



**Good Practice Story Title:**

Songkhla Old Town Revival: A Community-Driven Transformation

**Destination:** Songkhla Old Town, Songkhla Province, Thailand

**Country:** Thailand

**Submitting Organization:** Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (DASTA)

**Category:**

- Destination Management
- Nature & Scenery
- Environment & Climate
- Culture & Tradition
- Thriving Communities
- Business & Marketing

**Destination description:**

Step back in time and explore Songkhla Old Town, a captivating landmark in southern Thailand. Steeped in history, this town settlements across three eras. Each period brought diverse cultures, traditions, and religions, shaping a unique "multicultural society."

This rich heritage is evident in everything from the delectable local cuisine to the time-honored traditions. Even the architecture reflects this fusion, with buildings showcasing a captivating blend of Thai, Chinese, Malay, and Western influences.



Songkhla's story extends beyond its cultural charm. Once a vital port city, it facilitated trade between East and West. Today, adapting to changing times, Songkhla has transformed into a captivating tourist destination. This transformation is a testament to the collective spirit and dedication of the Songkhla people.

### **Summary of Good Practice Story:**

Songkhla Old Town faces urban deterioration due to economic, social, and environmental changes over time. Furthermore, a lack of awareness and understanding among the community about the importance of preserving the old city contributes to the destruction of valuable heritage buildings. To counter this trend, the Songkhla Heritage Trust has emerged, uniting individuals dedicated to revitalizing their hometown. Through collaboration with public, private, educational and governmental sectors, the association orchestrates various initiatives. These include soliciting public feedback, showcasing the city's heritage through visual storytelling, fostering tourism, and creating spaces for youth and community engagement. Moreover, international policy management strategies, such as driving Songkhla towards a UNESCO World Heritage Site and The UNESCO Creative Cities Network of Gastronomy, are leveraged for sustainable development. As a result, community awareness has increased, leading to concerted efforts in preserving and developing Songkhla Old Town into a thriving tourist destination, attracting both domestic and international visitors.

### **Issues faced:**

Songkhla Old Town, once a vibrant trading hub. After WWII, has fallen victim to the tides of change. Shifting economic realities saw trade routes shift from ships to trains, diminishing the city's importance. The rise of Hat Yai International Airport further solidified this decline, transforming Songkhla from a bustling port to a quiet fishing town.

This economic upheaval led many residents turned to fishing, a lot of fishing and ship-based jobs. However, it also brought unintended consequences. Entertainment venues and the sale of services boomed, leading to waste problems, crime, and even infectious diseases. Fearing for their well-being, some residents immigrate elsewhere.





The deserted streets tell the story. Once-proud residences now stand abandoned or serve as storage spaces. Rental houses are overcrowded, while the cost and legal restrictions of renovation often prove insurmountable. A lack of awareness about preserving the old city's architectural style adds another layer to the challenge. Songkhla Old Town, adrift in a sea of neglect, awaits a restorative solution to revive its former glory.

### **Solution:**

Solving the problems of Songkhla Old Town focuses on driving urban development through civil society mechanisms. It adheres to the principle of mass participation from both old and new generations committed to revitalizing the city's historic core. Songkhla Heritage Trust, established in 2013, serves as a crucial mechanism for supporting and coordinating efforts among government, private, educational, and public sectors in the area. This collaborative approach aims to address urban challenges and preserve the essence of Songkhla Old Town, guided by clear direction and goals.

### **Methods, Steps, and Tools applied:**

The significant challenges have compelled the locals of Songkhla to rise and rejuvenate the city, addressing the deterioration of Songkhla Old Town. With a profound love and commitment to the area, they have initiated city development efforts driven by the community's collective power. Beginning initiatives and inviting network collaboration, they've propelled city activities. This journey divided into three key phases :

#### **Phase 1: Building Consensus (2009)**

The year 2009 marked a turning point. Recognizing the need for change, the Songkhla City Municipality organized community forums. Open discussions allowed residents to express their concerns and aspirations for the Songkhla Old Town. This participatory approach fostered a shared vision for revitalization, laying the groundwork for a unified community effort.



### Phase 2: Rekindling Pride and Awareness (2009-2013)

The "Showing Old Town Stories" initiative, launched in 2009, played a crucial role in reconnecting residents with their rich past. Historical photographs and storytelling sessions showcased the area's heritage, from historical sites and buildings to traditions, significant events, and local cuisine. This initiative fostered a sense of belonging and appreciation for Songkhla's unique cultural legacy.

In the same year, the Songkhla Heritage Trust was established. This organization, formalized as the "Songkhla Heritage Trust" in 2013, became the official custodian of the Old Town's knowledge. Their responsibilities included collecting historical data, monitoring physical changes, promoting tourism activities, and advocating for global heritage recognition. Collaboration became key – Songkhla Heritage Trust strategically partnered with civil society, the private sector, educational institutions, and government agencies. This collective effort integrates existing resources to create a livable city for all.

### Phase 3: Sustainable Development and Collaboration (2010-present)

A significant step towards conservation came in 2010 with the Old Town's designation as a protected area. This paved the way for the "Songkhla Towards World Heritage" project, launched in 2013. This ambitious project aimed to elevate Songkhla Old Town to the prestigious status of a UNESCO World Heritage Site. And in 2021, we began driving Songkhla towards becoming a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy which will apply to join the network in the future.

Focusing on cultural tourism in 2015-present, the project harnessed local cultural resources to boost tourism. Visitors were captivated by the city's unique architecture and nostalgic activities tailored for those seeking a glimpse of the past. Street art, mesmerizing Nora performances, and a convenient tram service provided by the Songkhla City Municipality all contributed to the city's vibrant atmosphere.

This revitalization extended beyond tourism. Local businesses, including shops, restaurants, cafes, souvenir stores, and accommodation providers, received a boost. Creative design processes were employed to enhance their offerings, adding value to the city's experience. This included the revitalization of old buildings. Collaborate to organize creative activities through the design process, such as the Southern Design Week event (Pakk Taii Design Week). Additionally, new creative spaces like Hub Ho Hin (Red Rice Mill), the Songkhla Art Gallery, a.e.y.space and Yap Ihian Tchoi Library emerged, providing platforms for artistic expression and cultural exchange.





Songkhla Old Town stands as a testament to the power of community-driven revitalization. The unwavering dedication of its residents, coupled with strategic collaboration, has transformed the town into a thriving destination. With its rich history, vibrant culture, and a flourishing present, Songkhla Old Town is poised for a bright future.

### **Achievements and Results:**

The cooperation among government, private, public sectors and educational institutions supporting sustainable cultural capital based on academic principles has positively impacted the Songkhla Old Town area in the following ways:

1. Enhancing the landscape and buildings in line with the old architectural style, based on a study for a conservation and rehabilitation plan conducted by Songkhla Heritage Trust in 2017. Initially, 26 dilapidated old buildings were identified. As of 2024, only 10 buildings remain in disrepair, indicating significant improvement. Urban development initiatives by Songkhla City Municipality and other partners, such as burying electrical cables and creating street art, have made the Songkhla Old Town area a more appealing destination for tourists.

2. Fostering tourism through new projects like the introduction of tram services by Songkhla City Municipality and designated walking routes to explore the old city. In 2023, an average of 1,667 tourists per month utilized tram services, visiting attractions and local businesses, including over 107 coffee shops, restaurants, and souvenir shops (2024). This tourism promotion has provided economic benefits to local entrepreneurs, contributing to income distribution and employment within the community.

3. Establishing creative spaces within the old city for various demographic groups to engage in diverse activities. For instance, the Hub Ho Hin (Red Rice Mill) alone attracts over 35,000 visitors yearly (2017-2024). Events like the "Pak Taii Design Week" showcase local creativity, approximately 90,000 Thai and foreign tourists. Total revenues from tourism are estimated at Baht 226.3 million. These initiatives propel the cultural capital of the region towards international recognition as a creative city.





4. Pursuing global acknowledgment by striving to elevate Songkhla Old Town to a renowned destination. The long-term vision includes positioning Songkhla as a world heritage site and fostering its recognition as a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy, promoting conservation efforts on a global scale.

### **Lessons Learned and Advice:**

Success in revitalizing the culturally diverse old city area hinges on the active involvement of all network partners. Crucially, community groups, comprising primary residents who deeply cherish their hometown, must unite to bolster the rehabilitation efforts in Songkhla Old Town. Collaboration with over 44 network partners, predominantly from the civil society sector, has established Songkhla Heritage Trust as a pivotal agency in the region. Serving as a prototype model for civil society engagement, it employs an integrative approach to facilitate and coordinate multi-sectoral development initiatives. This collaborative framework can serve as a blueprint for other tourist destinations seeking to rejuvenate and preserve their cultural heritage in the years ahead.

### **Recognitions and Additional References**

ASEAN Sustainable Tourism Awards 2024 under the concept of Gastronomy Tourism (Urban Product)

Songkhla heritage society

<https://www.facebook.com/songkhla.asia/>

SONGKHLA HERITAGE TRUST

<https://www.songkhla-ht.org/about>

“Songkhla Old Town”, the area that drives Songkhla to become a world heritage site.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ygub86MGAQ>



Songkhla, the creative city that reflects through food ingredients and multiculturalism in one dish.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jpMCGksn\\_w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jpMCGksn_w)

Portrait of Songkhla exhibition

<https://readthecloud.co/portrait-of-songkhla/>

Songkhla Old Town From the head of Khao Daeng to Laem Son and Bo Yang : Thai Public Broadcasting Service; TPBS

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDPJ7vW5oRk>

Information about Songkhla Old Town

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ttTup6jn6z6GdWM3FcrTV7KzJVwKh2eX?usp=sharing>