Chiang Khan Studies: Weaving Stories, Empowering Local Communicators Towards Sustainability

Chiang Khan, Thailand
Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (Public Organization) (DASTA)
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
Visitor Experience & Destination Management

Summary of Good Practice Story
Chiang Khan, a historic Mekong River town in Thailand and celebrated sustainable-tourism model, found its fame turning into a triple crisis: declining fish stocks from Mekong River fluctuations, overtourism from up to 4 million annual visitors reducing sacred rituals to photo backdrops, and inconsistent, conflicting stories told by different local guides. The Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (DASTA Loei) partnered with Kasetsart University to co-create the "Chiang Khan Studies" curriculum, adapting the international AUN-QA academic quality framework into plain-language modules on Old Town History, the Mekong Way of Life, Local Wisdom, and Green Environmental Management, delivered through workshops that helped elders and fishermen overcome self-doubt about sharing their own heritage. The result was a unified knowledge base supporting standardised 3-hour to 2-day itineraries that spread visitors more evenly across the district, and — most significantly — transformed residents from passive service providers into confident local storytellers, contributing to Chiang Khan winning 1st place globally in the GD Story Awards for Environment and Climate at ITB Berlin 2026. The lesson: true sustainability is embedded in people, and destinations must first dismantle communities' self-doubt before building content around them.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
Nestled on the banks of the Mekong River in Loei Province, Chiang Khan is a peaceful historic district where century-old wooden houses meet a vibrant, timeless culture. The river is the true soul of the town, shaping a simple yet profound lifestyle defined by local fishing, traditional bamboo weaving, the sacred morning sticky rice almsgiving, and the "Phasat Loi Khro" ritual.

By blending authentic charm with systematic community development, Chiang Khan has evolved into a globally recognized destination for sustainable tourism. Its journey of excellence includes a spot in the 2020 GD TOP 100 Stories, the GD Silver Award, and 2nd place in the Thriving Communities category in the GD Story Awards 2025.

Most recently, at ITB Berlin 2026, the "Chiang Khan Local Fishing Community" secured 1st place globally for the GD Story Awards in Environment and Climate. Today, Chiang Khan stands proud as a living global learning center, inspiring visitors and study groups worldwide.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed
Chiang Khan's international success from the 2020 Green Destinations TOP 100 Stories to the GD Silver Award turned this small town into a global sustainable tourism model. However, fame became a double-edged sword, triggering a triple crisis for the community.

First, an ecological crisis from Mekong River fluctuations decimated fish populations, disrupting traditional livelihoods. Second, overtourism brought up to 4 million annual visitors, causing overcrowding, tons of waste, and turning sacred traditions into mere photo backdrops. Finally, a communication crisis emerged as educational tourism boomed; lacking a unified knowledge system, locals and guides shared conflicting stories, leading to disorganized visits.

If left unchecked, Chiang Khan's true identity would have faded. The community urgently realized that "preserving the old wooden town means nothing if the spirit and the people are not developed."

This pressing need drove Chiang Khan to take definitive action, creating the "Chiang Khan Community Tourism Curriculum (Chiang Khan Studies)" to transform its people into genuine storytellers and true guardians of their sustainable future.

The Vision: What you set out to do
To counter the triple crisis of ecology, overtourism, and scattered information, the Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (DASTA Loei) partnered with Kasetsart University to launch the "Chiang Khan Community Tourism Curriculum Development Project." This initiative aimed to bridge academic frameworks with practical tools, transforming Chiang Khan from a surface-level sightseeing spot into a "Living Sustainable Learning Destination."

Recognizing that winning global awards means nothing if locals cannot articulate their own value, DASTA Loei acted as the strategic first mover, uniting with civil society to bring international-standard knowledge management to the community.

The ultimate driving force was the community's fierce love for their hometown. Witnessing their Mekong fishing livelihoods decline and tourist overcrowding rise, residents refused to let Chiang Khan become a soulless tourist stage. They chose to become the directors of their own future.

Driven by the desire to pass on their authentic history and traditions with dignity, the community ignited the change, stepping forward to develop the Chiang Khan Studies curriculum in their own voices.

The Journey: How change happened

The Journey of Innovation: Co-Creating the Chiang Khan Studies Curriculum

Transforming scattered oral histories into a unified knowledge management innovation was a rigorous yet lively journey, driven through four pivotal stages:

- Building a Shared Foundation: DASTA Loei and Kasetsart University initiated the project with a comprehensive Stakeholder Needs Analysis. The true turning point was establishing an open, transparent forum. This space allowed diverse community voices - including local tourism committees, elders, youth, and traditional Mekong fishermen - to collectively air their concerns and align their vision.

- Overcoming Unexpected Hurdles: During field research, the team struck a "wall of conflicting memories." Historical events and cultural practices were described in vastly different ways depending on whether the storyteller was a guide, a vendor, or a fisherman. Compounding this, many ordinary residents and elders suffered from low self-confidence, feeling too "uneducated" to present their heritage to high-profile international study groups.

- Adapting with Educational Innovation: To bridge this gap, the team ingeniously adapted the international AUN-QA (ASEAN University Network-Quality Assurance) framework into a community-friendly education model. Complex academic theories were translated into conversational terms, culminating in four structured core modules: Old Town History, The Mekong Way of Life, Local Wisdom & Traditions, and Green Environmental Management. These were then tailored into highly practical, flexible itineraries ranging from 3-hour briefings to immersive 2-day-1-night programs.

- The Community as the Main Character: Hands-on workshops empowered ordinary citizens to become systematic storytellers. The profound impact of this shift is best captured by a local artisan’s reflection:

"I used to think my daily routine-hand-making quilts or cooking Khao Pun Nam Jaew - was completely ordinary. This curriculum made me realize our way of life carries immense value. Today, I am deeply proud to stand and share our story confidently with the world."

Ultimately, this project succeeded not because of funding, but because the tripartite alliance of DASTA, academia, and the community successfully breathed life into a rigid technical framework, transforming it into a "curriculum for life" that roots true sustainability within the people.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved

The Impact: A Transformed Chiang Khan

The implementation of the "Chiang Khan Studies Curriculum" has catalyzed a profound transformation, reshaping both the town's operational management and its cultural spirit across two vital dimensions:

1. Systematic & Operational Excellence

The curriculum replaced fragmented narratives with a unified knowledge database, establishing a consistent and authoritative source of truth. By standardizing visitor itineraries—ranging from 3-hour briefings to 2-day immersion programs—the community now manages study groups with seamless, professional efficiency. Crucially, this structure allows for the strategic rotation of activities, distributing economic benefits more equitably across the district while effectively alleviating overcrowding in the historic old town zone.

2. Human Empowerment & Identity Restoration

The most significant achievement, however, lies in the transformation of the residents themselves. Once passive service providers, community members—from youth to elders—have blossomed into skilled "local storytellers." This newfound confidence has redefined the visitor experience; tourists no longer visit Chiang Khan just for scenic photos but to engage with authentic, heartfelt narratives. By empowering locals to take ownership of their heritage, the project has fostered a deeper, more meaningful connection between the town and its visitors, ensuring that Chiang Khan remains a destination that possesses both a compelling story and a resilient soul.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn

Overcoming the Invisible Barrier: Lessons from Chiang Khan

The Challenge of Fear

The greatest obstacle was a psychological barrier: the lack of self-confidence among grassroots locals. Many elders and fishermen refused to participate, believing "curricula" belonged solely to

academics. This taught us that before organizing knowledge around a community, we must first dismantle the walls of fear within its people.

People as the Heart of Sustainability

True sustainability extends far beyond infrastructure. Authenticity emerges when ordinary citizens transform into the main characters of their own narrative, sharing their heritage in their own voices and with dignity.
Reflections & Recommendations

We should have prioritized an "Empowerment Phase" to build community self-worth before drafting content. For destinations following this path, we recommend:

1. Start with People: Help locals see that their ordinary daily routines are extraordinary to the world.
2. Academics as Facilitators: Use academic partners to structure data, but translate complex jargon into the community's everyday language.
3. Embrace Transparency: Global standards do not reward flawless projects; they honor genuine community learning and the courage to adapt.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact
Sustainability Embedded in People: The Future of Chiang Khan

The Chiang Khan Studies Curriculum (Phase 1) is not an end but a stepping stone toward province-wide policy. Moving forward, this model will guide visitor distribution to outer routes, sustainably relieving ecological pressure on the historic old town.

This journey has proven a new concept: "Sustainability Embedded in People." Through a strong tripartite alliance of DASTA, Kasetsart University, and civil society, the true preservation has shifted from physical structures to the human spirit. Today, ordinary citizens—elders, youth, and traditional fishermen—confidently articulate their heritage and green environmental initiatives with ultimate dignity.

Inspirational Conclusion

Chiang Khan proves that amid the shifting currents of nature and tourism capitalism, the town's truest shield is the intellectual strength of its people. As long as residents control their own narratives, tourism will never destroy their identity. Instead, it becomes the vital force that breathes life into the river, the old wooden houses, and their beloved way of life—sustaining this vibrant destination for generations to come.

Awards or Certifications

- 2020: Received the Green Destinations Top 100 Good Practice Stories for "Sticky Rice Almsgiving: The Restoration of the Authentic Story of Chiang Khan."

- 2024: Awarded the Green Destinations Silver Award for excellence in tourism destination management.
- 2024: Received the Public Sector Excellence Award (Lertrat Award) in the category of "Participatory Governance – Effectiveness of People Participation" (Outstanding Level) for the project: "Driving Chiang Khan towards Sustainable Tourism."
- 2025: Won 2nd Place globally in the "Thriving Communities" category at the Green Destinations Story Awards 2025 for the "Breakfast Coupon" initiative.
- 2026: Won 1st Place in the "Environment and Climate" category at the Green Destinations Story Awards 2026 for "When the Mekong Changed: A Chiang Khan Fishing Village's Journey Towards Sustainable Tourism."

Web Articles

1. https://www.posttoday.com/business/634817
2. https://www.sdperspectives.com/alternative/chiang-khan-nan-old-city-sustainable-global-top100-destinations-2020/
3. https://www.dasta.or.th/th/article/3432
4. https://www.banmuang.co.th/news/region/421610
5. https://www.khaosod.co.th/lifestyle/news_10164994
6. https://www.matichon.co.th/lifestyle/food-travel/news_5631757
7. https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/lifestyle/901264
8. https://www.arsa-story.com/news/travel-food/1708335728870625
9. https://www.posttoday.com/smart-life/720596
10. https://www.prachachat.net/business/news-532726

Other Relevant Links

- 360 Degrees Go Green https://youtu.be/gj_FAiQlrDQ?si=b3EZ79MAPfoA1YRY

- Good News Across Thailand https://youtu.be/E7tOD5fprJU?si=mGu4UtpuL8O2Nm4h

- Morning News / Rueng Lao Chao Nee https://youtu.be/2lbkE7eLGR0?si=FEfxebTND9FgmxWS

Quotes or Testimonials

"When our town won a world-class award, study groups started coming in large numbers — so many that the residents could hardly keep up, and it almost became more than our small town could handle. But this curriculum came and helped us organize ourselves. Now we are not just

standing around waiting to welcome visitors or letting them come, look around on the surface, and leave. Every group in Chiang Khan has become the main character—the one telling our own life stories accurately and proudly protecting this old wooden town."