

Sustainability Report

Mueang Kao Sukhothai, Thailand

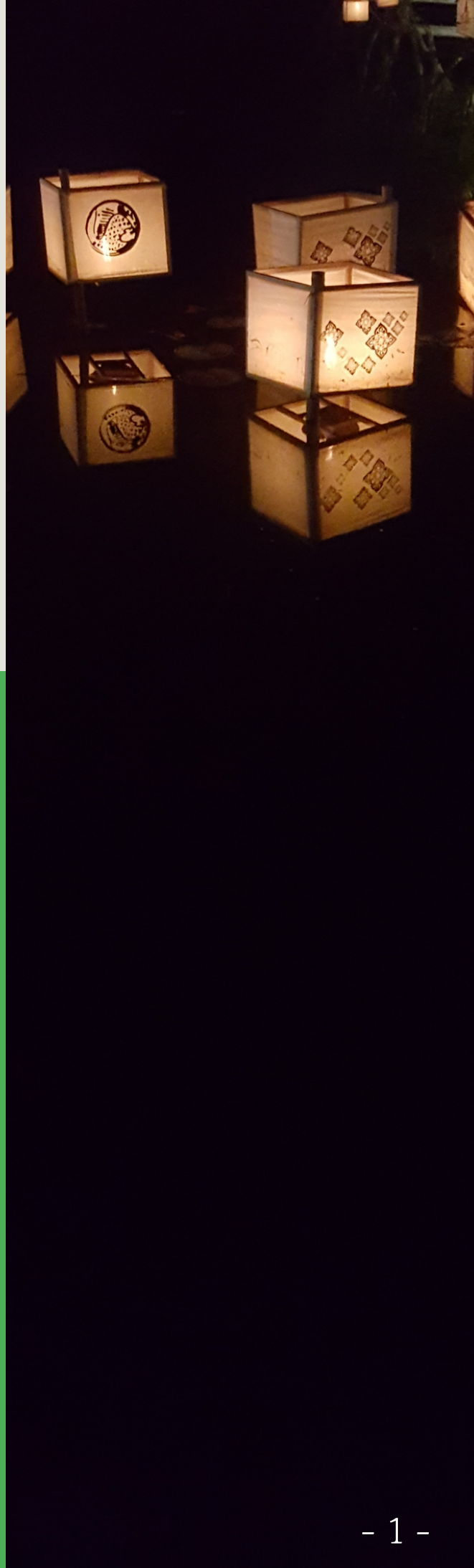
A collaborative initiative for sustainable tourism
under the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC)
and Green Destinations framework.

Summary

Mueang Kao Sukhothai, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, has made significant progress in sustainable tourism development. Assessed under the Green Destinations Top 100 Stories framework, based on 30 core criteria aligned with the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC Version 1.0), the destination has demonstrated leadership in cultural preservation, environmental protection, community engagement, and inclusive local economic development.

Key Achievements:

- **Top 100 Destination Sustainability Stories (2021):** Recognized globally for innovative solutions in sustainable tourism that balance heritage protection with visitor experience.
- **Top 100 Destination Sustainability Stories (2023):** Highlighted the destination's efforts to maintain ecological balance in order to protect cultural heritage.
- **UCCN Creative City of Crafts & Folk Art (since 2019):** Emphasizes the city's commitment to preserving local crafts, cultural identity, and knowledge transfer.
- **Green Historical Park model with EV trams and low-carbon tourism:** Sukhothai Historical Park became Thailand's first low-carbon heritage site by restricting fossil-fueled vehicles and promoting eco-friendly transport.



Introduction



Mueang Kao Sukhothai (which means the old city of Sukhothai) is a tourism destination which has the Sukhothai historical park, an UNESCO world heritage site inscribed in 1991, as a main tourism attraction. Sukhothai was the capital of Thai in the 13th and 14th centuries. It represents a masterpieces of the first distinctive Thai architectural style, reflected in the planning of the towns, the many impressive civic and religious buildings, their urban infrastructure, and a sophisticated hydraulic (water management) system. It also represents the great period of Thai art and architecture, language and literature, religion, and the codification of law, from which was created the first Thai state.

Nowadays, Mueang Kao Sukhothai is a famous tourism destination among Thai and foreign visitors, not only by Sukhothai historical park as a main attraction, but also with its uniqueness, aesthetics, tranquillity, and local's friendliness. The historical park features the view of the combination between cultural archaeological site and biodiverse natural landscape and scenery assimilated into the same ecosystem. Hence, the historical park also has a character of living cultural heritage and lively township because it is surrounded harmoniously with the local community.

Mueang Kao Sukhothai is internationally recognized for its Loy Krathong "Candle Lighting and Fire Display" Festival, which won the Gold Prize in the "Best Festival (Nighttime Theme)" category at the 2023 International Festival & Events Association (IFEA) Asia Chapter Awards.

According to the resolution of the Cabinet on April 26, 2011, approval was granted for the designation of the Sukhothai–Si Satchanalai–Kamphaeng Phet Historical Parks as a Special Area for Sustainable Tourism, as proposed by the Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (DASTA). Mueang Kao Subdistrict is one of the designated areas included in this initiative.

In 2019, DASTA adopted the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC), developed by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council, as a tool to assess the sustainability status of the tourism destination. These criteria cover four key pillars:

- (1) sustainable management,
- (2) socio-economic sustainability,
- (3) cultural sustainability, and
- (4) environmental sustainability.

DASTA continues to use these criteria as a framework for developing the Mueang Kao tourism destination. As a result, two local management bodies for sustainable tourism were established: the Coordinating and Steering Committee for Sustainable Tourism Development of Mueang Kao Subdistrict, Mueang Sukhothai District, Sukhothai Province, and the Working Group for Driving Sustainable Tourism Development of the same area. Both bodies operate under the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC).

These groups comprise representatives from government agencies, the private sector, and local communities, working together through an integrated, holistic approach toward sustainable development in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Moreover, the committee and working group are also responsible for jointly developing and implementing the action plan for the sustainable tourism development of Mueang Kao Subdistrict in accordance with the GSTC framework.



Issues and Expectations

Economic

- Managing the tourism economy in a systematic and sustainable manner
- Revenue leakage in tourism-related supply chains
- Establishing tourism-related businesses within the local community to generate income
- Creating local employment opportunities
- Increased tourism expenses with unclear or insufficient benefit distribution

Cultural

- Cultural values have yet to be effectively transferred and preserved
- Lack of effective media or tourism activities that promote local identity
- Need to present community values and wisdom in ways that are accessible and engaging for the new generation and global audience
- Insufficient understanding or knowledge among visitors regarding local cultural significance
- Inadequate management and conservation of local cultural sites

Quality of Life and Well-being

- Inadequate or incomplete basic infrastructure and utilities to support tourism sustainably
- Unequal access to benefits from tourism development
- Lack of mechanisms to promote community participation in tourism development
- Limited awareness among local people about their rights and benefits from tourism
- Lack of communication channels to ensure inclusive participation in development from all sectors
- Need to build a strong sense of ownership and cooperation among stakeholders

Environment

- Natural resource management remains insufficient
- Continued environmental degradation due to tourism-related activities
- Growing concerns over water, air, and noise pollution caused by tourism
- Inadequate waste management and wastewater treatment systems
- Lack of understanding and participation in environmental conservation among visitors and some local stakeholders
- Need for increased awareness and responsibility among tourists and service providers toward environmental sustainability

Vision

From Mueang Kao advancing toward a new city of creative and sustainable tourism that meets international standards.

Development Goals

The development goal is to become a tourism destination that effectively utilizes the values and identity derived from its cultural World Heritage, promoting diverse and appropriate tourism activities that generate income and improve quality of life, while preserving the ecosystem.

Development Approaches

The development approach aims to progress toward a new city of participatory tourism, building partnerships and networks with neighboring areas to ensure equitable and appropriate benefit distribution. It emphasizes the importance of preserving traditional lifestyles, social conditions, and ecosystems that support the protection of cultural heritage.

Advantages:

- Promotes tourism that shares benefits equitably among all sectors, ensuring fair distribution and joint preservation of cultural heritage, as well as safeguarding lifestyles, society, and the ecosystem.
- Expands tourism opportunities in the area by fostering creative collaboration with partners inside and outside the region, encouraging mutual support and exchange, generating income, and jointly protecting society and the environment

Challenges:

- Local communities may lack awareness of the necessity to develop tourism collaboratively with other stakeholders.
- Requires significant human resources.
- Benefits may be short-term and not realized quickly.

From

● Vision

to

● Action

Towards Sustainable Tourism

Mueang Kao Sukhothai,
Thailand

1

Sustainability Management



Key Approaches:

- **Multi-stakeholder planning:** Includes government agencies, private sector, local leaders, and communities in strategic tourism planning.
- **Destination master plan (2023–2027):** Developed with public hearings and aligned with Thailand's national strategy and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) criteria.
- **Action plan for developing in Mueang Kao Destination according to the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC) 2023–2027:** Developed with the collaboration of the public sector, private sector, and local communities, based on genuine issues identified through years of stakeholder consultations and continuous data collection.
- **Annual monitoring:** Regular surveys of residents and visitors to evaluate satisfaction and identify areas for improvement.

A steering committee has been established to drive tourism site development, comprising representatives from both provincial and local government agencies, as well as the private sector and civil society. Additionally, six specialized working groups have been formed, focusing on the following areas:

1. Public Health and Safety
2. Welfare and Equity
3. Local Economy through Tourism
4. Cultural Heritage
5. Urban Planning and Landscape
6. Nature and Environmental Conservation

2

Cultural & Natural Heritage

- **Cultural Heritage Conservation:**
 - Strict regulations govern construction near historical sites.
 - Restoration of wells and traditional architecture within the Historical Park is underway.
- **Heritage-Nature Integration:** Sukhothai Historical Park and surrounding landscapes preserve both cultural relics and natural ecosystems in harmony.
- **Legal protection frameworks:** Sites protected under national heritage and park laws, reinforcing long-term conservation.
- **Invasive species response:** Local awareness campaigns and regulations prevent practices like fish release in sacred ponds to protect biodiversity and historical structures.

Key Tools:

- A dedicated Biodiversity and Tourism Management Handbook
- Interpretive signage and online platforms to educate visitors on the site's cultural and ecological values

3

Environmental Conservation



REDUCTION IN
SINGLE-USE
CUTLERY



BAN ON FOAM
CONTAINERS
2022



REUSE OF
FOOD WASTE
FOR COMPOST
OR ANIMAL FEED

Waste & Pollution Control:

- **Ban on foam containers:** Effective since 2022, supported by public awareness and vendor compliance.
- **Food waste utilization:** Converted into compost or livestock feed to reduce landfill volume and promote circular economy.
- **Plastic cutlery reduction:** A 47% decrease achieved through incentive-based campaigns among local restaurants.

Water & Energy Efficiency:

- **Wastewater treatment by businesses:** Each operator uses septic tanks and grease traps under municipal law.
- **Renewable energy:** Solar-powered lighting implemented in public areas and eco-certified hotels.

LOW-CARBON TRANSPORT & EV AT SUKHOTHAI HISTORICAL PARK



GASOLINE
VEHICLES



BICYCLES
& EV SHUTTLES

1.192
kgCO₂

-46%

0.651
kgCO₂

BEFORE 2017

SINCE 2017

Low-carbon Mobility Initiatives:

- **Fuel-vehicle ban inside historical park:** Introduced in 2017 to preserve tranquility and reduce emissions.
- **Eco-friendly transport options:** 20+ electric vehicles and over 1,350 rental bicycles available for tourists.
- **Green Park recognition:** Sukhothai is a national model for "slow travel" and low-impact tourism.

Results & Recognition

Carbon Emission Reduction

- Down nearly 50% after shift to electric transport.

Visitor Perception

- Nearly 80% of surveyed tourists see the park as an eco-conscious destination.



4

Society and Human Rights



Human Rights

Communication strategies are in place to ensure tourists respect local culture and community rights.

Support for local livelihoods

Homestays, handicrafts, and cultural tours provide income for small local enterprises.

Participatory governance

Public forums and workshops allow local people to voice opinions in tourism development.

Social Impact:

Empowered communities, improved service quality, and enhanced cultural pride through direct involvement in tourism value chains.

5

Business and Communication



Promoting Sustainability in Business

- Businesses are encouraged to join the Green Hotel certification program or participate in plastic reduction campaigns.
- Tourism businesses receive assessments and guidance on meeting sustainability standards.
- A list of certified establishments is published on www.phraruangheritage.com in both Thai and English.

Business Data on Water, Waste, Energy, and Carbon

Businesses collect and report data on water usage, waste management, energy consumption, and greenhouse gas emissions.

Code of Conduct for Tour Operators

Tour operators are trained on ethical practices that avoid negative impacts on cultural heritage.

Visitor Information on Sustainability

Information on environmental protection and appropriate behavior is provided via signage, websites, and printed materials.

Good Practices Stories

Mueang Kao Sukhothai, is a cultural tourism destination registered as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Sukhothai Province has been a member of the Creative Cities Network in the field of Crafts and Folk Art since 2019. Therefore, Mueang Kao has made significant progress in sustainable tourism development by referencing the six criteria of Green Destinations, covering governance, environment, social, cultural, and economic dimensions. There are two good practice stories as examples.



Sangkhalok, inter-generational heritage of science and art.

Sangkhalok ceramics, rooted in over 700 years of craftsmanship, are a proud cultural symbol of Mueang Kao Sukhothai. Facing threats from illegal excavations and declining local engagement, the revival of this heritage has been driven by strong collaboration between government agencies and local communities. Efforts include legal protection, public awareness campaigns, creative tourism programs, and the integration of Sangkhalok art into school curricula. Today, traditional designs are creatively adapted into modern souvenirs and lifestyle products, reflecting local identity. These joint initiatives have helped preserve intangible heritage while enhancing the local economy and positioning Sukhothai as a UNESCO Creative City for Crafts and Folk Arts.

Top 100 evaluator comment:

"Mueang Kao Sukhothai has been able to preserve the traditional ceramic wares production through many interesting initiatives, including educating local communities on the relevance of the art."

- Top 100 evaluator

"By offering the local population an incentive to produce Sangkhalok art, part of the local culture was preserved."

- Top 100 evaluator

Good Practices Stories



Nature conservation for protecting cultural attraction : the case of invasive species in Mueang Kao, Sukhothai

The Sukhothai Historical Park, an UNESCO world heritage site and the main attraction of Mueang Kao Sukhothai, has been invaded by invasive species for many years which harms the landscape and scenery as well as aesthetics in the historical park. There have been 2 cases that were identified as the highest priority; (1) invasive catfishes in the pond of archaeological site brought in by visitors that bought them from a nearby fresh market and released them in the pond. (2) A flock of migratory egrets nesting inside the historical park, however, they are protected by law. These 2 issues have been successfully handled; as all hybrid catfishes were relocated, the pond is being renovated and the local ecosystem is being restored. Next to that there have been made adjustments to discourage the birds from nesting, which resulted in a decreasing number of the birds. To manage the complexity of nature that coexists with cultural heritage it can be regarded as a long-term experiment. This case shows that cultural issues and natural issues usually affect and associate to each other one way or another.



Why did this story stand out?

"I really like the story, It is very well written, you can see that they've studied the options and they really want to create a change for the better."

"Challenging the sacred practices in favour of the environment"

Timeline Towards Sustainable Tourism

1. Awareness & Stakeholder Engagement



- Conduct baseline assessments (environmental, cultural, social, economic).
- Identify key stakeholders: local communities, government, tourism businesses, NGOs.
- Raise awareness about sustainable tourism principles.

2. Planning & Policy Development



- Establish a local tourism committee or working group.
- Develop a Sustainable Tourism Management Plan.
- Set short- and long-term goals (e.g. reducing emissions, supporting local livelihoods).
- Align with national strategies and global standards (e.g. UN SDGs, Green Destinations criteria).

3. Infrastructure & Capacity Building

- Improve waste management, water conservation, and energy systems.
- Upgrade facilities to support accessibility and reduce environmental impact.
- Train local guides and tourism operators in sustainable practices.
- Promote eco-friendly transportation (e.g. EV shuttles, bicycles).

Timeline Towards Sustainable Tourism

4. Implementation & Monitoring



- Track key indicators (e.g. visitor satisfaction, waste reduction, income distribution).
- Monitor environmental impacts (e.g. water quality, carbon footprint).
- Adjust based on monitoring feedback.

5. Certification & Recognition



- Apply for sustainable tourism certifications (e.g. Green Destinations, GSTC).
- Publicize milestones and community benefits.
- Encourage local businesses to join certification programs.

6. Continuous Improvement & Innovation



- Regularly review and update tourism plans.
- Foster innovation in low-carbon tourism and circular economy.
- Support youth and community-led initiatives.
- Share best practices with other destinations.

Mueang Kao Sukhothai, Thailand

