

Can a multidisciplinary approach to tourism tackle poverty and support sustainable development?

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Editor's note: This month, we are exploring “[how science can build a sustainable future](#)” – revealing opportunities we may not have considered. We open this series in Thailand, where economists, historians and geographers are investigating an unusual approach to “creative tourism” that can benefit local populations as well as tourists.

When Dr. Sukanda Luangon Lewis visited Vietnam to make batik cloth with a local craftswoman, she saw an opportunity to solve a growing problem while also helping communities like this around the world.

Vietnam is one of many countries experiencing economic benefit from a surge in tourism, but also paying a hidden price. Globally, we take about [1.2 billion international trips a year](#), and tourism contributes an estimated \$7.61 trillion to the economy. But in our eagerness to visit more and more remote places, we are changing the once pristine landscapes, putting habitats and biodiversity at risk. At the same time, the people living in the local communities rarely benefit from the tourism, and instead run the risk of losing their livelihoods.

Chulalongkorn University (Credit: Kantapat Phutthamkul)

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Upon returning to Thailand, where Dr. Lewis is an economics professor and Deputy Director of Research at the [Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University](#), she realized her experience could be an opportunity for “creative tourism” to support sustainable development. So she began to design a research project, using [Scopus](#) and [SciVal](#) to pinpoint an unmet need, collecting data on the impact of creative tourism and assembling a multidisciplinary research team.

The trouble with tourism

Dr. Lewis was familiar with the urgency of the situation well before she set out on her trip to Vietnam. Every year, people travel to Thailand in droves: there were 32.6 million visitors in 2016, an increase of 72 percent in just five years. The sector provides about 2 million jobs, accounting for 6 percent of the country's employment last year. But not everyone – or everything – benefits from the prosperity, as Dr. Lewis explained:

Unrestrained tourism threatens our natural resources. It also has potential harmful effects on the environment, such as natural habitat loss, increased pollution, soil erosion and shortage of water resources. Revenues from tourism go to the rich and middle income people, according to some research, leaving the poor behind and widening the poverty gap.

Dr. Sukanda Luangon Lewis on a trek with Sapa O Chau, a tourism-related social enterprise in Vietnam, where she spent a day making batik cloths with a local woman.

This is certainly true of Thailand; some of the beautiful places Dr. Lewis had visited decades ago have since changed beyond recognition. When she spent a day making batik cloths with a local woman in Sapa, Vietnam, she realized that giving tourists hands-on experiences of living like the locals would put money in the pockets of those who need it, while preserving what is left of the pristine environment.

Making a traditional Vietnamese batik cloth is labor intensive: craftswomen draw the elaborate, meaningful designs on the cloth by hand and then dye the cloth with deep blue pigment from the indigo plant. They draw the characteristic patterns on it using a pen dipped in hot wax. After dying the cloth, they boil away the wax, and the dark blue patterns are left, often on both sides.

The whole process can take several days, yet tourists in Vietnam, Indonesia and many other countries buy the cloth cheaply with little understanding of the process – or the impact on the people making it. After a day of doing the work, Dr. Lewis understood how much effort goes into producing the cloths, and she bought a few pieces of the craftswoman's batik cloths to show her appreciation. Her experience was formative:

It's so, so beautiful in Sapa but it's possible to do something more fulfilling than just look at the mountains. We can talk to the people, see how they work and earn money, as in the case of the Hmong women. In the village, I saw a Hmong woman doing her laundry with her feet; she may have been old, but she was still working hard. You have to experience this first-hand, then you can appreciate the reality.

Creating connectivity

Dr. Lewis was inspired to take action. She began to investigate research on similar integrative travel experiences in Thailand. Using Scopus to explore the peer-reviewed literature, she discovered an opportunity: many communities were already offering integrative experiences, yet there was very little research being done in this area, and nothing that aimed to have a practical impact on local people.

We want tourism – it is a way to help people. But how can we really bring the benefit to the poor and how can we conserve the environment? There is a potential solution: what we think of as network tourism – creative, sustainable approaches to tourism, that enable producers and consumers to relate and get value from their connections.

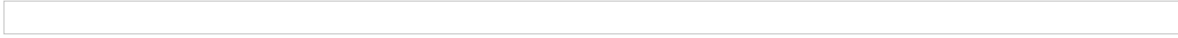
With this potential solution, Dr. Sukanda started to build a multidisciplinary team of experts from Chulalongkorn University to look at tourism from different perspectives. Geographers could first identify the areas that have tourism potential, historians could tell the hidden story of a city or region and engage the local people, and designers from the Faculty of Fine Arts could work with locals to develop fashion and product lines that appeal to international travelers. Having health experts on the team would enable them to provide guidance on using native herbal medicines, and economists could visit the local communities before and after the sub-projects to determine their impact.

With this multidisciplinary team, Dr. Lewis has designed 18 interwoven projects with three main objectives:

- To use cultural capital and innovations to increase the competitive potential of Thailand's tourism sector.
- To encourage the peaceful co-existence of people in multicultural society and enhance better relationships with neighboring countries.
- To develop creative, sustainable tourism with appropriate management of the environment.

With their different perspectives, the team can explore ways to connect tourists and people in the local community more closely, ensuring the locals benefit directly from the tourism and appreciate the need to preserve the environment.

Engaging the community



Dr. Sukanda Luangon Lewis (third from left) with her team and a local farmer in Nan (right). Other members of her research team (left to right): Dr. Siripen Supakankunti, Faculty of Economics; Dr. Watcharapong Ratisukpimol, Faculty of Economics; Dr. Chanita Duangyiwa, Faculty of Arts; Usa Kotsripetch, the Social Research Institute; Dr. Narumol Arunothai, the Social Research Institute; and Dr. Wasana Wongsurawat, the Faculty of Arts.

Using SciVal, Dr. Lewis could find the people already working in connected areas, but to build a successful proposal, she also needed to talk to people in the local community. One of the projects involves lime farmers in Nan, Thailand, who had founded a social enterprise in their village in 2016 growing and selling limes to MACRO in Bangkok.

Nan is one of the poorest provinces in Thailand. To earn money, some people destroy the forest to produce maize. They use pesticides, and in March and April, they burn their fields, which causes smoke pollution in Chang Mai and other areas. As Dr. Lewis points out:

You can't just tell people not to destroy the forest and water resources. They are poor and need a livelihood. If we try to do something in creative tourism, it needs to bring in revenue for people so they have a reason to help protect the environment.

The mountains of Nan, in northern Thailand.

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Dr. Lewis led 20 researchers on a field trip to Nan to interview the local people – including a farmer who started a "Farmers' School" a few years ago to teach school children about the many local varieties of rice – and have a meeting with 50 local people, most of whom were community leaders.

I really want this project to have an impact. This research is not only for publications; we want to have something else too – something that has an impact on the people. I felt that, in order to write an appropriate proposal, we must engage people in the field and learn from other development organizations.



Dr. Siripen Supakankunti, Dr. Watcharapong Ratisukpimol and Dr. Sukanda Luangon Lewis on a field trip in Nan. Dr. Siripen is the head of the health-related creative tourism sub-project in Nan and Dr. Watcharapong is the member of that team.

Local students will also play an important role in the project: the university has a campus in Nan where 60

undergraduate scholarship students in the School of Agricultural Resources will have an opportunity to get involved in the research.

The field trip revealed a great opportunity for Dr. Lewis and her team to set up and test creative tourism in Nan. The city of Nan is steeped in history, which will be the thesis topic for a PhD student. With knowledge about the city's many temples and the cooperation of local farmers, it will be possible to provide the information tourists need to set up unique holidays that benefit local people and the environment. In the future, this could even be in the form of an app, as Dr. Lewis explained:

I'm a tourist and I want to go to Nan. I love temples, but what if I want to do a farmers' route? I need something more than TripAdvisor – I need to know the details. As researchers, we can do more: we're choosing some pilot trips and some routes in Nan to test the impact of creative tourism.

Writing proposals for funding

When she wrote the concept papers for this project, Dr. Lewis didn't know anything about creative tourism. She needed to find out what research had been done and who was working in the area before she started; that's where SciVal and Scopus were most valuable, as she explained:

I'm an economist, and my field is banking. But with Scopus I could look at what people are doing, search for tourism, look at Impact Factors and see citations. When I searched for creative tourism in Thailand, only four papers came up, and only one had been cited. This showed me that it is a very new field in Thailand – one where we can make a difference.

In her research role at the university, Dr. Lewis also writes proposals for international research funding. For this, she says, you need to know two things:

You first need to identify the trend. What is the new thing that not many people know? I used SciVal for this. And second, you need collaborators. How do you find people? You can't just work with people from Thailand. In our proposal on migration in the agricultural sector in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand, we have researchers from Japan, Switzerland, the Philippines and Thailand. First you look at your own contacts, then you use SciVal to see who's writing a lot on what you're interested in.

With inspiration from her experience making batik cloths in Vietnam, and using information analytics tools such as SciVal and Scopus, Dr. Lewis was able to identify a potential solution to the problems of tourism in Thailand that needs more research. And she could set up a multidisciplinary team that worked with local people to develop a meaningful research proposal. With their unique combination of perspectives and knowledge, the team hopes to secure funding so they can gain valuable insights into how creative tourism can make a real and lasting difference to local people.

University and the Power of Data

On July 5 and 6, Chulalongkorn University and [Elsevier](#) will co-host the [4th Annual Asia Research Intelligence Conference](#) in Bangkok, bringing together more than 200 leading research executives and administrators from the

region. The invitation-only event will focus on the power of data and science for a sustainable society.

Dr. Sukanda Luangon Lewis

Dr. Lewis is the Deputy Director of Research at the Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. She also teaches intermediate macroeconomics and development economics on the Faculty of Economics. Dr. Lewis completed a PhD in Economics from the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1996, a master's degree in International Finance from Yokohama National University in 1988, and a bachelor's degree in Economics (first class honours with a gold medal) in 1984 from Chulalongkorn University. Her experience includes working as a financial economist of Asian Development Bank (ADB) in Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Pakistan; leading a team of international and local consultants in an ADB financial inclusion project in Thailand; and working for several commercial banks in Thailand. Her fields of research are innovation in the banking sector, microfinance, financial inclusion and creative tourism. She enjoys field research and traveling. She has received a Japanese Government Scholarship, the Harvard-Yenching Fellowship and the Fulbright's New Century Scholars Fellowship.

How science can build a sustainable future

This month, we are exploring “[how science can build a sustainable future](#)” – revealing opportunities we may not have considered.

In Thailand, economists, historians and geographers are investigating an unusual approach to tourism to tackle poverty and protect our planet. Tourism can have a negative impact on the environment, but by approaching the topic through creative multidisciplinary research, it can transform lives. At Elsevier, we understand the power of bringing different perspectives together to fuel new approaches to global problems. That's why we provide the information and analytics needed to connect and generate ideas.

- Find more stories on [how science can build a sustainable future](#).
- For more stories about people and projects empowered by knowledge, we invite you to visit [Empowering Knowledge](#).