

Mekong Tourism Forum



Singapore, The Annual Mekong Tourism Forum ended on May 28, 2011, Saturday, which saw more than 250 industry experts congregating in the Southern City of Pakse in Laos to discuss and exchange ideas on promoting tourism in the Greater Mekong Sub region (GMS). The two-day forum was held at the Champasak Grand Hotel.

In his keynote address to Forum delegates, Robert Hecker, Managing Director of Horwath HTL Asia Pacific highlighted the strong need to facilitate access to the GMS by improving infrastructure and loosening visa regulations, while supporting growth with proper planning and control. "Relaxing entry conditions to all Mekong countries will give the GMS a major boost. Now we can get people there, the question is how many? [Spiralling arrivals risk] endanger the ultimate asset of why people come here in the first place," said Hecker. He added, "Once you have that balance [between access and planning], you can start to manage what you're getting out of [tourism in the GMS]; the income, the economic impacts, the social impacts. But without that planning aspect, you're lost." In 1996, Hecker was part of a survey team hired by the UN's Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) to produce a conceptual tourism plan for the Mekong River, ahead of the inaugural Mekong Tourism Forum later that year.

Several other industry experts expressed the same concerns. Bill Calderwood, interim CEO of the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA), challenged delegates, "Governments in the region face now this daunting question: are we just looking at higher numbers or are we looking for higher yield? Quality of tourism is vital for the region as it attracts travellers for its unique and authentic experience". Deputy Director General of Luang Prabang Provincial Tourism Department, Khamtanh Somphanvilay, added, "We have to prepare to manage tourism so it does not bring a lot of [negative] impact to local [communities]. That's why we need a lot of stakeholders to be part of this team."

According to Christine Jacquemin, Project Coordinator at the Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office (MTCO), total arrivals to the six countries and provinces, which form the Greater Mekong Subregion, grew by 112.9% between 2000 and 2010, reaching 29.04 million in 2010. Southeast Asia represents the largest source of tourist arrivals at 31.5% (9.15 million) in 2010, followed by Northeast Asia at 26%. Tourist arrivals from European markets have remained relatively constant at about 20%-22% over the years. The introduction of low cost carriers in Southeast Asia, such as from Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, has facilitated travel into the GMS.

The Lao National Tourism Administration (LNTA) forecasts Laos' total tourism revenue at almost 400 million U.S. dollars in 2011, generated by over 2.6 million visitors.

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