

Introduction


Tourism is a place-dependent industry. It is developed from the natural, cultural, and historical resources in a particular location. The value of these resources arises from the local environments in which they exist. These environments are not defined by clear political boundaries. They are described by overlapping natural, cultural, and socioeconomic systems that cross and connect politically-defined areas. Similarly, the users of these resources—tourists and nontourists alike—are not necessarily constrained by boundaries drawn on a political map. This is the primary rationale for a regional approach to tourism development.



A regional approach to tourism planning recognizes the multiplicity of interests in an area. This can make it possible to define strategies that can ensure an equitable distribution of benefits, as well as a fair accounting of the costs for the countries that share the regional resources. Recognizing the common interests within a region also enables the pooling of resources needed to build, market, and manage tourism in a profitable, sustainable, sensitive, and socially and environmentally responsible manner.

It is in the above context that the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) consisting of six countries—Cambodia, People’s Republic of China (Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and Yunnan Province), Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam (see map 1)—that share the Mekong River and also have in common a rich and diverse natural and cultural heritage, sought to formulate a long-term tourism strategy that would contribute to a more integrated, prosperous, and equitable vision of the subregion. The key building blocks for attaining this vision are enhanced regional connectivity, increased competitiveness, and the building of an increased sense of community among the Mekong countries (3 Cs) adopted by the 12th GMS Ministerial Conference in 2003.





In preparing a 10-year strategy¹ to guide the development and implementation of the tourism sector, the GMS countries were particularly conscious of the need to

- develop greater policy commitment to subregional cooperation and provide the development partners with a mechanism for prioritizing action on a subregional basis, as well as allocating resources in an integrated, more effective and more efficient manner; and
- provide a clear framework of programs and projects for the subregion for a 10-year period (2006–2015), including recommendations and guidance for future interventions in support of the strategy by national tourism organizations (NTOs) and related national and local government organizations impacting on tourism, development partners, nongovernment organizations (NGOs), and mass organizations.

The preparation of the strategy was undertaken between 2 November 2004 and 30 June 2005, with the technical assistance of the Asian Development Bank.

Development of the strategy involved a review of existing studies and plans, and three rounds of field visits and consultations with stakeholders from the six GMS countries. About 600 representatives of government, private sector (both within and outside the subregion), NGOs, mass organizations, and development partners, were consulted and more than 300 stakeholders from these sectors participated in the 13 national and 3 subregional strategic planning workshops. This strategy, the result of these activities and consultations, reflects a truly subregional view of the future of the tourism sector.

The strategy begins with an analysis of the current context of the tourism sector and identifies the main issues and challenges that need to be addressed to boost tourism's contributions toward subregional goals. The specific objectives and targets to be met by 2010 and 2015, and the related programs and projects directed at achieving these, are presented. Finally, mechanisms for implementation, monitoring, and updating the strategy and action plans are presented.

Many organizations contributed to the production of this strategy and while it is not possible to mention them all specifically, the efforts of the NTOs of each country and the major development partners, such as the Pacific Asia Travel Association, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Tourism Organization, and the Netherlands Development Organization in supporting the efforts of the Tourism Working Group and its advisors must be acknowledged. In addition, the important contributions of the private sector, academe and vocational training institutions, and NGOs covering the environment, natural and cultural heritage conservation, social development, labor, women, children, and health also need to be acknowledged. Finally, special appreciation is expressed to the Ministry of Tourism and Sports of the Royal Thailand Government for making available office space and equipment at its Bangkok offices for the project team during the course of the project.

¹The full details, including outlines of proposed projects, are contained in the Greater Mekong Subregion Tourism Strategy (TA 6179-GMS) Report submitted to the national tourism offices of the GMS countries.