Where Forests and Communities Thrive Together: Doi Inthanon Community Stewardship

Doi Inthanon National Park, Thailand
Doi Inthanon National Park
Protected Areas (including public natural or cultural parks)
Visitor Experience & Destination Management

Summary of Good Practice Story
At Doi Inthanon National Park in Thailand, rising visitor numbers on the popular Pha Dok Siew Nature Trail raised concerns about environmental impact and local wellbeing. In 2015 the park and the Mae Klang Luang Karen community signed a co-management agreement defining roles, visitor management measures and benefit-sharing, followed by a 2018 carrying-capacity study to guide trail management. Through trust-building, training in guiding and hospitality, low-impact visitor controls, and fair distribution of income from guiding, handicrafts and coffee, the community grew from just 3 guides in 1999 to a certified network of 137 guides. Between 2021 and 2026 the trail welcomed over 366,000 visitors, generating THB 14.9 million in household income and THB 1.49 million for a community fund, with high visitor satisfaction for local guiding. The model demonstrates that protected areas thrive when communities are treated as conservation partners whose wellbeing and traditional knowledge are central to management, not obstacles to it.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
Doi Inthanon National Park, one of Thailand's most visited protected areas, demonstrates how tourism can support conservation, local livelihoods, and cultural continuity. Home to Thailand's highest peak and an important watershed forest, the park attracts large numbers of visitors,

making responsible visitor management and community participation essential for long-term sustainability. The 2.6-kilometre Pha Dok Siew Nature Trail showcases montane forests, streams, and waterfalls. The trail leads to the ten-tiered Pha Dok Siew Waterfall, while wildlife such as the white-handed gibbon reflects the importance of habitat protection and forest connectivity.

What makes Pha Dok Siew unique is its integration of conservation and community life. The Mae Klang Luang Karen community serves as guides, hosts, farmers, and stewards of the landscape. Through storytelling, terraced rice farming, Arabica coffee cultivation, local food, handicrafts, and cultural traditions. The journey from forest to village demonstrates a practical sustainability model: protecting headwater forests, managing visitors through guided low-impact tourism, empowering communities as conservation partners, and using tourism as a tool for environmental education and local benefit.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed

As tourism at Pha Dok Siew Nature Trail grew, increasing visitor numbers raised concerns about environmental impacts and local quality of life, highlighting the need for a management approach that could balance conservation and community benefits.

In response, Doi Inthanon National Park, the Mae Klang Luang community, and government agencies established a collaborative management system. A key milestone came in 2015 when the National Park and the community signed an agreement to jointly manage tourism activities, defining roles, visitor management measures, environmental protection, and benefit-sharing mechanisms. Community members have since served as guides, trail caretakers, environmental monitors, and tourism service providers.

In 2018, a carrying-capacity study provided evidence-based recommendations on visitor flow, trail management, environmental protection, and visitor experience. These recommendations continue to guide management today.

As a result, Pha Dok Siew has become a successful model of community-based ecotourism, demonstrating how participatory governance, scientific research, and equitable benefit-sharing can balance tourism growth with environmental stewardship, community well-being, and meaningful visitor experiences. The model offers a practical and replicable approach for sustainable tourism in protected areas.

The Vision: What you set out to do

The Pha Dok Siew model reflects Doi Inthanon National Park's vision of sustainable protected-area management, where conservation success is measured not only by protecting forests and wildlife, but also by strengthening connections between people and nature. Through community participation, environmental education, and responsible visitor management, the Park aims to transform tourism into a force for conservation while benefiting local communities.

Through collaboration between Doi Inthanon National Park, the Mae Klang Luang community, and other stakeholders, Pha Dok Siew Nature Trail was transformed from a traditional forest

path into a sustainable tourism experience. More than a nature attraction, it became a platform for conservation awareness, learning, and local livelihoods.
By redefining tourism as a tool for stewardship rather than visitor growth alone, the initiative demonstrates how conservation and community development can reinforce one another. Today, the Pha Dok Siew model offers a practical and replicable approach for balancing conservation, visitor management, and sustainable livelihoods in protected areas.

The Journey: How change happened

The transformation of the Pha Dok Siew Nature Trail began with a simple but ambitious vision: to demonstrate that biodiversity conservation and community well-being can advance together. Rather than viewing tourism as a threat to protected areas, Doi Inthanon National Park sought to use tourism as a tool to strengthen conservation awareness, generate local livelihoods, and encourage shared responsibility for natural resource management.
The transition was not without challenges. Initially, some community members were concerned that new conservation measures could restrict traditional resource use and affect their livelihoods. At the same time, the National Park faced the challenge of balancing its conservation mandate with the needs and aspirations of local residents.
To address these challenges, Doi Inthanon National Park developed a participatory process that gradually transformed the relationship between the Park and the community from regulation-based management to collaborative stewardship.
Step 1: Build Trust and Shared Vision
The National Park initiated continuous dialogue with community leaders, local residents, and key stakeholders. Through regular meetings, consultations, and open discussions, stakeholders developed a shared understanding that conservation and community development should not be competing objectives but mutually reinforcing goals.
Step 2: Empower Communities as Conservation Partners
Once trust was established, local residents became active partners in designing the tourism experience. Community members participated in decision-making processes, helped identify local opportunities, and contributed traditional knowledge to tourism development and environmental management.
Step 3: Invest in Local Capacity
The Park and its partners provided training in guiding, nature interpretation, visitor management, hospitality, watershed conservation, and environmental stewardship. This enabled local residents to transform existing knowledge and skills into sustainable livelihood opportunities linked to conservation.
Step 4: Design a Low-Impact Tourism System
The Pha Dok Siew Nature Trail was carefully planned and managed to minimise environmental impacts while maximising learning opportunities. Visitor management measures were introduced, including mandatory local guides, designated routes, and evidence-based carrying capacity assessments to protect sensitive ecosystems.
Step 5: Create Fair Benefit-Sharing Mechanisms

Tourism benefits were intentionally distributed across the community. Income opportunities extended beyond guiding services to include handicrafts, locally produced goods, Arabica coffee enterprises, cultural experiences, and community-based tourism activities. This ensured that conservation generated tangible benefits for a broad range of households.

Step 6: Reinvest Tourism into Stewardship

As local people began to benefit from tourism, conservation became increasingly valued as an economic and social asset. Tourism revenue supported local livelihoods while reinforcing incentives to protect forests, watersheds, biodiversity, and cultural heritage.

Step 7: Monitor, Adapt, and Improve

The model continues to evolve through environmental monitoring, visitor management assessments, community participation, and adaptive management practices. Regular reviews help ensure that tourism growth remains aligned with conservation objectives and community well-being.

Pha Dok Siew Nature Trail demonstrates how a protected area can transform tourism from a potential source of environmental pressure into a catalyst for conservation and community development. The model offers a practical framework that can be replicated by other protected areas seeking to balance biodiversity conservation, visitor management, and sustainable livelihoods through community-led stewardship.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved

The most significant outcome of the Pha Dok Siew Nature Trail is the transformation of conservation into a shared responsibility among the local community, Doi Inthanon National Park, and visitors. Through participatory tourism, stakeholders learn about, care for, and benefit from natural resources together.

When the trail was established in 1999, there were only three local guides. By 2026, this had grown to a certified network of 137 guides supported by a seven-member community management committee, demonstrating strong community-based governance.

The trail has become a living learning space where visitors gain first-hand knowledge of watershed ecosystems, biodiversity, and Karen (Pgakenyaw) culture through local interpretation. Between 2021 and May 2026, it welcomed 366,228 visitors in 74,570 groups, generating over THB 14.9 million in household income and THB 1.49 million for a community fund.

A 2024 survey showed very high visitor satisfaction, particularly for local guiding and knowledge sharing. Most importantly, local residents have become active stewards of the watershed forest, strengthening their commitment to protecting the natural resources that sustain both biodiversity and community livelihoods.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn

The Pha Dok Siew Nature Trail demonstrates that sustainable tourism begins with strong connections between people and nature. Its success is built on the belief that conservation

should benefit all stakeholders and that local communities should play a leading role in shaping their destination.
Key success factors include placing the Mae Klang Luang community at the center of decision-making, linking conservation with livelihoods, building trust through participation, and fostering strong collaboration among the National Park, community, government agencies, researchers, and development partners. Tourism has created income and employment while strengthening incentives to protect watershed forests, biodiversity, and cultural heritage.
Another important lesson is that success should be measured not only by visitor numbers, but also by visitor learning, community well-being, and environmental outcomes. Through local guiding and authentic storytelling, visitors gain a deeper appreciation of nature and Karen cultural heritage, transforming tourism into a tool for environmental education and conservation awareness.
The Pha Dok Siew model shows that protected areas can balance conservation, visitor management, and local livelihoods through a shared vision, strong community leadership, and equitable benefit-sharing. Its greatest lesson is simple: people protect what they value and benefit from.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact
The success of the Pha Dok Siew Nature Trail extends far beyond the trail itself. What began as a local initiative has become a model demonstrating how conservation, community development, and sustainable tourism can reinforce one another.
A major achievement has been the transformation of local attitudes toward conservation. Community members now recognize that healthy forests, clean water, biodiversity, and cultural heritage are the foundation of local livelihoods and well-being. Tourism has created income and employment through guiding services, local products, handicrafts, and coffee experiences, while encouraging the protection of natural and cultural resources.
Community involvement in trail management has strengthened the conservation of watershed forests and biodiversity and enhanced visitor experiences. The trail has also become a learning site for agencies, researchers, and destinations interested in participatory management.
Today, Pha Dok Siew stands as a living example of community-led conservation, showing that tourism can support livelihoods while safeguarding nature and culture. It offers a practical and replicable model for conservation, education, and community resilience.

Awards or Certifications
- International media recognition

Condé Nast Traveler reportedly named Doi Inthanon mountain as one of the “Seven Wonders of Southeast Asia.”
- Green National Park (G-Green : Silver)

Web Articles

- Conde Nast Traveler names Thai mountain one of its seven wonders - สถานเอกอัครราชทูต ณ กรุงวอชิงตัน
- http://news.dnp.go.th/news/41761

Other Relevant Links

- https://www.facebook.com/NationalPark.Interpretation/posts/pfbid02vAZciGjEaACp8cdyrKW8jCWcRt38UN49yL6dCMkHkZDPLEhVJK4UokT1AxKi3TNKl?rdid=6Y7mAuiya2vNQMgu#
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Quotes or Testimonials

Community Leader of Mae Klang Luang Village
Mr. Pongthoo Chuesujaritpaiboon
"There was a time when we believed that the community and the National Park could not coexist. Today, the Pha Dok Siew Nature Trail has proven otherwise. Through dialogue, trust, and collaboration, conservation and community development have become partners rather than competitors. We are no longer simply people living alongside the forest; we are caretakers of the forest together, as one Inthanon family."
President of the Pha Dok Siew Local Guide Association
Mr. Noppachai Charoenpraipana
"The Pha Dok Siew Nature Trail has transformed more than our local economy—it has transformed the way we think. We once questioned how a community could live alongside a National Park. Today, we work together to protect the forest while improving our quality of life. We have learned that the forest is not just a natural resource; it is our home. If we do not protect it, no one else can protect it for us."
Young Local Guide
Ms. Naiyana Chuesujaritpaiboon
"The Pha Dok Siew Nature Trail has changed not only the forest and tourism, but also the people in our community. Many young people have developed new skills and become local guides because guiding is more than a job—it is an opportunity to represent the community and the forest we love. This trail has taught us that we do not live with the forest simply to benefit from it; we live with the forest to protect it. The forest is our home, our livelihood, and our future."
Doi Inthanon National Park Officer

Ms. Usa Takham

"The most effective conservation happens when communities become co-owners of the process. Although the Pha Dok Siew Nature Trail is only 2.6 kilometres long, it has generated income and opportunities across the entire community. More importantly, it has helped people recognise the forest as their home, their source of livelihood, and a shared future worth protecting together."