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Geoconservation and sustainable development through geotourism for the Kanchanaburi region, Thailand

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Geotourism involves geosites, geotourists, guides and local communities. The concept of geotourism may vary among geoscientists, business groups and general public. Over the past decade we have witnessed a rapid growing number of both geotourists and geosites. Introduced by UNESCO, “Global Geopark” is a tool for geoconservation and geosite management. To achieve the “Global Geopark” label, certain criteria must be met with the focus on education, geotourism and geological features of international significance. Most of these geoparks have fascinating and beautiful landforms with long history telling the relationship between human settlement and natural resources. The development of the establishment of global geoparks in Thailand has been carried out for several years with steady progress in several provinces (Satun, Khonkaen and Ubon Ratchathani). However, these locations are quite far away from Bangkok metropolitan area, where several millions of potential visitors reside.

While other parts of the world are competing on the development of global geoparks, local communities throughout Thailand are still looking for places where their children can learn about basic geology, related landform and environment. Since 2001, science curriculum for pre-university level introduced by the Education Ministry covers extensive matters on Earth sciences, which are new to science teachers across the country. The majority of these teachers have limited idea on how to benefit from geological sites in their own communities. As a result, students end up learning about rocks and minerals by looking at pictures in the books provided. One of the best possible places that offers visitors to learn more about geodiversity without having to travel a long way from the centre is Kanchanaburi province.

With the beginning of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), Kanchanaburi has become a focus on many economic developments as the country’s gate way to Myanmar. The province is famous on its geological settings that provide a variety of mineral commodities, i.e., tin, base metals and sapphires, with beautiful karst landscapes and the major fault zones of the country. The province has a long history of human settlement (caves) and numerous important battle fields during Ayutthaya and early Ratanakosin periods. The province is also famous as the site where the Death Railway was built during the Second World War along the Three Pagoda Fault Zone. A number of these historical- archaeological and geological sites have been under threat of being destroyed by the deteriorating environmental conditions and human activity. Thus, building awareness among local community on their valuable geological resources in the areas is considered an urgent issue.

It is thus important to develop local geosites through the use of geotourism as a tool to conserve geological resources and historical sites. A pilot project has been carried out on two sites in Kanchanaburi: one is the old mining areas and the other is located along the Death Railway. The project aims to introduce the local community to set up provincial geosites and achieve sustainable

development through geotourism activity. The study also looks at the potential and opportunity to further develop these geosites to become part of the Global Geoparks Network in the near future.

