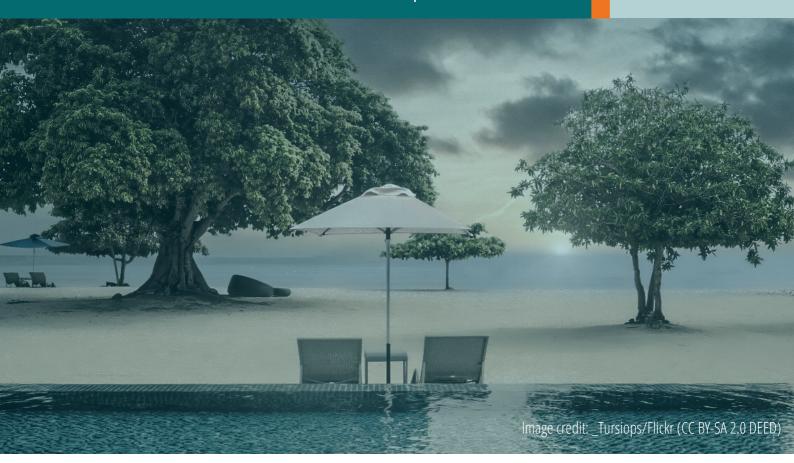# NCHS PAPER

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RESISTING PARADISE: EXCLUSIVE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

This NCHS paper takes a comparative look at tourism enclaves in Southeast Asia and their exclusionary dynamics for local communities, particularly examining the links between tourism and various forms of dispossession.

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INTRODUCTION

The mantra that tourism brings development is remarkably resilient and continues to legitimate the construction of high-end resorts and ecotourism ventures around the globe. While there are robust critiques of development as an 'anti-politics machine' (Ferguson, 1994), tourism continues to be treated as a largely depoliticised enterprise and the idea that tourism is a catalyst for positive change is alive and well. Few studies illustrate this better than Matilde Córdoba Azcárate's *Stuck with Tourism* (2020), an ethnography of tourism in the Yucatán Peninsula. Despite the evident failure of tourism-based development in the region to deliver on the promise of inclusive growth, sustainable ecological development, or the empowerment of indigenous populations, "tourism somehow manages to reemerge as the promise that will finally deliver a better and more just future" (2020:186). "How", she asks, "can tourism continually reemerge unscathed from every failure in order to present itself as a panacea"?

What Córdoba Azcárate is driving at is the urgent need to revisit the "acritical embrace of tourism as a promise of development" (2020:193). This is a timely call given that tourism is one of the biggest industries in the world, one which is only expected to increase in size and significance. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), in 2022 the tourism sector accounted for 7.6% of the global GDP, an increase of 22% from 2021. In 2019, prior to the Covid pandemic, the tourism sector contributed 10.4% of world GDP, which translated to one in ten jobs globally (WTTC, 2020). Crucially, tourism continues to be widely promoted as an industry that makes an important economic contribution, especially to marginalised people in rural and peripheral areas of the Global South (Duffy, 2016).

The Chengdu Declaration on 'Tourism and Sustainable Development Goals' (2017) affirmed that "tourism is a vital instrument for the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)."[1] But this optimistic scenario glosses over the fact that the tourism industry is firmly embedded in a growth-oriented capitalist economy, with a stunning capacity to generate new destinations and products for global consumption. Some argue that tourism plays an important role in sustaining and expanding global capitalism, not least through the creation of new commodity frontiers (Büscher & Fletcher, 2017; Fletcher, 2019; Duffy, 2015). Importantly, the relentless drive to find new markets for excess capital means that tourism development can be highly disruptive, with islands and coastlines around the world being transformed into touristic enclaves and exclusive tourism zones.

This paper takes a comparative look at tourism enclaves in Southeast Asia and their exclusionary dynamics for local communities. Zooming in on the creation of tourism enclaves, this paper shows how these projects are shutting local communities out of prosperity. Although I can only provide snapshots of selected projects, the cases presented demonstrate the links between tourism and various forms of dispossession. In addressing tourism in relation to dispossession, I draw on Devine and Ojeda's (2017) ideas of the strong connections between tourism and different forms of violent dispossession. Taking a critical geography approach, they propose that violence is inherent to the production and maintenance of tourism destinations and identify enclosure, extraction, erasure and commodification, destructive creation and (neo) colonialism as recurring themes or dynamics.

While these dynamics are interrelated, this paper will mainly address the creation of enclosures or enclaves as pivotal to how tourism produces value for some but frequently entails dispossession for others. By shedding light on the darker side of tourism developments in the region, with a particular focus on land conflicts and displacement, this paper is a small effort toward re-politicising tourism as a matter of public and scholarly concern that deserves more empirical and theoretical scrutiny.

TOURISM FIXATION AND ENCLAVE SPACES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

In recent decades there has been a booming growth of tourism enclaves, exclusive spaces designed around leisure and consumption (Saarinen & Wall-Reinius, 2019; Simpson 2017). While this is a global trend, it is hyper visible across mainland and Insular Southeast Asia, where numerous islands and coastlines have been converted into resorts and exclusive tourism zones. In fact, some scholars identify Southeast Asia as a prime target of a paradigmatic form of financialised real-estate tourism development revolving around integrated resorts and spectacular mega-projects (Hampton & Bianchi, 2018; Gibson, 2021). In Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, tourism enclaves can be seen as sites of spatial play where tourism imaginaries take concrete and material form.

Let me start by introducing enclave tourism, using the case of the Maldives to illustrate some of the troubling paradoxes of tourism development at this time of anthropogenic climate change and deepening global inequalities. In general, tourism enclaves contain all or most of the facilities, operations and services needed for tourists and their enjoyment. Such exclusively planned spaces include all-inclusive resorts, gated resort communities, private cruise liner-owned beaches and eco-tourism reserves.

Typically, locals' access to these spaces may be restricted and often limited to working purposes only (Saarinen & Wall-Reinius, 2019). Seen from a business perspective, enclave tourism has many desirable characteristics. It almost goes without saying that enclavic milieus tend to favor bigger economic players and transnational corporations; their development and governance are often externally driven (Britton, 1991). As Shaw and Shaw (1999:68) point out, "enclaves are operated by global capital and transnational corporations through a series of spatial networks, which unless they are strongly regulated by the local state, allow only limited economic benefits to accrue to the host communities." Taken together, these elements have given enclave tourism a rather dubious reputation. Basically, enclave tourism is widely seen as "a highly suspicious mode of tourism development and planning"; it is seen "as an unsustainable form of tourism and an antithesis to discourses on inclusive growth and sustainable development" (Saarinen, 2017:432).

In light of the above, it is ironic that high-level UN summits dedicated to solving pressing global challenges – from poverty to anthropogenic climate change – often take place in beach resorts, such as Sharm el-Sheikh (Egypt), Cancún (Mexico), or Nusa Dua (Indonesia) to name but a few. Yet the fact that such luxury enclaves are attracting the world's political leaders and tropical vacationers alike underscores at least two issues. First, as Orvar Lőfgren (1999:5) noted in *On Holiday*, "we invest a great deal of money, time and emotional energy in vacationing but may find it hard to think of these activities as producing the world's largest industrial complex." Second, despite the vast carbon footprint generated by the global tourism industry, tourism is often depoliticised and treated as a set of leisure practices largely outside the realm of politics (Enloe, 1990; Azcárate, 2020; Mostafanezhad et al., 2021). But as I will argue, it is imperative to re-politicise tourism and to challenge the fixation on tourism as a promise of development.

PARADISE AND 'LAST FRONTIER' FANTASIES

The Maldives, an archipelagic nation in the Indian Ocean, has opted for a hyper-exclusive tourism model: one island, one resort. When the Maldivian government began investing in tourism in the early 1970s, part of the rationale for locating resorts on uninhabited islands was to shield the local population from the corrupting influence of hedonistic lifestyles. Importantly, the policy of only permitting resorts on uninhabited islands provided an illusion of isolation, enabling the design of resorts and beaches in line with 'empty' tropical island paradise imagery, creating a kind of Robinson Crusoe effect (Kothari & Arnall, 2017).[2] As resorts have been located on small islands, with exclusivity generated through geographical detachment – or the illusion thereof – tourism development in the Maldives has not involved the worst forms of tourism-related dispossession, such as evictions and forced displacement. Yet by making resort islands off-limits to locals and their traditional livelihoods, the result is the production of tightly controlled enclavic spaces.[3] Despite a growing focus on 'sustainable' or 'green' tourism in recent decades, the tourist sector is altering coastal environments so as to ensure their continuing attractiveness to high-paying tourists. Efforts to fashion beaches and atolls in line with picture-perfect beachscapes involves significant landscape alterations, such as sand mining, dredging and land reclamation, with harmful environmental impacts (Kothari & Arnall, 2017; Kothari & Arnall, 2020).

Although revenue from international tourism has greatly boosted the Maldivian economy, the country's heavy dependence on tourism is rife with costs and contractions. The Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 thrust the Maldives into the global spotlight as 'the canary in the coalmine' of environmental vulnerability and climate change (Hirsch, 2015). Projections of rising sea levels indicate that many of the islands comprising the Maldives will be submerged by the year 2100. In response, the Maldivian government is setting aside revenue collected from tourism in a fund to purchase land on higher ground abroad. Airborne travel is a contributing cause of rising sea levels that is expected to turn Maldivians into climate refugees. Nowadays, tourists are increasingly drawn to the Maldives to visit 'paradise' before it disappears. As such, current concerns over climate change and impending extinction are being harnessed as opportunities to draw visitors, effectively turning the anticipation of future disasters into commercial opportunities.[4] This is a stark reminder that the global tourism industry, like other extractive industries, is a major contributor to climate change and its geographically uneven harms.

The search for 'untouched' paradisical environments is among the most deeply entrenched imaginaries mobilising tourism, driving many tourism initiatives in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Just as 'untouched' imaginaries shape tourist encounters, they perpetuate extractive logics by which ostensibly pristine islands and entire archipelagos become high-value commodities. Consider the case of the Myeik Archipelago, a chain of islands along Myanmar's Andaman Sea cost, which the 2014-edition of the *Lonely Planet* guide described as "one of the final frontiers in Asia" (Smith, 2022:2). At this time Myanmar experienced a tourism boom and was among the world's fastest-growing tourism markets after Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy's (NLD) revocation of their support for a tourism boycott in 2011.

Since the 2015 general election in which the NLD won a landslide victory, rapid tourism development has aimed to attract foreign investment and to enhance Myanmar's geopolitical image (Mostafanezhad, 2019). While the opening of the country to tourists has been legitimated through discourses of poverty alleviation and conservation, critical scholars note that tourism has served as a territorialisation strategy by the state, especially in border areas and conflict zones.

In much of the marketing materials produced by both state as well as industry actors, the Myiek Archipelago has been promoted as a unique place to be visited before it is 'too late.' The archipelago's alluring status as a last frontier combines longstanding Eurocentric images of 'virgin' nature with concerns about environmental destruction and eco-systems under threat. Given this fixation on sites and destinations that are 'not yet' ruined by tourism, tourism is arguably perpetuating a form of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2007). By perpetuating the urge to discover the next frontier, 'untouched' imaginaries support a paradigm of endless growth that is fundamentally incompatible with environmental sustainability (Smith, 2022). These imageries also facilitate forms of corporate encroachment and the production of tightly controlled enclavic spaces aimed at complete revenue capture. Let me now illustrate these dynamics with reference to the Lampi Marine National Park in the southernmost part of the Myiek Archipelago.

Ecotourism development in the Lampi Marine Park has been promoted as a win-win solution of biodiversity conservation, community empowerment and poverty alleviation. Established in 1996, approximately 75% of the 205 km2 park has now been zoned as a no-fishing area. According to the Lampi Marine National Park Ecotourism Plan (2015-2018), there is considerable potential to generate publicity, grow the visitor market and attract new tourists to the park (Oikos, 2015).

However, it also acknowledges that the marine park has been plagued by illegal fishing, logging and hunting, activities partly attributed to the resident Bamar and the Moken, a semi-nomadic population that has inhabited the archipelago for centuries. Like other nomadic groups, the Moken have faced repression by the state. Tightening marine conservation regulations and the decline of fisheries has made life increasingly difficult for the Moken, who have largely abandoned their former nomadic way of life (Smith, 2022). This predicament is noted in the Ecotourism Plan, which observes that "with few development opportunities available, individuals are prone to alcoholism and drug abuse" (Oikos, 2015:12). Predictably, the solution on offer involves training Moken to become tour guides, develop Moken-focused products, and to develop ceremonies around Moken culture.

The optimistic scenario of ecotourism as a win-win solution of conservation and poverty alleviation has been firmly debunked by a team of scholars who have examined the Lampi Marine Park within the broader political context of tourism developments in Myanmar. For one, they found that the plans for tourism developments centering on eco-lodges and other enclave-type resorts "offer very limited scope for local community involvement particularly for the Moken but also for other park residents" (Clifton et al., 2018:332). In their view, "the most likely impact of private sector-led ecotourism on these communities will be to enmesh local participants in increasingly precarious livelihoods vulnerable to the globalised drivers of tourism which will in turn diminish their capacity for self-sufficient or sustainable development" (2018:332). Finally, they underline the very real threats of land confiscation, forced labor and other human right abuses faced by rural communities in association with 'development' projects, including tourism, in Myanmar. Since that time, both the Covid-19 pandemic and the February 2021 military coup have put tourism projects on hold for now.

None of the above is particularly surprising, but illustrates how Myanmar's top-down tourism development strategy has involved land grabs, land enclosures and various forms of dispossession. The erosion of local populations' subsistence strategies, as Devine and Ojeda (2017:609) point out, has repeatedly been reported as one of the expected outcomes of tourism projects that rarely benefit the populations most directly implicated. As the following will show, the creation of tourism destinations may also use disasters to advance the expansion of tourism infrastructure, turning crisis into opportunities for economic growth.

TOURISM AND DISASTER OPPORTUNISM

The process of carving out of tourism enclaves in coastal areas of Southeast Asia often requires the removal of local populations in order to become exclusive and attractive business ventures. Across the region, governments in partnerships with private companies have been widely accused of taking advantage of natural disasters to push through controversial tourism projects. I will argue that the nexus of what I call disaster opportunism and tourism development deserves closer attention. As Neef and Grayman (2019:7) point out, the tourism industry has often been assigned a pivotal role in recovery and reconstruction after 'natural' disasters, which strongly suggests that this nexus deserves critical scrutiny. It is no coincidence that Naomi Klein (2007) used the impact of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami on coastal communities in Thailand and Sri Lanka to exemplify key logics of 'disaster capitalism.' A key argument in Klein's book is that the recovery efforts after the tsunami paved the way for commercial actors to claim large swathes of coastal land for tourism ventures, typically under the pretext of rehabilitation and disaster recovery.

Tellingly, such land-grabs have been called 'the second tsunami', implying that those who were not killed by the monster wave, were wiped out by a wave of tourism related development schemes (Cohen, 2011).

To illustrate the nexus of tourism and disaster opportunism, I use Sicogon island in Iloilo Province of the Philippines and super typhoon Yolanda, also known as Haiyan, in 2013 as the main example. Before turning to this case, it is worth noting that there is probably no such thing as a purely 'natural' disaster, as most disasters result from a combination of a hazard and vulnerable populations. As already indicated, beach tourism development in Southeast Asia often involves major landscape modifications, including sand mining, dredging and the clearing of vegetation that have provided a buffer against tidal waves, tsunamis and tropical storms. The clearance of green belt buffers contributed to the devastating impact of the Indian Ocean Tsunami (Neef & Grayman, 2019), which suggests that the tourist industry can aggravate environmental degradation and amplify the impact of 'natural' disasters.

Super typhoon Yolanda/Haiyan hit the Philippines in 2013, leaving a trail of destruction particularly in the Eastern Visayas. One of the strongest typhoons ever recorded, Yolanda caused more than 6,000 deaths, damaged one million homes and displaced at least four million people. Crucially, Yolanda and the post-disaster recovery strategy cleared a path for disaster opportunism through an alliance of state and commercial actors. Residents on the island of Sicogon were badly affected by the government's policy of 'no-build zones', which ostensibly aimed to reduce the risk of future emergencies. The prohibition on constructing houses within 40 meters of the coastline left about 1,000 people homeless, barring them from rebuilding their homes.

There are well-documented allegations that the Sicogon Island Development Corporation (SIDECO) seized the chaotic aftermath of the typhoon to turn Sicogon into a tourist destination.[5] This cooperation claims to have bought 70% of the island in the 1970s, but residents have refused to leave the island and kept campaigning for land rights. Shortly after the typhoon, SIDECO signed a partnership with Ayala, a major real estate corporation, to initiate the Sicocon Island Redevelopment Project. On their part, islanders, aided by domestic and international NGOs, claim that neither the government, nor SIDECO provided adequate humanitarian relief to typhoon victims. Some allege that SIDECO's security guards prevented them from repairing and rebuilding their homes. SIDECO offered modest lumpsums to families to leave the island, but after finding these houses of poor quality and lacking a livelihood, most families returned to Sicogon, occupying public forest land. This led to a tense situation, with SIDECO threatening lawsuits against members of the Federation of Sicogon Island Farmers and Fisherfolk (FESIFFA), who vigorously protested airport construction and resort development.

Yet thanks to mobilisation by domestic and international NGOs, the Sicogon case gained significant national and international media attention and elicited national political interest. In 2017, the National Anti-Poverty Commission (NAPC) brokered an agreement between SIDECO and FESIFFA, which established that the corporation would construct houses and provide training for locals to obtain jobs in the emerging tourism business. However, the agreement provoked divisions, as it stipulated that the 784 families affiliated with the Federation dropped claims to some 334 hectares of land that they had sought to acquire under the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program. Hence, when Sicogon Airport opened in 2018, FESIFFA continued to stage protests, claiming that SIDECO and Ayala had failed to comply with the compromise agreement

In 2019, the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) issued a Cease-and-Desist Order instructing a halt in tourism construction activities in the 334 hectares disputed zone, nearly one third of the island. While this was a partial victory for those resisting tourism-related evictions and dispossession, the island now boasts several luxury resorts. In fact, Sicogon is being promoted as "the new hub for eco-oriented tourism in the Western Visayas." From Ayala Land's sleek webpage we learn that "as the leader of pioneering the concept of sustainable development in the Philippines, Ayala Land continues to integrate eco-efficient practices into all of its developments, from responsible land acquisition and green building design to sustainable construction practices and management."[6]

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is tempting to conclude this brief tour of coastal tourism projects in Southeast Asia and the Andaman Sea by quoting Cynthia Enloe's *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (1990): "That tourism is not discussed as seriously by conventional political commentators as oil or weaponry may tell us more about the ideological construction of 'seriousness' than about the politics of tourism" (Enloe, 1990:40). Upon first reading, this statement may seem startling, but Enloe wants to shake the tendency to treat tourism as a somewhat 'trivial' subject, mere leisure. Noting that what she calls 'the tourism formula for development' has often symbolised a country's entrance into the world community, Enloe argues that the reliance on tourism, in reality, often may be creating a new kind of dependency for poorer nations, which become 'stuck with tourism', to borrow Córdoba Azcárate's (2020) book title. A key concern for Enloe is that tourism and the pursuit of pleasure is rife with gendered implications, an important topic largely ignored in this paper.

All forms of tourism create a mixture of positive and negative impacts on host societies and these impacts are not evenly distributed. This paper has showed that enclavic beachfront tourism schemes often generate various forms of dispossession and precarious livelihoods, and sometimes forced displacement of long-term residents. Although the selection of cases is limited and may seem biased towards projects with negative impacts on local populations, it would not be difficult to expand the list of tourism development and eco-tourism projects with similar dynamics and outcomes. A quick search in the Environmental Justice Atlas using 'tourism' as the search term gave 364 entries, across Southeast Asia and other world regions. These cases involve environmental injustice and conflicts linked to tourism developments and tourism related infrastructure, such as airports and ports. The Atlas features conflicts that have attracted the attention of activists and scholars and is a valuable resource. Yet many tourism related conflicts in Southeast Asia that infringe on land and resource rights of local communities have not (yet) found their way into the Atlas. Considering the current political will to develop tourism enclaves and special tourism zones across much of the region, coastal populations and islanders are at particular risk of being pressured to move or being forcibly displaced to make room for tourism.

Perhaps surprisingly, the tourism sector has not featured centrally in debates on global land and resource grabbing, but tourism related displacement and land grabs are beginning to attract more interest among critical tourism scholars and human rights scholars (Neef, 2019; Hashimoto et. al., 2021). This is a welcome trend, especially given that the tourism industry is expected to grow in the coming years and governments across Southeast Asia are pinning great hope on tourism as a source of foreign exchange, vigorously promoting tourism in the name of 'national development' and 'public interest.'

The enclavic tourism model's popularity among Southeast Asian governments and elites requires large parcels of 'empty' green fields, external capital and a favourable jurisdictional environment (Kingsley and Telle, 2022). Importantly, enclavisation processes are increasingly characteristic of transnational tourism planning in many parts of the world. Simply put, these tightly controlled, privatised spaces are geared towards complete revenue capture. In the worst case, these enclavic spaces with their 'all-inclusive' offerings can, as Saarinen (2017:433) argues, turn out to be "all-exclusive spaces for local communities in development." Despite the problematic nature of tourism enclaves, their proliferation should not simply be blamed on alliances of government and commercial tourism enterprises. In order to halt the expansion of exclusive tourism enclaves, or to guide their transformation in more socially and environmentally sustainable directions, we must also get rid of destructive tourism imageries. Resisting 'paradise' could be a start.

Based on the above discussion of enclavic tourism development in Southeast Asia, several recommendations can be identified:

- International financial institutions and banks should refrain from financing tourism development projects that will lead to forced displacement of local communities and indigenous populations.
- International tourism organisations, such as World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) and World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), should encourage their members to operate in accordance with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGP).
- Tourism businesses operating in countries with histories of development-induced displacement should not take advantage of weak human rights frameworks. Instead, they should respect the rights to land and access to resources of those who are directly impacted by their business operation, also when these rights are not recognised in national legislation.

- Tourism actors and governments should stop promoting the 'untouched' paradise imaginary in their marketing and branding strategies.
- Governments should provide clear regulatory frameworks to ensure that tourism planning and development is always done with active involvement of all relevant stakeholder groups, including local communities and marginalised groups.
- Governments are encouraged to acknowledge and respect customary and indigenous land rights, and should provide appropriate compensation and remedial actions for all groups that have been adversely affected by state-led enclavic tourism developments, irrespective of whether people possess land certificates or not.
- Civil society organisations can play important roles in raising public awareness about the unevenly distributed costs of enclavic tourism developments and advocate for stronger human-rights protection and environmental justice in tourism.

FOOTNOTES

[1] The Chengdu Declaration was signed by representatives of the UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) Member States in Chengdu, China, September 2017.

[2] It is only quite recently that the government permitted tourism on inhabited islands, a policy motivated by pressures to allow Maldivians to benefit from the tourism sector, see Kothari and Arnall (2017).

[3] See Elena dell' Agnese (2019) for an illuminating analysis of the racialised work hierarchies in Maldivian resorts, which operate as 'islands within islands'.

[4] Fletcher's (2019) discussion of Anthropocene tourism and the creation of novel tourism products which go under the label of 'disaster', 'extinction' tourism speaks directly to this issue.

[5] Sources consulted include, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2018/8/16/typhoons-and-tycoons-disaster-capitalism-in-the-philippines, and the Environmental Justice Atlas, https://ejatlas.org/conflict/sicogon-island-tourism-estate-philippines. This case is also discussed in Neef (2019).

[6] See Ayala Land, https://www.ayalaland.com.ph/sustainability/.

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