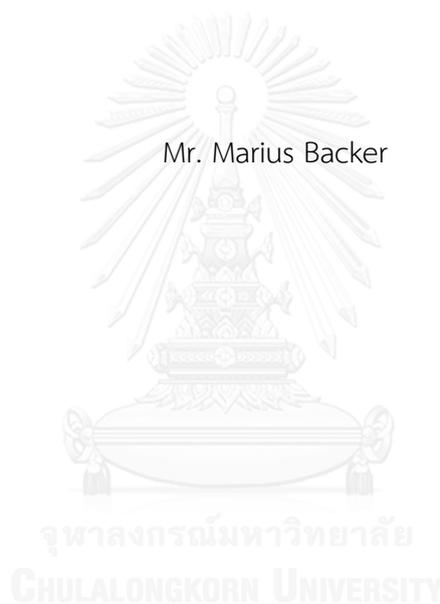


THE POLITICS OF TOURISM IN LAO PDR: DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGING SOCIETY

Mr. Marius Backer



บทคัดย่อและแฟ้มข้อมูลฉบับเต็มของวิทยานิพนธ์ตั้งแต่ปีการศึกษา 2554 ที่ให้บริการในคลังปัญญาจุฬาฯ (CUIR)  
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การวิจัยนี้มีลักษณะที่การเจริญเติบโตและพัฒนาการท่องเที่ยวในสาธารณรัฐประชาธิปไตยประชาชนลาว สาธารณรัฐประชาธิปไตยประชาชนลาว มันได้ไหลออกมาจากเก้าอี้ของลัทธิจักรวรรดินิยมสงครามและลัทธิคอมมิวนิสต์และขณะนี้ได้รับรางวัลชนะเลิศหลายรางวัลสำหรับการเดินทางและการท่องเที่ยว นี่เป็นกรณีศึกษาของประเทศลาวและเก็บข้อมูลทั้งจากการสัมภาษณ์และเขียนแหล่งทุติยภูมิ ลาวเป็นหนึ่งในประเทศที่ยากจนที่สุดในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้และการท่องเที่ยวเป็นดริฟท์ที่สำคัญสำหรับการพัฒนาและการบรรเทาความยากจน มันมีคนจำนวนมากและนำเงินตราต่างประเทศการศึกษาแสดงให้เห็นว่าลาวจะมีศักยภาพที่ดีสำหรับการพัฒนาต่อไปของการท่องเที่ยวอย่างยั่งยืน หลายพื้นที่มีศักยภาพที่ดีและจะมีความสำคัญสำหรับการท่องเที่ยวในอนาคต แต่ไม่มีประสิทธิภาพการกำกับดูแลและการเชื่อมต่อที่ไม่ดีด้วยกันกับการแข่งขันที่เพิ่มขึ้นอาจทำให้เกิดความกังวลลาว เว็บไซต์การท่องเที่ยวเชิงนิเวศหลายเผชิญกับความท้าทายของความเสียหายและมลพิษทั้งโดยนักท่องเที่ยวหรือสถานประกอบการธุรกิจนักท่องเที่ยวได้รับรางวัลชนะเลิศโครงการและกิจกรรมที่นักท่องเที่ยวสามารถเข้าร่วมเป็นเครื่องมือที่ดีสำหรับการพัฒนา แต่พวกเขายังคงปิดวงเงินกับผู้เข้าชมมากที่สุด ในขณะที่มันสำคัญกับตลาดระดับไฮเอนด์ กิจกรรมส่วนใหญ่จะเป็นในบางภูมิภาคและกิจกรรมส่วนใหญ่ นอก NPA จะมากหรือน้อยเช่นเดียวกับเว็บไซต์การท่องเที่ยวมวลดั่งนั้นมันจึงเป็นเรื่องยากที่จะชี้ให้เห็นว่าลาวเป็นตัวแทนของสิ่งที่ใหม่ภายในการท่องเที่ยวเป็นจำนวนมากแสดงให้เห็น

จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย  
CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY

สาขาวิชา เอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ศึกษา  
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ลายมือชื่อนิสิต .....  
ลายมือชื่อ อ.ที่ปรึกษาหลัก .....

# # 5587698320 : MAJOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

KEYWORDS: LAO PDR / MASS-TOURISM / SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

MARIUS BACKER: THE POLITICS OF TOURISM IN LAO PDR: DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGING SOCIETY. ADVISOR: ASST. PROF. THEERA NUCHPIAM, Ph.D., 124 pp.

This research looks at the growth and development tourism in the Lao Peoples Democratic Republic, Lao PDR. It has emerged from the ashes of imperialism, war and communism, and is now an award winning destination for travel and tourism. This is a case study of Laos and data is collected both by interviews and secondary written sources. Laos is among the poorest countries in Southeast Asia, and tourism is a major drift for development and poverty alleviation. It occupies many people, and brings in foreign currency. The studies show that Laos do have great potential for further development of sustainable tourism. Several areas have great potential, and will be important for tourism in the future. However, inefficient governance and poor connectivity together with increased competition can cause Laos concerns. Several eco-tourism sites face challenges of damage and pollution, either by tourists or local business establishment. The award winning projects and activities travelers can join, are great tools for development, however, they remain off limits to most visitors, as it caters to the high end market. Most activities are in certain regions, and most activities outside the NPA are more or less the same as mass tourism sites, so it is hard to suggest that Laos represent something new within tourism, as many suggests.

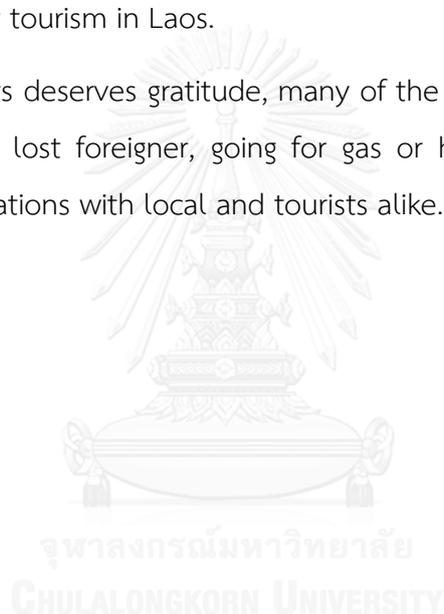
Field of Study: Southeast Asian Studies      Student's Signature .....

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Lao Peoples Democratic Republic, Lao PDR, or simply Laos, is among the smallest and poorest of ASEAN nations and the regions only landlocked country, and has performed great achievements in terms of developing the country into a destination for travel and tourism. It has gained a good reputation for its many ecotourism and “community based” tourism activities. In several provinces it is possible to explore the nature and culture of Laos in a new and different way, rather than the traditional mass tourist way of resort holidays. In 2013, Laos was awarded “the destination of the year” by European Council on Tourism and Trade (ECTT). Among the reasons for this prestigious award was that the country is *“promoting a new concept of community based tourism, friendly to nature, with low ecological impact and preservation of natural biodiversity and protection of endangered species and areas, especially rainforest eco-climate”*.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, Laos promotes and attracts many people for its beautiful nature and several opportunities for travelers who like more adventurous experiences like mountain trekking and so on. But it also say that Laos can offer something “new” within tourism, a way of travel that minimizes the well-known negative effects of mass-tourism, a possible depletion of natural and cultural resources, and instead offer a way of travel that benefits the local communities better. Laos, among many of small and so-called “off the beaten track” destinations have gained

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<sup>1</sup> European Council on Tourism and Trade: <http://ectt.webs.com/apps/blog/show/26126702-laos-is-selected-as-world-best-tourist-destination-for-2013>

popularity in the latter years.<sup>2</sup> This paper will discuss whether the form of *community based tourism* (CBT), or “pro-poor tourism”, as it may also be called, really can contribute to poverty alleviation and development in Northern Laos.

People all over the world can now read about and see pictures from Laos, in travel magazines, books and on internet. Perhaps the pictures show wild elephants, or beautiful pagodas in the ancient Royal city of Luang Prabang. Perhaps a photo of the lovely Mekong River floating steadily down towards Cambodia before Vietnam, while passing steep vertical mountain formations, with local fishermen on the river casting their fishing nets for their daily food, or if you are thirsty for history and culture, you can experience colonial architecture and visit areas with great historical significance.<sup>3</sup> Portrayed by the government as a destination which are “yet untouched by the modern demands, stress and peace of life? Its beauty lies in the Lao people, century-old traditions and heritage and its lush, pristine landscape“.<sup>4</sup>

For the Government of Lao PDR, tourism is as a key sector for contributing to the Nations socio-economic development and poverty alleviation, that is formulated through the governments “Lao PDR Tourism Strategy 2006-2020”.<sup>5</sup> It’s a major

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<sup>2</sup> Mowforth & Munt, 2011: *Tourism and Sustainability, Development, Globalization and New Tourism in The Third World*

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Lonely Planet or Condé Nast Traveller and Tripadvisor:  
<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/search?q=Laos> <http://www.cntraveller.com/guides/asia/laos/laos/where-to-stay>.  
<http://www.tripadvisor.com/LocationPhotos-g293949-Laos.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.tourismloas.org/index.php>

<sup>5</sup> Lao PDR Tourism Strategy 2006-2020:  
<http://www.tourismloas.org/files/files/Lao%20PDR%20Tourism%20Strategy%202006-2020%20in%20English.pdf>

contributor to the GDP, and is also among the fastest growing businesses in Laos. In 2013, Laos welcomed around 3.7 million tourists, and the latter years have seen a double digit percentage in growth Tourism generated close to 600 million American Dollars, a great contributor to Laos modest economy<sup>6</sup>.

Still, Laos is a relative new destination, and receives significantly less tourist annually than its neighbors, such as Thailand and Vietnam<sup>7</sup>. That respectively catered to roughly about 22.4 and 6.8 million visitors annually in 2012.<sup>8</sup> Laos still has a modest and small tourism industry compared to its neighbors. This paper will be a critical analysis of the growth of tourism in Laos. And aim to gain knowledge and understanding of tourism and development, with emphasizing Northern Laos, but it may also hold relevance to other countries and destinations as well.

The rather rapid growth in tourism in Laos, and other developing countries raises several important questions. How does international tourism impact with small often rural, communities and fragile nature in developing countries? And how does, or do the local communities benefit from tourism? Can tourism, as mostly a western commercialized concept really alleviate poverty and helping Laos elevate from a

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.tourismlaos.org/files/files/2013%20Statistical%20Report%20on%20Tourism%20in%20English.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <http://statistics.unwto.org/content/yearbook-tourism-statistics>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.asean.org/images/resources/2014/Jan/StatisticUpdate28Jan/Tourism%20Update/Table%2028.pdf>

Least Developed Country (LDC), and also a High Indebted Poor Country (HIPC)? The government aim is to do so by 2020.<sup>9</sup>

This paper also will study this “new form” of tourism. Laos has gained such a good reputation and won several awards for its many eco projects. Perhaps the most famous and rewarded is the program in Luang Namtha. In 2001, the project has been awarded by UNDP as a model project, to contribute to the reduction of poverty, and in 2002, the British Airways has also awarded to this project.<sup>10</sup> It offers travelers wildlife safari, with a perhaps rare opportunity to spot endangered wildlife, maybe even a tiger<sup>11</sup>. Or it is possible to go on a “fair trekking”, a trekking experience through mountains, visiting villages. Then the villages get paid and receive back a share of the income from the tour.<sup>12</sup>

An important and growing concern is the environmental impact mass tourism, with all the jumbo jets and mass transport and consumption has on the environment and communities. Cultural depletion and degradation of local culture and customs caused by mass tourism should be of concern also. A main goal of this thesis is to analyze and discuss whether the rather rapid growth in tourism in Laos is *sustainable* or not.

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<sup>9</sup> Cooper, Robert, 2014: Laos, a work in progress, phrase is from the cover

<sup>10</sup> Lao PDR Tourism Strategyplan 2006-2020:6

<sup>11</sup> [http://namha-npa.org/kayaking/5\\_3\\_day\\_ky.html](http://namha-npa.org/kayaking/5_3_day_ky.html)

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.trekking-in-laos.com/>

Plenty of books and research have been written about politics and the history of Laos, including French colonization, the so-called “secret war”, America’s bombing in Laos during the Vietnam War between around 1965 and 1972, and the political and the rise and decline of communism in Laos. Because of Laos great strategically importance, and in line of the domino doctrine, Laos became a pawn between left and right wing ideologies. Laos has the grim record of being the most heavily bombed country in the world, as the war in Vietnam spread into Laos. The exact figure of bombs dropped on Laos, and thus the remains of Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) is nearly impossible to figure out exactly. However, it is believed that 30 percent of the about 266 million bombs, or cluster bombs were dropped over Northeastern and Southern parts of Laos did not detonate and remains still a threat to anyone who is exposed to it. This deprives many people for development.<sup>13</sup>

In the years following the war, when USA lost the war, the new regime was established in 1975. Laos fell into isolation and followed socialist doctrines. Outside contact with other nations remained mostly to its neighbors, notably Vietnam, and a few other socialist countries. It is not until the latter decades, especially since the new millennium that Laos really has gained a momentum for developing into a destination for tourism<sup>14</sup>. Historical and cultural tourism seems to be an important

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<sup>13</sup> <http://uxolao.org/index.php/en/the-uxo-problem>

<sup>14</sup> Hitchcock, King & Parnwell, 2009. *Tourism in Southeast Asia: Challenges and New Directions*, p 181

aspect or niche of the planning according to the government, Several destinations such the Plain of Jars and areas around the former “Xiasombone Special Zone”, which next year, 2015, the Lao National Tourism Authority (LNTA) will promote as “Visit Xiasombone Year”, have great potential for a liable and sound destination for eco and community based tourism, through its unique history and nature<sup>15</sup>. This province not only harbors great historical significance, but the region is also home to a wide variety of natural resources and beautiful nature. The highest mountain peak in Laos is here, Phu Bia, and is smaller surrounding peaks guards the southern border to the famous site of the Plain of Jars.

*Community Based Tourism (CBT)*, a concept that will be important in this thesis, shows that it can give positive effects to the host communities, in terms of improved economically situation and that it provides jobs and empowerment.<sup>16</sup> However, most of the research is done on the earlier mentioned projects, and tend to focus on the more “high end” of tourism. So this thesis tries to fill in that gap, and focuses on small scale village projects in selected cities and villages such as Phonsavan and VangVieng, where I will focus on smaller local initiatives.

The title of the thesis, “politics of tourism”, is to show the reader the importance of tourism, both for the government and the people of Laos. Tourism is

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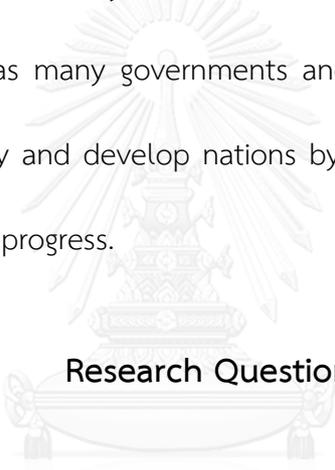
<sup>15</sup> [http://www.ttgasia.com/article.php?article\\_id=22662](http://www.ttgasia.com/article.php?article_id=22662) and Vientiane Times:

[http://www.vientianetimes.org.la/FreeContent/FreeCont\\_Visit%20Xaysomboun.htm](http://www.vientianetimes.org.la/FreeContent/FreeCont_Visit%20Xaysomboun.htm)

<sup>16</sup> Hitchcock, King & Parnwell, 2009: Chapter 11: Tourism in the Lao Peoples Democratic Republic p. 181

a major force of income for many, and it is as will be talked about later, also a question of allocation of resources and a question of equal and unequal development, also in a broader international context.

The overall aim of this paper is to study the growth and impact of tourism in Northern Laos. And hopefully to expand knowledge and understanding of Laos, a country that deserves more attention about. There is an overall growth in the use of terms such as “eco”, “community” and so on in the field of tourism, so a study about this is important, as many governments and private institutions claims that they can alleviate poverty and develop nations by tourism. Thus it is important to keep a critical eye on this progress.

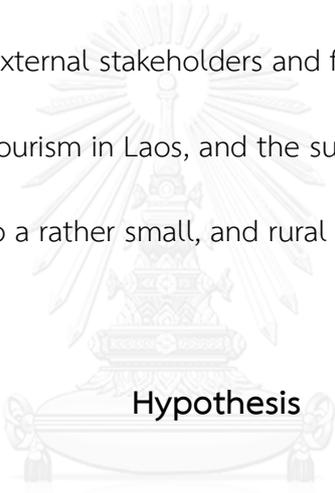


### Research Questions

1. Can or does tourism in Laos alleviate poverty?
2. Does the tourism in Laos really represent something “new”, and is it really less harmful than traditional mass-tourism, as stated by the ECCT?
3. How has Laos, a country with limited resources, managed to sustain this growth in tourism, and tourist activities? Are there any other stakeholders, or is it managed by their own governmental bodies?
4. Is this rather rapid growth in tourism sustainable?

## Objectives

1. Study the growth and development of tourism in Laos, focusing on the period from after the decline of socialism in Laos, in other words after the New Economic Mechanism came into place, from the 1990s and until present time
2. Research about this new form of tourism and how it differs from traditional form of mass tourism,
3. Study the impact of external stakeholders and foreign aid and investors in Laos
4. Study the impact of tourism in Laos, and the sustainability of this rapid growth of tourism and visitors to a rather small, and rural community.



## Hypothesis

Tourism can bring many benefits to Laos, as it provides the country with a steady flow of cash, mainly foreign currencies in American dollars. This offers Laos, among the poorest countries in the world with economical possibilities. Tourism creates work, and stimulate to a general growth in the economy. However, perhaps it also can harm Laos in several ways. A rapid growth in visitors to the country can lead to increased pollution and put stress on a pristine nature and local resources. The tourism in Laos is located to specific areas and regions and thus the benefits are limited and perhaps out of reach for most people. This can lead to a further gap between rich and poor.

## CHAPTER II

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Following will be an account of the theoretical framework that will function as the framework or basis of this thesis. It will provide an account of the framework for tourism as a field of study. Tourism is a topic that most people in some ways are familiar with. Most people have been a tourist at least one or perhaps several times, either on a holiday to a foreign country or a shorter trip within its own country. Perhaps going for dinner at your local restaurant down the road from your house can be considered tourism? It is essential to devote some space to gain a clearer idea of the concept of tourism and limit as a field of study before proceeding to the next chapter. Anyhow, the space devoted to a definition of the term will be limited, worthy as a field of study in its own right this will not be a priority for this thesis.

#### **What is tourism? Definitions and limitations**

Tourism has been contested and still lacks some sense of consensus of what it really is, its definitions and limitations<sup>17</sup>. How to define tourism and activities related to tourism is not as easy as it may seem. Many people travel and move around for many different reasons, and time periods and so on. Are you a tourist for simply having dinner at one of your favorite restaurants near your home? Or are you

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<sup>17</sup> Thefler & Sharpely, 2008: *Tourism and Development in the Developing World*, p 1-30

tourist for going away on a trip that relates to your work or other duties you may have? The literature has developed several viable theories and definitions. This paper will embrace the commonly and widely used definition from The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). Their definition states that tourism or tourists are people “traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes”.<sup>18</sup>

It should be noted that this definition also include work related trips, and also it has a time limit. As mentioned, there are other definitions with different points of view. However, the definition itself is not central to the thesis as such. Still it is important to grasp on the many definitions. Especially when reading and looking at statistical data on tourism arrivals for instance. As will be discussed later, in the case of Laos, sometimes numbers tend to be higher than the actual numbers. As most countries counts the numbers of arrivals through airports, harbors, or land crossings, many of these are visitors for a shorter period, maybe only a day, and are there on business, and not for leisure. However, it is also viable argument that sometimes business and pleasure goes hand in hand. Let us say that Vientiane host a bigger summit or a convention, as they have in the past, should those people who attend these meeting be regarded as tourists? Perhaps after the meeting is over, and the delegates go for a dinner at a local restaurant they are tourists? It also broadens the

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<sup>18</sup> UNWTO: [www.unwto.org](http://www.unwto.org)

scope of tourism to other related businesses and industries. The point is that one should be a bit critical when considering the definition of tourism. However as mentioned it is not a critical point of this thesis. It should also be argued that such summit and meeting and general business trips is an important aspect of tourism, as they use the same services as the traditional holiday people, they stay in hotels, eat at restaurants and so on.

### **Tourism as a multidisciplinary study**

As said, tourism is a subject that most people have some kind of relationship to, at some point, or in some way. Tourism has been and is being studied widely, within many subfields and categories. What seems to be recognized by Botterill & Platenkamp (2012), is that scholars agree that tourism should have a space within the social sciences, as it concerns the interaction of millions of people worldwide, every day, in most countries at all times<sup>19</sup>. The reach and scope of tourism, when thinking of all the human and cultural interaction, makes it even more interesting to study. Tourism is also about the relations between human and human behavior, and thus as they sees it, belongs within the sphere of social science. At different fields and level of society can we study tourism, anthropological, economical and political etc.

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<sup>19</sup> Botterelli & Platenkamp, 2012, p 1-3

It is in other words a highly multidisciplinary subject. It can be studied and categorized in many different fields of study too, economy, management and hospitality and so on. Tourism is also highly connected to economy as well, both international and local. Prices and behavior are in many ways tied up to oil prices, supply and demand and so on. Local people devote their work to the industry and rely on its salaries and are affected by trends and changes in the market as well. Several scholars have noted a weakness in tourism research Britton (1991) noted that:

*Although over-simplifying, we could characterize the “geography of tourism” as being primarily concerned with: the description of travel flows, micro scale spatial structure and land use of tourist places ..... These are vital elements of the study of travel and tourism. But these sections are dealt within descriptive and weakly theorized ways”<sup>20</sup>*

Therefore, this paper focuses on the social and or political aspect of tourism, with important keyword is development and sustainability, and this will be addressed shortly. As mentioned there have been several attempts to define tourism itself, but also a debate on the scope of its reach and the studies can broadly be categorized in two groups. The first is mainly concerned with auditing, categorizing, listing and grouping and the outcomes and so on. The second approach is “concerned primarily

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<sup>20</sup> Mowforth & Munt, 2011: Tourism and Sustainability, Development, Globalization and New Tourism in The Third World:2

*with conceptualizing the forces which impact on tourism and through an analysis of these forces, providing a broader context for understanding tourism”.*<sup>21</sup> The difference is that in the latter approach, is that tourism is seen, or approached and embraced at a multitude of different forces and broader considerations can be taken into account. This confirms the multidisciplinary aspect of tourism and is a focal point of this thesis too. Further I will explain and write about tourism and related topics for this thesis.

#### **- Tourism and sustainability**

Sustainability is a term that most of us know, or hear or read about from time to time. We can also see and hear in a speech by a politician or a representative for an environmental organization or someone else promoting or talking about sustainable development. What does it mean and what is it? What does something need to fulfill to be sustainable? How can one define, and even harder, how to measure sustainability is questions that repeats itself in many fields of research.

According to Liu (2010) sustainability as a concept has its root from the growth of the environmentalist movements in the 1970s.<sup>22</sup> In other words the author witnessed a growing concern for the deterioration of natural and human resources

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<sup>21</sup> Mowforth&Munt 2011:2

<sup>22</sup> Sustainable tourism – an overall perspective in Fjord Norway;

<http://223.27.200.2/brage.bibsys.no/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/185201/Maristuen.pdf?sequence=1>

due to the heavy industrialization and growth in pollution, putting a major pressure on the environment both locally and globally.

This became a concern for many people. Later on sustainability would be formalized into public policy for governments and international organizations.<sup>23</sup>

Probably the most viable, or at least among the most used and common and agreed upon definition of *sustainable development* is from the so-called “*Brundtland Commission Report*”, or the formal name, World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). The commission defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.<sup>24</sup> What should be noted is that the Brundtland Report does not mention anything about tourism specifically. But neither does it mention many other businesses and sectors that potentially harm the environment.

Anyhow, it is clear to trace the same meaning in later definitions by stakeholders in the tourism industry themselves. Such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), understanding of the term, use the following definition of a sustainable tourism “that takes full account of its current and future

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<sup>23</sup> Sustainable tourism – an overall perspective in Fjord Norway;

<http://223.27.200.2/brage.bibsys.no/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/185201/Maristuen.pdf?sequence=1>

<sup>24</sup> WCED, 1987: 43)

economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities”<sup>25</sup>. The meaning within both is that it takes into account that the effects of our consumption should not jeopardize the future generations the same ability to meet their needs and consumption. What is the point of have a lot today, if we have less, or nothing tomorrow? The global community, through UN has hosted a series of summits, and provided reports on this subject. At the “World summit” in Rio in 1992 put tourism and sustainability on the agenda, and was followed up 10 years later, “Rio +10”. These summits and reports acts as important guidelines for further development.<sup>26</sup>

What should also be noted is that it is mainly organizations from the western world, and western organizations that set the standard and agenda for sustainability and development. It is perhaps easier for a wealthy country or a firm to actually have the extra surplus of money and wealth to consider these issues. This should be of importance later in the next part, when I discuss the tourism in Laos more specific.

Telfer & Sharpley (2008) argued that there is at least three ways to link tourism and sustainability together, namely an economic sustainability of tourism, an

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<sup>25</sup> <http://sdt.unwto.org/content/about-us-5>

<sup>26</sup> Telfer & Sharpley, 2008, p 30

ecological stand of tourism, and a social stand to tourism<sup>27</sup>. What they embrace is a multidisciplinary and holistic approach to tourism. Today, as will be explained later, a multitude of actors of companies and agents, in Laos, and elsewhere that promotes “eco tourism” and “community based tourism”, based on principles of sustainability.

### - Tourism and development

Theories and understanding of development have shifted and evolved as time passes. In general, the classical approaches to an understanding of development studies are *Modernization*, *Dependency*, *Economic Neoliberalism*, and what Thelfer & Sharpley (2008) calls *Alternative Development*.<sup>28</sup>

*Dependency Theory* is based on the concept that all societies follow a certain path to development, and inevitably and a more or less evolutionary “path” from a traditional society to a modern one, i.e. Western values and Western ideas? As a critique to these ideas, the *Dependency Theories* came about in the 1960s. This based its critique on most if not all of the poor countries in the world have a lot of disadvantages in the modern world, that is by many large powerful, western powers and organizations, and also private institutions, a world market economy and so on.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Thelfer & Sharpley, 2008: *Tourism and Development in the Developing World*, p 12

<sup>28</sup> Thelfer & Sharpley, 2008, p 12

<sup>29</sup> Thelfer & Sharpley, 2008, p 12

*Economic neoliberalism* came about as a reaction to interventionist policies, Keynesian economic policy<sup>30</sup>. The followers propose that underdevelopment and concerns towards poverty and development arose from excessive state interventions, and thus embracing liberal market policies. *Alternative Development*, as Thefler & Sharpley (2008) writes, “rejects the Western-centric, economic, growth-based development paradigms”.<sup>31</sup> These theories recognize that development is a complex and multilayered topic. It embraces that development must come from, and be implemented naturally and internally, or not imposed from a different country or culture.

All these theories or, paradigms, are still somewhat contested and debated, provides a lens to understand development and affairs such as tourism in the developing world better. So it is important to notice that such theories and paradigms only provides a general understanding and theoretical approach to how to understand and provides different understanding of development However, in the real world it is harder to generalize and conceptualize through theoretical paradigms.

Anyhow, the link between tourism and development has been studied and contains an ever increasing literature. Reputable works and scholars by Mowforth & Munt (2008), and many more contributes to an increased knowledge on the field

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<sup>30</sup> Cited in Thefler & Sharpley, 2008, 12

<sup>31</sup> Thefler & Sharpley, 2008, p 14

tourism and development.<sup>32</sup> What all these authors show is that it is a highly relevant and important topic for many countries in the developing world. Tourism is also a highly debated topic. With the core questions mainly evolve around the effects on the host communities.<sup>33</sup>

The literature is debated on who really benefits from tourism, is it the host communities or actors and stakeholders in the travel in the travel industry? What is evident is that most of the travel industry is mainly a western based and controlled industry, as much other industries in the world, and these will be a factor to consider when studying and understanding of tourism, especially in the developing world. These issues will be central throughout the paper, and will be addressed in the next section.

As mentioned in the introduction, governments in developing countries, and the Government in Laos in particular, sees tourism, and uses it as a key resource in developing the country, and reduce poverty, increase rural empowerment and employment and so on. Tourism also brings in much needed cash, often foreign currency. Laos is a Least Developed Country (LDC), and with a high public debt.<sup>34</sup> Income from tourism provides a steady flow of US Dollars through visa, taxes and fees etc, and brings jobs and money for many people in the service sector and so

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<sup>32</sup> Mowforth & Munt, 2011, p 31-45

<sup>33</sup> Thefler & Sharpley, 2008, p 174

<sup>34</sup> World Bank: <http://data.worldbank.org/country/lao-pdr>

on. Also in other words, what these mentioned theories and paradigms try to explain and tell us is the dynamic of development, and underlying factors for *underdevelopment*.

## - Tourism and Politics

The link and connection between tourism and politics is easily visible in several ways. We can see that tourism is a sector and activity that involves human activities and behavior. Tourism brings people together, and often cross national borders and across cultural borders as well. Most Nations foreign ministries and relevant department provide travel warnings or alerts for its citizen to certain countries and regions that may in any way or form possess a threat to its citizen. These warnings serve as a warning and a general safety awareness a government provides its citizens.

However, scholars points out (Mowforth&Munt 2011), that perhaps these warnings are more politicized and shaped by ideology, than we might think of in the first place. Research show us that the more connections or relations there are between two countries, the less of a chance there is that one country pose a negative travel warning onto the other.<sup>35</sup> In other words, that politics and foreign relations, in terms of diplomacy, trade etc, are more important than the actual safety

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<sup>35</sup> Mowforth & Munt, 2009, p48-81

and security concern for its citizen. This may drift a bit off the topic, but it is worth mentioning and to reflect on the political and ideological an important point, that politics, and how people and governments and tourism can be a tool for acting out its policy.

Previous studies on tourism and politics both studies how events and actions around the world affects the other, to gain more understanding of the ever increased globalized world we live in. The second, which will be the main focus in this thesis, is the study of political power relations, and the result of a multitude of actors and stakeholders within the tourism industry. Researchers points out that a multitude of stakeholders, apart from local government bodies, often limit and even sometime bypass the formal government in the development of tourism in developing countries<sup>36</sup>.

There are a multitude of International Organizations, different UN bodies, including the World Bank and other regional financial institutions, Non Governmental Organizations (NGO), and also private institutions that is heavily involved in the development of tourism in the developing world. When developing a country into a sound destination for tourism, with investment in human capital, education but also a feasible transportation network, roads, infrastructure and so on, these investments often come at a cost as several scholars points out, that this flow of investment and

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<sup>36</sup> Mowforth & Munt, 2009, p 52

increased flow of goods and trade mostly favors the already wealthy and rich countries, and elites in the respective developing country.

The perhaps familiar term “Washington Consensus” was coined in 1989 by the English economist John Williamson.<sup>37</sup> In his article he refers to a set of more or less obvious specific pattern, that he considered the “standard reform package” promoted for developing countries by Washington D.C–based institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and so on. The “prescriptions” as he calls them, encompasses policies in such areas as macroeconomic stabilization, economic opening to trade and investment, and the expansion of markets within the domestic economy.<sup>38</sup>

The point that is relevant for this thesis is that the development of Laos as tourist destinations rests heavily on the broader development and expansion of international market interests entering Laos, a country that also just joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) and thus now are a part of the global world trade order. Laos became a member as recent as 2013.<sup>39</sup>

Anyone who have observed and spent some time in Laos in the recent year could not notice the development in urban areas in terms of new shops and more and more cars in the streets. Now Laos is open for business, and seems to embrace

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<sup>37</sup> Williamson, 1989: What Washington really means by Policy Reform:  
<http://www.iie.com/publications/papers/paper.cfm?ResearchID=486>

<sup>38</sup> Williamson, 1989

<sup>39</sup> UNWTO: [http://www.wto.org/english/news\\_e/news13\\_e/acc\\_lao\\_08jan13\\_e.htm](http://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news13_e/acc_lao_08jan13_e.htm)

capitalism with full force. Tourism plays a major part in this, as it opens up a market for people all over the world. Globalization and tourism is two of a kind, or as Mowforth and Munt argues, “Economic Globalization is conveys manner in which economic relationships and flows have been stretched across the globe. In the context of tourism, many points to the phenomenal growth of the industry in a global sense (it is now reputed to be the largest single industry) and the rapidity with which new places are continually drawn into the tourism process”<sup>40</sup>

What will be emphasized and studied here in the context of this thesis is the political aspect of tourism in Laos. And gain knowledge and understanding of the power relations and the stakeholders within tourism in Laos. There is, as we shall see later, a great variety of stakeholders, governmental and Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) with interests in the tourism sector in Laos. To study it with the lens of politics we can gain a broader knowledge of the power structure and a greater understanding of the politics and development of tourism in Laos. It is, as Mowforth and Munt (2009) puts it, “the study of tourism is another way of exploring unequal and uneven development”.<sup>41</sup> In other words, tourism and political often goes hand in hand, without most people think of it. It

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<sup>40</sup> Mowforth & Munt, 2009, p 13

<sup>41</sup> Mowforth & Munt, 2011, p 293

## The growth of mass-tourism

Before we proceed to the main part it is useful to shed some light on the growth of tourism, and grasp on the term “mass tourism”. As mentioned already in the introduction part, Laos seems to represent something else within tourism, apart from the usual mass tourism. It has gained reputation and credits for its “eco” and “community based tourism”. Before clarify new forms of tourism that will be mentioned comes as a result of a growing concerns to mass tourism. What is it and what are its roots?



Modern tourism can be traced to what was known as the “Grand Tour”, which was a traditional trip of Europe especially Germany and Italy, undertaken by mainly upper-class European young men with wealth and means, mainly from Western and the Northern European countries.<sup>42</sup> The new trend flourished from about year 1660 until the onset of large-scale rail transport in the 1800 century. It served as an educational opportunity and almost as a “rite of passage”, as New York Times writer Matt Gross (2008), who ventured on a modern version of the old Grand Tour himself:

*“Three hundred years ago, wealthy young Englishmen began taking a post-Oxbridge trek through France and Italy in search of art, culture and the roots of*

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<sup>42</sup> Lessons From the Frugal Grand Tour: New York times: <http://frugaltraveler.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/09/05/lessons-from-the-frugal-grand-tour/>

*Western civilization. With nearly unlimited funds, aristocratic connections and months (or years) to roam, they commissioned paintings, perfected their language skills and mingled with the upper crust of the Continent. No one knows who came up with it, but their adventures soon had a perfectly appropriate name: the Grand Tour”.*<sup>43</sup>

Mass tourism developed with improvements in technology, which allowed the transport of large numbers of people in a short space of time to places of leisure interest, so that greater numbers of people could begin to enjoy the benefits of leisure time. It would be the jumbo jets and the growth of mass transportation that would lift the travel industry to new heights.<sup>44</sup> New technology such as jet plane, which grows larger and larger, carries more and more people longer and longer. In the last decades an ever-increasing in places and numbers of destinations opening up to and investing in tourism. It's a key driver for export revenue and job creations worldwide; every one of eleven holds a job within tourism.<sup>45</sup> What is to be noted is the growth in tourism and tourists from newly industrialized countries, such as India and China. The growth in the middle class in the two most populous countries in the world, have now resulted in that they are in the top of the table when it comes to travel. They will more than likely shape the future of many destinations throughout

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<sup>43</sup> Lessons From the Fugal Grand Tour

<sup>44</sup> Mowforth & Munt, 2011, p 12-14 & 48

<sup>45</sup> UNWTO: [http://dtxqtq4w60xqpw.cloudfront.net/sites/all/files/pdf/unwto\\_highlights14\\_en\\_hr\\_0.pdf](http://dtxqtq4w60xqpw.cloudfront.net/sites/all/files/pdf/unwto_highlights14_en_hr_0.pdf)

the world, especially in Asia.<sup>46</sup> This will be discussed in the next chapter. What or how is this important for Laos?

This growth has been to the benefit of many, but someone bears the cost of it. We do not have to study about tourism for long to spot obvious negative effects of tourism. Some of the destinations in Latin-America and The Caribbean, destinations that early became “hot spots” for western tourism, have seen a rather severe natural pollution and other negative effects.<sup>47</sup> Several studies, and NGOs, and observers and others have highlighted several trends, United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) have pointed out several negative effects.

*“There are many hidden costs to tourism, which can have unfavorable economic effects on the host community. Often rich countries are better able to profit from tourism than poor ones. Whereas the least developed countries have the most urgent need for income, employment and general rise of the standard of living by means of tourism, they are least able to realize these benefits. Among the reasons for this are large-scale transfer of tourism revenues out of the host country and exclusion of local businesses and products”.*<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> UNWTO

<sup>47</sup> Mowforth & Munt, 2011, p 94-97

<sup>48</sup> UNEP:

<http://www.unep.org/resourceefficiency/Business/SectoralActivities/Tourism/FactsandFiguresaboutTourism/ImpactsofTourism/EconomicImpactsofTourism/NegativeEconomicImpactsofTourism/tabid/78784/Default.aspx>

One particular phenomenon that is pointed out by several observers is the so-called “leak effect”.<sup>49</sup> This is a term that refers to or tries to explain the flow of money or income that does not end up in the host community. “The direct income for an area is the amount of tourist expenditure that remains locally after taxes, profits, and wages are paid outside the area and after imports are purchased; these subtracted amounts are called leakage. In most all-inclusive package tours, about 80% of travelers' expenditures go to the airlines, hotels or other international companies (who often have their headquarters in the travelers' home countries), and not to local businesses or workers. In addition, significant amounts of income actually retained at destination level can leave again through leakage” (UNEP).<sup>50</sup>

The same study shows, that in Thailand, a country that is perhaps the most established tourism destination in Southeast Asia, especially on the mainland, or the Greater Mekong Sub-region, has about 70 percent leak. It will be further explained throughout the paper when dealing with the leak effect in Laos, in the next chapter.<sup>51</sup>

This leak effect indicates that there is some sort of dependency over often western controlled companies or local elites or business owners, where most of the cash flows back into the wealthier countries, or companies, rather than the host

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<sup>49</sup>UNEP

<sup>50</sup>UNEP

<sup>51</sup>UNEP

communities. In this respect is an important question to ask if Laos is any different than other destinations. Is the tourism industry there any different that minimizes that leakage of money and surplus to the industrial countries?

There is no wonder that a great resentment have grown towards tourism, or mass tourism. It has harmed many areas and destinations around, both in the developed and developing world. Scholars, observers and travelers alike, have seen negative impacts on host communities in the following section I will briefly explain the “rise of new forms of tourism” as Mowforth & Munt (2011) names it.<sup>52</sup>

### **Mass-tourism vs. New Tourism**

The new form and growth of what has been termed “new tourism”, is still a rather new topic and thus makes it is a bit challenging and hard to describe and categorize, also the roots, and terms within what Mowforth & Munt calls “new tourism”<sup>53</sup>, is a bit disputed and debated, however this only adds to the excitement of studying the field.

Although, there is some disagreement on the rise of the new forms of tourism, it seem to be accepted that it is the easily and mentioned visible negative

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<sup>52</sup> Mowforth & Munt, 2011, p 94

<sup>53</sup> Mowforth & Munt, 2011, p 94-100

effects of mass tourism that led to the rise in alternative forms of tourism. As Thefler & Sharpley (2008) explains,

*“As concerns grew over the negative consequences of the rapid and uncontrolled growth of mass international tourism, epitomized perhaps, by the development of the Spanish “costas” from the 1960s onward, attention was increasingly focused on alternative approaches to tourism development. Variouslly labeled as “green”, “responsible”, “appropriate”, “low impact”, “soft” or “ecotourism”, these styles of tourism collectively represent, literally, an alternative to mass tourism development, designed to minimize tourism’s negative impact, while maximizing benefits to destination”.*<sup>54</sup>

This illustrates the development of travel and tourism, and most destinations in the developing world is part of this increase in offers or wave of alternative, “green”, “eco” and so on. Laos is as a destination is most definitely part of this development.

Anyway, others, such as Mowforth & Munt (2011) have perhaps a bit more cynical and critical view of this development. As they explain, it is perhaps also a natural development for the stakeholders, hotels, tour companies, and governments as well, that they start to market and promote tourism differently than in the past,

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<sup>54</sup> Thefler & Sharpley, 2008: Tourism and Development in the Developing World, p 38

simply to legitimize their own business, and following a trend in the market to sustain itself. As they argue:

*“much of what are now seen as new forms of tourism, have arisen because “the mainstream tourism industry” has in fact merely tried to invent a new legitimization for itself – the “sustainable” and “rational” use of the environment, including the preservation of nature as an amenity for the already advantaged.”*<sup>55</sup>

Whatever reason for the growth and concerns is, the study of it should always hold relevance. Especially for Laos and other emerging destinations. In the list of tables, there is a table that explains the terminology and puts mass and new tourism apart.

What also should be a part of the discussion of the rise of new tourism is the relationship between mass tourism, and new tourism. To what degree do they depend on each other? And where would new tourism be without mass tourism? Are these new forms of tourism really more sustainable than traditional mass tourism? Important and relevant studies as it is, it will breach the limits of this paper.

Pro Poor or CBT tourism is set up in developing countries as a means to improve the local economy for local people. It enhances the linkages between tourism businesses and impoverished and poor people so that poverty is reduced and poor people are able to participate more effectively in tourism development.

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<sup>55</sup> Mowforth & Munt, 2011, p 95-96

The aims of pro-poor ranges from increasing local employment, wages but also to involving local people in the decision making process.<sup>56</sup> Pro poor tourism had its emergence from a UK Department for International Development in 1999. It is a way of tourism that provides the host community with a net income of the revenue<sup>57</sup>. It also deals with community governance and so on I will discuss pro poor tourism deeper later, when talking about the projects in Luang Namtha and other areas in Laos.

Mass Tourism	New Tourism
Mass	Individual
Packaged	Unpackaged/Flexible
SSS (Sun, Sand, Sex)	TTT (Travelling, Trekking, Trucking)
Unreal	Real
Irresponsible	Responsible

Source: Adapted from Mowforth & Munt, p 26

<sup>56</sup> Ecotour: <http://www.ecotourdirectory.com/pro-poor-tourism.htm>

<sup>57</sup> Khouangvichit, 2010, 150

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This thesis bases itself on a primarily *qualitative approach*. However, qualitative data is nonetheless inevitable and make up an important part of the paper. I will combine use of secondary data and statistic with my own findings through interviews and observation. What is mentioned earlier is that this thesis bases itself on a social scientific, holistic approach to the study of tourism. This poses several obstacles, both academically, and more practically. First and foremost is how to grasp and study sustainable development and, social and political issues? How to measure sustainability? How to measure development? Can it really be measured? In the next section I will provide a methodological approach that scholars, researchers and stakeholders in the tourism industry have provided to what degree is possible, to measure sustainability. What makes it so hard are the many variables and indicators, and also the definitions for the term itself can also possess challenges in study and measure it. The measuring of sustainability will be discussed shortly. Therefore, I will limit this paper to include, as mentioned environmental factors, and some social and political factors. This will be explained in the next section.

The thesis will also be supplemented with quantitative data and findings, mainly data from known institutions and databases, such as UN, World Bank, ASEAN, LNTA and so on. It is very useful, given a critical eye, to collect data from among

these mentioned organizations as they possess and produce a huge amount of data. If interpreted correctly and critically, these are very useful in research and dissertations.

I have performed several field trips to several regions and areas in Northern Laos, these trips have been performed mainly out of Vientiane and Vang Vieng, and covered areas north towards Luang Prabang, Phonsavan in Xieng Khouang and Xiasombon. These trips occurred February-July 2014. These trips have been good for observation and I also interviewed people on these trips.

### **In depth, face to face interviews**

Informal and “*semi-structured interviews*” have been performed to several people, key informants, especially in Vang Vieng and Vientiane, and Phonsavan, the regional capital of Xieng Khouang. A semi-structured interview is defined by Coles, Duval & Shaw (2013) described as “which you the interviewer produce a clear list of topics/questions but are flexible as to when and how these are discussed in the interview”.<sup>58</sup>

Interviews have been performed in a natural setting, in the hotel area, lobby or garden etc. *Face to Face interviews*, as Coles, Duval & Shaw (2013) describes: “involves the researcher making direct contact with the respondent/subject. They

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<sup>58</sup> Coles, Duval & Shaw, Writing Dissertations and theses in Tourism Studies and related Disciplines: 2013:63

may be carried out in a number of environment; for example the street within a tourism resort or at an attraction, at people's home or holiday accommodation".<sup>59</sup>

I made contact with roughly two groups of respondents, *visitors* and *local* or a person who had residential status in Laos, *expatriates*, guesthouse owners and workers and so on. One particular place I made interviews with visitor is the *Nam Song Garden Guesthouse* in Vang Vieng, Laos. As one of my key informants, the owner, Norwegian resident, Arne Tonnessen, welcomed me to interview him. This gave a great advantage at and chance of meeting up front with many visitors in a natural setting. Mainly I was interested in travel habits and the use of the tourism activities that involves either community based or eco tourism. Also, I was interested in if they visited other countries in Southeast Asia during their same trip to Laos and their length of stay and so on. Mr. Tonnessen gave me useful information about the evolvement of Vang Vieng, as he lived there for the last 12 years. He have witnessed the rise and decline of the tubing, and an evolve from a major party scene to a more sedate and a city that tries to shift its focus towards a more green and eco tourism.

The other group of respondents, the owners of an establishment, a guesthouse, restaurant or tour company, involves in how they look at sustainability and community based tourism. Also I was interested in how they run the place in terms of garbage handling and pollution as is natural for almost any tourism based

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<sup>59</sup> Coles, Duval & Shaw, 2013,p 63-64

business. And also an important thing is the use of local or foreign goods or labor for their production, as this is relevant to the mentioned leak effect. The findings of these in depth interviews will be addressed throughout the paper where it is natural.

### How to measure sustainability?

This is a question many scholars and researchers have debated and to some extend still do. While there seems to be more of an agreement on how to define it than to measure it, makes it a challenge to study.

**Table 1**

Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria for Destinations
<i>SECTION A: Demonstrate sustainable destination management</i>
<i>SECTION B: Maximize economic benefits to the host community and minimize negative impacts</i>
<i>SECTION C: Maximize benefits to communities, visitors, and culture; minimize negative impacts</i>
<i>SECTION D: Maximize benefits to the environment and minimize negative impacts</i>

Source: Adapted from Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria for Destinations

This is a summary of the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria for Destinations (GSTC-d)<sup>60</sup>. A complete list of the indicators and so on is kept in the appendix. What makes the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria useful is the interdisciplinary nature of it. As we can see from the table, it measures sustainability from more than one

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<sup>60</sup> GTS: <http://www.gstcouncil.org/sustainable-tourism-gstc-criteria/criteria-for-destinations.html>

indicator, not only environmental impacts. Sustainability, is as this argues, more than just the strive for environmentally sustainability. GSTC is one of the latest efforts to come to a common understanding of sustainable tourism and destinations, and are the *minimum* undertakings that any tourism management organization or authority that wishes to be sustainable should be able to aspire or to reach<sup>61</sup>. As we can read from their introductory text at their website:

*“To satisfy the definition of sustainable tourism, destinations must take an interdisciplinary, holistic and integrative approach which includes four main objectives: to (i) demonstrate sustainable destination management; (ii) maximize social and economic benefits for the host community and minimize negative impacts; (iii) maximize benefits to communities, visitors and cultural heritage and minimize impacts; and (iv) maximize benefits to the environment and minimize negative impacts. The criteria are designed to be used by all types and scales of destinations”.*<sup>62</sup>

This means it is useful to measure the sustainability of destinations, Like Laos, more specifically in this context, Northern parts of Laos. I will thru discussion and debating, evaluate the indicators relevant to this thesis, the mentioned focusing on environmental and mostly section A, what concerns destination management, and planning. Some, are however not so relevant for Laos. As we can read, from the

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<sup>61</sup> GTS

<sup>62</sup> GTS

Global Sustainable Tourism Councils website, it is possible to leave out variables as long it is justified:

*“It is recommended that all criteria be applied to the greatest extent practical, unless for a specific situation the criterion is not applicable and justification is provided. There may be circumstances in which a criterion is not applicable to a specific tourism destination or destination management organization, given the local regulatory, environmental, social, economic or cultural conditions. In the case of smaller destinations and communities, it is recognized that limited resources may prevent comprehensive application of all criteria”.*<sup>63</sup>

It is fairly broad and is supposed to be covered and used by all types of destinations, in different parts of the world. But, however, there are some local differences and different degree of development that differs from place to place.

Beginning in 2007, a coalition of 27 organizations – the Partnership for Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria – came together to develop the criteria. They have out to close to 80,000 tourism stakeholders, analyzed more than 4,500 criteria from more than 60 existing certification and other voluntary sets of criteria, and received comments from over 1500 individuals. The first version of the criteria was released in October 2008.<sup>64</sup> |

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<sup>63</sup> GTS

<sup>64</sup> GTS

In the following pages I will list the major findings of the criteria relating to Laos, at a destination level. In other words, I will use this table to gain a broad assessment of the sustainability of Laos. As some variables may not be relevant, these will be explained and justified. Most variables are however suitable for all destinations of any kind. The data have been collected through research online where it is often readily available, and some is harder to come by. This will be explained also. The point of this assessment is not to conclude if the tourism in northern Laos is sustainable or not per se, but to gain as broad picture of the overall sustainability as such and as a whole through a holistic approach.



### GSTC-D Survey

The findings here are based on research and data collected through government documents, observation, but most are available online, some in published reports. While others are simply impossible to measure and find out. And some indicators are as mentioned vague and general in its language. However, using and following these criteria will provide a broad and good understanding of the sustainability of the tourism in Laos, within a holistic approach of sustainability. In this part, I will list the major findings, but also along the next chapters will discuss important marks on the sustainability of the tourism in Laos.

Some of the variables are easy to measure and figure out, as data is readily available either online or in other forms. Such as Section A contains mostly indicators to measure the destinations “planning” and “monitoring” and so on, and to raise the quality and awareness of sustainable tourism management. It seems the purpose with section A is to secure a certain awareness and quality of the organizational and managerial issues for tourism, concerning governments and authorities. For instance, section A3, Monitoring *“The destination has a system to monitor, publicly report, and respond to environmental, economic, social, cultural, tourism, and human rights issues. The monitoring system is reviewed and evaluated periodically”*

It’s a way to acknowledge and respond to the challenges concerning tourism. As mentioned, some indicators may not be so relevant for Laos, or simply futile to measure, these will be mentioned here. Sections will be dealt chronologically Also some will be elaborated more throughout the paper when it is relevant. As we can read from their website: “In the case of smaller destinations and communities, it is recognized that limited resources may prevent comprehensive application of all criteria”.<sup>65</sup>

It is nonetheless not a way to make it a question of yes or no to of the tough question if tourism in Northern Laos is sustainable or not. This table provides a tool

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<sup>65</sup> GTS

for evaluate and discuss different aspect of and general usage of sustainable practices.

### ***SECTION A: Demonstrate sustainable destination management***

Section A is mostly about sustainable management at an organizational and governmental level. A1 is about that each destination should have a sustainable destination *strategy* and mechanisms for *reporting*. If we study and search for information about strategic planning and government documents about different tourist destinations throughout Laos, we will see that it does not lack of “strategy plans” and reports on different projects and surveys concerning tourism and eco tourism in particular. However, it is mostly very broadly defined goals and set of norms used in those documents and planning. It is easily to find reports and statistics about facts and figures measuring certain trends and variables.

What also should be noted considering the monitoring and collection and gathering of data for reporting, is that even if it seems to be a lot of data available, for instance arrivals and other economical factors and so on, it is a lot of data that is non-existence. For instance, those indicators concerning negative trends and statistics can perhaps be under reported or not reported at all. This is hard to proof. However,

section A12 *“Safety and security The destination has a system to monitor, prevent, publicly report, and respond to crime, safety, and health hazard”*.<sup>66</sup>

Often it is hard for people, tourist as well, in distress of some sort to get aid from police force. This is widely warned about, both by government warning, travel books and so on. Tourists are warned that any major injuries or illness, transportation to Thailand, or even Vietnam should be considered, as the quality of healthcare and hospitals are better there.<sup>67</sup> Laos simply lack a proper health care system. Certain areas in Laos are worse off, as we will see later. In Vang Vieng, a city many people associate with backpacking and a “lively” party scene will be devoted an own section.

Section A is perhaps mostly about securing good governance and a level of transparency, and to set measures to acknowledge the need for a quality control of a destination. Some should be of concern however Laos is improving quite well. The infamous tubing site at the Nam Song River in Vang Vieng, is a good example of bad governance and lack of safety and security awareness. A long the river where tourist stopped for drinks and sometimes others stronger substances that was readily available, made this into quite a hazardous adventure. The tubing in Vang Vieng have claimed countless lives, due to lack of safety awareness, both by tourists

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<sup>66</sup> GTS

<sup>67</sup> See travel warnings issued by for instance the American State department:  
<http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/country/laos.html>

themselves, but also local and central government. It seems that money and income was of greater interests than tourist safety.

What should be noted, is that even if one acknowledge a sustainable issue, it is not the same as follow through with it. A7 is can be relevant, about Planning Regulations “The destination has planning guidelines, regulations and/or policies that require environmental, economic, and social impact assessment and integrate sustainable land use, design, construction, and demolition. The guidelines, regulations and/or policies are designed to protect natural and cultural resources, were created with local inputs from the public and a thorough review process, are publicly communicated, and are enforced”<sup>68</sup>

***SECTION B: Maximize economic benefits to the host community and minimize negative impacts***

Section B is about securing economic benefits for the host community. This is very relevant for this thesis. As what I stated and questions with the old fashion mass tourism industry is that most of the benefits in money goes to to others than the local community. This takes the eco and community projects in Laos to the core, maximize economic benefits.

These indicators evaluate ways to improve economic benefit through local empowerment, do the local villages have a saying in the tourism planning? In Laos

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<sup>68</sup> GTS

there are several NGO and foundations that work with village empowerment and education programs for local communities. Much of the resources and efforts in tourism planning can be traced or linked to Section B. It is relevant for the local communities to be a part of the business, not merely a stop on the tour. What previous research have shown, is that even Laos has several programs for communities to participate, and thus gain income and benefits from tourism. This is the key point of community based tourism, and Laos has several companies and programs that cater to this.<sup>69</sup> For instance, Tiger Trail and Green Discovery, two important companies that run trekking and adventure tours that provides direct income to communities throughout Laos.

***SECTION C: Maximize benefits to communities, visitors, and culture;  
minimize negative impacts***

As said it is perhaps a general and a bit vague language and hard to interpret the indicators from each other. Section C1 again is about measuring or controlling to evaluate, the natural conservation sites. Laos is blessed with a rich culture and a bundle of natural and man-made cultural sites. Several places in Northern Laos contain several important sites. Plain of Jars, where UNESCO has done significantly work to rehabilitate and preserve the stone jars, and temples around Luang Prabang.

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<sup>69</sup> See for instance: Tiger Trail: <http://www.laos-adventures.com/> & Green Discoveries: <http://www.greendiscoverylaos.com/>

Through NGO and governmental cooperation sees that many important sites are kept sustainable<sup>70</sup> However, it is easy to see the worn out and crumbling colonial architecture in Vientiane and other places, that could and should be invested and conserve.

I would claim that C3 is an area of concern, *“The destination has published and provided guidelines for proper visitor behavior at sensitive sites. Such guidelines are designed to minimize adverse impacts on sensitive sites and strengthen positive visitor behaviors”*.

It is hard to define a *sensitive* site, but many historical and temples have warning with appropriate clothing. But, it has some other implications as well. That concerns the behavior around the “party places”, such as Vang Vieng. In many ways, as we shall see it can be compared to as a beach party in Thailand, only in the jungle with a river as the sea. Much of the same behavior and partying are going on there as many infamous places in Thailand, such as Ko Samui, Ko Pha Ngan, and it is a question of sustainability. This will be addressed later in the section of Vang Vieng. Western tourist, on holiday in a country and culture that differs quite a lot from their culture and behavior is a strange sight to observe. Every day, every week, several groups of rather young tourist, in swimsuits and bikinis, often drunk and loud, is now a major part of the city life in Vang Vieng. Several other observers have noted this,

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<sup>70</sup> UNESCO Laos: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/la>

and that the local culture and custom is sanitized and Vang Vieng does not longer reflect Laos or Lao culture<sup>71</sup>. In other words, the tourist and visitors have claimed the city for themselves. Underlying factors can be lack of destination management, as most locals do not interfere directly nor does much to stop unruly behavior.

*What seems to be approached in Laos is section B9 Supporting local entrepreneurs and fair trade: “The destination has a system that supports local and small- and medium-sized enterprises, and promotes and develops local sustainable products and fair trade principles that are based on the area’s nature and culture. These may include food and beverages, crafts, performance arts, agricultural products”. In Vientiane and in the provinces it is possible to purchase locally produced goods. Laos makes good coffee, and tea. Famous for its silk too, and several outlets and locally brands are being sold.*

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***SECTION D: Maximize benefits to the environment and minimize negative impacts***

This section is vital and important, as it acknowledge a problem with tourism and pollution and environmental hazards. However, Laos do lag behind in certain areas of proper garbage handling and waste management, and also illegal logging and cutting down of woods is a major obstacle for a sustainable development of

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<sup>71</sup> CNN: <http://travel.cnn.com/explorations/life/24-signs-partys-over-vang-vieng-965782>

Laos.<sup>72</sup> Some of the programs and tours in Northern Laos, are also created more or less as a environmental friendly and low impact tours, safari and such. *D3 for instance, “The destination has a system to ensure compliance with local, national, and international laws and standards for the harvest or capture, display, and sale of wildlife (including plants and animals)”* However, even with regulation and a marker that stimulates conservation, we still read and measure illegal hunting and poaching in Laos, as will be talked about later when relevant. Also, many places, especially in Vang Vieng, and elsewhere a bit rural areas, we can find wildlife on display, both at markets, and at tourist shops for marketing or promotions. Sometimes they keep a monkey or two in cages, somewhat tenuous when perhaps running an eco shop. What should be added, Laos has been in the forefront of implementing a innovative system of payment for the safari tours. The participants pay per spotted animal, the more animals and wildlife they see, the visitors puts all the animals on a “spotted list”, and the more animals spotted, the more they pay. This gives incentives to the locals to preserve wildlife and fauna, and shows that it can have a sustainable future of tourism, and not only hunting. The more animals that are left in the nature, the more will the community earn, at least that is the idea.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Illegal Logging Portal: <http://www.illegal-logging.info/regions/laos>

<sup>73</sup> Nam Nerm Safari: <http://namet.org/namnern.html>

## CHAPTER IV

Now that the theoretical and methodological framework and foundations for this thesis laid, it is due time to proceed to the part of discussing Laos more particular. This little nation, is Southeast Asia's only landlocked country, and one of the poorest and smallest country too. It lies in the middle of mainland Southeast Asia, and borders Myanmar (235 km), Cambodia (541 km) China (423 km), Thailand (1,754 km), Vietnam (2,130 km)<sup>74</sup>. With its modest population of about 6.8 million<sup>75</sup> and with its still sleepy capital Vientiane, with about 780 000 people<sup>76</sup>, it offers a quite some contrasts and possible a more sedated holiday here than the other mega cities such as Bangkok and Ho Chi Min City. Still today one can walk around in the center of downtown Vientiane, overlooking the Mekong River and a cross, Nong Khai in Thailand, it perhaps feels like more like one of the world largest village, yet a capital city. The country is about the size of Great Britain, and one main feature of the country is the Mekong River, the twelfth longest in the world, and more of this great river runs through Laos than any other country.<sup>77</sup>

What is noted by several scholars of Lao and Southeast Asian studies, they seem to claim in their work and books, that the majority of research and interest lies

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<sup>74</sup> CIA Factbook, Laos, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/la.html>

<sup>75</sup> World Bank: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL/countries/LA?display=graph>

<sup>76</sup> World Bank

<sup>77</sup> Dakin, 2003, p 9

mostly to its neighboring countries<sup>78</sup>. It sure does not reflect the historical significance this little mountainous country had during the Cold War, especially during the Vietnam War.

To understand contemporary Lao issues, it is useful to give an account of the historical path, to gain a better understanding of the present time. Laos is as we shall see, very much a product of external forces, as internal. How to describe Laos as a state today, challenges the leading theories explaining state and nationhood. Not really a communist, nor a true capitalist and democratic state neither.

The famous and acknowledged scholar on Southeast Asian affairs, Alfred McCoy, who bravely travelled around Laos and Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War, collecting data and evidence for his doctoral dissertation, describes:

*“Laos is one of those historical oddities like Monaco, Andorra, and Lichtenstein, which were somehow left behind when petty principalities were consolidated into great nations. Although both nineteenth century empire builders and cold war summit negotiators have subscribed to the fiction of Laotian nationhood out of diplomatic convenience, this impoverished little kingdom appears to lack all of the economic and political criteria for nationhood”.*<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> See for instance: Dakin, 2003, p 7

<sup>79</sup> McCoy, Alfred, 1972, Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia, p 202-203

Alfred McCoy went to Laos as he was working on his dissertation on the global drug trade. He spotted a huge increase and number of drug abusers, mostly in the armed forces fighting the war in Vietnam. It was the drug and opium trade that led him to Laos in the midst of the war.

Although Laos is not a kingdom anymore, and this quote was printed in 1972, much is different in Laos today, but still it holds its ground. Laos is most definitely a state, but perhaps not a nation? Or more correct, it is perhaps not a *Nation-state*? What he tries to tell us is that Laos lacks certain aspects of most nations around the world. Some still remains to this day. Since the time of the “revolution”, or the creation of Lao PDR in 1975, the regime has struggled to carve a nation out of the state. But still, Laos is a country that remains an ethnically and geographically divided nation. This process of have been covered by several scholars and authors. One important contribution to this concern was Brett Dakin, who wrote his account of his life in Laos while working for the LNTA in Vientiane. He lived in Laos from 1998 to 2000. He noticed the struggle the government, or perhaps more, the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, have to mold a nation between Thailand and Vietnam, and the lack of connectivity and so on. In fact, most of the ethnic Lao people live in Thailand. And Thailand is a country that has a firm position in Laos, both through popular culture and business.<sup>80</sup> This is issues that will be addressed more in detail

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<sup>80</sup> Dakin, 2003: 217-229

later. Laos is a bit hard to describe and understand as a nation. It is highly fragmented and consists of numerous ethnic groups, still contested how many, but the latest revision and the number the LNTA use is 49 recognized groups, living in rural areas, mostly out of reach and road access, thus, making it hard for any central government to create a process of nation building<sup>81</sup>. The point is that being “Lao” or to say you are from Laos, can mean so many things, it perhaps a bit “political” term.

What McCoy’s analogy also tells us is that is that Laos has been through many ordeals that the country was not necessarily so much part of themselves, such as colonialism and later on the cold war where left and right wing ideologies has shaped Laos tremendously. But still Laos somehow exists as a sovereign state. The next section will be devoted to increase the understanding of contemporary Laos, and perhaps also try to understand more why tourism has come to play such a large role for the country, for the government and society at large as well. Laos seems to be caught up in globalization even before tourism. Perhaps tourism is the latest leap Laos took into the globalized world? Tourism is also as Mowforth & Munt claim, interchangeably connected to globalization, that they define as a “process or set of processes that which embrace most of the globe or which operate worldwide ... Politics and other social activities are becoming stretched across the globe”.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> LNTA: [http://www.tourismlaos.org/show.php?Cont\\_ID=358](http://www.tourismlaos.org/show.php?Cont_ID=358)

<sup>82</sup> Mowforth & Munt, 2011, p 12

In other words, the peripheral Laos is drawn into the world market, and tourism plays a major role for this. I will not cover the history of Laos in depth, but emphasize what is important to the understanding of current Laos and tourism in particular for the further discussion. The following sections will account for the major crossroads for Laos, and I chose the headline, “the land in the middle”, because that’s what Laos is, both geographically and more metaphorically.

### **Pre-colonial Laos, Lan Xang, The land of a million elephants**

Laos as we understand it today perhaps can be traced back to the history of the kingdom of Lan Xang which existed from the 14th to the 18th century when it split into three separate kingdoms. But the area has been inhabited and enjoyed a rich culture, with archeological findings stretching 63.000 years ago, in the caves around Houa Phan.<sup>83</sup>

Settlements around the Plain of Jars tell us of a rich trading culture, however all the secrets concerning the Plain of Jars is yet to be revealed. But what is certain, it is a very important site for tourism in Laos today. The Plain of Jars in north-eastern Laos is home to over 2000 stone jars varying in size from 100 kg to over 30 metric tonnes<sup>84</sup>.

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<sup>83</sup> Cooper, 2014, Laos: A Work in Progress, p 26

<sup>84</sup> Van Den Bergh, J: Geological Mysteries of the Plain of Jars begin to Unravel, 2009, p 145-150

The jars were probably made between 1500 and 2500 years ago; however, by who is not really known, as the indigenous people have only lived in the area for 1000 years. Anyhow, local legends tell tales of that these jars were used to store Lao-Lao or rice whisky, more sober researchers indicate that these jars were part of local funerary rituals, and there are currently 60 known jar sites, where anywhere between one and 350 individual jars are recorded.<sup>85</sup>

As mentioned, Laos as we understand it stems from the old kingdom of LanXang, or the “kingdom of million elephants under the parasol”.<sup>86</sup> For three and a half centuries, Lan Xang was one of the largest kingdoms in Southeast Asia. The kingdom is considered as the “forerunner” of Laos and the basis for the national historic and cultural identity.<sup>87</sup>

However, internal and external forces, Thai and Burmese armies, made this ancient kingdom finally break apart, only to later be brought together under French rule, after Vientiane and several other regions were sacked by Siam.<sup>88</sup>

## French Laos, Indochine Française

Laos became a part of the French Empire in 1893, with King Sisavong Vang of Luang Prabang and became a puppet ruler of a unified Laos with Vientiane again

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<sup>85</sup> Van Den Berg, 2009, p p 145-150

<sup>86</sup> Stuart Fox, M, 1998, Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang: Rise and decline, p 43-44

<sup>87</sup> Stuart Fox, 1998, p 43-44

<sup>88</sup> Cooper, 2014, p 29

became the capital, with the other two kingdoms of Luang Prabang and Champasak, shaping the form what is now known as Laos. Laos would constitute one of the five territories of French Indochina, Annam, Tonkin and Cambodia.<sup>89</sup>

However, Laos was never really as prized and important colony as Vietnam would be. Apart for some minor construction of some mediocre roads, France never really cared for any major investments in Laos. It would remain as a backwater to the more important colonies in Vietnam. Laos produced some quantities of tin, rubber and coffee, but never accounted for more than 1% of the total of French Indochina's exports.<sup>90</sup> Also the geographic isolation led to Laos being less influenced from France compared to other French colonies and in a 1937 estimate, only 574 French civilians along with a smaller number of government workers lived in Laos, a figure significantly smaller than in Vietnam and Cambodia<sup>91</sup>.

However, with this in mind it is a bit peculiar that France seem to have a greater interest in Laos today than back during colonial times, at least for many French people. But, if France did not invest much for Laos, they sure did build many houses and buildings catering for their administration and its residence. It is easy to spot this colonial legacy today. The colonial heritage and architecture is easily visible around the country, perhaps best spotted in Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

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<sup>89</sup> Cooper, 2014, p 30

<sup>90</sup> Martin Stuart-Fox (1995). *The French in Laos, 1887–1945*. *Modern Asian Studies*, 29, pp 111-139

<sup>91</sup> Carine Hahn, *Le Laos*, Karthala, 1999, pages 72-76

The literature is full of books and articles dealing with colonial heritage and tourism<sup>92</sup>. It seems to have a great appeal for many, and Luang Prabang in particular and Vientiane also, is famous for this, as both UNESCO and most travel books describe them as “unique”, and “outstanding “fusion of traditional architecture, and Lao urban structures with nineteenth- and twentieth-century European colonial architecture”<sup>93</sup>.

As mentioned, Laos was never really an important territory for Laos, and only about 600 people lived there, yet it spawned an imagination and reverence of this region and country that still last to this day. Last year, in 2013, more than 52 thousand French people visited Laos.<sup>94</sup>

And those 52 thousand sleep mostly in hotels, eat in restaurants and involve themselves in activities in a much larger scale and reach.

This does put some interesting implications and questions. What are the relationships between colonialism and modern market economy and cultural links? Does it differ on a cultural level? Important questions as it is, I will not elaborate so much more, but this will be followed up in later pages. Anyhow, French would

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<sup>92</sup> See for instance Mowforth & Munt, p 277, King & Parnwell, 2009, p 8-

<sup>93</sup> Mowforth & Munt, 2009, p 277

<sup>94</sup> TTRWEEKLY: <http://www.ttrweekly.com/site/2014/02/lao-pdr-tourism-up-13/>

remain in Laos until after World War II, until 1954 France would leave Indochina in chaos, and the new superpower after the war, USA, would enter the region.

Also, it is important to understand that Laos was never really a unified country, even before the French colonialist arrived, and more or less saved the territory from rivaling neighbors. Perhaps this still lingers in the back of the head of the current regime? Can the Party and the government actually give some credit to France for a Lao territory today? Interesting question but will not be discussed any further.

### **Post-colonial chaos and secret war**

Just as the smoke of Dien Bien Phu disappeared, so did the aspirations of a peaceful and liberated Laos. The following decades after France left in 1954-55 would be marked by internal chaos and external pressure, both from regional forces, in Vietnam, and China. But Laos would be tangled up in a world chess game inline of the domino doctrine Laos was considered a key area in the global fight against communism. Laos would be used as a pawn between east and west ideologies. As Mcoys paper shows:

*“In the minds of geopolitical strategists in the CIA's Special Operations division, potential Infiltration routes stretched from the Shan hills of northeastern Burma, through the rugged Laotian mountains, and southward into the Central Highlands of South Vietnam. According to one retired CIA operative, Lt. Col. Lucien*

*Conein, Agency personnel were sent to Laos in 1959 to supervise eight Green Beret teams then training Meo<sup>95</sup> guerrillas on the Plain of Jars”<sup>96</sup>.*

Laos has been more wars than many other countries. Still today several areas still is contaminated with a deadly legacy of UXO, unexploded ordnance, or “bombies” as the local term for it is. For nearly a decade, the USA dropped large amounts of bombs and toxic defoliants in several areas of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in their war against communist forces on the Indochinese peninsula. Xieng Khouang province in Northern Laos became the stage of one the most massive air bombardments in history, more bombs were dropped on Laos than Germany and Japan combined during World War II.<sup>97</sup> Can or should tourism contribute any positively to this legacy?

This mountainous area hosted a “secret” side war to the Vietnam War, with little attention from foreign observers. It would in fact be the largest para-military operation in history ever conducted by the United States.<sup>98</sup> Throughout Laos, America through CIA, built secret airbases and runways, so-called “lima sites” or landing sites, to be able to wage war against communist forces in this ruggedly mountainous country. Up until today, this still remains visible several places

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<sup>95</sup> Meo: is the nickname for Hmong-people, often today seen as derogatory. But at the time, it was more common to use “meo” rather than “Hmong”.

<sup>96</sup> McCoy, 1971, p 214

<sup>97</sup> UXO Lao: <http://uxolao.org/index.php/en/the-uxo-problem>

<sup>98</sup> Parker, 1997, foreword,, also read McCoy, 1972, p 203 and 214

throughout the landscape of Northern Laos. Many parts, vital areas for tourism, are still plagued by UXOs. Already are many areas, among Plain of Jars, and the Pathet Lao Caves in Vieng Xiay in the North-east corner near Vietnam, designated areas for tourism.

The North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao emerged victorious in 1975, as part of the general communist victory Southeast Asia that year, and made Laos into a People's Democratic Republic, based on Marxist principle, and a centrally planned economy. The monarchy was abolished and the power would be made up nine members of the Politburo, the Central Committee, and a Secretariat.<sup>99</sup>

The new regime, and the head of state Kaysone Phomvihane, would after the war isolate Laos to the outside world. The socialization and collectivization of Laos would not last, as important support from the Soviet Union began to shrink throughout the 1980s.<sup>100</sup>

Laos has since its creation been plagued by financial deficit, and after a decade with socialist rule, the country had developed very little. How to explain this rather rapid development away from socialism to a more open market based society is hard to give a clear answer too. Perhaps it reflects Vietnam's influence on Laos, as reforms were first spawned there, and then adopted in Laos. Also, several scholars have noted this rapid change and removal of socialist policy. Some, like Dakin uses

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<sup>99</sup> Dakin, 2003, p 11

<sup>100</sup> Cooper, 2014, p 12-13

the words as “the ultimate pragmatic” to describe Kayson Phomvihane, in the description of him and the reasons for the political change<sup>101</sup>. Perhaps he and his comrades actually had the foresight and common sense to understand that the path chosen a decade earlier was not the best for Laos?

### Post-Communist Laos..?

Haunted by fiscal problems, lack of foreign aid, and also a huge human exodus, among many scholars and skilled people left Laos in the years following the “revolution” led Laos to revise its policies and would introduce New Economic Mechanism in 1986-87.<sup>102</sup>

For whatever the reason for reforms, and whatever influence Vietnam have on Laos, the reforms and opening up of Laos took place at almost the same time as in Vietnam. It is worth mentioning that the relationship between Laos and Vietnam have been studied by several scholars and have suggested that Vietnamese influence is big.

Nevertheless, for the government, these new economic mechanism meant shaping Lao into an open society and soften up on socialist rule. It should be added it was futile for a country as diverse and small as Laos to develop through socialism, and development as in China and Russia, where huge factories and a large industry

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<sup>101</sup> Dakin, 2003, p 246

<sup>102</sup> See for instance, Cooper 2014, 10-15

drives development. For little Laos lacked all these resources. Still the government faced the same issues as McCoy witnessed a decade earlier:

*“Unable to finance itself through corporate, mineral, or personal taxes, the government has filled its coffers and lined its pockets by legalizing or tolerating what its neighbors have chosen to outlaw, much like needy principalities the world over, Monaco gambles, Macao winks at the gold traffic, and the Laotian government tolerates the smuggling of gold, guns, and opium”.*<sup>103</sup>

Still confronted with an empty state reserve, and few readily available resources, tourism is perhaps an easy and natural answer to economic growth and development. Long gone are the days where slinging drugs was deemed possible, and a lucrative side business for many a high ranking official or diplomat for Laos. Laos has traditionally been an opium producing country, and it has been a temping source of income for many. As the reality changes and Lao have evolved towards an open and legit society, tourism has come to play a great role for the country. It provides a steady flow of foreign currency. Tourism can offer an alternative to other sources of income, less legit and destructive such as opium. Perhaps tourism can also contribute as an alternative to drug cultivation for some villages and people who otherwise might do so? This interesting questions, and should be more of a concern.

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<sup>103</sup> McCoy, 1972, p 203

Anyhow, since the 1980's and 1990's, Laos became more open towards the region and the world at large. It re-established relations with the US in 1992. Throughout the 90's, Laos signed, ratified trade treaties and joined regional and international organizations. Laos joined ASEAN in 1997.<sup>104</sup>

In other words, since the end of the cold war, and the fall of the Soviet Union, Laos seemed to embrace the world, and join the world market, but still remained a socialist state. It still is among the few one-party states left, among China, Vietnam, Cuba and some other states around. However, it is somewhat hard to compare theoretical paradigm and political theories to real life. But it is worth noticing that North-Korea and Laos are the only two “People's Democratic Republic”. This adds to the difficulties of categorizing Laos within known paradigms and theoretical frameworks. So perhaps Laos can be described as a “post-socialist-not-quite-capitalist” or a country in transition is maybe easier.

Laos has attracted some attention from investments within hydropower and dam projects around the country. It has aspiration to be the “battery of Southeast Asia”.<sup>105</sup>

This has spawned much debate and controversy on the expansion of dams along many of Laos's pristine and important rivers. It seems that the need for

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<sup>104</sup> Cooper, 2014, p 34-35

<sup>105</sup> BBC:<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/11962210>

development outreaches the local harm and change of terrain and so on. Even with the occasional economical set-backs from the financial crisis in Southeast Asia in 1997, thanks to considerable international assistance, investments and foreign aid poverty is being addressed by both the government and a wide arrange of NGO's throughout Laos.<sup>106</sup>

As mentioned, Laos is already a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the ASEAN Economic Community, is increasing its integration into the regional and global economy. On February 2, 2013, Laos officially became a member of the World Trade Organization, “the culmination of a 15-year process of reforms and negotiations”. In 2011, The World Bank raised Laos's income categorization from a “low income economy” to a “lower-middle income economy”.<sup>107</sup>

Tourism has an important role of Laos today, and is a key sector for the government, which has set a goal to be off the list of Least Developed Countries, and High Indebted Country, by 2020.<sup>108</sup> About 20 percent lives below the poverty line, and the per capita income is 1.674 US Dollar. It ranks almost same as Cambodia,

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<sup>106</sup> Schipani & Harrison, 2009: Chapter 11 in Tourism in Southeast Asia; p 168

<sup>107</sup> World Bank: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lao/overview>

<sup>108</sup> Lao PDR Tourism Strategy: <http://www.tourismlaos.org/files/files/Lao%20PDR%20Tourism%20Strategy%202006-2020%20in%20English.pdf>

but below Burma on the Human Development Index<sup>109</sup> Tourism will be a major contributor to this effort, and thus make it even more relevant to study.

This section was meant to provide greater understanding of Laos, in the regional, global and historical setting. Much of the history of Laos, evolve around globalization and external forces, and tourism is today a major part of that, and perhaps will only increase in the years to come.



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<sup>109</sup> UNDP Laos: [http://www.la.undp.org/content/lao\\_pdr/en/home.html](http://www.la.undp.org/content/lao_pdr/en/home.html)

## CHAPTER V

### TOURISM IN LAOS

Now we have come to the part where it is time to discuss and assess the tourism in Laos more in depth. As we have seen, Laos has transformed greatly in the last decades. Since the late 1980's, Laos has started a slow transformation towards a market based economy and an open and modern society.

Tourism plays a major part for the government to achieve goals within development and poverty alleviation. This we can see through the many reports and plan that spans years and even decades into the future.<sup>110</sup> Since it opened up for tourist visas in 1989, and about 15 years later in 2004, it became the principal earner for foreign exchange earner, bringing in USD280 million.<sup>111</sup> Shortly after they opened up, it did spawn a quick rise in visitor number. From 1990 until 1997, tourism numbers grew at an impressive 74 percent each year.<sup>112</sup> It is a bit of a challenge to analyze numbers from this time period, as they can be unreliable. But who were these early tourists to Laos? At least some early vagabonds of backpackers did travel around Laos, pioneer travelers wanted to experience a country that just opened up after decades of war and isolation.<sup>113</sup> However, others suggest that an important

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<sup>110</sup> See for instance LNTA: Masterplan for Tourism, and Masterplan for Development by the

<sup>111</sup> Cooper, 2014, p 188

<sup>112</sup> Dakin, 2003, p 14

<sup>113</sup> Dakin, 2003, p 14-15

aspect of early Lao tourism was mostly catered to group tours, controlled by the government. However, Laos was visited both during colonial times, by French people, perhaps others as well, and before the opening up, it was also visited by some “comrades”, from foreign, most socialist countries or parties.<sup>114</sup>

Anyhow, it is important to consider the rather quick turnaround by the government. Few years earlier Laos was a closed for business, and following a rigid Marxist line of socialism, suddenly it is open for business, attracting foreign capital and investors.

This section will be devoted to discuss the main objectives and questions of this thesis can tourism bring development and alleviate poverty in Laos? And is it sustainable? Laos is particular promoted as a destination based on ecotourism and promotes itself as a destination where many of the negative effects of tourism are minimized, and the benefits to local community and activities that are friendly to nature.

Perhaps for most people across the world, the travel brochures and online articles are the first thing they read about Laos. Perhaps they read an article from Lonely Planet about “The Lao wilderness is drawing travelers looking for nature, adventure or both. Kayaking, rafting, rock-climbing and biking are all available, but it’s the community-based trekking that is most popular because it combines spectacular

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<sup>114</sup> Harrison & Schipani 2009, chapter, 165

natural attractions with the chance to experience the ‘real Laos’ with a village home stay, while spending your money where it’s needed most”.<sup>115</sup>

As mentioned already in the introduction section, Laos was awarded in 2013 with one of the highest award a destination or country can get within tourism, the “Destination of The Year” award by ECTT. As explained, it was mostly because of the promotion of eco-tourism and community based tourism. This is a quote from the reasons the committee gave for awarding Laos: “Community based ecotourism is a way to share revenues and income, to support rural communities in prospering and presenting the foods and handicrafts to the world and to make the base for an economic local development. Sharing tourism benefits to all the population, offering a social tourism it is a lesson that Lao is offering to the world”. And also, “Offering to tourists not only a historical and outstanding cultural experience but also the possibility to explore nature, to contribute to ecological preservation and the opportunity to visit extraordinary space such as: Nam Ngum reservoir, Bolaven plateau, Mekong river islands, Mekong river boat trip, Tad Kouangsi waterfall, the cave of de Ting. All this are model of achievements in ecological and green tourism that must be world recognized.”<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Lonely Planet, Laos: <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/laos>

<sup>116</sup> ECTT: <http://ectt.webs.com/apps/blog/show/26126702-laos-is-selected-as-world-best-tourist-destination-for-2013>

It seems that both the Lao government and other governments as well and public opinion all agree on that Laos can actually offer a new kind of travel experience, and tourism. Is all this really true? As I mentioned in the previous chapter, there has been several efforts to point out the possible negative outcomes of tourism. The already quoted Mowforth & Munt argues that tourism can lead to a situation of dependency, leakage of revenue and damage to local culture and nature. It seems great if Laos really have overcome all these possible negative effects or obstacles. It certainly raises some other questions. Such as, what is the difference between community based tourism and mass tourism? And to what extend is it relevant to Laos? In other words, how much of the tourism industry can be said to be community based, or at least do not bring any of the mentioned negative effects?

Although Laos has achieved much progress and growth in tourism, in terms of arrivals and revenue, it is still rather small compared to its neighbors. In 2013, Laos was visited by nearly 3.8 million tourists. For a country its size and current infrastructure it should be considered quite impressive.

However, compared to Thailand, which perhaps is futile to compare to anyway, receives nearly 27 million tourists in 2013.<sup>117</sup> As mentioned also, the overall growth in tourism worldwide has also mostly been growing in the last decades, and

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<sup>117</sup> TAT: <http://www.tatnews.org/thailand-welcomed-26-7-million-visitor-arrivals-in-2013-exceeding-target/>

can also explain a general growth for the case of Laos too. As I talked about that there has been a growth in travelling to third world countries and a rise of “off the beaten track” destinations such as Laos. Many smaller LDC are on considered “hot spot” for tourism. Perhaps Cape Verde is worth a visit? Many other African countries, Uganda, is increasingly also capitalizing on tourism<sup>118</sup>

It is a legitimate question to ask whether this rise in tourism to rather peripheral, important natural sites that is open for travel and business is really sustainable. Although research has shown that it has positive economic effect, in terms of increased GDP and state revenue, perhaps it can harm and be destructive in other less obvious ways? Change in local culture or values, or degradation of natural areas and such. As also mentioned, what does it do to the environment to cater to an ever increasing flow of tourist to these areas?

If we see in the table of tourism arrivals to Laos, even though the rise was significant at first in percentage, but low in numbers, the real rise began mostly by the turn of the new millennium. However, it is important to note that the numbers from the 1990s could be a bit inaccurate and is also mostly people from Thailand on some sort of cross border trade or shorter trips, not necessarily on a traditional holiday travel.<sup>119</sup> So out of 3.7 million tourist, most of them are today too Thais. In

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<sup>118</sup> <http://www.ecotourdirectory.com/>

<sup>119</sup> Cooper, 2014, 186-87

those regions that host community based tourism does not see all of these tourists. I will discuss those more in detail later on.

It is important to remember that Laos still is a rather small destination, and probably will still remain a destination that is visited less than its neighbors for the near future, but it that does not say it will not grow further and see a continuous growth.

This chapter will contain first an analysis of the political and the power relations concerning tourism in Laos. I will explain and show the development of the tourism industry in Laos, and the region as well. As we shall see, international aid and investment have played a large role in the development of tourism in Laos. Then I will go more in depth and discuss the features and nature of some the community based tourism projects in Northern Laos and in general.

As mentioned also in the introduction I will keep a focus on certain destinations, such as Vang Vieng and Plain of Jars, and adjacent areas, such as Xiasombon, the new region in Laos, that borders Vientiane and Xiengkhouang region. Tourism is a major force for generating income, notably foreign currency to a rather poor Lao economy, and since 1995 it was raised as a tool for development and poverty alleviation by the government.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Harrison & Schipani, 2009, p 168

## The politics of Tourism in Laos

This section is will discuss the political and organizational aspect of tourism in Laos. I argued already in the first chapter for that tourism is a highly po

Since the first tourist visas was issued in 1989, when tourism was mostly kept to small tightly controlled groups, catering to the high end market, it has evolved a decade later to the highest generator for foreign exchange, ahead of garment and wood products.<sup>121</sup> How has this process been? Has this development been rather dependent or independent of foreign organizations, from big internationals to smaller NGOs?

The tourism industry in Laos, consist of several different stakeholders, varying from governmental bodies to Non Governmental Organizations and private institutions. Also international organizations and lending institution have been active in the tourism industry in Laos.

As I covered in the first chapter, it is a viable question to consider and analyze further, the power relations and the structural and organizational lay out of the tourism industry. As Mowforth and Munth argued, mostly the international tourism industry is largely a western dominated business, and evolves mostly, but not limited to these institutions, “The World Tourism Organization, International Monetary Fund,

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<sup>121</sup> Shcipani & Harrison, 2009, p 168-169

United Nations, World Bank and UNESCO. These organizations pretty much sets the standard and parameters in tourism development and planning.<sup>122</sup>

Also, there have been local and regional efforts as well, through Asian Development Bank (ADB), and most notably the Greater Mekong Sub region (GMS), the program launched in the mainland Southeast Asia region, to plan and promote tourism under one region, or in other words: “In 1992, with assistance from ADB, the six countries entered into a program of sub regional economic cooperation, designed to enhance economic relations among the countries”.<sup>123</sup>

So on the next pages I will explain and debate the key institutions and stakeholders that make up the tourism industry in Laos, or have been important to the development of eco and community based tourism in Laos.

### **Lao National Tourism Agency (LNTA)**

As mentioned, tourism in Laos is made up of several actors and stakeholders. The principal tourism authority is the Lao National Tourism Authority (LNTA), formerly known as National Tourism Authority of Lao PDR). LNTA is under the Prime Minister Office and is led by a minister, or chairman. Its main office is in Vientiane, and has provincial offices in each province as well. Their main responsibilities and duties are to

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<sup>122</sup> Mowforth & Munt, 2009, 297

<sup>123</sup> ADB.org: <http://www.adb.org/countries/gms/overview>

regulate add for licensing and market and so on. It works closely with other ministries as well especially together with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism<sup>124</sup> This shows the great significance of tourism, when there is more than one ministry that includes tourism.

LNTA also works closely, and receives support, from several international specialists and organizations. Both Asian countries and Western/European countries have played a part in support here. This will be explained a bit more in the next sections. Japan and The Netherlands have been especially active as we shall see.

The book already mentioned “Another Quiet American”, was written by Brett Dakin, who spend almost two years working as a consultant of some sort at the LNTA. Fresh out of University he enrolled in a consultant program at the main office in Vientiane. His book gives a better understand of the “inner life” or other info we don’t get by reading the official descriptions and articles about what goes on inside Laos. He witnessed an organization, severely underfunded, lack of leadership and real knowledge about tourism among some of its key staff, making the organization somewhat not so efficient. As he worked there just before the “Visit Laos Year 1999-2000”, he gained some knowledge about this important event in tourism in Laos. As LNTA wanted to increase and stimulate growth, they decided to make 1999 a visit Laos year, as most countries do. Thailand did so with great success years before. And

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<sup>124</sup> Harrison & Schipani, 2009, p 175-176

it is used to boost visitors, through marketing and hosting festivals and happenings throughout the county. Seems like a great way to attract visitors. However, what he witnessed, was a country with few roads, a rising insurgents in the northern areas with local minority groups. He even noticed an ambivalent attitude towards tourism, from Party officials. Legitimate as it can be, what and how will tourism affect the country? Anyway, the visit Lao year came, and went without much being done, as money ran out, or disappeared. Instead of openly admit that it was poor planned and followed through, LNTA, in its pragmatic way, simply added a year, so that's the reason behind "Visit Laos Year, 1999-2000".<sup>125</sup>

Funny it may seem, it also tells us that for obvious reasons, but what can challenge and question the sustainability is the large focus on qualitative growth. Off course it is natural with a growth in tourism, but the questions remains if it should be controlled in some ways, how can it be controlled, and is it possible even? Should it be controlled? Important questions, but it seems that it has gone pretty much unnoticed. A major part of his book was devoted to describe the vast network of NGO and governmental Aid agencies involved in the LNTA and Laos in general.

## NGOs and international consultants in Laos

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<sup>125</sup> Dakin, 2003, p 143

Laos, as a third world LDC obviously receives attention from the world community, governments and organizations alike that provide some sort of assistance or aid programs. Either as bilateral agreements between Laos and the respective governments or in the form of organizational and multilateral support, Laos receives significant aid and support.

Anyhow, some organizations and governments are more visible and have specialized in certain fields. Especially two countries are relevant for the discussion here. The Netherlands, and Japan. Both have provided much needed money and staff to harbor programs and support for the tourism in Laos.

The Netherlands Development Organization (SNV) has been very active in Laos since around 2000, and provided both technical and financial assistance. They have also been very active in many reports and those “masterplans” and planning documents, are mostly made in cooperation with SNV.<sup>126</sup> They have been active in creating several pro poor tourism activities in several provinces in Northern Laos, in Luang Prabang, Luang Namtha and also the famous “Pathet Lao Caves” in Houa Panh. This will be discussed a bit more later.

Dakin, who worked for LNTA and wrote a book about his experiences in Laos, did notice the large presence of foreign aid workers and people who really had not so much knowledge about Laos. Consultants who often worked on contracts for

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<sup>126</sup> Harrison & Schipani, p 173-174

either other governments or NGOs would more often than not, work all over the world<sup>127</sup>. Perhaps a consultant, highly paid off course, would work a year or two in Africa, perhaps working for a program in Uganda, before moving to Laos or wherever doing something similar, but in a different cultural setting. They have little time to specialize in a region or cultural setting, assuming that what works in for instance Africa or Laos, will work vice versa. If we look at what SNV have done both in Laos, and in Tanzania in Africa, we can see much of the same activities and even words used in both countries “tourism planning”, and activities. Even their websites look similar, “ecotourismlaos.org” and “tanzaniaculturaltourism.org”.<sup>128</sup>

It is not a critique against the work these organizations do, but it does put it in perspective, as Eco-tourism and community based tourism is mainly a western idea and concept, that caters mostly to westerners and take little into account of the local setting and so on. Other countries, such as Japan and New Zealand have supported Laos too, and have interests in Laos as such.<sup>129</sup>

Anyone who spent some time in Laos, anywhere, from Vientiane to Pakse, to Luang Prabang cannot miss the large presence of foreign NGOs. They occupy many buildings and office spaces, generate work and business for many people. Working in many fields, such as farming, logging, tourism and so on, they all do some kind of

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<sup>127</sup> Dakin, 2003, p 89-108

<sup>128</sup> SNV: <http://www.snvworld.org/>, Laos, <http://www.ecotourismlaos.com/>, Tanzania: <http://tanzaniaculturaltourism.go.tz/>

<sup>129</sup> Harrison & Schipani, p 172

work for the development of Laos. In Vientiane it is impossible not to notice. The urban centre is very much dominated by houses and cars (tax free off course) that caters to governmental and non-governmental organizations.

### Asian Development Bank (ADB)

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) is a regional development bank established on 22 August 1966 which is headquartered in Metro Manila, Philippines to facilitate and foster economic development and inclusive growth of countries in Asia. Since it was established in 1966 with 31 members, it today has grown to 67 members, worldwide.<sup>130</sup>

It should be noted, that the regional bank has a lot of non regional members, both from Europe and America. ADB was modeled closely related on the World Bank, and has a similar weighted voting system where votes are distributed in proportion with member's capital subscriptions and assets, so it is not a particular democratic institution. By the end of 2013, Japan holds the largest proportions of shares at 15.67%. The United States holds 15.56%, China holds 6.47%, India holds 6.36%, and Australia holds 5.81%,. While little Laos has about 0.014 of the shares, and a reported 0.310 % voting power.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> ADB.org: <http://www.adb.org/about/members>

<sup>131</sup> ADB.org

“The total voting power of each member consists of the sum of its basic votes and proportional votes. The basic votes of each member consist of such number of votes as results from the equal distribution among all members of 20% of the aggregate sum of the basic votes and proportional votes of all members. The number of proportional votes of each member is equal to the number of shares of the capital stock of ADB held by that member”.<sup>132</sup>

ADB assistance has mainly focused on responding to the Laos changing and multiple development priorities and needs, “from an early emphasis on agriculture in the 1980s, to roads and transportation in the 1990s, and education, energy, and regional integration in the 2000s”.<sup>133</sup>

Considering the bargain power and the total of shares, the total cash stock for Laos in the ADB, makes them a small voice. As I mentioned in the first chapter, critique against international lending institutions such as World Bank and Asian Development Bank has pointed out this. I talked about the “Washington Consensus”, which is the term coined by the English economist John Williamson in 1989. In his article, already referred to, he argues that what he calls the “prescriptions” for lending money and support to third world or “crisis-wrecked developing countries”,

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<sup>132</sup> ADB.org

<sup>133</sup> ADB.org: <http://www.adb.org/countries/lao-pdr/main>

is mainly in macroeconomic stabilization and most importantly to open up local or internal market to world trade, within the domestic market.

So what happens according to Williamson, is that Laos and other third world countries get economic support and aid, but under the caveat of opening up their domestic market to foreign products and investment. For sure United States, Japan and other wealthier countries want something back for their investment. It should also be noted, that ADB is located in Manila, the capital of The Philippines, perhaps one of United States closest allies and a former colony of United States. Can this tell us something about the power relations to?

As of today, Laos is a highly indebted country, with about 1,869.43 million in loan to Asian Development Bank. Energy and Transportation and infrastructure are the main areas for investments.<sup>134</sup> It seems it pays a high price for lending money. This questions the dependency of the development and also tourism in Laos. It makes Laos fairly dependent on a constant flow of people and liquidity to be able to foster those loans and sustain it over time. Is it a viable question to ask whether the growth in tourism in Laos is another way of affluent countries to expand their market into Laos?

## Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS)

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<sup>134</sup> ADB.org: <http://www.adb.org/countries/lao-pdr/main>

The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) is a natural economic area bound together by the Mekong River, covering 2.6 million square kilometers and a combined population of around 326 million. The six GMS countries are Cambodia, the People's Republic of China (specifically Yunnan Province and Guangxi Region), Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam<sup>135</sup>.

With support from ADB and other donors, the GMS Program helps the implementation of high priority sub regional projects in transport, energy, telecommunications, environment, human resource development, tourism, trade, private sector investment, and agriculture.

Substantial progress has been made in terms of implementing GMS projects since 1992. Priority infrastructure projects worth around \$11 billion have either been completed or are also being implemented. Among these are the upgrading of the Phnom Penh (Cambodia)-Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam) highway and the East-West Economic Corridor that will eventually extend from the Andaman Sea to Da Nang<sup>136</sup>.

The GMS Sustainable Tourism Development Project (2009-2014) is mainly financed by a US\$ 10 million grant from the Asian Development Bank with additional budgetary resources sourced from the Government of Lao PDR. The Lao National Tourism Administration is the executing agency responsible for the coordination,

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<sup>135</sup> ADB/gms: <http://www.adb.org/countries/gms/main>

<sup>136</sup> ADB/GMS

management and implementation of the project in the 9 target provinces of *Champasak, Salavanh, Savannakhet, Vientiane Province, Houaphanh, Oudomxay, Sayabouli, Bokeo and Luang Namtha.*<sup>137</sup>

The main goal of the project is to contribute to the sustainable socioeconomic development of Laos, focusing especially on poverty reduction, sustainable development and protection of the natural and cultural heritage and protection of vulnerable groups from exploitation. To achieve this goal the project seeks to enhance the protection and conservation of natural, cultural and urban heritage assets of importance for tourism; increase tourism's contribution to poverty reduction by expanding the traditional community-based tourism approach to include tourism-related supply and value chains interventions; improve the facilitation of tourism along the economic corridors by improving services and management of tourist attractions found there; raise public sector official's tourism management skills at the national, provincial, district and site level; improve service and hygiene standards among staff in small to medium hospitality enterprises; and enhance local private sector participation in small and medium scale tourism enterprise investment and operation.<sup>138</sup>

At a more daily level, we can find travel books in the bookshelves that covers the region as a whole, Lonely Planet for instance, has a yearly edition of "Vietnam,

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<sup>137</sup> ADB/GMS

<sup>138</sup> <http://www.ecotourismlaos.com/gms/index.htm>

Cambodia, Laos and NorthNorthern Thailand”.<sup>139</sup> In that book is a widely used guide books and travel tips, a major force of influence in the travel industry.

## Private investments

Private investment and initiatives in Laos has seemed to be somewhat limited in the segment of tourism, apart from local tour companies and hotels and guesthouses and hospitality segment.<sup>140</sup> Even if the organizations and programs mentioned, ADB, GMS and SNV are supposed to work with private organizations it is somewhat limited. Several reasons can be possible, perhaps a private firm is reluctant to invest in Laos or maybe those organizations look at the private sector with some suspicious? Can be many answers, but what is a fact is that Laos have attracted less foreign investment that many other LDC.<sup>141</sup>

Laos is as stated, one of the few last remaining socialist states left, no opposition to speak of, lack of transparency and democracy, highly corrupt state, features that not cling good in the ears of western firms sometimes, unless there are some major opportunities for a real surplus off course. Let's make a thought experiment, let's say that Laos was a country rich in oil and gas resources, probably

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<sup>139</sup> Lonely Planet: <http://shop.lonelyplanet.com/asia/vietnam-cambodia-laos-northern-thailand-travel-guide-4/>

<sup>140</sup> Harrison & Schipani, p 177-178

<sup>141</sup> Harrison & Schipani, 178

big firms would have waited in a line to invest. However, business within the service sector is more dependent on human capital and infrastructure and a lot of other closely related business for a successful operation, which still Laos lacks. Perhaps this makes it hard for Laos to attract responsible actors and investors from outside.

What I would like to suggest as further studies, as I revealed through interviews with Lao staff at hotels around Vientiane, is the remittance from Lao diaspora. This is a field that mostly studied of the regional foreign workers, especially in Thailand. But interviews with staff at hotels suggested that the ownership and investments made by Lao people, especially those who lives in United States and France do investment and in hotels and guesthouses in Laos. This should be studied more. It is interesting notion that investments are coming from a group of people that was to some extent ousted from Laos after the new regime took place. Several hotels in Vientiane and Vang Vieng are partially owned and funded by Lao Americans or Lao French. This will be discussed briefly later.

In the tables there is information about the different programs and cost, and visitors. This shows the rather expensive cost of investment. It reflects that even Laos have several good programs that are run in a sustainable manner, in terms of environmental and economical and so on, it is limited in terms of the total tourism industry in Laos. Most activities and visitors stay elsewhere and do other things than the community based projects.

## LAOS, THE UNSPOILT SOUTHEAST ASIA?

This section will discuss some of the projects that can go under “community based”. I will as mentioned focus on the northern areas, simply because it is there where most of these projects are, and it is easier for logistical reasons to focus on a few regions. Laos is a small country yes, but travel time between destinations does not reflect the actual length. Roads are bad, buses are slow, sometimes way to fast, and sometimes even not running. Anyway, the areas I’m concerned can be termed as the “northern heritage route”, or perhaps what some travel journalists calls it “the banana pancake route”.<sup>142143</sup>

However, geographical limitations and demarcation are not so important, as it is the concept and phenomenon that will be studied, and the implications of these programs. The point is that Northern Laos could be seen as a destination in itself, and the sites are linked through either road access or river access.

As I said, several programs have won recognition and awards for their community work, where groups of travelers can join organized trekking-tours that take them through local villages. Among these acclaimed tour programs is “Tiger Trail”, based in Luang Prabang, they organize tours and adventure based activities around Northern Laos. Under the name “fair trekking”. They organize tours and trips

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<sup>142</sup> [http://www.tourismloos.org/show.php?Cont\\_ID=16](http://www.tourismloos.org/show.php?Cont_ID=16)

<sup>143</sup> [http://wikitravel.org/en/Banana\\_Pancake\\_Trail](http://wikitravel.org/en/Banana_Pancake_Trail)

from the mentioned fair trekking, to elephant rides through the jungle, while sleeping in a replica French expedition camp, or even home at the villagers houses. And the local communities earn revenue from the income.<sup>144</sup>

Both governments overseas have awarded projects like these, and the media and public opinion seem to embrace it too. As Lonely Planet, a world leading travel-company writes in their country profile about Laos:

*“After years of war and isolation, Southeast Asia’s most pristine environment, intact cultures and quite possibly the most chilled-out people on earth mean destination Laos is fast earning cult status among travellers. It is developing quickly but still has much of the tradition that has sadly disappeared elsewhere in the region. Village life is refreshingly simple and even in Vientiane it’s hard to believe this sort of languid riverfront life exists in a national capital. Then, of course, there is the historic royal city of Luang Prabang, where watching as hundreds of saffron-robed monks move silently among centuries-old monasteries is as romantic a scene as you’ll experience anywhere in Asia”*

As I stated on previous pages, Laos has among the lowest population densities in all of Southeast Asia. This make it a truly unique setting. From the huzzle and buzzle of Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City, to Vientiane, it is a stark difference. The nature seems to be more intact. And less industrialization that before haunted Laos,

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<sup>144</sup> Tiger Trail: <http://laos-adventures.com/>

can now act as a positive thing. However, if we look at it critically, Laos is perhaps not the ecological paradise it wants to be. Illegal logging, hunting and pollution is still a large problem in many areas.<sup>145</sup>

The name of “Lan Xan”, Land of million elephants, the reality is a couple of thousand still left in the wild. The point is that in comparison to other places such as Thailand and Vietnam, it is perhaps not the greatest achievement to be compared to. However, these are probably some of the reasons for this focus on eco and community based tourism projects came to be:

*“Based on the geographical locations, and abundance of historical and cultural sites, Laos has its old special character that attract more tourists in rural remote areas, especially those living by the protected forest, caves, rivers, well-known tourism sites and ethnic villages For instance, Nam ha project in protected Luang Namtha province has proved that eco-tourism is one of the successful eco-tourism projects. Each year, about 2000 tourists come to the area which, in turn, provides direct and indirect benefits to local villagers. The project also creates jobs for number of people in rural remote areas. The project also helps to conserve the natures; reduces slash and burn practice; promotes village production; and helps to preserve good customs of ethnic people. In 2001, the project has been awarded by (UNDP) New York as a model project to contribute to the reduction of poverty, and*

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<sup>145</sup> Dakin, 2003, 90

*in 2002, the British Airway has also awarded to this project. At present, the lesson from the model project in Luang Namthahas already been applied by other 8 province of phongsaly, Luang Prabang, Xiengkhuang, Vientiane, Bolikhamxay, Khammouane, Savannakhet and Champassack. The project drew a lot of attraction by tourists and more important than that is the International Agencies continue to support such efforts”.*<sup>146</sup>

It is important to note that most tourism activities are clustered around certain areas, mostly in the north, but the southern part also hosts important sites. But tourism, and most income remains mostly in around 8-9 of Laos 18 regions.<sup>147</sup>

The roots of this development in eco projects in Laos, came from the beginning of 1990s. Laos, in cooperations with NGOs set up several Natural Protected Areas, NPA, or National parks. This would attracted firstly a great deal of NGO and interest. Laos did actually reserve almost 13 percent, and a world leader, on the paper at least, in efforts for conservation.<sup>148</sup>

This off course attracted many NGOs, environmentalist and off course money. However, soon several NGOs would simply leave and do not follow through with several programs, as money disappeared into the vast Lao governmental beuracracy. The NPA program was put under the Department of Forestry, one that is notoriously

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<sup>146</sup> Lao PDR Masterplan for Tourism, 3.3.1

<sup>147</sup> Khouangvichit, 2010, Socio-Economic Transformation and Gender relations in Lao PDR, p 147-148

<sup>148</sup> Dakin, 2003, p 90

known for corruption and lack any mean to control illegal logging and a violations of the laws agains protection of the areas.<sup>149</sup>

However, it is important to keep in mind that still many of the successful programs were facilitated by the launch of NPA. Laos does harbor some unique natrue and wildlife that is hard or even impossible to find elsewhere in Southeast Asia. This project have been studied and will be mentioned briefly, then focus on Vang Vieng, Plain of Jars and Xiasombone. However, it still remains to be visited by the majority of the tourist. Most people still tend to flock to the certain areas outside, notably Vientiane Capital, Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang. In table 5, we can see that the numbers of hotels far outreached rural areas such as Luang Namtha and Xieng Khouang.

### **Nam Ha Eco-project**

Luang Namtha in far northern Laos, is the capital town of a unique and diverse province with the same name.

*“Luang Namtha is well known for the excellent ecotourism activities available in the Nam Ha National Protected Area that have been developed by Nam Ha Ecotourism Project and Mekong Tourism Development Project. These two projects have received a range of international award including a United Nations Award for poverty reduction (2001); a British Airway Tourism for Tomorrow Award*

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<sup>149</sup> Dakin, 2003, p 90-91

*(2002); and was a finalist for the UNDP Equator Prize (2007) in recognition of the outstanding success Luang Namtha had in reducing poverty through the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity”.*<sup>150</sup>

I mentioned earlier that Harrison and Schipani did research on this region. They saw a positive effect in terms of empowerment and income generation. About 18 percent of income went back to the villages through the pro poor trekking and home stays and so on.<sup>151</sup> This has been a model for other destinations, and we can spot similarities in other destinations at other continents in Africa. I will address this soon. However, there is a major weakness with this, and it caters to very narrow group of travelers. Only about 2000 participated in those particular activities. A number that is very low when think of that Laos receives about 3,7 million every year.

Most tourist tend to spend money on food, sleeping and handicrafts before joining organized tours, and even fewer actually do the home stay, which Laos is famous for. Those tours are also expensive thus most people in Laos have a daily budget around 10 dollar pr day.<sup>152</sup> Both my own interviews and previous studies show this. People spend most money on food and shelter before any other things,

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<sup>150</sup> [http://www.luangnamthatrek.com/web\\_file/Recommendation.html](http://www.luangnamthatrek.com/web_file/Recommendation.html)

<sup>151</sup> Cited in Khouangvichit, 2010, p 150, see also:

[http://www.ecotourismloos.com/directory/publications/an\\_assessment\\_of\\_international\\_tourists\\_in\\_luang\\_namtha\\_province.pdf](http://www.ecotourismloos.com/directory/publications/an_assessment_of_international_tourists_in_luang_namtha_province.pdf)

<sup>152</sup> Cooper, 2014, p 184-190

perhaps obvious, but it is a thing the tour managers should note. Perhaps the prices of certain activities are too high, and more people would join if the prices were lower? But with high cost of investment, as mentioned before, it is hard to sustain projects like these with low prices.

As I stated in the introduction section, I would also keep an eye on the more low key or grass root offers for tourism. Most of the discussions here, have been focused on larger more expensive projects and organizations. But Laos do also have some good projects that do also fulfill much of the same as the other larger projects. The next two sections will be about Vang Vieng and Plain of Jars, and the adjacent region of Xiasombon. The findings there, are the result of several field trips of different length, and based on interviews and observations, as well as previous secondary data.

### **Vang Vieng, eco-paradise or hedonistic backpacker hell?**

Just about four hours with the local bus north of the Capital Vientiane, lies the small but famous village of Vang Vieng. What used to be a convenient stop over on the longer trip north to Luang Prabang, Phonsavan and so on, has become a site in its own right. The reasons for why I include a separate section about Vang Vieng, is because it in so many ways are a micro cosmos of the tourism in Laos. It harbors some of the most beautiful mountains in the country, a true eco-tourism gem. However, it is perhaps more famous for a “lively” party scene, where the

“backpacker” have more or less taken over, and drugs, cannabis and opium are sold and consumed more or less openly. Not the kind of place that we read about on marketing brochures and advertisement about the unique Lao culture, with pagodas and monks walking the streets in the morning for their alms. The village got a native population of about 51,000, however backpackers now outnumber locals by about three to one. In the main town, where nearly all the tourism is concentrated, the figure on any given day is an astonishing 15 to one<sup>153</sup>

Anyway, Vang Vieng is a place where you can see quite a lot of tourists smoke opium, or other drugs, perhaps while a monk walks by collecting the daily bread for the temple. This little village that is home to the worst, and some of the best of Laos, deserves an analysis in its own. Considering Vang Vieng, and perhaps is “little brother destination” in the south, Don Det, part of the 4000 Islands, makes Laos seem like a two tiered destination, as will be explained later.

This little village, that actually also harbors a old “lima site”, or landing strip built by United States during the war, however nothing is said or done with this historical piece of Vang Vieng. Anyhow, the town is a lively “travelers hub”, and have anything a travelers needs and wants. Many people who are going from Vientiane to a northern or vice versa, are stopping a few days and nights Vang Vieng. It was visited by

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<sup>153</sup> The Guardian: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/07/vang-vieng-laos-party-town>

Vang Vieng, lies along National Road 13, north of Vientiane Capital, but still inside Vientiane Province. The lovely Nam Song river runs next to it. The village is on one side, passing lovely karst formations of limestone mountains on the other. Perhaps the most known activity, and what has got a lot of attention, but have yet to be seriously studied, is the “tubing” on the river Nam Song. Tubing is an activity that is green, clean and does not pollute, bottom line. And it has also .made quite a good income for many villages. The activity is organized at village level, people who want to be part of it, invest in a old truck or traktor tire, the inner tube of the tire hose, and act as a flotation device. Then tourist rent one of these, and are being driven a few kilometers out of town, and simply floats back to Vang Vieng, normally it takes a couple of hours, like a half day trip. In theory it seems like a model activity. No pollution and relatively easy and cheap for local people to invest, it does not require a lot of capital. It has on average generated about 30 US Dollars to every family every month to about two thirds of the families in the villages.<sup>154</sup>

However, along the Nam Song River, before at least, locals set up bars and served both alcohol and drugs to the many tourist. A mix of alcohol, and or drugs and the river is doomed. And obviously they place after a while got a lot of bad reputation. A significant number of younger tourists have drowned as a result of this. In 2011 it was reported 22 tourist died as a result of tubing, but it is reported to be

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<sup>154</sup> Khouangvichit, 2010, p 173

higher, as some incidents go unnoticed and not reported properly.<sup>155</sup> Interviews with Arne and other long term expats in the city made predictions as high as one per month.

Irresponsible behavior, lack of safety standard, and carelessness from both local and tourists made this experience deeply unsustainable. In 2012, the government did crack down on the bars and tubing, the activity is still there, but in a much more relaxed and sober atmosphere, and focus on safety and water level in the river and so on.

This is the usual story of that authorities are slow and need to see a real catastrophe before interfering. Perhaps other motives are there for be reluctant to crack down, it went on for almost a decade, with countless fatalities and unreported deaths.

The reason why bring this in is relevant, as more people tend to visit Vang Vieng, and other destinations than the strictly pro poor tourism activities. There are eco tours and trips out of Vang Vieng, but more in a commercialized way, and not those programs further up north. Vang Vieng all in all resembles just the typical tourist enclave that is mentioned as a negative side effect of tourism. And perhaps Vang Vieng is more representative for the tourism industry in Laos than those

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<sup>155</sup> The Guardian

programs that few people visit, and cost millions to invest in. Vang Vieng is a city with negative outcome of tourism because of bad planning and bad governance.

### **Plain of Jars, the natural intersection?**

Laos has seen more wars than many other countries. Still today several areas still is contaminated with a deadly legacy of UXO, unexploded ordnance, or “bombies” as the local term for it is. For nearly a decade, the USA dropped large amounts of bombs and toxic defoliants in several areas of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in their war against communist forces on the Indochinese peninsula. Xieng Khouang province in Northern Laos became the stage of one the most massive air bombardments in history, more bombs were dropped on Laos than Germany and Japan combined during World War II. This mountainous area hosted a “secret” side war to the Vietnam War, with little attention from foreign observers. External forces have played a major role for Xieng Khouang, since the time of the Plain of Jars up until now. This mountain plateau contains hundreds of peculiar stone jars, dated millenniums ago. UNESCO, and other organizations works for the area to fulfill its potential for visits by tourists, and set to restore it as much is possible after centuries of weather and tear, and remove the remaining unexploded ordnance left over from the 1960s and early 1970s American secret bombing campaigns.

NGOs in the area have set up museums and shops where they offer information and knowledge about the history, especially the bombing. Some NGO

sell different merchandise and souvenirs. A rarity for the Xieng Khouang region is the recycled bomb cutlery and other utilities and artwork. Some have raised the question of creating a market for this sort of merchandise. For farmers and civilians can see this as an possible economical opportunity, to go out and find UXOSs and melt them into things they sell, most likely to a tourist. Accidents and fatalities for caused by UXO still remain high in certain areas. Clearing areas for bombies and mines is a key focus for any development, also within tourism. Actually, talks of keeping the ordnance after it has been defused, have been raised, and some the ordnances, most notably the cluster bomb, the type of weapon that a larger container opens up and drops a high number of smaller bombs that are intended to detonate over a larger area, causing more destruction, are being kept as a solid proof of what happened here. But a serious concern and controversy of the weapon, is that many fails to detonate, and causes a threat as long as it lie there. There are plentiful of potential for historical tourism in Laos, with many places that host a cave that functioned as shelter for many civilians during the bombings, but also sites that had either a secret airport, or former hospital, and so on that can draw visitors in Northern Laos. Particularly the area from Sam Neua, along the border with Vietnam, down to Vientiane, a cross the Plain of Jars, was a key area during the many Indochina Wars, and includes much undeveloped sites.

The damage done of the nine year long period of almost daily bombing raids by B-52 bombers, changed the society for an unforeseeable time, and the impact

made by tourist today also puts pressure on local community and the beautiful nature. Today the biggest threat to the archeological sites is tourism. Poorly funded and lack of qualified people and equipment make maintaining and preserve the unique ancient jars a challenge. Phonsavan the, regional capital of the historical strategically important area of Xhieng Khuang, are an equally important area for tourism development.

### **Ecological or economical tourism?**

Hopefully, the reader will now have a better understanding of the tourism industry and new forms of tourism such as eco and community based tourism. It is important to keep an critical eye of this process and development. It is explained that the tourism industry has evolved to offer or manage a new forms of tourism towards sustainability.

Critic towards the business, leakage in laos, based on interviews and readings, there is nothing to suggest that the tourism industry in laos represent something really new that minimize the negative effects. Neither within waste and garbage management, unefficient transport sector, and high degree of corruption within governmet institutions and the fact that Laos is very dependent on import of goods from Thailand and Vietnam. The tourism industry are simply dependent on production elsewhere to sustain itself., same leak effect as Thailand, is it then really

a new form of tourism? What is the main point? Save the environment through consumption? Tourism sponsored by Avis and Pepsi? Perhaps tourism is more about opening markets, and increasing markets, bringing in goods and supplies to new areas, new markets, expansion and growth.

What should be noted is the rather uncritical use of “eco”, “green”, “responsible” and so on. If we are critical and expand a view of travel and tourism, how can it really be sustainable? As I argued here, most of the activities and tourism in Laos perhaps do not qualify as very much responsible or greener than so many other destinations. They do host some of the best places and programs yes, but as said, very limited and Nam Ha was only visited by around 2000 people per year. At a cost of millions of dollars, and much planning and so on, it is rather small return of investment so far. If the government focuses more on low key at village level, and simply leave out the international organization and creates something for the villages, and by the villages, in a Lao way, shouldn't that be more of an aim?

But perhaps it is less money there. It is great to be supported with millions of dollars every year to create some new “high end” tours, picturing Laos as a destination for luxury. Perhaps the government has an interest in depicting Laos as a more successful and developed than in reality? As mentioned about enclave tourism in the introduction, is also a feature several have noticed. It is the concentration of tourism in certain places, and few outside benefits from it. This is also visible in Laos,

to a less extent than Thailand and Vietnam, where we can find big fancy hotel chains, where most of the surplus goes anywhere but the local communities.

This leak effect is interesting to study, as it tells us a lot of the dynamic of the tourism industry. Most of the cashflow goes back to the country, often from where the tourist is coming from, either through travel agencies, airlines or hotels, which is mostly western or rich country they are found.

As mentioned, a survey made in Thailand said stated that about 70 percent of the cash flows never end up in the host community. One important question remains, is this situation any better in Laos? If we are to believe the awards and the experts, and commercials, so is Laos in the front community based tourism. It raises some important questions, what is

But we need to look a bit deeper and broader to get the full picture. Laos is a small country, with little industry, of any kind. Most what people in the urban centers are actually import from Thailand. This import leak make it legitimate to question whether the tourism industry in Laos really have escaped from the mentioned negative effects. Earlier studies have indicated that there is nothing to suggest that Laos has any less leak effect than Thailand.<sup>156</sup> About 70 percent.

During interviews with several guesthouse owners in Vientiane and Vang Vieng I uncovered that most establishments are quite dependent of import from Thailand.

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<sup>156</sup> International Tourism, Socio-Economic Impacts in Lao PDR, UNDP, 2006

This ranges on most consumer goods, to construction and bricks and PVC pipes, which Laos either does not produce, or the quality is seen as inferior. As Dan, an expat guesthouse owner told me during interviews “If I want make something new for my gueshouse, I can either buy badly made Lao bricks, or import better quality bricks from Thailand”.<sup>157</sup>

Many restaurants also are dependent on imports from Thailand. I interviewed one owner of two established bar/restaurants in Vientiane, where both the drink and the menu are almost completely of foreign products. What the first mentioned survey from Thailand shows, is that Thailand lose a lot of cash to international companies. Take Bangkok or any given established beach resort, where we can find hotels like Hilton, Sheraton, Holiday Inn and so on. These maybe attract people as prices are reasonable compared to Europe and America, but the only winners are the hotelchains and their local owners, not the poor communities.

Do it seem like the tourist industry in Laos is somewhat different then the reality? If it is, it not something new, as said before also, the tern “eco”, “green” and “natural” and so on in terms of tourism is watered out and does not really constitute as any greener. Perhaps also it involves so much other pollution and possible negative effects before and after these “green” activities, than the gain will be drained before or after?

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<sup>157</sup> Interview

It also has some deeper implications, that a business somewhat misleads or take advantage of something, that perhaps is not really true or genuine. Ecotourism was coined before the Pro poor tourism came about, and it is an important question to ask whether pro poor tourism also will follow the same trend. Will this also establish itself more as an business idea or business strategy to attract more customers, to make poor and impoverished people a commodity that will be sold on the world market?



## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

With the chosen title of “the politics of tourism” I tried to show that tourism and politics is in an important and growing part of the life, not only in Laos, but elsewhere as well. It is about the distribution of wealth, and equal and unequal development, it is an activity that brings people together and a cross border and cross culture activity. The title reflects the social and economical aspect of tourism, and it is thus a major part of both the government and the people of Laos. As many people in Laos have benefited economically from tourism still Laos faces issues with distribution of goods. This is evident in the fact that most tourism activities are focused on specific areas, mainly in the northern parts. For several others least developed countries, but Laos in particular, tourism plays a major role in the lives of many people. It is no wonder why the Lao government have embraced tourism and especially the new forms of tourism such as CBT with full force. Community based tourism is a new form of tourism that tries to minimize negative impacts to the host community. Negative impacts can be a degradation of local culture and nature, and what has been noted in the past, that local community does not get so much economic gain. Most of the income in general from tourism goes back to the mostly western dominated countries and businesses. Anyhow, Laos is a bit of a “two

tiered” destination, within those areas mentioned in this thesis, Luang Namtha especially, have received a lot of attention and external financial aid, and it does really benefit the local communities and is more sustainable than other parts. Nonetheless, as I have shown, most people and activities takes place outside the areas. Places such as Vientiane and Vang Vieng receives far more visitors than the National Protected Areas and the community based tourism activities.

Tourism has become a central part of economic income for Laos, and other LDCs as well. Primarily it provides the country with a steady flow of foreign currency, a key element for ease the trade deficit and pay back loan to foreign institutions and banks. Secondly it employs a great deal of people, and also act as an useful second income. It is one of the main employers in the country. Many people are dependent on the income tourists bring them, either through a guesthouse, restaurant or a small shop or any establishment that cater to tourism. That is the great benefit about tourism, it caters and relates to a wide array of closely related business, such as transport, food and beverage.

One important aspect of tourism in Laos, and much of tourism in the developing world at large for that matter, is the contact and relationship between governments, NGO and other private institutions. In Laos, most of the “success stories” for eco-tourism and CBT are projects in the northern areas of Laos. Within many of the government designated protected areas, it is possible to join tours and activities that provide important income for local ethnic minorities. Several of these

projects are funded and staffed or trained by foreign organizations, both UN bodies and government bodies from e.g The Netherlands and Japan, and companies from the private sector. This can raise several interesting concerns, and tell a lot of about the nature and power structure of the development of tourism in Laos. These programs are widely marketed and available through travel agencies throughout the country.

However, most people who visit Laos do not participate in these activities. Those programs belongs to the so-called “high end market” and embraces a quantitative small part of the visitors to Laos. That does not say that these programs, where a part the income and revenues goes directly back to the communities and villages, are not a viable source or tool for development. But it remains limited, and still out of reach for most poor communities. Several small-scale local initiatives, such as the “tubing” in Vang Vieng for instance can contribute greatly too, with less investment and aid from outside. It has been a great focus on high end, rather expensive programs and development in rural areas, and perhaps this has come to the expense of several small scale initiatives. However, they do not provide so for the majority of the people involved. The major places and activities that performs well for community development are somewhat limited and not something the majority of travelers use. The tourism activities in Laos is fairly consentrated to certain areas, mostly in the north and deep south, perhaps most in the northern part, the area that has been the focus of this thesis.

To a large extent, the tourism in Laos is focused and concentrated to certain areas, and most activities related to tourism, still seem to fall in the old fashion “mass tourism way”. People flock to certain areas, stay in guesthouses that their local travelbooks tell them and rarely steps far out of the “tourist trail”. This resembles a lot like the “enclave tourism” mentioned as one of the negative effects. Thai tourist tend to come into Laos using Thai companies, eating and sleeping at Thai establishments and visit temples before they return home. Most of the tourism in Laos is also regional, such as from Thailand, China and Vietnam. Korean and Japanese tourist are also an increasing group, and will be more so in the future. Perhaps this enlarge the “enclave tourism” even further.

So it is important to remember that most of the tourism in Laos, even somewhat contradictory to what the government and companies wants us to believe, still could be categorized as mass tourism. As mentioned also, much of the success stories and projects that falls under “new” or community based or pro poor tourism, is limited and could possibly also be said to rely heavily on mass tourism. This brings some interesting questions, and suggestions for further studies. How independent is community based tourism in relations to mass tourism? Can community based tourism survive without mass tourism? Is community based tourism really something new and actually manage to empower and make communities independent from a rather western dominated or rich country dominated business? This study has shown that perhaps it is not so easy to claim so.

Most of the projects have been developed with the aid and investments from foreign or external institutions. This can suggest that there still is a relation of dependency between local community and organizations that facilitate these programs.

Also in this paper, I tried to measure the sustainability of the tourism in Laos. It has grown quite significantly over a short period of time, and thus making it a viable and important question. We know that tourism can affect negative in several ways mentioned. And many want us to believe that tourism in Laos really represent something new, and a more ecofriendly tourism. I used the GSTC C-D criteria and table for measure the sustainability. What this chart or method does, is to measure sustainability from a holistic approach. That will say that it measures it from several factors and indicator, economic, environmental and so on. It should be stressed that sustainability should also cover more areas than the traditional environmentally approach.

In the test, I found that the tourism industry in Laos is fairly sustainably, but still lagging behind in some areas. Both in terms of the traditional environmental issues and more structural and governmental issues that Laos should address if they want to maintain a viable and competitive and sustainable tourism industry.

Laos is not the most democratic country around, and the tourism industry is very “top down” driven, with a lot of power concentrated higher up, in the government and international organizations. This contradicts a transparent and inclusive

development of tourism. It seems many of the projects mentioned here in this thesis is the product of NGO and foreign intervention and ideas on tourism.

Laos also have some challenges coping with the rise in tourist, as this generate more traffic and waste and pollution. It is improving, but still Laos lacks a sustainable garbage handling system. In larger tourist areas, such as Vang Vieng, lacks a real local enforcement of waste management and pollution into rivers and nature is a growing problem. What is good news for a local guesthouse owner or a laundry shop, is bad news for the nearby river, as a lot of unprocessed waste and water ends up there.

Also, what is noted here with Laos, it is a country with a high degree of corruption. This is a field that needs more focus and research about. What is noted by many travelers, and also warnings by governments, is the lack of police authority many places in Laos. Many crimes go unnoticed and undocumented, both by tourist and locals. Especially in Vang Vieng, a city that is notoriously famous for a police force that does not contribute to the fight against drug related crimes. The police authorities in Vang Vieng are often more interested in hand out fines tourist for either drug possession or minor infringements concerning motorbikes and so on, than actually investigating crimes. There are several establishments in Vang Vieng, and elsewhere in Laos, that openly markets and sell drugs and opium. At bars and restaurants in Vang Vieng we can get menus with “happy pizza” and “happy shakes”. It is no secret to where these places are located, and the owners can operate with the “protection” of Police if they pay a share of the revenue. These places exist not

because of good tourism planning, it still exists because of lack of enforcement and corruption. It can in the long run harm the image of Laos as a place for sedate ecotourism. Laos has a long tradition with drug cultivation, and the use of drugs should not necessarily be seen as a problem concerned with tourism per se. However, tourism can set a market for many locals. And this market is sustained by lack of real law enforcement and policing.

What I also tried to discuss and show, is the rather oddities, tourism and globalization, and to some extent a socialist or communist state. There seem to be a sense of ambivalence within aspects of the government or the Party in Laos. It is perhaps some implications that party cadres are worried about, national identity, or what would it do to a local population with all these new visitors? The scope and reach of tourism far outreaches the colonial days, and cultural impact is hard to spot and measure, but should be taken seriously.

On the other hand, tourism comes with great opportunities and possibilities. It brings in investment and construction of roads and improved connectivity, roads, internet and so on. Toppled with the notion that it will bring development, the government uses it for what its worth, but could it also be that tourism is yet another mean for the government for nation building? Tourism has made it easier and has broaden the scope and reach Vientiane and its governing bodies to more rural areas in a way that few other sectors do.

However, Laos has, in cooperation with NGOs and other external actors managed to create a sound and viable tourism industry that creates better life for many people. It will be a major force for the further development for the country. Perhaps it will help Laos rid itself of the categorization as a LDC by 2020.

This thesis tried to be more critical to the growth and the tourism industry itself. Other works on tourism in Laos tend to focus mainly on descriptive analysis and categorization of projects and sites. Perhaps assuming that it benefits the local communities with no critical analysis of the implications of the industry, the underlying factors and external forces makes this picture look a bit different. Isolated those programs mentioned, pro poor tourism programs and trekking tours and so on, are really a great way for people to come in contact and visit communities. It generate income and provide a “soft” cultural meeting and setting. However, I tried to show through a holistic approach that it is more forces behind. Laos relies heavily on foreign production and capital for sustaining these. These program are expensive to create, and run. They are expensive, and covers only a small portion of tourists in Laos. Most activities are in other areas, that are mostly private run and the level of sustainability is much less, like Vang Vieng.

However it is important to state that Laos is a young destination and it has come really far in a short time, thanks to international aid and support. The future will see an increase in competition, and Laos will for sure see competition. But with proper cooperation, between governments, ASEAN, GMS and so on, it should be

possible to promote and sustain a common destination plan for Mainland Southeast Asia. As many others, and this thesis suggests, many travelers are visiting multiple countries while traveling in the region.

To sum up, this study shows that Laos together with NGOs and others have created tours and activities that bases itself on ecological and community based principles, it shows greater sustainability than many other countries. However, they remain expensive and limited. Also, perhaps that much of that segment might be dependent on the traditional mass tourism as well. An important question that should be devoted more space and further studies. Even those program mentioned, are part of a larger foreign run, NGO-based, assistance aid programs, that comes either thru loans or subsidies. So perhaps, it is another way for western world to open up and get easier access to market, as this makes Laos too dependent on external forces. In that way the tourism industry in Laos does not represent something new, it is just more hidden. Said differently, perhaps it is tourism on down payment, sponsored by NGOs, ADB, World Bank, governments and the inevitable multinational companies and large companies such as Pepsi-cola and Avis.

The development of Laos as a tourist destination is still in a beginning, and still we can get a different experience than most places around Southeast Asia. Laos is a small and less densely populated country than most other Asian countries, and Laos has still, escaped much of the introduction of large chain hotels, big multi-internationals, that often dominate tourists scenes elsewhere. Perhaps this will

change in the near future. Thus making more credit to whomever came up with the term, “Go Before it is too late”.



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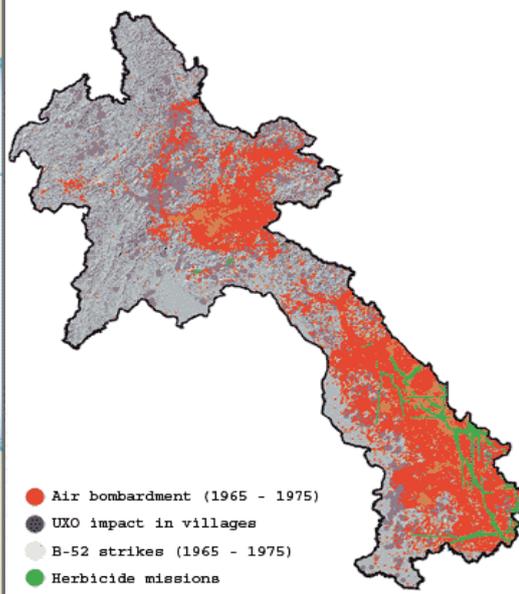
APPENDIX



MAPS & TABLES



Map 1



Map 2

Source: Map 1: Cia Factbook Map 2: UXO Lao

Laos and its Provinces

	1 Attapeu	11 Salavan
	2 Bokeo	12 Savannakhet
	3 Bolhikamxai	13 Vientiane Prefecture, VTE Capital
	4 Champasak	14 Vientiane Province
	5 Houapan	15 Sainabuly
	6 Khamouan	16 Xiasombon
	7 Luang Namtha	17 Sekong
	8 Luang Prabang	18 Xiengkhouang
	9 Udomxai	10 Phongsali

<b>Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria for Destinations</b>
<b><i>SECTION A: Demonstrate sustainable destination management</i></b>
<p><b>A1 Sustainable destination strategy</b></p> <p>The destination has established and is implementing a multi-year destination strategy that is publicly available, is suited to its scale, that considers environmental, economic, social, cultural, quality, health, and safety, and aesthetic issues, and was developed with public participation.</p>
<p><b>A2 Destination management organization</b></p> <p>The destination has an effective organization, department, group, or committee responsible for a coordinated approach to sustainable tourism, with involvement by the private sector and public sector. This group is suited to the size and scale of the destination, and has defined responsibilities, oversight, and implementation capability for the management of environmental, economic, social, and cultural issues. This group's activities are appropriately funded.</p>
<p><b>A3 Monitoring</b></p> <p>The destination has a system to monitor, publicly report, and respond to environmental, economic, social, cultural, tourism, and human rights issues. The monitoring system is reviewed and evaluated periodically.</p>
<p><b>A4 Tourism seasonality management</b></p> <p>The destination dedicates resources to mitigate seasonal variability of tourism where appropriate, working to balance the needs of the local economy, community, cultures and environment, to identify year-round tourism opportunities.</p>
<p><b>A5 Climate change adaptation</b></p> <p>The destination has a system to identify risks and opportunities associated with climate change. This system encourages climate change adaptation strategies for development, siting, design, and management of facilities. The system contributes to the sustainability and resilience of the destination and to public education on climate for both residents and tourists.</p>
<p><b>A6 Inventory of tourism assets and attractions</b></p> <p>The destination has an up-to-date, publicly available inventory and assessment of its tourism assets and attractions, including natural and cultural sites.</p>
<p><b>A7 Planning Regulations</b></p> <p>The destination has planning guidelines, regulations and/or policies that require environmental, economic, and social impact assessment and integrate sustainable land use, design, construction, and demolition. The guidelines, regulations and/or policies are designed to protect natural and cultural resources, were created with local inputs from the public and a thorough review process, are publicly communicated, and are enforced.</p>
<p><b>A8 Access for all</b></p> <p>Where appropriate, sites and facilities, including those of natural and cultural importance, are accessible to all, including persons with disabilities and others who have specific access requirements. Where such sites and facilities are not immediately accessible, access is afforded through the design and implementation of solutions that take into account both the integrity of the site and such reasonable accommodations for persons with access requirements as can be achieved.</p>
<p><b>A9 Property acquisitions</b></p> <p>Laws and regulations regarding property acquisitions exist, are enforced, comply with communal and</p>

<b>Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria for Destinations</b>
indigenous rights, ensure public consultation, and do not authorize resettlement without prior informed consent and/or reasonable compensation.
<b>A10 Visitor satisfaction</b> The destination has a system to monitor and publicly report visitor satisfaction, and, if necessary, to take action to improve visitor satisfaction.
<b>A11 Sustainability standards</b> The destination has a system to promote sustainability standards for enterprises consistent with the GSTC Criteria. The destination makes publicly available a list of sustainability certified or verified enterprises.
<b>A12 Safety and security</b> The destination has a system to monitor, prevent, publicly report, and respond to crime, safety, and health hazards.
<b>A13 Crisis and emergency management</b> The destination has a crisis and emergency response plan that is appropriate to the destination. Key elements are communicated to residents, visitors, and enterprises. The plan establishes procedures and provides resources and training for staff, visitors, and residents, and is updated on a regular basis.
<b>A14 Promotion</b> Promotion is accurate with regard to the destination and its products, services, and sustainability claims. The promotional messages treat local communities and tourists authentically and respectfully.
<b><i>SECTION B: Maximize economic benefits to the host community and minimize negative impacts</i></b>
<b>B1 Economic monitoring</b> The direct and indirect economic contribution of tourism to the destination's economy is monitored and publicly reported at least annually. To the extent feasible, this should include visitor expenditure, revenue per available room, employment and investment data.
<b>B2 Local career opportunities</b> The destination's enterprises provide equal employment, training opportunities, occupational safety, and fair wages for all.
<b>B3 Public participation</b> The destination has a system that encourages public participation in destination planning and decision making on an ongoing basis.
<b>B4 Local community opinion</b> Local communities' aspirations, concerns, and satisfaction with destination management are regularly monitored, recorded and publicly reported in a timely manner.
<b>B5 Local access</b> The destination monitors, protects, and when necessary rehabilitates or restores local community access to natural and cultural sites.
<b>B6 Tourism awareness and education</b> The destination provides regular programs to affected communities to enhance their understanding of the opportunities and challenges of tourism, and the importance of sustainability.
<b>B7 Preventing exploitation</b>

<b>Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria for Destinations</b>
<p>The destination has laws and established practices to prevent commercial, sexual, or any other form of exploitation and harassment of anyone, particularly of children, adolescents, women, and minorities. The laws and established practices are publicly communicated.</p>
<p><b>B8 Support for community</b></p> <p>The destination has a system to enable and encourage enterprises, visitors, and the public to contribute to community and sustainability initiatives.</p>
<p><b>B9 Supporting local entrepreneurs and fair trade</b></p> <p>The destination has a system that supports local and small- and medium-sized enterprises, and promotes and develops local sustainable products and fair trade principles that are based on the area's nature and culture. These may include food and beverages, crafts, performance arts, agricultural products, etc.</p>
<p><b><i>SECTION C: Maximize benefits to communities, visitors, and culture; minimize negative impacts</i></b></p>
<p><b>C1 Attraction protection</b></p> <p>The destination has a policy and system to evaluate, rehabilitate, and conserve natural and cultural sites, including built heritage (historic and archaeological) and rural and urban scenic views.</p>
<p><b>C2 Visitor management</b></p> <p>The destination has a visitor management system for attraction sites that includes measures to preserve, protect, and enhance natural and cultural assets.</p>
<p><b>C3 Visitor behavior</b></p> <p>The destination has published and provided guidelines for proper visitor behavior at sensitive sites. Such guidelines are designed to minimize adverse impacts on sensitive sites and strengthen positive visitor behaviors.</p>
<p><b>C4 Cultural heritage protection</b></p> <p>The destination has laws governing the proper sale, trade, display, or gifting of historical and archaeological artifacts.</p>
<p><b>C5 Site interpretation</b></p> <p>Accurate interpretive information is provided at natural and cultural sites. The information is culturally appropriate, developed with community collaboration, and communicated in languages pertinent to visitors.</p>
<p><b>C6 Intellectual property</b></p> <p>The destination has a system to contribute to the protection and preservation of intellectual property rights of communities and individuals.</p>
<p><b><i>SECTION D: Maximize benefits to the environment and minimize negative impacts</i></b></p>
<p><b>D1 Environmental risks</b></p> <p>The destination has identified environmental risks and has a system in place to address them.</p>
<p><b>D2 Protection of sensitive environments</b></p> <p>The destination has a system to monitor the environmental impact of tourism, conserve habitats, species, and ecosystems, and prevent the introduction of invasive species.</p>
<p><b>D3 Wildlife protection</b></p> <p>The destination has a system to ensure compliance with local, national, and international laws and standards for the harvest or capture, display, and sale of wildlife (including plants and animals).</p>

<b>Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria for Destinations</b>
<p><b>D4 Greenhouse gas emissions</b></p> <p>The destination has a system to encourage enterprises to measure, monitor, minimize, publicly report, and mitigate their greenhouse gas emissions from all aspects of their operation (including emissions from service providers).</p>

**Table 1: Mass vs New Tourism**

Mass Tourism	New Tourism
Mass	Individual
Packaged	Unpackaged/Flexible
SSS (Sun, Sand, Sex)	TTT (Travelling, Trekking, Trucking)
Unreal	Real
Irresponsible	Responsible

Source: Adapted from Mowforth & Munt, p 26

**Table 2: Market share of tourist arrivals to Laos by region (%), 2002-2013.**

Year	2002	2005	2008	2010	2013
Region					
Asia & Pacific	78.7	82.1	85.36	89.93	91.89
Europe	13.85	11.99	9.72	7.09	5.62
Americas	6.35	5.48	4.33	2.68	2.27
Africa & Middle East	1.09	0.42	0.59	0.30	0.21

Source: LNTA

Table 3: Top Tourism spenders, Source: UNWTO

Rank	Country	Region	Expenditure 2012	Expenditure 2013	Market share
1	China	Asia	\$128.6 billion	\$102.0 billion	11.1
2	United States	North America	\$86.2 billion	\$83.5 billion	7.4
3	Germany	Europe	\$85.9 billion	\$81.3 billion	7.4
4	Russia	Europe	\$53.5 billion	\$42.8 billion	4.6
5	United Kingdom	Europe	\$52.6 billion	\$51.3 billion	4.5
6	France	Europe	\$42.4 billion	\$39.1 billion	3.7
7	Canada	North America	\$35.2 billion	\$35.0 billion	3.0
8	Australia	Oceania	\$28.4 billion	\$28.0 billion	2.4
9	Italy	Europe	\$27.0 billion	\$26.4 billion	2.3
10	Brazil	South America	\$25.1 billion	\$22.2 billion	2.2

Source: UNWTO: "Tourism Highlights 2014"

Table 4: Top destinations

Rank	Country	Region	International tourist arrivals 2013	International tourist arrivals 2012
1	France	Europe	—	83.0 million
2	United States	North America	69.8 million	66.7 million
3	Spain	Europe	60.7 million	57.5 million
4	China	Asia	55.7 million	57.7 million
5	Italy	Europe	47.7 million	46.4 million
6	Turkey	Europe	37.8 million	35.7 million
7	Germany	Europe	31.5 million	30.4 million
8	United Kingdom	Europe	31.2 million	29.3 million
9	Russia	Europe	28.4 million	25.7 million
10	Thailand	Asia	26.5 million	22.4 million

Source: UNWTO

Table 5: Number of Tourist Arrivals, Revenue from Tourism, and Average Length of Stay, selected years

Year	Number or Arrivals	Change %	Average stay, international	Average stay, regional	Revenue, Dollar
1990	14,400	NA	NA	NA	NA
1991	37,613	161	NA	NA	2,250,000
1992	87,571	133	NA	NA	4,510,000
1993	102,946	18	3.5	NA	6,280,000
1996	403,000	16	4.8	1.8	43,592,263
1998	500,200	8	5.0	2.4	79,960,145
2000	737,208	20	5.5	2.4	113,898,285
2001	673,823	-9	8.0	2.4	103,786,323
2002	735,662	9	6.5	2.1	113,409,883
2005	1,095,315	22	7.0	2.0	146,770,074
2010	2,513,028	25	7.0	2.0	381,669,031
2013	3,779,490	13	8.4	2.0	595,909,127

Source: LNTA

**Table 6: Numbers of Guesthouse/Hotels in in Norhern Laos (2011)**

Vientiane Capital	392
Vientiane Province (Including Vang Vieng	271
Luang Namtha	77
Luang Prabang	279
Xieng Khouang	29

Source: STDPLaos

**Table 7: Numbers of Tourist participating in eco activity in Luang Namtha**

Year	Tourists
1999	
2000	
2001	944
2002	2,716
2003	887
2004	2,725
2005	3,103
2006	5,027
2007	5,145
2008	6,675
2009	5,209
2010	5,627
2011	6,614
2012	
2013	
2014	

Source: LuangNamthaEcotourism.org

**Table 8: Revenue from eco-tourism projects in Luang Namtha**

Year	Tourists
1999	
2000	
2001	17,795
2002	66,650
2003	23,459
2004	61,515
2005	76,455
2006	170,723
2007	188,909
2008	311,870
2009	243,370
2010	276,167
2011	310,000
2012	
2013	
2014	

Source: LuangNamthaEcotourism.org

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**Table 9: Visitors to Laos, selected regions 2013**

Region	2013
Vientiane Capital	1,445,345
Vientiane Province	445,636
Luang Prabang	342,611
Xiengkhouang	35,568
Oudumxay	172,731
Xayabouli	87,776
Luang Namtha	305,608

Source: TourismLaos.org

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## VITA

Marius Backer grew up in Norway, where I lived most of my life. I have worked for NGOs in both Norway and Thailand. After my bachelor degree I started to work for NGOs in Thailand, along the Thai/Burma border. Later I interned for UNA Norway before I started Chulalongkorn University.

My field of interest is history, development, tourism and anything about Lao studies. At a daily basis you can find me somewhere around Southeast Asia, Bangkok or Vientiane, or maybe Hanoi.

