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Ecotourism and mass tourism in Southern Thailand: Spatial interdependence, structural connections, and staged authenticity

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Abstract

The desire to spend leisure time in 'natural' settings represents a key factor behind the recent and rapid growth of ecotourism. A search by ecotourists for remote landscapes and locations has shaped the way in which geographers have defined ecotourism, but few scholars have explored, in detail, the mechanics of the spatial relationship between ecotourism and mass tourism, two forms of travel usually considered mutually exclusive in spatial terms. Using the island of Phuket – southern Thailand's premier resort destination – as a case study, this paper investigates the spatial overlaps and connections between ecotourism and mass tourism and tests the assumption that ecotourism and mass tourism must exist spatially apart in order for the former to succeed. Despite Phuket's association with mass tourism, and the small physical distances between built-up mass tourist areas and 'natural' ecotourism settings, the 'communicative staging' of natural authenticity allows ecotourism companies to convey geographical remoteness to tourists. Although ecotourism in Phuket must struggle constantly to overcome the perceptual impact of spatial proximity to resort locations, the tourist markets and business networks of the existing mass tourism industry remain crucial to the survival of ecotourism in this region. Thus, contrary to conventional notions that ecotourism and mass tourism must exist as separate entities, this paper argues that an interconnected, symbiotic, and spatially-contiguous relationship between the two is necessary in the case of Phuket.

Introduction

The promise of physical rest and recreation are obvious stimulants of travel but, at a more fundamental level, the innate human desire to visit distant locations relates directly to emotion, fantasy, and imagination (Davis, 1999; Crouch, 2000). Whether one yearns for a purely hedonistic poolside retreat or an extended special-interest tour with like-minded travelers, pre-conceived images and expectations shape tourist demand and behavior. This especially holds true for many participants in, and advocates of, ecotourism who, when ruminating on the concept, likely picture small groups of conservationists trekking through isolated and remote areas of wilderness as the sounds of birds and falling leaves fill the air. Although a caricature, this depiction of the 'ecotourist imagination' reflects research that illustrates that, among North American ecotourists at least, experiencing and enjoying wilderness settings and scenery form the most important elements of a trip (HLA and ARA, 1994). A desire among ecotourists for particular kinds of landscapes, and by implication spatial locations, has also informed the way in which geographers have defined ecotourism. In his content analysis of 85 ecotourism definitions, Fennel (2001) examines multiple variables in order to highlight common threads within the diverse literature on ecotourism. Of the 20 variables examined, the one most frequently cited – appearing

in 62.4% of all definitions – relates to location, specifically in 'reference to where ecotourism occurs' (Fennell, 2001, p. 407).

The emphasis on space and place in definitions of ecotourism becomes most obvious when examining some of the adjectives used to describe the places in which ecotourism is said to occur: natural (Boyd and 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), and relatively undisturbed (Boyd *et al.*, 1994; Wallace and Pierce, 1996). As it is almost universally defined, ecotourism excludes mass tourism because of the assumption that the latter is, by necessity, found in areas with high concentrations of people, infrastructure, and other examples of human modifications of the natural landscape. Not only is ecotourism considered possible only in geographical locations where mass tourism is absent, but the differences between the two are also spatially marked in diagrams that, in their attempts to map theoretical categories of tourism, place ecotourism and mass tourism in discrete circles or columns (Burton, 1998; Fennell, 1999). Although the mutual exclusion of ecotourism and mass tourism is implied in definitions of ecotourism, few have actually explored the mechanics of the spatial relationship between the two supposedly separate, 'polar opposite' tourism types

(Diamantis, 1999, p. 116). Recent exceptions to this historical neglect come from Dwyer and Edwards (2000) and Higham and Luck (2002), who discuss the possibility of urban-based ecotourism. Weaver (2002a) provides another, and in this case more pertinent, exception, commenting that in the 'rainforest and reef' ecotourism zone of Asia, concentrations of conventional tourists in beach resort areas and international gateways seek diversionary day-only trips to more 'natural' terrestrial or marine locations. Recognizing a gap in the geographical literature on tourism, Weaver concludes by calling for a '*more systematic examination of emerging spatial and structural patterns of ecotourism in Asia*' (Weaver, 2002a, p. 168).

This paper provides such an examination, and investigates the spatial overlaps and connections between ecotourism and mass tourism in southern Thailand. This paper also tests the assumption that ecotourism and mass tourism must exist spatially apart in order for the former to succeed, or even to qualify as ecotourism in the first place. Thirteen months of fieldwork, spread out over a span of five years between 1996 and 2001, yielded the data on which this paper is based. Though research was conducted with many companies, this paper relies on examples from the two largest and oldest ecotourism companies in Phuket: *Sea Canoe* and *Siam Safari*. Several forms of data were collected. First, self-administered surveys were completed by 209 customers of Sea Canoe. The survey gathered several kinds of information, including demographic data, reasons for participating in a Sea Canoe daytrip, and numerical rankings of various elements of the daytrip. Second, taped interviews were conducted with 62 tourists, 8 tour company representatives, 2 officials from the Tourism Authority of Thailand, and 6 owners and 3 managers of Phuket-based ecotourism companies. These taped interviews covered a range of topics, including the social and environmental impacts of tourism, the motivations behind travel, the logistics of purchasing vacations to and in Thailand, and people's enjoyment of kayaking and trekking excursions. Untaped interviews were also conducted with 20 local travel agents and 22 Thai ecotourism guides. Aside from interview data, participant-observation—conducted during a total of 43 trips with Sea Canoe and Siam Safari—also produced a significant amount of information regarding the ways in which Phuket's ecotourism companies operate on a daily basis.

The fieldwork took place in the province of Phuket and in Ao Phangnga Marine National Park, which straddles the provinces of Phuket, Phangnga, and Krabi on Thailand's southwest coast (Figure 1).

Tin mining, fishing, and rubber tapping defined Phuket for centuries but, since the mid-1970s, government agencies and private tourism operators have marketed Phuket as the 'Pearl of the Andaman', resulting in a swift transformation of the island into a typical mass tourism seaside resort destination. Because of Phuket's association with mass tourism, and its frequent comparison to Pattaya and other mass tourism beach destinations in Thailand (Smith, 1992), few would imagine the possibility of ecotourism in this region. However, through the clever 'staging' of natural authenti-

city, ecotourism operators in Phuket are able to overcome the potential mental, or psychological, effect on tourists of the small spatial distances between built-up mass tourist areas and 'natural' ecotourism settings. Moreover, without the tourist markets and business networks of the existing mass tourism industry, ecotourism would cease to exist in Phuket. Thus, contrary to conventional notions that ecotourism and mass tourism must exist as spatially separate entities, this paper argues that an interconnected and proximate relationship between the two is not only possible but is also, in the case of Phuket, structurally and conceptually necessary.

The emergence of ecotourism in Phuket

Ecotourism in Phuket emerged long after the establishment of a conventional tourism industry. Aside from illustrating how quickly the nature of tourism in a location such as southern Thailand can change according to shifting tourist preferences, the late temporal emergence of ecotourism contradicts common evolutionary conceptions that preclude the possibility of specific forms of 'alternative' tourism, including ecotourism, to develop alongside their mass counterparts (Cazes, 1987; Cohen, 1987; Pearce, 1989). The recent arrival of ecotourism in Phuket is the latest stage of a spectacular path of growth experienced by the tourism industry in this area. Phuket's traditional role as a source of raw materials began to erode in the 1970s as the island moved towards international tourism of the stereotypical 'sun, sea, and sand' variety (Uthoff, 1997). The first large hotel in Phuket was built in 1976 and, by 1979, the Thai government had built an international airport while also supporting the further construction of hotels in Phuket Town and Patong Beach on the island's west coast. The number of international tourist arrivals in 1976 stood at roughly 20,000 (Ludwig, 1976, p. 23), but accelerated abruptly during the next decade, reaching 530,000 in 1989 (TAT, 1997, p. 131). The past fifteen years have seen no abatement in the growth of tourist arrivals, in spite of the Gulf War in 1991, the events of 11 September 2001, and the subsequent American military action in Afghanistan (it remains to be seen, however, what effect the conflict in Iraq will have). By 2001, international tourist arrivals had reached 2.7 million, an increase of 8.6% from the year before, and an astonishing number when one considers the small size of Phuket's permanent population (250,000), the marginal character of tourism in Phuket as recently as the early-1980s, and the state of global tourism, which in 2001 suffered a 1.3% drop in international arrivals (TAT, 2003a, b).

A fifteen-fold increase in the number of international arrivals in just fifteen years (between 1986 and 2001) has led to an explosion in the number and variety of accommodations, tourist activities, and companies. Although many of the recreational opportunities currently available to mass tourists in Phuket relate to entertainment, shopping, or beach-related activities, there are also several ecotourism options related to experiencing the natural environment of Phuket and surrounding provinces. Since Phuket is home to hundreds of

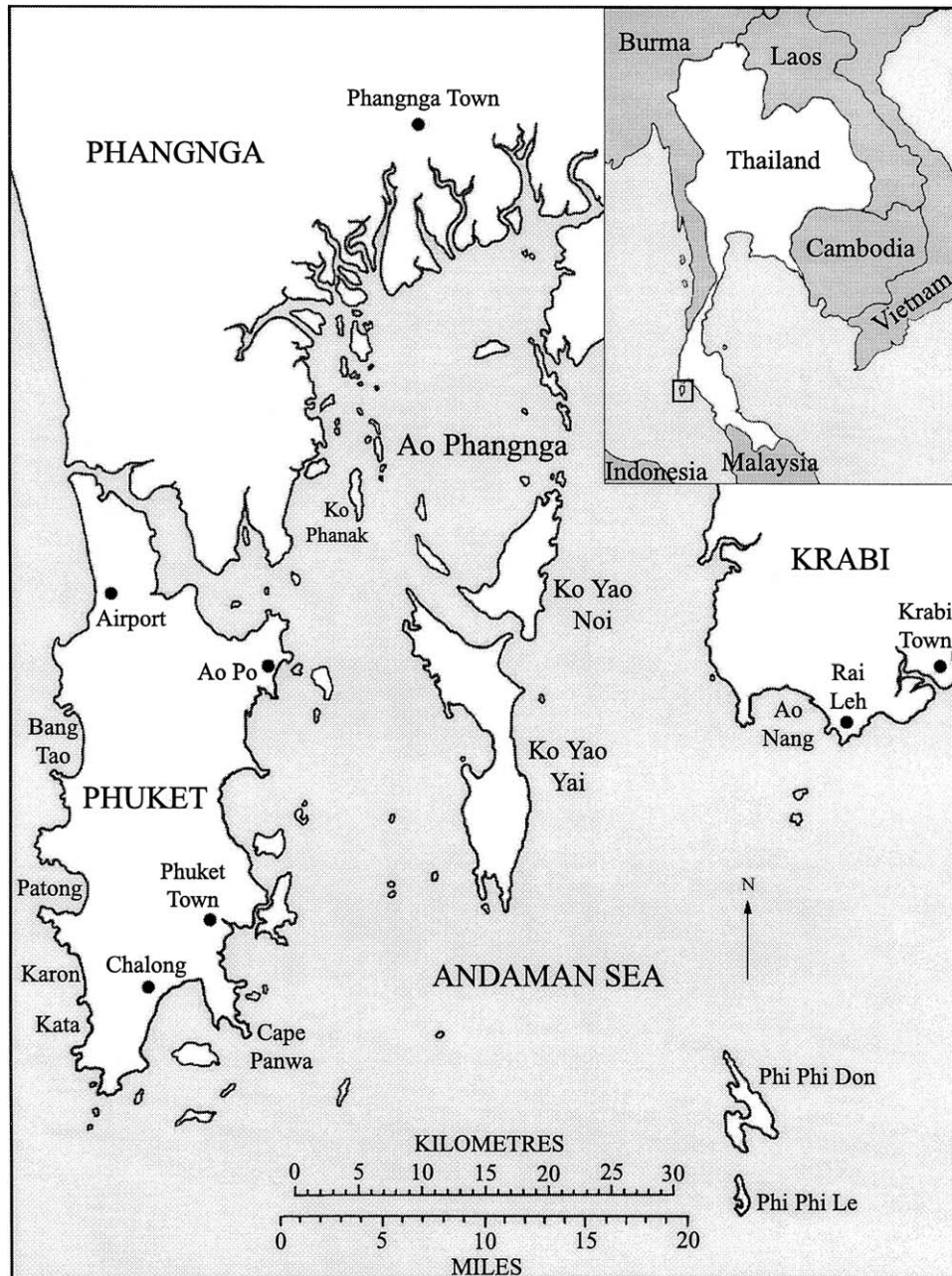


Figure 1. The provinces of Phuket, Phangnga, and Krabi in southern Thailand.

travel agents and tour operators, many of which offer nature-oriented trips as part of their overall product range, identifying the exact number of ecotourism companies is difficult. Comprehensive and holistic definitions of ecotourism (for example, Wallace and Pierce, 1996; Diamantis, 1999; Fennell, 1999) that encompass a wide range of variables, such as education, sustainability, cultural sensitivity, conservation, and local benefits, would yield roughly 20 ecotourism companies in Phuket. On the other hand, the number can range as high as 40 if ecotourism is considered loosely, as anything that takes place in 'natural areas' and is offered by operators self-identifying as ecotourism companies.

Determining the exact number of ecotourism companies in Phuket may be tricky, but there is no doubt about the origins of ecotourism in Phuket. In particular, Sea Canoe

and Siam Safari, both founded in 1989, initiated tours that brought mass tourists to nature spots not far from the most popular beaches of the island (Dowling, 2000). Sea Canoe is a marine ecotourism company that offers sea kayaking trips to Ao Phangnga Marine National Park, the shallow bay that covers an area of 154 square miles and lies immediately to the north and east of Phuket (Figure 1). Sea Canoe brings tourists, by means of inflatable kayaks, into open-air lagoons via cave passages that are filled with and emptied of water as sea tides flow and ebb. Siam Safari, by contrast, is land-based and offers daytrips that include elephant hill treks, river canoeing, mountain biking, and nature trail walking. Siam Safari's 35-acre 'nature compound' in Chalong, on Phuket's southeast coast, is the locational base of most itineraries, with virtually every daytrip passing through the

compound at some point. Both Sea Canoe and Siam Safari have won several domestic and international awards for their efforts to promote sustainable forms of tourism: these include a British Airways Tourism for Tomorrow Award, a Best Tour Programme Award from the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), and a Gold Environment Award from the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) (Neale, 1999).

As mentioned above, many companies based in Phuket now offer nature-oriented trips, but Sea Canoe and Siam Safari remain to this day the largest, most successful, and most visible ecotourism companies in Phuket. The two companies are also significant because their implementation of ecotourism principles illustrates that, even in cases where business depends on mass tourists staying in resort areas, companies can still practice ecotourism, or at least a 'soft' version thereof (Lindberg, 1991; Weaver, 2002b). As Fennell (2001, p. 403) points out, the development of definitions is 'one of the most habitual practices in the sub-field of ecotourism', but common to virtually all definitions is an emphasis on education, sustainability, local benefits and control, and 'natural' locations (Diamantis, 1999).

Sea Canoe and Siam Safari make great efforts to educate their customers on the ecology of the areas that are visited and, in the case of Siam Safari, this education extends to informing tourists of the plight of the endangered Asian elephant and raising money for elephant conservation through the Elephant Help Project (EHP). Sea Canoe passengers travelling in minivans from their hotels to Ao Po, the bay from which Sea Canoe escort boats depart, receive information from the guide who accompanies the minivan driver. On the escort boat, 'lead guides' give a formal presentation that provides information and outlines the details of the day's trip. During the on-board presentation, the lead guide directs tourists towards a bound folder containing several laminated information sheets. Although the informational folder is rarely mentioned again after the initial lead-guide presentation, 64% of Sea Canoe passengers surveyed still made the time to peruse the folder on their own at some point during the trip. This finding is significant because most mass tourists in Phuket are attracted to sea kayaking for reasons other than education. For example, 'adventure' and 'experiencing nature' were the two most common answers selected by Sea Canoe passengers (64 and 63%, respectively) as reasons for choosing to participate in a sea kayaking trip. Further, the 'importance of learning about the ecology and natural history of the area' received the lowest average ranking among nine variables that tested the importance to tourists of various components of the kayaking daytrip. Despite the low pre-trip importance of seeking educational experiences, Sea Canoe customers gain both a bolstered geographical knowledge of the area and a heightened sense of environmental awareness and appreciation. For example, when asked whether the Sea Canoe daytrip made them more aware or concerned about the natural environment, 40% answered 'definitely' and another 41% selected 'probably'.

Intense and ongoing training ensures that the employees of Sea Canoe and Siam Safari receive extensive environmental education. Sea Canoe spends over half a million baht

(\$11,600) annually on employee training, with guides receiving 50,000 baht (\$1,160) in training by the time they receive promotion to a lead guide position. Sea Canoe guides receive environmental education through Thai- and English-language informational materials, which are augmented with informal, ongoing lessons on natural history, geology, flora, and fauna. Similarly, Siam Safari educates its employees about the wildlife, botany, and geology of Thailand. Siam Safari requires its guides to participate in four hours of weekly classroom instruction, and through its connections to national government agencies and environmental organizations, Siam Safari has also attempted to spread its environmental message to the wider national Thai audience.

Sustainability is another feature of ecotourism promoted in the practices of Sea Canoe and Siam Safari. Both companies strictly limit group sizes and scatter tours throughout different times of the day in order to disperse the overall number of tourists and, therefore, reduce the pressure put on particular areas at any given moment. Unfortunately and ironically, the success of Sea Canoe and Siam Safari has hampered efforts to promote sustainability due to the quick and frequent imitation on the part of rival ecotourism companies, many of which do not share the original ecotourism operators' concern for ecological carrying capacities (Shepherd, 2002). For example, by 1992, only 3 years after the founding of Sea Canoe, 4 imitators had emerged in close succession and they were joined by 15 others by 1999. With approximately 20 companies currently offering sea-kayaking daytrips, the small islands and enclosed lagoons of Ao Phangnga have gone from receiving virtually no visitors to hosting hundreds of tourists every single day (Vannisse, 1996). Fortunately, the small number of accessible caves and the impossibility of entering lagoons with motorized vessels have served to cap the possible number of tourists, thereby limiting the damage caused by the recent increase in sea kayaking in Ao Phangnga. Similarly, the small percentage of land in Phuket still covered by rainforest serves as a natural limit to endless expansion of trekking companies and, thus, may help to sustain the activity.

Ecotourism in Phuket provides local benefits and contributes to community development. Despite, in most cases, possessing no more than a grade six education, Sea Canoe guides, cooks, and drivers receive 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 clerical, sales, and services workers (National Statistical Office, 1999, p. 20). Sea Canoe employees receive many benefits, including health and life insurance, disability allowances, and free language, paddling, and tourism certification training.

The owners of Sea Canoe and Siam Safari are all Thai, and most are southern Thai specifically. Further, although both companies have employed locally-based expatriates as managers in the past, the current management is almost exclusively Thai; most managers are from either Phuket or other southern provinces of Thailand. Sea Canoe and Siam Safari not only promote local ownership and management, but also ensure that benefits remain in local hands.

In particular, Sea Canoe and Siam Safari provide employment opportunities to poorly educated local residents with few prospects of finding rewarding and well-paying employment. Over half of Sea Canoe's kayaking guides, and all but a few of its boat captains, deck hands, and on-board cooks, are residents of Ko Yao Yai, an island just off the east coast of Phuket that hosts several poor fishing communities (see Figure 1). Similarly, Siam Safari hires workers from outside southern Thailand only in the case of elephant handlers (mahouts), the majority of which are original residents of northern and northeastern Thailand.

Ecotourism companies in Phuket spend the majority of their costs locally, thereby maximizing linkages to the local economy. Other than specialized equipment, including inflatable canoes manufactured in the United States, Sea Canoe spends over 98% of its total costs locally. Sea Canoe contributes approximately two million baht (US\$46,500) to the local economy in an average month: one-third of this amount goes to payroll and roughly three to four hundred thousand baht goes to the owners of three contracted and two 'freelance' (i.e., part-time) escort boats. The leakage rate is also low for Siam Safari, which contributes tens of millions of baht annually into the local economy and purchases few goods or services beyond the immediate region surrounding Phuket. With daytrips that cost between US\$70 and US\$90, Sea Canoe and Siam Safari both charge prices that are high in comparison to most other tours in Thailand, but managers in both companies point out that the need to charge these rates stems from costs related to high staff wages and benefits.

The final, and most cited, component of ecotourism definitions, namely the importance of 'natural areas', is a key feature of the activities of Sea Canoe and Siam Safari. As the characteristic that most distinguishes Sea Canoe and Siam Safari from other tourism companies, particularly those labeled 'mass', the spatial nature of ecotourism deserves special attention, which it receives in detail in subsequent sections of this paper.

Spatial overlaps and connections between ecotourism and mass tourism

Although wildlife- and nature-oriented tourism do take place in remote, outlying parks and reserves, the bulk of recent ecotourism activities in southern Thailand have grown out of, and adjacent to, 'typical' mass sites such as the hotel complexes and urban centers found in Phuket (see Kontogeorgopoulos, 1998). Ecotourism companies, such as Sea Canoe and Siam Safari, take full advantage of small physical distances between popular mass tourist beaches and areas of natural beauty. Only 22 miles separate Patong Beach, the most developed resort area of Phuket, and Ko Phanak, an island located to the northeast of Phuket and visited by Sea Canoe and all other sea-based ecotourism companies. The driving distance between Patong and Chalong, the location of Siam Safari's 'nature compound', is even smaller at 8 miles. Such small distances not only make the

task of transporting customers from mass tourist destinations to natural areas logistically straightforward, but they also simultaneously enable mass tourists concerned with nature-oriented excursions to participate in trips that do not necessitate long, uncomfortable, or inconvenient journeys.

The small distances that separate mass tourism enclaves and areas supporting ecotourism belie the expectations, and in some cases the experiences, of geographers studying ecotourism in other parts of the world, or even other regions of Thailand (Dearden, 1991). For example, in one of the earliest definitions of ecotourism, Ceballos-Lascuráin (1988, p. 2) defined ecotourism as travel to '*relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas*'. Assessing the degree to which an enclosed landscape is 'undisturbed' or 'uncontaminated' is, of course, operationally problematic since drawing the line between these areas and 'disturbed' ones depends on the specific criteria used, as well as on the nature of the activity considered. Nevertheless, it is likely that few would consider an area such as Ao Phangnga – with its fishing trawlers and steady flow of sightseeing tourists coasting through the bay's open seas on speedboats and long-tail boats – as undisturbed or uncontaminated. The caves, lagoons, and rain forest areas in which Sea Canoe and Siam Safari operate are themselves 'natural', uninhabited, and tranquil areas, but these micro-environments in turn belong to landscapes that are both heavily marked by human activity and spatially contiguous to built mass tourism environments.

The spatial overlap between ecotourism and mass tourism in Phuket is more than just coincidental. Without close ties to mass tourism, companies such as Sea Canoe and Siam Safari would fail to survive financially. The spatial proximity of natural areas to beach resort locations allows ecotourism companies in Phuket to capitalize on three components of mass tourism. First, the clientele of ecotourism companies is, according to every possible objective measure, quintessentially 'mass' in orientation. Ecotourism customers in Phuket plan and book their vacations through conventional mass tourism operators, visit Phuket for short periods of time or as part of larger multi-stop holidays (which last 11 days, on average, for Sea Canoe customers), and stay in four- and five-star hotels. Le Meridien, one of Phuket's most exclusive five-star resorts, accounts for the largest share of Sea Canoe passengers (16%). Further, 45% of all surveyed Sea Canoe customers were at the time staying in one of just five large, luxurious hotels: Le Meridien, Dusit Laguna, Sharon Grande, Banyan Tree, and Cape Panwa. In Phuket, as elsewhere in the developing world (see Weaver, 2001a), ecotourism operators have tapped into the burgeoning desire among Western mass tourists for novel, adventurous, and 'green' travel experiences. The presence of a large, spatially-concentrated, and financially-willing population of mass tourists supplies a guaranteed market for Phuket's ecotourism companies. In particular, 55% of Sea Canoe's customers stay in hotels located in Patong, Phuket's most developed

and congested beachside resort location, and an additional 25% stay in the 'Laguna Bay' enclave, an integrated complex of five-star hotels on Bang Tao Beach in northwestern Phuket.

The second way in which ecotourism in Phuket is spatially dependent on mass tourism is the necessity of using the infrastructure of the existing mass tourism industry. The airplanes that bring tourists to Phuket, the hotels in which tourists stay, the roads on which tourists are transported to natural areas, the boats and minivans that shuttle tourists to Ao Phangnga and Siam Safari's nature compound, and the marketing outlets in which ecotourism companies advertise their message to tourists all exist in the first place because of mass tourism in Phuket and all preceded the arrival of ecotourism.

Lastly, and related to tourism infrastructure, the flow of business transactions among ecotourism companies in Phuket derives from existing logistical networks on the island and beyond. In particular, Sea Canoe and Siam Safari rely heavily on the roughly 15 tour wholesalers that assemble holiday packages in Phuket. While on vacation in Phuket, mass tourists meet regularly with representatives from multinational tour operators, who offer a range of possible daily excursions for purchase; sea kayaking and trekking represent just two excursions among many. Fifty-nine percent of all Sea Canoe customers purchase a daytrip directly through their tour representative, or independently based on a recommendation of a tour representative. Further, since only 23% of Sea Canoe customers know about the company before coming to Phuket, mass tourism intermediaries and their representatives offer crucial booking and purchasing links, and ultimately generate the bulk of daily business for Phuket's ecotourism companies.

Although providing a smaller relative share of total business, local travel agents in Phuket represent a second key tourism intermediary that directs mass tourists toward ecotourism companies. For the 41% of Sea Canoe customers that do not book tours through – or based on the recommendation of – tour representatives, daytrips are purchased through local travel agencies and streetside kiosks in Phuket that sell excursions to 'walk-in' tourists, known also as FITs (Free Independent Travellers). In purchasing daytrips in this way, FITs exercise the option of arranging daytrips outside the structure of standardized package tour options. Just as foreign tour operators possess enormous power in determining the flow of mass tourists to individual ecotourism companies, local travel agents carry great influence over the travel choices of FITs. For this reason, most ecotourism companies in Phuket pay hefty commissions of up to 25% of the total cost of a trip to travel agents who book FITs with them rather than with their competitors. However, bucking a strong trend towards greater FIT business among ecotourism companies operating in the Asia-Pacific region (Lew, 1998), Sea Canoe and Siam Safari have increasingly shunned the FIT market, which, according to Sea Canoe and Siam Safari managers, only provides between 10 and 15% of total revenues for each company. Company managers also point out that, although shunning the FIT market means reducing

business links to locally-owned travel agencies, the avoidance of high commissions ultimately facilitates the provision of high wages and generous benefits for locals who, unlike the owners of travel agencies, usually possess few economic resources or job prospects.

Ecotourism companies that operate in areas associated with mass tourism enjoy access to the tour wholesalers, tour operators, and travel agents that steer the purchasing choices of large numbers of customers. In light of the necessity of such access, it is clear that ecotourism enjoys its greatest chances for success not in remote areas, but adjacent to 'mass' destinations such as Phuket. This does not necessarily preclude ecotourism in remote areas of southern Thailand, but insufficient transportation connections and poor or neglected infrastructure undermine the financial viability of many small-scale ecotourism ventures located in areas far from mass tourism destinations. Without connections to locations with high tourist concentrations and mass tourism business networks, companies that remain relatively distant from significant mass tourism markets and depend on limited, scattered marketing, must face the perpetual threat of financial closure, particularly during the low tourism season (Kontogeorgopoulos, 1998). The inconvenience in both time and comfort of travelling to participate in the trips of remotely-located ecotourism companies ensures that only those tourists with plenty of flexible holiday time visit on a regular basis. Thus, in the case of southern Thailand, spatial proximity to mass tourism remains the most salient determinant of financial success since such proximity provides ecotourism companies with a consistent and almost guaranteed supply of relatively wealthy mass tourists looking for interesting, novel, and time-efficient experiences beyond their pre-bought package holidays.

Communicative staging of natural authenticity

Although the absence of inhabitants or built structures in ecotourism sites fosters a feeling among tourists that such sites are 'natural', this perception is constantly threatened by the sight of other tourists. Further, the small amount of time and space that it takes to bring tourists from built-up resort landscapes to uninhabited natural settings makes such settings less than pristine. Hence, despite operating in natural areas and utilizing natural resources, ecotourism operators in Phuket must work to counteract the psychological effect of spatial proximity between ecotourism sites and areas of mass tourist concentrations found throughout island.

In order to offset the perceptual impact of this spatial proximity, ecotourism operators in Phuket deliberately create, among tourists, a mental sense of distance between built-up and natural areas. This is accomplished through the 'staging' of authenticity, a concept first developed within the context of tourism by MacCannell (1976). MacCannell argues that the demand for authenticity stems from a search among tourists for an authenticity missing in 'advanced', industrialized societies. The alienation and fragmentation caused by industrial forms of employment, coupled with the confusion and self-doubt caused by the disappearance

of intimacy, creativity, and spontaneity from modern life, has, according to MacCannell, created an eternal quest for an authenticity found in other historical periods and in other cultures. Using Goffman's (1959) notion of front and back regions, MacCannell discusses the journey that the modern tourist invariably makes from one stage to the next, always in search of an elusive 'back region' where truth, reality, and authenticity exist in an unstaged manner.

Authenticity for MacCannell is a purely cultural phenomenon but, as the recent expansion of ecotourism worldwide illustrates, mass tourists are also increasingly interested in *natural* authenticity. However, the staging of natural authenticity in Phuket is done not by local 'native' residents hoping to cash in on touristic notions of cultural purity and authenticity, but rather by the owners, managers, and employees of ecotourism companies. Efforts on the part of companies, such as Sea Canoe and Siam Safari, to stage the natural authenticity of the locations in which they operate are facilitated by several factors. First, though mass tourism is rarely associated with a desire to experience natural authenticity, the customers of Sea Canoe exhibit a clear interest in natural authenticity. Just over half (51%) of all Sea Canoe passengers surveyed stated that they were attracted to sea kayaking because of the authenticity of the experience. In addition, among the nine variables that tested the importance of various elements in attracting tourists to a sea kayaking daytrip, the three cited most frequently – 'uniqueness of landscape', 'scenery', and 'experiencing authentic Thai nature' – all relate directly or indirectly to the issue of natural authenticity.

However, despite demonstrating a general concern and desire for authenticity, ecotourists in Phuket entertain relatively lax expectations of natural authenticity in comparison either to 'hard-core' ecotourists travelling to remote areas of southern Thailand, or to trekkers in northern Thailand who respond to eroding cultural authenticity by shifting attention to the authenticity of the natural environment and the overall jungle trekking experience (Dearden and Harron, 1992). The relatively relaxed and fluid attitudes regarding natural authenticity among Phuket's mass tourists were confirmed repeatedly in interviews with customers of Sea Canoe and Siam Safari. For example, when asked about the meaning and importance of natural authenticity, many customers admitted that, while a valuable goal, the achievement of authenticity while on vacation is usually a secondary concern compared to such things as relaxation, novelty, and fun. Loose expectations of natural authenticity do not necessarily mean that Phuket's mass tourists are uninterested in the natural experiences offered by ecotourism companies, but it is likely that more stringent expectations of authenticity would hinder the staging efforts of ecotourism companies.

Lastly, ecotourism in and around Phuket takes place in spectacular natural settings that stand in stark contrast to the crowded, noisy, polluted, and manufactured locations of seaside mass tourism resorts. For example, trekking through a rainforest or abandoned rubber plantation is a tranquil experience for most tourists, as is kayaking through silent enclosed lagoons. Ao Phangnga is especially breathtaking

and, therefore, a perfect location for ecotourism and for mass tourists hoping to experience nature in an 'authentic' but convenient manner. As a 'drowned karstland', or region of submerged limestone topography, Ao Phangnga features over 150 small limestone islands (Figure 2).

Wave, rain, and current action have for thousands of years severely eroded the porous limestone formations of the bay. This constant erosion has turned the islands into giant sponges by carving out large caverns connected by long, winding cave passages. Over the past thousands of years, some caverns grew so large as a result of erosion from rainwater that the heavy limestone roofs caved in, leaving behind large sinkholes in the middle of the islands. Filled with mangrove trees and surrounded by sheer cliffs rising up to 1000 feet, these sinkholes, or internal lagoons, open up to the sky and are known as *hongs*, the Thai word for 'room' (Figure 3).

The ability of marine ecotourism companies in Phuket to provide tourists with 'hands-on' experience with the rock formations, water, and vegetation of Ao Phangnga make attempts to stage natural authenticity easier than would be the case in the absence of such a dramatic, and nearby, national park.

Despite the presence of striking natural habitats, providers of ecotourism experiences, such as Sea Canoe and Siam Safari, still feel compelled to *communicate* a sense of natural authenticity to mass tourists who enjoy feeling as if they are 'getting away' from it all, albeit for short periods of time. In this way, ecotourism in Phuket represents a nature-based example of the 'communicative staging' of authenticity common in northern Thailand (Cohen, 1989; Dearden, 1993). In his work on trekking in northern Thailand, Cohen (1989) identifies 'communicative staging' as a measure employed by locals to communicate the authenticity of a region without having to physically tamper with (or create artificially) a tourist site, in which case it would constitute 'substantive staging'. Since the particular tourists interested in trekking in the late-1970s and early-1980s sought out primitive and remote trekking villages, trekking operators competed with one another to convince tourists of the authenticity of their particular treks. However, the hilltribes were at the time undergoing incorporation into the Thai and global cash economies and, with the presence of ever more tourists, the perceived authenticity of the area diminished. In response to this erosion of authenticity, trekking companies, guides, and hilltribes in northern Thailand began communicating an authenticity favorable to tourists in the following ways: emphasizing in brochures several tropes of authenticity, including primitiveness, naturalness, variety, colorfulness, exoticism, remoteness, and timelessness; making the actual physical experience of the jungle trek appear adventurous, fascinating, full of discovery, and interesting; and convincing tourists that individual, renegade trekkers faced danger and legal hassles if they dared to venture out into the jungle without the helpful and knowledgeable hand of a trekking guide.

The communicative staging found in northern Thailand relates to authentic people, whereas the marketing of Sea



Figure 2. Typical karst island in Ao Phangnga.

Canoe and Siam Safari emphasizes the authenticity of spatial settings. Nevertheless, the communicative staging of natural authenticity in Phuket shares many parallels with the staging undertaken in northern Thailand. For example, the images created by ecotourism companies replicate several of the tropes of authenticity identified by Cohen (1989): primitiveness, naturalness, remoteness, and timelessness. In Phuket, the close proximity between mass tourism resort areas and ecotourism sites such as Ao Phangnga and small forest tracts in central Phuket complicates efforts to communicate geographical remoteness, but operators succeed both in fostering a sense of isolation from other tourists, and in communicating the natural authenticity of primitive, pristine, and unspoiled locations far from mass tourist 'hordes'. Siam Safari, for instance, promises in its promotional brochures to take people 'far from the tourist crowds' to 'another world – The Real Natural Thailand'. A major element of Sea Canoe daytrips also revolves around communicating authenticity and conveying to tourists a feeling of discovery and exploration of 'untouched' caves, lagoons, and mangrove forests; this is a task that is made difficult but necessary by the staggered presence of hundreds of tourists a day. In its brochure, Sea Canoe assures potential customers of the natural and historical authenticity of its locations:

'Nothing gets you closer to Nature than Sea Canoe. The freedom from motor noise and exhaust glides you silently across the water into a natural tranquility you've only imagined. Approach birds, monkeys, reptiles, and fish closer that you have ever dreamed possible. Guests claim that cruising through a sea cave into Asia's limestone inland tidal lagoons is like going back a million years, to a time before people walked the Earth.'

Just as trekking companies in northern Thailand communicate a sense of adventure, fascination, and discovery, ecotourism companies in Phuket convince customers of the adventurous, and by implication unstaged, nature of the itineraries offered. Siam Safari transports tourists around Phuket in Land Rovers that are painted jungle green to project an adventurous, off-road feel. Each Land Rover carries a maximum of eight passengers, who travel together the entire day and, thus, participate in the trip as a sort of exploration 'team'. The activities undertaken by sea kayaking companies are more inherently adventurous than those associated with trekking and, therefore, require less communicative staging of adventure. In particular, due to the possibility of drowning or cutting oneself inside the cave passages, an element of danger remains forever present on a Sea Canoe trip. Although safety is emphasized heavily to ease the fears of tourists, a careful balance is nurtured between comfort and safety, on the one hand, and danger and adventure, on the other.

The agents most responsible for the communicative staging of natural authenticity in Phuket are the guides that mediate the experience between tourists and the natural environment. In northern Thailand, trekking guides, dressed for the part in army fatigues, bush hats, and bandanas, 'have become part of the visual show and a major factor in the substantive and communicative staging of authenticity' (Dearden and Harron, 1994, p. 90). Similarly, Siam Safari guides wear khaki adventure gear and create, through verbal reminders, an image of themselves as expedition leaders leading small teams of mass tourist explorers on partly unscripted off-road tours of Phuket. Judging from comments made by its customers in one-on-one interviews, Siam Safari's efforts to create a sense of adventure and authenticity



Figure 3. Enclosed inner lagoon ('hong') of an island in Ao Phangnga.

clearly succeed. Considering Phuket's small size (210 square miles) and the spatial proximity of uninhabited forested areas to congested beach and urban locations, this successful communication of natural authenticity is a testament to the skill of Siam Safari's guides.

Although, as mentioned, Ao Phangnga affords sea kayaking companies an instant advantage where communicative staging is concerned, Sea Canoe guides also succeed in conveying to tourists the natural authenticity of ecotourism in Phuket. Just as Siam Safari customers comment often on the importance of their guides, Sea Canoe customers also place great emphasis on guides: when asked on the survey to rank (from 1 to 10) the quality of 14 different elements of the daytrip, Sea Canoe customers gave the top average score (9.24) to the 'service provided by guides'. An intimate ratio of one guide for every two passengers, along with the long stretches of time that passengers listen to information and instructions, imbue Sea Canoe guides with enormous influence over tourists' perceptions of the authenticity, danger, adventure, and novelty of their experiences. Through word choices and tone of delivery, on board presentations by guides depict the trip as dangerous, and tourists commonly hear stories of past accidents caused by passengers not obeying the rules. Guides also call constant attention to the spontaneity and lack of control associated with shifting tides and the narrow window of opportunity in which inflatable kayaks can enter or exit lagoons. The discourse of adventure and danger found in marketing documents is also reinforced through the actions and words of guides. For instance, as tourists approach the islands of Ao Phangnga, they are informed by guides that they will soon be entering a 'lost world' or alternatively 'another world' that is millions of years old and preserved in its pristine pre-modern state. Interestingly, even the occasional

site of floating garbage, not to mention the much more frequent site of other passengers in kayaks, fails to weaken the sense of temporal, mental, and spatial detachment cultivated by Sea Canoe.

Conclusion

The spatial relationship between ecotourism and mass tourism remains uncharted terrain within the geographical literature on tourism. Most definitions of ecotourism imply that the two types of tourism are separated by virtue of the natural, pristine, or uncontaminated locations in which ecotourism must occur. However, the example of Phuket in southern Thailand illustrates that overlaps between ecotourism and mass tourism are not only possible, but also vital in cases where ecotourism companies must draw on the tourist markets and channels of mass tourism in order to survive financially. Other than challenging implicit spatial assumptions inherent to ecotourism definitions, the arguments put forth in this paper make several contributions to the geographical study of tourism. First, in examining in detail the structural and spatial features of ecotourism in southern Thailand, this paper extends recent work by Weaver (2002a) that places southern Thailand in a 'rainforest and reef' zone defined in large part by the synthesis of ecotourism and mass tourism. Second, the ability of ecotourism companies to portray locations close to mass tourism areas as authentic and natural expands on MacCannell's (1976) concept of 'staged authenticity' by demonstrating that the authenticity of both people and settings can be staged to meet the demands of tourists. Similarly, the idea of 'communicative staging' is usually associated only with culture and, geographically, with north-

ern Thailand (Cohen, 1989; Dearden and Harron, 1992; Dearden, 1993), but the owners, managers, and guides of ecotourism companies in Phuket also communicate, through imagery and language, the natural authenticity of jungle and marine spots in southern Thailand.

Another lesson offered by the case study of Phuket is that place matters: the circumstances that make it possible to communicate natural authenticity in this region are not universal. In other words, what works for companies in Phuket would not necessarily work in locations without similar conditions. As mentioned earlier, the proximity of dramatic natural landscapes to popular mass tourism beaches and the relatively relaxed approach to authenticity of Phuket's mass tourists constitute two significant local conditions. Another condition or circumstance relates to the environmental and social consequences of the island's rapid tourism growth from the mid-1970s to the present day (Cohen, 1996; Pleumarom, 2001). In particular, the recognition that mass tourism was causing ongoing problems in Phuket spurred a move in the late-1980s by the founders of Sea Canoe and Siam Safari to initiate more benign, community-oriented tourism ventures. Recognition of the harm done by conventional tourism has also stimulated demand among mass tourists for novel and adventurous experiences such as those offered by ecotourism companies. The success of ecotourism in Phuket is therefore linked to specific local circumstances such as the presence of suitable nearby locations, the lack of stringent tourist expectations for remoteness and authenticity, and the consciousness that is prompted by visible environmental and social change.

For ecotourism purists who advocate spatial and conceptual exclusivity, the coming together of ecotourism and mass tourism in Phuket would surely provoke a negative or cynical reaction. However, in order to remain financially viable, ecotourism in Phuket has no choice but to forge links to mass tourism. Spatial overlaps and connections between ecotourism and mass tourism are therefore beneficial in that they allow the latter to survive. Mass tourism also benefits from a spatial association with ecotourism because greater demand for nature-based activities has the potential to 'green' the mass tourism industry (Weaver, 2001b). Although public displays of environmentalism by mass tourism operators often relate more to profit and 'greenwashing' than to true concern for the environment (Wight, 1993; Mowforth and Munt, 1998), opportunities to utilize trends in tourist demand that encourage a more ethical and responsible tourism industry are surely worth pursuing. Fostering environmental awareness among Phuket's mass tourists encourages the dissemination of environmental principles into an otherwise passive or irresponsible mainstream tourism industry, while also avoiding the approach of many specialist ecotourism operators and environmental advocates who preach to the converted. At a broader level, ecotourism may also contribute to the prolonged survival of tourism in Phuket. Though none of the tourists interviewed for this research came to Phuket specifically because of opportunities to participate in ecotourism, many admitted that the novel and fun excursions offered by Phuket's ecotourism companies have contributed

to the likelihood that they might return to this area again in the future: this is significant, considering that 63% of Sea Canoe passengers surveyed were visiting Thailand for only the first time. Thus, without the innovation, novelty, and excitement provided by ecotourism, the mass resort areas of southern Thailand would perhaps proceed more quickly to the stagnation and decline stages suffered by all but a handful of destinations (Butler, 1980). In addition to reflecting an incidental coexistence, therefore, the spatial relationship between ecotourism and mass tourism in southern Thailand illustrates mutual interdependence and benefit.

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