

# Sustainable Tourism, Development and the Discerning Traveler in ASEAN

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## Abstract

This paper describes current opportunities and challenges for tourism in an ASEAN single market and discusses the need for sustainable approaches. The areas of knowledge addressed include current trends in tourism theory and practice, and the conceptual linkages between tourism, postmodernism, sustainability and development. Having described the positive and negative impacts of tourism, this paper introduces the notion of the postmodern ‘discerning traveler’ and positions this among sustainable tourism and current theoretical developments. It explains the characteristics of various discerning travelers and highlights the implications of these for ASEAN members, tourism authorities and companies. Finally, the study provides practice examples of destinations which embody sustainability and attract the high-end, low-impact discerning traveler.

*Keywords: ASEAN, Sustainable Tourism, Discerning Traveler, Postmodernism*

## 1. Introduction

### Objectives

This is a theoretical (or academic) paper which:

1. Notes current trends in tourism theory and practice, emphasizing the rise of postmodernism
2. Explores the conceptual linkages between tourism, postmodernism, sustainability and development
3. Positions the discerning traveler within these linkages
4. Identifies the advantages, characteristics and tourism destinations of the high-end discerning traveler
5. Indicates the relevance and advantages of the discerning traveler for sustainable tourism in the ASEAN region

### Conceptual linkages

The paper notes that the turbulence of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has yielded major transformations in value systems and world views and that the rise of sustainable development is directly traceable to these changes. Consequently, sustainable tourism, emerging from the sustainable development movement, reflects these altered value systems and ethics regarding individual and communal responsibility (e.g. environmental consciousness, respect for cultures, etc.), the importance of personal experience, and a reaction against the damaging effects of template and mass tourism.

Related to these changes, postmodernism, in reacting against objectification and positivism, emphasizes subjective experience and the variegated nature of situations and individuals. Accordingly, in tourism, postmodernism translates into individualized experiences as opposed to package tours and template travel. Furthermore, as will be demonstrated in this paper, the discerning traveler embodies these postmodernist values and worldview.

### **Tourism and ASEAN**

The anticipated formation of a single ASEAN market in 2015 is causing great excitement among those involved in the regional tourism industry. ASEAN and the GMS have long shown interest in tourism and hospitality with many attempts at joint and cooperative approaches (Chia et al., 2006; Wu et al., 2002). For example, early initiatives, such as the ASEAN Tourism Forum (1969) and Visit ASEAN (1991), proposed ASEAN as a single destination. The blueprint for regional approaches is the ASEAN Tourism Agreement (2002) which expands on not only the single destination theme, but also the economic development accompanying tourism (Wong, 2006). Interestingly, this agreement gives very little attention to sustainability.

The GMS includes tourism as one of the eleven flagship programs in its ten year Economic Cooperation Programme. However, by linking these flagship initiatives with its Millennium Development Goals (poverty alleviation, gender equality, empowering women and sustainable development in the sub-region by 2015), it highlights the role of sustainable tourism development in meeting the needs of tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing future opportunities for local people (Khanal and Babir, 2007).

A concern is that although a single ASEAN market and accompanying initiatives may provide a financial boon for regional tourism, it may not augur well for sustainable tourism. The current discussion is overwhelmingly commercial, encompassing corporate, MICE and mass tourism, including from Asia. As the Pata CEO recently declared, “With 100 million Chinese tourists expected to travel by 2020, and Indian tourist numbers growing at a steady 12%, the travel industry is very upbeat about this region,” (Shankhar, L., 2012). This commercial preoccupation would seem to support the view of tourism as an academically vacuous part of business studies (Botterill, 2003).

In considering current approaches to tourism development in the ASEAN region, Choibamroong (2006) highlights a number of obstacles. He notes that there is very little emphasis on sustainability, a lack of infrastructure to support One Destination policies, a disempowerment of local communities, the commoditization of local cultures with consequent loss of cultural identity and the placement of similar competing products. In addition, he characterizes tourism education in ASEAN as narrow and outdated, being overwhelmingly market- and business-oriented, with little attention given to sustainability and other problems associated with tourism.

### **Current Trends in Tourism**

The paper now identifies the major current trends in tourism, and highlights the role of postmodernism within these. This, in a small way, can be considered as a response the allegations of some that tourism is scholastically superficial.

Urry (1990) declares that, at its core, tourism is “between leisure and work, home and away, everyday and holiday”. It is about escaping the drudgery of the prosaic for the exotic and the other. It is often about affluent people from fortunate places visiting poorer people in developing locales (O’Reilly, 2007).

Haanpaa (2005) notes the dominant trends in tourism as fordism, prepackaging and postmodernism, with postmodernism manifested in the ecological and ethically responsible. Most are familiar with fordism (template travel) and prepackaging, so, in this section we examine postmodernism and tourism theory and practice.

The turbulence of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has yielded massive demographic, intellectual, economic and lifestyle changes. It has also transformed our values concerning communal and individual responsibility and altered how we interpret the world (Zahra and MacIntosh, 2007). These changes are apparent in the attitudes of the postmodern traveler and carry serious implications for the future of tourism.

Academically, tourism has been criticized as lacking scholastic depth and critical theory (Veal, 2002; Botterill, 2003), with Jones (2004) describing it as an intellectual void, and others noting a preoccupation with operational management (Taylor and Edgar, 1999). This paper answers these criticisms in part by demonstrating the conceptual linkages between sustainability, postmodernism, development and the discerning traveler.

The influential, but still controversial, intellectual current of postmodernism is apparent in Urry’s “tourist gaze”, building on Foucault’s earlier “medical gaze” (Foucault, 1980; Urry, 2002). Postmodernist approaches bring a theoretical depth and contribute to tourism research by highlighting the variegated and situational nature of the visitor’s experience (Hottola, 2004). Postmodernism seeks a critical engagement, endeavoring to extract meanings from the complexity of human life worlds, such as in a multi-themed ASEAN, with which the traveler interacts (Hottola, 2004). Tourism, in this context, is not simply a major commercial activity nor the intellectually impoverished child of management studies, but rather an enriching, optimistic and deeply significant pursuit.

From this viewpoint, some perceive tourism as part of a search for meaning, providing a lens through which societal complexity is viewed and organized (Zahra and MacIntosh, 2007). Mass tourism, “mindless hedonism and pleasure seeking are no longer fashionable” (Singh, 2004) nor is template travel (Haanpaa, 2005). The postmodern or discerning traveler is different.

## **2. Advantages and disadvantages of tourism**

To understand the rise of sustainable tourism and the postmodern discerning traveler, we need to reacquaint ourselves with the familiar discussion of the economic, socio-cultural and environmental advantages and disadvantages of tourism.

The longstanding debates, which the regional ASEAN tourism industry needs to recall, about whether tourism is a boon or a curse are renowned but persistent, with the pros and cons falling into three categories:

- Economic
- Socio / cultural
- Environmental

#### **Economic advantages**

Economically, the travel and tourism industry is one of the most important sectors of the global economy (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2010). From 2004 to 2007, the average Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth of this sector was 3.6% and, over the long-term, travel and tourism remains one of the world's fastest growing industries (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2010). In regard to local economic impact, the tourism industry has created 204 million jobs world-wide, contributing to about 19% of the world's workforce (Hassan, 2008). ASEAN member states are well aware of this.

Aside from the creation of direct and indirect employment, tourism can stimulate the growth of locally made products and provide significant multiplier effects as expenditures are recycled through communities. Furthermore, the industry provides major increases to state and regional revenues and facilitates the development of local and national infrastructure.

#### **Socio-cultural advantages**

From the social and cultural perspective, tourism provides a number of benefits. It can increase educational opportunities, preserve local cultures, reinforce identity and enhance human rights.

#### **Environmental advantages**

Environmentally, postmodern tourism particularly can lead to an increased consciousness of the importance of the environment and local ecologies, and lessening pollution (Coathup, 1999). In this area especially, tourism has goaded some governments into formulating and implementing policies aimed at habitat preservation and sustainability.

However, the regional tourist industry should recall the familiar downsides of tourism, including economic exploitation, cultural devastation and, most famously, destruction of the environment, especially in mass tourism destinations (Singh, 2005). These problems could be greatly exacerbated by the predicted increased numbers of tourists (Hassan, 2008).

#### **Economic disadvantages**

Economically, there can be significant leakage of funds and resources away from localities, import substitution and destruction of local trades, skills and economies, increased prices of staples and land, and wholesale dependence on tourism. It may restrict local access to jobs in the industry and reduce employment through the destruction of lifestyles, resulting in relative poverty and mendicancy.

#### **Socio-cultural disadvantages**

Socially, mass tourism has often led to corruption, the displacement of indigenous people, deterioration of local cultures and loss of identity, the exploitation of women and children, increased economic inequality, crime and conflicts over land, traditional customs and law.

### **Environmental disadvantages**

In regard to the environment, unsustainable tourism has had three major effects:

- Increased pressure on natural resources (e.g. deforestation, land degradation)
- Pollution (e.g. unmanaged waste disposal, high energy resource consumption, air, water and land pollution)
- Damage to ecosystems (e.g. wildlife and habitat destruction, indiscriminate clearances, damage to reefs, pollution of beaches) (Singh, 2005).

Most commonly, it has been governments, tourism companies and authorities that facilitated these transgressions and certain types of tourists who unwittingly conspired in perpetrating them. Most threatening to sustainability are mass and charter tourist firms and travelers, while what used to be called elite tourists are least likely to be attracted to places which are exploitative or environmentally offensive (Choibamroong, 2003).

### **3. Sustainable tourism**

A global understanding of the economic, socio-cultural and environmental damage wrought by certain types of tourism has led to a search for a tourism that is beneficial and constructive, i.e. sustainable. Efforts have been made to avoid the devastating negative economic, social and environmental impacts of this avalanche of travelers. Most notably, the search for a tourism that conserves rather than destroys, together with the sustainable development movement, has led to the emergence of sustainable tourism.

So, what is this sustainable tourism that now completely dominates the discourse on ethical travel (Tribe, 2006)? Most interpretations of sustainable tourism address environmental threats, with only a few dealing with the three dimensions of sustainability—economic, social, and environmental (Butler, 1999).

Eber (1992) provides a comprehensive definition: “Sustainable tourism is tourism and associated infrastructures that: both now and in the future, operate within natural capacities for the regeneration and future productivity of natural resources; recognize the contribution that people and communities, customs and lifestyles, make to the tourism experience; accept that these people must have an equitable share in the economic benefits of local people and communities in the host areas” (Eber, 1992).

The World Tourism Organisation defines sustainable tourism as tourism that meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future (Institute for Tourism, 2010). This complements the post materialist values of postmodern society, no longer the throwaway society, emphasizing the role and responsibility of the individual in making ethical, sustainable choices (Haanpaa, 2005). This dominant discourse underpins all ethical tourism activities and is integral to all aspects of the industry’s development and management.

#### 4. Sustainable tourism and the discerning traveler

This section links types of tourists, the negative impacts of tourism and sustainable tourism and the characteristics of the discerning traveler as identified in the Greater Mekong Subregion and elsewhere.

Perionova (2005) provides a limited typology of tourists as organized mass, individual mass, explorers and drifters. She notes that each type impacts differently on the locals and the environment. Choibamroong (2003) offers various categorizations, including the elite tourist who has some similarities to today's high-end discerning traveler.

Tepalus (2000) remarks that a variety of tourists, not simply the elite or high-end, have become increasingly discerning and conscious of sustainability. She notes the increased proportion of comparatively wealthy, ecologically conscious, older tourists who "were the mass travelers of the 1960s and 70s, and are today's discerning and sophisticated travelers with the means and the will to travel" (Tepalus, 2000).

Today's postmodern discerning traveler emerges conceptually from the sustainable development movement and the reaction against mass tourism. As Semone (2008) notes, in the Greater Mekong Subregion Tourism Marketing Plan (2008-2011), initiatives aimed at luring discerning travelers must acknowledge that the postmodern tourist:

- Has high expectations of quality
- Is e-savvy and expects a wide range of choices
- Wants products that provide unique experiences and complement their values
- Is often time-poor and cash-rich and expects ease of consumption
- Expects individualized products, such as those embodying 'health' and 'wellness'
- Is influenced by a destination's image and particularly its values

For the discerning traveler, tourism concerns experiences rather than products, a search for destinations that provide community, security, leisure, and tranquility or learning and adventure. MacCannell saw the discerning traveler as a pilgrim, in search of authentic experiences and even a way of life (MacCannell, 1999).

Postmodern value systems and beliefs are dominated by quality of life, lifestyle, freedom and health (Haanpaa, 2005) and postmodern tourism is highly personal and experiential (Zahra and MacIntosh, 2007). The discerning postmodern traveler, "is searching for new experiences, is concerned about the environment, is interested in taking part in a health/well-being lifestyle and wants to experience the local culture." (Yeoman, 2008).

According to Boniface and Cooper (2005), the discerning traveler has the following characteristics:

- knows what he/she wants in terms of quality, service, and value for money
- is concerned about the environment and the ethical consumption of tourism
- is experienced, able to compare destinations and products
- is flexible and spontaneous in travel arrangements

- has considerable consumer and technology skills
- is motivated by experience, e.g. wanderlust, culture, learning, curiosity, not by products.

So, although there is still no shortage of mass and charter tourists, trudging around markets and temples, following the leader's flag and megaphone, there is now a critical mass of experienced and discerning travelers. These are not all wealthy, of course, but some are and, unsurprisingly, postmodern values tend to predominate among those individuals and societies where there is a high level of affluence (Haanpaa, 2005). These wealthy postmodernists we will refer to as high-end discerning travelers.

## 5. Sustainable tourism and the high-end discerning traveler

This section focuses on the characteristics and requirements of one type of postmodern tourist, the much sought after 'high-end discerning traveler', and the advantages for ASEAN in attracting these.

Tourism authorities and companies in the ASEAN region would be well advised to consider attracting high-end discerning travelers. They have the same concerns and desires as other postmodern tourists but with this difference: because cost is not the major issue for them, they will only patronize tourism experiences which are the best in their class. The high-end discerning traveler is concerned with individualization of destinations rather than expense. They are flexible and value moving across a variety of experience (Uriely, 1997). Although financially similar to the old elite travelers, they exhibit postmodernist values, being seriously concerned about ecological and ethical issues and technologically adept.

It is about standards and ecological responsibility (Haanpaa, 2005). Tourism providers will increasingly have to meet the needs of the postmodern discerning traveler—more environmentally aware and much more sophisticated (Jefferson, 1995).

As Jefferson (1995) notes, “they are today's sophisticated and discerning travelers with the means and will to travel. They expect high standards.”

This high-end discerning traveler is financially very attractive to governments and tourism firms. However, they are time-poor and cash-rich. They expect ease of consumption and the opportunity to experience, unwind and relax. They will not tolerate uncaring staff or management, stress, disorganization or inattention to detail (Semone, 2008).

Tourism authorities and companies should note that these travelers expect more than simple functionality. The tendency of some providers to performativity, i.e. minimum input for maximum cash return, does not attract the high-end discerning traveler (Tribe, 1997).

Being concerned with quality, not cost, places pressures on destinations to ensure that they are 'the best in their class.' The high-end discerning traveler is like other postmodern tourists—“a child of the information technology age, a sophisticated and discerning consumer increasingly alive to 'green' issues” (Jefferson, 1995). To attract them, a destination must match

their aspirations and be the best of its kind. So, what sorts of places attract this postmodern, high-end, discerning traveler?

## 6. 'The best in their class:' destinations that attract high-end, discerning travelers.

What destinations currently attract this type of postmodern tourist, the high-end discerning traveler? The paper now gives a few examples of these places.

### 6.1 *The Point*, Saranac Lake, Adirondack Mountains, New York.

*The Point* has, for many years, been considered by hospitality experts as the model of its genre—the best resort in its class (Won, 2010).

“Perhaps no other country house hotel-or resort anywhere-has been so widely recognized for its excellence as *The Point*...considered the premier hideaway in the U.S., it’s the one against which all other upscale resorts have been measured.” (Murray, 2003)

The discerning traveler is seeking not a product, but an experience (MacCannell, 1999). Therefore, at *The Point*, attention is paid to individualization (Haanpaa, 2005). For example, as a private home, all bookings are handled by telephone interview. The discerning traveler joins a house-party as a private guest in a very special place. To ensure a “memorable” experience (Gretzel and Fesenmaier, 2003), guests are not presented with a bill upon departure. Instead, payment in full is made at least 30 days before arrival (average room costs \$2000) and everything’s included. No extras and no tipping.

Contributing to sustainable tourism, all purchasing, recruitment and training is done locally. The first year the staff numbered three and now, with 32 local employees, *The Point* is the largest employer (and tax payer) in the county. Being chosen to be a member of *Relais et Châteaux* is an honor and provides the validation of excellence, the best in its class, sought by high-end discerning travelers (Coathup, 1999). When *The Point* became joined in 1982, there were only three other members in the United States. Today, there are still less than 50.

### 6.2 *Little Governor's Camp*, Masai Mara Game Reserve, Kenya

*Little Governor's Camp* deliberately targets the postmodernist values, as described by Haanpaa (2005), of the high-end discerning traveler. The camp has only seventeen tents, each with comfortable beds, a desk, a rack for clothes and a tile-floored, bathroom tent with a basin, a shower with hot and cold running water and an ecological flush ‘loo’. Days are spent on safari drives and, at night, guests can observe the hippopotami, giraffes and elephants that come to the lake. It provides a unique, eco-experience as proposed by Gretzel and Fesenmaier (2003).

### 6.3 *Les Crayères*, Reims, France

Pritchard and Morgan (2006) point out that special hotel experiences are under-explored in postmodern tourist literature. *Les Crayères*, a member of *Relais et Châteaux*, is an historic chateau in the center of the champagne region of France. It is also one of the most distinguished restaurants in the world. This special hotel experience (Pritchard and Morgan, 2006), combining

comfort, precise service, brilliant cuisine and a beautiful setting, attracts the postmodern, high-end discerning traveler.

#### **6.4 Tawaraya, Kyoto, Japan.**

The postmodern tourist is attracted by the unique and situational (Hottola, 2004) and the individual and the select (Yeoman, 2008). *Tawaraya*, Kyoto's oldest ryokan (traditional-style inn), has been managed by the same family for eleven generations. Until recently, *Tawaraya* was so exclusive that accommodations were only available through the personal recommendation of a previous guest. *Tawaraya*, aims for an experience of luxury, simplicity and sustainability.

#### **6.5 Four Seasons Tented Camp, Golden Triangle, northern Thailand.**

For the discerning traveler, a destination must embody the key postmodernist values—health, freedom and quality of life (Haanpaa, 2005). The experience must meet individual needs, while being ecologically and ethically sound (Haanpaa, 2005). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, peace, time, and solitude are three of the most valued commodities. Like *The Point*, *Four Seasons Tented Camp* has all three and appeals to the cash-rich, time-poor, discerning traveler (Semone, 2008). The postmodern tourist is flexible and searching for new encounters (Yeoman, 2008). *Four Seasons Tented Camp* provides a memorable experience of “roughing it” in style replete with gourmet meals. Discerning travelers do not wish to simply “be there” but wish to participate in and “experience the there” (Gilmore and Pine II, 1999). This destination satisfies that desire, e.g. elephant mahout training, and attracts high-end, discerning travelers from all over the world.

*Four Seasons Tented Camp* is the Thai version of *The Point*: same procedures, same atmosphere and camaraderie between guests and staff, and, at approximately \$2500 per day, similar cost. In October 2010, for the third consecutive year, the readers of *Condé Nast Traveller* voted *The Four Seasons Tented Camp Golden Triangle* as the number one property in the world.

#### **6.6 Summary**

These ‘best’ destinations are outstanding examples of sustainable, postmodernist tourism. By being the best, they attract the high-end, discerning traveler and the region benefits economically, socially and environmentally. The downsides of tourism are reduced or even eliminated and the upsides maximized.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study has described the upsides and downsides of tourism and the characteristics of postmodern discerning travelers, general and high-end. It has demonstrated their importance to sustainable tourism and thus to the industry overall. Given the reality of increasing tourist numbers over the next few decades and the potential negative impacts that this can have—economic, social and environmental—governments and others involved in the industry in ASEAN need to prioritize sustainable tourism policies. The paper has offered an achievable objective and strategy, to complement policy change, for maximizing the upsides and minimizing the downsides of tourism: attracting the discerning traveler, particularly the high-end traveler. Also presented have been some examples of destinations which have successfully implemented postmodern

tourism values and policies and appealed to the high-end discerning traveler by understanding their characteristics and meeting their requirements. Governments and commercial interests can advantage both localities and themselves by targeting the postmodern discerning traveler, particularly the low-impact, high-end discerning traveler.

In summary, this theoretical (or academic) paper has:

1. Noted current trends in tourism theory and practice, emphasizing the rise of postmodernism
2. Explored the conceptual linkages between tourism, postmodernism, sustainability and development
3. Positioned the discerning traveler within these linkages
4. Identified the advantages, characteristics and tourism destinations of the high-end discerning traveler
5. Indicated the relevance and advantages of the discerning traveler for sustainable tourism in the ASEAN region

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