

Management Plan to Appreciate and Understand Thailand's Heritage Case study: Prasat Phimai, Nakhon Ratchasima Province, Thailand

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Abstract

The significance of Prasat Phimai can be attributed to several cultural values and the integrity of the architectural heritage and its landscape have continued throughout time. It could be said that the place is a cultural landscape. However, its lack of a proper management plan and the improper uses of some of the buildings do not promote the proper appreciation to the visitors of its significance and interpretive value. Therefore, this study of the management plan of an historic site as a cultural landscape attempts to analyze and evaluate its value and then offer suggestions for a proper treatment plan as well as propose an overall long-term management plan for future use. The study focuses mainly on the sustainability of land-use in cultural tourism and the conservation of the existing architecture and landscape.

Keywords: Management plan, Heritage, Interpretation

Introduction

Travel and tourism are considered the world's largest generators of jobs and wealth (World Travel and Tourism Council – WTTC, 2004). According to the World Travel Organization (WTO), the number of tourists visiting the Asian Pacific region rose to 104 million arrivals in 2000 and is forecast to reach 190 million in 2010. These figures imply that the average annual growth rate will peak at 6.7 percent (WTO, 1999b).

In terms of income, in 1999, this sector generated 200 million jobs, or 8 percent of the world's employment, and US\$ 3.5 trillion, or 11.7 percent of the world's GNP. In 2000, the global tourism receipts reached US\$ 527 billion (WTTC, 2004).

Regarding Thailand, the highest rate of the growth in visitors' arrival to Thailand in recent years has been recognized in Asian markets. In 1998 Thailand was ranked as Asia's third most popular tourist destination after Hong Kong and China (Tourism Authority of Thailand – TAT, 2001). The number of tourists arriving to Thailand increased 106-fold in 40 years, from 81,340 in 1960 to 8.6 million in 1999 (TAT, 2001). In addition, the tourism industry was the second-highest source of foreign exchange for the country in 1999 (Thailand Board of Investment – BOI, 2004). This growth can be attributed to a number of factors for example, the attractiveness of natural and cultural features, etc.

Moreover, Thailand is a country with a long historic significance and cultural diversity influenced by neighboring countries, such as Laos, Burma, Cambodia, Vietnam and Malaysia. These similarities and differences have formed values, beliefs, religions, social classes and its governance. Its authenticity is mystically and spiritually influenced. Thailand's cultural heritage resources consist of many cultural significances; aesthetic, historic, scientific, social, interpretative, associative, political and economic values, which can be characterized as tangible and intangible.

However in 1990, The Fine Arts Department investigated historic places in the Northeast of Thailand, since then 1,912 ancient sites have been discovered. Prasat Phimai is the greatest sites of this region and is a remarkable place of worship, it has great architecture and is a marvelous example of building from the ancient period with its mysterious construction technique.

In the conservation and management of Thailand's places of architectural heritage, the relationship between the conserving and managing of them can be described as conservation and management in law, planning and property market.

Statement of Heritage Site Significance

Australia's ICOMOS (2000) suggested, that cultural significance consists of aesthetic, historic, scientific and social values. In contrast, China's ICOMOS (2002) argued that heritage sites must be historically authentic and the fundamental significance of a heritage site resides in its inherent values, which are historical, artistic and scientific values. Timothy and Boyd (2003) also added that the value and significance of heritage sites include economic, social, political and scientific significance.

Adapted from the theories mentioned above, Prasat Phimai has interrelated areas of significance in heritage. The value and significance of Prasat Phimai will be explained by consideration of the criteria in reference to its social, scientific, aesthetic and historic value.

Social value: The social value of Prasat Phimai is related to traditional, social activities and compatible present day use. It involves contemporary social interaction in the community and plays a role in establishing social and cultural identity, such as the libraries for keeping religious documents. There are also the temple store sanctuaries that are religious sites or shrines, usually a large stone sanctuary (Principal Tower), built as places to hold ceremonies in the community.

In addition to showing the belief system, the carvings also allow us to see the appearance of people who lived nearly a thousand years ago, the clothing of men and women and the characteristics of armies, palaces, musical instruments and more.

Scientific value: Prasat Phimai is a historic site, which reflects ancient technique methods, design, materials, customs, local wisdom, ways of life of all the cultures in Thailand and related cultures of people from overseas that had relationships with Thai people in the past, such as Khmer.

The layout and setting of the heritage site (Prasat Phimai) reflects the intelligent thinking and traditions of the ancient or local people using natural resources and construction methods adapted from their way of life, such as wall bearing construction systems built by sandstone.

Aesthetic value: Prasat Phimai is a heritage structure that represents the unique art of a particular period, such as the performance of the sculpture on the lintel showing musicians and dancers. This is a setting for a sense of harmony with humankind and gives the site a sense of beauty. (Wright 1997, p.118)

Historic value: Prasat Phimai is a historic site that represents the important association of history and displays the old way of life of people from the past. The site remains identify the materials, style, and social practice of a particular historical time, such as Dharmasala or "house of fire", a lighted house built for travelers to stay overnight on the route from Angkor to Prasat Phimai and Arogayasala or Kuti Ruesi, a place for physical remedies and health treatments in the community.

In addition, for historic value, the roof structure of Phimai sanctuary resembles that of Angkor Wat. Perhaps Phimai sanctuary was the model for the construction of Angkor Wat that was built in a later period.

The significance of Prasat Phimai can be attributed to several cultural values and because of the integrity of the architectural heritage and its landscape throughout time, it could be said that the site is a cultural landmark.

Moreover, Prasat Phimai also has economic significance because of the value it offers in terms of expenditures of visitors to the site.

Background of Khmer Cultural Rout; Stone Sanctuaries in Lower Isan and Prasat Phimai

In the southern Isan region or the Khorat Plateau, located between the Mun River and the Dong Rak Mountains along the Thai-Cambodian border, there is evidence of human settlements that date back more than 2,000 years. In the past, this area was called "upper Khmer" that was separated by the Dong Rak Mountains from lower Khmer (present day Cambodia). But people in the two areas were able to travel and contact each other through more than 40 passes since ancient times. Signs of the relations of the two sides from the past appear in the form of the stone sanctuaries that are located in a line from Phimai, a large city of the Mun River basin, to Angkor Wat which show the similarities of the art, culture and way of life of the upper and lower Khmer groups.

The Reasons for the Construction of the Stone Sanctuaries

These stone sanctuaries are archaeological sites that are considered to be characteristic of ancient Khmer culture. Khmer kings had the sanctuaries constructed to be the abode of celestial beings in accordance with the system of a god-king in which the king is believed to be a living god or a divine being in the Hindu religion such as Shiva, Vishnu or

Brahma. Although Hinduism of the Shivaite sect, that believes that when the king dies he will go to join the highest gods that are symbolized by the Shiva lingam, was predominantly practiced in the Khmer, there are also other belief systems such as Vaishnavite sect and Mahayana Buddhism that are mixed in with Khmer culture.

In Thailand, stone sanctuaries had been built since the 6th century A.D. The construction of the stone sanctuaries in lower Isan showed the power of the leaders of important communities and their relations with the Khmer court. Constructing the sanctuaries was like building a city, which must be a center of faiths of many groups of people. The construction of the sanctuaries also brought about the donation of people, things and land in order to maintain the religious site, and so a community established it self around the site and grew into a city.

The construction of many stone sanctuaries in lower Isan brought the plan for communities in Khmer culture into use, such as cities with surrounding moats with earthen dikes and a stone sanctuary or religious shrine in the middle of the city. Also Barays or reservoirs were built to collect and store water, which was well suited for this area of Thailand. The barays were of both large and small sizes depending on the use and the size of the community. They were an important source of water as we can see at Prasat Muang Tam where there is a baray nearby which has been and is still used as an important source of water up to today. The building of stone sanctuaries and baray naturally brought the Khmer culture into use into the setting of communities that were popular in the 10th-12th centuries A.D.

Prasat Phimai

On the Mun River plain is the city of Phimai or "Vimayapura" which is a large rectangular ancient city surrounded by moats and mounds. This city is located on the trade route linking the Northeast with communities in other regions, and there is evidence of an ancient road that is believed to have connected Phimai with Angkor, the ancient Khmer capital.



Figure 1 The three structures (left to right) are Prang Hin Daeng, the Principal Tower and Prang Brahmabat. 2004, TAT.

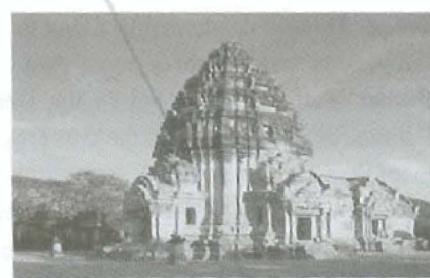


Figure 2 The Principal Tower. 2004, TAT

Prasat Phimai was built in the 11th century A.D. in the Mahayana Buddhism style and housed the respected image of Kanirateng Jagata Vimaya, which is believed to be an image of the Lord Buddha.

The roof structure of Phimai sanctuary resembled that of Angkor Wat. Perhaps Phimai sanctuary was the model for the construction of Angkor Wat that was built in a later age.

There is a legend in the area of Phimai about Prince Pachit of Angkor Thom and Nang Oraphim, which is a story of their love and separation, which was obstructed by Prince Brahmathat of Vimayapura. This story demonstrates the link between Phimai and Angkor in Cambodia as some places in Phimai city were named after some characters in this story.

Management Plan to Appreciate and Understand Thailand's Heritage

A Case Study: Prasat Phimai, Nakhon Ratchasima Province, Thailand

Scope of Study: Prasat Phimai and Surrounding Area in Phimai Historical Park

Problems: Prasat Phimai is a heritage tourism destination situated in the Northeast of Thailand. It is one of the Thai heritage destinations that reflects Thailand's belief in Buddhism, long history, and ancient culture. (Fine Arts Department, 1988).

Firstly, as the Thai government encourages the tourism industry to be one of the majority income producers of the national product, tourism has played an important role in all tourism destinations. When tourism begins booming, it not only changes a community's economy, but also its culture. As we can notice, nowadays, people believe that money is the most important thing in their life. Therefore, they will do whatever they can to get money from tourists. For example, a Thai guide took a foreign professor to Wat Pra Kuew during a tour. The professor asked the guide, what was the meaning of the three colors on the Thai flag. As the guide had no etiquette and wanted to get as much money from the tourist (the professor) as he could, he explained that the red meant ruby, the blue meant sapphire, and the white meant diamond. The purpose of this was that he just wanted to make the tourist buy expensive jewelry. Therefore, the guide could make money from those commissions (Siriphund, 2003).

Turning to Prasat Phimai, it also has some problems regarding guides, interpretative signs and tourism site management. While collecting data at the site I learned of some problems from observation and by interviewing stakeholders for 3 hours. For example, there were not enough local guides for tourists (foreigners) and most of them could not speak English. According to my observations and interviews of both Thais and foreigners at Phimai Historical Park, it was found that they could not understand architectural concept and history. This could explain the lack of good management and interpretation, which is an important factor for tourism at the present.

Therefore, the manager who is located at the site should be knowledgeable regarding interpretation because interpretation is a bridge. And a good bridge should link knowledge and the meaning of information from the site to the visitors.

In conclusion, when tourists are traveling, they can learn about the place (the site), the way of life, customs, culture, etc, which are so different from their own. Therefore, learning how to give interpretation should be undertaken at the site because the problems with the existing interpretation are not sufficient and can not fill up the gap between the knowledge of the site and the expectations of the tourists (visitors).

Goals of the case study

Goal I: To develop more extensive interpretation plans and strategies for tourism in the Architectural Heritage locations in "Prasat Phimai".

Problems found while investigating, observing and collecting data

The "BUZZ" word of the day in tourism is "Interpretation".

"Interpretation" can be defined as "responsible tourism which maintains the well being of the local population" and is further defined as:

1. Having little impact on the culture which the tourist is coming to visit.
2. Contributes to the protection of nature and the economic benefit of the local population.
3. Tourism nearly always has some damaging effects and therefore sets a number of demands for tourists as well as tour operators
4. Enhances the tourists understanding of nature, culture, environment, and development issues.

... this is a very inclusive definition of "interpretation".

Prasat Phimai contains various kinds of art, moreover it is a heritage site, thus some kinds of interpretation may not be suitable, like explanations by tour guides, because tourists tried to walk around the site.

According to the observations made and data collected of how tourists (visitors) approach Prasat Phimai, it was found that there are two main types of visitor:

1. Thai visitors who come with their group without tour guides, and
2. Foreign visitors who come by following guidebooks or reference manuals.

Inside Prasat Phimai there are many buildings that lay on a unique compound. But from observation it was noticed that the visitors explored only 2-3 buildings. When they read the message "sand stone building" they probably thought it was not an important place of worship from the past. Each building was explored for only a short period of the visit. Therefore, they rarely learned or appreciated the architecture especially at the main tower. The importance of the principal tower is that it has a sandstone base relief lintel sculpture which tells an ancient story, about Buddhism philosophy, religion and the cultural development on that era. Foreign visitors could not understand what the lintel sculpture told about because the young volunteer guides could not communicate in foreign languages. This is one problem between site management and interpretation.

Regarding the guidebooks or reference manuals which refer to Prasat Phimai several have been found in print but they have only short explanations on rough details and lack anything motivating visitors to go.

While collecting the data an interview was conducted with Ajarn Pranorm Chaivichit; teacher from Phimai Witthaya School and two students' named, Miss Nitsara Khumphimai and Miss Prakairung Viriyasuk, both of whom are young volunteer guides and they are in their third year in secondary school. The problem with volunteer guides is that they are available to serve only on weekends or public holidays.

The following chart lists the advantages and disadvantages of guide service management at the present time:

Volunteer Tour Guides in Prasat Phimai

Advantages	Disadvantages
1. Community involvement	1. Too many student overflows from their service demand.
2. Income for students	2. No guide queuing system
3. Promotes community harmony and unity	3. No daily volunteer guide service.



Figure 3 Group of volunteer tour guides in Prasat Phimai, 2004, N. Maneenetr.



Figure 4 Volunteer tour guides in Prasat Phimai, 2004, TAT.



Figure 5 Interpretation is not easy for Farangs (foreigners) in Prasat Phimai, 2004, N. Maneenetr.



Figure 6 Text difficult to read, 2004, N. Maneenetr

In analyzing the interpretative sign, the sign was not compatible with the panel size and the text size was difficult to read.

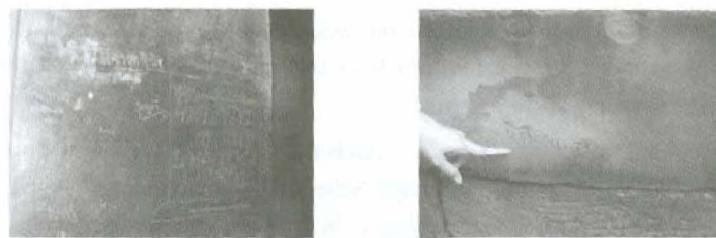


Figure 7 - 8 Inside Prasat Phimai, there were plenty of marks and damage because visitors have not been educated concerning treatment of “heritage sites”. 2004, N. Maneenetr.

Another severe problem is that the architecture has been damaged by inconsiderate visitors carving their name or pictures on the stone panels. Prasat Phimai has plenty of problems, therefore renovation should be undertaken at the site and an education of visitors concerning how to treat a “heritage site”.

The place for ceremonial functions was here but there are no explanations given concerning them.

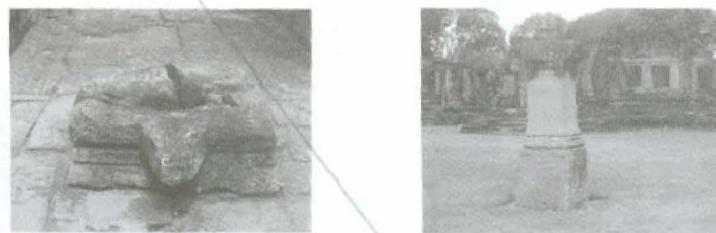


Figure 9 - 10 No Interpretative sign regarding “Yoni” and “Stone pillar”. 2004, N. Maneenetr.

Interpretation Plan for Sustainable Tourism in Prasat Phimai

The interpretation plan can be summarized in this chart (Modify from Hall & McArthur, 1996, p.94; Staff, Heritage and Tourism Interpretation Reading Document1, 2004, pp. 33-37)

To set a plan for sustainable tourism in Prasat Phimai, It is essential to plan both the physical and interpretation because there are important and valuable pieces of art and unique ancient architecture. However, the management of the site needs to improve. For this study there are 2 main parts for the management plan which are to address and improve the physical aspects and to propose interpretation for Prasat Phimai. Both plans are related to each other in order to become a holistic plan which will be beneficial for sustainable tourism in Prasat Phimai.

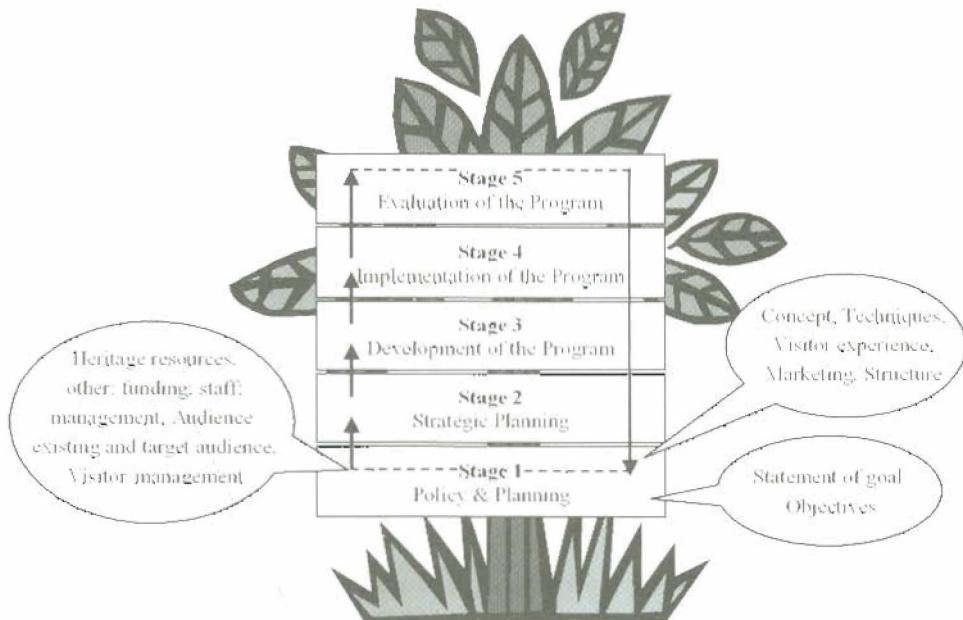


Figure 11 Summarize of Interpretation Plan

Plan to improve the physical aspects in Prasat Phimai, for interpretation

Stakeholders of the interpretation plan

Stakeholders of this interpretation plan include many agencies and organizations such as:

1. The local government agency
2. The Fine Arts Department
3. The Tourism Authority of Thailand
4. The Ministry of Culture
5. Dramatic Arts College
6. The Provincial Chamber of Commerce
7. Phimai Municipality Office
8. Provincial Hotel Association
9. The tour operators and travel agents responsible for convincing the visitors to experience the site
10. The secondary schools
11. Communities adjacent to the heritage site

Interpretation Center or Visitor Center

The Interpretation Center or Visitor Center would provide direct information regarding the background and special attractions of the heritage site to visitors. For this study the center will be called the "Visitor Center". The visitor center will be defined in 2 zones: interpretation zone and service zone.

1. Interpretation Zone: The interpretation zone is a place to store all information. It can be used to present information to the public by exhibition booths, poster banners or multi media presentations, etc. The content of the presentations would be the history of Prasat Phimai, architectural style, cultural features, the way of life in the ancient period, etc. There should be prohibitions located at the site to advise the visitors in terms of "Dos" and "Don'ts" while visiting the site.

The interpretation zone is the area which would provide information to visitors, for example;

1.1 Directory Board: to guide visitors around the site and answer questions.

1.2 Exhibition & Mini Museum: should have exhibits of past cultural prosperity of the Northeast, especially artifacts in the lower part of the region. These areas should have several sections, including local Isan culture and daily utensils like mortars, cotton chests, carls, monk items, and an area that recounts the history of Phimai and lintels from sanctuaries in Nakhon Ratchasima and the Northeast.

2. Service Zone : This area contains the visitor's facilities and tourist liaisons.

2.1 Ticket Kiosk: The existing ticket kiosk is located at the main gateway to the site. The kiosk architecture itself looks temporary and not friendly to the heritage site environment. The ticket kiosk should give the visitors a good first impression of the site. The print media now is of a rather cheap quality and tickets should be able to be kept as a souvenir.

2.2 Recreation Area: should be created for visitors to spend some time relaxing while exploring the historic park. The site should be situated at the best viewpoint location at the site. The seating and any other furniture should be in line with the park's historic theme. This area would be beneficial for exchanging ideas between tourist visitors and local residents of the area.

2.3 Souvenir Shop or OTOP (One Tambon One Product: one village one product outlet by villagers): The souvenir shop should be adjacent to the leisure or recreation area. It can be used to provide merchandise to the foreigners easily and also bring in revenue. The problem of existing vendors around the historic park is that the site has no control of their shop frontage or the quality of their merchandise. They give a negative effect to the general appearance of the heritage site. The shop and handicraft outlet should be reorganized to control its image and also to insure regular cleaning.

2.4 Local Guide Pavilion: In Prasat Phimai, youth volunteer guides who escort tourists and attempt to describe the history and architectural features can be seen around the site, but they are untrained "youth volunteer tour guides" from Phimai Witthaya School. This is a weakness of the interpretation which occurs on this site. However, the concept of heritage should consist of the integration of an interpretation plan between visitors and tour guides. Therefore, the local guide pavilion should be the emphasis in this interpretation.

Furthermore, volunteer guides should be trained in a foreign language which can be used to communicate with overseas visitors.

2.5 Car Park and Traffic: At the present time, there is a specific place for the car parking lot in front of the main entrance, but it is not enough space. An extra parking lot for coaches should be provided due to the peak period of the season. The location can be somewhere near the site. A drop off and pickup area should be provided at the main entrance.

2.6 Interpretative Sign: There should be a sign having the building's name according to legend on the site map. The location of the sign should be visible and content of the sign large enough to be easily read. Furthermore, the signage should have a simple design it should also be, clean and functional to avoid detracting from the atmosphere of the site and devaluating the buildings.

2.7 Performance Stage (Movable Stage): Dramatic performances are held every month and a big performance at the end of the year. An electrical system has been installed and is ready for use when functions are held. The electrical system now in place runs along the building in plain sight and naked cable can generally be seen running along the stone. The temporary stage, when not in use, should be able to be stored somewhere behind the historical site fence.

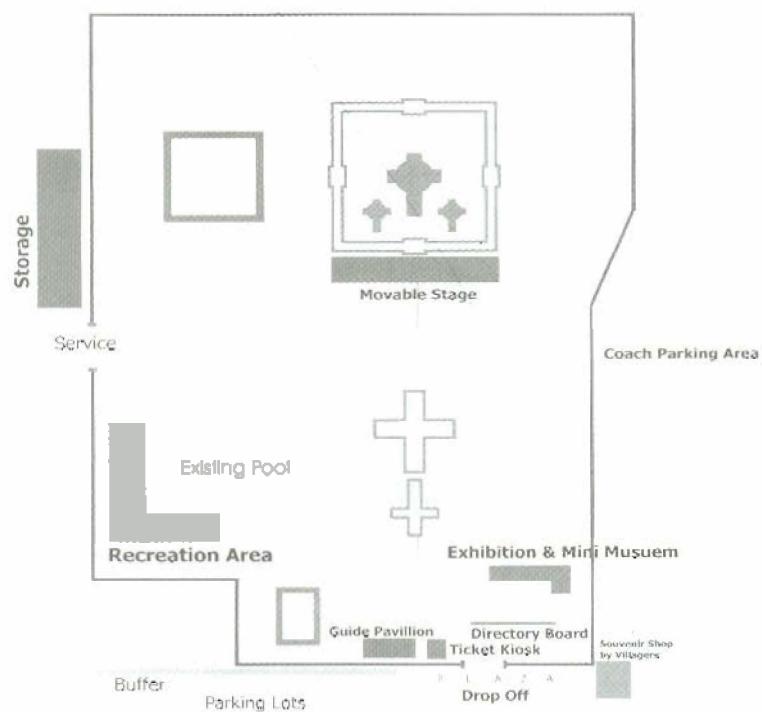


Figure 12. New physical plan to support the Interpretation Plan.

Goal II: To promote and stimulate local people to cooperate in learning, understanding and realizing the importance of conserving these cultural sites or areas in order to maintain local uniqueness and sustainable tourism.

Training Programs

In order to sustain the significance of the cultural heritage and promote and stimulate the local people to cooperate in learning, understanding and realizing the importance of conserving these cultural sites or areas in order to maintain local uniqueness and sustainable tourism, macro-management organization must place emphasis on the following:

1. Education programmes for conservation in line with principles of the significance of cultural heritage sites.
2. Training programmes to assist communities in maintaining traditional building systems, materials and craft skills.
3. Information programmes which improve public awareness of the cultural significance especially among the younger generation.
4. Regional networks on cultural significance to exchange expertise and experience.

Regarding the above, The Tourism Authority of Thailand and the National Environment Board is responsible for sustaining tourism at the national level. At the local level the Regional Offices of Tourism Authority of Thailand, the Provincial Authority, the Regional Offices of Environmental Policy and Planning and the local Administration Organization are responsible.

Evaluation of The Programmes

It will be done by using questionnaires to visitors to get the data for the interpretation manager to monitor the programs that satisfy the objectives or those that do not. In addition, the interpretative techniques and training programmes will be modified to meet the expectations and satisfaction of visitors.

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