National Endeavors on Green Tourism and Development case of Thailand

During the past five decades, the tourism industry in Thailand has enjoyed tremendous progress, with the numbers of tourists increasing every year. However, the rapid growth of tourism has resulted in deterioration of the environment, particularly related to waste and the management of its disposal. This has led to a negative attitude toward the tourism industry by the general public. And from the tourists’ perspective, repeat visits are likely to decline if these environmental problems are not properly addressed.

Because of the environmental problems, an attempt has been made to learn from the past mistakes and come up with a sustainable development plan. This is something which the Thai Government has pushed for, while indicating the need for research into the issues. As a result, tourism has started to be more responsible, paying attention to its sustainability. The green tourism concept has been emphasized as one of the strategies to be used to meet the principles of sustainable development.

In 1990s, Tourism Authority of Thailand published a 39-pages booklet entitled Policies and Guidelines; Development of Ecotourism of the Tourism Authority of Thailand outlining the broad future direction of ecotourism development in Thailand. The growth of interest in ecotourism among Thai government planners is clearly evident in the most recent national tourism master plan, released in March 1997.

The plan features and ecotourism budget of over 3 billion baht (100 million US$) for the expansion of ecotourism infrastructure, environmental rehabilitation and protection of tourist destinations, the enhancement of tourist–related income in small communities, and for
the support of “increasing the potential” of (i.e. marketing and developing) high priority tourism sites. In addition, the government has set up an ecotourism training center in the Northeastern Province of Nakorn Ratchasima worth 120 million baht. Along with budgetary support, the TAT has in recent year launched activities promoted ecotourism through such measures as ecotourism guide certification and the granting in 1996 of its first Thailand Tourism Awards. This is to awards environmentally friendly tourism operators that promote natural and cultural conservation through sustainable tourism projects. With close to one hundred application in six areas of competition the Thailand Tourism Awards demonstrated both the swelling popularity of the ecotourism catchword and the tourism industry‘s enthusiasm over the profit of the label.

Knowing and understanding that Thailand’s environmental degradation was in a critical stage, in 1991 a group of environmental activists recognized that several things could be done in this industry to bring about resource efficiency, decreased pollution and cost savings. Since tourism industry was the country’s number one fast growing industry, they then focused on this industry to identify potential for broad-based change. Moreover it was also found that many people in this sector did not realize their negative environmental impact or the opportunities to decrease this impact in ways that would actually benefit their business model. There was a need to help the stakeholders in the industry to understand, to be aware and motivated to make changes through various learning and motivating activities.

Later they sealed their efforts through partnership with six organizations namely Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand,
Tourism Authority of Thailand, Metropolitan Water Works, United Nations Environment Program, Thai Hotel Association and Association for the Development of Environmental Quality and jointly established Green Leaf Foundation (GLF) as a not for profit organization in 1995. Green Leaf environmental certification project was launched in 1996.

The certification process centers on a rigorous assessment of the following

- Environmental Policies
- Waste Management
- Efficiency in Energy and Water Conservation
- Green Procurement; Indoor Air Quality
- Air Pollution
- Noise Pollution
- Quality of Water
- Management of Fuel, Gas, Toxic and Hazardous Materials
- Ecological Impact
- Collaboration with Community and Local Government

Participating hotels receive a rating of 1 to 5 “Green Leaves”, based on the results of the audit, every two years. GLF provides ongoing training for hotel administrators and staff to learn and share comprehensive environmental strategies. That involves low or no capital investment and promotes collaboration among hotel staff, suppliers, guests, and the community in environmentally-friendly practice.

Much of the Green Leaf ethos evolves around “going local”. Hotels are encouraged to present a “Green Menu” using locally-grown, seasonal ingredients to reduce energy resources needed for transporting and storing imported food. Rather than importing high-end toiletries from overseas, Green Leaf recommends local Thai products that are
friendlier on the environment and more appealing to guests. Architecturally, hotels are urged to utilize traditional Thai building, such as a slanting roof which prevents direct sunlight to enter the room and lessens the need for air-conditioning. These practices also boost the local economy through increased local revenue and job creation.

The relationship of water, energy, food, space, nature, and well-being are explored and measured in the Green Leaf certification process in a manner consistent with Thai personal and business custom.

Green Leaf also provides significant economic motivation for hotels. Potential cost savings from implementing the program are at least $20,000 annually. Furthermore, the Green Leaf certification provides hotel guests with the ability to make informed decisions, thereby creating a market advantage for hotels to attract business visitors and tourists who are increasingly concerned about their environmental impact.

This green tourism policy and partnership have shown to be the most effective in promoting sustainable tourism since it could actually and significantly mobilize changes in this industry. Marketing this green certification to wider audiences worldwide to better understand and support these certified hotels has been the biggest challenge. Introduction of Thai green tourism and green leaf certification to tourists and tour operators overseas needs special attention and extra support in order to overcome this challenge.

UNWTO could play a crucial role in promoting locally initiated green certification and standard programs and in supporting this development model to be applied to other countries.