

# Feature

## Laos, Sri Lanka to jointly develop eco-tourism

□ SOMSACK PONGKHAO

Laos and Sri Lanka are two countries that have only begun developing eco-tourism in the past 9 years, but both have seen an early success in the large numbers of tourists keen to experience the natural wonders of these countries.

Tourism officials from both countries had the chance to discuss an eco-tourism exchange programme during the 2007 Lao Ecotourism Forum, held at Don Chan Palace Hotel in Vientiane last month, specifically the potential of eco-tourism to generate incomes for local villagers and boost the poverty reduction process.

The National Tourism Administration held the eco-tourism forum with the aim of providing a forum for buyers and sellers to meet and make contacts from different countries.

The President of Sri Lanka Ecotourism Foundation, Mr Palitha Gurusinghe, in Laos for the forum, told Vientiane Times last week that an exchange programme between the two countries would likely start in



The President of Sri Lanka Ecotourism Foundation, Mr Palitha Gurusinghe (left), Travel Editor of the Daily Mirror, Mr Sanath Weerasuriya (centre) and Coordinator for Sustainable Tourism Development, Mr H.G.I J. Harshana after the 2007 Lao Eco-tourism Forum.

January next year.

"We plan to return to Laos to learn more about community-based eco-tourism practices here, and conversely will take a group of Lao people to Sri Lanka to see how their counterpart projects are

operating, to exchange lessons and experiences" he said.

The ecotourism forum brought together some of the best and most innovative ecotourism products and services on offer in Mekong Region, and included a fair

comprising 80 different booths.

The event provided a good opportunity for tourism-related businesses to learn about how to prosper from becoming more involved in GMS Eco-tourism, and increased knowledge for tourists and investors about ecotourism in the country.

More than 60 buyers from GMS countries as well as the Philippines, Brunei and Sri Lanka, and 300 buyers from all around the world, including the US, Australia and countries in Europe met to discuss the tourism business.

Later, Mr Gurusinghe said this was the first time that the Sri Lankan tourism industry had been promoted in Laos.

"For more than 900 years, Sri Lanka and Laos have shared religious and cultural

similarities," he said.

"We think that Laos is one of the best countries in this region, especially in promoting community-based eco-tourism."

He said his country planned to organise a Buddhist pilgrimage tour to Laos at end of the year, before moving to Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand.

"We are Buddhist countries and our people want to see the Buddhist monuments, temples and monks of other countries," he said.

Sri Lanka is a country filled with ancient cities, world heritage sites, and centuries-old historical ruins that reveal the advanced culture of ancient civilisations of Sri Lanka.

It is well known to tourists for its coastal tropical beach resorts, the fascinating eco-tourism attractions of natural parks, rainforests, vast lakes, reservoirs, protected wildlife and the greenish hill country, and the country is seeing growing numbers of tourists each year.

Around 500,000 tourists visited Sri Lanka last year, of which between 5 to 10 percent were eco-tourism tourists, and the country plans to get one million people in 2010.

Mr Gurusinghe explained that Sri Lanka has 25 ecotourism sites, with a mix of natural and religious themes. The country began developing the industry in 1998, and today eco-tourism projects involve 292 villages (more than 500,000 people, who mainly live under the poverty line), mainly in protected areas.

Sri Lanka has seven world heritage sites, some of which

are more than 5,000 years old.

"Laos has a religious connection with Sri Lanka dating back 3,000 years, although our population is much larger, with about 20 million people" he says.

Laos started developing community-based eco-tourism in 1999, in the two provinces of Luang Namtha and Luang Prabang. By 2004, it had developed more eco-tourism areas in Khammuan and Champassak provinces.

Since last year, the country has had eco-tourism sites in eight provinces, with 50 different tour programmes, under which visitors can go kayaking and trekking, as well as experience home-stays in ethnic villages to learn more about traditional culture.

The Director General of the Department of Planning and Cooperation under the National Tourism Administration, Mr Thavipheth Oula, told Vientiane Times last week that eco-tourism was the only industry in which Laos has an advantage against other countries.

"We have to protect our natural resources through training villagers to provide services that are compatible with maintaining their natural lifestyles," he said.

Tourist arrivals in Laos reached 1.2 million in 2006, of which 40 percent were in relation to eco-tourism programmes.

The participation of Sri Lanka was an important opportunity for Laos to exchange lessons and experiences on ecotourism development as a way of alleviating poverty, in accordance with the national strategies of both countries.

**SENGDARA**  
fitness & recreation

**Join Now & Save!**

**Do you want to Lose Weight?  
Do you want to Firm Up?**

**Sengdara Fitness can help you reach your goals.  
Join this summer and get in shape.**



**Summer Special**

**Become a member for only  
\$230 / year and receive  
FREE 500,000 kips for**

purchase of food & beverage,  
therapeutic massage, oil massage,  
aroma therapy and much much more.



SENGDARA Fitness offers:

- Tons of weights, fitness machines, bikes, treadmills and elliptical machines
- Relaxing steam and sauna rooms
- Yoga, aerobics, salsa, spinning and kickboxing classes
- Massage and spa treatments to relieve your stress and worries
- Swimming pool and Jacuzzi

**Call: 021 414 058**

**Phanhmaly Garden, Manivanh Garden**

Flowers, potted plants, trees, garden landscaping  
Ban Souanemone, Thadeua Road, KM-5 Turn left at Souanemone Market  
Tel: 312769, 312052

**U.S. Embassy  
Raise-Hands Auction**

**ONE SHIPPING CONTAINER**

<b>External:</b>	<b>Cubic capacity:</b> 33.1 Cu.m
Length: 6,058 mm	Tare weight: 2,180 Kg
Width: 2,438 mm	Max Payld: 28,300 Kg
Height: 2,591 mm	Max Gr.Wt: 30,480 Kg

**9 August 2007**

Viewing Starts 4:00 PM; Bidding Starts 4:30 PM

**No mobile phones allowed in auction area !**

For more information, please contact U.S. Embassy  
Rue Bartholonie, That Dam / BP 114 / Vientiane  
(021) 267-036 or (020) 550-7162