

MONITORING COMMUNITY BASED ECOTOURISM IN THE LAO PDR: THE UNESCO-NTA LAO NAM HA ECOTOURISM PROJECT MONITORING PROTOCOL

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INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the development, marketing and implementation of community-based tourism projects in the Southeast Asia region. Whether packaged as “ecotourism”, “cultural tourism”, “nature tourism” or more comprehensively, “sustainable community-based ecotourism” there is a paucity of published information about the monitoring protocols used to measure community satisfaction and progress towards meeting the good-intentions of these initiatives. This paper provides an introduction to the UNESCO-National Tourism Authority of Lao PDR Nam Ha Ecotourism Project and provides an overview of the project’s monitoring protocol.

Background – The UNESCO-NTA Lao Nam Ha Ecotourism Project

Launched in October 1999, the UNESCO-NTA Lao Nam Ha Ecotourism Project (NHEP) is the first community-based ecotourism project ever implemented in the Lao PDR. Arising from the urgent need to develop a sustainable, endogenous model for community-based culture and nature tourism, the National Tourism Authority of Lao PDR is implementing this project in Luang Namtha Province in cooperation with the Office of the UNESCO Regional Advisor for Culture in Asia and the Pacific. The main collaborating national institutions include the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and Ministry of Information and Culture. The project’s name is derived from the 222,400 ha² Nam Ha National Protected Area (NPA), home to 37 species of large mammals and over 280 species of birds. In addition to diverse flora and fauna, the Nam Ha NPA is also home to people. There are 25 villages inside the protected area and 86 villages just outside its borders. The majority of people living in and around the protected area are of the Akha, Lantaen, Khmu and Hmong ethnic groups.

Using a participatory approach that incorporated input from local communities, provincial authorities and local guides, the project team initiated the development of three trekking programs and one river tour. The one and two-day treks and river tour are located outside the NPA in the buffer zone and the three-day trekking program takes place entirely within the NPA. All four programs visit ethnic minority villages, with simple traditional lodging and accommodation provided by the villagers. The non-profit Nam Ha Ecoguide Service - trained by the project team - operates the trekking programs and river tours in accordance with strict carrying capacities and cultural and environmental safeguards. Many of the cultural and environmental “rules” were introduced by local communities and are an integral part of every program. The guide service is under the close supervision of the Luang Namtha Provincial Tourism Office (PTO) and Nam Ha NPA Management Unit, which share responsibility in the promotion, management and monitoring of the newly introduced ecotourism activities. Independent trekking and visits to remote villages is prohibited in the province. Below is a

narrative describing the practical implementation of the three-day trekking program to provide further background prior to discussing the monitoring protocol.

The Three-day Nammat trek

The three-day Nammat trekking program begins 17 km north of Luang Namtha Town, the main starting point for all tours. The evening prior to departure, tourists are required to attend a cultural and safety orientation hosted by the Nam Ha Ecoguide Service. Group size is limited to 8 tourists, two departures per-week. One lead, one assistant and one village based guide accompany tourists on the three-day, 28-km trek. Only local food is served on the program, with separate traditional accommodation provided for tourists in the villages. The material and traditional culture in the two Akha villages located on this route remains largely intact. Inhabitants of these villages also possess vast knowledge of the Nam Ha Forest including the use of traditional medicine and hunting techniques. There is no road access to either village.

With advice from the project team, the community has established a natural resource reserve in Nammat Kao Village where village-based guides lead tourists on early morning walks displaying their knowledge of medicinal plants, forest products, and amazing ability to call and spot birds. All tourists participating in the tour are issued trekking permits that generate US\$ 1 per-day (included in the US\$ 35 cost of the trek) for the Nam Ha NPA Protected Area Management Unit to finance trail maintenance, conservation activities and biodiversity threat monitoring. This is the Lao PDR's first protected area user-fee permit system. Economic opportunities exist for villagers through the provision of food, lodging, guiding services and handicraft sales. The village deposits lodging receipts into a communal fund, with cooking, food, handicraft and guide fees paid directly to the provider. Any profit remaining from the initial US\$ 35 is retained in a provincial ecotourism and village development fund used to expand ecotourism activities and finance small-scale development projects in the province. The PTO administers the ecotourism and village development fund. Trekking groups have been visiting the village for one year, numbering just over 350 tourists.

METHODS

The PTO and NPA Protected Area Management Unit are the government agencies responsible for monitoring the three-day trekking operation. To finance monitoring activities under its jurisdiction, the PTO collects a 5% tax on provincial ecotourism revenues. Provincial Tourism and Protected Area Management staff supervises local guides in the collection of monitoring data. Tourism and Protected Area staff are trained to analyze these data for presentation to the Provincial Tourism Director and Nam Ha NPA Manager. Local guides and provincial staff attended a 5-day classroom and field based monitoring training on the principles and practice of monitoring of community-based ecotourism. This group also attended a similar training in biodiversity threat monitoring held by the Wildlife Conservation Society. All monitoring forms were twice field-tested and then refined to the present format. The monitoring protocol is attached as annex A. Personal interviews, field observations, community meetings, review of Nam Ha Ecoguide Service financial records, and review of tourist feedback forms are employed as data collection tools. Statistical analysis of empirical data is performed using the software

package SPSS for Windows version 9.5. Qualitative data are categorized and compiled using standard forms.

RESULTS

The annual community ecotourism workshop is conducted based on data gathered during bi-annual household surveys. This workshop is designed to report individual household data back to the community and identify any problems that may have arisen due to ecotourism operations in the village. The workshop also serves as a transparent forum to discuss financial matters along with suggestions for improving the ecotourism operation. Any progress towards the conservation objectives of the protected area resulting from ecotourism or otherwise are also assessed during the workshop.

Every tourist is asked to fill out a visitor feedback form. This form provides useful information to monitor the guides performance and tourist's perception of the authenticity and actual quality of their experience. Because ecotourists are often willing to provide honest feedback and many are highly sensitive to the negative impact tourism can have on participating villages, they can be very effective sentinels for the PTO and NPA Management Unit. This form also contains demographic data on the tourists, which can be used for marketing purposes and to help guide the expansion of ecotourism operations.

The Nam Ha NPA Wildlife and Resource Use Monitoring forms are completed in joint effort between Nam Ha Ecoguides and tourists on every trek and river tour. Not only do these forms provide valuable data for the Nam Ha NPA Management Unit, but serve as an educational tool and activity for tourists as well. As there presently are only three staff available to manage the entire protected area, it is unlikely that they would be able to obtain even a fraction of the data these forms provide without the assistance of tourists and guides. The regular contact made with communities participating in ecotourism also provides the opportunity to collect information on the presence of threatened species of wildlife and illegal activities occurring inside the village area. This information is collected by the guides – using the NPA Village and Threat Monitoring form – and by a village conservation team (or joint monitoring team) established in the village.

To monitor trail conditions and logging activities along the trekking trails, guides perform a monthly survey while leading tourists on the trek. The Ecotourism Trail Maintenance and Impact Monitoring form is then handed over to the NPA Management unit for action. A portion of the trekking permit revenue is used to hire local villagers to implement trail maintenance under the supervision of NPA managers.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The challenge of implementing this complex and multi-sectoral monitoring protocol in the Lao PDR is formidable. Major obstacles include weak national capacity, low public funding, especially in NPA's, and a small PTO and NPA Management Unit Staff with already heavy workloads. It is therefore apparent that the Nam Ha Ecoguides and tourists will play a critical

role in virtually all of the monitoring activities. Encouraging the tourist to participate in monitoring activities has been quite easy thus far, and conveys a sense of purpose to the visitor. Convincing the Nam Ha Ecoguides to regularly and accurately conduct the monitoring activities has been far more challenging. With adequate follow up and incentive, it is expected that the trained Nam Ha Ecoguides and tourism staff will be able to carry out the data collection according to the monitoring schedule, especially as they begin to realize the importance of addressing threats to the natural and cultural assets which sustain their new-found (and well paying) profession.

Experience to date indicates that the monitoring protocol is a very useful process and forum for ensuring that tourism and NPA staff maintains regular dialogue with communities to evaluate issues in regard to ecotourism and also wider social problems. This is helping to build much good will and trust with participating communities while concurrently raising awareness about the philosophy and objectives of ecotourism among both the general population and authorities.

The final caveat is that although the local community, guides and tourists will furnish the authorities with ongoing information, it is unlikely the monitoring protocol will reach its full potential should the tourism and protected area managers lack the wherewithal to use these data to guide their management decisions.

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(annex A) ANNUAL MONITORING SCHEDULE: UNESCO Nam Ha Ecotourism Project

DATA COLLECTION

Activity	Jan	Feb	Mar	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Who is Responsible
<i>Every Trip</i>	●											●	
Visitor Feedback / Form # 2													Guide Office director
Nam Ha NPA Wildlife and Resource Use Monitoring / Forms # 6 (river and trail)	●										●		All guides
<i>Monthly</i>													
Trail Maintenance and Impact Survey / Form # 3	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	All guides
Village Conservation Team data collection (wildlife and outsider threats) / Form # 7	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	NPA staff guides
<i>Biannual</i>													
Village Household Questionnaire / Form # 5	X						X						All guides
Nam Ha NPA Village-based Threat Monitoring / Form # 4	X						X						All guides
<i>Annual</i>													
Community Workshop / Checklist # 1		X											All guides / PTO staff (note : Form 5 data should be collated in advance and returned to village during the community meeting)

REPORTING AND EVALUATION

<u>Activity</u>	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Who is Responsible
<i>Weekly</i>													
Collect Nam Ha NPA monitoring data Forms # 6 and return to NPA manager.	●											●	NPA staff
<i>Monthly</i>													
Trail Maintenance Survey Form # 3 – collate and present to PTO director for evaluation.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Guide office director / PTO director
Collect Village Conservation Team data Forms # 7 and return to NPA manager.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	NPA staff
Visitor Feedback Forms # 2 – summarize and present to PTO director for evaluation.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Guide office director
<i>Biannually</i>													
Village Household Questionnaire Form # 5 – summarizes and present to PTO director for evaluation.	X						X						PTO staff / director
Collect NPA Village-based Threat Monitoring Forms # 4 and return to NPA manager.	X						X						NPA staff
Income Generation Biannual Account Summary (including estimation of economic multiplier effect as sourced from Form # 2)	X						X						PTO accounts officer
<i>Annually</i>													
Community Workshop results – collate and present to PTO director and NPA manager for joint evaluation.		X											Guide office director / PTO director / NPA director
Income Generation Annual Account Summary	X												PTO accounts officer

