

HANDBOOK FOR REBUILDING RURAL TOURISM IN ASEAN USING REGENERATIVE TOURISM



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We are deeply grateful to all who contributed their knowledge and experiences. We hope that this handbook supports ASEAN Member States in advancing regenerative tourism approaches that empower communities, regenerate ecosystems and create unique experiences in tourism.

About The Handbook

Purpose of the Handbook

The purpose of this handbook is to provide guidance to community-based tourism planners and rural tourism operators interested in introducing regenerative tourism to their destination as part of the overall movement towards sustainable tourism. The target audience of this handbook could also include tourism policy makers and rural development agencies who are looking to provide support and financing for the implementation of regenerative tourism initiatives in their area.

What You'll Find in This Handbook

Introduction to Regenerative Tourism

Provides an overview of regenerative tourism and explains how it differs from conventional and sustainable tourism approaches.

Step-by-Step Framework for Regenerative Tourism

Presents a practical pathway to guide communities in initiating and developing regenerative tourism initiatives.

Case Studies from ASEAN

Showcases real examples from communities and organisations that demonstrate regenerative tourism practices in different contexts.

Critical Success Factors

Highlights key conditions that support successful regenerative tourism initiatives, including leadership, governance and collaboration.

Issues and Challenges

Discusses common difficulties faced by communities in implementing regenerative tourism and lessons learned from practice.

How This Handbook Was Developed

This handbook was developed through a combination of desktop research and case studies of regenerative tourism initiatives in Malaysia and Thailand. The purpose of the research was to identify practical insights, critical success factors, and implementation challenges for regenerative tourism in rural and community-based tourism settings.

Desktop Study

The first stage involved a desktop study of regenerative tourism concepts, global trends and implementation practices. This review examined existing literature, policy documents and international case studies to understand the definitions, principles and impacts of regenerative tourism. The desktop study also explored best practices in regenerative tourism development, particularly within ASEAN contexts.

Data Collection and Analysis

Primary data for this handbook were collected through interviews, site visits and group discussions with key stakeholders involved in regenerative tourism initiatives.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with project owners and managers from selected regenerative tourism initiatives in ASEAN, including KOPEL, Sawit Kinabalu, Scuba Junkie SEAS in Malaysia and the Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (DASTA) in Thailand. These interviews aimed to identify critical success factors and challenges in implementing regenerative tourism projects.

Site visits

Site visits were conducted to observe regenerative tourism initiatives and engage directly with local communities. The visits allowed the study team to better understand how regenerative tourism is conceptualised and implemented in real settings.

Group discussions

Group discussions were also carried out with local community members involved in tourism activities to understand community perceptions, participation and experiences in regenerative tourism.

Study Visit to Thailand

A study visit to Thailand was conducted as part of the data collection process. Two communities were identified in collaboration with the Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (DASTA), a government agency responsible for developing sustainable tourism in Thailand. The study visit included interviews with DASTA officials and field visits to two regenerative tourism destinations: Khung Bangkachao (Bangkok) and Takhian Tia Community (Pattaya). These sites demonstrate successful examples of community-based tourism that integrate environmental protection, community empowerment and economic development. The visit provided valuable insights into how DASTA supports communities through capacity building, participatory planning and internationally recognised standards such as the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) destination standard.

Study Visit to Sabah, Malaysia

A second study visit was conducted in Sabah, Malaysia, focusing on regenerative tourism initiatives in Kinabatangan and Mabul Island. Three sites were selected as case studies: KOPEL, Sawit Kinabalu, and Scuba Junkie SEAS. These sites represent different governance models of regenerative tourism. KOPEL demonstrates a community-led model integrating tourism with forest restoration activities in the Kinabatangan Biosphere Reserve. Sawit Kinabalu represents a corporate-led model, where conservation and restoration are incorporated into plantation land management through partnerships with local communities. Scuba Junkie SEAS illustrates an operator-led model, focusing on marine conservation and community engagement on Mabul Island. The study visits showed that regenerative tourism can emerge from multiple actors and governance approaches. In all cases, tourism activities contributed to environmental restoration, community livelihood opportunities and increased awareness of conservation among local residents.



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01

Introduction

Context and Rationale

The COVID-19 pandemic brought global tourism to a sudden halt. Rural destinations across ASEAN were among the hardest hit because many depend heavily on tourism for jobs and local income. When travel stopped, it exposed not only immediate economic losses but also deeper weaknesses in tourism models that relied on high visitor numbers, external investors and profit-driven practices (Brouder et al., 2020).

As recovery began, an important question arose: should rural tourism simply return to the old way of doing things? Even before the pandemic, many destinations faced problems such as overtourism, environmental damage and cultural commodification (Capocchi et al., 2019; Mihalic, 2020). Going back to the same model risks repeating these challenges.

Regenerative tourism offers a different path. Instead of only reducing negative impacts, it focuses on creating positive social, environmental and economic outcomes for local communities (Dredge, 2022; Bellato et al., 2022). This handbook provides practical guidance to help rural ASEAN communities rebuild tourism in a way that strengthens resilience and supports long-term wellbeing.

What is Regenerative Tourism?

Regenerative tourism is about helping a place become better because of tourism, not worse. It is not only about bringing visitors and earning income. It is about making sure tourism improves the lives of local people, protects nature and strengthens local culture over time (Dredge, 2022; Bellato et al., 2022). In simple terms, instead of “taking” from a destination, regenerative tourism tries to “give back” more than it takes. This can mean restoring damaged environments, supporting local businesses, strengthening community relationships and protecting cultural traditions. It sees tourism as part of a living system that includes people, nature and local institutions.

Tourism is not separate from the community. It is connected to everything around it. Regenerative tourism is often compared with sustainable tourism, but they are not exactly the same. Sustainable tourism mainly focuses on reducing harm. For example, it tries to reduce waste, save water and protect resources. The goal is to avoid making things worse. It aims to keep balance and prevent further damage. In practice, sustainability efforts can sometimes become checklist-based or focused only on meeting certain standards (McEnhill et al., 2020).

Regenerative tourism goes one step further. It does not only aim to reduce negative impacts. It aims to create positive change. It focuses on restoring nature, improving social wellbeing and strengthening local economies. It encourages communities to learn, experiment and develop solutions that fit their own context rather than copying fixed models (Bellato et al., 2022). In short, sustainable tourism tries to do less harm. Regenerative tourism tries to make things better.

Why Regenerative Tourism is Relevant for Rural Communities in ASEAN?

Regenerative tourism is well suited for rural areas across ASEAN for several reasons.

First, many rural communities have strong connections to their land, water and cultural traditions. This fits well with regenerative tourism, which values care for nature, local knowledge and interconnectedness (Dredge, 2022; Nelson and Shilling, 2021).

Second, regenerative tourism puts communities at the centre of decision-making. It supports bottom-up and place-based development, giving local people more control and ownership. This helps ensure tourism reflects community priorities and shares benefits more fairly (Price et al., 2024).

Third, regenerative tourism strengthens local supply chains, supports diverse livelihoods, restores ecosystems and builds social unity. This makes rural destinations more resilient to economic shocks and environmental change (Cave and Dredge, 2021).

Fourth, it encourages meaningful visitor experiences based on real interaction, cultural exchange and care for place. This helps rural ASEAN destinations stand out in a competitive tourism market (Price et al., 2024).

Finally, by prioritising local participation and reinvestment, regenerative tourism reduces economic leakage. It ensures tourism supports and nourishes host communities rather than extracting value from them (Cave and Dredge, 2021).

In essence, regenerative tourism provides a practical and values-driven framework not only for post-crisis recovery but for guiding the long-term evolution of rural tourism in ASEAN towards outcomes where communities and ecosystems are strengthened together.



02

Core Principles of Regenerative Tourism

The shift towards regenerative tourism is based on a set of connected principles that are different from traditional tourism models that mainly focus on extraction and profit. These principles are supported by key research and real case studies. Together, they provide practical guidance for rural communities across ASEAN that want to rebuild tourism in ways that support people, protect nature and strengthen the place.

- 01 Holistic and Systems-Based
- 02 Place-Based and Culturally Grounded
- 03 Community-Centred and Empowering
- 04 Nature as a Stakeholder
- 05 Transformative Visitor Engagement
- 06 Care, Respect and Reciprocity
- 07 Local Agency and Leadership
- 08 Collaboration and Governance
- 09 Continuous Learning and Co-Evolution
- 10 Rethinking Success and Impact



01 Holistic and Systems-Based

Regenerative tourism does not treat tourism as a separate industry. Instead, it sees tourism as part of a larger system that includes the environment, society, culture and the economy (Dredge, 2022). This means we must look at both direct and indirect impacts across different sectors and levels. It does not rely on one standard solution for all places. Instead, it responds to local conditions, relationships and needs (Bellato et al., 2022). In regenerative tourism, success is not measured only by tourist numbers or income. It is measured by the overall health and wellbeing of the destination as a whole.



02

Place-Based and Culturally Grounded

This principle means regeneration must grow from the unique character of each place. Tourism should reflect the local environment, history, culture and community identity. Regenerative tourism values local and Indigenous knowledge. It recognises that humans are part of nature, not separate from it (Dredge, 2022; Nelson and Shilling, 2021). In practice, this means creating tourism activities that match local values and landscapes. For example, it may involve reviving traditional skills, celebrating cultural festivals or reusing heritage buildings in ways that strengthen local identity and sense of place (Price et al., 2024).



03

Community-Centred and Empowering

At the heart of regenerative tourism is a change in priorities. Community wellbeing comes first. It is not treated as a side effect of tourism but as the main goal. This approach is bottom-up. It builds local skills, confidence and ownership in tourism decisions (Dredge, 2022). For example, communities may run their own tourism businesses, create local jobs, support local producers, improve shared facilities or address social issues through tourism. In this model, tourism serves the community's goals. The community does not have to change just to meet tourism demands (Price et al., 2024).



04

Nature as a Stakeholder

Regenerative tourism changes how we see the environment. Nature is not just a resource to use. It is an important partner that must be cared for. Tourism activities are designed based on ecological principles such as renewal, diversity and circular use of resources (Dredge, 2022). The goal is not only to reduce environmental damage, but to improve environmental conditions. In practice, this may include restoring habitats, protecting biodiversity, using renewable energy, turning waste into useful resources and managing land in a sustainable way (Price et al., 2024).



05

Transformative Visitor Engagement

In regenerative tourism, visitors are not just consumers. They are active participants in supporting the place they visit. Tourism experiences are designed to encourage meaningful engagement, responsibility and contribution. This creates “visitor positive” outcomes (Price et al., 2024). This means attracting visitors whose values match the destination, educating them about responsible behaviour and giving them opportunities to support conservation, protect culture or contribute to community projects. The goal is for visitors to leave a positive impact, not just a footprint.



06

Care, Respect and Reciprocity

This principle forms the ethical foundation of regenerative tourism. It is grounded in mutual respect and a commitment to avoid harm to people and ecosystems while actively giving back more than is taken (Dredge, 2022). Responsibility is understood not as a compliance requirement but as a shared ethic of care. In practice, this includes fair wages, respectful cultural engagement and equitable relationships with local suppliers and workers. Value circulates within the destination through reciprocal arrangements that nourish the wider system (Price et al., 2024).



07

Local Agency and Leadership

Regenerative tourism values and strengthens local leadership. It recognises that knowledge and experience already exist within the community, not only with outside experts (Dredge, 2022). Community members help identify their own priorities, challenges and opportunities. Outside organisations do not impose ready-made solutions. Instead, they support the community by encouraging dialogue, building skills and increasing confidence. This approach allows communities to decide and shape their own tourism future (Price et al., 2024).



08 Collaboration and Governance

Regeneration cannot happen alone. It requires cooperation between many groups, including government agencies, private businesses, community organisations and civil society (Dredge, 2022). Decision-making should be participatory and inclusive. Different sectors such as tourism, environment, culture and local development must work together in a coordinated way. Good regenerative governance builds trust and long-term commitment to the place. It encourages cooperation instead of competition, as seen in destination networks that work together for shared goals (Price et al., 2024).



09 Continuous Learning and Co-Evolution

Regenerative tourism is not a one-time goal. It is an ongoing process. Destinations are always changing because social, environmental and economic conditions change (Bellato et al., 2022). Therefore, continuous learning, reflection and adjustment are important. Communities and tourism actors regularly review their actions, listen to feedback and improve their practices. This flexible approach builds resilience and helps tourism adapt to change over time (Dredge, 2022; Price et al., 2024).



10 Rethinking Success and Impact

Regenerative tourism questions the usual way of measuring success. It does not focus only on increasing visitor numbers or revenue. Instead, it looks at wider indicators of destination health, such as community wellbeing, strong social relationships, healthy ecosystems, active culture and positive visitor contribution (Bellato et al., 2022; Price et al., 2024). The focus shifts from maximising growth to caring for long-term wellbeing. This requires new ways to measure and value social, cultural and environmental outcomes, not just economic results.



Takian Thia Community,
Thailand

03

Step-by-Step Guideline For Rural Destinations



Translating principles of Regenerative Tourism

This guideline translates the principles of regenerative tourism into an actionable, iterative pathway for rural destinations in ASEAN. It emphasizes process over blueprint, advocating for a journey of continuous learning and adaptation tailored to local context.

Step 1

Identification & Invitation: Discovering Potential

This phase focuses on locating and engaging with communities that possess the foundational assets for regenerative tourism.

Action 1.1: Asset Mapping & Selection

Identify rural villages with distinctive, tangible and intangible cultural heritage and high-value natural ecosystems that are both a unique selling proposition and in need of careful stewardship. The focus is on places where tourism could directly support conservation and cultural transmission.

Action 1.2: Community Readiness Assessment

Engage the identified community not with a pre-made plan, but with a question and an invitation. Facilitate dialogues to understand their perceptions of tourism, their livelihood challenges, and their willingness to explore Regenerative Community-Based Tourism (CBT) as a tool for improving wellbeing while protecting their culture and nature.

Outcome

A shortlist of prioritized communities with high regenerative potential and a foundational level of interest in collaborating.



○○○ CASE STUDY 1

Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (DASTA), Thailand

DASTA is affiliated with Thailand's Ministry of Tourism and Sports. It supports tourism development in selected designated areas, mostly rural and community-based tourism contexts. DASTA's mandate covers destinations, attractions, tourism businesses and communities. Their wider work also includes Creative City development aligned with UNESCO's Creative Cities Network. DASTA leads development in nine designated areas across Thailand. These areas are treated as learning models for sustainable destination development, not as mass tourism growth zones.



Comprehensive Asset Documentation

DASTA identifies potential communities through a structured selection process based on three core criteria that directly align with the regenerative tourism principle of identifying places where tourism can support conservation and cultural transmission:

1 Unique Value

The community must possess distinctive cultural, historical or environmental assets.

Example:

Bo Suak Village in Nan Province was identified for its 750+ years of Lanna cultural heritage, including traditional weaving, pottery and bamboo crafts.

2 Fragility

Assets must require protection and careful management to prevent exploitation

Example:

Chiang Khan fishing village faced ecological disruption from climate change and upstream dams, threatening traditional livelihoods and requiring stewardship.

3 Governance Challenges

Overlapping jurisdictions or departmental silos risk undermining coordinated planning

Example:

Urban fringe areas like Khung Bang Kachao face pressure from multiple authorities and require integrated management





Once a community is identified through these criteria, DASTA conducts comprehensive research on local resources and sensitivities before any development conversations begin. This research phase documents:

Tangible Cultural Heritage

Physical assets such as the historic Hundred-Sao House in Takhian Tia or the weaving equipment in Bo Suak

Intangible Heritage

Traditional knowledge, rituals and community practices that define local identity

Natural Ecosystems

Environmental assets requiring stewardship, such as fish habitats in Chiang Khan or forest ecosystems in designated areas

Livelihood Patterns

Understanding existing economic activities and their relationship to cultural and natural assets

This asset mapping process is not extractive, it serves as the foundation for understanding a community's regenerative potential while building DASTA's knowledge base for facilitative engagement.



Identification & Invitation: Community Readiness

DASTA begins with a simple question that shapes everything that follows:

“ Do you want tourism? ”

This question turns engagement into an invitation, not a sales pitch. It protects communities from being pushed into tourism because of outside agendas. It also creates an early moment of consent, shared intention and collective responsibility.

If the community does not agree, **DASTA steps away**.



What DASTA does?

Create a safe space for honest conversations

Before any project design, DASTA facilitates discussions on what tourism could mean locally. Communities explore:

- What benefits they expect
- What risks they fear
- What they want to protect in culture and nature
- What kind of future they want beyond income alone

This shifts the focus from “how to attract tourists” to “what kind of life do we want here and can tourism support it?”

Build a shared plan with shared roles

DASTA does not work alone. When a designated area is developed, planning involves ministries and agencies such as culture, environment and industry alongside local authorities and community committees. They describe this approach as thinking together and planning together. The plan includes responsibilities, budget pathways and a monitoring process. The plan is meant to be realistic, trackable and collectively owned.

Start with identity, not products

Many rural communities do not see their everyday life as valuable. DASTA helps them rediscover local identity and assets such as:

- Food culture, herbs, farming and fishing practices
- Festivals, crafts, music and local stories
- Architecture, heritage buildings and cultural landscapes
- Waterways and traditional mobility systems like canals and boats

The key idea is that difference is value. If a place is distinct, visitors will come to learn, not to consume.



The Invitation, Not Imposition, Principle

DASTA's approach to community engagement is deliberately designed to avoid top-down imposition. As Watcharee Churaksa, Assistant Director of DASTA, explains:



DASTA's role is one of "mentorship and facilitation, with the strategic goal of enhancing the community's capacity to manage, operate and equitably distribute tourism income sustainably



Watcharee Churaksa
Assistant Director
of DASTA

Step 2

Foundation & Visioning: Building the "Why"

Before any training on "how," the community builds a shared understanding and purpose.

Action 2.1: Awareness & Mindset Building

Conduct workshops to facilitate a shift in social-ecological consciousness (Dredge, 2022). This involves exploring the differences between extractive, sustainable and regenerative tourism and connecting tourism development directly to the community's own goals for cultural vitality, environmental health and economic resilience.

Action 2.2: Co-Creating a Regenerative Vision:

Guide the community in articulating a shared vision for their future. This vision answers: How can tourism help our community and our place not just survive, but thrive? This process ensures the project is Place-Based and Culturally Grounded from the outset.

Outcome

A community-owned vision statement that frames tourism as a tool for regeneration, creating intrinsic motivation and a "North Star" for all decisions.



○○○ CASE STUDY 2

Koperasi Pelancongan Kampung Batu Puteh (KOPEL), Malaysia

Koperasi Pelancongan Kampung Batu Puteh (KOPEL) is a community-based cooperative established in 1996 in Kampung Batu Puteh, located along the Lower Kinabatangan River in Sabah, Malaysia. It is one of Southeast Asia's most important biodiversity hotspots. The Lower Kinabatangan is home to:

- 10 species of primates including orangutans, proboscis monkeys and Bornean gibbons
 - 50 mammal species including pygmy elephants
 - More than 250 bird species including hornbills
- Regenerative Tourism

KOPEL was initiated with support from WWF Norway at a time when the village faced poverty and limited livelihood options. Its early years were challenging due to limited local capacity, and the first three years were devoted primarily to planning and capacity building. Over the next twenty-five years, KOPEL evolved from a makeshift office in 1996 to a modern office cum training centre. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it became one of Malaysia's most successful Community-Based Tourism (CBT) models

The development of Koperasi Pelancongan Kampung Batu Puteh (KOPEL) was not a quick process. The journey from 1996 to 2026 reflects decades of community effort, persistence and learning. Some early members eventually moved on, but many remained committed to building a better future for their village. The initiative began when village youth reached out for support to develop ecotourism in 1996, which later led to the establishment of the MESCOT (Model for Ecologically Sustainable Community Tourism) initiative in March 1997. From the beginning, the effort reflected a strong community spirit and collective aspiration.





What KOPEL does?

Building the Foundation Through Community Dialogue

Between 1997 and 1999, members of the MESCOT group held regular workshops, discussions and learning exchanges. They researched ecotourism practices, consulted elders and community leaders, and travelled to learn about tourism development, marketing and regulatory requirements.

These meetings were not externally imposed. They were organised by the community to ensure that local people remained in control of planning and decision-making.

Participation was intentionally inclusive. The process welcomed anyone who wished to be involved, encouraging wider participation across the village.

Through these repeated interactions, community members learned how to share ideas, make collective decisions and take responsibility for the outcomes. At the same time, the initiative respected customary law (adat) and local cultural norms.

Developing a Community Vision

After several years of dialogue and preparation, the community agreed in 1999 to establish four social enterprises. Rather than focusing on a single tourism activity, this approach allowed benefits to be distributed across a wider section of the community.

At the centre of this vision was the Miso Walai Homestay programme, supported by initiatives such as the *Maya do Talud* Village Boat Service. Around the same time, the MESCOT initiative also began forest restoration activities following the forest fires of 1998, linking conservation with tourism development.



Strengthening Community Institutions

The MESCOT initiative later helped secure external funding to establish the Tungog Rainforest Eco Camp and contributed to the formation of KOPEL Bhd, the village cooperative responsible for managing tourism activities.

The MESCOT facilities also became a shared space for the village tourism associations, supporting coordination, meetings and training activities.

Linking Tourism with Conservation

Although visitor numbers in the early 2000s were still small, often only a few hundred per year, a strong relationship between tourism and forest restoration had already emerged. Many visitors were students, volunteers and travellers interested in supporting conservation work and some participated directly in restoration activities.



○○○ CASE STUDY 3

Sawit Kinabalu Group Green Sdn. Bhd., Malaysia

Sawit Kinabalu Group is a state-linked plantation company owned by the Sabah State Government through the Sabah Land Development Board (SLDB). Established in 1996, it manages large oil palm plantations across Sabah and contributes to rural development. Many of its plantations are located near the Kinabatangan region, a major biodiversity hotspot that supports endangered species such as orangutans, pygmy elephants and proboscis monkeys. However, agricultural expansion has fragmented forests and disrupted wildlife corridors. In response, Sawit Kinabalu has begun integrating conservation and restoration into its plantation management.



What Sawit Kinabalu Group does?

Sungai Pin Conservation Area (SPnCA)

Sawit Kinabalu established the Sungai Pin Conservation Area (SPnCA) in 2017, covering 2,632 hectares within an oil palm plantation landscape in Kinabatangan. The purpose was not tourism initially but to address critical environmental problems such as:

- habitat fragmentation
- disruption of wildlife corridors
- biodiversity loss in plantation landscapes

This shows that the initiative began with a clear conservation purpose, which later created opportunities for education and tourism experiences.

Awareness and Mindset Shift

The conservation area demonstrates a shift in how plantations can be understood:

Traditional mindset

- Plantations are purely production landscapes.

New mindset

- Plantations can also support biodiversity conservation, ecological restoration and environmental education.

This shift helps stakeholders see tourism as a tool for environmental learning and conservation funding, not just visitor attraction.

Innovative Restoration Actions

A major restoration innovation is the construction of three canopy bridges across the Sungai Pin river. These bridges allow arboreal wildlife such as:

- Orangutans
- proboscis monkeys
- long-tailed macaques

to move safely between fragmented forest patches.

Camera trap monitoring recorded about 50 orangutans using the bridges, including mothers with young, showing that the bridges successfully reconnect habitats.



Long-Term Landscape Restoration

Another important effort is the replanting of trees along 27 kilometres of the Sungai Pin riverbank. This restoration programme began in the early 2000s through collaboration with:

- WWF
- Sabah Forestry Department

The riparian forest buffers help to:

- protect water quality
 - restore habitat connectivity
 - strengthen biodiversity in the Kinabatangan landscape
-

Tourism as a Learning Platform

Tourism experiences at the conservation area are designed to help visitors understand restoration. Visitors can:

- observe canopy bridges used by wildlife
- learn about camera trap monitoring
- understand habitat restoration efforts

This creates an educational tourism experience, where visitor spending helps support conservation work.



○○○ CASE STUDY 4

Scuba Junkie SEAS, Malaysia

Scuba Junkie is a dive tourism operator based in Sabah, Malaysia, with a major base on Mabul Island near Sipadan, one of the most biodiverse marine regions in the Coral Triangle. Recognising that marine tourism depends on healthy coral reefs and marine ecosystems, the organisation established Scuba Junkie SEAS (Social and Environmental Awareness Sabah), a non-profit conservation initiative that integrates tourism, community engagement and marine restoration. Rather than treating conservation as a separate activity, the organisation integrates environmental education and participation into the visitor experience. Through these initiatives, tourists, local residents and youth become active participants in protecting marine ecosystems.



Awareness and Mindset Building

A core element of the initiative is environmental awareness and education. Scuba Junkie SEAS runs outreach programmes to educate both visitors and the local community about marine ecosystems, reef health and the impacts of human activities.

These programmes encourage people to recognise the link between healthy oceans, tourism livelihoods and long-term community wellbeing.

Visitors participate in:

- marine conservation briefings
- educational talks and storytelling sessions about coral reefs, turtles and marine biodiversity
- beach and ocean clean-ups to address marine debris

These activities help shift visitors from being passive tourists into active participants in marine stewardship. Regular beach clean-ups are organised with tourists, local residents and conservation groups to remove marine debris while also documenting waste sources and environmental impacts.

Co-Creating a Regenerative Vision

Scuba Junkie's conservation model invites both tourists and local communities to contribute directly to ecosystem restoration.

Coral Restoration

The organisation conducts coral rehabilitation programmes, including coral nurseries and coral transplantation to restore damaged reefs. These activities are often supported by divers and conservation volunteers who help monitor reef health and understand the impacts of climate change on coral ecosystems.

Turtle Conservation and Rehabilitation

The Mabul Turtle Hatchery, established in 2011, protects turtle nests from illegal harvesting and allows hatchlings to be safely released into the ocean. The project has released thousands of hatchlings and often allows visitors to witness the release events. The Mabul Turtle Rehabilitation Centre, created in collaboration with the Sabah Wildlife Department, treats injured or sick turtles before releasing them back into the wild.



What Scuba Junkie does?

Community Awareness and Youth Engagement

Through the Scuba Junkie SEAS (Social and Environmental Awareness Sabah) programme, conservation teams regularly conduct marine awareness sessions for local and Indigenous children living on the island.

These sessions introduce children to the rich biodiversity of the surrounding marine ecosystem, including coral reefs, turtles and reef fish species. Activities often include storytelling, interactive learning sessions and field-based experiences that help children understand how healthy oceans support both marine life and community livelihoods.

By engaging local youth early, the programme aims to cultivate long-term stewardship of marine ecosystems and strengthen community pride in protecting their natural environment. In this way, conservation awareness becomes embedded within the community itself rather than being driven only by external organisations or tourism businesses.

Step 3

Capacity Building & Co-Design: Building the "How"

This is the intensive "handholding" stage where skills are developed and offerings are designed *with* the community, not *for* them.

Action 3.1: Regenerative Skills Training:

Provide tailored training that moves beyond standard hospitality. This includes:

- Training community members to share the deep meaning of their culture and ecology with visitors.
- Building skills for operating small social enterprises, ensuring widespread community economic benefit
- Practical training in conservation, waste management and cultural preservation techniques

Action 3.2: Co-Designing Experiences & Governance

Facilitate the community in designing their own tourism offerings that are Community-Positive and Visitor-Positive (Price et al., 2024). Simultaneously, help them establish a fair and transparent governance structure (e.g., a CBT committee) to manage benefits, resolve conflicts, and ensure Care, Respect and Reciprocity.

Outcome

A skilled core group, a set of pilot tourism experiences, and an agreed governance model.



○○○ CASE STUDY 5

Bang Kachao, Thailand

Bang Kachao is located along the Chao Phraya River near Bangkok and is often referred to as the “lungs of Bangkok”. The area is characterised by canals connected to the Chao Phraya River; fertile soil formed from river sediment agricultural landscapes such as sugar palm gardens; and high biodiversity and green spaces. Because of its proximity to Bangkok, the area serves both as a recreational green space for the city and an important ecological buffer. The settlement pattern and housing also reflect the environmental context. Traditional Thai houses are built on raised stilts to cope with seasonal flooding.



What Bang Kachao does?

Community-based Tourism as a Tool for Revitalisation

Community-based tourism in Bang Kachao began when local residents recognised several problems:

- declining income opportunities
- young people leaving the community to work in Bangkok
- abandoned agricultural land
- fading local culture and traditional practices

To address these issues, the community organised tourism activities that highlight local resources and traditions. They mapped what each household could contribute, then created tourism routes that connect these assets. Examples include:

- canal boat tours
- bicycle routes linking different communities
- local food and agricultural experiences
- cultural and craft activities

This approach allowed tourism income to remain within the community while encouraging residents to stay and participate.

Low-Carbon Community-based Tourism

Bang Kachao integrates low-carbon principles into its tourism activities. Key practices include:

- using bicycles for community travel
- offering non-motorised boat tours along canals
- reducing fuel use in transporting goods
- producing food using local ingredients
- using natural dyes instead of chemical dyes in crafts
- replacing plastic bags with paper bags

These practices reduce environmental impact while strengthening the local economy.



Circular Resource Use and Local Production

Tourism activities rely heavily on materials and resources available within the community, such as:

- natural herbs for herbal compress products
- local ingredients for food production
- natural plant dyes for textiles

Souvenirs are made from traditional knowledge and local plants, including herbal oils and medicinal products. This strengthens the local resource economy and reinforces cultural knowledge.

Community-Based Environmental Innovation

One of the biggest challenges was garbage flowing into canals from the Chao Phraya River. The community developed an innovative solution by creating a floating trash barrier made from recycled plastic bottles, called the “Red Dragon.”

This barrier:

- captures garbage before it enters canals
- prevents pollution from spreading into the community
- turns waste into a useful environmental tool

The innovation was highly successful and even received financial rewards for the community.



Co-Designing Experiences & Governance

Tourism activities in Bang Kachao were designed with the community rather than for the community.

Local residents identified their own resources and assets and mapped what each household could contribute to tourism. Tourism governance is organised through a community-based tourism association, registered with the government around 2010. Responsibilities are shared among local residents, including roles related to administration, arts and sustainability.

Decision-making also involves consultation with Buddhist temples and monks, reflecting the traditional role of temples as centres of community dialogue and guidance.

Step 4

Pilot Implementation & Iteration: Learning by Doing

The community launches initial, small-scale offerings in a controlled, learning-oriented environment.

Action 4.1: Soft Launch & Mentoring

Support the community through their first guest interactions. Facilitators observe, provide real-time feedback, and help troubleshoot. This embodies Continuous Learning and Co-Evolution (Bellato et al., 2022).

Action 4.2: Feedback Loops & Adaptation

Create structured ways for the community to gather feedback from visitors, internal members, and environmental indicators. Use this data to refine experiences, operations, and governance in an iterative cycle.

Outcome

A live, operational CBT initiative and a community confident in adaptive management.



○○○ CASE STUDY 6

Takhian Tia Community, Thailand

Takhian Tia community in Chonburi province, located near Pattaya, demonstrates how communities move from vision to practice through small-scale experimentation in community-based tourism. After identifying coconut farming as the core identity of the village, the community began testing tourism activities rooted in their everyday lifestyle. Rather than launching large tourism projects immediately, they introduced simple, small-scale experiences that allowed both residents and visitors to learn together.



What Thakian Tia Community does?

Coconut Tourism Route

Around twelve years ago, with support from Thailand's Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (DASTA), the village began opening its activities to visitors. Training programmes helped community members understand how to organise tourism experiences and work together as a community enterprise.

Instead of launching large-scale tourism products immediately, the community started with simple pilot activities. These included:

- coconut farm visits
- traditional cooking experiences
- coconut craft workshops
- cultural storytelling.

Visitors were invited to learn about the village lifestyle and how coconuts are used in food, crafts and daily life.

Formation of different community groups

Different community groups were formed to manage specific activities, such as cooking, farming demonstrations and handicraft production. This allowed more households to participate and helped distribute tourism benefits across the community.

Through repeated interaction with visitors, the community gradually improved their tourism offerings. Feedback from guests, facilitators and community members helped refine the experiences, adjust pricing and strengthen coordination among the different activity groups.

Participation in community-based tourism grew steadily, eventually involving around 100 local residents, with women playing a major leadership role in organising activities and hosting visitors.

Through this process of trial, feedback and adaptation, Takhian Tia developed a functioning community-based tourism initiative rooted in its coconut landscape and cultural traditions.

Step 5

Strengthening & Networking: Building Resilience

As the community gains confidence, the focus shifts to strengthening connections and building long-term resilience.

Action 5.1: Building Collaborative Networks

Connect the community to broader support systems, other successful CBT villages, local NGOs, ethical tour operators and regional government agencies. This builds Collaboration and Governance capacity beyond the village level (Dredge, 2022).

Action 5.2: Environmental Regeneration Planning

Move from basic stewardship to active regeneration projects. Identify key ecosystems for restoration and design ways for tourism (e.g., visitor participation, funding) to contribute directly, treating Nature as a Stakeholder.

Outcome

A well-networked community enterprise engaged in deeper regenerative practices and less dependent on direct external facilitation.

CASE STUDY 7

Bang Kachao, Thailand

Collaborative Networks in Bang Kachao

Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration: Public-Private-Community Partnership

One of the most important collaboration platforms in Bang Kachao is the “OUR Khung BangKachao” initiative, which was designed to improve environmental quality and community wellbeing while maintaining the area as Bangkok’s green oasis. The initiative explicitly promotes cooperation among government agencies, private companies and local residents to develop the area sustainably. This initiative represents a multi-stakeholder governance model, where different actors contribute resources, expertise and funding while communities remain central to decision-making.

Large Network of Organizations Supporting the Area

The OUR Khung BangKachao programme involves more than 34 partner organisations working together to conserve the landscape and support community development. These organisations include:

Government agencies

- Royal Forest Department
- Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning
- local district administrations

Private sector companies

- Bangchak Corporation
- Shell Thailand
- Charoen Pokphand Group
- True Corporation

Academic institutions

- Kasetsart University
- Community stakeholders
- local farmers and residents
- Community-based tourism operators
- village committees

This type of network links local livelihoods with national environmental goals, allowing communities to access technical knowledge, funding and policy support.



Role of Universities and Research Institutions

Universities, particularly Kasetsart University, play a major role in the Bang Kachao network by conducting interdisciplinary research on:

- biodiversity and ecological resources
- sustainable horticulture and agro-ecology
- architecture and spatial planning
- sustainable tourism development

These research programmes provide scientific knowledge that supports long-term ecosystem management and tourism planning. This creates a knowledge network, where researchers, students and community members collaborate on environmental monitoring and sustainable development strategies.

Community-Based Tourism Networks Across Subdistricts

Community-based tourism in Bang Kachao is coordinated across multiple subdistricts, including:

- Song Kanong
- Bang Kasob
- Bang Yor
- Bang Namphueng
- Bang Koh Bua
- Bang Krachao

These communities work together through tourism development programmes supported by Thailand's Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (DASTA). DASTA helps communities:

- build tourism management systems
- collect visitor data
- develop revenue distribution mechanisms
- coordinate regulations for visitors

This creates a regional CBT network, rather than isolated tourism villages.

Step 6

Monitoring, Mentorship & Redefining Success

The "handholding" transitions to strategic mentorship, with success measured holistically.

Action 6.1: Implementing Regenerative Indicators

Work with the community to develop and monitor a simple set of indicators beyond economics. This could blend adapted GSTC criteria with local measures of social cohesion, cultural vitality, ecosystem health and visitor contribution, thus Rethinking Success and Impact.

Action 6.2: Transition to Strategic Mentorship

The external agency's role shifts from trainer to long-term mentor and advocate, supporting the community in tackling new challenges and scaling positive impacts on their own terms.

Outcome

An empowered, self-sufficient community enterprise that is a steward of its culture and environment, with tourism as a regenerative force. The cycle then begins anew, as this community can become a mentor for others.

CASE STUDY 8

KOPEL, Malaysia

Transitioning to Strategic Mentorship

Training and learning hub for community-based tourism

Over the years, KOPEL has hosted:

- Study visits from other Malaysian villages
- learning exchanges with community-based tourism groups across ASEAN
- training programmes for students, NGOs and tourism practitioners

Their learning centre and eco-camp facilities provide spaces for workshops, conservation training and leadership development. Through these exchanges, KOPEL shares practical knowledge on:

- community governance structures
- conservation-based tourism models
- homestay management and visitor hosting
- community enterprise development

In this way, the community has moved from being a tourism destination to becoming a mentor for other emerging community-based tourism initiatives.

CASE STUDY 9

DASTA, Thailand

Tools used to support readiness and monitoring

GSTC-aligned sustainability framework

DASTA uses the Global Sustainable Tourism Council foundation and adapts it for Thailand. The framework covers four pillars:

- Sustainable management
- Socioeconomic wellbeing
- Cultural heritage protection
- Environmental sustainability

They turn this into a Thailand-ready system with expanded local criteria.

CBT Thailand criteria

DASTA developed CBT Thailand as a community-friendly tool aligned with global standards but written for local use. Communities can evaluate themselves year by year. In early stages, many communities meet only 20 to 30 percent of criteria. With mentoring and exposure to model communities, performance rises over time. Communities may apply for national recognition when they reach higher thresholds.

Colour-based monitoring system

Progress is reviewed every year using a simple colour logic:

- Red: urgent risk, action needed now
- Pink: action plan exists
- Yellow: implementation in progress, monitor closely
- Green: achieved and maintained

Not all destinations are green. The purpose is improvement, not perfection.

04

Conclusion

Critical Success Factors

The step-by-step framework presented in this handbook outlines the process through which communities can initiate and develop regenerative tourism initiatives. However, successful implementation depends on several enabling conditions. The critical success factors presented in this section highlight the institutional, governance and capacity requirements that support the effective application of the steps. While the steps describe what communities can do, the success factors explain what conditions help ensure that these efforts lead to meaningful and lasting outcomes. Explanation of each is explained in the next page.

- 01 Supportive Government Policies
- 02 Institutional Support and Guidance
- 03 Visionary Community Leadership
- 04 Transparency and Accountability
- 05 Monitoring and Evaluation Systems
- 06 Equitable Participation and Benefit Sharing
- 07 Capacity Building and Skills Development
- 08 Resource Assessment and Asset Mapping
- 09 Integration with Broader Sustainability Networks
- 10 Adaptation of International Best Practices

CSF	Description
Supportive Government Policies	Government policies that encourage and enable regenerative tourism development within communities.
Institutional Guidance and Ongoing Support	Continuous guidance, facilitation and technical support from relevant government agencies to assist communities in planning and implementing regenerative tourism initiatives.
Visionary Community Leadership	Strong and responsible community leadership that champions regenerative tourism and inspires collective participation.
Transparent and Accountable Governance	Clear and transparent management practices within community organisations that build trust and ensure responsible decision-making.
Effective Monitoring and Evaluation	Systematic management, monitoring and evaluation processes to assess the environmental, social and economic outcomes of regenerative tourism initiatives.
Equitable Participation and Benefit Sharing	Fair access to opportunities and equitable distribution of tourism benefits among community members.
Capacity Building and Skills Development	Continuous learning opportunities and training programmes, particularly in applying scientific approaches and the use of technology in regenerative tourism.
Comprehensive Resource Assessment	Thorough identification and inventory of community assets and resources to understand strengths and opportunities for regenerative tourism.
Connection with Sustainability Networks	Linkages between community initiatives and wider sustainability networks, conservation programmes and green development systems.
Contextualisation of International Best Practices	Adoption and adaptation of relevant international standards and best practices in ways that suit local cultural, environmental and community contexts.

Challenges and Potential Solutions

Regenerative tourism offers a promising pathway for rural destinations. However, the transition towards regenerative practices is not always straightforward. Many rural communities, particularly those managing community-based tourism initiatives, face a range of social, economic and environmental challenges as follows:

ISSUES

01

Youth Participation and Generational Continuity

Younger generations may be less interested in participating in tourism initiatives in rural areas due to different career aspirations or migration to urban areas.

SOLUTIONS

Offer start-up incubation programmes that provide seed funding, mentorship, and shared workspaces for youth to launch small tourism businesses (e.g., guiding services, eco-activities, homestays, creative experiences).

Train and rotate youth as official digital storytellers to capture authentic village life and traditional skills for social media, offering small honorariums or booking-based incentives.

Facilitate intergenerational mentorship circles where elders teach traditional skills and youth teach digital literacy, then co-design tourism experiences together.

Reserve rotating youth seats on the community tourism committee with 6–12 month elected terms to ensure direct youth voice in planning and benefit sharing.

Organize low-cost peer skill-sharing exchanges where youth from one village train peers from nearby villages or schools, building confidence and spreading practices organically.



ISSUES

02

Competition with Larger Tourism Companies

Local communities may face competition from larger tourism companies that have more capital and resources. These companies usually have stronger marketing, better facilities and greater investment, which allows them to attract more visitors. As a result, CBT initiatives may struggle to compete and sustain their tourism activities.

SOLUTIONS

Large tourism companies operating in rural areas should adopt responsible and inclusive business practices. Instead of competing directly with community-based tourism (CBT) initiatives, they can collaborate with local communities such as:

Forming partnership agreements with CBT operators to include community experiences in tourism packages

Promoting local tourism products and activities through company marketing channels

Sourcing goods and services from local communities, such as food, handicrafts and guiding services

Supporting community training and skills development in tourism management and hospitality



ISSUES

03

Community Collaboration

Building consensus within the community can be difficult as members may have different ideas, priorities and expectations regarding tourism development. Some individuals may disagree with proposed initiatives or choose not to participate, which can slow down decision-making and implementation.

SOLUTIONS

Develop a simple community agreement that outlines shared values, rules and expectations for tourism development. This helps reduce misunderstandings and provides a common reference when disagreements arise.

Instead of launching large projects immediately, begin with small tourism activities. Early success can build trust and encourage wider participation.

External facilitators such as NGOs, universities or local authorities can help mediate discussions and support communities in resolving disagreements.



ISSUES

04

Balancing Tourism and Environmental Protection

While tourism provides income for local communities, increasing visitor numbers may also place pressure on fragile ecosystems. Local organisations and community groups often emphasise the need to maintain small-scale, low-impact tourism.

SOLUTIONS

Communities can decide a maximum number of visitors per day or per season to avoid pressure on fragile ecosystems.

A small fee from visitors can be collected and directly used for environmental conservation, waste management or habitat restoration.

Identify sensitive areas where tourism activities are restricted or carefully managed, while directing visitors to more suitable areas.

Community members can act as environmental stewards who monitor visitor behaviour, guide tourists and protect natural areas.

Simple guidelines such as “leave no trace,” wildlife protection rules and waste management practices help ensure visitors respect the environment.

The Way Forward

Regenerative tourism represents an important shift in how tourism is understood and practiced. Rather than focusing only on minimising negative impacts, regenerative tourism encourages communities, governments and tourism stakeholders to actively restore ecosystems, strengthen local culture and enhance community wellbeing. The experiences presented in this handbook demonstrate that regenerative tourism is possible when communities are empowered, when collaboration across stakeholders is strong, and when tourism development is guided by shared values and long-term vision. However, the journey towards regeneration is continuous and requires commitment, patience and adaptive learning. Moving forward, several priorities can help strengthen regenerative tourism initiatives across ASEAN. Finally, the future of regenerative tourism depends on recognising that communities are not simply destinations for tourism but stewards of landscapes, culture and ecosystems. When tourism supports these roles, it can become a powerful tool for regeneration.

Strengthening community leadership and youth engagement will be essential to ensure continuity and innovation in community-based tourism initiatives.

Enhancing capacity building and knowledge sharing can support communities in applying scientific approaches, digital tools and monitoring systems that strengthen regenerative practices.

Fostering collaborative networks among communities, government agencies, NGOs, researchers and the private sector will help mobilise resources and encourage collective learning.

Integrating regenerative tourism into broader sustainability agendas such as biodiversity conservation, climate resilience and circular economy initiatives can further enhance its impact.

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