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Rethinking the Monsoon: Sustainable Surf Tourism in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

There are surfers on vacation looking for waves — and surfing and surf tourism are analogous: they are focused upon locating specific destinations where natural resources and phenomena occur that are conducive to the sport; and traveling for the sake of surfing new places is as old as the sport itself. Surfing is a freedom sport, connected to the human being seeking individual harmony with nature, yet natural environments are fragile with limited capacity to support sustainable use. This paper discusses myriad aspects of surf tourism specific to Thailand's natural and cultural host environments in terms of sustainability and under the following theoretical framework: coastal resources; environmental issues; social sensitivities; economic concerns; political disturbances; aspects of safety; and the overall concept of imagery. In terms of surf tourism, Thailand's natural and human resources are somewhat limited, especially when compared to prolific surfing destinations like Hawaii, Australia, or Indonesia, where scores of expert surfers, surf schools, and world-class waves exist. Nonetheless, this study identifies that Thailand surf tourism is filled with potential and is at a stage of infancy, affording an opportunity to develop appropriately and sustainably. This work is only the second paper to address surf tourism in Thailand, and it is the first to examine sustainability. This interdisciplinary research found that although the overall prognosis for surf tourism is favorable, environmental, social, and safety issues are paramount to the discussion. Ultimately, this study suggests rebranding the *monsoon season* as the *surf season* and explores such implication.

Key words: surf tourism; sustainability; coastal resources; Thailand

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INTRODUCTION

The global surf tourism industry has grown significantly since the middle of the twentieth century. When measuring the economic scale of the surfing industry, including travel, surf-branded clothing, and the manufacture of surfboards, it was estimated in 2002 to be in the order of ten billion USD per annum with some ten million surfers worldwide (Buckley 2002a,b). Given the profound growth in recent years, it would be reasonable to estimate this figure is now much higher. At the turn of the twenty first century, surf tourism researchers (such as Buckley) began to study and describe the structure of the surf tourism industry in terms of the impacts caused to natural and cultural host environments, the distribution of the product, capacity management, as well as a broad-spectrum description of the market (Fluker 2003).

Surf tourism is a relative newcomer to hospitality and tourism research and this paper addresses surf tourism with in an interdisciplinary approach in the context of sustainability and serves as the second body of work addressing surf tourism in Thailand. The significance of this research can be utilized by the likes of tourism academics and planners, environmentalists, and government agencies. This research identified and assessed eighty surfing sites and found that although the overall prognosis for surf tourism is favorable, environmental, social, and safety issues are paramount to the discussion.

Both the Andaman Coast and the Gulf Coast of Thailand experience a *monsoon season* or *rainy season* which lasts about half of the year. From a tourism industry perspective, these periods are commonly referred to as the *low season*, when many hotels experience very low occupancy. In 2004 the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) launched a marketing campaign to tackle seasonality and smooth out fluctuating tourism arrivals by employing the term *green season* for its obvious colorful appeal (this term is focused on the Andaman coast). In 2009 a private marketing campaign led by a group of Phuket's small and expatriate-owned businesses (and supported by several hotels) initiated the concept of *summer season* based on the premise of empty beaches, reduced hotel rates, and adventure sport opportunities offered by the untamed weather. Conceptually, they bring to light the lifestyle that expatriates enjoy during this time of year when Thailand's beaches feel somewhat deserted.

This interdisciplinary research has surveyed the natural and cultural host environments in terms of sustainability by inventorying the country's coastal resources, environmental issues, social sensitivities, economic concerns, ocean safety issues, and the overall concept of the *imagery* of surfing. This research proposes *rethinking* the monsoon to bring out the observable facts and imagery that the sport of surfing presents. To this end, and based on the research herein, this study suggests *rebranding* the monsoon season as the surf season. This recommendation is coupled with an identified need for environmental conservation and water safety.

THAILAND SURFING BACKGROUND

Although occasional surfers from overseas visit Thailand, one can hardly talk of surf tourism as a local industry. Surf tourism in Thailand, as an industry or definitive market segment, is in its infancy. Nonetheless, Phuket is an emerging destination choice among surfers visiting Thailand

during the southwest monsoon season from May through October (Phuket is the definitive location for surfing in Thailand). Currently, there are approximately two-hundred fifty surfers in Phuket, including Thai nationals and foreign expiates (Nadon, 2008), which has grown significantly from about thirty surfers in 2002 (Aiyarak, 2008).

At the turn of the twenty-first century, several private surf clubs and organizations began to form in the Phuket area. These include the Phuket Boardriders Club, the Kata-Karon Surf Club, and the Kamala Go Surfing Club. These clubs have been instrumental in the promotion and development of surfing in Phuket. For example, as they built web sites and began organizing surfing contests on the island, recognition and popularity grew considerably. Beginning in 1999, the Phuket Surfing Contest at Kata Beach (potentially the largest of annual surfing contests in Phuket) has grown to include more than one-hundred and fifty competitors from thirty-five countries. This contest was supported by community volunteers, the aforesaid surfing clubs, the Kata-Karon Municipality, the Kata-Karon Hotel Association, and received sponsorship and financial support from local businesses (author's field notes 2008; Nadon 2008). As an outgrowth of the community spirit, the Kalim Surfing Contest took shape in 2005 and by 2008 it had matured to find an international stage with sponsorship and support never seen in the history of the surfing in Thailand (Aiyarak, 2008).

At the time of writing this research (April 2009), the formation of a new entity, the *Thailand Surf Series* (an outgrowth of the Phuket Boardriders Club), was underway to unite 3 local surf competitions. The *Thailand Surf Series* looks to raise corporate sponsorship for the sport in Thailand, as well as to enter a new era of regional cooperation with Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Quiksilver, one of the largest surf companies in the world, has offered new and

unprecedented support for these events (Aiyarak, 2009). Quiksilver will offer monetary support and sponsor beach cleanups with a strong emphasis on the environment and education (Hudson, 2009). The Patong Mayor's Office (Phuket) will offer their experience in event management and provide a stage and set up materials (Sukban, 2009). This is to say that there is a contemporary and progressive movement for the promotion of the sport in Thailand.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this investigation is based primarily on exploratory research, participant observation, extensive field notes, personal interviews, and unstructured conversations conducted from June 2006 through May 2009. Author has 30 years surfing experience in 30 countries, 5 years professional experience in lifeguarding for the County of Hawaii and the State of California, and 5 years experience as owner/operator of *Hawaii Lifeguard Surf Instructors* surfing school on the Big Island of Hawaii.

Three significant approaches were employed in this research. Firstly, based on the author's extensive experience with the sport, he conducted a beach and coastal survey over a two year period using his personal vehicle and a variety of maps. This exploratory research produced a descriptive analysis of eighty surfing locales. Secondly, the author was able to incorporate a true participant observation approach to data collection through competing in four Thailand surfing competitions and serving as the head surfing judge in three Thailand competitions. In this way, the author integrated with the surfing sub-culture. Thirdly, in-depth interviews were conducted with surf tourists, surfers, surf club members, government officials, NGOs, and myriad stakeholders. As an interdisciplinary research, methods vary according to subject area [topic] and are evident through each section of this paper.

As abovementioned, exploratory research was conducted in 2007-2008 to survey and assess the coastal resources for surf tourism (Martin and Assenov, 2008). Approximately four-hundred kilometers of the Andaman Coast determined to be the most likely to have ride-able surf (out of 739 kilometers) were surveyed (including Phuket). Similarly, eight-hundred kilometers of the Gulf of Thailand were surveyed (out of 1,839 kilometers including Ko Samui).

On the foundation of establishing the natural resources requisite for surf tourism, some twenty-five informants were interviewed in order to select ten individuals as key informants to assist the author in conducting a wide-spread field research on surf tourism issues focused on but not limited to the question of water quality along the Andaman coast. Due to the delicate subject matter surrounding environmental issues and informant observations, the identity of these informants is confidential. Each informant had the following three minimum qualifications: surf experience of at least fifteen years; surf experience in Thailand of at least three years; and surf experience in at least three countries. Collectively, these informants aided the author's personal observations in the discussion of sustainable surf tourism issues as an informal focus group.

COASTAL RESOURCES

The sport of surfing is inherently dependent upon coastal resources. In point of fact, coastal resources are limited resources, and the ocean waves, and the coastlines needed to make them break in a manner conducive to the sport, are in the lead of many other factors needed for sustainable surf tourism. Within the developmental and sustainable perspectives for surf tourism, coastal resources are married to issues of the cultural and human landscapes.

This survey took into account that coastal geography and weather patterns dictate the way waves break near beaches and reefs, and that waves may vary considerably at any given location and on any given day, as well as from one location to another. This is to say that waves are natural phenomena and surfing conditions are never the same two days in a row. Therefore, a thorough descriptive analysis called for repeated visits to specific surf sites. Martin and Assenov (2008) identified approximately eighty surf sites on mainland Thailand, Phuket, and Ko Samui, and reported that contrary to popular belief there are a large number of areas suitable for surfing and surf tourism in Thailand, including those for advanced, intermediate, and beginner surfers. However, Martin and Assenov (2008) provided inadequate reference to the issues of water quality and environmental concerns of sorts. The following is a discussion of these issues.

SURFING AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Arguably, human interaction with nature feeds our souls, spirits, and bodies – and our connection to the ocean may be fragile at best. Surfing requires an enabling environment and surfers are among the earliest to get ill from contaminated waters; thus they are often proactive and on the forefront of environmental issues. *The Independent* reported that “Surfers tend to be the first to get sick if there's sewage in the water, to notice reefs dying, to be affected by oil spills, agricultural run-off and industrial pollutants. It's fair to say that we surfers should be natural environmentalists” (Dick-Read, 2007). Surfers have founded countless proactive and globally influential associations, such as The Surfrider Foundation, The Groundswell Society, Save the Waves Coalition, Surf Aid International, Waves for Development, Greensurf, and Surfers Against Sewage Ltd., to name a few.

Based on further analysis of the author's 2007-2008 coastal survey, water quality can be singled out as the key negative in an otherwise positive prognosis for surf tourism. This is to say that anecdotal evidence indicates that a number of water quality issues have been identified and classified as two-fold: pollution (dissolved), and rubbish (3 dimensional).

In the widest sense, during the respective monsoon seasons and periods of ride-able surf, water quality often degenerates, becoming brownish in color and unpleasant in odor (author's field notes, 2006-2009). These issues vary widely from one beach to another and may be attributed to a variety of reasons. A definitive beach to beach survey of water quality issues is beyond the scope of this current paper. Nonetheless, author's 2007-2008 coastal survey indicates that discoloration of water in Phuket and Phang-nga provinces (Andaman Sea) are caused by water runoff and canal discharges which regularly occur at a number of beaches and surfing areas. These areas [waters] tend to clear up in several days after the heavy rains. On the whole, Phuket beaches have better water quality than that in Phang-nga province (to the north of Phuket) which is earmarked as having brown water during the surf season. Brown water, especially if having an unpleasant odor, makes such areas less attractive for surfing, and reports of surfers getting ear infections have been reported (Blauer 2008; Aiyarak, 2009).

Phuket and Phang-nga tin mining may have some relationship to water quality. Reynolds (2008) notes that twenty years ago, when off-shore tin mining was still practiced in Phuket, water quality was much worse than today. As tourism replaced mining, water quality improved. Similarly, Phang-nga province recently terminated permits for off-shore mining but it may be a number of years before water quality improves (ibid.).

On the Gulf of Thailand, surveys conducted in 2007-2008 indicated that waters from Pattani in the south extending to Surat Thani in the north are brownish in color during much of the surf season with only a few exceptions, namely the Khanom area and the Ko Samui area in Nakhon Si Thammarat and Surat Thani provinces respectively. Examining the causes for the brown water in the gulf are beyond the scope of this short paper, but can likely be attributed to natural and man-made causes, including the fishery industry in the region. Surfing in most of Thailand's gulf area is more of a novelty than a true surf tourism destination (Ko Samui notwithstanding). Other than in Ko Samui, during the survey periods in 2007 and 2008, the author did not encounter even a single surfer in the Gulf of Thailand.

Semi-structured interviews with ten expatriate surfers (identified as informants 1 through 10 to protect their identities) who reside in Thailand and have global surfing experience, indicate that trash and debris along Thailand's western coastline is a serious issue and has reached a critical point, which adversely affects the image and quality of the overall surf experience. During the 2008 surf season, informants 1 through 10 identified thousands of plastic materials floating at or just below the water surface, or washed up along the coast. These material pollutants were examined by each informant as to best determine their origin. Collective analysis is as follows: 75% has Thai language printed on the material; 5% has various Indonesian languages; 5% has Burmese language; and the remaining 15% has no identifiable markings. An exception was the beach cleanup alert posted by the Phuket Boardriders website in late August 2008 when the trash collected was predominantly from Indonesia (Remmers, 2008).

Informant 1 spent several days in September 2008, with the support of five Thai youth, collecting trash washed in at high tide in the Bang Tao Beach area. Informant 1's group had

collected three-hundred cubic gallons of rubbish and reported that ninety-eight percent of the material was of Thai origin and appeared identical to materials used at local construction sites. Furthermore, informant 1 witnessed Burmese work camp residents dumping rubbish in tidal areas. Informant 2, located in the Khao Lak area, identified the writing on trash during August and September 2008 and reported that writing was again predominantly Thai. Informants 3 through 10 had similar findings in regard to the rubbish being of Thai origin.

Further accounts for the origins and nature of rubbish on Thai beaches are as follows. Informant 1 theorizes that materials coming from far offshore appear degenerated and algae-covered due to the extended time at sea, whereas materials originating from local canals and fishermen appear newer and were quite recently introduced to the environment. Lutz Mueller, General Manager of Marriott's Courtyard Hotel in Kamala proposes that "The rubbish originates from three sources: local businesses, picnickers [park users], and the trash that washes in from the sea" (Mueller, 2009). Remmers (2009), a volunteer surf instructor agrees but adds, "during the early part of the monsoon season the trash is mainly from local sources, but as the big storm systems come up from the south later in the season, they bring the foreign garbage (it may have barnacles)." Williams (2009) with the Mai Kao Turtle foundation has initiated beach cleanups since 2004 has personally witnessed that the primary source of the 3-dimensional pollution as the "Careless rubbish disposal of Thai people on boats and on the beach."

Interviews with informants regarding how, why, or where, the rubbish originates offer only provisional results and a number of hypothesis emerged including the following: during periods of high tides and heavy rains debris are flushed from local canals and are carried out to sea, returning with the tides and waves to the west-facing coastlines; materials are dumped in the sea

by Burmese work camp residents; materials are dumped into the sea from construction workers; materials are carried out to sea and dumped by local fisherman; materials are carried up from the Straits of Malacca by the predominate wind patterns; large Indian Ocean storms transport the rubbish to the Thai coast; boats passing in the outer shipping lanes are dumping these materials; local beach businesses are somewhat responsible; and picnickers and beachgoers are somewhat responsible.

The issue of garbage in the Andaman Sea is not often addressed in the media. Anecdotal evidence would indicate that fewer people swim during this period, especially during high surf and tides when garbage is most visible. During the Andaman high season (December through March) predominate winds blow from the east carrying trash out to sea toward the west and away from Thailand coastlines, and therefore the issue is not familiar. Informant 10, who has firsthand experience in the Similan Islands said that during this period large amounts of debris build up on Similan eastern coastlines and theorizes that the issue of garbage in the Andaman Sea is very serious. This is to say that there is a considerable amount of rubbish in the sea and what is experienced [washed up] on the beaches is a mere fraction of that.

These findings are inconclusive and the amount of material at sea is nearly impossible to determine. However, albeit obvious, the rubbish is from people and is foreign to the natural aquatic environment. Five out of ten informants reported that after stormy periods they do not surf due to the brown smelly water and the amount of rubbish in the sea, rather they wait a day or two until the water quality improves. Further study is needed to determine how this issue might affect surf tourism (and the image of Thai beaches) both current and in the future, but a common sense approach would lend that 'clean sells'.

No discussion of the coastal environment in Thailand would be complete without mention of the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami, yet an in-depth discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this short paper. However, worthy of mention is that the entire Andaman coast was virtually scoured by the event and the beaches and surf sites were adversely affected. Perhaps the most prolifically altered area once known for surfing was Pakarang Point in Khao Lak, once a haven for a handful of expatriate surfers. Blauer (2008) explains that the entire point was stripped clean of all sand and coral deposits, the surfing areas were drastically changed, and at least one surfer was killed. Over the past four years, sand and coral deposits are slowly returning and no less than four surfing areas are again surf-able to some extent (Author, 2007-2008 survey; Blauer, 2008). Furthermore, in the wake of the tsunami's destruction, construction along coastal areas has been prolific, especially in Phang-nga province and the effects are recommended for further study. Furthermore, it may go without saying that the tsunami has left a global and indelible negative image of 'waves' in Thailand -- an image which is embedded in the lives and minds of coastal inhabitants (a discussion on *imagery* has been included in this paper).

SOCIAL ASPECTS OF SURFING

Surfing areas are limited spaces and often are focused on specific points where surfers need to position themselves to catch the waves. This is to say that there are limits to the carrying capacity for each surfing area and that overcrowding at surfing areas leads to tensions amongst surfers and dissatisfaction of the surfing experience. It would be safe to assume that the idea of localism (often associated with crowded surfing areas) is due to the lack of resources.

Surf tourism in Thailand has only developed as a market segment in the recent five years. Personal interviews with expatriate surfers, all of which have global surfing experience, indicate

that overcrowding is the greatest threat to the sustainability to surf tourism in Thailand. All interviewees adamantly commented that the promotion and subsequent crowding of Thai surfing areas would spoil the experience of surfing in Phuket. All interviewees expressed that it is precisely that these surfing areas are not crowded which is the draw-card for tourism. This would indicate a paradox and further study and assessment are needed to discussion of surf tourism sustainability.

Survey and assessment of Thailand's Andaman Islands has yet to be conducted (Phuket notwithstanding). Speculatively, these areas, namely the Similan and Surin Islands may not be appropriate for surfing given their topography. However, Ko Phayam and Ko Chang [islands] have been reported to have surfing waves and offer the potential for a managed approach to surf tourism (where carrying capacities could be determined and limited).

As surf tourism in Phuket increases, social issues among tourists and local Thais are likely to increase and may reach unsustainable levels, such as is reported in some beaches in Hawaii, Australia, and Indonesia for example. Reports of 'surf rage' have been reported at Kata Beach between tourists and locals and this is likely to increase over time (author's field notes 2006-2009).

SURF ECONOMICS

There is an estimated four-thousand surfers (including tourists that take a surf lesson) visiting Thailand annually (Nadon, 2007). Anecdotal evidence and observations from informants would indicate that this number is increasing by as much as thirty percent per annum. Foreign

participation in the 2008 Kalim Surf Contest was nearly double that of 2007, and included surf tourism businessmen from Singapore and Malaysia (Aiyarak, 2008).

Martin and Assenov (2008) identify three significant categories of surf tourists fitting the Thailand case study, namely incidental, soft, and hard surf tourists. Although many fit the former category (incidental) and had little or no knowledge of surfing in Thailand prior to arrival at the beach, soft surf tourists constitute the majority group (ibid.). Soft surf tourists are those who reported that surfing was not necessarily their primary objective for travel to Thailand; rather they saw surfing as a component to their vacation. This is to say that they may involve in other activities apart from surfing, thus they saw surfing as adding value to the destination. Surfing as a valued-added construct may add to the overall resiliency and sustainability of the economy of the destination.

In the situation of economics and surf tourism in Thailand, seasonality is a key issue. Martin and Assenov (2008) demonstrate that indeed there is the potential for surf tourism in Thailand based on the availability of waves arriving on Andaman shores during the southwesterly monsoon period (May through October) and on the Gulf of Thailand shores during the northeasterly monsoon period (November through March). From a perspective of surf tourism, the monsoon seasons provide the advantage of consistent ride-able waves. Traditionally, the monsoon period was viewed as a threat to tourism and many hotels simply reduced staff and advised tourists not to swim at beaches. The monsoon seasons can be used to advantage in annualizing tourism and reducing seasonality. For example, as the Phuket surfing season corresponds with the southwest monsoon or *low season*, there may be some relief in the context of seasonality, while similarly, Ko Samui's surfing seasons corresponds with the Gulf of Thailand's northeast monsoon time of

year. This juxtaposed seasonality may provide an element of sustainability to overall tourism sector, especially benefiting the economics of Thailand beach tourism by offering year-round opportunities for surf tourism.

Rough ocean conditions have been perceived as a threat to beach resorts; however, surf tourism turns weakness into opportunity by offering the prospect of selling rooms as well as surfing products and services, such as surf lessons and tours. Principal problems are two-fold: prospects and the associated challenges (and a lack of awareness on each case). On one hand, there are surf tourism industry potentials that are currently not recognized. Such potentialities could address [for example] current issues of seasonality at Andaman coast resorts in Phuket, Phang-Nga, and Ranong provinces. Many of these coastal resorts, especially Phang-Nga, experience extremely low occupancies during the monsoon season when the conditions for surfing take place. Progression of the industry could provide jobs, draw new tourists, build a new tourist market segment for the country, and promote a novel *imagery* for the region and the season (see section on imagery). On the other hand, safety issues need to be addressed as follows.

OCEAN SAFETY

In the simplest of terms, if surf tourism business models are not safe, then they cannot be sustainable. Surf and ocean safety was given minimal recognition support prior to the 2004 Boxer Day Tsunami. After this event a fund was developed and the government began to contract the private sector to provide basic lifeguard services.

Safety is a key issue with regard to surf tourism in Thailand. Interviewees at Kata Beach reported that issues with jet skis and paraglide operations were of concern, as were careless first-time

surfers who rent hard boards. All informants expressed that crowding and accidents are on the increase in Phuket, and that the use of soft boards and the training of instructors have yet to be implemented.

Thailand surf tourism is draw card, luring beginner surfers who have little or no experience. The recent Tourism Authority of Thailand publication *Surfing in Phuket* makes diminutive mention of safety issues and many web sites promoting tourism explain that Thailand's waves are safe and ideal for beginners, and often refer to the surf as "small" or "ideal for beginners." However, this may not exactly be the case given the types of waves and conditions found in the region. This is to say that given the close proximity of the ocean storms (and associated winds) which generate waves near Thailand, conditions pose considerable hazards, such as short period swells (waves are close together), which can cause very strong rip currents, and strong on-shore winds (which can make surfing difficult). Seven out of ten informants, as well as the author, have been involved in the rescue of swimmers and beginner surfers who underestimated the ocean conditions and found themselves in need of assistance. Davis (2008), Director of Hawaii County Aquatics, examined Thai ocean safety conditions and reported that, "The water safety aspect needs to be realized in Phuket, it is much more dangerous than it appears, especially for the lay person. Ocean safety does not appear to be taken seriously in Phuket."

If Thailand is to develop sustainable surf tourism, there are a myriad of safety issues which need to be addressed, including the delivery of appropriate information, further development of lifeguarding services, proper signage, trained surf instructors, and the availability of soft boards which greatly reduce the risks of the individual beginners (namely the incidental and soft surf tourists) and all those who they may encounter in the water.

Natural or environmental problems overlap with educational and training issues. As such surf conditions pose inherent dangers, especially for beginner surfers, a problem arises regarding the availability of trained surf instructors and coaches to accompany and assist potential novice surf tourists. Furthermore, Thailand has few experienced surfers, especially those with lifeguarding and lifesaving experience, and therefore training and experience for potential surf instructors, coaches, and lifeguards may prove time consuming and expensive.

Additionally, there are liability issues to be measured in the case of injury or drowning. Consider that a hotel promoting surfing on its beaches should provide lessons on soft boards and lifeguarding services. Hotels inviting surf tourists may be inviting a degree of liability.

POLITICAL ISSUES

Recent political events in August and September 2008, and again in mid April 2009 (commonly referred to as the *red* shirt and *yellow* shirt supporters) have negatively impacted tourism throughout Thailand and demonstrated the fragile nature of the tourism industry as a whole. The Phuket economy, which relies heavily on tourism, was especially hard-hit by the closure of the Phuket International Airport and the BBC reported from Kata Beach (September 2008) that Phuket tourism had slumped some 40 to 50 percent compared with the same period in 2007.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that surfers and adventure tourists may be less likely to cancel travel plans to destinations experiencing periods of security/political security issues in the media. Indrajith De Silva (2008), Assistant Director of the Sri Lankan Tourism Promotion Bureau said, “Our surf tourism sector does not appear to fluctuate in the face of Sri Lankan security issues compared to other market segments which normally see sharp declines in arrivals three to four

months following a terrorist attack in the country. For example, during June and July 2008 when the government announced they were officially at war with the Tamil Rebels and tourism arrivals to Sri Lanka dramatically decreased, hotels catering to surfers at Arugam Bay in Eastern part of the country and near to the Tamil area were booked to capacity levels.” Many surfers with advance reservations for the same period and did not cancel their plans to Sri Lanka (Ida, 2008).

Such anecdotal evidence may indicate that surf tourism as a market segment may be somewhat resilient in the face of political and security issues in contrast to other market segments.

SURF IMAGERY

In a global context, the image of surfing and the growth of the surf tourism industry are significant and represent one of the fastest and most resilient tourism market segments today. Although each of Thailand’s monsoonal surf seasons last just six months or less, the positive image of surfing may have lasting effects on the overall identification of Thailand. At the time of writing, Phuket billboards, such as those near the Phuket international airport, including those for Jungceylon Shopping center (Phuket’s largest shopping center) and Central Festival (Phuket’s second largest shopping center) incorporate surf imagery into their advertisements. Surf imagery is used generally in Phuket for clothing and product sales, such as those at the aforementioned shopping centers. This is to say that surf imagery is already in use in Phuket to promote various products and services geared toward tourism markets. Perhaps a long-term marketing strategy involving the rebranding from the *low season* or the *monsoon season* to the *surf season* would be an appropriate and image-positive makeover for the region.

In contradiction, the aforementioned sight of rubbish-fringed beaches and brown waters could cast a negative image for Thailand beach tourism and the overall imagery. Mueller (2009) commented “I was showing a potential Marriott client the beach [at Kamala], and it was so dirty [with rubbish] that it was embarrassing.” During the recent 2009 Kamala Beach cleanup sponsored by the aforementioned *Summer Season Phuket* campaign, participants picked up an estimated two tons of trash [150 30-gallon bags] including drug paraphernalia and two syringes (author’s observation, 2009). Foreign beach goers had to find clearings [between rubbish piles] on the beach to lay their towels and expressed that they “never imagined that Thailand’s beaches were so polluted” (author’s field notes, 2009). Anecdotal evidence would indicate that promoting tourism during the *surf season* could have a negative impact on the image of Thailand beach tourism.

Similarly, the aforesaid tsunami has left a world-wide ineffaceable negative image of ‘waves’ in Thailand. This negative image is embedded in the lives and minds of incalculable people in Thailand and around the world. Blauer (2009) estimates that this image will take several generations to reconcile, especially for the coastal inhabitants of Thailand.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research found that although the overall prognosis for surf tourism is favorable, environmental and social issues are paramount to the discussion. Similarly, Thailand’s *monsoon season* can be rebranded as the *surf season* but concerns over water quality, safety, and capacity should be addressed. Progressively, the promotion of surf season and surf tourism may spawn environmental awareness and affirmative action as surf clubs and corporate sponsors fuel the drive toward clean waters, beaches, and public environmental education.

The findings presented in this paper can help businesses and authorities to make an informed judgment regarding sustainable surf tourism. Appropriate surf tourism promotions include a sustainable mindset, and may target *soft* surf tourists and surf tourism as a value-added product alongside other available activities. In consideration for the future for surf tourism, as well as the overall sustainability for tourism in the southern region, it was determined that there is potential for healthy surf tourism growth in Thailand (Martin and Assenov 2008); however, a number of points have been short-listed for deliberation: the need to address the issue of low awareness of the sport; encouraging wise and sustainable growth of surf tourism; environmental concerns including water quality; promoting a hospitable surf culture; identification and involvement of all stakeholders; and addressing the need for ocean safety. Furthermore, this research brings to bear issues of imagery: those favorable though the global media surge in surfing and surf tourism; to those less favorable such as issues of dirty beaches and natural disasters.

Based on this research, it is determined that the need for education and awareness for environmental issues emerged as the dominant issue. Recommendations for this issue include endorsement and encouragement to raise awareness through at the community-based surf contests. Surf clubs are recommended to sponsor beach clean ups, such as the 2008 Phuket Boardriders Club, the 2009 Summer Season clean up at Kamala, and others (not mentioned in this short paper). Preliminarily, this research indicates that a majority of the trash comes from Thai sources which points to a low awareness and a need for public education. Speculatively, the coastal environment may not be valued and the problem may be generational. The tsunami event may have produced a sense of indifference among Thais along coastal areas.

From an economic point of view, there is a need to find a value for the ocean in the context of environmental concerns, especially with regard water quality and the dumping of rubbish. Hutson (2009) expresses that the Quiksilver *Thai Surf Series* “Can bring to the table important issues, including discussion on the environment... Quiksilver has an environmental aspect, promoting beach clean ups, education, and a long term plan to bring environmental awareness as goal.”

Regarding safety, the current low awareness in media may indicate a low awareness of safety issues among locals, tourists, and hotel management alike. Importantly, any surf tourism strategy needs to address the significant need for ocean safety. Water safety and ocean awareness should be promoted at beach parks and resort properties. Water safety and risk assessments should be carried out for each location. Moreover, this problem can be turned into economic benefit through surf lessons by trained or certified instructors using soft surfboards (threat as opportunity).

Furthermore, Phuket can serve as a base and warm-up grounds for hard surf tourists en route to other Southeast Asian surf destinations, such as Indonesia and the Nicobar and Andaman Islands. Hard surf tourists may visit Phuket for the uncrowned conditions, being that hard core destination are often packed with surfers and a surf tourist may only get a few waves on a given day, whereas a surf tourist in Phuket may catch waves all day long (Ida, 2008).

For soft surf tourists, there is room for surf lessons, rentals, and for surfing as a part of the wider Thai experience. For incidental surf tourists, surf lessons and water safety classes could simply offer a value added beach experience.

In order to encourage wise and sustainable growth, hotels offering services need consider the conditions and associated hazards in their specific locations; capacities for each area should also be considered to promote a hospitable surf culture, while surf contests and promotions need consider the feelings and opinions of the local surfers along with identifying and involving other stakeholders, rather than to risk their alienation. In this way, a sustainable brand of Thai hospitality surf tourism could develop and thus benefit myriad stakeholders. It should be noted that these recommendations ought to be considered in accord, and that the majority of surfers interviewed in this study are of the opinion that the promotion of Thailand as a surf destination – and issues of overcrowding – run the risk of spoiling the resource.

As aforesaid, surfers are on the forefront of environmental and sustainability issues and can offer profound insight to the issues of surf tourism development. General benefits to this study may include the following: support for seasonality problems for hotels and businesses; increased water safety awareness; opportunities for existing surf-related companies; identifying opportunities for new businesses, such as those to conduct surf lessons, surf camps, coaching and rentals, as well as those who stand to benefit economically in the future retail, clothing, and market branding of surf products, etc. On the whole, this research identifies new market potentials for the surf seasons as well as creating environmental awareness and appreciation for Thailand's coasts and natural reefs.

In the newly developing surf tourism industry in Thailand, there is a unique opportunity to consider the effects of surf tourism growth in respective areas. This has certainly not been the case in a number surf tourism destinations, such as those in Indonesia, where it was only after a surf tourism boom (and with profound negative impacts) that scholars and tourism officials

began to consider the significance and consequences of carrying capacities at surfing areas. Thailand has the opportunity to develop new surf tourism products and services that fit a sustainable model, which is low impact and high quality, for businesses, including surf lessons, surf coaching, and other aspects of ocean awareness and water safety. Although it is unlikely that surf tourism can provide overall sustainability to tourism in southern Thailand, it can surely be a component to an overall strategy of sustainability and it is recommended to take it into account.

During the southwest monsoon, when many Andaman Coast hotels are running at barely sustainable occupancies, it is evident that Thailand needs to develop recipe of success to deal with the environment and water quality, ocean safety, social and economic issues, political climate, image, seasonality, and overall – the long-term sustainability of tourism resources. As evident in the theme of this research, surfing has a global and mainstream appeal – and the image of the sport can play a positive role for the overall Thai tourism marketing strategy, especially as a schema for the monsoon season. This research offers a pathway to *rethinking the monsoon* and contributes to the study of *sustainable surf tourism in Thailand*.

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