

Myanmar Ecotourism Policy and Management Strategy



Introduction

Tourism is a priority of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar's development policy, and is the fastest growing sector of the country's economy. Myanmar, blessed with a rich diversity of natural, cultural, and historical tourism assets, is laying the foundation for decades of tourism growth to generate foreign exchange earnings and employment throughout the country. While its tourism products are currently centered around its cultural and urban assets, the Union Government is in the process of opening its vast wealth of globally unique ecosystems to growing numbers of domestic and international visitors. This process is part of the government's goal to develop a green economy.

To achieve this objective, the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism (MOHT) and the Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry (MOECAF) are in the final stages of drafting the Myanmar Ecotourism Policy and Management Strategy. In collaboration with the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), and with support from the European Union and the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Core Environment Program (administered by ADB through the GMS Environment Operations Center), the policy and strategy takes its lead from the Myanmar Tourism Master Plan. Key objective 4.2 of the Master Plan specifies a need to develop an ecotourism management strategy for protected areas to ensure that tourism supports biodiversity conservation, community-based income generation, and strengthens the management of protected areas. The following sections summarize the framework and direction of this distinctive policy and strategy, which is based upon a review of the biodiversity and social/geographical situation and tourism activity in 21 of Myanmar's protected areas designated as ecotourism sites.



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Myanmar Ecotourism Defined

In Myanmar, the term ecotourism refers to tourism-related activity in and around its protected areas, and focuses on management tools, systems, and processes that deliver three elements:

- ▶ biodiversity and ecosystem conservation;
- ▶ education and learning to enable hosts and visitors to understand and engage with management approaches to protect and conserve the natural and cultural assets of these areas; and,
- ▶ economic and social benefits to communities in and around protected areas that (a) reduce their demand for the natural assets of these areas, and (b) engage them in collaborative approaches to protected area management.



Indawgyi Lake Wildlife Sanctuary

Vision

The Myanmar Ecotourism Policy and Management Strategy intends to use ecotourism as a driving force to strengthen the management of Myanmar's expanding protected area network. It aims to engage all stakeholders to implement ecotourism policies, business models, and management approaches that protect the unique ecosystems of Myanmar, and celebrate indigenous groups that have made these special areas their home.

Mission

By 2020, Myanmar will establish a diversity of quality ecotourism products and services. Targeted towards domestic and international markets, these experiences will raise international awareness of Myanmar's extraordinary wealth of diverse ecosystems – from the dense forests and lofty peaks of the Eastern Himalayas to the rich marine life of the Myeik Archipelago. An ecotourism services framework will be developed to determine where and when visitor services are needed in and around protected areas. This framework will guide decisions related to the form, scale, and management systems of business services that are appropriate to site conditions, and that simultaneously support and partially finance protected area objectives. To achieve the policy's vision, selected protected areas with special assets and high visitor interest will serve as models to test new approaches and develop good practices that can be replicated throughout the country.



Hkakaborazi National Park

Guiding Principles

To achieve the vision and mission, ecotourism activities will support and follow ten guiding principles. Myanmar ecotourism will:

- ▶ align with protected area objectives and management plans to ensure resource conservation as the number one priority;
- ▶ support and respect zoning systems that restrict visitor use of core areas to conserve key species and habitats;
- ▶ increase awareness among all stakeholders of the value and benefits of protected area networks, especially with regard to climate change mitigation;
- ▶ form destination management organizations to embed ecotourism plans in district and state/region planning, and develop synergies with the UN Millennium Development Goals and the post-2015 Development Agenda;
- ▶ leverage cultural and spiritual assets and values in interpretation plans to engender respect and responsible use;
- ▶ promote responsible business models that engage local people, reduce the overharvesting of natural assets, and deliver conservation benefits;
- ▶ provide income sources to sustain and protect the country's protected area network;
- ▶ use baseline data and monitoring programmes to assess and minimize negative impacts on nature, culture, and host communities;
- ▶ attract world-class investors, promote innovative architecture and infrastructure that harmonize with nature and cultural landscapes, and minimize energy consumption;
- ▶ provide models of good practices to help protect natural and cultural assets outside of protected areas.

Strategic Programmes

The Myanmar Ecotourism Policy and Management Strategy has six strategic programmes, which are depicted below with their themes of work.

1. Strengthen Institutional Arrangements

In addition to strengthening ecotourism planning at the centre, state/region, and protected area levels, a key policy objective is to establish an ecotourism services framework. The framework will set in place organizational requirements (laws, policies, management capacity) and the planning, contracting, and monitoring processes needed to ensure that ecotourism businesses in protected areas are strongly controlled and regulated.

2. Develop Ecotourism Management Plans

Protected area goals and management plans determine where tourism activities are permissible. Where activity is approved, ecotourism management plans will be prepared and destination management organizations (DMOs) formed. Activities under this programme include: training DMOs, MOECAF and MOHT staff in ecotourism planning; mitigating negative impacts associated with high-visitation to religious sites; and setting out guidelines for dispersing revenues raised through entry fees.

3. Engage Local Communities

A range of measures will be implemented to impart tourism-related knowledge and skills to local entrepreneurs and destination communities with verified tourism potential. Guidelines will also be developed to facilitate productive relationships

between local communities and DMOs, guides, tour operators, and accommodation providers and to enable NGOs to deliver market-oriented skills to local communities.

4. Invest in Infrastructure and Responsible Business Models

Besides capital investments in major infrastructure projects to facilitate visitor movements around the country and to protected areas, an enabling environment will be created to allow innovative partnerships aligned to the Policy's mission and vision to flourish. Special attention will be given to piloting media savvy business models with demonstrable linkages to local communities and conservation objectives.

5. Strengthen Research and Monitoring Frameworks

Successful protected area management depends upon improved understanding of many issues, from species and habitat conditions to visitor behaviour and supply chain dynamics. Interventions under this programme include actions to: prioritize management information needs; facilitate research partnerships with local, national, and international stakeholders; and elaborate visitor impact and experience monitoring strategies.

6. Strengthen Marketing and Interpretation

Myanmar ecotourism will become a distinctive brand and component of the country's tourism product. A variety of activities will be carried forward to profile and position Myanmar's unique ecotourism assets in the domestic and international marketplace. Emphasis will be given to promoting respect, responsible use, and collective action.



Projects, Programmes, and Development Partner Activities

A number of NGOs are partnering and supporting the preparation of the Ecotourism Policy and Management Strategy, including the Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association (BANCA), Myanmar Environment Rehabilitation-Conservation Network (MERN) and Friends of Wildlife. Several international NGOs with experience in the ecotourism and protected areas interface are also supporting the process and working in partnership with MOECAF to strengthen ecotourism models and approaches.

MOECAF's Forest Department and Istituto Oikos have prepared a management plan for Lampi Marine National Park. Its vision is to preserve the unique terrestrial and marine environment, and support sustainable human development while recognizing cultural and spiritual values. The management plan will assist the Forest Department to harmonize conservation and development activities, including ecotourism.

The Wildlife Conservation Society is working with the Department of Fisheries in the Irrawaddy Dolphin Protected Area to protect the critically endangered Irrawaddy Dolphin. The aim is to reduce threats to dolphins and assist cooperative fishing communities in developing an ecotourism model that delivers direct incentives for dolphin conservation.

Fauna and Flora International (FFI) is supporting Inn Chit Thu, a community group at Indawgyi Lake Wildlife Sanctuary.



LaNgann Island

This has increased the flow of visitors, local incomes and environmental awareness, as well as promoted a range of new skills. FFI has helped establish new accommodation at Kadon Kalay Island, allowing visitors to observe migratory birds, saltwater crocodiles, Irrawaddy Dolphins and turtle nesting.

ICIMOD and the Myanmar Institute for Integrated Development have recently supported MOHT with the development of a Destination Management Plan for the Inlay Lakes Region, which includes a series of activities to be carried forward by the Inlay Lake Wildlife Sanctuary. ICIMOD is continuing its support to MOHT's Taunggyi office with the implementation and monitoring of the Destination Management Plan.

Through its Transboundary Landscapes Initiative for Far Eastern Himalayas, ICIMOD is supporting protected areas with conservation through development interventions in Kachin State, which will include ecotourism.

International Ecotourism Conference

The Myanmar Ecotourism Policy and Management Strategy will be launched at an international ecotourism conference convened to promote good practices and knowledge sharing within and beyond the region.

Dates: **18–20 May 2015**

Place: **Nay Pyi Taw**

Website: www.icimod.org/ecotourismconference

The conference is endorsed by PATA



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Photos: Wildlife Conservation Society – p2 (right); Fauna & Flora International – p2 (left), P3, P4 (top); Tun Aung – p1; Paul Rogers – p4 (left), Putao Trekking House, p4 (right)

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Inlay Lake