ECO-COOPERATION

From 27-28 July 2003, Langkawi hosted the "Malaysia-Thailand Technology and Business Partnership Dialogue". More than 350 participants from both countries, with participants comprising key economic development officials and policy makers from relevant ministries, captains of industry, academic experts and entrepreneurs, attended this dialogue with its theme, “Harnessing Strategic Business and Technology Partnership for Economic Growth”.

The dialogue was jointly organised by the Malaysian Industry-Government Group for High Technology (MIGFHT) and the National Science and Technology Development Agency of Thailand (NSTDA) in collaboration with the International Trade and Industry Ministry of Malaysia.

Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his Thai counterpart Dr Thaksin Shinawatra delivered keynote addresses at the plenary session.

The dialogue promoted technology-business cooperation between the private sector of both countries, particularly on agro-biotechnology and agriculture, information and communication technology (ICT), the automotive, electrical and electronics (E&E) sector, eco-tourism and sustainable development.

The scope covered for eco-tourism included the following:

- What type of infrastructure development is needed to help bolster tourism?
- How can tourism be expanded and sustained throughout the year? How can ICT boost growth in the tourism industry?
- How to strengthen collaborations in the industry for mutual benefits?

ECO-TOURISM IN THAILAND

Thailand has been viewed as a country with diverse tourism resources. According to a survey of the country’s tourism resources in 2003, Thailand has 1,334 natural attractions, 1,060 cultural attractions and 463 annual festivals and events.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) is a state enterprise responsible for national tourism development and promotion planning. TAT prepared a preventive plan for any negative impact caused by the use of tourism resources alongside with the marketing promotional plan, based on one item of their main policy that said, “To conserve as well as revive cultural heritage, natural resources and the environment in order to maintain as much Thai identity as possible”.

In 1985 and 1986, aggressive and irresponsible use of resources by private tourism business operators, namely the establishment of many hotels and resorts, resulted in a negative impact on major tourist cities caused by a polluted environment, leaving behind garbage and polluted water. The

Accreditation of eco-tourism sites could well be the first step towards sustainable tourism.
tourism industry was then branded by NGOs as the business that pollutes the environment.

To prevent the expansion of the problem, TAT had educational institutes as well as the Research Council of Thailand carry out research in order to achieve a master plan for tourism development and conservation. In addition, TAT had sponsored several studies related to carrying capacity of the destination for tourism development as well as the sustainable development principles.

In 1995, TAT collaborated with the Thailand Institute of Scientific and Technological Research (TISTR) and developed an eco-tourism policy to be used as a framework for eco-tourism development and management. The institute was requested to provide the Thai definition for eco-tourism.

Later, in 1998, the Prime Minister of Thailand designated the National Committee on Eco-tourism Development and Promotion. In the same year, the Thai Eco-tourism and Adventure Travel Association (TEATA) was established by the private travel sector to work together with TAT.

Requirements for eco-tourism attractions were established so as to set a framework for development in various aspects to achieve the sustainable development principles.

RESOLUTION

At the end of the dialogue, Malaysia and Thailand resolved to, among other things, to conform and subscribe to the:

- existing ASEAN Tourism Agreement, the sole official agreement involving Malaysia and Thailand.
- Article 41 of the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPI) 2003 on sustainable tourism.
- existing eco-tourism policies of the respective countries.
- opportunities offered by the e-ASEAN programme towards more dynamic information sharing and dissemination.

The resolution too recognised:

- the commitment and deep interest shown by both governments.
- that both countries have similar tourism resources, natural features and characteristics.
- the geographical proximity between Malaysia and Thailand as a strategic advantage for continuous and sustainable cooperation.
- an emerging and increasing trend of eco-tourism experienced in both countries.

The eco-resolution has called for establishing joint promotions and marketing of eco-tourism product of both countries regionally and internationally.

The resolution acknowledged the:

- challenges faced by both countries to balance conservation and development.
- business restrictions faced by the eco-tourism community due to bureaucratic and lengthy procedural requirements in cross-border activities.
- existing lack of nature sensitivity amongst the general public.

The participants of the dialogue identified common strengths in terms of technology in conservation and in particular towards Green Productivity and Architectural Design, with the objective to minimise negative impacts on the environment and simultaneously reduce operating costs of companies and organisations. They were also in agreement to raise the awareness of conservation and sustainable use of the environment, natural resources and cultural heritage.

The existing national plans and agreements by the relevant authorities of both countries need to implement better enforcement, which seems to be the major problem facing the eco-tourism industry.

An introduction of a joint certification programme for accreditation of eco-tourism sites could well be the first step towards sustainable tourism. Both countries were committed towards establishing the unity and collective interest of the public and private sector.

At the end of the two-day dialogue, Malaysia and Thailand resolved to recommend eight major scopes of collaboration.

THE MALAYSIA-THAILAND LANGKAWI ECO-RESOLUTION:

1. Establishing the concept of "sister-parks" and transboundary protected areas.
2. Establishing common standards for eco-tourism products and services.
3. Identifying and establishing a network of eco-tourism destinations between the two countries.
4. Establishing an integrated network of travel agents and tour operators in both countries.
5. Establishing joint promotions and marketing of eco-tourism product of both countries regionally and internationally.
6. Establishing programmes for human resource development and capacity building, including the involvement of local communities.
7. Establishing joint research cooperation and facilities.
8. Establishing joint information sharing strategies.

In conclusion, the participants of the dialogue were steadfast in ensuring that these recommendations be executed by establishing a joint taskforce comprising key relevant players, including both the public and private sectors from both countries, to further identity and implement the action plan to safeguard the depleting natural resources.
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CEO Shawn Sher (right) & Senior Organisational Consultant Ian Blackwood of Shers Management