

SEA KAYAKING AND ECOTOURISM

Thailand Canoe Union
Chao Mai National Park
March 25, 2000

I – Ecotourism – A Labor of Love

Ecotourism is the trend these days, and like most trends it is, or was, short-lived and meaningless. When I first started sea kayaking on a commercial level, the word didn't exist. I built a business model based upon 30 years of thought, and called it adventure travel. Five years later Ecotourism came along, and had meaning for about three days. Today, most Ecotourism is in fact 'Greenwash', mass tourism owned by maximize-the-profit owners who generally have little understanding of their activity and no knowledge of the environment. Instead of protecting Nature, these operators actually destroy the last remaining pristine sites in Thailand.

"Ecotourism" on this level is actually counterproductive.



Watermelon Man, Krabi

Just look at Talin's monkey problem. For years, we paddled Talin and left it perfect. When we were quiet, Nature rewarded us with regular macaque sightings. Our "Labor of Love" background reminded us that no responsible wildlife biologist tolerates feeding wildlife. It's a basic outdoor concept.

Somehow, the new companies didn't get it, or didn't care. For some reason, probably easy money, feeding the monkeys became commonplace. Today, Talin is a shocking disgrace that makes our customers cry. At the first notice of kayaks, the monkeys come running, bold and aggressively begging for food, a diet that is certainly outside anything these Crab-Eating Macaques used to eat before they were commercialized into beggars.

They actually sit and hold out their hands to beg. and jump into kayaks if they don't get what they want. How soon before somebody's customer is attacked, in a kayak, in a narrow mangrove channel. Even worse, there is no way out for the monkeys, once proud as they foraged their mangrove domain, now reduced to begging.

Ecotourism means getting in, and getting out, without leaving a trace – perhaps without the monkey even knowing that you see them. It isn't easy, but it's real.

Ecotourism means "Labor of Love". If you are already kayakers, you have a start. However, as you are going to discover in a few minutes, kayak racing has little to do with sea kayaking or natural history touring. Today, I hope take your love of kayaking, find a few of you who have a true understanding of the sea, and then find a few within that reduced group and find some "Labor of Love" naturalists. Those of you who



Lucky So Far – Talin, Krabi

really care about Nature are the ones who will make true “Labor of Love” Ecotourism operators, paddlers who will fight to protect a habitat not only because you have commercialized it, but also because conservation is the right thing to do.

“Labor of Love” means loving your staff, your host community, your country, and the Planet. Local pollution has global ramifications. Every plastic bag you see floating in the sea can kill a turtle, or a whale. On Midway Island in the Central Pacific, autopsies on dead gooney bird chicks found they ingested disposable cigarette lighters from Central China. Ecotourism is supposed to mean honest and ethical business, enlightened human resources, and truth in advertising. Set these examples, succeed through hard work and dedication, and you help create a stronger Thailand. Small business is the backbone of any national economy, and everybody wins when the hard-working honest businesses succeed. Your host community is whom you serve, not exploit and abuse. They should be your loyal allies and true supporters, not your adversaries or underlings.



Mut Bong Explores the Crocodile Cave, 1991

Your staff is your company. Robert Griefenberg of Siam Safari recently said that staff is 80% of the Ecotourism experience. I wonder if it's more like 90%. Treat your staff like gold. Most of our staff has been with us for more than five years, several since the start. They are polished, worldly, knowledgeable, well trained, service oriented and experienced. There is no way a high turnover operation can offer a similar experience.

Then there's your activity. Follow your heart. When I started 17 years ago, sea kayaking was an unknown – but I loved it. As a marketer, I understood that I was the sea kayaking market, and that I could create my own market for this high appeal activity – for my generation at this time.

What I'm saying is to be creative. Creativity is breaking down quantitative thought, and having the pride to avoid copying at all costs. Find your own way in the paddling world. SeaCanoe is famous for traversing extremely tough coastlines, and sea caving, especially tidal. I knew what the extremely tough Hawaiian waters had to offer, but sea caves were a bonus. Look for your niche – create a new concept when you can – and go for it with total commitment.

Ecotourism is not an easy course.

II – Ecotourism and Kayaking – Your Labor of Love

First, I have to pop a bubble - Sea Kayaking has nothing to do with flat-water racing – Steve Cole is a first class Hawaii waterman. He paddles one-man canoes and runs a Na Pali boat service. Occasionally, he surfs. With no advance notice, Steve came to Col. Sakchai's first surf-ski race and won it – because he knows the sea. And he won it year after year, even when his conditioning dropped – because he knows the sea. Oscar Chalupsky won last year. I haven't talked to Oscar, but I know that his knowledge of the sea is as important to him as his conditioning.

If you grew up paddling the sea from childhood, and now you race kayaks, you probably have what it takes to be a knowledgeable sea kayaker. If you don't know the sea by now, you probably never will. It's a life-long lesson.

That's one reason why mangrove paddles are so popular. It's difficult to find more protected waters than a mangrove channel – unless there is shrimp farm effluent! However, you are competitors, or you wouldn't be racing. You don't want to be second any more than I do, and you certainly don't want to be known as the guy who can operate in the mangroves, but not in the open sea.



Hurricane John, 1995 - Moloka'i, Hawai'i

Sea Kayaking is Safety; Sea Kayak Touring is Safety, Safety, Safety. It took me a lifetime to learn the ocean – before I ever ran a commercial tour. Paddling hand-powered small boats in the open sea is a serious matter. Offering tours for hire to the public is a completely different matter – your game has to be twice as good when you are responsible for a novice paddler's life when an “unexpected” storm blows by. Seamanship is by far the most important asset a sea kayaker has. You can survive without a paddle, but you can't survive without seamanship.

There's a rule in Sea Kayaking – “Local Conditions Rule”. The same for the activity. I can traverse most rivers – I did Umphang's Mae Klong in an inflatable sea kayak in 1992 – but I don't consider myself a white water kayaker – and I'm certainly not qualified to guide, or even manage, a white water tour. The same for racing. I'm into natural history observations, and the challenge of the sea. Find your own specialty, and follow your heart.

More important, racing has nothing to do with the next subject

III – Ecotourism and Natural History

Sports tours are not Nature Tours. More than Kayaking, Nature should be your Labor of Love. Look at the Macaques in Talin – A Natural History Disaster. How will we ever rehabilitate the monkeys without stopping the tours? And how long will it be before a tourist is severely injured if we don't?

Ecotourism is a strange industrial sector. Maximizing profit isn't the goal. Nature must come before business, and that can be costly – in training, equipment, compensation, and operations. When you are entering somebody's home – be non-invasive, and leave it as you found it – or better. Remember that you are making money by running tours through somebody's house. They may not be human, but they do have emotions. Respect the wildlife, your customers, and your commercial site.

Volume limits are necessary in pristine sites. One kayak can be one to many if the kayakers are impolite, noise and destructive. Unfortunately, unless you have “Labor of Love” life experience, you may not even know what destructive behavior is in the pristine situation.

All good planners know that it always pays to work with the local people, not ignore or dominate them. In Chiang Rai or Chao Mai, you have commercialized their home – respect them employ

them, treat them as family, pay them more than the going wage, train them, and give them pride in their work and their village. Understand that your lives and theirs intertwine in an *Ecological System* where every action affects upon every element.



Ecotourism is not a get rich quick scheme. You will never drive a Mercedes, but you are “buying” a lifestyle. There’s education, action, adventure and worldwide friends (if you are truly “Labor of Love”. It’s OK - if you are sincere and made enough to buy that Mercedes in honest Ecotourism, you probably gave it away already to support some weird environmental cause or village in need.

Traffic Jam – Phang Nga Bay, 1999

IV – Sea Kayaking Natural History Tours –

You may find a commercial niche developing kayak racing tours, but the market want Nature and adventure, so I’ve been invited here today to discuss the Natural History by Sea Kayak concept. I believe that all paddlers are drawn to Nature, so I sincerely hope that many of you will pursue your love of paddling and turn it into a business, especially if your goals are to help – your country, village, staff, and customers – and not just make money. If you are prepared to follow your heart, never copy a fellow kayaker, and protect your land and people, listen close to this concept. You are welcome to visit SeaCanoe and learn more – we always have an open door for a fellow paddler.

Respect for carrying capacities is one major distinction between Mass Tourism and Ecotourism. If you want to be “Quiet and Clean”, there’s no way you can go for the volume. Even when they do not leave permanent physical damage, large groups violate the serenity of Nature, and neither operator nor customer understands how to conduct themselves in the quiet of Nature. By destroying Nature’s serene ambience for other tours around them, group tours destroy the appeal of “Ecotourism” sites and disturb wildlife. The concept of carrying capacity is a cornerstone of Ecotourism, but honoring volume limits might mean turning away business. You



have to be prepared for the day when you turn away bookings to honor your carrying capacity because you are committed to conservation. It is not easy to do, and weak-minded businesspeople break this concept every day in the name of more money. Maximize those profits!

Brown Fish Owl, 1999

Sea kayaking offers great wildlife sightings – without turning wildlife into beggars – but even when you commit to small groups, they should always be quiet, not only with respect for the site, but to improve the chances of your customers enjoying wildlife sightings. Because SeaCanoe discourages talking, we frequently enjoy talking with owls, snakes, monkeys and water monitors – and paddling away without ever disturbing the wildlife. I once played with a family of silver langurs for an hour, and with a brown fish owl for 45 minutes, and paddled away leaving the animals still sitting on the same branch where we found them. Learning the diplomatic group control that allows this magic isn’t easy, and requires an environmental commitment.

Knowing kayaking does not mean that you know kayak guiding. World champion kayakers certainly possess kayaking skills, but they may be terrible kayaking guides. They probably don't know seamanship, so their flat-water skills are virtually meaningless, and they may not have the people skills required of a top quality nature guide, who must be teacher, psychologist, manager, scientist, and police officer. It's easier to teach kayaking to a natural leader than it is to teach leadership to a great kayaker, and if you don't have the people skills, you won't make it as a Nature guide.

Because your customers are totally out of their everyday element, they do some crazy things. You have to anticipate their stupidity to avoid injury, death, or environmental destruction. Here are some examples -

Husband and wife asked to go surf kayaking at Waikiki. The husband was a go-for-it active outdoor athlete, his wife the fattest and laziest woman I've ever seen. At the surfing spot, she didn't paddle into the wind, was blown into the surf and dumped. When I rescued her, she never moved even to save her own life, and I had to give up my kayak to save her. I have over 200 high surf rescues, and this was the first time a victim never moved a muscle to save their own life.

On a cliff-lined coast with surf breaking on the rocks, I constantly had to keep a novice paddler away from the rocks. Despite his lack of experience, he kept paddling within a meter of the cliffs. When I told him this was dangerous and he might lose his life, he replied that he had found Jesus, and no harm would come to him with God On His Side. My reply was that God protects him on his own time. On my trip, I am responsible for his protection, so get away from the cliffs – Now!

I was sweep guide on a club trip, and briefed the lead guide on how to deal with surf landing on that particular beach. He ignored my advice, and landed the group right in the middle of a surf break. A set came in, and the entire group dumped. I had to surf-rescue several swimmers, and then go back for the gear and the boats tossing around in the surf.

I kept telling a Hawai'i competitor he had neither the experience nor the equipment to surf-land on a remote rock beach in a national park. He eventually injured a customer so seriously she required a helicopter evacuation. The park closed down all kayak tours, including mine.

There are dozens of examples of egotistical kayak guides showing off in rock gardens. Naturally, their novice customers follow, and dump in dangerous waters. Two brothers try a crossing to an island that looks close. Off shore, the winds changed and both died. A school group ignores a subtle weather warning, and eight teenage sea kayakers died.

Then there's cold-water sea kayaking. Check out the stories in Sea Kayaker magazine. Combine both cold and warm water sea kayaking, and more sea kayakers die each year than white water kayakers do.

What does it take to be a capable sea kayaking guide or operator? First, you have to love people. You cannot be racist, because your customers are your most precious resource, and if you are racist, or treat them as "tourists", you are doing a disservice to them, yourself, your company, and Thailand's entire travel industry. Make friends with your guests; teach them not only your nature, but your culture as well. Protect them from danger, especially on their

transfers. No matter how dangerous the seas, driving to the beach is many times more dangerous.



The Wedge, Newport Beach

It isn't easy, especially here in Thailand, where the only thing that matters is how much money can be made from Nature. Your commitment might require you to take a stand against government policy, or even a TAT promotion! But if you aren't prepared to speak out for environmental protection, you are in the wrong business.

Second, you need true knowledge of your product. In Ecotourism, that requires a lifelong interest. I walked into the sea at six months, rehabilitated wildlife at eight years (and continue to this day), grew up on small boats and started SCUBA diving at 12, I started lifeguarding at 16, and one and on. It's nothing special – many of you share the same qualities – but it demonstrates the “Labor of Love” commitment required to be a legitimate Ecotourism operator. I found some of Phang Nga tidal sea caves because I remembered sand patterns from my youth in Mexico, I didn't have to read a book to learn how to act in limestone caves - I knew caving from my youth.

Third, or should this be first, a sincere Ecotourism operator must have a deep-rooted commitment to conservation awareness. It

Activism isn't always confrontation. It's only natural that you want to share your “Labor of Love”. Your commitment demands you accurately educate your customers in both kayaking and natural history. Your commitment means it's only natural to spend some time away from work with your new friends, because you truly want to share your culture. Your commitment demands that your staff be properly trained to international standards, and learn their nature from academic authorities – lectures that have to be paid for somehow.



Learn to “Think “Farang” in a hundred ways. Why? *Wildlife rehabbing is passive activism* Because Farang are your market. You want to know how to laugh and joke, discuss current events, feel comfortable guiding and teaching, manage them as a group, and keep them satisfied. You can't just “Play the Game” but you have to love meeting international tourists, seeing them as friends, not pocketbooks.

Thai's often misunderstand the Farang “Value For Money” concept. Everybody shops price, but most Farang throw in another concept called Value for Money. Many of us automatically throw out the cheapest tours because we know they are low quality, and we want to have a good time on our vacation. Many Farang select the most expensive trip just to guarantee quality. But “Value For Money” does not mean increasing your prices either, or coming in just under the Original. In fact, most Farang will gladly pay a few hundred baht more just to get the Original because they know the Original is usually a “Labor of Love” quality operator,

Even if they are tricked into thinking they booked the original when they didn't, Farang are not stupid. By the end of the day, they know a rip off – and they love to tell their friends back home.

Vacation rip-off stories are a hobby in English-speaking countries. The “Copy Culture” is prevalent in Asia, but Farang hate it. Copies, other cheap trips such as charging extra for soft drinks or not providing English-speaking guides who know their nature lead to the decline in quality tourists that we have in South Thailand. Of course, the TAT’s “Devaluation Promotion” chased away quality tourists as it embraced Cheap Charlie group tours that are counter-productive to Thailand’s welfare but do increase arrival counts. What all this means is that the Concerned Visitor – that person who is willing to pay for knowledge and quality, and to stay quiet in Nature – now goes to greener pastures. Asian group tours now dominate the market, and you have to ask if it is appropriate to take large volumes of people with no environmental awareness into Thailand” few remaining pristine habitats.



Fishing Temple, Ha Long Bay, Vietnam

Farang think about these things – and talk when they get back home. Word-of-Mouth advertising is important in Western cultures.



Grand Palace, Bangkok

Finally, enter Ecotourism because you are patriotic, and want to see a better future for your Kingdom. Don’t be afraid to fight for your Rights, for your Nature, for your children’s future, and for Thailand’s future. Thailand is in an era of great change, and you can make a difference. The new Constitution and Senate election are significant steps towards true democracy and honest government, so use this political progress to protect your country’s Nature, because once we lose our Nature, we will also lose our Future.

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OUTLINE

I – Ecotourism – A Labor of Love

II – Ecotourism and Kayaking – Your Labor of Love

A – Sea Kayaking has nothing to do with racing – look at Steve Cole. Olympic paddlers rarely finish in the top ten in a surf ski race – they don’t know the ocean

1 – Sea Kayaking is seamanship, white water and racing experience is unimportant to seamanship

B – Sea Kayaking is Safety; Sea Kayak Touring is Safety, Safety, and Safety

C – Racing has nothing to do with the next subject

III – Ecotourism and Natural History

A – More than Kayaking, Nature should be your Labor of Love

1 – Look at the Macaques in Talin – A Natural History Disaster

2 – Nature must come before business

a – you are entering somebody’s home – be non-invasive, and leave it as you found it – or better

- b – Volume limits a must in pristine sites*
- c – Always work with the local people, not ignore or dominate them.
This is their home – employ them, treat them as family, pay them more than the going wage, train them, and give them pride in their work and their village*
- d – Ecotourism does not buy Mercedes – if you made that much in honest Ecotourism, you would probably use it to support environmental protection*

IV – Sea Kayaking Natural History Tours –

A – Quiet and Clean – Large groups destroy the concept – and the site

- 1 – Your groups should always be quiet, not only with respect for the site, but to Improve the quality of the experience for your customers.*
 - a – sea kayaking offers the best possible wildlife sightings – without turning Wildlife into beggars*
 - b – knowing kayaking is not knowing kayak guiding*
 - 1 – Some idiot situations*
 - The Waikiki Fat Lady*
 - God On His Side*
 - Land at any cost*
 - Budlong landing*
 - Rock Garden Madness*

B – What It Takes

- 1 - Your customer, your most precious resource*
- 2 - True knowledge of your product*
- 3 - Sincere conservation awareness*
- 4 - Think like a Farang*
 - a - Value for money does not mean increasing the price, or coming in just under the Original*
 - b - Farang are not stupid, they know when they are getting ripped off – and they love to tell their friends back home. All these copies and cheap tricks - combined with the TAT's devaluation promotional campaign – lead to the decline in quality tourists that we have in South Thailand.*
- 5 – Fight For Your Rights, For Your Nature and Thailand's Future*
 - a – You have the right to make a difference –
Thailand is in a Time of Great Change*
 - b – With no Nature, commercialized or not, there is no Future*
 - c – The New Constitution and Senate Election are sincere steps towards true democracy and an honest government.*