

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC (ESCAP)
ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK (ADB)

Fourth Meeting of the Working Group on the Greater Mekong
Subregion Tourism Sector

22-23 November 1996
Ho Chi Minh City

REPORT

ORGANIZATION

1. The Fourth Meeting of the Working Group on the Greater Mekong Subregion Tourism Sector was held in Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam from 22 to 23 November 1996. The objectives of the Meeting were to facilitate the implementation of priority subregional tourism projects and to discuss specific areas for promoting cooperation in the tourism sector of the Greater Mekong subregion. The Meeting was organized by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in collaboration with the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism.

ATTENDANCE

2. Representatives of national tourism organizations of Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam as well as representatives of ESCAP, ADB, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the European Union (EU), the World Tourism Organization (WTO), the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) and the Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund of Japan (OECF) participated in the Meeting. Representatives of the Working Group on Economic Cooperation in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, the University of Queensland, the Skybird Group, Thai Airways International and Vietnam Airlines also participated in the Meeting. The list of participants is attached as Annex 1.

OPENING SESSION

3. In his opening statement, Mr. Bui Xuan Nhat, Vice Chairman, Vietnam National Administration of Tourism stated that six countries along the Mekong River had been making great efforts, either individually or collectively, to use the River as a basis for developing transportation, telecommunications, tourism, trade, energy and human resources development. He pointed out that Greater Mekong subregional cooperation in tourism was drawing the attention of many countries outside the subregion and international organizations.

Mr. Nhat indicated that representatives of Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, Government Office, the Ministry of Planning and Investment, and the Tourism Departments of Ho Chi Minh City and Can Tho Province, as well as various sectors of the tourism industry, which were particularly interested in subregional cooperation for tourism, were present at the Meeting. He concluded his statement by expressing his gratitude to ESCAP and ADB for organizing the Fourth Meeting of the Working Group on the Greater Mekong Subregion Tourism Sector in Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam.

4. In his statement, Mr. Eustace Nonis, Director, Agriculture and Social Sectors Department (West), ADB remarked that the Working Group on the Greater Mekong Subregion Tourism Sector was one of the most active working groups established under the umbrella of subregional cooperation. He pointed out that the activities of this Working Group had figured prominently at the Sixth Ministerial Conference on Subregional Economic Cooperation held at Kunming in August 1996. The Conference had agreed that a new tourism project, namely the development of a north-south tourism corridor (southern China -

countries of South-east Asia), be included in priority projects. It was expected that such a corridor would complement the land and air routes being planned under the Greater Mekong subregion programme. Mr. Nonis informed the Meeting that the feedback from the programme to train trainers in tourism, which was implemented jointly by ADB, the Tourism Authority of Thailand and the Government of Singapore had been very positive. He hoped that the Fourth Meeting of the Working Group on the Greater Mekong Subregion Tourism Sector would be held in the same high spirit of cooperation that had been the hallmark of previous meetings.

5. In his statement, Mr. M. Rahmatullah, Director, Transport, Communications and Tourism Division, ESCAP stated that since the Working Group had been established in April 1996 through the joint efforts of ESCAP and ADB, remarkable progress had been achieved with respect to priority projects. He pointed out that these achievements were tangible results of cooperation among the six countries in the Greater Mekong subregion, and international and regional organizations, namely ESCAP, ADB, PATA, WTO, UNESCO and the Mekong River Commission. He remarked that issues and problems identified by the Seminar on Tourism Promotion in Countries in an Early Stage of Tourism Development organized by ESCAP immediately prior to the present Meeting had a direct bearing on the type of problems faced by countries in the Greater Mekong subregion. Mr. Rahmatullah said that ESCAP would make the utmost effort to assist the countries in an early stage of tourism development based on the recommendations of the Seminar. He remarked that setting up of a Secretariat for the Working Group on the Greater Mekong Subregion Tourism Sector to coordinate implementation of various projects was vitally important in consolidating collaborative efforts and shaping the future direction of working arrangements for the Group.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS AND ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA

6. The Meeting elected Mr. Bui Xuan Nhat, Vice Chairman, Vietnam National Administration of Tourism as Chairman, Mr. Sannya Abhay, Deputy Director General, National Tourism Authority of Lao People's Democratic Republic as Vice Chairman, and Mr. Santichai Euachongprasit, Director, Research and Training Department, Tourism Authority of Thailand as Rapporteur.

7. The Meeting adopted the Agenda which is attached as Annex 2.

8. Agenda notes were circulated at the Meeting to facilitate discussion. These notes are attached as Annex 3.

AGENDA ITEM 4 (a): PROMOTING THE SUBREGION AS A TOURIST DESTINATION

9. The representative of ADB indicated his appreciation that PATA had been leading efforts to promote tourism in the Mekong subregion. He outlined out the work that Thailand had done in identifying the jewels of the Mekong and the achievements to date, as recorded

in the agenda notes.

10. The representative of ESCAP reported that France had been approached for funding a project, including preparation of the Greater Mekong subregion (GMS) tourism marketing strategy and a response was being awaited. ESCAP indicated that a PATA office in Japan was keen to work on developing the Japanese market for the GMS. To this end, PATA agreed to work in close cooperation with ESCAP to develop a familiarization trip format for the Greater Mekong subregion starting with Japan.

11. The representative of PATA noted that its members were enthusiastic about PATA's promotional work for the Working Group and they now see the Mekong subregion as a tourist destination of the future. She gave a full briefing of PATA's Mekong market activities and noted the special session on the Mekong at the last PATA Conference in Bangkok, the distribution of Mekong brochures to all the PATA offices and at global trade shows. The "Jewels of the Mekong" video would also be promoted, with a nominal fee charged to cover the costs of production. The GMS now has a home-page on the Internet under the PATA umbrella.

12. For 1997, special Mekong destination seminars were planned using the PATA international network. In February 1997, seminars would be held in Perth, Melbourne, Sydney, Auckland and Brisbane; between February and March 1997, in Zurich, Oslo, Copenhagen and Helsinki; and in late 1997 in Japan. There were also plans for a series of familiarization trips to the Mekong region. The Meeting commended PATA for its Mekong marketing work. PATA asked for input from the other GMS countries on future marketing ideas.

AGENDA ITEM 4 (b): SUBREGIONAL TOURISM FORUM

13. The representative of ADB introduced the project, provided background information and noted that it was the centrepiece of the entire GMS project. He indicated that Kunming had been offered as the venue for the next forum, but due to manpower shortages and other commitments, the China National Tourism Administration (CNTA) had recently withdrawn the offer of the venue. Approaches had been made by various groups for CNTA to reconsider the decision, and this was being pursued. Until this matter was finalized, planning for the 1997 forum had been suspended. The Working Group was requested to propose an alternative venue while leaving an opportunity for CNTA to confirm its position at its earliest convenience.

14. The representative of PATA informed that the Association had received very positive feedback about the last Forum in Pattaya, Thailand, and now needed to know urgently the venue of the next forum.

15. The representative of ESCAP explained that while the Working Group Meeting was held twice a year, the Forum was held only once a year and needed to be carefully positioned in order to make it worthwhile for the tourism industry representatives to attend. At the last Forum, a ready audience was available due to the PATA Conference being held

at about the same time. He noted that the Forum should be linked to another major travel event in order to get such attendance. He requested expressions of interest about the 1998 Forum.

16. The representative of Cambodia indicated that country's willingness to host the Forum in 1997. Viet Nam also made the same offer. The representative of Myanmar said his country would also consider hosting the Forum, but he could not at present think of any major tourism event to coincide with it.

17. The representative of ADB indicated that Ho Chi Minh City would be a good venue for the next Forum as the city had recently made much progress in tourism and the idea of hosting the Forum in conjunction with the Vietnam International Travel Fair in October 1997 would enhance the possibility of much greater attendance by overseas tourism industry representatives.

18. The representative of Viet Nam expressed concern that the VNAT faced manpower constraints, but he did not foresee any problems.

19. The representative of PATA clarified that it would do the marketing, promotions, registration, etc. It would also develop the programme and identify the speakers. The host country was only required to supply the venue, (a conference room in a hotel), handle the airport transfers, and find hosts and sponsors for dinners and lunches.

20. The Meeting decided that a final reply should be awaited from China. If the reply were negative, the Meeting requested Viet Nam to begin planning with PATA for hosting the Forum along with the Vietnam International Travel Fair in October 1997.

AGENDA ITEM 4 (c): TRAINING THE TRAINERS IN THE BASIC SKILLS OF TOURISM

21. The representative of ADB explained the background to the project as outlined in the agenda notes. He reminded the Working Group that the original intention of this project was to emulate the successful ASEAN "Ripple Seminars" funded by EU. It was pointed out that WTO and ESCAP have submitted the Working Group's request to have a similar project for the Mekong subregion to the EU.

22. The representative of WTO informed the Meeting that the WTO has been discussing a number of GMS project ideas with the EU, including a joint marketing programme for the Mekong countries. It was also noted that WTO has been formulating a new regional policy for Asia. The new policy would emphasize a subregional approach. In the future, Great Mekong Subregional projects would be included in WTO programmes.

23. WTO offered to do a special overview study on the Mekong region with an emphasis on the qualitative and quantitative aspects of tourism by the year 2000 and beyond. This would help with market planning. The six countries accepted this proposal and asked WTO to initiate this project.

24. The Meeting noted the report of the WTO and ESCAP on the progress made in regard to possible funding support from the EU for the project on Human Resources Development. The Meeting decided that a project document could be prepared for five countries of the subregion, namely Cambodia, China, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Thailand and Viet Nam. The Meeting felt that some countries would be interested in ecotourism, some in culture and heritage and others in hotel front office management. The Meeting further decided that WTO should provide the EU with an opportunity to indicate which aspects of tourism human resources development would be of interest. Depending on the scope of EU interests, WTO should advise ESCAP and ADB to ascertain the countries' priorities. WTO would then formulate the project document based on inputs provided by ESCAP, after consultation with the countries.

25. The representative of ESCAP indicated that a letter has been received from EU stating that the proposed project should be focused on the private sector. The representative of PATA offered to help coordinate such private sector involvement. The Meeting decided that a separate project for Myanmar should be formulated and resources sought from other sources, including UNDP. In this context, the Meeting noted with appreciation the offer by the representative of Thailand to provide assistance to other countries in human resources development when the need arises.

26. The representative of ADB reported on the outcome of Project 3.1. He said the feedback has been positive. Participants had improved their skills in course design and their ability to design simple courses in hotel management, catering, front office management, etc.. The training programme helped participants to evaluate their own training schemes. A majority of participants rated the programmes as excellent. ADB circulated copies of its evaluation report and invited feedback from the countries.

AGENDA ITEM 4 (d): TRAINING RESOURCE MANAGERS IN CONSERVATION AND TOURISM

27. The representative of ADB briefed the Meeting on the background to this project recalling that it was originally linked to projects in the Environment and Human Resources Development sectors. The original idea of a Centre for Studies in Environment and Resource Management had not progressed, but the fundamental idea remained alive. ADB initiated a regional technical assistance (RETA) entitled "Subregional Environmental Training and Institutional Strengthening". One objective of this RETA was to formulate plans to establish specialized regional environmental training centres, which would include training in resource management and tourism.

28. At a Meeting of the GMS Working Group on Environment (WGE) from 31 July to 1 August 1996 at AIT in Bangkok, the six GMS countries requested that ADB should provide for postgraduate (MS degree level) training in environment and natural resources management, including ecotourism, as a component of all future GMS RETAs in the environment sector. Two such RETAs were currently under preparation: the first was Protection and Management of the Tonle Sap and Critical Wetlands in the Lower Mekong Basin, budgeted at about \$US 4 million, including up to \$US 200,000 for long-term training.

29. The second RETA was Poverty Reduction and Environmental Improvements in Remote Watershed Areas of the GMS, and should be ready in late 1997. The project incorporates components of a previously proposed RETA, Sustainable Management of Forest Resources, including a \$US 500,000 to 600,000 training component for protected area and tourism managers, focusing on the design and management of national protected area systems, including community participation and ecotourism development. The project would be implemented by the Regional Community Forestry Training Center (RECOFTC) at Kasetsart University in Bangkok.

30. The representative of ADB clarified that the RECOFTC course would be intensive and involve both government managers and NGOs. The training will establish a capacity at RECOFTC to continue the training if it is in demand by countries. He also noted that RECOFTC is planning a four-day ecotourism workshop with the Food and Agriculture Organization at the end of January 1997. RECOFTC was looking for participants and would welcome interest from the GMS countries.

31. The Meeting strongly endorsed the ADB's RETA programme and the idea that resource management training and tourism training should be linked.

32. The representative of UNESCO reported that it has formulated a draft proposal, "Preserving the Future of Laotian Culture: Training the Trainers in Heritage Management", and was willing to work with ADB on developing this as a subregional project. Heritage management in this context included both culture and natural heritage.

33. UNESCO had chosen a country specific approach to enable more in-depth training and reach local managers, but it was willing to explore alternative approaches. The initial project was formulated for Lao People's Democratic Republic and could become a model for other countries.

34. The representative of UNESCO also noted that WTO was developing heritage management training modules aimed at policy makers. WTO was coordinating with the International Union Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and UNESCO in Paris.

35. The representative of Thailand noted that both subregional and country-specific approaches were important and this was endorsed by the Meeting.

36. The representative of ESCAP recommended that ADB consider a mechanism to incorporate specific country follow-up into its subregional training programmes and that the UNESCO project incorporate a mechanism to guarantee exchange at the subregional level.

AGENDA ITEM 4 (e): MEKONG/LANCANG RIVER TOURISM PLANNING STUDY

37. The representative of ADB gave a brief background to the project and the decisions reached so far. He pointed out that this was one of the priority projects identified in the original study. It was conceived as a three phase project. Phase I was being

implemented by ESCAP to assess the tourism resources of the River and their marketability. Phase I would identify the scope of work for Phases II and III, which would be implemented by ADB.

38. The consultant of ESCAP gave a detailed presentation of the findings from the Phase I study and distributed a draft report. He identified the tourism resources and overall tourism patterns along the river. He noted that in some areas the priority should be to stimulate tourism, in others to control access.

39. The representative of ADB complimented the ESCAP consultant on the amount of work done and endorsed his suggested approach for Phases II and III. In Phase II, the countries would agree to a series of tourism concept plans covering the GMS portion of the River. These would be presented in a graphic way and published as a means to stimulate private sector interest in Phase III. He envisaged that the NTOs be involved in a series of workshops to decide on tourism goals and development guidelines to be included in the concept plan.

40. The representative of Myanmar reported that his country was improving many of its roads and more border points were being opened. He indicated that Myanmar was trying to adjust the border entry checkpoints to allow circuit travel not requiring return to the point of entry.

41. The representative of Thailand thanked ESCAP for funding the study. He said it would assist in planning future tour circuits. But he noted that many projects are already ongoing in these areas. He wanted the tourism planning for this project to include consideration of the development plans of other sectors. The ADB consultant suggested that the NTOs would need to coordinate and represent all the sector interests of their respective countries in the planning process.

42. The Meeting expressed the view that the report had just been received and should be studied first, and comments should then be sent to ESCAP by mid-December 1996. The representative of ADB said that the terms of reference for Phases II and III needed to be further elaborated.

43. The Meeting requested that the ESCAP consultant should do further work on the terms of reference for Phases II and III. The terms of reference should then be forwarded to ADB, after which they should be confirmed by the six countries. The Meeting stressed that the terms of reference must be confirmed by January 1997 so that ADB can then process the project for further consideration of financing and implementation.

AGENDA ITEM 4 (f): FACILITATION OF TRAVEL TO AND
WITHIN THE GREATER MEKONG SUBREGION

44. The representative of ESCAP informed the Meeting that the study on the above subject was in an advanced stage and a draft report could be finalized within a week. He further noted that the ESCAP consultant had addressed some of the issues in his presentation,

especially those related to infrastructure. Discussion of other issues needed to be further expanded. The Meeting noted that ESCAP would present a comprehensive report to the next Working Group Meeting.

AGENDA ITEM 4 (g): VILLAGE-BASED TOURISM

45. The representative of ADB explained the background of the project and recounted the decisions taken to date.

46. Thailand gave a progress report on the selection of the pilot villages. The village identified by Thailand was a weaving village on the bank of the Mekong River which had a traditional weaving style. He noted that this project should be coordinated with Project 5, the Mekong/Lancang River Tourism Planning Study.

47. The representative of Myanmar said his country was proceeding with the selection of its village. He noted that the area involved was sparsely populated and the infrastructure was poor. He said Myanmar will report back to Thailand in due course.

48. The representative of Lao People's Democratic Republic said a village had been selected, but the decision of the Government was being awaited.

49. The representative of Cambodia said the selected village was about 15 kms from Phnom Penh, upstream on the Mekong River, and could be reached by road, ferry and boat. It represented all aspects of the traditional life of the local people.

50. The representative of Viet Nam said that a village would be carefully selected in the Mekong delta region with good accommodation and infrastructure facilities.

51. The representative of ADB suggested a funding and implementation strategy, for which the project could be divided into eight parts. The first part would be a series of feasibility studies on the selected villages, implemented as a component of Phase II of the Mekong/Lancang River Tourism Planning Study.

52. The second part would involve subregional training in the skills for developing village-based tourism. He reported that New Zealand had assisted the development of the Mekong Institute at Khon Kaen University in North-eastern Thailand to provide a focus for subregional training in development skills. He suggested that the Working Group might approach the new Institute with a suggestion that subregional training in village-based tourism could be included in its future training programme.

53. The other six parts of the project would be model village development in each of the six countries and the NTOs would act as the implementing agencies. Funding requirements for these projects could be addressed case by case, rather than on a subregional basis.

54. After seeking clarification on funding, the Meeting strongly endorsed this strategy. ADB was asked to consider using some funding from the Mekong/Lancang River Tourism Planning Study for the feasibility studies and to make a formal approach, on behalf of the Working Group, to the New Zealand Government and the Mekong Institute.

55. The representative of ADB stressed that in choosing the villages, priority should be given to situations where environmental and cultural heritage preservation goals could be achieved and villagers themselves were committed to these goals.

ITEM 4 (h): NORTH-SOUTH TOURISM CORRIDOR

56. The representative of ADB indicated that this was the first time this project had been included on the agenda as the idea originated from a suggestion by Thailand's delegation to the Sixth GMS Ministerial Conference at Kunming in August 1996.

57. The representative of Thailand gave an outline of the project idea. He suggested that it was linked to the idea of liberalizing aviation and transport policies within the subregion. He said that Thailand would be undertaking further studies on the project idea and asked for cooperation from other members of the Greater Mekong subregion.

58. The representative of ADB suggested that the project could be approached as a macro-scale study of tourism flows through the subregion. It might involve NTOs and the subregion's academic specialists in tourism. The representative of ESCAP suggested that a slight change in the name of the project might be appropriate if it was to focus on the whole subregion. The Meeting suggested "GMS North-South Tourism Flows" as the possible title, and requested Thailand to formulate terms of reference for the study to be considered by the members and the concerned agencies.

ITEM 5: SECRETARIAT OF THE WORKING GROUP ON THE GREATER MEKONG SUBREGION TOURISM SECTOR

59. On the question of establishing the secretariat in Thailand, the representative of ESCAP briefed the Meeting on the responses he received. It was noted that Cambodia, China and Myanmar had already given written agreement supporting the establishment of the secretariat in Bangkok. He sought the opinion of the other two countries, namely Lao People's Democratic Republic and Viet Nam.

60. The representative of ADB explained that the Senior Officials Meeting at the Sixth Greater Mekong Subregion Ministerial Conference at Kunming had discussed and supported the secretariat idea, and it was noted in the minutes of that Conference.

61. The representative of the Lao People's Democratic Republic indicated agreement in principle to the need for a permanent secretariat in Bangkok, and a formal communication would be sent to ESCAP as soon as possible. He sought clarification on the terms of reference of the secretariat.

62. The representative of Thailand noted the experience of the Tourism Authority of Thailand on marketing issues and its global distribution network. He emphasized that secretariat's role would be one of coordination, following the decisions of the Working Group.

63. The representative of Viet Nam thanked Thailand for this clarification and agreed in principle with the establishment of the secretariat, provided that there must be prior consultation with member countries on the secretariat's activities, and decisions should be by consensus.

64. The representative of Thailand suggested that ESCAP and ADB should continue their activities in regard to the organization, preparation of documentation and servicing of future meetings. This suggestion was agreed to and the secretariat's role was defined accordingly with an emphasis to follow up on the decisions of the Working Group to coordinate all joint marketing activities, training activities and projects being implemented by the countries themselves.

65. The representative of PATA supported the proposal to establish the secretariat in order to maintain momentum and coordinate collective efforts. PATA's Chapter Coordination and Projects Manager, Ms. Andrea Yeo, would be the coordinator of PATA's Mekong marketing work and PATA remained committed to placing a staff member in the secretariat.

66. The Meeting decided that the secretariat should be established within the Tourism Authority of Thailand. It appreciated the cooperation of TAT in this regard.

67. The representative of ESCAP suggested that for efficient and effective functioning of the secretariat, it should have separate staffing and clearly marked premises. The Meeting requested the representative of Thailand to prepare a paper outlining all the details of the office arrangements, including terms of reference, and circulate it to all Greater Mekong subregion countries and involved agencies. Although 1 January 1997 was the preferred starting date for the secretariat, it was recognized that much work needed to be done. The representative of Thailand requested that each of the NTOs identify a contact person for future liaison.

68. With regard to the staff member placed by PATA, it was agreed that TAT, PATA and ESCAP would coordinate to prepare the terms of reference and determine the appropriate remuneration prior to starting recruitment. It was felt that importance should be given to determining the requirements of the position and finding the most appropriate person. TAT offered to be responsible for meeting government requirements for placing the person, e.g. work permit, etc. The Meeting noted with appreciation that TAT would provide two to three persons for the secretariat.

AGENDA ITEM 6: DATE AND VENUE OF THE FIFTH MEETING

69. The Meeting accepted with appreciation the offer of Thailand to host the Fifth Meeting of the Working Group in Chiang Rai, which is also one of the attractive destinations along the Mekong River. The Meeting was tentatively scheduled to be held in the first week of April 1997.

AGENDA ITEM 7: OTHER MATTERS

70. The Meeting expressed appreciation to the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism for the excellent arrangements made for the Meeting and the warm hospitality accorded to participants. The Meeting expressed gratitude to the Government of Japan for financing the Meeting.

ADOPTION OF THE REPORT

71. The report of the Fourth Meeting of the Working Group on the Greater Mekong Subregion Tourism Sector was adopted on 23 November 1996.
