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OVERVIEW

The October 2026 issue of IMPACT brings together inspiring stories and practical initiatives from across Southeast Asia, highlighting how individuals, communities, and institutions are driving meaningful change through responsible tourism, sustainability, cultural preservation, and collective action. At the heart of these contributions is a shared belief that lasting transformation begins with people, their values, and their commitment to making a difference.

This issue places particular emphasis on youth empowerment, education, and community participation. From nurturing responsible mindsets among young people to empowering women and strengthening local pride, the featured stories demonstrate how grassroots initiatives and experiential learning can inspire positive behavioural change and create opportunities for inclusive development.

Cultural heritage and community identity also feature prominently, with contributions exploring how local traditions, folklore, and historical landmarks can be preserved and revitalised through responsible tourism. These experiences remind us that meaningful tourism development begins with understanding, respecting, and protecting the communities and cultures that make destinations unique.

Environmental stewardship and sustainable livelihoods form another important dimension of this issue. Through initiatives involving aquaponics, agritourism, soil conservation, and university-community collaboration, the contributors illustrate how practical innovation and shared responsibility can support more resilient communities and sustainable futures.

Together, these stories reflect IMPACT's commitment to connecting practitioners, academics, and communities through real-world experiences and transformative initiatives. We hope this issue encourages readers to recognise the power of small actions, meaningful partnerships, and collective responsibility in creating lasting positive impacts across the region and beyond.

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WHEN YOUNG VOICES BEGIN TO LEAD

Kanyapat Pattanapokinsakul
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From Shared Trust to a New Generation of Leaders

"Ban Nai Nang" derives its name from the Malay term "Sungai Kanang," meaning "happiness and well-being." More than the name of a place, it reflects the spirit of the community—a way of life rooted in nature, culture, and a strong sense of belonging.

When community-based tourism was first introduced, local people raised questions about the opportunities it might create and the impacts it could bring. These perspectives were not obstacles to development. Instead, they showed how deeply community members cared about their home, natural resources, cultural identity, traditional way of life, and invaluable local wisdom.

Senior community leaders began by bringing local people together, encouraging participation, and setting shared goals. Instead of pursuing immediate large-scale change, they started with small, achievable steps and gradually worked toward greater ambitions. At the heart of this journey was trust, the foundation that enabled community members to cooperate, learn from one another, and move forward together.

Today, Ban Nai Nang continues to strengthen its grassroots economy by creating supplementary income and opportunities for local people. Its senior leaders remain guided by a simple but powerful principle: "It is better to fall forward than to stand still." – Mr. Sucha Wansuk, senior community leader.

Every mistake offers a lesson. Weaknesses are not reasons to stop but opportunities to learn, adapt, and create something better. This mindset has enabled the community to grow through experience, resilience, and collective action.



Senior and youth community leaders at "Ban Suan Wansuk" reflecting how knowledge, responsibility, and leadership are carried forward across generations. (Source: Authors)

Yet its progress has raised an increasingly important question: "If we stop leading tomorrow, will the community continue?" – Mr. Sucha Wansuk, senior community leader

Ban Nai Nang's community-based tourism has grown from the knowledge, experience, and determination of its senior generation. Its future depends on whether younger people deepen their involvement, assume greater responsibility, and carry the community forward. This concern extends beyond tourism; it also involves protecting the natural resources on which local lives and livelihoods depend. As the community's leaders explain:

"What we are doing today is for our children and future generations. If our generation fails to protect our coastal resources, what will future generations rely on for food? Protecting these resources is our responsibility, and that responsibility must be passed on to the younger generation." (Mr. Sucha Wansuk, senior community leader)

The next chapter of Ban Nai Nang will therefore not be defined solely by increasing visitor numbers or generating more income. Its true impact will be seen in how young people are equipped with the confidence, knowledge, and opportunities to participate in decision-making and shape the community's future. When young voices begin to lead, the wisdom of the older generation does not disappear—it is carried forward, renewed, and transformed into a living legacy. This is the essence of regenerative community-based tourism: strengthening the community, caring for its natural resources, and sustaining local values and responsibilities across generations.

Bridging Generations: From Local Wisdom to Digital Innovation

Ban Nai Nang's future will therefore be measured not by the number of visitors it receives, but by how effectively tourism strengthens the community, regenerates the environment, and empowers young people to take responsibility and lead.



Young community members represent a new generation contributing to the future of community-based tourism in Ban Nai Nang.. (Source: Authors)



Ms. Sakaorat Wansuk, the youth community leader, shares Ban Nai Nang's responsible tourism impacts on the international stage, reflecting the emerging leadership of a new generation. (Source: Authors)

Today, Ban Nai Nang serves as a community learning centre for natural resource management. Local people continue to practice and share their knowledge of traditional fishing, organic farming, and community-based activities that connect visitors with the local way of life.

What began with a small group of committed individuals has grown into a broader community network built on mutual trust, collective responsibility, and shared stewardship of local resources.

This transformation reflects social regeneration in practice. Young people are no longer merely observing the work of senior leaders; they have taken an active role in continuing and strengthening community-based tourism. The COVID-19 crisis became an important turning point, encouraging the younger generation to introduce online platforms and digital marketing to help the community adapt, remain visible, and reach new audiences. Their digital skills and new perspectives complement the experience, local wisdom, and established relationships of senior leaders (Ms. Sakaorat Wansuk, the youth community leader).

Rather than replacing one generation with another, Ban Nai Nang's leadership transition is developing through intergenerational collaboration. Senior leaders provide knowledge, values, and lessons grounded in experience, while younger members contribute new ideas, technologies, and ways of responding to change.

Through this partnership, local wisdom is not only preserved but also adapted to remain relevant in a changing world.

Ban Nai Nang therefore demonstrates the power of tourism as a living classroom where young people learn leadership through participation, while also being trusted to introduce change. When the wisdom of the older generation meets the creativity and capabilities of the younger generation, community-based tourism becomes more resilient, regenerative, and capable of sustaining both the community and its natural resources into the future.

SCRUBBING TOILETS, BUILDING FUTURES: A WOMAN-LED TOURISM REVOLUTION IN RURAL BALI

Aniek Puspawardani

In 2012, I watched a group of children get chased off a public beach in Bali by a villa's security guard. They were Balinese kids, on their own ancestral land, told they were "disturbing" tourists. That moment changed my life. When I investigated further, the reality was worse than I imagined: around 85% of the farmland along my village's coastline in Kelecung, Tabanan, had already been bought up by investors.

Research on tourism and land grabbing in Bali confirms this is not an isolated case. Across the island, nearly 25% of agricultural land has been lost in the past two decades, displacing communities whose livelihoods depend on it. Kelecung, a hamlet of just 144 families, was next in line. I could not stand by.

In 2015, I left a stable career in the city and returned to my village with a vision: to build community-based tourism that would give people an economic alternative to selling their land. Not tourism that extracts from the community, but tourism that is the community.

The beginning was brutal. As a woman proposing change in a deeply patriarchal village, I faced rejection from roughly 95% of the community and, even worse, a death threat. I started by teaching English to the village children voluntarily. Slowly, their parents' suspicion of a hidden agenda I brought softened. I then approached two families, went to their homes, and scrubbed their toilets with my own hands to show them hospitality standards. I listed their rooms on Airbnb, invited my former students from Surabaya as the first guests, and paid for everything from my personal savings.



Inside and around a family-run homestay in Kelecung: traditional beds beneath a woven bamboo roof, and the family garden courtyard where guests share meals. (Source: Author)

That small experiment worked. The families earned real income. Others began to pay attention.

Today, Kelecung Eco Village operates 15 homestays with 30 rooms, all managed by local families. We host over 50 student groups per year from Japan and Taiwan, alongside individual travelers and digital nomads.

We offer edu-ecotourism experiences: turtle conservation, regenerative agroforestry, traditional Balinese dance and gamelan, wellness treatments, and soft-adventure activities. Everything operates on an "on-supply" basis, meaning tourism is integrated into the daily rhythm of village life rather than built on top of it.

Each homestay is a real Balinese family home, not a resort room. Guests sleep in traditional pavilions of carved wood and woven bamboo, share meals with the family, and wake to the rhythm of village life.

What makes our model distinctive is not just what we do, but how the money flows. All tourism revenue enters a single communal account and is then distributed directly to participating families, the women's catering group, youth guides, cultural performers, and daily workers based on their actual involvement. This is recorded in a financial ledger and reviewed collectively during monthly community meetings.

There is no intermediary, and very little leakage. The impact has been transformative. Twenty-five women who previously had no personal income now earn IDR 200,000–300,000 per day through catering, massage, cooking classes, and tending our communal forest. Monthly, they could earn at least IDR 1,000,000, more than half of their family's previous income, money they had never earned before as a woman. Ten youth work as tour guides and drivers.

In 2024, a group of young villagers independently launched a collective souvenir business, funded entirely with their own capital. This matters deeply: in the past, 75% of local youth chose to leave for city jobs. Now, they are building their future at home. In total, operating in a hamlet of just 144 families, our tourism activities now directly benefit around 40 people, and approximately 80% of the population feels the economic impact, up from just 2 families when we started in 2016.

Twenty-five women earning their first independent income, ten youth choosing to stay rather than migrate, and 80% of a 144-families hamlet now feeling the economic impact of tourism, up from just 2 families in 2016.

My own role in all of this has been to lead, and to lead specifically through the women. I approached the wives of the first two families myself and trained them in hospitality, cooking, and guest care, women who had never held a personal income of their own. I built the women's catering group and the communal account as deliberate structures, so that participation and payment would never depend on any single man's goodwill.

Today around twenty-five women work in catering, traditional massage, cooking classes, and tending our forest, and most of the people who plant and care for the communal forest are women and youth. I set up the distribution system that keeps this fair, and I lead the review with the community every month. Leading this change as a woman in a village where patriarchy still runs deep remains the hardest and the most important part of my work.



Women actively involved in tourism at Kelecung Eco Village. (Source: Author)

Through a grant from Women Earth Alliance, we established a communal forest with over 1,000 trees across 375 plant species, using the Miyawaki rapid-growth technique with a 95% survival rate, designed to offset the carbon footprint of visitors and move our tourism activities toward climate neutrality. We also support a grassroots turtle conservation program that has released over 30,000 hatchlings since 2007.

A communal forest of over 1,000 trees across 375 plant species with a 95% survival rate for tourism decarbonization and a grassroots turtle conservation program that has released over 30,000 hatchlings since 2007, all integrated into the village's tourism model.

Our co-working space was built entirely from local materials: river stones, bamboo, beach sand, and reclaimed wood. Recognition has followed, and the model has kept growing. In 2024, Indonesia's Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy designated Kelecung as a national Pilot Project for Women-Friendly and Environmentally Conscious Tourism Villages, intended as a replicable model. In 2025, Mark Plus Tourism and the Bali Tourism Board named Kelecung the Most Bali Impact-Tourism Village, together with three category awards for People-Centric, Green, and Partnership Excellence villages.

As of 2026, the village runs steadily, receiving more than twenty guests a month and hosting around two educational group visits a month, while I complete facilitator training with Women Earth Alliance and a trainer program on green tourism for small enterprises run by the Ministry of Tourism with the ILO, so that I can help other villages follow the same path.

Even through the post-pandemic years, when rising costs and renewed investor pressure pushed more coastal land toward sale elsewhere, our community has held its ground, and some families have even begun buying their farmland back. I have since been invited to speak at TEDxTabanan, Earth Company, and government policy forums on rural tourism governance and gender inclusivity

The lesson I want to share is simple: we do not need investors or government directives to start. We need conviction, patience, and a willingness tobegin with what we have, even if that means scrubbing someone else's toilet. Responsible tourism is not a certification or a label.

It is a daily choice to make sure that the people who share their home with visitors are the ones who benefit from it. Kelecung is proof that a small village canresist the tide of displacement, not by fighting development, but by building a better kind of it.



Launching and inaugural tree-planting of the Kelecung Eco Village Communal Forest (2023). (Source: Author)

BUILDING COMMUNITY PRIDE THROUGH AQUAPONICS EXTENSION INITIATIVES

Tan Toh Hii

Imagine a primary school kid who welcomes visitors to their school, no matter what program the visitors are attending. After the event, students will happily approach visitors, ask if they are free and gently pull visitors' hands to their school's iconic landmark - an aquaponic system. Community pride rarely emerges from majestic infrastructure or iconic landmark alone. More often, it grows quietly from everyday places where people learn, care and take responsibility together.

A collaboration between Universiti Putra Malaysia Bintulu Sarawak Campus (UPMKB) and Sekolah Kebangsaan Sungai Bagiau (SK Sg. Bagiau) initiated since 2024, established a small-scale aquaponic system primarily designed as an educational platform integrating science learning, food security awareness, and responsibility. The school-based aquaponic initiative eventually developed into the community's pride. While never intended to be a tourist attraction, it has evolved into a meaningful learning space, and a point of pride for the school community, led by its youngest members.

A small-scale aquaponic system primarily for supporting learning and daily routine is able to empower youth into confident hosts.

The initiative is deeply woven into daily school life as Primary 1 students feed the fish every Tuesday as part of their regular class routine while Primary 2 students take on greater responsibility every Thursday to feed the fish, conduct simple water quality testing and measuring fish length under teacher guidance. These activities are not carried out as special events but ordinary daily routine similar to cleaning the class and washing student's own plate.

Over time, these routines have molded the primary students to be more consistently more caring and patient for the fish and plants. Students learn that their attitude towards these routine tasks such as fish measurement accuracy and water quality monitoring have visible consequences towards the living organisms. Teachers observe that students gradually become more confident in feeding and measuring tasks as well as being more attentive and more willing to work together as a team. Responsibility is not taught but practiced.

According to teachers at SK Sg. Bagiau, the aquaponic system gives students a hands-on way to learn about sustainability, science and responsibility. They understand how the ecosystem works while encouraging teamwork and problem-solving skills. Learning becomes tangible when students can see fish grow and plants thrive through their consistent care. The sense of ownership has transformed the aquaponic system into something more than an educational tool.

The school never positioned itself as a tourism site, yet visitors still come. Education officers, agency representatives, community stakeholders came to the school for other events.



The small-scale aquaponic system that marks the beginning of a bigger impact in Sekolah Kebangsaan Sungai Bagiau, Tatau. (Source: Author)

However, when they come, students intentionally show the aquaponic system as part of the school visit.

Teachers led the visitors and shared what they value: learning through care, responsibility through routine and pride through action. In some instance, students are the ones involved in leading visitors to the aquaponic system and explaining their effort on it. They are able to describe feeding methods, checking water quality and how plants depend on the fish.

Teachers provide guidance to ensure explanations are clear and accurate, but the credit still belongs to the students. These interactions show that students are no longer learners and have become ambassadors of the school.

The sense of pride was not limited within the walls of SK Sg. Bagiau. Teachers and students who participated in STEM Project-Based Learning Carnival at the district level in January 2025, displayed their aquaponic work sharing not only the system itself but also the story behind it.

The response from participants and jury were encouraging as another school later expressed interest to UPM in establishing similar aquaponic system at their school. This shows that community pride and learning can spread through example rather than formal replication of programs.

We acquired several important lessons from SK Sg Bagiau experience. First, community pride does not require large-scale projects. It can grow from simple, well-supported initiatives that trust young people with real responsibility. Secondly, youth empowerment is most effective when it is embedded in everyday routines and not treated as special occasional activity. When responsibility becomes normal, confidence follows.

Thirdly, meaningful places do not need to be labelled destinations. If a school can become a landmark within the community, likewise an aquaponic system can become a landmark of the school because it reflects the community's pride.

SK Sg. Bagiau's story offers an important insight into responsible tourism. The small-scale aquaponic system does more than supportlearning; it prepares the community to receive others with confidence and care.

Communities could not suddenly become responsible hosts when tourism arrives. Stewardship, responsibility, hospitality and care are built earlier before visitors come. Responsible tourism begins not at destinations but in ordinary places where communities care about and have stories to share.

Ordinary places with stories where communities care about could also be potential tourism destinations.



The small scale-aquaponic system is always part the attraction for visitors to Sekolah Kebangsaan Sungai Bagiau, Tatau. (Source: Author)

PLANTING GREEN MINDS: HOW STUDENT-LED PROJECTS CULTIVATED LASTING BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE

Dau Thi Ngoc Phung

When my students first proposed a sustainability campaign in 2021, it looked perfect "on paper".

The visuals were polished. The messaging was strong. The ideas were convincing. But I had seen this pattern before: campaigns that generate attention but fail to change behaviour.

That was when I realised something critical: "Sustainable tourism is not an awareness problem—it is a behaviour problem."

This insight became the foundation of how I mentored the Semillas Project, a student-led sustainability platform at Hoa Sen University. Its name, meaning "seeds", reflects our belief that meaningful change starts with small individual actions that grow over time.

Across ten consecutive student-led seasons, each cohort has inherited the experience of the previous team while bringing new ideas, partnerships and activities. This continuity has transformed a classroom initiative into a living platform for experiential learning, community engagement and leadership development.

Sustainable tourism is not an awareness problem—it is a behaviour problem.

From Awareness to Participation

In its early stages, Semillas followed a familiar path. Students designed social media campaigns and awareness activities about environmental issues. The information was valuable, but awareness alone proved insufficient.

COVID-19 became a turning point. As mental-health concerns emerged, we shifted the question from "How do we raise awareness?" to "How do we change what people actually do?"

Students were managing project uncertainty, stress, isolation and declining motivation. Semillas responded by moving to online workshops, talk shows and reflective activities that connected environmental issues with mindful living. This practical adjustment revealed a deeper relationship between sustainability, emotional well-being and human behaviour.

Students then redesigned initiatives around participation. Instead of simply telling people to reduce waste, they created challenges that encouraged reusable items and organised a "Mindful Living Week". Workshops allowed participants to practise eco-friendly habits and explore a more sustainable mindset.

Across the seasons, the project's reach became more visible. Early campaigns generated more than 1,600 social media interactions; a later season recorded 2,039 Facebook page likes. Student teams collected more than 800 plastic bottles, welcomed over 50 workshop participants,

and surveyed 158 young people before designing the "Green Mind" campaign. Today, the online community exceeds 4,000 followers. These figures demonstrate sustained reach and a progression from receiving information to taking practical action, although they do not alone prove lasting behaviour change.

The impact became tangible during a community clean-up along the Nhiêu Lộc canal in Ho Chi Minh City. Over four hours, the core team, volunteers and community participants cleaned a two-kilometre stretch, sorted recyclables and spoke with passers-by. Sustainability was no longer something presented only "on paper"; it became a shared experience of responsibility and collective action.



Semillas volunteers participating in a community clean-up activity along the Nhiêu Lộc canal in Ho Chi Minh City. (Source: Author)

Growing Beyond a Student Project

One reason Semillas has remained active is its succession model. Each organising committee transfers knowledge, project materials, networks and leadership responsibility to the next cohort. Faculty mentoring provides continuity, while students from tourism, hospitality, business, design and languages contribute fresh perspectives.

The project is sustained through student volunteers, lecturer guidance, university facilities and communication channels, and collaboration with community organisations, guest speakers and industry partners. Project documents include sponsorship planning, while in-kind expertise, venues, digital platforms and volunteer time reduce dependence on one funding source. This partnership-based model allows each season to adapt while retaining the project's purpose.

This led me to reflect on an idea that became central to the project: "Green from the Inside Out."

Challenges Along the Way

One of the biggest challenges was the gap between intention and action. Students were genuinely passionate about sustainability, yet early efforts relied heavily on communication and lacked the experiential elements needed to turn intention into action.

Over time, especially during the pandemic, I began to realise that behavioural change could not be separated from emotional well-being and human connection.

Sustainability is not only about external actions—what we consume, reuse or recycle. It is also about internal states—how we think, feel and relate to others. COVID-19 highlighted inner awareness and emotional balance as foundations for more sustainable action.

This led me to reflect on an idea that became central to the project: "Green from the Inside Out."

I observed that when students paused, listened more attentively and became more conscious of their emotions, their collaboration improved. Conflicts became easier to navigate, while differences in expectations and working styles became



Students participating in collaborative sustainability activities during a later season of the Semillas Project. (Source: Author)

opportunities for learning. I therefore embedded mindfulness practices and reflective sharing into later seasons. Real impact, I came to believe, begins by shifting the mindset of the core team and participants—cultivating a "green mind" before expecting sustainable action.

Mindfulness did not replace sustainability; it became a way of experiencing it. Reflective discussions, mindful pauses and shared learning helped students become more attentive to themselves, more understanding of one another and more intentional in how they collaborated. Lasting engagement depends not only on information, but also on deeper internal shifts in how people think, feel and connect with sustainability.

Planting Seeds for the Future

Looking back, the most meaningful outcome is not simply the campaigns delivered or people reached. It is the culture of learning, collaboration and reflection that has continued across ten student-led seasons.

Semillas has evolved from promoting sustainable actions into a platform where students learn to lead and inspire change together.

Looking ahead, Semillas aims to strengthen partnerships with schools, community organisations and industry; widen interdisciplinary participation; and embed reflective, mindfulness-informed practice in student leadership development. Future teams will continue documenting activities and outcomes so that progress can be evaluated across seasons, not only within individual campaigns.

Rather than measuring success only by the number of activities delivered, Semillas seeks to cultivate future tourism and hospitality professionals who can influence their teams, organisations and communities. Like its name, the project continues to plant seeds—not only for a greener environment, but for mindful leaders, stronger collaborations and lasting behavioural change from the inside out.

FROM MYTHS TO ASSETS: DECODING SOUTHERN VIETNAMESE FOLK GHOSTS FOR CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY

Nguyen Minh Khue
Mai Kim Thoa

In the rapid tide of global integration, Southeast Asia is witnessing a profound generational disconnect in how cultural heritage is transmitted and consumed.

While today's youth effortlessly consume Western and East Asian supernatural pop culture, they paradoxically remain estranged from their own local folklore and spiritual systems.

Historically in Southern Vietnam, spiritual narratives served as vital lenses for ancestors to rationalize natural phenomena and pass down moral philosophies. Nowadays, however, these rich traditions are often confined within dry academic texts or superficially commercialized and dismissed as outdated superstitions.

When heritage is frozen behind the glass panels of a museum, without a vibrant space for active practice, it loses its capacity to engage in meaningful dialogue with the younger generation.

The critical challenge of 21st-century intangible heritage preservation lies not in passive archiving, but in keeping the heritage breathing:

How can we decode this rich repository of regional folklore and transform it into an inspiring asset that motivates young people to actively reclaim their own cultural identity?

Creative actions: Story-living through immersive design

Recognizing this critical vacuum, the Tran Sao Am Vay (TSAV) project emerged as a strategic cultural intervention powered by immersive and interactive experiential mechanics. Set in the 1930s-1940s in the Southern Vietnam, the project meticulously reconstructs a signature rural riverine landscape, complete with monkey bridges (cầu khỉ), traditional wooden rowboats and the imposing architecture of a village councilor's mansion.

However, the definitive breakthrough of TSAV lies in its operational philosophy of Live Conservation. Rather than presenting historical data through passive lectures, it immerses participants in a symmetrical ecosystem: Lang Duong (The Living Realm) and Lang Am (The Ghost Realm). Within this framework, visitors become active villagers who co-create the narrative.

The experiential journey begins by equipping each participant with a tangible life-system: three Hồn (Souls) and seven Vía (Vital Spirits) - the fundamental spiritual energies of a human being inspired by authentic Vietnamese cultural concepts. According to culturologist Tran Ngoc Them, while Hồn constitutes the higher spiritual soul, Vía represents the vital energy intrinsically bound to the physical body.

TSAV leverages this duality to heighten suspense as players cross into Làng Âm (The Ghost Realm): each time a supernatural encounter startles them, they lose a portion of their Vía.

This mechanic is not arbitrary; it is rooted in Tran's analysis of the folk phenomenon "thất thần" (soul-shock) - where extreme terror causes a person's Vía to scatter from the body. Consequently, this experiential structure compels participants to strategically purchase protective vernacular amulets at the local marketplace to safeguard their spiritual integrity.

This immersive storytelling climaxes when participants navigate a narrow monkey bridge suspended over a misty river, accompanied by the haunting melodies of Bắc Kim Thang (a traditional nursery rhyme). Instead of its modern playful connotation, the song is decoded into its chilling original context, a cautionary tale about a water ghost (Ma da) lurking beneath the currents, waiting to pull unsuspecting travelers down to take its place.

By engaging multiple senses through spatial design and interactive gamification, TSAV enables youths to organically comprehend their ancestors' psychological and protective rituals without relying on dry moralization.

This immersive storytelling climaxes when participants navigate a narrow monkey bridge suspended over a misty river, accompanied by the haunting melodies of Bắc Kim Thang (a traditional nursery rhyme). Instead of its modern playful connotation, the song is decoded into its chilling original context, a cautionary tale about a water ghost (Ma da) lurking beneath the currents, waiting to pull unsuspecting travelers down to take its place.

By engaging multiple senses through spatial design and interactive gamification, TSAV enables youths to organically comprehend their ancestors' psychological and protective rituals without relying on dry moralization.

Decoding the collective unconscious

Beyond entertainment, the TSAV model's academic depth lies in utilizing supernatural entities as diagnostic tools to decode the collective unconscious of historical Southern Vietnamese society.

Through structured interactions within Lang Am, participants realize these folk demons did not emerge from arbitrary imagination.



The spatial design layout contrasting the prosperous Lang Duong with its shadowed reflection, Lang Am, illustrating the deep-rooted cultural concept of "As in the living world, so in the underworld." (Source: Author)

The Ma da (water ghost) directly reflects the existential fears of early pioneer settlers navigating an untamed, perilous river network - a historical reality meticulously documented by writer Sơn Nam in "The historical reclamation and settlement of the southern territory". Similarly, tragic spirits like the Ma nữ tóc dài (long-haired female ghost) serve as a powerful socio-cultural indictment.

As anthropologist Philip Taylor analyzed in his studies of Southern Vietnamese beliefs, this figure reflects severe historical injustices, class exploitation, and the hidden domestic suffering of vulnerable individuals behind the opulent facades of colonial-era mansions. These entities are situated within Làng Âm to establish a clear environmental boundary. This spatial design aligns closely with Cambridge anthropologist Heonik Kwon's research, demonstrating how Vietnamese ghost beliefs reflect a structured cosmological boundary separating protected communal spaces from the dangerous wilderness beyond.

By peeling back the superficial layers of horror, the project restores folklore's core humanistic values: a subtle voice of social resistance, a narrative anchor for karmic justice, and a profound respect for environmental boundaries.

From local heritage to ASEAN's creative economy

Although currently operating as a conceptual student-led initiative, TSAV's early reception suggests strong resonance. Within one week of its digital launch, the project recorded over 20,000 website visits, nearly 75,000 views on Threads, and gathered 548 survey responses indicating high intent to attend a physical exhibition.

These figures transcend media metrics, proving that young people remain deeply fascinated by local culture when unlocked through experiential language.

Moreover, they actively seek to engage with their heritage to reconnect with their ancestral roots and comprehend the profound life philosophies of past generations - messages cleverly encoded within supernatural entities rather than existing solely to frighten. This enthusiastic engagement perfectly aligns with a 2024 empirical study by Nguyen and Nguyen, asserting that youth do not reject heritage; they merely reject static and passive methods of preservation.

Domestically, TSAV provides an actionable blueprint for Vietnam's cultural industry, highlighting the potential to evolve from an academic project into a comprehensive, heritage-based model encompassing films, novels, video games, and immersive 3D websites.

This roadmap establishes a sustainable creative economic loop: authentic heritage generates compelling experiences; these experiences build dedicated communities; communities attract resources; and those resources are directly reinvested into independent research, cultural reconstruction, and further creative production - effectively shifting heritage from a fragile artifact "in need of rescue" to a self-sustaining asset.

Regionally, TSAV offers a powerful methodology adaptable across Southeast Asia. ASEAN nations share an interconnected cultural foundation characterized by agrarian roots, river-dependent livelihoods, and deeply ingrained animistic belief systems; this similarity also exposes the region to the shared threat of global cultural homogenization.

In this context, the Live Conservation methodology can be readily deployed to decode and redesign experiential narratives for similar folklore - whether the



An immersive scene depicting the tragic fate of a traveling musical troupe overturned by Ong Nam Cheo (a mythical demonic crocodile), alongside lurking water ghosts (Ma da). This illustrates the early settlers' existential fears of the untamed riverine environment. (Source: Author)

ghost legends of Thailand, forest mysticism in Indonesia, or vernacular rituals in Malaysia.

It equips developing economies with a sophisticated tool to combat cultural dilution, empowering youths to retell their ancestral stories in a globally competitive creative language. The scientific foundation and practical applicability of this approach are reinforced by Nguyen and Nguyen's 2024 study, which asserts that providing interactive spaces immediately transitions youth from passive observers to active co-creators in cultural preservation.

Furthermore, TSAV's practical application perfectly aligns with UNESCO's 2021 policy report, emphasizing that ASEAN's intangible cultural heritage can only survive sustainably if youth are empowered to re-practice it through contemporary media. With this theoretical and practical launchpad, TSAV transcends being a solitary project to become a robust prototype, ready to be replicated by neighboring countries across the region.

Authentic preservation begins when we possess the creative courage to retell our ancestors' stories using the experiential language of the future.

Conserving heritage does not mean freezing it in the past. Authentic preservation begins when we possess the creative courage to retell our ancestors' stories using the experiential language of the future. When folklore is designed as a living ecosystem where people can touch, feel, and converse, heritage naturally uncovers its own pulse.

TSAV proves that sustainable development does not require trading identity for modernity. On the contrary, a resilient creative economy is one where local culture act as an unyielding anchor, allowing Southeast Asian youth to proudly ground themselves in their roots while confidently stepping onto the global stage.

THE ULU AI EXPERIENCE – A MODEL FOR RESPONSIBLE TOURISM IN SARAWAK

Robert Basiuk

Borneo Adventure, an inbound travel company was established in 1987 with aim to provide tours that featured the best of Sarawak's spectacular nature and cultural heritage. The company has been working with several communities in the upper Ai River of Sarawak for close to 40 years promoting tourism to these areas to support conservation and community development. In addition to the community, rivers and rainforest, a core attraction is the chance to view orang utan in the wild. The local communities are partners in the tourism endeavour and receive direct benefits through employment and other economic opportunities. Tourism to the area has not only provided economic benefits to the people but has also fostered a sense of stewardship for the surrounding habitat and the resident wildlife.

Aims for Tourism

Borneo Adventure's aim from the company's inception was to promote conservation of Sarawak's natural assets while at the same time providing tangible benefits to the local communities. However, to realise these lofty goals and ensure that they became more that just marketing points it was necessary to diversify the communities' economic base. Tourism provided this means by building partnerships with the local communities and providing employment and economic benefits as well as promoting conservation of the surrounding area.

The creation of employment in tourism in this remote rural area had a profound impact on the economies of the communities. By providing in situ employment, community members (and importantly, women) were able to earn cash income at home. Borneo Adventure's experience with community-based tourism has revealed several key considerations regarding this economy.

Tourism brings money into the community

- Typically, to earn cash, members of remote communities (mainly men) would have to travel away to other areas in the state, other states and even other countries. This not only disrupts families but also incurs expenses. Cash earned at home tends to stay at home, especially if this money is being earned by the women.

- Earning money at home means it is possible to continue with other forms of livelihood such as farming and handicraft production. This not only diversifies income streams but also increases the potential amounts of household income earned.

- Women are able to take up employment in a range of tourism jobs while continuing their important roles in the community.

The money from tourism flows through the community

- People within in the community employ other members in the community – thereby creating an internal economy. Before tourism there was very little cash in the economy and as a result, money did not move through the community.

- Money gets used for education, medical expenses, and other necessities. This is especially so for money that is in the hands of the women.

- The money brought into the economy breaks subsistence agriculture cycles allowing farmers to invest in cash crops that will increase household incomes. Before tourism farmers depended on growing rice as a crucial subsistence crop. Any failure to the crop would put them in a precarious position. The additional money brought in by tourism provided options and released the farmers from total dependence on their rice crops. These options allow for diversification of their economy.

Currently, Borneo Adventure contributes around RM 1 million annually to the communities in wages and other tourism related services.

Giving Back

In addition to creating employment, Borneo Adventure has also re-invested money to assist in the development of the communities involved. Profits from tourism have been used for community services such as:

- The Aki Along Education fund. Named after the former headman who provided guidance when Borneo Adventure first started bringing tourists to the area; this was established to support school children and encourage staying in school. To date there have been over 30 graduates from the communities.

- Micro loans. One of the early challenges was the inability to afford outboard motors (critical for travel in an area with only rivers and no roads). Borneo Adventure provided interest-free loans that could be paid back over time as they worked providing tourism transport services. This effort provided access to a means of production. This service was extended to include chainsaws after fire destroyed the longhouse and all its contents.

- Medical assistance for those from the community needing support in hospitals.

- Community projects to improve infrastructure and rebuild community buildings. Borneo Adventure has provided funds and sourced additional funds for sewerage and drainage systems as well as rebuilding the longhouse after it burned down.

- Crop compensation. The success of the conservation efforts have come at a cost to the local farmers. Increased sightings of wildlife have resulted in increased crop depredation, which impacts the livelihoods of the community. Borneo Adventure has provided an annual conservation bonus to recognise that the crops have been damaged by wildlife. There is now a project with WWF Malaysia to seek methods to protect crops and provide compensation.

Conservation Benefits

These efforts have also served to promote conservation of the surrounding area. Wildlife tourism has provided employment and a much-needed source of cash income. Only once basic needs were addressed was it possible to gradually shift the focus to what the surrounding area had to offer and to highlight conservation of wildlife, in this case orang utan. The initial steps were very simple. During hikes through the surrounding rainforest, if orang utan were sighted during the tour, the guide asked the clients to tip the guide after the tour.

The amount of the tips was not large, but the impact was immediate and directly connected to seeing the wildlife. Gradually there was an understanding that visitors were interested in seeing wildlife; and they were willing to pay for this experience.

The community began to see wildlife in a slightly different light – the employment created through wildlife-oriented tourism provided an incentive and served to monetise the viewing of wildlife. Now an asset, wildlife viewing provided a means to range of employment opportunities in the community for whoever was able to work, including (and importantly) women.

Borneo Adventure's experience with community- and wildlife-based tourism has resulted in several observations regarding the impact of tourism on conservation. There are now increased sightings of wild orang utan throughout the area. As visitors increased and their presence along the trails became more common place, sightings of orang utan in the wild also increased. These results have been verified by surveys conducted by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS).

Tourism as a force for conservation

Tourism has become a positive force for conservation, especially conservation of habitat outside the existing protected area network. In 2011, much of the area in Ulu Ai had been placed under license to be logged (and in all likelihood converted to oil palm). This area was known orang utan habitat, but there was no data to support this claim. To address this, Borneo Adventure convened a meeting with Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), the Sarawak Forest Department (SFD) and the Sarawak Forestry Corporation (SFC).

Tourism has become a positive force for conservation, especially conservation of habitat outside the existing protected area network.



Views of orang utan in the wild are one of the highlights of a trip to Ulu Ai. (Source: Author)

The objective was to conduct surveys in the area to gather data regarding the presence of orang utan.

Orang utan nest count surveys were conducted over a period of 2 weeks by 4 separate teams in 4 separate locations in 2012 and 2013. The data from all the surveys were collated and analysed to obtain an estimate of the size of the resident orang utan population in the area in question. It was estimated that the area proposed to be logged was habitat for up to 200 orang utan (over 10% of the total estimated Sarawak orang utan population).

This information was presented to the then Chief Minister who declared that the licenses were to be revoked and the area to be designated as an orang utan conservation zone. A contributing factor to this decision was the fact that at least 4 communities in the area were employed in wildlife-based tourism and receiving significant incomes through this endeavour.

Engaging the community in conservation through tourism

While there has been some success in protecting habitat and increasing wildlife numbers, this has come at a cost. As the orang utan have become more accustomed to seeing people they now tend to come closer to the communities in search of food. The forest provides a range of food, but this is not always consistent so the orang utan must move about in search of sources of food. This includes incursions into local fruit orchards and other sources of food used by the local community. This has placed the orang utan in conflict with the community.

The next steps

The next steps in this journey will be to seek methods and new projects to improve local livelihoods. To this end Borneo Adventure has established a not-for-profit, Ulu Ai Conservancy (UAC). In addition to continuing Borneo Adventure's community support project, UAC is investigating (with WWF Malaysia) potential crop compensation and conservation models. The aim is to build on the existing conservation bonus and seek methods that will provide an encouragement or reward to the communities for participating in the conservation of orang utan.



Tourism provides employment and gives visitors a unique experience. (Source: Author)

The community have co-existed with the orang utan for centuries and their folklore recognises the orang utan as special – harbouring the souls of the departed. Thus, there was already a level of tolerance to their presence. The economic benefits through tourism have helped to further encourage this tolerance. Nonetheless, Borneo Adventure has recognised the communities' contribution to conservation and has been providing an annual conservation bonus to each community as a form of appreciation. This bonus is funded based on the tourism the area receives.

Tourism has been the catalyst and will continue to underpin these efforts and contribute to the continuation of the projects. Borneo Adventure started with the goal to provide a great tourism product that contributed to community development and supported conservation. This continued partnership with the communities has demonstrated that it is indeed possible to provide a meaningful and sustainable product and the best Heart of Borneo experiences.

A VILLAGE BEFORE A DESTINATION: WHAT THAI HAI TEACHES TOURISM ABOUT PROTECTING WHAT VISITORS COME TO SEE

Bui Thi Ngoc Phuong

Before the first visitor: protect living heritage and regenerate the place

In the early 2000s, Nguyễn Thị Thanh Hải returned to the ATK Định Hóa area and saw traditional Tày stilt houses being dismantled. Local reporting records that she mortgaged property and mobilized resources to acquire land and rescue old stilt houses. Thai Hai therefore did not begin as a tourism product. It began with a decision to protect a living place and a culture at risk of disappearing.

ICRT Global records that 28 original Tày stilt houses were relocated and carefully restored, with more than 30 now preserved and used in everyday life. More importantly, these houses still carry social life: people live, gather, teach, pass on knowledge and welcome guests within them.

Culture is not separated from everyday life and repackaged as a scheduled performance. Tày language, customs, rituals, clothing, music, food and handicrafts remain part of community life and continue through intergenerational transmission. ICRT Global emphasizes that Thai Hai preserves culture as everyday practice rather than as performance or exhibition.

Protecting living heritage was followed by regenerating the place that sustains it.

ICRT notes that regeneration began on degraded land, first with fast-growing trees to improve the soil and later with native species connected to Tày life. The sequence matters: ecological recovery was treated as part of sustaining the community, not simply as scenery for visitors.

At Thai Hai, conservation is therefore not simply about saving a house or maintaining a ritual. It is about protecting the conditions that allow culture to remain alive. A restored house can become scenery. But when meals, memories, work and intergenerational transmission still take place inside it, the house remains part of a living cultural system. Nature, likewise, is not merely scenery; it is the ecological foundation to be handed on to the future.

Before growth: build shared governance

Once the community had identified what needed to be protected and regenerated, Thai Hai developed a system for living, working and sharing benefits collectively. VnExpress reports that income is placed into a common fund to support food, health care, education and other community needs. ASEAN captures the philosophy in the phrase "One meal we share, one purse we bear". The lesson is not that other destinations should copy this model literally, but that Thai Hai has clear principles governing how work is organized, how benefits circulate and how collective life is protected.

Its economic model also connects livelihoods with knowledge the community wants to retain. UN Tourism highlights the "one family, one product" approach, through which households develop products rooted in local skills and knowledge.

For tourism practitioners, the lesson lies in the order of decisions. Before asking how to attract more visitors, a destination should ask: who decides, who benefits, what is shared, what should not be commercialized, and who has the authority to say "no" when a profitable activity begins to damage community life? Marketing can create demand. Governance decides whether a destination can survive its own success

A destination can become more successful in the market while becoming less itself when growth moves faster than stewardship.

The visitor enters village life - not the other way around

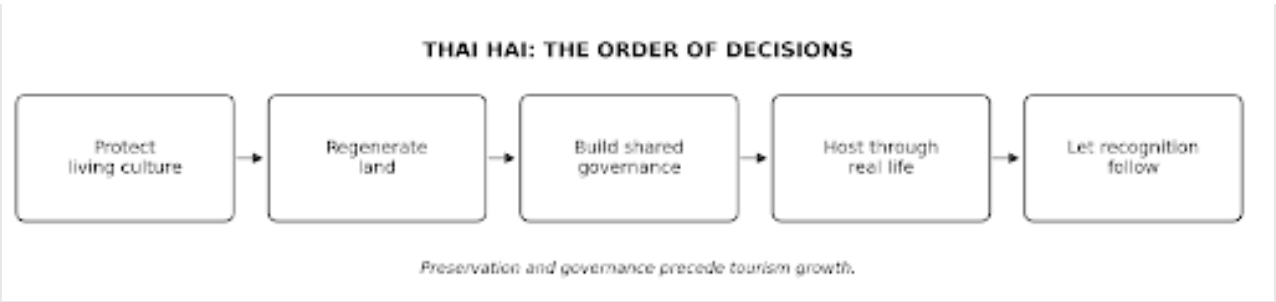
The difference becomes visible in the host-guest relationship. ICRT describes visitors staying in traditional stilt houses, sharing meals, joining farming and food preparation, and learning about traditional health practices through interactions based on real life rather than staged performances.

The emphasis is on participation in an existing way of life rather than on a performance designed around visitor expectations. That choice is easy to describe and difficult to protect. Tourism often pushes communities to reorganize daily life around what visitors expect to see. Thai Hai attempts the opposite: the visitor is invited into a rhythm that already has meaning. The guest learns because the host continues to live - not because the host has been turned into a permanent performer.

The 2026 ICRT jury citation reports approximately 50,000 visitors a year and about 90% arriving through personal recommendations rather than formal marketing. Whether those figures rise or fall in future years, the strategic point is more important than the number: strong word of mouth is a result of an experience people find meaningful, not simply of promotional reach.



International tourists learning how to weave bamboo utensils with Thai Hai villagers. (Source: Thai Hai villagers)



Thai Hai reverses the common tourism sequence: preservation, regeneration and shared governance precede tourism growth. (Source: Author synthesis based on UN Tourism, ICRT Global, ASEAN and Viet Nam sources.)

Awards came after the hard work

External recognition has followed. Thai Hai received two ASEAN tourism awards — the ASEAN Sustainable Tourism Standard Award in 2018 and an ASEAN Homestay Award in 2025 — was named one of UN Tourism's Best Tourism Villages 2022, and won Gold for Championing Cultural Diversity at the 2026 ICRT Southeast Asia Responsible Tourism Awards.

Recognition is valuable, but it is not harmless. Awards bring visibility; visibility brings demand; demand brings pressure to standardize, commercialize and expand. The next test for Thai Hai is therefore the same one facing every successful community destination: can recognition continue to serve the place, or will the place gradually begin to serve recognition?

Thai Hai's transferable lesson is an order of decisions: protect what must endure, regenerate the place, govern together, and only then let tourism and recognition grow.

The question Thai Hai leaves with us

Thai Hai's most important contribution to responsible tourism is not the idea that every village should live as one family.

It is a different order of priorities: tourism comes after the work of keeping a place worth living in. The houses matter because people still live in them. The songs matter because another generation is still learning them. The forest matters because it is treated as something borrowed from the future. Tourism matters when it sustains that living system rather than replacing it.

The practical lesson begins with a different first question. Do not ask, "What can we sell here?" Ask, "What must still be alive here twenty years from now?" The strongest destinations are not those that turn community life into a product, but those that use tourism to help that life endure. The most dangerous moment for a destination may not be when nobody comes. It may be when everyone wants to come — and the community has not yet decided what it refuses to lose.

FROM FARMS TO LEARNING DESTINATIONS: USTP AGRI-ECOTOURISM INITIATIVE AS A UNIVERSITY-LED MODEL FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Maribel S. Tizo
Remy John S. Tizo

The USTP Claveria Campus is situated in a highland municipality characterized by a cold climate, diverse farming system, and abundant natural resources. Farming is the main livelihood source for most households in the area. However, smallholder farmers have had to contend with several challenges, including unstable incomes from farming, lack of value-adding services as well as weak integration into tourism activities. Before 2020, the farming system in the area was traditionally focused on production with little exposure to agri-ecotourism practices, engagement with customers, and entrepreneurship activities. As a result, the farmers did not have any opportunity to diversify their income.

At the same time, the University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines Claveria (formerly known as MOSCAT) was trying to establish itself as a leading institution of higher learning committed to science and technology. With its strong academic programs in agriculture, hospitality management, engineering and technology, and social work, the university was well placed to tackle the problem of development in the area. The combination of academic skills with the needs of the community presented the opportunity to develop a model of agri-ecotourism based on research, practices, and community participation.

In 2021, USTP Claveria officially launched its Agri-Ecotourism Initiative as part of its instructional, research, production, and extension activities. The initiative is based on applied research, sustainability concepts, and community engagement, which reflects the Agropolis and farm-based learning of the university. Its purpose was to convert traditional farms into dynamic learning sites as well as promote inclusive and sustainable rural advancement. Various stakeholders were engaged through various strategies. For the capacity building and extension services, the initiative provided training to local farmers and farm managers relating to standards for farm tourism, sustainable farming practices, and food safety, product development, and marketing. In addition, the initiative provided technical support to farmers through faculty members from various disciplines who acted as mentors in helping them develop ways to enhance their farm operations and being more engaging when interacting with tourists.

Secondly, the program encouraged application of research in addition to the engagement of students. The students participated in a range of experiential learning activities including internships,



Dairy farm during milking. (Source: Authors)

practicums, and thesis projects that focused on agri-eco tourism operations, the experience of visitors, as well as sustainability of farms. Results of academic work were not limited to theoretical use; rather, they translated to practical uses through the extension outreach which ensured the presence of university-based knowledge was widely disseminated and practically useful to the partners' community.

The third element involved the development of the enterprises and linkages. Selected farms received support in establishment of guided tours, demonstration sites, local food products, and value-added items from agricultural resources. The program partnered with local tourism and government authorities to ensure the farms become integrated into the broader picture of involvement in tourism, which will provide increased visibility and higher accessibility of their farms. The groups involved included farmers and other farm operators from Claveria and neighboring towns, the faculty members as researcher and extensions workers, and over four hundred students from courses includes engineering, technology, and hospitality and agriculture from 2021 to 2024.

The local government units were also heavily involved by providing infrastructure assistance, policy coordination, and promotional support. Most importantly, farmers were considered as co-implementers rather than beneficiaries, which helped create a sense of ownership and sustainability for the program.

The result of the program was visible in many different aspects. In terms of education, many research results were produced including thesis related to supervision and models for farm tourism and the building of rural industries. Training designs for tourism at the farm and management for visitors were designed and incorporated in both extension work and in classrooms.

In the economic and social aspect of the program, the cooperating farms received additional income from product sales, farm visits from tourists, and other educational activities. Farmers reported a renewed confidence when dealing with the tourists and marketing their products.

The program also increased the active participation of young and family members of the farmers in farm-based businesses. The Environmental impact was also notable in the area of agriculture as farmers began practicing sustainable farming practices which include using organic inputs, effective waste disposal and conserving nature. Farmers became aware of climate-smart farming practices and responsible practices in tourism which brought about environmental sustainability.

The impact of the program goes beyond the gaining of individual farms. At the community level, agricultural areas became centers for learning that attracts visitors and students. Farmers were able to gain extra value for their resources which helps them enjoy stable income and improves the local economy.

While at the educational level, students gain practical experience in their field of study which increases their knowledge and experience in agribusiness and hospitality management. This experienced based learning contributes to the readiness of students for employment opportunities.

At the institutional level, the university strengthened its role in development in that it shows how research, instruction and extension can be integrated and result in economic and social benefit. Through this initiative, the university is able to create awareness of its role in agri-ecotourism and community engagement while increasing the level of collaboration of the university internationally.

To ensure sustainability of the initiative, several actions were taken. The concepts of agri-ecotourism has been integrated into curriculum continuously so that future generation would benefit from the program. Faculty members were able to sustain research efforts and extension services and support to the communities.

USTP Claveria has managed to convert old-style farms into places for learning which produce extra income as well as improve the rural development through community-based processes.

Through this initiative, the educational institution is able to provide technical assistance to the communities. Farmers were able to reinvest their proceeds in improving their facilities and services for their visitors. Another critical factor will ensure that the initiative receives policy support and sustainability through the national strategy on agri-tourism.

Moreover, the USTP Claveria Agri-Ecotourism Model is replicable throughout the Philippines and Southeast Asia. The university led model is research based and is applicable in other regions and countries. The program ensures the participation of the locals.

In summary, the USTP Claveria Agri-Ecotourism Initiative showcases the transformational potential of higher education institutions in rural areas by combining knowledge and practice in agriculture.

Specific Programs/Projects Implemented and Their Community Impact

The Agri-Ecotourism Development Initiative, executed by the University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines-Claveria, was launched in 2021 as a university-led initiative, which combined instructional, research, production, and extension functions.

The program aims to transform traditional agricultural farms into sustainable educational centers, and at the same time, improve the livelihoods of farmers and enhance community-centered rural development. The project makes use of the expertise of the university in agriculture, hospitality management, engineering and technology and social work to meet the immediate needs of farmers in the community.

The implementation of the program consisted of three interconnected components, namely: (1) capacity building and extension services, (2) applied research and student engagement, and (3) enterprise development and institutional links. Farmers and farm managers were trained on standards for farm tourism, sustainable agriculture practices, food safety, tourism product development, and basic marketing skills.

Academic staff served as technical advisors and students undertook internship programs, practicum and thesis research on agri-ecotourism, visitor experience and farm sustainability.

Selected partner farms also received assistance on offering guided tours, demonstration farms, offering local food products and value addition in dairy products. Partnerships with local government agencies and tourism offices enabled the collaboration specially on local activities.

The main beneficiaries of this initiative were local farmers, tourist, and farm managers who were not only viewed as passive receivers of support but were part of the program's implementation, thus promoting ownership of the program at the local level. This participatory approach increases the chances of sustainability of the project outcomes beyond the initial project duration. In addition, from 2021 to 2024, the program was able to involve over 400 students from programs in engineering and technology, agriculture and hospitality to provide a two-way exchange whereby students got practical experiences while communities benefited from research and extension services provided by the university.



Tree planting (Source: Authors)

The outcome of the initiative on other beneficiaries was two-fold. Economically, the partner farms were able to diversify their income sources by providing farm tours, selling their products and creating learning experiences for visitors. This means that the farmers were able to derive more value from their existing agricultural resources. Socially, the farmers were more confident in their interactions with tourists and marketing of farm products, while young people and other family members were engaged in more farm-related activities, and were able to develop a new appreciation for the agricultural sector.

Educationally, this project provided authentic opportunities for learning for the students and helped them to develop the competencies needed in agribusiness, hospitality management, sustainability, entrepreneurship and community engagement skills. The farms became active laboratories where the students were able to apply classroom principles to people facing real problems. This not only prepared the students for employment but also ensured that the university's research and education have positive implications for the partner communities.

The project is a remarkable demonstration of how universities combined with scientific researches can merge training, innovations, and local communities to make possible the development of inclusive agri-ecotourism initiative throughout the Philippines, as well as in Southeast Asia.

Environmentally, the project encouraged farmers to adopt more sustainable practices, such as the use of organic fertilizers, proper waste management, conservation of the natural environment, climate-smart agriculture and responsible tourism development practices. With these interventions, the farmers implemented more eco-friendly and sustainable farm operations.

Wider community-level impact was the transformation of agricultural areas from being just agricultural spaces into centers for learning and tourism, thus helping farmers to gain additional economic benefits from agriculture, education, tourism, and processing. Thus, the initiative illustrated the ability of a university to turn knowledge, research and extension services into practical changes in the communities.

Replicability of the USTP Claveria Agri-Ecotourism Initiative Across the Philippines and Southeast Asia

The USTP Claveria Agri-Ecotourism Model is an approach which can be implemented throughout the Philippines and Southeast Asia due to its basis on principles rather than a provided fixed farm design. The various integral components of this framework—namely university-community partnership, applied research, capacity building, experiential learning, sustainable agriculture, enterprise development, and tourism linkages—allow it to be used with any type of agricultural commodity under the different geographical, cultural, and community conditions.

First, the framework can adjust to the varying agricultural systems of Southeast Asia and the Philippines. The case in point would be that of rice farms, coconut farms, coffee farms, vegetable farms, fruit farms, livestock and dairy farms, fisheries, and mixed farms. The approach does not ask the local communities to create tourism attractions that are the same in nature but allows each one to see which potential agricultural gaps it can introduce to the local learning, tourism, and livelihood opportunities.

Secondly, the framework is participatory as it is centered around local communities. In this case, it is important to note that farmers are treated as the co-implementers as opposed to being simply beneficiaries waiting for assistance. This element of the framework allows farmers to choose which practices, traditions, goods, and tourism-related activities will be conducted in their locality.

Thirdly, the approach adopted is one which is based on universities taking part in the initiative but requiring the participation of villages and farmers at the same time. The higher education institutions around the world are able to become knowledge and innovation centers by using, among other things, faculty expertise, the practicum of students, research projects, and labs resources. This gives rise to an effective way to join universities with farmers, local administrations, tourism offices, and private sector stakeholders. When the local capacity is built up, farms in partnership will be able to manage their own businesses and invest back into them, which assures the sustainability of the model. USTP Claveria has been implementing the approach toward sustainability by incorporating agri-ecotourism education programs in conducting faculty research as well as extension and concentrating on local and national tourism, environmental and agricultural plans.

The fourth aspect lies in the fact that it creates a low barrier to rural communities' income diversification. This provides an addition to the existing agricultural livelihood instead of replacing it and, thus, allows creating several outputs, which include farm visits, educational tourism, local food, demonstrations, and value-added agricultural products together with agricultural production. The given fact makes the approach especially relevant for the smallholder farming communities that can hardly afford any capital investment but have productive farms, knowledge about the land, natural resources, and the culture of the population.

The fifth feature is well suited for the rural development in Southeast Asia where agriculture is still closely embedded into the life of communities, food systems, resources, and cultures. This implies that the initiative may vary by countries, for instance, through the establishment of coffee and cacao excursions, rice and specific cultural elements farming practices, agroforestry and biodiversity tourism, and dairy farms. The basic framework remains the same, while agricultural products, the culture, tourism goods, and institutional allies become localized.

The sixth and the last characteristic of the initiative is the possibility to replicate its approach among many universities and communities because of the achievement of several Sustainable Development Goals (such as poverty reduction, quality education, decent jobs, responsible consumption and production) via its implementation. The strong point of the model is that it relates the functions of the university to the demands of the communities, which creates the opportunity for replication without any barriers or constraints.

In conclusion, USTP Claveria can be viewed as a demonstration laboratory of the agri-ecotourism innovation and implement it in other universities, local governments, farmer organizations, and development institutions all over Southeast Asia.

FROM A FORGOTTEN CROSSING TO A LIVING HERITAGE DESTINATION: THE VOLUNHERITAGE @ JAMBATAN KOTA KLANG

Shaiful Azli bin Muhamad Surol

When visitors arrive in Klang, they are often drawn to its royal heritage, multicultural identity, and vibrant food culture. Yet for many years, one of its most historically significant landmarks—Jambatan Kota Klang—remained largely unnoticed as a tourism asset. While it functioned as an important transport link across the Klang River, it was rarely experienced as a destination in its own right. Despite its architectural presence and historical relevance to the town's development, the bridge existed on the margins of public imagination, seen more as infrastructure than heritage.

This perception began to shift through the introduction of VolunHeritage @ Jambatan Kota Klang, a community-driven cultural tourism initiative developed in strategic collaboration with Majlis Bandaraya Diraja Klang. The programme redefined how heritage spaces could be activated through people-centred placemaking rather than physical redevelopment. What started as a small experimental effort has evolved into a sustained weekly initiative held every Saturday from 4:00 PM to midnight, transforming the bridge into a living cultural corridor where heritage, arts, tourism, environmental awareness, and community participation intersect.

The journey toward transformation was not without challenges. One of the most significant barriers was changing public perception. For decades, the bridge was associated primarily with movement and traffic, not memory or meaning. Repositioning it as a cultural destination required not only programming but also a shift in mindset among local communities and stakeholders. Like many urban heritage sites, it also faced the challenge of remaining relevant in a rapidly modernising city where new commercial attractions often overshadow historical spaces.

At the heart of the initiative was a guiding question: how can a forgotten crossing be transformed into a meaningful, sustainable visitor experience without compromising its authenticity?

The answer emerged through the principles of placemaking, volunteerism, and responsible tourism. Instead of introducing large-scale physical alterations, VolunHeritage focused on activating the bridge through community participation. The concept of "Seni Atas Jambatan" (Art on the Bridge) was introduced as a platform that invites local artists, artisans, cultural practitioners, students, entrepreneurs, and residents to co-create the space every week.

Through this approach, the bridge became an open cultural stage. Visitors

VolunHeritage has transformed Jambatan Kota Klang into a vibrant living heritage destination through community-led arts, culture, and placemaking.

now encounter rotating experiences such as art exhibitions, live sketching and caricature sessions, traditional cultural showcases, photography exhibitions, artisan markets, storytelling performances, and interactive community activities. These experiences are not static displays but living expressions of Klang's evolving identity.

A key outcome of this approach is the redefinition of tourism itself. Rather than passive observation, visitors are engaged in active cultural exchange. They meet local creators, listen to lived stories, participate in hands-on activities, and experience heritage through human connection. This shift has proven essential in creating emotional attachment to place, a core principle of sustainable tourism development.

The social impact has been significant. Every Saturday, the bridge becomes a shared civic space where diverse groups converge—families, youth, artists, heritage enthusiasts, photographers, students, and tourists. Individuals who might never otherwise interact find common ground through creativity and shared experience. This has strengthened social cohesion and fostered a renewed sense of community ownership over public heritage space.

Economically, the programme has created tangible benefits for local micro-entrepreneurs and creative communities. Food vendors, artisans, and small business owners are provided direct access to visitors in a high-footfall environment without the barriers of formal commercial venues. This inclusive model allows cultural tourism to function as a grass–roots income generator while preserving authenticity and cultural integrity.

In addition to social and economic dimensions, VolunHeritage contributes meaningfully to heritage education and preservation. Through guided storytelling, heritage displays, traditional craft demonstrations, and cultural performances, younger generations are introduced to the intangible cultural heritage of Klang. The bridge itself becomes an experiential classroom where history is not only presented but actively experienced.

Environmental awareness is another key pillar of the initiative. Positioned along the Klang River, the programme integrates river stewardship into its cultural activities. Educational sessions and community discussions highlight the importance of river conservation, waste reduction, and environmental responsibility. By linking cultural heritage with ecological awareness, VolunHeritage reinforces the idea that sustainable tourism depends on the health of both cultural and natural ecosystems.



Local media report by Buletin TV3 on a casual event with the Klang Mayor together with the community and creatives. (Source: Author)

One of the most distinctive achievements of the programme is its contribution to destination diversification. Instead of concentrating tourism in conventional hotspots, VolunHeritage has successfully repositioned existing public infrastructure into a cultural destination in its own right. The bridge is no longer just a passageway —it has become a place where people gather, engage, and return intentionally.

A signature component of the initiative is the 60-Minute Heritage Bridge & Jejak Warisan Sungai Klang Walking Tour. This immersive experience guides visitors through the historical and cultural landscape surrounding the bridge and the Klang River heritage corridor. Led by community volunteers and heritage advocates, the tour explores how the river shaped trade routes, settlement patterns, and the multicultural development of Klang as one of Malaysia's oldest royal towns.



"Art on the Bridge" held every Saturday along Jambatan Kota Klang. (Source: Author)

Along the route, participants encounter historical markers, architectural narratives, and oral histories from Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities. The experience moves beyond textbook history, offering instead a lived interpretation of place through storytelling, observation, and engagement. Visitors gain a deeper understanding of how the river and its co–mmunities shaped Klang's identity over time. The cumulative impact of VolunHeritage reflects key principles of sustainable and responsible tourism. It demonstratesthat heritage conservation and tourism development are not opposing forces but can reinforce each other when communities are actively involved. It also shows that economic benefits from tourism can be distributed inclusively, supporting grassroots entrepreneurs, cultural practitioners, and creative workers.

Most importantly, it highlights the power of reimagining public space through creativity, collaboration, and volunteer-driven engagement. As a result, VolunHeritage is increasingly recognised as a model for community-based heritageactivation and sustainable urban tourism, aligning with broader national aspirations for inclusive tourism development under Visit Malaysia initiatives.

In essence, VolunHeritage has transformed Jambatan Kota Klang from a forgotten crossing into a living cultural destination. It has shifted perceptions, strengthened communities, supported livelihoods, and reconnected people with theheritage of the Klang River. What was once a passive infrastructure now stands as an active symbol of cultural continuity and innovation.

Today, every Saturday evening, the bridge tells a new story—not only of Klang's past, but of its evolving future. A futurewhere heritage is lived, communities are empowered, visitors are meaningfully engaged, and tourism becomes a bridge between people, culture, and place.

VolunHeritage demonstrates how sustainable tourism can strengthen local identity, support livelihoods, and reconnect people with the Klang River's heritage.

FROM INVENTORY TO IDENTITY: CULTURAL MAPPING AS A CATALYST FOR RESPONSIBLE TOURISM IN SAN TEODORO, ORIENTAL MINDORO

Noelah Mae D. Borbon
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Tourism development often fails when it prioritizes promotion over understanding. This tension became evident in San Teodoro, a municipality endowed with rich cultural and natural resources yet constrained by fragmented documentation and weak integration of heritage into tourism planning. The cultural mapping initiative was introduced not as a routine documentation activity, but as a strategic intervention to shift tourism development toward a more inclusive, evidence-based, and community-driven approach.

The engagement began during a workshop on updating the Local Tourism Development Plan (LTDP), where it was observed that tourism strategies were largely focused on visible attractions such as beaches and landscapes, while intangible cultural heritage—oral traditions, local knowledge systems, and community practices—remained undocumented and undervalued. This imbalance created a superficial representation of the destination. Cultural mapping was therefore positioned as a process of reclaiming identity and aligning tourism development with local realities.

A participatory methodology was adopted to ensure that the mapping process was grounded in community knowledge.

Key stakeholders, including local government officials, tourism officers, cultural workers, and residents, were involved through interviews, focus group discussions, and field immersion. Rather than treating participants as mere respondents, the process recognized them as co-creators of knowledge. This approach strengthened the validity of the data and ensured that the outputs reflected shared perspectives rather than external interpretations.

Despite its potential, the initiative encountered significant challenges. First, cultural knowledge within the community was fragmented. While elders possessed rich historical narratives and traditional practices, these were not systematically documented, creating a risk of knowledge loss across generations. Second, institutional limitations hindered implementation. The local government lacked standardized frameworks and technical capacity for conducting cultural mapping, highlighting a gap between policy intentions and operational readiness. Third, community skepticism emerged due to past experiences where external projects failed to produce tangible benefits. This required deliberate efforts to build trust and demonstrate the value of the initiative.

Furthermore, not all local stories and sites were deemed suitable for public promotion or digital dissemination, as some contained private or sensitive community information.

These challenges necessitated a strategic shift. Instead of accelerating data collection, the process emphasized validation and trust-building. Multiple consultations were conducted to verify findings and ensure accuracy. Community members were given opportunities to review and refine the mapped data, reinforcing their ownership of the outputs. This iterative process not only improved data quality but also strengthened stakeholder engagement.

A critical breakthrough emerged when the mapping results revealed interconnected cultural systems rather than isolated assets. Traditional fishing practices, local cuisine, seasonal festivals, and ecological knowledge were found to be deeply linked to the community's identity and environment. This insight reframed tourism development from an attraction-based model to an experience-based approach, where visitors engage with living culture rather than static sites.

The impact of the cultural mapping initiative can be examined across multiple levels. At the community level, the process enhanced awareness and appreciation of local heritage. Residents began to recognize the value of their traditions as both cultural assets and potential sources of sustainable livelihood. This internal recognition is crucial, as tourism sustainability depends on community support and participation.

At the institutional level, the local government gained a structured database of cultural and tourism assets. This enabled more strategic planning and informed decision-making. The mapping outputs served as a foundation for revising the LTDP, ensuring that tourism programs are aligned with the municipality's cultural identity and long-term sustainability goals.

Sustainable tourism begins not with infrastructure, but with a clear understanding and ownership of local cultural identity.

At the industry level, the initiative contributed to repositioning San Teodoro within the broader tourism landscape of Oriental Mindoro. Rather than competing with high-volume destinations, the municipality can differentiate itself through culturally immersive and community-based tourism experiences. This aligns with global trends emphasizing responsible and regenerative tourism.

However, the sustainability of these impacts depends on continued implementation. Cultural mapping should not be treated as a one-time activity but as an ongoing process integrated into governance and planning systems. Without regular updates and policy integration, the data risks becoming obsolete and underutilized.

Several key lessons emerged from the experience. First, cultural mapping must be institutionalized to ensure continuity and relevance. Second, genuine community participation is essential for both data accuracy and long-term sustainability. Third, tourism development should be anchored on identity rather than infrastructure. Investments in facilities and marketing must be guided by a clear understanding of what makes a destination unique. Finally, responsible tourism requires deliberate and consistent practice, not just conceptual alignment.

The experience in San Teodoro demonstrates that cultural mapping can serve as a powerful tool for bridging heritage preservation and tourism development. By transforming fragmented knowledge into a coherent narrative, it enables destinations to position themselves authentically while ensuring that development benefits local communities.

Cultural mapping transformed tourism planning in San Teodoro from attraction-based promotion to identity-driven development grounded in community knowledge.

What began as an effort to document cultural assets evolved into a process of redefining the municipality's tourism identity. San Teodoro is no longer viewed merely as a collection of attractions but as a living community with a distinct cultural narrative. The challenge moving forward is not in sustaining the documentation process, but in translating it into sustained action and measurable impact.

FROM SMALL SEEDS TO BIG TREES: CULTIVATING A RESPONSIBLE WORKFORCE FOR VIETNAM'S TOURISM

Do Tran Phuong
Nguyen Xuan Trung
Nguyen Duc Ba

The Encounter And A Shared Vision

My name is Do Tran Phuong, a lecturer at Hanoi University of Culture. For over 20 years, I have dedicated my life to researching and teaching Culture and Tourism in Viet Nam. Throughout this journey, I have always wondered: Why does a nation so rich in heritage and natural beauty struggle to reach its full potential? There may be many reasons, but one crucial factor is the shortage of high-quality human resources in the tourism industry.

In 2020, I had the fortunate opportunity to meet Mr. Nguyễn Xuân Trung, Director of the Tam Chúc National Tourist Area, it changed everything. We shared a deep concern: tourism is Vietnam's strength, but its sustainability depends entirely on how we train the next generation. Together with Mr. Nguyen Duc Ba, we launched the "Talent Incubator for Culture and Tourism Programme". Our mission was: Together, we can nurture the young talents so that from small, good seed, they grow into big trees in the future.

The Foundation: Five Core Values

After extensive discussions, planning, and preparation, the project was officially launched in 2020. The executive board built a project based on five pillars:

1. Knowledge;
2. Experience;
3. Creativity;
4. Humanity;
5. Sharing & Spreading.

We didn't just want to produce employees; we wanted to nurture "Cultural Ambassadors" who understand that culture is not a decorative background, but the living identity and soul of a destination.

Bridging the Gap: From Theory to Impact

From 2021 to 2025, after five years of operation and continuous effort, the project has achieved remarkable results:

1. Established connections with hundreds of scholars and researchers from Vietnam and abroad;
2. Collaborated with hundreds of colleges, universities, and academies nationwide;
3. Provided training for thousands of students annually on topics such as history, culture, religion, fine arts, tourism, hospitality, foreign languages, and soft skills;
4. Organized the Student Cultural Tourism Ambassador Contest;
5. Held the Creative Ideas Contest for Cultural Tourism Products and Tourism Communication;
6. Hosted the Creative Video Contest to Promote Vietnam's Culture and Tourism;
7. Organized international conferences;
8. Provided domestic field trips for students;

9. Facilitated international study and exchange programs for students;
10. Developed an online learning platform;
11. Hosted job fairs;
12. Connected students with businesses, heritage site management boards, and tourism organizations for job opportunities.

One of our proudest achievements is we engaged 2,760 students from 86 universities and colleges across 35 provinces. Training included 25 specialist topics, 5 seminars, and 60 days of online learning, supported by 32 experts and trainers.

To ensure the program reflected the true diversity of Vietnam, we prioritized representation. Among the 185 students selected for intensive training, 65% were women and 20% were from ethnic minority communities. These students didn't just learn; they brought their own ancestral stories and local perspectives to the table, ensuring that the tourism ideas we developed were respectful and authentic.

To achieve this, we seek greater support and collaboration from: Government organizations; Non-governmental organizations; Experts from universities, research institutes, and businesses; and Local communities.

We don't just produce employees; we nurture "Cultural Ambassadors" who understand culture as the living soul of a destination.

Practical Experience And Creative Freedom

We believe that "good seeds need good soil". To provide this, we moved learning into the field. Students explored UNESCO WorldHeritage sites like Trang An and Ha Long, and cultural landmarks like Tam Chuc, and Van Mieu (Temple of Literature).

The programme also connected participants with 30 tourism enterprises and related organizations, giving them practical insight into how tourism businesses, destinations, and cultural assets interact.

A key part of this work was reducing cost barriers to participation. Each selected participant received VND 4,000,000(approximately USD 153) to support travel and accommodation during intensive learning activities. Across 185 selected participants, this amounted to around VND 740,000,000 (approximately USD 28,000) indirect participation support, excluding final prize values. This made it possible for students from different regions to access the same field-based cultural learning and development opportunities.

The creative output was staggering. Over five years, participants generated:

- 600 cultural tourism product ideas many rooted in heritage, local identity, and destination storytelling.
- 190 video concepts promoting cultural tourism, including 10 award-winning works.
- 22 TEDx-style presentations where young voices shared their vision for responsible tourism.
- 50 press and media reports covered activities and outputs from the programme.

To support continuation beyond the competition stage, the programme also offered the total prize value reached VND 2 billion (approximately USD 80,000), including cash awards, courses, vouchers, and overseas study tours to Thailand and China to observeglobal best practices in destination management and cultural presentation.

Why This Matters for Responsible Tourism

Viet Nam's tourism industry has long faced pressure in human resource development. According to the Vietnam



Tourism Culture Ambassadors, 2024. (Source: Authors)

National Authority of Tourism, the sector needs around 40,000 new workers each year, while the education system produces only about 20,000.

Only around 43% of the tourism workforce has received formal professional training, and only 9.7% hold university or postgraduate qualifications related to tourism. The COVID-19 pandemic deepened this gap: tourism businesses cut an estimated 50–70% of their workforce, and around 60–80% of workers left the sector or moved into other industries.

Although tourism later recovered strongly, with more than 108 million domestic trips and over 12.6 million international arrivals in 2023, the workforce did not recover at thesame pace in either quantity or quality. This affected service standards, product innovation, and long-term resilience.

This mattered especially in Viet Nam, where tourism is closely tied to cultural diversity. The country is home to 54 ethnic groups, more than 40,000 cultural heritage sites, and 8 UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Yet this diversity is not always represented well in tourism development.

Cultural heritage can be presented too superficially, local stories can be simplified, and community voicesmay not be fully reflected in tourism experiences. We believe that if tourism contributes positively to cultural diversity, then the people entering thesector must be better prepared to understand culture not as decoration, but as identity, memory, and living practice.

We identified this need through several channels. Feedback from students and universities consistently showed a gap betweenclassroom learning and real-world application, especially in cultural storytelling, destination interpretation, and tourism product design. Tourism businesses and local partners also highlighted the need for young professionals who not only had technical skills, but also understood local culture and community contexts. We also observed a wider shift in tourism demand after COVID-19, as travellers increasingly sought more

authentic, local, and experience-based tourism.

This mattered to us because tourism can either flatten cultural differences or help people understand them better. We therefore designed the programme as a learning ecosystem connecting students with cultural knowledge, expert guidance, and real-world experience.

Through this model, we aimed to bridge the gap between theory and practice while encouraging young people to turn cultural understanding into responsible tourism ideas that support cultural pride and more respectful connections between visitors and host communities.

What make us different?

The Talent Incubator for Culture and Tourism Programme is different because it treats cultural diversity not as background content, but as a core skill for future tourism practice. While many tourism pro–

The project engaged 2,760 students from 86 universities, empowering youth to turn cultural understanding into responsible tourism ideas.

–grammes focus mainly on technical training or short-termemployability, our approach helps young people understand, interpret, and communicate culture in ways that are respectful, locally grounded, and relevant to real tourism settings.

A second difference is the way we combine national reach with direct cultural engagement. Through a network of 86 universities and colleges across 35 provinces and cities, the programme brings together participants from diverse regional, social, and culturalbackgrounds. Among selected participants, 20% are from ethnic minority communities.



Tourism Culture Ambassadors, 2024. (Source: Authors)

They do not only take part; they also contribute perspectives from their own backgrounds and help shape the ideas and discussions developed through the programme. This means cultural diversity is reflected not only in what is taught, but also in who helps create the content.

The programme also moves participants from learning to interpretation and creation. Students do not only study heritage and local culture; they work with them through field-based learning, expert mentoring, and creative output. This has ledto 600 cultural tourism product ideas, 25 stage presentations, 22 TEDxTalks-style initiatives, and 190 video concepts, showing that participants are active interpreters of culture rather than passive learners.

What further sets it apart is that access is backed by real investment. Each selected participant received VND 4,000,000 (approximately USD 153) for travel and accommodation, and the programme's total prize value over five years reached VND 2billion (approximately USD 80,000). This creates practical conditions not only for participation, but also for the continued development of strong ideas.

A Call For Fertile Soil

Ultimately, the programme does more than train young people for tourism jobs. It helps shape a generation better prepared to champion cultural diversity through tourism. After five years, the Talent Incubator has become more than a project; it is a movement.

We have seen small seeds grow into confident professionals who champion cultural pride and responsible practice. However, the journey does not end here. We aim for a legacy of 10, 20, or 50 years. To sustain this growth, we need the "fertile soil" of collaboration from global experts, local communities, and organizations. Sustainable development is in our hands. Let us nurture these seeds together, for they are the ones who will carry the torch of responsible tourism into the future.

FOOD FOR THE EARTHWORM: SOIL CARE AND OPEN-ACCESS AGRITOURISM AT GOCHIN TAMBUN POMELO AGRO FARM

Shehnaz Tehseen
Kavitha Sathasivam
Jessica Sze Yin Ho

Agritourism is widely promoted across Southeast Asia as a diversification strategy for smallholder agriculture. It provides supplementary income for farmers while connecting urban populations to food production systems. Most businesses control visitor access and charge for entry. Visitor experience is designed as a product distinct from cultivation. Although this approach generates revenue, it can also gradually discourage visitors from returning to the farm.

GoChin Tambun Pomelo Agro Farm is a multi-generational family enterprise on the limestone fringe of Ipoh, Perak. Unlike the typical agritourism farm that collects entrance fees, GoChin developed an alternative approach. Orchard access is free and unrestricted. Cultivation remains the primary activity but visitor engagement operates as an extension of the farm rather than as a separate business line. A visitor survey compiled by the family recorded arrivals from approximately 120 countries. More importantly, the farm has achieved this without paid advertising or any formal marketing campaigns.

Context and Challenges: Fifty Years in the Same Soil

Tambun lies within a limestone valley whose economy depended on tin mining for much of the twentieth century.

Commercial cultivation of pomelo dates from the 1940s when tin mining was still dominant. Households combined both activities before moving to full-time fruit production as the mines closed. Labour was typically limited to a married couple in the family working tirelessly without the support of additional staff. Therefore, land size and scale remained small at approximately two to three acres. This limited economies of scale and constrained conventional growth strategies.

The growing conditions in Tambun are hard to find elsewhere. Limestone feeds minerals into the soil, and underground water moves through the valley. The proximity to the hills also produces cool night temperatures. These conditions contribute to the market reputation of Tambun pomelo.

While the landscape is ideal, the trees standing on it are old. "*The pomelo tree majority very old, 50, 60, 70 years old… The soil no change. Still that soil,*" Mr. Tan says. The trees were planted by an earlier generation and the ground beneath them has not been turned over or replanted since. Continuous cultivation over such a long period can progressively deplete the mineral content of the soil. For a business whose assets rest on mature trees, soil conditions are therefore a concern.

"The pomelo tree majority very old, 50, 60, 70 years old… The soil no change. Still that soil."

Feeding the Soil, Not the Tree

GoChin's response has been to produce its own fertiliser instead of relying on external inputs (buying conventional fertiliser). The fertiliser is directed at soil biology rather than at the trees. "Actually this fertiliser, it is a food for the earthworm," the second-generation owner explains. "In our farm, the soil, a lot of earthworm. What we do, we neutralise the soil, so the tree will get strong, get healthy."

The idea comes from observing forest systems where mature trees persist for decades without external inputs. This method focuses on the conditions that sustain the tree. It does this by balancing the minerals and soil organisms rather than feeding the tree directly. The owner is explicit about the limitations of the approach. The objective is to return the soil to more natural conditions "but not 100%". This method costs less but takes years. The family will not see returns in a single season. This method also limits rapid scaling. It does, however, suit the asset they are protecting.

Giving the Garden Away

The family also maintains a herb garden containing plants that are traditionally used for skin conditions, liver and lungs complaints, fever, coughs and colds, and diabetes. Some are also taken by people undergoing cancer treatment. These are customary uses and the family makes no therapeutic claims for them.

The garden is not commercialised. Visitors who express interest are shown the beds and given cuttings without charge. Although the herb garden does not add to revenue generation directly, it enhances the visitor experience.

Open-Access Agritourism

The orchard walk is free, self-guided and unrestricted by fixed routes. This model was not planned. It started when coach operators began bringing groups as domestic tourism expanded. Mr. Tan's family simply accommodated them.



The model pomelo landmark inside the compound at GoChin Tambun Pomelo Agro Farm, Ipoh. (Source: Authors)

Word of mouth brings in most of the visitors. GoChin's online presence consists largely of visitor reviews. Repeat visitors return to the farm for the warm hospitality provided by Mr. Tan, his wife and his son. Following the pandemic, visitors began spending longer on site rather than simply purchasing and departing. The family observed this pattern and reconfigured the seating accordingly. Fresh juice and cut fruit from the farm's own pomelo, guava and starfruit were also offered. Together, these changes built an experiential marketing journey that makes a visit to GoChin distinctive.

Reputation can substitute for marketing expenditure where the underlying experience is consistent.

Lessons and Transferability: What Travels, and What Does Not

The GoChin story shows that a farm does not need built attractions or a ticket gate to be worth visiting. Three of its practices could work elsewhere. First, farming and visits are mutually reinforcing. Because the orchard is still a working farm, what visitors see is the real thing. Second, low-input soil management is well suited to businesses whose productive assets are expected to last for generations.

With the trees expected to stay in the ground for many years more, caring for the soil is the same as maintaining the asset. Third, reputation can substitute for marketing expenditure where the underlying experience is consistent.

These practices are replicable. The growing environment that gives the fruit its market position is not. This is why the practices that sustain the farm are worth paying attention to.



Mr. Tan, his wife and his son, and their warm hospitality. (Source: Authors)

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