

Koh Pitak Island, Thailand: Community conservation revitalizes livelihoods and marine resources

Phil Dearden^a and Dachanee Emphandhu^b

^aDepartment of Geography, University of Victoria, Canada

^bFaculty of Forestry, Kasetsart University, Thailand

Key Messages

- Conservation initiatives such as habitat creation and fishing restrictions have improved the biodiversity around Koh Pitak Island.
 - Establishing a community-based tourism industry enabled further development of lower-consumptive activities to support island livelihoods and reduce dependence on marine resources.
 - Community conservation on Koh Pitak Island was successful due to leadership, social capital, distributional equity, tourist attractions, media interest, village culture, support network, and timing.
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Community Profile

Koh Pitak is an island ecosystem located approximately one km off the coast of Chumporn Province in the Gulf of Thailand in Bang Num Jeud Sub-District, Luang Suan District. The area of the small, relatively steep island is 113.92 ha, about one-half consisting of natural vegetation and the rest mainly coconut plantation or housing. The island is inhabited by about 45 related households, the majority of whom are Buddhist. Koh Pitak was established over a hundred years ago by fishers who took shelter along its coasts. The abundant sea resources surrounding the island allowed the community to flourish (Dearden et al., 2016).

Conservation and Livelihood Challenges

The marine environment around Koh Pitak Island was formerly very productive and diverse but suffered rapid declines around 20 years ago due to over-fishing and pollution. The decline in marine resources led the island community heavily into debt – a situation faced by many Thai fishing communities during this period (Dearden et al., 2016). Senior levels of government were unresponsive to the plight of the community.

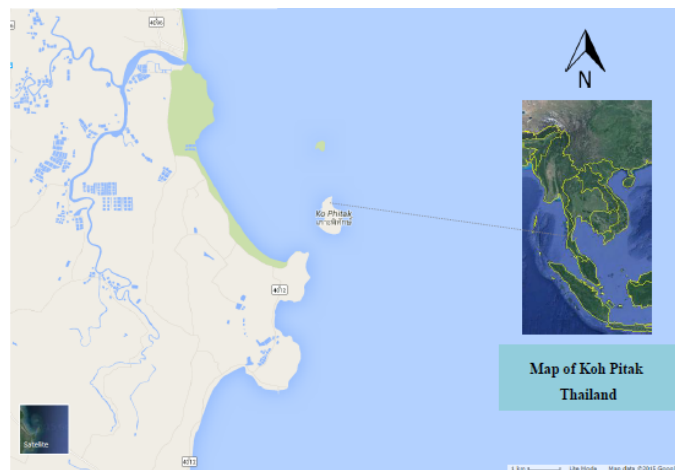


Figure 1: Map of Koh Pitak Island Thailand

Community Initiatives

“I want it to be like it was 30 years ago, with the seas full of fish...” – Headman of koh Pitak regarding their main goal for conservation

Conservation was seen at Koh Pitak as being an essential element of livelihood recovery. The community, under charismatic leadership, recognized that they themselves were partially to blame for the environmental degradation that had occurred and designed initiatives to reverse this trend. Some of these initiatives included (Dearden et al., 2016):





Figure 2: Mangroves replanted by the community
Photo: Philip Dearden

- Establishing a community-based tourism industry that enabled further development of lower-consumptive activities to support island livelihoods and reduce dependence on marine resources.
- Creating an artificial reef which enhanced marine biodiversity and provided supplemental income for fishers.
- Protecting marine resources through seasonal closures, zoning and the use of grow nets.
- Designating a local no-take zone where villagers seed giant clams; this site has become popular for dive and snorkel tourism.
- Restoring mangrove populations along Koh Pitak's shoreline.
- Improving waste disposal through the use of micro-organisms that rapidly digest organic waste. The treated wastewater from this system is then used to develop and water home gardens. These gardens have become a popular tourist attraction, where the village teaches visitors how to create such gardens.
- Initiated a study to understand the tourism carrying capacity of Koh Pitak by monitoring water quality, waste and the quality of visitor experience.



Figure 3: Interviewing two of the main exponents of the 'garden culture'
Photo: Philip Dearden

Influencing marine policies

As for all other coastal communities in Thailand, Koh Pitak is ostensibly governed by the same fisheries laws, rules and regulations of the country. However, through their own initiative, the community has managed to create unprecedented flexibility in this respect that is of national importance. One example is the stewardship of a local island, Koh Kram, about 1 km further offshore Koh Pitak.

Koh Kram has the best remaining biodiversity in the area and is part of a larger national park, Mu Koh Chumporn. Nevertheless, the administration of Mu Koh Chumporn has allowed the villagers to have stewardship over the island who, in turn, have developed a no-take fishing zone and oversee a reseeded and enhancement of giant clams in the area. They are allowed to enter and leave as they wish and take tourists there. This kind of practical relationship between the Thai National Parks Department and local communities is very rare.

Another important example is the current revision of the Thai National Fisheries Law to recognise the abilities of communities, such as Koh Pitak to manage their own fisheries. Although Koh Pitak figures prominently, it is not the only fishing community to be recognised in this area. Interestingly, the community has elected to have a smaller ocean area than permitted under the

proposed bill, due to a practical recognition of their own limitations in patrolling a larger area.

Although the ever-changing constitutional landscape of Thailand embraces decentralisation, it is usually more in terms of theory than practice in a centuries-old hierarchical society. The attempts which are now being made to allow more local control are at least partly the result of the demonstrably successful coastal management practices shown by communities such as Koh Pitak.



Figure 4: Although Koh Pitak is now known for its community-based tourism, it is still a fishing village. Community conservation has facilitated the return of a productive fishery.
Photo: Philip Dearden

Practical Outcomes

The success observed on Koh Pitak Island can be attributed to several factors:

Leadership - A charismatic, far seeing and powerful village leader was critical to the transformations.

Community social capital - The community has very high social capital and unity due to their inter-relatedness and common history.

Distributional equity - Activities are undertaken by groups; a proportion of all income is returned to the community fund with full transparency.

Tourist attractions - Koh Pitak does not offer the coastal tourism attractions typically associated with Thailand, such as long, white sand beaches and azure blue seas. Had it done so it is quite likely that it might have already been consumed by mass tourism. The attractions are more suited to the kind of community-based tourism that has developed there.

Media interest - There has been significant media interest in the transformation of the village, providing ample free marketing for tourism.

Village culture - The village enjoys a slow pace of life that is well suited to low-key tourism development.

Support network - The village enjoyed an extensive support network ranging from government agencies, institutions (such as universities) and other villages developing community-based initiatives.

Timing - The conservation and tourism initiatives coincided with the growing popularity of the Thai King's "self sufficiency" philosophy which promotes small, local, low-impact development and living a moderate, self-dependent life without greed or overexploitation of, for example, natural resources.



Figure 5: A homestay extended out over the water

“For me [...] conservation cannot be done by only one person, or by one community. It must have collaboration among communities and organizations that we call it “our conservation network”. It is a network of conservation in many aspects: giving ideas, supporting each other, and working together. Conservation is not only at our homeland but covers from mountain to the sea. This conservation network is like a jigsaw that missing one piece can bring a whole mission down.” - *Koh Pitak village head concerning his thoughts on conservation*

References

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Community Conservation
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Our website is home to community stories from around the globe, short documentaries and our book:

‘Communities, Conservation and Livelihoods’

www.communityconservation.net

