily activities of influential companies in Phuket and Bali. Further, the actual “mass” and “eco” components of mass ecotourism were delineated in order to show that both forms of tourism coexist and interact in integral ways. Without reaching out and taking advantage of existing mass tourism infrastructure, markets, and business channels, ecotourism in this rainforest and reef zone would likely fail financially, and would therefore fail also as a method of spreading an environmental message to a group of tourists that all too often are sheltered from conservation messages in the world of mass, packaged tourism. With respect to the importance of local context, mass ecotourism in Southeast Asia is made possible by several particular circumstances associated with Phuket, Bali, and many other of the beach resorts of the region. Such circumstances include mature mass tourism industries, an emerging interest among mass tourists for novel and adventurous experiences, small distances between resort areas and uninhabited natural locations, low operating costs, and a laissez-faire business and regulatory climate that encourages rapid imitation, intense competition, and product innovation. Thus, alongside research conducted on other localized forms of ecotourism in Southeast Asia, such as mountain trekking in northern Thailand (Cohen, 1989; Dearden & Harron, 1992), overnight expeditions in relatively remote jungle regions of Sabah on the island of Borneo (Markwell, 2001), or wildlife tourism to protected areas like Komodo National Park in Indonesia (Walpole *et al.*, 2001), this paper’s discussion of the hybridized and parallel development of mass ecotourism in Phuket and Bali illustrates that ecotourism can occur in unexpected places, and need not necessarily avoid its supposed mass tourism antithesis in order to succeed.

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