Opening Remarks
by
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at
ASEAN Ecotourism Forum
Pakse, Champasak Province, Lao PDR, 22 June 2016

Your Excellencies

Prof. Dr. Bosengkham Vongdara, Minister of Information, Culture and Tourism of Lao PDR

Honorable ASEAN Tourism Ministers and Heads of Delegation

Dr. Bounthong Divixay, Governor of Champasak

Xu Jing, Director for Asia Pacific and Executive Secretary of General Assembly & Executive Council, World Tourism Organization

Distinguish Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Sabaidee

On behalf of the Secretary-General of ASEAN, I would like to congratulate Lao PDR on the convening of this Forum; especially in this beautiful city of Pakse, with its strategic location as a commercial and transportation hub (to Southern Laos), and a gateway to significant historical and natural attractions.

Indeed, Pakse provides the perfect setting for today’s forum on Ecotourism.
But, before we put on our adventure gear and head towards Si Phan Don, in search of freshwater dolphins or to tame the rapids of the Khone Pha Pheng Falls, allow me to share some significant developments on the ASEAN Community, in particular the ASEAN Vision 2025, that will help provide important context to our deliberations on promoting Ecotourism in ASEAN.

**Excellencies, Distinguish Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen**

31 December 2015 marked a significant milestone for ASEAN following the establishment of ASEAN Community comprising of the ASEAN Political-Security Community, an ASEAN Economic Community and an ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community.

Under the ASEAN Economic Community, significant progress have been realized as the region strive towards establishing a single market and production base where there are free flow of goods, services, investment, skilled labor and freer flow of capital.

Our market are now more open, with intra-regional tariffs virtually eliminated and restrictions in services sector gradually removed.

Investment regimes continue to be improved and further liberalized.

A more business-enabling and innovation-supportive environment created through adoption of common frameworks, standards and mutual cooperation.
Transportation and infrastructure networks enhanced through establishment of ASEAN Highway Network and also the realization of an ASEAN Open Skies.

Integration with global economy further deepened through the conclusion of existing free trade and comprehensive economic partnership agreements with its major trading partners.

**Excellencies, Distinguish Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen**

Notwithstanding the progress made, today growth can no longer be relied upon low cost labor or resource extraction. For growth to be sustainable, ASEAN will need to focus on quality growth; one that is sustainable, inclusive, and people-centred; one that is value-oriented, driven by productivity and innovation.

It is under such premises that the new ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025 was developed as it charts the pathway for ASEAN’s economic integration over the next decade.

It re-focuses ASEAN economic integration from production-led growth towards growth driven by innovation and productivity, and supported by coherent and responsive regulations; and paying more attention to the intangible attributes of economic growth, particularly human capital, innovation policies and improvement to the intellectual property and competition frameworks.
At the same time, it also stresses inclusiveness in its growth, a theme that will resonate in the discussions on Ecotourism, which will involve enhancing Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) development, building up a knowledge center for MSMEs, and forging links with multinational corporations in value chain integration.

All these will have bearing on the development of Ecotourism in ASEAN.

**Excellencies, Distinguish Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen**

For tourism, its 2025 vision is to be a quality tourism destination offering a unique, diverse ASEAN experience, and committed to responsible, sustainable and inclusive tourism development.

ASEAN, with its diversity, offers many natural attractions – *Tasek Merimbun Heritage Park in Brunei Darussalam; Preah Monivong “Bokor” National Park in Cambodia; Nam Ha National Protected Area in Laos; Gunung Leuser National Park in Indonesia; Taman Negara Pahang National Park in Malaysia, Nat Ma Taung National Park in Myanmar; Mount Apo National Park in the Philippines, Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve in Singapore; Khao Yai National Park in Thailand; Kon Ka Kinh National Park in Viet Nam* – to name just a few.

As you can see, there is a wealth of natural resources that can attract investments and increase the economic well-being of the local community around them, not least the desire to educate and raise awareness among citizens of ASEAN and
beyond, on the beauty, value and the need to protect and conserve our natural heritage.

In this regards, an ASEAN reference framework to guide the development, promotion and implementation of Ecotourism needs to be established soon, to capitalize on our collective regional strengths, and to ensure a more coherent, productive and secure development of Ecotourism in ASEAN.

This reference framework should leverage the cross-sector ASEAN Economic Community 2025 Blueprint, and in particular the Tourism sector strategic directions, which called for, amongst others, raising the capacity and capability of human capital involved, mainstreaming of local community and private sector participation in the tourism value chains, protecting and maintaining natural and cultural heritage, and increasing responsiveness to environmental protection and climate change.

Most importantly, this reference framework should consider key principles and established best practices from the Ecotourism community itself (in particular, mechanisms to involve the local community).

Aside from the reference framework, we need to also establish an Ecotourism community that can spearhead and help translate these values, principles and guidelines, into concrete action plans.
We should also seek to establish a network of ecotourism clusters that offer high standards of service, deliver positive experiences and ecological education for the traveller, generate financial benefits for the local/indigenous community, encourage partnerships with the private sector who can offer expertise and deliver the requisite services, yet maintaining and conserving the cultural and natural heritage of the region.

These are some of the important ingredients in formulating a robust ASEAN Ecotourism development framework.

**Excellencies, Distinguish Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen**

As you can see, there is much to discuss in order to refine and realize these ideas.

To this end, I look forward to having productive discussions at this Forum and to jointly develop the reference framework or guidelines for the development of sustainable Ecotourism in ASEAN, which will involve responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves education and interpretation of the natural environment.

Khop Chai