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To What Extent Is Tourism In Thailand Sustainable Over Time?

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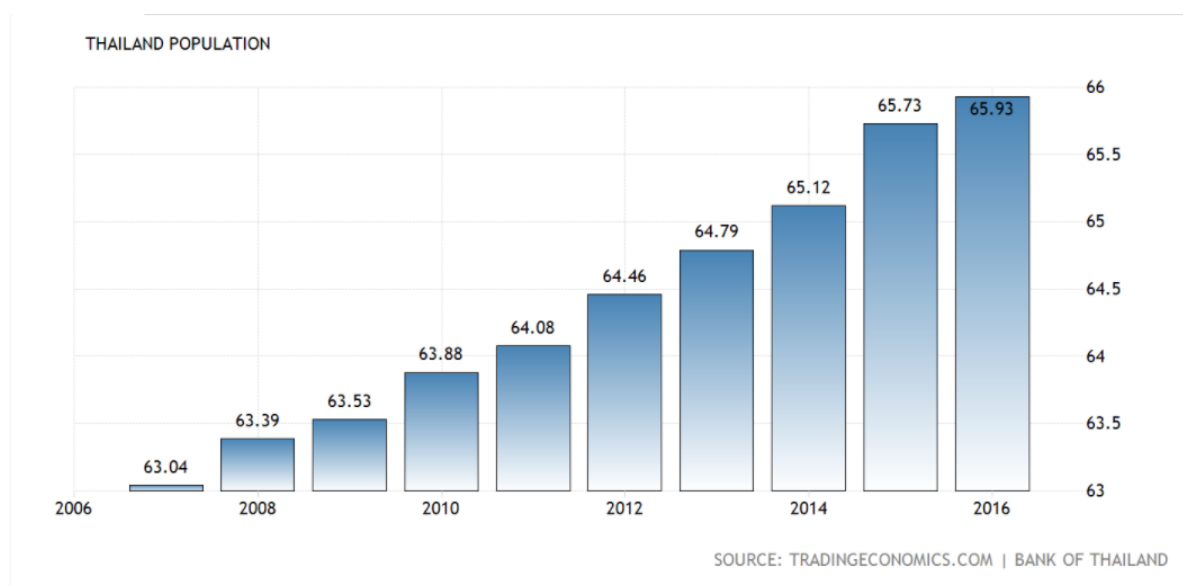
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Thailand is currently among the many nations struggling with an existential crisis. Like its brethren in the Caribbean and Central America, Thailand has an opportunity to take advantage of the economic lifeline thrown to it by tourism. At the same time, Thailand finds itself in the unenviable position, shared by its fellow tourist states, of having to protect its natural environment in the face of rising tourism. This brings about important economic, cultural, and even moral questions in the country. Just how much of the environmental sanctity of the nation is one willing to sacrifice in order to achieve economic growth through tourism? How much of its cultural landscape is the country willing to auction off for the dollars of people coming from Mainland Asia, from North America, and from Europe? These questions have haunted many in Thailand as they attempt to answer another critical question—just how sustainable is tourism over the long run in the nation? Thailand is a country that has been growing, and more, it has become more popular among those who love to travel. Both inside the important center of Bangkok and elsewhere in the country, people are coming to take advantage of the weather, the culture, and the beautiful coastal areas. This presents a challenge for the country. The very thing that makes it special are its stunning coastal regions, complete with landforms that people cannot find elsewhere and some coastal marine life that is also a draw¹. The more people move into these areas, the more difficult it will be for Thailand to sustain itself. This has brought some to a difficult conclusion. While tourism in the country might be sustainable over the long term with enough monitoring and regulation, there is a catch-22 that currently exists. That which makes tourism a popular and important industry in Thailand is the very thing that could be damaged or otherwise undermined by the growing population numbers and the growing tourism numbers in

¹ Nasa, Mayuree, and Fatimah Binti Hassan. "Assessment of Tourism Resource Potential at Buriram Province, Thailand." *Asian Social Science* 12, no. 10 (2016): 27.

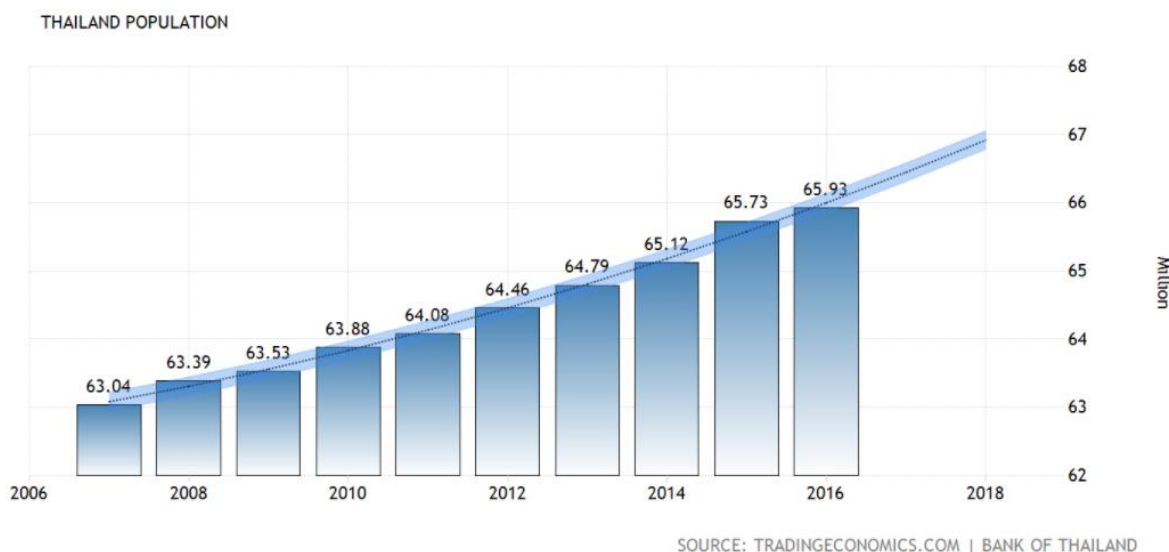
the country. This creates problems of scale, as growing tourism in Thailand may devour itself because the addition of more people can destruct the very things drawing those people to Thailand in the first place.

The population of Thailand has been growing by leaps and bounds over the last decade or more. While there are many reasons that can help to explain this growth, one is that more people are looking for economic opportunity. That economic opportunity is driven, at least in part, by growth within the tourism industry in the country. The recent history of population growth in the country can be seen in the following graph. This graph shows sustained population growth. It begins in 2007. On the Y-axis, the population growth is chronicled in millions of people.



This does not, of course, appear to be a trend that is stopping anytime soon. Instead, it appears that population growth in Thailand is going to continue to explode over the next few years in a similar rate as it has previously. This is a good opportunity for the country, but it also represents a potential challenge to sustainable tourism growth in the country. Given that the current situation is putting pressure on the ecological situation in Thailand, there is some concern

that if numbers keep up in this way, then population density issues will force more and more people into areas where they were simply not meant to be. Looking at the potential population growth numbers through charting can be more instructive to understand precisely what situation the leaders in Thailand are facing at the current time. That projected data is represented in the following chart. Again, the numbers represent a similar phenomenon to what was presented in the prior graph, with the population numbers being displayed in the millions.



While those population numbers represent the number of people living in Thailand permanently, there are also a number of concerns about the growth in tourism numbers. Those numbers have risen steadily since around 2009, when people began to discover Thailand as a destination, and more, when the Thai government invested more in marketing and infrastructure. It has not all been due to increased interest. It has also been due to increased capacity on the part of Thailand to handle and manage more people coming to the island. The growth in tourism population figures can be shown and seen in the following graph, which shows that people are coming to Thailand in greater numbers than ever before. This represents a bigger overall trend in global tourism, as people are better able to travel today and are more interested in taking

advantage of a relatively peaceful, connected world². The following graph shows tourist arrivals in Thailand, demonstrating that over an eight-year span, the number of tourists coming into Thailand more than doubled.



Source: World Bank and Thailand's Tourism Department; graph by www.Business-in-Asia.com

In order to properly understand the situation, one must understand the extent of damage occurring in Thailand as a result of the rise in population and the growth in tourism. Simply put, Thailand is a country with a limited rural inland. Much of the territory, and especially the territory that people like to visit and live in, is located near the sea. This is leading to an

² Kumar, S., Kusakabe, K., Pradhan, P., Shrestha, P., Goteti, S., Tuan, T. A., ... & Linh, K. (2014). Greenhouse gas emissions from tourism service providers: case studies in Chiang Mai, Thailand and Hue, Vietnam. *Livelihoods, ecosystem services and the challenges of regional integration in the Mekong region. Selangor, Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (SIRD)*.

unintended consequence of tourism that is continuing to threaten the sanctity of the country.³

That consequence is coastal degradation. Thailand has long been at major risk for degradation and coastal erosion as a result of changing weather patterns and the like. Thailand is vibrant in that it has many different types of coasts (Nara et al, 2014). There is coastal beach property, there are rocky coastal cliffs, and there are other landforms, too. There are coastal wetlands that have been eroded and threatened over the last two decades. Each of these coastal types has run into its own particular set of problems as a direct result of not only tourism but also the changes in the environment, which can have said themselves to be the result of changes in human movement patterns and ultimate behavior. One of the primary areas of coastal erosion has been beach pollution. As more people come to Thailand in hopes of taking advantage of the beaches, which are a core asset for the country, it is likely that human activities will continue to cause more beach pollution. This comes through problems as simple and seemingly small as litter and problems as big as some of the emissions from vehicles that are used in order to access and service the beaches. This is only one of the issues, but it brings to bear the bigger problems facing the country as it tries to maintain its beauty, its ecological integrity, and its appeal as a tourist destination in a world where there is competition for tourism dollars in Asia and elsewhere.

Another of the major issues with coastal degradation is the critical element of coastal wetland erosion (Suwanteep, 2016). Wetlands can be looked at as science projects of sorts. They are basically living labs where creatures of all kinds come for protection and to live their lives.

³ Chubchuwong, M., Beise-Zee, R., & Speece, M. W. (2015). The effect of nature-based tourism, destination attachment and property ownership on environmental-friendliness of visitors: A study in Thailand. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 20(6), 656-679.

Thailand has many different species that are native to the country and make up an important part of the ecosystem. However, coastal wetland areas are often in some of the most beautiful, desirable parts of the country. They sit in places where tourists want to overlook sunsets and enjoy the water. This means that there have been increasing amounts of pressure put on government leaders to allow development into these areas. When people want to come in and built homes, developments, hotels, and resorts, the coastal wetlands can often stand as a barrier to that progress. This has set up something of a standoff between those who seek to protect the sanctity of the environment and those who seek to provide for more growth in the country. It also poses one of the most important existential questions for the future of tourism in the country. If things like the coastal wetlands continue to be destroyed without worry, will Thailand still be the sort of country where people want to come to explore and to take advantage of the extensive amounts of water they will find? The very thing that is providing a reason for people to come to the country can be eviscerated if Thailand is not careful, and the growth conundrum in regard to the coastal wetlands is a good illustration of how this is playing out in the country.

Beach sand dunes are also a critical part of the coastal topography. These serve not only an aesthetic purpose, but also a practical purpose. Thailand is among the countries in which coastal sand dunes are there to protect the beach front from problems of wind and flooding. This is critical, too, because Thailand sits in a part of the sea where problems tend to happen. Typhoons can tend to blow through, and large waves can threaten the interior areas if they are not stopped at the coastal level. This is what sand dunes are for. More than just being something to dot the sea and provide a pretty picture, sand dunes are critical for that protection of both

property and human life⁴. Unfortunately, the sand dunes also sit on prime property for building and expansion. Many large resort companies have wanted to build in the coastal areas of the country. While Thailand was able to hold them off for quite some time, as the demand has risen in tourism, there has been more pressure to make allowances to allow these developers to develop some of the dunes areas. Thailand is not an especially large place, and what this means is that when people come in, mixed with the rising population figures, there is just not enough room to house them. Not wanting to miss out on opportunities for more growth, many have argued that sacrifices have to be made in order to continue to be the sort of place where another company might want to come in and build. This, however, brings about long-term danger and questions of stability in the region on and on. One of the biggest things that will keep companies from investing large amounts of money into developments and tourism in the country is if that country is not well-prepared to defend against natural disasters. While tourism companies always have to contend with weather problems because their installations tend to be built in places that are heavily at risk, they are usually in the business of wanting to reduce their risk as much as possible. To the extent that Thailand is interested in further degrading the sand dunes that help to protect structures from wind and rain, it will create a situation that is riskier and riskier for the companies that may want to come in and occupy the island. There is a sustainability and even scalability problem complicit in that construction. Namely, without more expansion, the country cannot continue to grow and meet the demand among people who want to travel to there. However, as more expansion comes about, the country will be less desirable to the very people

⁴ Nara, P., Mao, G., & Yen, T. (2014). Applying environmental management policy for sustainable development of coastal tourism in Thailand. *International Journal of environmental protection and policy*, 2(1), 19-23.

that the expansion is aimed toward. Thailand is in the difficult position of having to try to come up with solutions that provide for additional growth possibilities without destroying the very reasons why companies are looking to build there in the first place.

Another issue in regard to sustainability and tourism in the region has to do with the carbon expenditure of people coming to the region. Simply put, Thailand is isolated in some respects on the map. While it is close to a number of high population areas, it is also quite far away from those places where most people come in order to explore the island. This is a challenge over the long run for the country in its tourism because in order to attract those individuals, it will be contributing to a growing carbon footprint and destroying the very beauty in the world it is trying to celebrate. In looking at the growth in Thai tourism, there is one very important trend that must be taken into account. That is the economic situation in China. China has seen explosive growth over the last two decades, even if that might be slowing down some currently⁵. More than that, it has seen the growth and emergence of a middle class, and particularly a young professional class, that now has money to spend on things like travel. Before, China was a nation where people rarely traveled because of the closed nature of society and the fact that many just did not have the money and opportunity. All of that has changed, and leading up to 2015, China's explosive growth in tourism spending had primarily benefitted Thailand. China remains the country that sends the most tourists to Thailand, in part because of the huge population numbers in China and in part because of the proximity of the two nations. The two most prominent population centers in China—Beijing and Shanghai—sit more than

5 Suwanteep, K., Murayama, T., & Nishikizawa, S. (2016). Environmental impact assessment system in Thailand and its comparison with those in China and Japan. *Environmental Impact Assessment Review*, 58, 12-24.

3,500 kilometers away from Phuket, where many people travel when they come to Thailand.

This means that the people coming from China to Thailand are often traveling by plane, heightening their energy expenditure and carbon footprint. While there are areas of China that are much closer to Thailand, it is unlikely that many tourists make the drive to the country, given the need to pass through Vietnam and potentially Myanmar to get there. Most will fly, which creates an issue related to sustainability and carbon foot printing, as well.

Travelers coming into the country from Japan and Korea are also making a major impact on the country. These people have to travel almost as far as those coming from major population centers in China, or further in some cases.⁶ The same problems exist in regard to these passengers. On the list of the top ten countries to send visitors to Thailand are both the UK and the US, which not only send people, but also send people who actually spend money in these areas. Just more than 400,000 people have come to Thailand from both countries each year, and all of these people are traveling by plane at some point in their journey. From the United States, there is no easy way to get to Phuket. The two places sit on opposite sides of the world, and flying either East or West from the United States produces a long trip. In fact, if one took a flight from Los Angeles in the West part of the United States all the way to Phuket, that person would travel 14,000 kilometers roughly. This is an extremely long flight that burns tremendous fuel and leads to sustainability issues abounding. The flight from London to Phuket is slightly less in distance. People making this trek will travel roughly 9,900 km on a flight that will take many hours. Still, taken together, the fact that the country is so isolated means that its travel industry is doing significant damage to the environment.

⁶ Chon, K. S. (2013). *Tourism in Southeast Asia: A new direction*. Routledge.

One country, which ranks second in travel to Thailand, does not pose as many problems.

Malaysia sends the second largest number of tourists to Thailand on a yearly basis, and Malaysia is only a few hours by car from Phuket. Many people are able to make the drive, and flights from area to area are also less extensive. This demonstrates the ways in which Thailand is both an international and regional destination. What it has to offer is appealing to people locally and abroad, but given the statistics on who comes to the country, it is clear that the focus on tourism is harming the environment in many respects just on the basis of the sheer travel burden to get there.⁷

Country (January - June 2015)	Amount	% change over January - June 2014
China	4,006,584	+111.64
Malaysia	1,704,370	+57.93
Japan	675,758	+16.79
Korea	638,296	+19.71
Laos	565,601	+20.73
India	526,120	+17.01
Russia	466,457	-50.35
United Kingdom	462,633	+2.73
Singapore	459,795	+36.46
USA	426,955	+12.21

While looking at the extent to which tourism has had an impact on the environmental situation in the country, one must also keep in mind the economic benefits that come from

⁷ Kumar, S., Kusakabe, K., Pradhan, P., Shrestha, P., Goteti, S., Tuan, T. A., ... & Linh, K. (2014). Greenhouse gas emissions from tourism service providers: case studies in Chiang Mai, Thailand and Hue, Vietnam. *Livelihoods, ecosystem services and the challenges of regional integration in the Mekong region. Selangor, Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (SIRD)*.

tourism. Simply put, Thailand is just using the tools in its disposal to try and keep up with some of the growth in the region. Southeast Asia is a region with great poverty in some areas, so the ability of Thailand to use tourism to its advantage has, at times, given the country an edge over similar countries around it that have not been able to match it in this regard. Knowing just how important tourism is to the country, there are many things that the government has done in order to both encourage tourism and try to control the flow of tourists at least a little bit into the country. One must first go back to 2009, when Thailand was in some political upheaval and also trying to recover from the global economic collapse. It was then that the prime minister of the nation gave a speech to the world in which he promoted tourism in the country as being “amazing.” There was a concerted effort on the part of the government there to promote to the world the idea that Thailand was both a safe and fun place for people to visit. There might have been some uncertainty in the world, of course, given how many problems Thailand had suffered. The PR and marketing campaign was in full force, though, as the leadership in Thailand did everything in their power to ensure that people understood that Thailand was open for business. What this signaled was both a focus area and some desperation on the part of the local government. In recovering from the economic downturn, they had to do something, and the something they chose was to make some sacrifices in order to attract people to come to the country. They decided that it was best to sacrifice some environmental sanctity in order to ensure that the country could get back on its feet more quickly than the neighbors all around it.

One of the policy elements that has come into play has been the desire among government forces in Thailand to ensure that people in the country understand that tourism can be its economic engine. In addition to exterior marketing, there has been some interior communication and marketing to suggest to people that tourism is going to be a focus area

specifically because it can help drive growth in the country. This is essentially a desire on the part of the Thai government to get people to accept some level of selling out Thailand because it is critical for long-term growth. Aside from that, the country has invested more in infrastructure to ensure that people can get to the area more easily and to ensure that people can conduct business activities once there. More and more, people are combining work with travel.⁸ They are not truly taking off for vacations, but rather, they are just moving their work space so they can enjoy a change of pace. Without being able to accommodate these new business travelers, Thailand would have run into difficulty on the long term in attracting the best types of people. The government has recognized this, knowing that if it wants to maintain its status as one of the world's "amazing" destinations, then it has to have more than just pretty sunsets and beaches. It also has to have the modern trappings that people need and demand, including modern Internet and the like. This upgrade in infrastructure has also made it much easier for the Thai tourism industry to market and reach the people around them.⁹ Critically, the Thai tourism industry has not rested on its laurels with a few core markets, either. It has looked to develop new cities and parts of the country as potential destinations, encouraging people to visit more than just Phuket and Bangkok when they come to Thailand.

Thailand has also been more open with its travel visas and such in order to allow more people to enter. While other nations have been concerned about security and the like, Thailand has tried to toe a middle line. It has added some of the modern security trappings, but it has

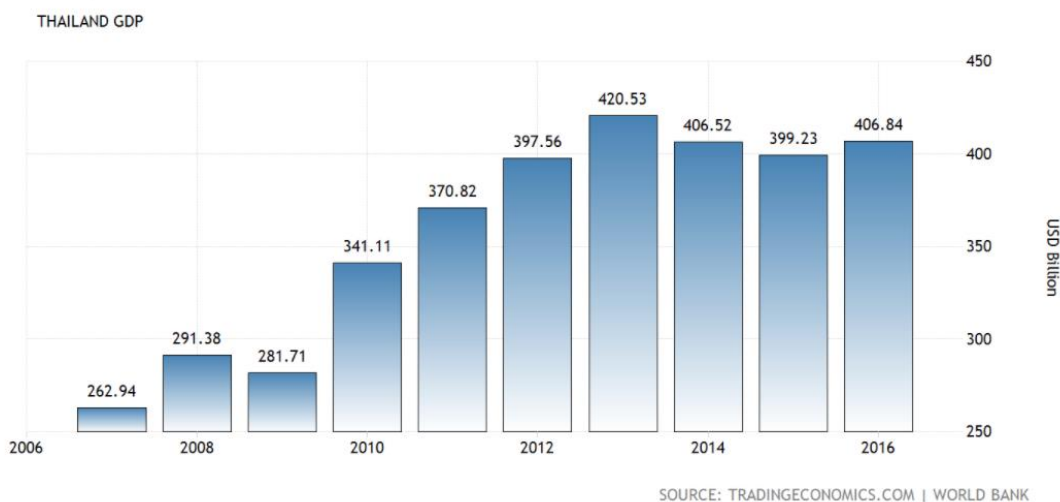
8 Kontogeorgopoulos, N. (2016). TOURISM IN THAILAND. *The Routledge Handbook of Tourism in Asia*.

9 Ghimire, K. B. (2013). *The native tourist: Mass tourism within developing countries*. Routledge.

largely been a nation open to many different types of people. This is yet another example of how the government has in some ways asked the population to make some sacrifices in order to build a more powerful tourism industry. It might also signal a problem with sustainability. Ultimately a system in which more and more people are allowed to enter not only destroys the exclusivity of a destination, but it can also make it less safe. If something becomes less safe, then many travelers are not going to want to spend their time there. In a world where people are more concerned than ever about mass attacks and the like, the tendency of Thailand to allow visitors from all over is both a boon and a potentially harmful element for its tourism industry. Sorting through this dichotomy is one of the core challenges for leaders who are trying to make the right decisions today.

Whenever one is looking at numbers on GDP growth and the contribution of an industry to GDP, one must understand the numbers and projections are approximate. There is no such thing as certainty. However, the government of Thailand estimates that tourism will bring in roughly 1.78 trillion Baht in the coming year. That represents around \$50 billion American dollars. This represents roughly a ten percent growth expectation over the numbers that the country experienced last year. Likewise, the number in total represents a roughly ten percent chunk of the GDP in Thailand. This means that tourism is significant, and in fact, it might be the most significant industry in the country at the current time. While there are others that are critical, including manufacturing and textiles, tourism brings in cash from all over and also contributes to jobs in the country. It is the reason why unemployment rates in the major tourist centers have gone down. With people in the country to spend money from China, the US, the UK, and the like, there is a need for more hiring. Here, the gross domestic product (GDP) of the

country is presented in terms of billions of USD. It shows that the country struggled during the economic downturn, as most countries did, but has experienced massive growth since that time.



Thailand's overall balance of payments has been positive in both 2015 and 2016, with its growth happening over the last year or so. This suggests strongly that bringing a greater focus on tourism has helped the country extensively, even if there are costs to that approach.

Looking at Thailand from both approaches, one can see that certain tradeoffs are happening. There is an understanding that the flood of people coming into Thailand is causing the country to suffer some in terms of environmental degradation, especially in the coastal areas that are so important. This seems to be a primary concern, with the increasing carbon footprint being less of a concern. Those in Thailand know that their marketing campaign is all about "amazing" things. This includes amazing views and the ability to go to amazing beaches. If the coastal regions are destroyed and overdeveloped, as they might be in order to account for growth there, then it might be bad over the long run. The thing cannot justify itself, and if the very thing that causes people to come to the country happens to be destroyed, then this can lead to long-term issues of sustainability and growth in the country. At the same time, the money is such that

it is difficult for Thailand to turn down opportunities for growth. Given some of the economic struggles that other countries in Southeast Asia have had to contend with, and the relative prosperity that Thailand is currently abiding, some have decided that it makes sense to push the envelope a bit. Still, in order to maintain the sort of safe, beautiful nation with awe-inspiring things that make people want to get on a plane from the UK, China, or the US, there must be an effort at preservation and conservation. Thailand is currently sorting through how to manage these two incredible needs after nearly a decade of taking a hardline pro-tourism stance.

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