

Handbook for Rebuilding Rural Tourism in ASEAN Using Regenerative Tourism

Building tourism that
strengthens place, people and nature



Strengthens
place



Empowers
people



Restores
nature



Builds lasting
prosperity

REGENERATIVE TOURISM

Make tourism a force that strengthens place, people and nature.

WHAT IT MEANS

Tourism should leave a place better because tourism happens there.

It seeks positive social, environmental and economic change by restoring ecosystems, strengthening local culture and improving community wellbeing over time.

SUSTAINABLE

- Reduce harm
- Maintain balance
- Minimise negative impacts

REGENERATIVE

- Restore & renew
- Strengthen local systems
- Create positive change

Why it matters for rural ASEAN

Five reasons highlighted in the handbook

01 Rooted in place

Builds on strong ties to land, water and cultural traditions.

02 Local agency

Puts communities at the centre of decisions and ownership.

03 Resilience

Strengthens livelihoods, supply chains and ecosystem health.

04 Meaningful visits

Turns cultural exchange and care for place into visitor value.

05 Value retained

Prioritises local participation and reinvestment to reduce leakage.

10 core principles

A connected system, not a checklist

01

Holistic & systems-based

See tourism as part of a living social-ecological system.

02

Place-based & culturally grounded

Build from local identity, knowledge and landscape.

03

Community-centred & empowering

Put wellbeing, capability and ownership at the centre.

04

Nature as a stakeholder

Improve ecological conditions, not only reduce damage.

05

Transformative visitor engagement

Turn visitors into informed, responsible contributors.

06

Care, respect & reciprocity

Give back through fair and respectful relationships.

07

Local agency & leadership

Strengthen local decision-making and confidence.

08

Collaboration & governance

Coordinate community, public, private and civil-society actors.

09

Continuous learning & co-evolution

Review, learn and adapt as conditions change.

10

Rethinking success & impact

Measure wellbeing, culture, ecosystems and visitor contribution.

HOW THE HANDBOOK WAS BUILT

Desktop research + field evidence

Interviews, site visits and group discussions in Malaysia and Thailand tested how regeneration works across different governance models.

THAILAND

DASTA • Khung Bang Kachao • Takhian Tia

MALAYSIA

KOPEL • Sawit Kinabalu • Scuba Junkie SEAS



THE 6-STEP REGENERATIVE PATHWAY

Process over blueprint • start small • learn continuously • adapt locally

ACTION + LEARNING = REGENERATION

01

Identification & Invitation

DO

Map distinctive cultural/natural assets; assess community readiness through dialogue and consent.

OUTCOME Prioritised community + interest to collaborate

02

Foundation & Visioning

DO

Build regenerative awareness; co-create a shared vision linked to culture, ecology and resilience.

OUTCOME Community-owned “North Star”

03

Capacity Building & Co-Design

DO

Train regenerative skills; co-design experiences and a fair, transparent governance model.

OUTCOME Skilled core group + pilots + governance

04

Pilot Implementation & Iteration

DO

Soft launch with mentoring; gather visitor, member and environmental feedback and adapt.

OUTCOME Operational CBT + adaptive confidence

05

Strengthening & Networking

DO

Build support networks; move from stewardship to active environmental regeneration planning.

OUTCOME More resilient, less externally dependent enterprise

06

Monitoring, Mentorship & Success

DO

Use indicators beyond economics; shift external support from trainer to strategic mentor.

OUTCOME Self-sufficient steward able to mentor others

10 ENABLING CONDITIONS

What helps the six steps last

- Supportive government policies
- Institutional guidance & ongoing support
- Visionary community leadership
- Transparent, accountable governance
- Effective monitoring & evaluation
- Equitable participation & benefit sharing
- Capacity building & skills development
- Comprehensive resource assessment
- Connection with sustainability networks
- Contextualised international best practice

COMMON CHALLENGES → PRACTICAL RESPONSES

- Youth continuity** → Incubation + youth roles + intergenerational learning
- Larger-company competition** → Partner on packages, sourcing, marketing and training
- Community collaboration** → Agree shared rules, start small and use neutral facilitation
- Tourism vs. ecosystem limits** → Set visitor limits, conservation fees, zoning and steward roles

MEASURE WHAT MATTERS

Go beyond visitor numbers and revenue: track social cohesion, cultural vitality, ecosystem health and visitor contribution.

THE WAY FORWARD

LEADERSHIP + YOUTH

Strengthen continuity and local innovation.

CAPACITY + KNOWLEDGE

Use scientific approaches, digital tools and monitoring.

COLLABORATIVE NETWORKS

Connect communities, government, NGOs, research and business.

WIDER SUSTAINABILITY

Link tourism to biodiversity, climate resilience and circularity.

ASEAN CASE STUDIES IN PRACTICE

Six grounded examples of regenerative tourism from the handbook



DASTA

THAILAND

Public facilitator

- Selects communities based on unique value, fragility and governance challenges.
- Starts with consent and mentoring, not imposition.



Lesson Consent builds stronger tourism futures.



KOPEL

MALAYSIA

Community-led cooperative

- Built tourism through long-term dialogue, local ownership and planning.
- Linked homestays and visitor experiences with forest restoration.



Lesson Strong institutions take time to grow.



Sawit Kinabalu

MALAYSIA

Corporate-led regeneration

- Turned a plantation landscape into a conservation and learning area.
- Used canopy bridges and river restoration to reconnect habitats.



Lesson Regeneration can happen in working landscapes.



Scuba Junkie SEAS

MALAYSIA

Operator-led stewardship

- Combines marine education, clean-ups and community outreach.
- Supports coral restoration and turtle conservation.



Lesson Visitors can become active marine stewards.



Bang Kachao

THAILAND

Networked community destination

- Uses bicycles, boats and local production for low-carbon tourism.
- Created community innovation such as the floating “Red Dragon” waste barrier.



Lesson Collaboration helps scale local innovation.



Takhian Tia

THAILAND

Start-small CBT

- Began with coconut visits, cooking, crafts and storytelling.
- Improved through feedback, coordination and wider participation.



Lesson Start small, learn fast, then grow.



CROSS-CASE INSIGHT

There is no single model of regenerative tourism. Across ASEAN, successful practice can be community-led, publicly facilitated, corporate-supported or operator-led, but all strong examples connect tourism with local leadership, ecological care and continuous learning.