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**Local perspective on Community Based Ecotourism:
A Case Study in Ban Na in Phu Khao Khoay National
Protected Area, Lao PDR**

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Local perspective on Community Based Ecotourism: A Case Study in Ban Na in Phu Khao Khoay National Protected Area, Lao PDR

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ABSTRACT

In 2002 the Lao government adopted a policy for nationwide economic growth based on the development of tourism as a priority sector. This aims to alleviate poverty through ecotourism and pro-poor tourism, through community based projects such as Ban Na community based ecotourism (CBE) project. This research aimed to investigate factors influencing household involvement in CBE projects in Laos. The impacts of the project within the village were also identified. To date little research with this focus has been undertaken in Laos. The findings and recommendations of this research will provide important information to the Lao Government for the future development of strategies and initiatives concerning community participation in rural ecotourism. This is particularly important for Laos as they are in the early stages of developing their ecotourism industry, especially CBE projects in rural areas. To achieve this, a single case study was undertaken focusing on Ban Na CBE project and field data was collected using semi-structured interviews and observations, and additional secondary sources. Qualitative data analysis methods were used to extract the key findings.

This research confirmed that CBE has the potential to enhance socio-cultural, socio-economic and environmental benefits for rural communities in Laos. In socio-cultural terms CBE increased household awareness of the value of their traditional culture, and in socioeconomic terms CBE allowed local households to improve their livelihoods through financial benefits. The benefits have taken place at both community and household levels. At the community level, public infrastructure has been improved such as water supply upgrading. At the household level, households actively involved have gained direct income from guiding and homestays. The new source of income has enabled households to improve their housing conditions, to purchase farm materials and investing in their children's education. Those households that have not been actively involved in CBE (that include the very poor) also benefit from selling local products and through access to the CBE village fund. CBE has resulted in enhanced conservation outcomes for the protected area. This is a consequence of increased household awareness of the environment and their impact on it. However, CBE has also had negative impacts including an increase in solid wastes and dust and noise associated with the increasing number of tourists.

Findings from this research indicate that the majority of households can benefit from CBE projects when the management of the project includes rules that limit the level of participation of any one household, thereby ensuring maximum household participation and subsequent resulting benefits. In a CBE project, there is no requirement for all households to be involved in providing services to tourists because it is not possible for some households to provide the types of service preferred by tourists. Although, not all households can actively participate in CBE, the benefits can be accessed by all those in the community. CBE has the potential to provide benefits across the community to both households who are actively and not actively involved in the project. This equitable benefit is a result of the CBE project rules that ensure assistance through the community fund, spread benefits from actively involved households and ensure those households not actively involved are able to access benefits.

The findings from this research also illustrate that a local structure such as village committee can manage and establish rules for CBE projects without support from outsiders. The committee also has the potential to manage the allocation of benefits across the community. Further, rules within CBE projects have the potential to assist long term sustainability and ensure the equitable distribution of benefits throughout the community.

CBE provides an opportunity for community members with different circumstances to participate in the project due to the range and nature of ecotourism activities such as guiding, hosting tourists and producing handicrafts. This is also the case for a homestay option which offers women an opportunity to be actively involved and gain direct benefits without leaving their children and household responsibilities. However, like other community based development projects, poorer households are limited from being actively involved as a result of lack of facilities, time, labour and lack of awareness of the rules around the project and potential benefits as well as personal confidence.

Key words: community based ecotourism, community participation, Phu Khao Khoay National Protected Area, Laos.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CBE	Community Based Ecotourism
DED	Germany Development Services
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LNTA	Lao National Tourism Administration
NGOs	Non-government Organisations
NAST	National Authority of Science and Technology
NGPES	National Growth Poverty Eradication Strategy
QDA	Qualitative Data Analysis
PKK	Phu Khao Khoay National Protected Area