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RESEARCH

The Soft Power of Authenticity: Lao Ecotourism as Participatory Exclusion

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Abstract

Ecotourism is uniquely situated within a key tension of the current "greening" of global capitalism – conservation vs development, which also defines the political ecology of late socialist Laos. Synthesizing the results of fieldwork on model ecotourism projects this paper argues that a fetishized notion of Authenticity takes on material force in ecotourism practice that works as a soft, i.e. inclusive form of power tending to reproduce the marginalization of rural populations. The paper traces the sources of this intricate complex of participatory exclusion, describes its workings and twisted outcomes, and considers ecotourism futures in rural Laos in the context of increasing integration into China's sphere of influence as well as potential pathways for transformation.

Keywords: ecotourism, inequality, Laos, nature reserves, participatory exclusion, postcapitalist transformation

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Introduction

When news broke in 2019 that despite concerted conservation efforts, "Laos lost its tigers"[2], this seconded results of a doctoral study on which this paper is based (Kleinod 2017). These news came in the wake of a report (Rasphone et al. 2019) on

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2 https://news.mongabay.com/2019/10/how-laos-lost-its-tigers/.

the National Protected Area (NPA) of Nam Et-Phou Louey in Laos' Northeast, where the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), supported by funds from GIZ and World Bank, had established a program for protecting the last viable population of tigers in the country. This project was and remains one of the best equipped and managed conservation projects in Laos, an important element of it being a cutting-edge eco-tourism project established by a former advisor to another outstanding Lao project, the ecotourism model in the Nam Ha NPA in the Northwest. This news also had something of a *déja vu*. For it was a few years earlier at Nam Ha that the headman of an ecotourism village inside the NPA had told me that there were no tigers left – again despite conservation efforts to which ecotourism was a central ingredient. There were other apparent contradictions as well: Despite the anti-opium policy that was a component also of tourism development, opium consumption remained high or even increased (along with that of other drugs, such as methamphetamines) in at least one village along one of the first, classical ecotourism routes through Nam Ha NPA.[3] Slash-and-burn cultivation, another target of ecotourism as conservation strategy, as well as cash crop production (namely rubber) were going on in Nam Ha NPA against regulations. Around Nam Et-Phou Louey, it was exactly in key eco-tourism villages that incidents of illegal hunting appeared highest, and endangered species were sold under the table in shops of ecotourism villages or at a bus station directly under a banner stating to "not hunt wildlife for sale". Meanwhile the same bus bringing ecotourists to their remote destination has prohibited wildlife as cargo on its way back to be sold in the urban center.[4]

How could those contradictions around ecotourism be explained? Since its inception ecotourism is hailed by policy-makers and conservationists as a sort of panacea: due to its supposed potential of reconciling capitalist development and resource conservation in so-called Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDPs) (Butcher 2007) it is widely employed on a global scale as a means to facilitate the management of nature reserves in a more inclusive, less fortress-like fashion. Concurrent with capitalism's ecological crisis nature conservation discourses and practices reach new heights (Wilson 2016; Marris 2013; Büscher and Fletcher 2020; Vettese and Pendergrass 2022). Thanks to a widespread discourse of "natural capital" among policy-makers all the way up to UN climate and biodiversity summits

3 As according, among others, to the village teacher at the time of visit in 2014. Apparently, quite a few areas of Luang Namtha have become opium-free afterwards because of new government policies, and addicted people have been send to rehabilitation programs. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this information.

4 This is not to say that such contradictions from the perspective of ecotourism and conservation are perceived as such emically among locals (see below).

envisioning the greening of capitalism, as well as due to an increasing longing for untouched Nature going along with its loss, ecotourism is a central ingredient in many if not most of the protected areas established in recent decades, and in those soon to be established in the internationally sanctioned "30 by 30" agenda[5] (Dinerstein et al. 2019) that became part of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework in late 2022. According to neoliberal conservation where nature pays its way (Duffy 2013: 99), income derived from nature appreciation in ecotouristic activities is used to fund and manage nature reserves. Moreover, it will contribute to the income of villages within or adjacent to such parks, providing an alternative to direct use of forest resources, and to integrating them into conservation activities, or so it is hoped. From the beginning, sustainable, pro-poor and community-based forms of tourism have been central to the tourism strategy of late-socialist Laos, which is heavily dependent on tourism income as a main foreign exchange earner.[6] Ecotourism thus was a central component of the country's socio-economic future(s), and remains so even more pronouncedly under recent schemes of green growth and climate change adaptation where the further "greening of tourism" is a medium to long-term priority of the Lao government (GoL and UNDP 2021).[7]

Laos can be considered a model country for the implementation of ecotourism as a development-through-conservation scheme in that it hosts an early, internationally renowned model project, the Nam Ha Ecotourism project, supported since 1999 by UNESCO (Lyttleton and Allcock 2002; Gujadhur et al. 2008; Schipani 2008). In order to control unregulated opium tourism, and to shift local economies away from opium production and shifting cultivation to safeguard the protection of Nam Ha NPA (Harrison and Schipani 2009), the project has seen considerable international financial and advisory support in the establishment of ecotourism structures,[8] and it

5 "30 by 30" is a worldwide initiative for governments to designate 30% of Earth's land and ocean area as protected areas by 2030.

6 In 2019, tourist arrivals to Laos reached an all-time high of 4.8 million, with international tourism receipts totaling about $935 million – a main source of foreign exchange earnings, and with a direct contribution to the GDP of 5.1% sustaining about 10% of total employment (ADB 2021). Numbers dropped by 81.5% in 2020 due to COVID-19 (GoL no year) while, "70% of tourism enterprises surveyed had reduced employees, cutting employee numbers by 38%" (Yamano et al. 2020:4). According to the COVID-19 Recovery Roadmap, tourism "has the potential to overtake mining and electricity export revenue in less than five years [...] and become the top export earners for Lao PDR" (GoL and UNDP 2021:6)

7 This relates to similar developments in late-socialist China and Vietnam (Bruckermann 2024; McElwee 2016).

8 According to Lyttleton and Allcock (2002:47), "it is unlikely there is a development project in the world that has maintained this level of expertise relative to the number of target communities", with almost one technical advisor per target village in the first phase.

has become one of the most popular tourist destinations in Laos. Nam Ha was thus intended as a model for further ecotourism development in the country and the region. And so it was that Nam Ha advisors soon established further schemes that were even more advanced, as they were based on a critical appraisal of the pros and cons of the Nam Ha project, such as in the ecotourism project in Nam Et-Phou Louey National Park, which came up with its own, and much celebrated, model (Eshoo et al. 2018).

Seeking to comprehend above contradictions, this paper synthesizes the results of extensive fieldwork on those model projects in terms of socio-ecological theory-building, namely regarding how ecotourism constitutes a "world-ecological"[9] practice putting the reproduction of humans in urban realms of capitalization into the service of the recreation of nonhumans ("biodiversity") on capital's frontiers (Kleinod 2017; Moore 2015).[10] Combining this approach with critical tourism studies and Bourdieusian praxeology, it conceives ecotourism in Laos from a critical, yet nuanced, perspective. It argues that a peculiar, fetishized notion of Authenticity (i.e. untouchedness) takes on material force in ecotourism practice, entailing an intricate complex of participatory exclusion: a double take on the local community as both environmentally "ignorant and noble" translates into a "servantization" of locals as tourism-cum-environmental servants, which results in the exclusion of locals from command over resources and economic proficiency. This dynamic relies on the dualisms of Nature vs. Society and Tradition vs. Modernity that reflect the well-off social positions of those whom ecotourism is largely for; i.e. members from urban middle-class milieus (see below). It works as a soft, i.e. inclusive, form of power that tends to reproduce the marginalization of rural populations in and around nature reserves in Laos by drawing on their active participation. This assessment is not to bluntly reject or condemn ecotourism, but to enable the envisioning potential pathways for transformation. My concern is thus only indirectly with the contradictions in conservation

9 World-ecology seeks to understand the global ecological crisis through the capitalist law of value emphasizing the production of Cheap Nature in global capital's frontiers and their appropriation for production and capitalization in capital's centers, in order to maintain the overall rate of profit (see Moore 2011, 2015).

10 This peculiar relation was termed "ecorational instrumentality". Empirical research was carried out between 2011 and 2014 focusing predominantly on semistructured interviews with tourists (25), ecotourism advisors, management staff and guides (23) as well as villagers (more than 60). The general fieldwork design was structured formally by the concept of the host-guest relation as central to (eco) tourism practice, and according to the intention to trace the conservation-development tension (see below) through practice. Four sites were selected, three of which were ongoing ecotourism projects: the Nam Ha Ecotourism Project at Nam Ha National Protected Area; the Nam Nern Night Safari at Nam Et-Phou Louey NPA; and the Katang Trail at Dong Phou Vieng NPA.

projects, and more with their social, and sociological, implications. What the failure to achieve project goals points at is the way in which, at the Lao frontier, conservation often undermines its ambition by further squeezing the resource base of local livelihoods relegated to continued subsistence. Focusing on a specific, key practice in conservation work, i.e. ecotourism, this paper is not only concerned with an under-researched topic in Lao studies, but also with one that is uniquely situated to demonstrate the "uncomfortable" nexus (Büscher and Davidov 2013) between large-scale resource development and conservation that defines Lao political ecology around the "turning of land into capital" (Dwyer 2007; Kenney-Lazar 2021). This also speaks to the global ecological predicament more generally as some kind of productive relation between conservation and development, as envisaged by ecotourism ICDPs, is clearly required in order to meaningfully deal with an aggravating socio-ecological crisis.

It needs to be stressed, again, that the criticism in this paper is not levelled against any particular project or individual; it does not deny the convictions and good intentions, the hard work as well as the successes of those involved in such projects, nor the benefit that ecotourism does bring to local communities. The critique is rather structural: it considers the symbolic "presets" of the ecotourism concept that quite necessarily tend to turn into certain material constraints when this concept gets enacted. The paper demonstrates how the symbolic-material rural/urban divide underpins a socially structured-structuring practice (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Mao, Nguyen, and Wilcox forthcoming) that subscribes to, and reproduces by practical acknowledgement, the exclusionary Nature/Society distinction that nature reserves are principally based on. Applying a "world-ecological" notion of ecotourism as related above, it further highlights the global entanglement of the rural and the urban in a concrete, observable practice. It deliberately goes beyond a strictly localized ethnographic account to make a structural point, considering how rural areas, including in late socialist countries of Asia, are being integrated into schemes of "ecorational instrumentality" designed to address the global ecological predicament in capital-friendly, thus contradictory ways. More pronouncedly, the paper traces the sources of the soft inclusive power of Authenticity, describes its workings and twisted outcomes, and considers ecotourism and rural futures in Laos in the context of recent socio-structural transformation and the COVID-19 rupture.

Ecotourism and Authenticity

The logic behind ecotourism as ICDP is aptly caught by the expression "nature conservation through nature appreciation" (Ellenberg 1998). It is in this sense that this paper refers to ecotourism: as touristic travel being directly linked to conservation

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management and local development. Ecotourism became increasingly popular with the rising criticism of conservation projects based on the "fortress" model that regularly led to the exclusion, and often outright expulsion, of local populations – as in the iconic parks of Yellowstone or the Serengeti (Chatty and Colchester 2002). Integrated Conservation and Development Projects should instead be community-based, i.e. letting locals participate to a considerable degree in various aspects and phases of such projects (Flacke-Neudorfer 2015). Despite increasing criticism (Butcher 2007; Duffy 2013; Büscher and Davidov 2013; Fletcher 2014),[11] ecotourism is employed to align local economies with nature conservation through basing them on "non-extractive" resources, such as the willingness of tourists to pay for appreciating nature and local culture.

The idea behind ecotourism needs at least some historical-cultural unpacking if the force is to be grasped that its employment as conservation tool draws from. Such unpacking demonstrates the cultural specificity of a practice relying on a peculiarly Euro-American notion of "Nature with a capital N" (Moore 2015:2), as supposedly pure realm of the wild nonhuman, to be experienced in aesthetic and kinesthetic consumption.[12] A fondness for the wild, one that could bring certain people as ecotourists into the position of "funders" for the management of nature reserves (Johnston and Ladouanglerd 2002), has long been in the making throughout European and US history, and it is still continually reproduced through nature spectacles (Igoe 2010; Igoe et al. 2010). The European Natural Theology's idea of God's presence in nature became secularized as aesthetic Sublime from the Renaissance onward (Groh and Groh 1991); the Sublime combined with the uniquely Northern American experience of the Frontier into a contrived, romanticist notion of wilderness as basis for the establishment of nature reserves as well as for the cultivated urge to experience nature (Cronon 1996).

11 Criticism targets the concept of participation as well-meaning yet difficult to implement for the lack of local capacity and the integration of communities in hierarchical power structures. A romantic focus on "the local community" tends to downplay local differences while at the same time creating or exacerbating local social differentials. Potentials for local development are seen as limited due to an intrinsic notion of "limited development" as ideal (Butcher 2007; see below). The model itself is principally non-local, Eurocentric in nature (Cater 2007), and, national tourism policies are often inadequate to ensure success.

12 For Jason W. Moore's world-ecology, "Nature with a capital N" denotes the neat separation of Nature (as purely nonhuman) and Society as the ontological basis for capitalism's cheapening of production inputs. It is the same dualism that underlies nature conservation as well as the ecotouristic, romantic notion of authenticity, which is therefore also written in this text with a capital A.

Following Adorno's critique of the *Jargon of Authenticity*, ecotouristic Authenticity equates "agrarian conditions, or at least [...] simple commodity economy" to "something undivided, protectingly closed, which runs its course in a firm rhythm and unbroken continuity"; this "left-over of romanticism" is "transplanted without second thought into the contemporary situation, to which it stands in harsher contradiction than ever before" – as if it was "not abstracted from generated and transitory situations, but rather belonged to the essence of man" (Adorno 1973:59). In short, Authenticity constructs Lao landscapes as realm of "untouchedness", uncorrupted by modernity and its markers; of primordiality, actuality (such as that a life "close to nature" is perceived as happier, more "natural", desirable); of life before the fall, of threatened abundance. As Cronon notes, the Authentic wild is a place that "we ourselves cannot inhabit" (Cronon 1996:19); while, in turn, wilderness from early on – beginning with the establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1872 – was created not least (perhaps even mainly) for touristic enjoyment.[13] Although ecological concerns were instrumental for establishing protected areas from the beginning, it is only with the increasing awareness of widespread biodiversity loss and climate change that protected areas enter the center stage of global politics. In other words, the protection of "Nature" and its aesthetic experience went in hand from the outset, and continue to do so under current conditions of "ecocapitalism". Because wilderness only works if humans remain detached from it, the only way of being in wilderness is in a mode that is by and large non-extractive. It is an ideological notion of untouchedness that underlies, as Cronon's (1996:15) lucid analysis foreshadows, wilderness experience up until recent ecotourism, as in Laos:

> *Wilderness suddenly emerged as the landscape of choice for elite tourists, who brought with them strikingly urban ideas of the countryside through which they traveled. For them wild land was not a site for productive labor and not a permanent home; rather, it was a place of recreation. One went to the wilderness not as a producer but as a consumer, hiring guides and other backcountry residents who could serve as romantic surrogates for the rough riders and hunters of the frontier if one was willing to overlook their new status as employees and servants of the rich.*

Wilderness and its experience were, in other words, artefacts of social structure (Fletcher 2009) – not least implying the rural/urban fault line that is so crucial to the capitalist metabolism (Foster 1999; Moore 2011). This is a central preset built into the

13 Also see in this regard the US Wilderness Act's definition of "wilderness" as, "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain" (https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd645666.pdf).

ecotourism concept as one of nature appreciation: it relies on, and tends to reproduce, the social differences associated with the rural/urban divide that it takes for granted and sometimes even glorifies (see Mao, Nguyen, Wilcox 2024). The typical ecotouristic guest (to Laos and elsewhere) hails from Western urban realms where she occupies social positions within the middle and upper middle class, while the typical ecotouristic host (at least in Laos) tends to dwell in rural, peripheral places and occupies socially marginal positions.[14] And as we will see, the promise of experiencing actually-existing (relative) untouchedness, which tends to reproduce the social distance between host and guest, underpins the practice of ecotourism: in order to appear convincingly Authentic, local nature and culture are conceived of in the mode of limited development – a compromise between (rather than a sublation of) conservation and development in favor of conservation (Butcher 2007).[15] Authenticity, the normative affirmation of simplicity and "untouchedness" in above sense, sanctifies and tends to reproduce underdevelopment and poverty at the same time as it enhances the cultural and symbolic capital of tourists.

It is argued below that ecotourism involves the exclusion of locals from their means of (re)production in a specific, inclusionary sense – and the socio-cultural specificity of Authenticity, which implies its socio-cultural alienness to the economic and historical context of rural Laos (as suggested by Cronon above), is a central element in this dynamic. The contrariness of ecotouristic habitus, and thus of the motivational structure of their clients, is an objective constraint to ecotourism projects, because whether or not a certain destination will receive funds depends on the customer's willingness to pay. To walk a fine line between the customer's "romantic gaze" (Urry 2002) of Authenticity and her need for (Inauthentic) services and infrastructure, is tricky for local villagers socially unfamiliar with this specific habitual makeup. And it is this tradeoff between development and conservation that underpins the idea of "limited development", which advocates,

14 The social demography of ecotourists to Laos in this study goes along with an early study according to which ecotourists tend to be comparably young, highly educated and well-earning white collar professionals (Crossley and Lee 1994). If recent German socio-demographic studies on nature awareness are any indication, ecotourists are most likely to hail from the milieus of "upper-conservatives", "post-materials" and "expeditives" – situated in the upper-middle class echelons between traditional and innovative orientations – as well as the most innovative but less well-off "neo-ecologicals" (BMUV and BfN 2023).

15 Or as an ecotourism advisor once put it in an interview: "As much conservation as possible, as much development as necessary" – in other words: local development should find its limits in the demands for conservation, i.e. it becomes a function of an ecorational outlook.

> *… the meeting of 'basic needs', or 'sustainable rural livelihoods', not as a stopgap measure,* ***but as development itself****. This is the approach of ecotourism ICDPs – to orient rural development around a rural, self-sustaining livelihood that meets basic needs (Butcher 2007: 165, emphasis original).*

Restricting tourism development in ecotourism sites in the name of "carrying capacities", including visual carrying capacity (Urry 2002), serves as much the "romantic gaze" as the conservation efforts it is intended to fund.[16] It is on these ideological grounds that the existence of an "ecotourist bubble" becomes comprehensible, i.e. a mode of ecotouristic experience that "ignores its context" (Carrier and Macleod 2005:316) like any form of alienated spectacle (Igoe 2010) and thus enables the experience of Authenticity in settings that are to be regarded "Inauthentic" according to the measure of untouchedness underlying this concept – as is clearly seen in the sociohistorical making of Laos into a capitalist frontier.

Conservation on the Lao Resource Frontier

The landscapes and people appreciated by ecotourism as Authentic are all but untouched. This becomes abundantly clear when looking at the historical making and recent makeup of the Lao political ecology. Most obviously, Laos is, "the most heavily bombed country per capita in history",[17] and unexploded ordnance from the Second Indochina War is still littering the countryside, not least also in those ecotourism destinations close to the former logistical network of roads and trails known as the "Ho Chi Minh Trail", which ran from North Vietnam to South Vietnam through the eastern parts of Laos, and which was heavily bombed during the American War.

The recent political ecology of Laos has been conceptualized as a resource frontier, where "a free, unbounded space available for commodity extraction and production" is awaiting investors (Barney 2009:150). In Marxian parlance, "frontiers" necessarily accompany capital's inherent expansionary drive to maintain the rate of profit (Moore 2015; Harvey 1982). More precisely, the frontier is characterized by the appropriation of "natural" resources to provide "cheap" input to commodity production in the centers. The "cheapness", i.e. devaluation, of nature means, for example, that the social and environmental costs of resource extraction by capitalist enterprises

16 To be sure, nature appreciation and conservation do not always and necessarily go smoothly together. There are many examples where both are at odds in actual practice, such as, when a wide view over an NPA is offered by an illegal swidden.

17 https://www.legaciesofwar.org/legacies-library.

are largely unaccounted for, left for the rest of society to remediate. Cheapness often also implies, not just in Laos, an authoritarian state, weak law enforcement, and elite capture. Social services, from healthcare to education, tend to be rather poorly developed, and access to them is highly unequal (see Huysmans 2024). The Lao saying, "The rich don't go prison, the poor don't go to the hospital", captures this situation well. This also means that a large part of the population in frontier areas, such as in Laos, rely considerably on subsistence economies including social safety nets within communities, traditional medicine (Elliott 2021) and so on.

Nature reserves and ecotourism inhabit a precarious niche in the overall political-ecological context of Lao late socialism, or what has recently been called Laos' "statist market socialism" (Creak and Barney 2022). Creak and Barney (2022:5) argue that the political ecology in Laos is only inadequately understood through categories of elite capture and or "rentier state" (Barma 2014); rather, in the case of Laos, it is analytically helpful to consider the regime's exploitation of natural resources in relation to the key nonmaterial resources that facilitate this exploitation, namely its institutional resources that mediate its relationship with society and the environment, and the ideological resources that rationalize the regime's exploitation of natural resources in the name of the national community.

In this perspective, the quasi-official policy of "turning land into capital" (e.g. through hydropower development, mining, or cash crop farming on plantations) serves the durability of the socialist regime. Nature conservation and ecotourism have to be seen within this context.[18]
While social inequality increases steadily with increasing capitalization, and has certainly seen a boost with COVID, a large section of the population still has access to land for subsistence agriculture – a tried and tested fallback option that people quickly turned to during COVID, even by official recommendation (Trostowitsch 2021).[19] NPAs tend to be located in the peripheries, often concurring with comparably high levels of poverty, and with a comparably multiethnic setup (Epprecht et al. 2018). Nam Ha and Nam Et-Phou Louey are both situated at historically important regional

18 More specifically, Creak and Barney (2022: 8) suggest that "statist market socialism" in Laos today functions as, "(1) an ideological, future-oriented project of state-building and national development [...] based on Marxist-Leninist principles [...]; (2) a political and organizational form based on party institutions [...]; (3) statist economic principles and programs [...] applied flexibly and in combination with incentives for private enterprise; (4) a statist system of extensive trusteeship over the nation's natural resources [...]; and (5) a statist mode of social mobilization [...]."

19 Various official orders around the time of the first COVID lockdown in Laos, such as Prime Minister's order 06/PM (March 29, 2020), did not include the prohibition of agricultural activities, 80% of which are subsistence oriented. I thank Sypha Chanthavong for this information.

gateways. Both have been heavily fought over during the Second Indochina War (commonly known as the "Vietnam War", in Vietnam and Laos also "American War") and both have been shut off from further reaching networks for a certain period after the Lao Revolutionary Front took over in 1975 (Walker 1999). The forest became military dominion with the Second Indochina War, and still today the presence of the military in protected areas is considerable as many newly created conservation forests, such as NPAs, were and remain military strongholds (Dwyer et al. 2016). Both NPAs are located at main thoroughfares to China or Vietnam, respectively, including or bordering villages of often mixed ethnic populations of Khmu, Hmong or Lanten, Akha, and lowland Lao, as well as further groups. Villagers' livelihoods (see Persson et al. 2021) revolve around multiple sources of income – from paddy rice and subsistence shifting cultivation, including hunting-gathering, to cash crop farming (rubber, maize, banana, melons), construction work and remittances from family members migrating to factories or other income opportunities in Vientiane, Thailand, China, Malaysia, or even further afield. Rather than static – as perceived in the ecotouristic outlook – Lao peasants are clearly "on the move" (Cole and Rigg 2019; Mao, Nguyen, and Wilcox 2024). While some cash crops compete with traditional staples such as rice for land, a dynamic which tends to infringe on the boundaries of the nature reserves, illicit trade in endangered wildlife and precious timber is rampant due to the proximity of large booming markets for traditional medicine and the conspicuous consumption of the newly rich in the urban centers of China, Thailand and Laos itself (Nooren and Claridge 2001; Singh 2014). Cash crop plantations – rubber in Luang Namtha, maize in Houaphan, as well as conservation efforts, continue to have notable implications for local ecologies and livelihoods, encroaching into NPA land at the same time as they increase local reliance on cash, as well as localized inequalities (Thongmanivong and Fujita 2006; Vongvisouk et al. 2014). Yet, even those most well-off still tend to regard rice cultivation for subsistence their top livelihood priority (Persson et al. 2021).

The ecotourism projects at Nam Ha and Nam Et-Phou Louey seek to mitigate the adverse impacts of the overwhelmingly extractive nature of Laos' resource politics, by providing income for locals and park management. The relation of conservation, and by implication ecotourism, and resource extraction is not just one of mitigation, however. Rather, it makes sense to think of this relation in the Lao context as one of "uncomfortable bedfellows", as Büscher and Davidov (2013) characterize what they call the ecotourism-extraction nexus. For Laos as well as other countries certainly, the observation is crucial that NPAs are considered key source areas of illicit wildlife trade (Nooren and Claridge 2001:214). While it may seem trivial to observe that in NPAs the concentration of endangered species tends to be high, it is important to note that illicit wildlife trade has the existence of conservation as a condition

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of possibility, exploiting the difference between de jure and de facto access to protected areas and their valuable inhabitants. From this perspective, NPAs appear as wildlife factories of sorts producing the goods for a market that is booming thanks to increasing inequality. Local villagers can, and often are, part of those networks, providing cheap labor extracting wildlife from its habitats. Easy run-off is facilitated by major roads connecting markets in China, Vietnam or Thailand, which often cut through or closely pass by NPAs.

The way in which resource conservation is connected to profit can also be seen in the connection between NPAs and hydropower projects. In fact, a forestry official in Nam Ha reportedly stated unofficially that the NPA still exists only "because of the dam" that was about to be constructed. To see what he meant, a brief shift to another major NPA is worthwhile: Nakai-Nam Theun NPA is perhaps the best endowed NPA in Laos, and considered to be among the most important in terms of conservation value. A major reason for its exemplary status is the nearby Nam Theun 2 Hydropower Project – one of the best-known and well-studied hydropower projects in Asia if not worldwide (Singh 2009; Lawrence 2012; Baird and Quastel 2015; Scudder 2021). Its scheme includes the annual payment of US$ 1 million to the NPA management – but not necessarily out of concerns for "greenwashing" or mitigation, but in order "to assure an adequate water flow with low sedimentation into the reservoir of the NT2 Project" to safeguard profitable dam operation (WMPA 2005). In this way, nature conservation and ecotourism tie productively, if inconveniently, into the extraction regime of the Lao resource frontier.

Participatory Exclusion in Lao Ecotourism

It is against the backdrop of the previous sections that the soft, symbolic-material power of Authenticity, as enacted through ecotourism ICDPs in Laos, can be understood. I employ the concept of "participatory exclusion" (Agarwal 2001), which I take beyond its original formulation in the context of gender inequalities of forest management in India, denoting a form of excluding certain populations from access to resources by way of including them into certain participatory arrangements. Exclusion is thus not effected openly, like the expulsion of local people from conservation "fortresses", but in a soft way and often inadvertently by practitioners, through the presets inherent in peculiar schemes.

In this sense, the Authenticity presumption of untouchedness in ecotourism becomes a material force when guiding practices, i.e. real-world actions. As the wilderness fixation underlying this assumption (and which in turn is based on the capitalist rural/urban divide) is made an objective fact in nature reserves, it gains material,

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compulsory force often already before ecotourism's onset, declaring resource use illegal in certain parts of a park, namely its core zones. As the Lao Forestry Law stipulates, in "totally protected zones" of conservation forests, "it is prohibited to conduct any activities except those for scientific research or walking trails for ecotourism" (GoL 2021: Article 71). Thereby, local ecologies which throughout history had, based on a subsistence-agricultural outlook, factually co-produced those spaces suddenly see themselves excluded from any further such co-production[20] in places now explicitly reserved for urban pursuits, while "adding layers of governance that simply complicate being poor" (Dressler et al. 2010:13).

Livelihoods in the area are far from "untouched" or "backward" but instead shaped and shaken by history and cutting across neat Nature/Society distinctions as envisaged by ecotourism as conservation tool. The same household, indeed the same person, can be involved in nature conservation as local guide for tourists or researchers, a hunter of endangered wildlife, a cash crop smallholder encroaching into preserved forest, a temporary labor migrant constructing the cities of the future. In fact, people living at the margins of a resource-based economy are often required to continue relying on a broad subsistence portfolio, including wage labor and commodity production, given the ways in which their means of reproduction are being constantly reshuffled by a policy of busily "turning land into capital".

Nature conservation adds to a situation in which local livelihoods become complexly constrained – forced by a logic of "cheapening" nature and labor (Moore 2015) to continued reliance on subsistence economies, and thus also on the resources available locally. Thus, the restriction of such resource use by NPA regulations often plays out as further squeeze of the local resource base, even though ICDPs such as ecotourism do provide some amount of monetary income. To systematize the symbolic-material power of ecotourism in the Lao countryside, we could therefore say that it involves three distinct moments that have Authenticity at its core: a) a double take on the local community as both environmentally "ignorant and noble" that translates into, b) a double "servantization" of locals as tourism-cum-environmental servants, which results in, c) a double exclusion of locals from command over resources and economic proficiency.

20 The banning of local resource use is still rational and necessary from the viewpoint of conservation as certain "traditional" land uses, like slash and burn cultivation, are being turned unsustainable due to the legal restriction of fallow periods, for example; or as "traditional" consumption of wildlife becomes entangled with region-wide networks of profit-making.

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The Noble-and-ignorant Savage

The trope of the noble-and-ignorant savage is deeply engraved into Euro-Western consciousness since the "discovery" of the New World, and it survives up until today in much development and conservation thinking (Görg 2003:243-51). In conservation, the wilderness optic makes for a precarious situation of local communities as they become valued in a contradictory manner (Kleinod 2011): on the one hand – in the register of "Nature vs. Society" – they are valued negatively, as potential or actual threats to protected ecosystems. However, if properly managed, such as through ecotourism ICDPs, they may be turned into environmentally benign actors. This is seen from the hope that ecotourism might not just provide village income as alternative to extraction, but may also, and through this, inspire an ethical valuation of untouched resources. Thus, hands-on conservationists do not appear to buy into the myth of the "ecologically noble savage" (Redford 1991) in Laos.

In ecotourism itself, i.e. from the viewpoint of ecotourists, however, local communities are regarded as ecologically "noble" already to the extent that these localities convince visitors to be simple and close to nature, so that they become positively valued in the register of "Tradition vs. Modernity". The fact that this myth has been thoroughly debunked in academia (Redford 1991; Buege 1996; Ellingson 2001) does not prevent it from gaining traction in ecotourism practice. The aspect of "ignorance" that is present and tangible in conservation's framing of the local community as primary threat thus gets transformed in ecotourism into a function of locals' perceived ecological "nobility": to the degree they remain ignorant of Modernity, that is, they can "remain" ecologically benign. That it is virtually through ecotouristic practice itself that this supposed proximity to Nature is brought about, i.e. through turning peasants into tourism providers, somewhat necessarily escapes the fetishized bubble of ecotouristic experience. From the perspective of conservation, the experience of supposedly actually-existing environmentality among local people serves its factual creation.

So, while ecotourism in Laos drives on the Authenticity of historically rather static, supposedly "relatively untouched" populations, "noble" because of their supposed "ignorance" with regard to corruptive Modernity, the overall enactment of this idea in ecotourism as socio-economic and ecological practice works dynamically, feeding into the broad trend of transforming local populations and their livelihoods in line with the Nature/Society dualism underlying the capitalization of land as well as nature conservation. It is not least the drive of preserving nature and culture that is at the heart of the double exclusion (below) effected by the presuppositions, a) that locals are most credible as ecotourism service providers when "ignorant" about tourism matters, supposed to "actually" be peasants – thereby reproducing their marginal

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social positions; and, relatedly, b) that the logic of development-through-conservation means that local development has to find its limits in the requirements of conservation, setting carrying capacities and employing a regime of limited development "*as development itself*" (Butcher 2007:165, emphasis original).

Tourism-cum-ecosystem Servants

This peculiar double take works towards turning locals into what the Convention on Biological Diversity calls "stewards and custodians of biodiversity".[21] It is by their inclusion into ICDPs, such as ecotourism, that locals become so: engaging in touristic services catering for customers who seek and pay for nature appreciation and cultural experience involves them in a meaningful way, while at the same time keeping them from harming the environment. Moreover, the economic benefits derived from such supposedly nonmaterial form of consuming nature will also translate into an ethical valuation of untouched environments.

What makes the ideological configuration such as the "noble-and-ignorant savage" (above) a material force that tends to work into the direction of locals being turned into "servants" are two important factual presets: first, the actual existence of a (more or less well managed) nature reserve; and, second, the general rationale underlying ecotourism that ecotourists become the "funders" of conservation (Johnston and Ladouanglerd 2002). This implies that successfully dealing with the milieu-specific expectations and habitual makeup of rather well-off, well-educated and travelled, urban Westerners is *the* key for ecotourism to work as an "integrated development and conservation" tool. Customer is king in the sense that her willingness to pay decides on whether conservation and village development is funded or not. What makes this construction a conservation tool is that the customer largely expects the experience of "conserved" nature and culture. That is to say that to the degree that the ecotourist's expectation is in line with conservation, the transformation of locals into tourism service providers at once also turns them into ecosystem caretakers. However, this is the case only to the extent that ecotourism income – which is intended to be limited by design – provides "alternative income" to local households, i.e. alternatives to other aspects of livelihoods that are seen as ecologically destructive. I will argue towards the end that this idea is problematic especially since ecotourism ICDPs come with a notion of limited development that does not appear to put locals into positions in which they can afford to act according to the affluent "either/or" proposition of nature conservation (as indicated by the notion of alternative income).

21 https://www.cbd.int/tourism/process.shtml.

In both projects, Nam Ha and Nam Et-Phou Louey, local participation in ecotourism was made dependent on benign ecological behavior more generally, employing cooperative agreements and contracts (Schipani 2008; Eshoo et al. 2018). Thus being employed as a local guide required that this person will not also hunt or gather restricted forest products, and trade in endangered species. Locals are also required to assist in scientific research as well as to maintain trails, bridges, boats, lodges etc. for tourists. Initial schemes at Nam Ha also required the village funds to be used for such maintenance of touristic infrastructure, rather than village development more generally (Gujadhur et al. 2008). According to a tour company manager in Nam Ha NPA, in the past bank books were kept by village headmen who regularly embezzled monies, so that, at the time of fieldwork, the books were kept by the company's office in Luang Namtha and headmen had to collect the money once a month upon justification of how it will be put to use.[22]

In this spirit, individuals and communities are to participate in ecotourism projects as providers of food, accommodation, handicraft or information. The notion of servant is to be taken critically here: it denotes a form of domination in that local livelihoods are made dependent variables of conservation as defined by experts, governments, and not least ecotourists. It denotes the social inequality and distance between hosts and guests as well as the differentials in the "freedom to act" to which the rural/urban divide is a key symbolic-material fault line (see Mao, Nguyen and Wilcox 2024).

Economic-ecological Exclusion

The ecotourists' habitus and motivation appears hard to understand for villagers, and even provincial guides; bluntly put, "Why pay a lot of money just to look at the forest and underdeveloped villages?" Such a habitus is arguably a contrived one, as contradictory or dialectical as the idea of "human-presence-in-wilderness" itself. First of all, it requires finding a balance between the "romantic gaze" and a degree of arduousness that goes along with the Authenticity urge on the one hand, and on the other the need for infrastructure, facilities, amenities and local hospitality in line with international hospitality standards. What this comes down to is the requirement of facilities and proficiencies at the local level to be "basic" – from the point of view of the customer that is (see Kleinod 2011). In short, the demand structure (on the satisfaction of which successful ecotourism involvement hinges) is socio-culturally

22 Misuse of village funds by local elites appeared to be a constant concern among ecotourism practitioners also in Nam Et-Phou Louey NPA, reflecting the fact that participatory, community-based instruments may still be contingent upon community-internal inequities.

alien and hard to grasp for local service providers – who are thus in a certain sense excluded from command and proficiency regarding their economic pursuits, continually relying on external support from urban professionals in terms of advice and explanation as well as in order to draw potential customers.

Although it is true, as argued, that local residents opt into ecotourism mainly for hopes of economic gain, i.e. development, local views of conservation and ecotourism are still rather complex. As Martin, Myers, and Dawson (2018) have shown for Nam Et-Phou Louey in particular, locals adjacent to protected areas in Laos exhibit seemingly contradictory opinions, criticizing conservation due to land loss but also embracing it due to the perceived necessity to protect resources and the rules established by government bodies. Generally, anti-conservation sentiments are less based on a denial of the necessity of protecting resources, but rather due to the perception of conservation as a foreign, Western agenda (Singh 2012). Western ideas of conservation, and ecotourism by implication (Cater 2007), which are geared towards "untouched nature", resonate in local statements that, "We know that we need to protect the forest. But we don't know how because we are so poor." It is clear to locals that "without forest, there is no village", but this expresses a different understanding of resource protection that is based on the sustainable use of resources, not their total non-use. In a similar fashion, villagers are in favor of ecotourism also for the experience of getting in touch with international visitors and exchange ideas and information, not just for the revenue, which they still hope will further increase. While revenue may at times be considerable (World Bank 2019; Keovilay 2012; Ounmany 2014), it remains limited in general, and necessarily so given the conservation goal that ecotourism strives for. It is still the case, though, that it is difficult to understand for villagers, and even provincial guides at times, why foreigners would pay huge sums of money just to look at the forest and poor villages, or why tourists insist on avoiding and removing garbage during tours.

More broadly, locals are being excluded from control over their means of reproduction also in a sense commonly known from tourism-dependent destinations: they are made dependent on conditions far beyond the reach of the community, such as those that determine global tourism flows and preferences. The COVID-19 rupture of global travel was an impressive and painful example here, though far from the only one. Also political developments or the capricious fashions of the global tourism market are beyond local control. Ecological-economic exclusion of locals is obvious in the fact that the core zones of NPAs forbid resource use while allowing ecotours and scientific research – i.e. subsuming rural under urban pursuits. Locals are thus allowed into the core zones of NPAs only as guides and helpers of tourists and researchers

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– into localities, that is, which were accessible for their subsistence needs until quite recently.[23] Thus, by their inclusion into ecotourism ICDPs they automatically become ecologically excluded, that is, from local resource use.

Given that, in the scope of ecotourism ICDPs, locals are made to participate in a rather contrived scheme that posits a logic of environmentally restricted local development – with a socio-culturally alien set of motivations at its core (Singh 2012) – as either/or alternative to other local livelihood strategies deemed ecologically destructive; and given that conservation initiatives tend to further squeeze the local resource base, putting demands on livelihoods that are already, and continue to be, marginalized – then it certainly comes as no surprise that this construction of peculiar, contradictory precepts gets undermined by the daily realities on the resource frontier: ecotourism income, that is, somewhat necessarily tends to be employed as additional (rather than alternative) income as part of a subsistence portfolio that cannot afford an either/or logic of alternatives, but is forced to pragmatically employ an as-well-as logic in order to make a living. From this perspective, villagers can provide ecotourism services while still practicing swiddening, or keeping an eye on lucrative wildlife. The initially mentioned apparent contradictions, such as that illicit hunting was reportedly highest in certain ecotourism villages, thus do not seem very surprising. Harking back to the beginning, this provides a sense of how the last viable population of the Indochinese Tiger in Laos has become wiped out despite outstanding conservation efforts, and including an award-winning ecotourism project as a central strategy.

All of this is not to bluntly denounce ecotourism in Laos as an outright, ill-intended strategy of domination against rural populations. Rather, my point is that the dynamic just examined is implied in the overall symbolic-material order of ecotourism, in Laos and elsewhere, and that it plays out somewhat automatically or unwittingly, regardless actors' intentions.

Lao Ecotourism Futures

With this step in the argument we enter the uncharted terrain of lacking further up-to-date research on tourism in Laos. We are thus left here largely with educated guesses and open questions. Ecotourism in Lao NPAs has spread and developed. Not least, outstanding areas in conservation terms, such as Nakai-Nam Theun and Hin Nam Nor NPAs (the latter contagious with Vietnam's Phon Nha Ke Bang National

23 Whereas, in turn, an ecotourism advisor to Nam Et-Phou Louey NPA would not "advertise to tourists" that around the tourism camp in the core zone former swidden fields can still be recognized.

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Park), which have recently attained the novel designation National Park (including Nam Et-Phou Louey), have introduced ecotourism projects in the past years. Moreover, the concept of nature conservation through ecotourism has expanded beyond the confines of NPAs proper, such as in the popular Gibbon Experience as well as the high-class Nam Kat Yorlapa Lodge (Kleinod and Chanthavong 2024).

While the recent impact of COVID on Lao ecotourism is still a matter of research, above considerations suggest that ecotourism and conservation inhabit a rather precarious niche in Laos' overall extractive political ecology. Maintaining a line between untouched nature and social development requires some kind of alternative income to detach livelihoods from the material use of the immediate environment. Ecotourism is central to Lao tourism in general, which, in turn, is major aspect of the national economy creating an inbound migration stream, while temporary or permanent rural outmigration constitutes an outbound migration stream that is central to rural subsistence portfolios (Sunam, Barney, and McCarthy 2021). Both streams were cut off and brought to a standstill by the pandemic. This has certainly not helped ecotourism projects–ones that are often hardly economically profitable anyhow, given their remoteness as well as the required socio-ecological responsibility of tour companies. Quite to the contrary, just like tourism guides in the capital found other jobs in car rental or food delivery, rural populations also in ecotourism villages tended to "go back into the forest" to hunt and gather, as the owner of a large national tour company stated in an interview. Conservation efforts may become thwarted rather than be successful under such conditions of an economic squeeze that endures into the present due to skyrocketing inflation rates and alarming levels of debt.

An important upshot of the COVID crisis in terms of tourism futures in Laos is the campaign "Lao Thiao Lao" (Laotians visit Laos): initiated by leading tourism proponents and the Lao National Chamber of Commerce, this campaign sought to salvage the national tourism industry in the complete absence of international customers due to COVID restrictions of movement. Touristic experiences and services established for comparably well-off, Western tastes – many of them ecotouristic in nature – were and are being sold now, at greatly reduced prices, to Lao people. While research is thoroughly lacking also in this respect, it appears that this campaign constitutes a further moment in the shaping of "socio-ecological" milieus among an emergent modern domestic urban middle class (Kleinod and Chanthavong 2024; Rehbein 2017; for China see Bruckermann 2024).

How this process will play out is far from clear, and needs to take into consideration another dynamic that becomes ever more pervasive: Chinese investment, and

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the integration of Laos into China's Belt and Road Initiative (Rowedder 2020; Wilcox 2022). Aside from Chinese-dominated businesses in the country and intensifying economic relations as well as dependencies overall, a steep increase in tourists from China is expected and already happening not least thanks to the newly established high-speed rail line between Kunming and Vientiane. As interviews with ecotourism proponents in Laos suggest, the industry demands from political leaders to proactively engage with this foreseeable trend instead of getting overrun by unregulated tourist movement and expectations, to channel and design this process so that achieved levels of quality and sustainability are not being sacrificed. While numbers of Westerns tourists are picking up again after the steep COVID dip, ecotourism companies are increasingly seeking to cater to environmentally-minded customers from China, Thailand, Vietnam or Singapore. How this trend will play out – especially in combination with increasing touristic capacity and interest among the Lao population itself – remains for further research to be closely observed, examined and, importantly, criticized.[24]

Conclusion

What is the upshot of above considerations for rural futures in late socialist Asia? What does the disappearance of the Indochinese Tiger – despite concerted efforts involving cutting-edge ecotourism projects – signal concerning the future viability of ecotourism, and regarding the future wellbeing of rural populations in late socialist Laos?

Overall, as mentioned, ecotourism is uniquely situated at central fault lines of Lao political ecology as well as the global ecological predicament more generally – namely in terms of its central guiding difference/relation between conservation and development. For one, the quaint contradictions around conservation and ecotourism signal that the power of Authenticity ruling ecotouristic practice, as expressed in the notion of "limited development", appears to almost necessitate its own undermining in an overall extractive, indeed frontier context. This directly relates to rural ambitions, to participate in ecotourism schemes, for example. In a structural sense: the key relation in ecotourism, between conservation and development, appears right within the host-guest relation, as those villagers who become part of such projects

24 It is widely recognized, for example, that infrastructure development is conducive for the extraction and run-off of natural resources (Nooren and Claridge 2001). With by far the most important destination of illicit trade in timber and wildlife from Laos being China, further development of the Belt and Road Initiative could be regarded as matter of grave concern from a conservation point of view.

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hope for "development" while guest are in it for "conservation". The "developmental" orientation of locals may be subsistence oriented, thus necessitating an inclusive portfolio of income strategies that simply cannot afford neat separations between Nature and Society. Moreover, the promises by the developmental state of wellbeing and wealth are echoed at the local level as well, aspiring to more than just survive. It would be hardly surprising if ecotourism and conservation were another means to making ends meet, for rural people. Ecotourism and conservation have existed in precarious niches within an extractive context, and they continue to do so, providing useful monetary income for various local needs.

How both will develop in the future will increasingly depend on China, for the fundamental degree to which Laos is indebted to and dependent on Chinese political economy is plain and clear. If the early observation by the external reviewers of Nam Ha's second phase is any indication – namely that "attractions based on cultural commodification", and "a fabricated tourism experience that has been heavily influenced by the Chinese model" are "detrimental" to community-based ecotourism schemes thought up by Westerners (Gujadhur et al. 2008:37-38) – increased presence of Chinese tourists may be at odds with existing ecotourism ICDPs. Indeed, it was a central point in this paper that the power of Authenticity is highly culture-specific. It certainly saw a decline during COVID lockdowns, and it may further lose its grip with increasing presence of Chinese investment, traders and tourists. However, it may also get a little more complex since a socio-ecological orientation increasingly becomes constitutive of certain middle-class milieus not just in "the West" but also in late socialist Asia. In any case, it seems clear that the way in which conservation and development are related in ecotourism ICDPs – that is in terms of Authenticity and limited development – makes for their precarious, almost self-defeating existence within the frontier economy of rural late socialist Laos. While it is foreseeable that the power of Authenticity described here is bound to wane with increasing integration in Chinese rationales of development, it remains to be seen if the latter will find a more viable, less contrived mediation between conservation and development. Such kind of mediation is envisaged in recent proposals of "convivial conservation" (Büscher and Fletcher 2020; Massarella, Krauss, Kiwango, and Fletcher 2023), and "postcapitalist tourism" (Fletcher et al. 2023) – which could potentially be fruitful in terms of late socialism as distinguished from capitalism proper.

As just mentioned, however, the COVID rupture and subsequent developments, such as soaring inflation connected also to the Ukrainian conflict, have had and continue to have a detrimental impact on the social economy of Laos. Given a pronounced "return to the land" for the sake of food security and an increasing dependence on Chinese development and investment indicate that rural futures in late socialist Laos

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aren't particularly rosy, at least from the perspective of sustainability. In order to maintain regime stability, the late socialist state is bound to further rely on its strategy of "cheapening" production inputs such as resources and labor (Moore 2015), and to further restrict public debate and protest – while the latter, in turn, increases with ongoing ecological destruction and social media use. Although China's presence is regarded with suspicion by many Lao people, attitudes appear more ambivalent: attentive to the advantages as well as disadvantages of Chinese involvement in Lao development and politics (Rowedder et al. 2023). It appears certain, however, that the notion of "late socialism" will acquire more, rather than less purchase with the increasing recent and future integration of Laos into the Chinese political-economic realm.

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