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Educating *the Tourists, Empowering the
Community the Way (it should be) for Eco- and
Cultural Tourism in Thailand*

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Abstract

National tourism policy in Thailand takes on a conventional “mass tourism” path, beginning with 1987 successful campaign on “Visit Thailand Year”, following by “Amazing Thailand” and “Unseen Thailand” with the emphasis on the exotic appealing to the physical senses of international tourists. Domestic tourism was systematically promoted with the slogan “Touring Thailand, You won’t Know Until You Go” and then “Touring Thailand, It’s Possible Throughout The Year”.

The Thai government started to turn their interest towards ecotourism after the United Nations International Year of Ecotourism in 2002, but the main policy and the development of infrastructure for tourism remains along the conventional line. Ecotourism came to be equated with nature tourism, but did not necessarily mean that local community would be involved in or would benefit from tourist development.

It was not so much the effort of the government, but the local communities, nongovernmental organizations, and a research-funding body which helped shape the path of small-scale eco-tourism and tourism as a participatory learning process in Thailand. The latest constitution of 1997 or the “People’s Charter” also paved ways for the local communities to claim their rights to participate in natural resources management, to conserve/restore their customs, local knowledge and arts, and to manage their own local affairs.

Keywords: tourists, empowering community, cultural tourism

The three models of eco-tourism which will be mentioned in this paper to illustrate how eco-tourism and cultural tourism could be a means to educate tourists and empower the local community are

1. **Participatory management model**, demonstrated by Responsible, Ecological, Social Tour or REST program initiated by the Thai Volunteer Service (TVS) a non-governmental organization, and by Mirror Art Group, another non-governmental organization working mainly in hill tribe villages.
2. **Community research-oriented model**, demonstrated by various research projects, supported by Thailand Research Fund.
3. **Youth guides and school-oriented model**, demonstrated by several local schools in many parts of Thailand.

Participatory management model – REST is the proponent of “active tourism” meaning tourism as a learning, sharing, and participatory activity. This is in contrast with passive tourism which tourists just visit and leave, neither the tourists nor the local community had a chance to enhance their experience and knowledge by learning from each other. REST encouraged the community to think and design their own vision of tourism in their community, to plan and mitigate negative impacts of tourism with the aim of local sustainability. Advice and trainings on destination development, tourism management, financial management and accounting, and public relations are given when needed. The World Legacy Award for Destination Stewardship for Yao Noi Island from Conservation International and National Geographic Traveler magazine has proved a success of both the community and REST. At Yao Noi Island, tourism is aimed mainly for educating outsiders about the community’s lessons and success in protecting and managing their own fisheries resources, the economic goal is only a second priority.

Mirror Art Group is a non-governmental organization that works on various development issues including community eco-cultural tourism. They work in several hill-tribe villages.

Community research-oriented model – Thailand Research Fund (TRF) have supported 26 community-based tourism projects since 1994. Community members have to become researchers, not merely

a research “subject”. Members are facilitated to identify research problem(s) and learn to solve the problem(s) through participatory research methods. In the process, they realize their own potential, become proud of their local cultural identity and finally able to manage their own form of community-based tourism. Instead of having a resident facilitator, TRF provides occasional supporting forums (research/financial management/writing report) for community members. The extra result is a well-documented research report which needs to be presented to the public, the report will also be transformed into a website, an article or a book to gain a wider audience and become an inspiration to other communities in the future.

Youth guides and school-oriented model –After the passing of Educational Reform Act of 1999, local communities are encouraged to participate in designing and even teaching the local curriculum. This local curriculum represents courses and lessons which are relevant to the daily lives of the children and the community rather than courses which are universally taught throughout Thailand. Several communities have picked ecotourism as one of the issues in their local school curriculum. The children eagerly learn the knowledge and skills of being junior tour-guides, and more importantly, they often come to realize the value of local knowledge and history.

Mass Tourism as a Mainstream Tourism Policy in Thailand

The Thai National tourism policy takes a conventional path, that is, the emphasis is placed on mass tourism. In fact, the past record has proved Thailand’s success in developing this hospitality industry. The well-known campaign of “Visit Thailand Year” initiated by the Tourism Authority of Thailand in the late 1980s made the number of international tourist arrivals rise by 15.58% in 1986 (2,818,092), then 23.59% in 1987 (3,482,958), and 21.47% in 1988 (4,230,737) (Tourism Authority of Thailand 2004:106).

The “Amazing Thailand” campaign was pushed forth in the late 1990s, and Thailand saw 7,764,930 international tourist arrivals in 1998 (Tourism Authority of Thailand 2004:107). The consecutive

campaigns of “Unseen Thailand” and “Happiness on Earth” have been used as a marketing scheme to boost up the number of international tourist arrivals. Meanwhile, domestic tourism was systematically promoted with the campaign “Touring Thailand, You Won’t Know Until You Go” and “Touring Thailand, It’s Possible Throughout The Year”.

There has been some criticism of the promotion of mass tourism and the environmental and socio-cultural impacts entailing from the very fast-growing tourism industry (Chayan 1995, Charnwit 1997, Yos 2001). However, there was little attempt to review the mass tourism policy or to find ways to mitigate the impacts. After the UN International Year of Ecotourism in 2002, the Thai government started to turn their interest towards ecotourism though the main policy and the educational infrastructure for tourism remains on the conventional line. Local capacity building and tourism as a means of community development is not clearly on the government agenda

Community-Based Ecotourism

It was the local communities, non-governmental organizations, and a government funding body which helped shape the path of eco-tourism and tourism as a participatory learning process in Thailand. The latest constitution of 1997 or the “People’s Charter” also paved ways for the local communities to claim their rights to participate in natural resources management, to conserve/restore their customs, local knowledge and arts, and to manage their own local affairs.

There are at least three models of eco-tourism spearheaded by the local communities, non-governmental organizations, researchers, and local schools in Thailand.

1. **Participatory management model**, demonstrated by Responsible, Ecological, Social Tour or REST program initiated by the Thai Volunteer Service (TVS) a non-governmental organization, and by Mirror Art Group, another non-governmental organization working mainly in hilltribe villages.
2. **Community research-oriented model**, demonstrated by various research projects, supported by Thailand Research Fund.

3. Youth guides and school-oriented model, demonstrated by several local schools in many parts of Thailand.

1. Participatory Management Model by Responsible, Ecological, Social Tour or REST and by Mirror Art Group

1.1 *Responsible, Ecological, Social Tour or REST and Community Participation in Tourism Management*

Responsible, Ecological, Social Tour or REST program initiated by the Thai Volunteer Service (TVS) in 1994 is the proponent of “active tourism”, meaning tourism as a learning, sharing, and participatory activity. This is in contrast with “passive tourism” in which tourists just visit and leave, neither the tourists nor the local community had a chance to enhance their experience and knowledge by learning from each other.

The program has worked with several local communities in over 10 provinces in Thailand. The major criteria for community selection are 1) The community should already have a strong community organization. 2) There should be a non-governmental organization working in the area. 3) The community must have potential natural and cultural resources which have not been developed into popular tourist destinations.

REST encouraged the community to think and design their own vision of tourism in their community, to plan and mitigate negative impacts of tourism with the aim of local sustainability. Advice and trainings on destination development, tourism management, financial management and accounting, and public relations are given when needed.

Community Empowerment

In the REST model, the initial phase of tourism development is to seek the community which already has a strong community organization. Therefore, it means the “social infrastructure” is there to build on community empowerment in terms of participatory management of ecotourism.

Then the following phase is to identify “themes” or “issues” which the community would like to share with the tourists; this is quite

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different from finding things which are “promotable” or “marketable”. While the former is community-oriented, the latter is tourist-oriented. “Amazing Thailand” and “Unseen Thailand” represent the themes which focus on appealing to the physical senses of “outsiders”.

They are definitely targeted at mass tourism, trying to attract tourists by using the “amazing” or “unseen” features as a marketing point.

REST model of ecotourism, however, does not start out with finding a marketable point. Instead, the community is encouraged to think about themes or issues which are important to **them** first, then develop marketable point(s) in order to bring tourists into the community to learn about those themes or issues.

It could be said that in this model, the first priority of the community in developing ecotourism is to present their themes or concerns to the tourists, and the second priority is money or income which is brought by the tourists. This also means that the community must have their own means of livelihood, and not pushing to develop ecotourism as their major means of livelihood. Consequently, the community needs to find ways to keep the number of tourists at the optimum instead of at the maximum, so that tourism development does not disrupt or even corrupt their traditional way of life. The following quotes from a local community member and from a member of a tourism group reflects the above-mentioned principle –

We have created an awareness of the natural habitat and their culture so that people strive to keep them and don’t become short-sighted in their attempts to make money. The more tourists who come here, the harder it is for us to control,” said Nipat Boonpetch, a core member of Kiriwong village (Kanjariya 1997).

And,

If villagers see that this business gives them a large sum of money, and they put their sickles and fishing nets aside, then ecotourism does not work to preserve their cultural heritage of natural environment as it promised,” said Piya Gongpernpoon, an active member of the Mae Hong Son tourism group (Kanjariya 1997).

Educating Tourists, Understanding the Local Way of Life

Apart from empowering the local community, this form of alternative tourism development also aims at educating the tourists. Ecotourism shows the deeper value of natural resources to the lives of the people, which is more crucial than the mere surface value of beauty and recreational value. Tourists learn to appreciate nature in terms of “cultural ecology”, that is, physical and social life of the community is founded in close relations with the local environment. Therefore, local communities often maintain the stewardship over their environment and resources, that is, they become resources “managers” rather than “users”.

Community eco-tourism offers a hands-on experience like working in the paddy fields, helping fishers to deploy fishing nets, etc. These “mildly adventurous activities” (Kanjariya 1997) are not only an attractive feature of community ecotourism but also an experience which helps tourists to learn the culture-ecology linkage. Therefore, this form of community participatory management ecotourism not only empowers the community, but also creates better quality tourists who appreciate and respect way of life of the local people. Instead of initiating the relations between “service providers” of the community members and “clients” who are tourists, the relations have been reconstituted in this form of eco-tourism.

Ecotourism: The Sample Case of Yao Noi Island in Phang-Nga Province

Yao Noi Island community in Phang-nga province is one of the several successful cases of community participatory ecotourism in Thailand. The Island consists of several ecosystems—sandy beach, mud beach, mangrove, etc. The majority of the people on the island are Muslims, and the main occupations of the islanders are fisheries, rubber plantation, rice farming, and wage labor.

In the early 1980s, the community faced the problem of destructive fishing. Large-scale commercial push-net and trawl-net boats came within 3,000 meters from the island shore to do fishing. The problem became more intense during 1987-1992, causing coral reefs and sea

grass habitat to be degraded (Wildlife Fund of Thailand, n.d.). Consequently, marine stocks like fish, mollusc, crab, and shrimp around the area clearly declined.

Realizing the intensity of the problem and recognizing the value of their marine natural resources, Yao Noi islanders got together to find a way to stop this destruction. They set up a fisher-folk club to work with local authorities, to learn from other successful grassroots groups, and to set up their local patrolling boat. The effort has been successful, and the villagers are able to solve the problem of destructive fishing.

This success has led them to create other activities and set up groups or community organizations like a savings group, a community forest group, a youth group and a women's group. All these activities were aimed at increasing awareness of natural resource management and bringing the community together to think about community concerns rather than individual or household concerns (Wildlife Fund of Thailand, n.d.).

The community later set up an ecotourism program. The success of the community in managing their own ecotourism is through the support of the Responsible Ecology and Social Tour (REST). This small non-government organization initiated natural tourism activities with strong involvement from the local community from the very beginning. This has strengthened community capacity in the management and administration of tourism, and they eventually created their own way of tourism under the principle of natural and cultural conservation.

With strong partnership between REST and the local communities, villagers designed a home stay program whereby tourists come to learn the fishing way of life, learn to appreciate the value of the sea to the traditional fishing life. The tourists usually follow the fishers to their fishing ground, and stay in the villagers' homes, then the villagers cook the fresh catch for tourists that evening. The general trip takes 3 days and 2 nights, and many households in the community are involved in the home-stay program. The main focus for this program is not to bring in tourist money, but to publicize their effort and success

in protecting local marine resources, and to create awareness about the “culture-ecology” linkage.

Tourists also come to respect the cultural ways of the local communities. As the majority of the populations on Yao Noi Island are Muslims, the locals dress with little exposure of their bodies. The tourists are also asked to dress properly.

In 2002, the Yao Noi Island Community won “The World Legacy Award for Destination Stewardship” from the Conservation International and the Washington D.C.-based National Geographic Travelers magazine. The Award has proved the success of the community and REST.

Post-Tsunami Situation on Yao Noi Island

The tsunami of December 26, 2004 did little damage to Yao Noi Island community compared to that of Khao Lak area in Phang-nga province and Phi Phi Island in Krabi province. REST appealed for relief aid and was successful in providing replacement of boats and fishing tools for villagers. A revolving Fund for Tsunami Relief has been set up, and REST officially closed the appeal in late March 2005. Six months after the tsunami, the local people on Yao Noi Island pursue normal life by going out to sea and maintaining their pararubber plantation.

Because tourism is merely an additional occupation for the locals and because their tourism management does not focus only on income or money, the island economy is not much affected. Nevertheless, the villagers got together to discuss about post-tsunami problems on their islands. Since the tsunami disaster hit several major tourist destinations like Phi Phi Island, Patong Beach and Khao Lak Beach, the islanders become worried that Yao Noi will be the target for tourism industry development to bring tourist money back.

The villagers have learned the negative lessons from other islands which cater to mass tourism, like Samui Island in Surat Thani province and Chang Island in Trat province. In those two islands, real estate businesses prevail and land price hikes up, causing a large turn-over of land holdings and more encroaching in protected areas.

To prevent that from happening to their island, Yao Noi villagers have laid out the “master plan” for the entire island, including zoning measures (designating zones for tourism development, for agriculture, for community residence, etc.) and designing sustainable water system. The future of the islanders will be more clear and more secure if the master plan is adopted. However, there remains a threat from national large-scale projects in which the villagers do not have much voice such as a plan for a “special economic zone” whose development schemes will be exempted from some legal acts and a plan to build a casino on Yao Yai Island (Pitsanurak, 27 June 2005).

1.2 Mirror Art Group and Eco-Cultural Tourism in Northern Thailand

Mirror Art Group is a non-governmental organization that works on various development issues including community eco-cultural tourism in northern Thailand. Their work focuses on hill-tribe communities like the Lahu, the Akha, the Mien, etc. The major aim is participatory management, empowerment of the community, income generation, and sustainable community development.

Community Empowerment

Mirror Art Group aims at organizing ecotourism for the community economic empowerment as much as social and cultural empowerment. This is slightly different from Yao Noi Island community development. At Yao Noi Island, the community remains solid and intact, with strong religious binding. Many hill-tribe communities, on the contrary, have been faced with the problem of out-migration. Younger generations of hill peoples have migrated to urban areas to find job opportunities. Many females are lured into sex business.

As a result, community development in the highland context has to take into consideration the economic viability of the local community. Mirror Art Group has involved the community in participatory management of tourism by increasing community skills in tourism management, developing and promoting local handicrafts, and setting up groups like a local guide group, a home stay group, a horse-raising group, a porter group, etc.

Local nature conservation has been a distinctive feature of ecotourism in hill-tribe communities. In addition, traditional customs and ways of life have been revitalized in the ecotourism program. Seeing that they can live, work, and earn income in their local community, many young hill-tribes decide to stay in the village instead of heading for new albeit risky opportunities in the lowland urban areas.

Educating Tourists, Learning about the Local Way of Life

One of the ecotourism principles put forth by Mirror Art Group is that “tourists are considered to be friends or relatives, not just clients”. So villagers and tourists are perceived to be equal and sharing mutual respect. There are recommendations for tourists during their trip and stay in the village as follow:

- 1) If you choose to take a home stay type of village tourism, that is, to stay in a house with villagers to learn their way of life, you should exercise a simple lifestyle –live simply and eat simply. You should follow village regulations or customs, pay respect to villagers as the owner and steward of the land. Do not behave in a way that contradicts community customs and regulations. Do not belittle or defy local beliefs.
- 2) Local food may be totally unfamiliar to you, but please take this as a learning experience. Do not ask the proprietor to adjust food taste or food form to your personal taste or to a universal taste, because it will ruin the local style and uniqueness.
- 3) When you visit handicraft villages, be enthusiastic to learn about the production process. You will realize how much effort the local people put into producing each piece, and then you will become proud to be able to own a piece of those handicrafts.
- 4) To put added value in your tourism experience, you should learn or study about local traditions, customs, beliefs, dialects, costumes, which all reflect the beauty of cultural diversity.
- 5) Unique items belonging to the local community should be left there to be enjoyed by the local; you should not take it away just for your individual keep.

- 6) Help us cherish traditional rural culture by following these recommendations. Do not promote commoditization of culture and material fetishism. Save thoughtfulness and generosity as a part of the Thai society forever.

These recommendations clearly point out that tourists are required to behave in a certain way and to be enthusiastic to learn about local way of life and customs. Therefore, this model of participatory and community-based tourism, propagated by REST and by Mirror Art Group, is a way of educating tourists while empowering the local community.

(From http://www.hilltribetour.com/autopage/show_page.php?t=1&s_id=1&d_id=1 searched on February 18, 2005)

2. Community Research-Oriented Model Supported by Thailand Research Fund

There have been many individual research projects on tourism in Thailand. The number is 261 pieces from 1986 to 1996 and 455 pieces from 1997 to 2001. These research projects are generally small individual projects, mostly master's degree thesis, with limited objectives, and have little impact on the development of national tourism plan and policy (Taweep 2004:12).

Thailand Research Fund is a national-level research funding agency which supports many interesting programs and projects. One of the research programs is on tourism, which includes these research sub-programs,

- 1) Research on community-based tourism
- 2) Research and development of data bank on tourism
- 3) Research and development of supporting system to facilitate decision-making on natural resources management for tourism
- 4) Research and development on plan and policy for macro-scale tourism

Up to 2003, Thailand Research Fund has supported 45 community-based tourism research projects, 32 of which were/are carried out in northern Thailand. In community-based tourism projects, villagers

or community members are treated as researchers and not as research “subjects”. Villagers go through participatory learning experience, realize their own potential, and become proud of their local cultural identity. There are recommendations for participatory research process as follow (Sint 2003:14):-

1) Research issues should not be pre-determined by funding agencies, but rather come from community agreement or consensus, in other words, they will have to be the issues which are pressing or of concern to the local community. 2) The research should seek participation from the local community, at the level of intensity which the local community are comfortable with. 3) The research work should bring concrete change to the local community.

Thailand Research Fund set up 3 developmental stages of community-based tourism research –upstream research, midstream research, and downstream research.

Thailand Research Fund has defined community-based tourism (CBT) as, “the alternative in tourism management whereby the community determines the direction of tourism on the basis that every local person owns the resources thus becomes the major stakeholder in tourism. This kind of tourism uses the local resources, be they natural, historical, or socio-cultural, way of life, and mode of production of the local community, as the capital or the base to manage tourism properly. This kind of tourism includes capacity building for the people in the community, enhance their knowledge and skill and elevate their roles in the management, from decision making, planning, implementation, summarizing lessons learnt, and place the community focus on the sustainability of natural resources and on benefiting the local community” (Sint 2003:12).

Upstream Research

This stage starts with the announcement of available funding for community-based tourism research themes. This is done through public relations, organizing local forums, word of mouth, etc. Then interested community organizations or institutions can submit a proposal through Thailand Research Fund area “node” or branch

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office. Expert forums will be organized to recruit comments and to give further input which will help the community to refine their proposal.

Midstream Research

In this stage, research contract will be made between Thailand Research Fund and the community organization or institution; the community organization/institution will be granted funding to implement their research project. Support will be given in the forms of expert support forums (for research, for collecting data, for financial management, for writing research report, etc.).

Downstream Research

After the research is completed, the result will be presented to the public and the final report will be publicized in different forms – website, article, book, etc. Lesson learnt will be documented and analyzed in order to develop policy and plan to lend a stronger support for community-based tourism in the future.

Community Empowerment and Sharing Lessons Learnt

Many of the past community-based tourism projects were conducted by academics, however, there are projects carried out by village headmen, local monks, NGO staff, hill-tribe cultural association staff, and environmental club staff. One project which is worth mentioning is on “A Form of Cultural Tourism Which Links to the Pagage-ngaw’s Traditional Knowledge about Birds in Doi Inthanon National Park, Chiang Mai Province”, conducted by the team from Birds’ Friends Group and Cultural Interpretation Center in Chiang Mai.

The research started with the study of traditional knowledge on birds, then proper training was provided for youth guides. Natural trails and bird-watching trails were developed and marketing plan implemented. The major problem is that the community has to rely on bigger and better-known tour companies. The companies then “sub-contracted” the tours to local tour guides, and paid them very little money. So recommendations are made from the project that

capacity building should be developed in terms of marketing skills/channels, and in terms of language and communication skills for the local guides (Chak 2003:150).

The strong point of this community research-oriented model is that community members are encouraged to think and analyze their own problems, sometimes with the help of outsiders like academics or NGO staff; then community-based tourism development experiences are documented and analyzed. There is usually a strong partnership between an academic institution, or local educational institution, and local community in the project. Lessons learnt are also documented and shared with other communities aiming to develop their own community-based tourism.

3. Youth Guides and School-Oriented Model by Several Schools throughout Thailand

Thailand National Education Act (1999) has endorsed decentralization in terms of educational management. This National Education Act indicates that local schools should come up with their own additional curriculum which is relevant to the local way of life. At a much smaller scale of tourism development, some local schools develop their own eco-or cultural-tourism scheme by encouraging the students to become local tour guides and providing them with relevant training or local curriculum which can really be put to use.

Baan Kob Dong School in Fang District, Chiang Mai Province has started the “young tour guide” program through the cooperation of Royal Project Foundation, Angkang Highland Agricultural Development Office, Watershed Management Unit, and Angkang Natural Resort. The staff from these organizations takes turns to teach the children (grade 3) about their community, natural resources conservation, and interpretive skills. Then the children are further trained in the summer camp, and each will receive a tour-guide identification card once they passed the written exam (Thippimon 2004).

Previously, tourists roamed around in the area while children tried to sell them souvenirs. But after the program is implemented, the children spend their Saturdays and Sundays, including school

holidays, to guide tourists around their community. A donation box was set up, and the money is divided into two parts –one for the tour guides, and the other for School Lunch Fund which benefits the rest of the students in Baan Kob Dong School.

In this case, the empowerment is not at the community level, but at the school level. The children used to be embarrassed to speak Thai because their mother tongue is hill-tribe language, but being the tour-guides, they need to practice and gradually become more and more articulated. They become more confident in themselves, and more proud of their local identity. Occasional questions from tourists urged them to do a small “research” about their own roots and traditions. In summary, the children not only eagerly learn the knowledge and skills of being junior tour-guides, they also come to realize the value of local knowledge and history in their practice of being tour guides.

End Notes

Thailand was very successful in the promotion of tourism industry. The number of international tourists visiting Thailand in 2002 totaled 10,799,067.

Tourism then became a national agenda in 2003-2004, and relevant government agencies had to draft up tourism projects which would be integrated into tourism action plans and submitted to the cabinet. These projects included increasing public relations, creating new tourism activities, increasing aviation hubs, creating e-marketing, etc. The strategic plan of “Happiness on Earth” is implemented during 2005-2008 to promote niche market for high-spending groups, such as conference group, golfers group, health-conscious group, divers group, honey-mooners, etc. (Benjawan 2004:10).

However, tourism industry in Thailand has been on the decline since early 2004 due to three main factors 1) SARS 2) International terrorism, and 3) the unrest in 3 of Thailand’s southernmost provinces (Benjawan 2004:8). In early 2005, tourism situation in Thailand has been much worsened by the tragic tsunami of December 26, 2004. The six southern provinces on the Andaman Sea Coast have been

affected. Half of these six provinces have the major tourist destinations, like Patong Beach in Phuket Province, Khao Lak in Phang-nga Province, and Phi-Phi Island in Krabi Province.

The lesson to be learnt here is that Thailand cannot rely too heavily on mass tourism. There should be a plan and policy which supports small-scale participatory community-based tourism which contributes both to community empowerment and to educating tourists. The promotion of this kind of tourism is definitely not through grand-scale marketing, but through counting local community in as the major stakeholders in tourism development and through long-term capacity building. The three models mentioned in this paper may pave a way for a more balanced tourism development in Thailand in the future.

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