



## Integrating Business Skills into Ecotourism Operations Training Workshop Summary

### Introduction

IUCN, in partnership with Kuoni, a globally active leisure travel and destination management organisation, organised a training workshop for the conservation community in Lao PDR with participants originating from Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar, to build business skills and share experiences for successful ecotourism development.

Increasingly, conservation organizations see tourism as one of the sectors with most potential for linking conservation to economic development. However, as many organizations have limited “business” experience, tourism products and services can fail the market test. The training, jointly convened by IUCN, Kuoni and Asian Trails, aimed to promote the transfer of skills between tourism professionals and the conservation community as a first step to making ecotourism development market-viable. It provided participants with an insight into the tourism reality so that tourism businesses/products can become a successful tool for conservation. The workshop also supported participants to understand the ecotourism potential of their proposed products and sites as well as providing support in product development and marketing.

This workshop is integrated into the wider project entitled “Supporting Ecotourism<sup>1</sup> Businesses for Conservation”. The project seeks to capitalize on the wealth of knowledge and experience that exists in the tourism industry to help design successful ecotourism products. The project is organized into three steps:

1. Understand the context (tourism market and natural values)
2. Build capacity – “Integrating business skills into ecotourism operations” workshop
3. Further support organizations to bring their products to the market

### Overview of the workshop

The training workshop on “Integrating Business Skills into Ecotourism Operations” took place from 4 to 8 June in Vientiane, Lao PDR. It brought together 30 participants from 20 organizations located in Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar. The participation included conservation organizations, community organizations, protected area managers, government tourism officials and a tourism and hospitality school.

The aim of the training workshop was to provide participants with a strong foundation in business skills that will enable them to design and run successful ecotourism businesses. The training covered 7 themes: **(i)** Understanding your market and product; **(ii)** Business and Financial Planning; **(iii)** Sustainable Operations; **(iv)** Health & Safety; **(v)** Human Resources; **(vi)** Marketing & Sales and **(vii)** Customer service.

For each theme, an instructor from Kuoni, Asian Trails and their business network presented the key elements for success in the theme and highlighted practical steps for implementation of their recommendations. Presentations were followed by individual and group exercises where participants were invited to apply the learning and share their experiences. The classroom element of the workshop was then complemented with a field visit to ecotourism/sustainable tourism businesses in Vang Vieng: the Silver Naga Hotel, the Kang Nyui Village and the Vang Vieng Organic Farm. The field trip and the discussions with these businesses helped reflect on the lessons learnt in the classroom from the first two days. The workshop finished with a discussion on how to maintain the momentum created by this training.

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<sup>1</sup> Ecotourism is “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people” (The international ecotourism society – TIES)

## Workshop aim & objectives

The **aim** of the workshop was to “enable the conservation community to better understand the risks and opportunities of developing ecotourism”. This aim was to be achieved through the following **objectives**:

- Create awareness of the importance of analyzing tourism potential, creating a business plan, understanding the market and marketing tools as well as paying attention to the health and safety, human resources and sustainability aspects when developing a tourism business;
- Enhance the capacity of conservation organizations and protected area managers to design (or improve) ecotourism products so that they become economically viable and positively contribute to biodiversity conservation.

The next sections summarize the four day workshop.

## My ecotourism business

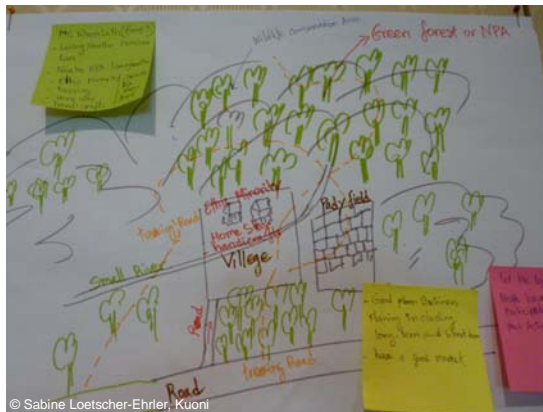


Fig 1 – Examples of ecotourism businesses by the participants

## Workshop Themes

### Ecotourism: Understanding your market and product

#### *Instructors:*

Latsamay Sylavong, IUCN Country Representative Lao PDR  
Björn Schimanski, Managing Director, Asian Trails Laos

*Summary:* Tourism and nature are intimately related. In fact, the prosperity of the tourism industry is directly dependent upon healthy ecosystems. Latsamay Sylavong began this session by providing an overview of the natural assets in East Asia and their importance for tourism. Björn Schimanski then gave an overview of how the tourism industry is set up in the region as well as tourism trends. This theme also provided participants with a better understanding of the tourism products/locations that have the greatest potential to succeed and the elements determining their success.

#### *Key messages:*

- Natural areas can be important assets for sustainable tourism development and have income generating potential for local communities
- International tourists come to the region for culture and nature and look for both relaxation and adventure



- International tourists often combine visits to two or three countries in the region and visit key locations in each. Therefore, being in between two key locations can be convenient.
- Accessibility is key
- When designing your product, it is important to know your market segments
- Consider what makes your product unique and what will make it survive in the long run

## Business planning

*Instructor:* Björn Schimanski, Managing Director, Asian Trails Laos

*Summary:* A successful business needs to be supported by a long term and well designed business plan. This session summarised the key elements that need to feature in a business plan, including, setting up the business, making the business economically viable and financial planning.

*Key messages:*

- In the planning process, it is important to visualize the big picture of a finished ecotourism business/product
- In financial planning and pricing:
  - plan to stay in business – create short, medium and long term financial goals
  - set priorities – Cash first, then profits and finally growth
  - Three basic tools: cash flow statement, income statement and balance sheet
  - Value is more important than price

## Sustainable Operations

*Instructor:* Shane K Beary, Track of the Tiger



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*Summary:* Coming from the conservation community, the participants have considerable knowledge of sustainability issues. In this session a business perspective on sustainability was given looking at different models for long term success.

*Key messages:*

- Sustainability is the end goal
- Tourism is simply one of a number of revenue generating options that can be used to achieve sustainability in conservation or development efforts
- All efforts must have a multiplier effect
- Collaboration – share costs and benefits to achieve more with less (e.g. engage skilled volunteers)
- Diversify within the ecotourism market segment and consider 2<sup>nd</sup> revenue streams (e.g. hosting field trips for international school students)

## Integrating Health & Safety and Human Resources

*Instructors:*

Geoffrey Fordham, Vice President, Engineering, Onyx Hospitality (H&S)

Alexandre Tsuk, Managing Director, Inthira Group (HR)

*Health & Safety summary:* Safety is not something that can be advertised as a benefit when providing a tourism product. It is an essential condition expected by consumers that can be costly to a business when things go wrong. This theme drew upon the regulatory environment of the tourism industry with regards to health and safety to better inform tourism product design.

*Human Resources summary:* At its heart, tourism is a people business. Your employees are the most important contact with your customer and are key to ensuring that your business runs the way you would like it to run. This theme provided an overview of how to find, hire and retain the right people.

### Key messages:

#### Health & Safety:

- Risk assessment and management:
  1. Identify the hazard
  2. Decide who might be harmed and how
  3. Evaluate the likelihood of this occurrence
  4. Evaluate the seriousness of this occurrence
  5. Record your findings
  6. Take actions to mitigate the risk
  7. Monitor and review progress
- Areas to consider in the risk assessment: accommodation, fire safety, emergency procedures, food and hygiene standards, restaurants, swimming pools, recreational facilities, qualification of guides, transportation, medical facilities.



#### Human Resources:

- Some top tips:
  - recruit for attitude and train for skills
  - the future of organizations is in ideas, so give people the opportunity to be creative
  - Put your problems behind you
  - Be curious, not judgmental
  - Don't give up – repeat, repeat, repeat
  - Respect the traditions
  - Follow the flow – if it works don't change it
  - Tell me, I forget. Show me, I remember. Involve me, I understand
  - In Rome, do as the Romans do



#### Marketing & sales for your ecotourism business

*Instructor:* Kirsten Focken, Senior Advisor, Lao Tourism and Marketing Board

*Summary:* Tapping into the right channels for marketing a tourism product is one of the key elements in a viable tourism venture. This last theme provided an overview of the marketing process from product development, to targeting the right market segments and to distribution through mainstream channels.

#### *Key messages:*

- The 5 Ps of Marketing:
  - Product: Know your product
  - Place: Know your market and to whom your product will appeal
  - Promotion: Develop tools to communicate to your target market(s)
  - Price: know your value and your competition
  - People: Develop capacity and knowledge
- Brands create value by generating demand and securing future earnings for the business

#### The importance of customer service

*Instructor:* Nisaxonh Sourivong, Teacher, Lao National Institute of Hospitality and Tourism (LANITH)

*Summary:* As a people business, customer communication and care are at the centre of successful tourism development and their importance must not be underestimated. This session gave an overview of the importance of customer service for the success of an ecotourism business.

#### *Key messages:*

- Know your customer and their needs
- Good service results in increased revenues, customer loyalty and a better image
- To handle customer complaints: listen, acknowledge, respond, take action, report, follow up

## Field visit

The field visit took place in and around Vang Vieng, Lao PDR. Visits and discussions were organised to three ecotourism/sustainable tourism businesses: the Silver Naga Hotel, the Kang Nyui waterfall (developed as a tourism site by Na Duang village and the Vang Vieng Organic Farm. The three businesses offer very different products and services and cater to different target markets. Whilst Silver Naga caters for international tourists wishing to enjoy the beauty of Vang Vieng with comfort, the Na Duang village offers basic accommodation close to nature and allows tourists to experience Lao culture, the Vang Vieng Farm offers a learning opportunity for day visitors but also for volunteers and researchers looking for more active holidays.



In their presentations, the owners/focal points of the three businesses explained how they have integrated environmental considerations into their enterprises, how they have worked with local communities to develop their products as well as the key challenges that they have faced in doing so.

## Next steps & business skill needs

In the last session of the workshop, participants were asked for their views on desired follow up activities as well as additional business skills they wish to gain. The outcomes of the session are listed below by country group:

Lao PDR	Myanmar	Vietnam
<p>A. Communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Share participants contact information</li> <li>- Exchange/report of implementation 2 times per year via internet</li> <li>- Organize regional meeting to exchange lessons learned</li> </ul> <p>B. Improve ecotourism work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Awareness raising to the concerned organizations (including local players)</li> <li>- Improve existing activities</li> <li>- Planning and fundraising</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Organize workshop on sustainable ecotourism development with state, business and civil society</li> <li>2. Ecotourism products assessments/analysis</li> <li>3. Organize other training workshops</li> <li>4. Develop action plan</li> <li>5. Create a regional ecotourism network</li> <li>6. Form an ecotourism association</li> <li>7. Set up a pilot site</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- After the workshop, keep contact through facebook and/or a google group</li> <li>- Create a working group within this class and then widen membership in the 3 countries.</li> <li>- Create a forum of sustainable ecotourism/responsible tourism group 1 website</li> </ul>

The feedback will be incorporated in the development of phase three of the project.

## Resources and further information

IUCN<sup>2</sup> [www.iucn.org](http://www.iucn.org)  
 Kuoni Group [www.kuoni.com](http://www.kuoni.com)  
 Asian Trails [www.asiantrails.info](http://www.asiantrails.info)  
 Silver Naga [www.silvernaga.com](http://www.silvernaga.com)  
 Organic Farm [www.laofarm.org](http://www.laofarm.org)



<sup>2</sup> For information on this project visit the project webpage at: <http://www.iucn.org/ecotourism>