

THAILAND: THE IMPACT OF TOURISM IS NOT ONLY POSITIVE



The turquoise reflections in the beautiful white waters and sands, a wide range of accommodation and advertising campaigns are attracting millions of travelers each year to the coastline of Thailand, which is now under the threat of its own success.

"Tourism has a major impact on the country's coastline, where the main challenge is to protect the marine ecosystems," says Thun Thamerungnaawat, a professor of marine biology at Cassitsart University and a collaborator on several state-owned projects.

More than half of the 34 million foreign tourists who visited Thailand this year have traveled to the country's charming beaches, according to industry calculations.

"Visitors are mainly traveling to one of the 30 regions where tourism is concentrated," he said, such as Fiji, Riley, Phuket, Samui or Tao.

One example of the density and environmental impact cited by the expert is Koh Khai, the 40,000-square-meter main cave surrounded by the Andaman Sea, where 1.4 million people come each year, which is more than those visiting the Maldives.

The domestic industry's reliance on tourism industry has increased in recent years to 20.6 percent of GDP or 2.90 billion baht (89,100 million dollars, or 75690 million euros) in 2016, according to data from the World Tourism Council.

More than 5.7 million people – 15.1% of the active population – are working directly and indirectly in this sector, which is expected to maintain growth over the next decade.

"Even if the negative impact of tourism is clear, the sector cannot be stopped or restricted because it will affect the country's economy and thousands of workers, but they can find a way to make them more sustainable to help and at the same time maintain and develop communities," asserts the expert.

The barge shelves are fixed in the popular Mayan Bay, a scene from the movie "The Beach" (2000) starring Leonardo DiCaprio. Everyday thousands of visitors come to explore the place. Recently, the authorities announced that they would limit visits to the Gulf for four months in the low season of 2018 – between June and September – in favor of environmental recovery.

Thun commented: "It is the first step to take care of Maya. People will earn less money, but it should help the environment. After some time we will evaluate the impact."

Another problem is the collection of plastics in the coastline of Thailand. Thun is one of the promoters of a project aimed at "gradually replacing" the plastics with biodegradable materials in half a dozen tourist islands in Andaman.

"You cannot block everything overnight, business will complain, so there is progress little by little," he says.

Thun says that social networking is a "tool" to encourage people to "raise their voices" to protect the environment and press the government to make a difference.

"We all work together, everyone does little and also demands the responsibility of big companies ... you have to work to make people think and then you can achieve a better preservation," says the professor.

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