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How South Korea Can Serve as a ‘More Responsible Tourist’ in Southeast Asia

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Although the South Korean government strongly advised the public to stay home during Chuseok—Korea’s Thanksgiving—it was estimated that the population movement increased by 5 percent during this year’s holiday compared to the last. As the public eagerly waits for Covid-19 to subside and travel restrictions to be lifted, popular Southeast Asian destinations including Thailand’s Phuket have already announced their reopening to foreign travelers. Before South Koreans resume their overseas travel, however, they need to

be reminded not only of the dangers of the pandemic, but also of the environmental issues that are particularly vulnerable to tourism. As people-to-people interactions rekindle through travel, South Korea can utilize its New Southern Policy Plus (NSP Plus) to help Southeast Asia economically recover and do so in conjunction with efforts to address environmental concerns as a more responsible middle power.

The pandemic has weathered the international community, but Southeast Asia has been hit especially hard due to its economic dependence on tourism. Prior to the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2019, the travel and tourism industry had contributed over \$393 billion for Southeast Asia's gross domestic product (GDP). As of 2021, the region suffered an estimated 8.4 percent loss in its GDP due to lack of inbound visits as well as an 82 percent drop in tourist expenditure. With such high economic costs borne by isolation measures, several Southeast Asian nations—including Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam—have announced plans to shift from 'zero-Covid' to 'live with virus' strategies.

As more and more Southeast Asian nations view Covid-19 as an endemic, one of their priority agendas will be to reopen its borders to inbound tourism. In fact, several Southeast Asian countries have already announced their plans to reopen. Thailand, for example, jumpstarted the region's tourism in July 2021 with popular sites including Phuket, followed by Koh Samui, Krabi and Phang-Nga. Indonesia also announced it will soon accept foreign tourists to its islands of Bali insofar as they abide by the outlined protocols including an eight-day quarantine and hold proof of vaccination. In addition to Thailand and Indonesia, other Southeast Asian destinations that are forecasted to reopen in 2021 include Vietnam's Phu Quoc island, Singapore, and Malaysia's Langkawi.

The news of a potential travel rebound in Southeast Asia comes with much excitement for many South Koreans. Prior to the pandemic, Southeast Asia had continuously ranked as one of South Korea's most popular tourist destinations. In December 2018, Southeast Asia accounted for over 54 percent of South Korean travel reservations, followed by Japan at 18 percent. This trend continued throughout 2019 as several Southeast Asian cities including Da Nang and Bangkok ranked as the top five most desired destinations for South Koreans. Furthermore, as Southeast Asia takes incremental steps to reopen due to continued Covid-19 cases, South Koreans are likely to be one of the first groups to be admitted. Indonesia, for example, has restricted inbound tourism to "countries with a high level of Covid-19 containment" which includes South Korea.

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recover from its large tourism deficits. According to the Tourism Authority of Thailand, it is believed that Thailand's Phuket alone generated \$68.1 million (2.3 billion THB) of revenue since July. Two-way cultural exchanges via tourism and other means are also being promoted as part of the South Korean government's New Southern Policy Plus (NSP Plus)—which outlines key socio-economic challenges following the outbreak of the pandemic.

In addition to immediate economic and health concerns, however, the NSP Plus presents further developments from the original NSP by upgrading the need to cooperate on various transnational problems including those related to the preservation of oceans and the environment. Just months before the pandemic, Southeast Asia had raised concerns regarding the environmental problems exacerbated by tourism including damaged coral reefs, lack of proper sewage, and trash-filled beaches. In October 2018, it was estimated that 50 percent of Maya Bay—in Thailand's Krabi—had been destroyed by tourists. According to YaleEnvironment360's interview with Randy Durband, chief executive officer of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council, "tourism [in Southeast Asia] [had] not only been badly managed, [but] it [had] not been managed at all.

South Korea's NSP Plus fortunately presents itself as a flexible policy framework that can embrace post-pandemic tourism both as an economic tool and an opportunity for environmental cooperation. Various Southeast Asian countries are currently in the process of creating pilot tourism programs more fitting for the Covid-19 era, such as the "Phuket Sandbox."^[1] As these popular destinations discuss effective ways for managing and accommodating inbound travelers, South Korea could be of assistance in building a more sustainable tourism infrastructure. For example, in tandem with efforts to share climate data collected by satellites, South Korea could also aid NSP partner nations in monitoring waste management on beaches and surrounding areas where tourism is prevalent. This would mean extended discussions among working groups and NGOs beyond regular track one and track two level dialogues on environmental challenges. In addition to monitoring, South Korea could build on the existing cooperation on renewable energy by identifying popular tourist destinations—in addition to urban areas—as focus zones. Unlike cities where the existing population often makes it difficult to test and apply new technologies, tourist sites—especially during these times of renewal—provide more opportunities for collaboration.

Tourism hence presents a critical junction where two of South Korea's key NSP Plus initiatives—particularly those related to cultural exchange and environmental cooperation

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—could meet. In fact, prior to Covid-19, tourism itself had been considered the nazar to the region’s environmental sustainability. As the nation’s most desired Southeast Asian tourist destinations reopen their borders, South Korea should take the opportunity to present itself as a more responsible stakeholder and visitor by helping them build a more sustainable tourist infrastructure.

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[1] The “Phuket Sandbox” is a pilot tourism program established by the Thai government to reopen Phuket islands to foreign tourists. Initially, the program was designated for travelers from low- to medium-risk countries who were placed on the island for 14 days prior to receiving permission to travel to other destinations in Thailand. The Sandbox is now open to all vaccinated travelers as of early October.

Return to the Peninsula