



# A New Model for Study Abroad: Place-based Experiential Studies of the Ecologies and Cultures of Thailand

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*Checking the GPS and map, Erin plots a course to a remote island several kilometers across the open water. On the second day of a sea kayaking expedition studying coastal resource management, the early morning wind driven waves have given way to glassy calm—perfect conditions for an open crossing.*

*Outside a Karen village in Mae Hong Son, Pat'ti Sa'ju leads Martha and Viki along a forest trail to the next village, explaining in Thai and Karen the names of the trees and how they fit into the local ecosystem the Karen have managed for generations.*

*Pulling their canoes together, Dave slowly drifts down the Yom river while Paw Sanguan points out where fish hide in the willows, and where shrimp live under the rocks. Hearing the growing sound of rapids ahead, they begin padding again.*

Experiences like those described above are rich in sights, sounds, and the potential for greater knowledge about the rich ecosystems and cultures of Thailand. The islands of Southern Thailand, the forested mountains of Mae Hong Son, and the rivers

of the North and Northeast are just three of the “classrooms” that we use to teach American college and university students about sustainable development and the links between culture and ecology.



**Kriisa and Erin paddling the Yom River**

The International Sustainable Development Studies Institute, based in Chiang Mai, has been on the forefront of a growing movement to reconnect students to the natural world through place-based education. Through unique “Expedition Field Courses” American university students studying with ISDSI spend time living and learning with local communities throughout Thailand. ISDSI has courses in every region of Thailand, including upland (mountain) ecosystems and tribal communities, lowland villages, rivers, cities, islands and coasts. We have found that experiential place-based learning gives students a deeper and richer understanding of the cultures and ecologies of Thailand than classroom based teaching alone. This article explains some of the advantages and challenges of place-based experiential education in Thailand, and hopefully will inspire other educators and students to look beyond the walls of the traditional classroom.

## Background

The International Sustainable Development Studies Institute (ISDSI) is an initiative of Kalamazoo College, USA. Kalamazoo College is an undergraduate liberal arts college in Michigan, and has been ranked number one in the United States for its study abroad program (US News & World Report 2003: America's Best Colleges).

ISDSI started in 1998, the first group of students arrived in 1999, and to date the program has worked with over 500 American, Thai, Canadian and Australian students in both short (multi-week) and long term (semester) programs.

ISDSI's mandate was to explore innovative ways to teach about sustainable development, and we began by studying various models of experiential education. One model that was very promising was

that used in wilderness and outdoor education. Emphasizing immersion in the environment, “full person” learning, and intrinsic challenges and rewards, this type of education shared many of the goals of cross-cultural study abroad, including personal transformation within a new learning environment for the students. Based on this, ISDSI then worked with the US-based National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) in 2002 to develop “Expedition Field Courses” (EFCs) which combine the best of study abroad and wilderness expedition courses. Academically

challenging, EFCs use the expedition skills of sea kayaking, backpacking and canoeing to enable deeper studies of the ecologies and cultures of Thailand than would be possible in a campus-based program. Each 16 week semester is a series of month-long “block courses” (four per semester), allowing us to run courses in every region of Thailand.

In 2004, as the program was growing, ISDSI realized a long-held goal of registering an independent educational foundation (*The Foundation for Experiential Learning*), and in 2005 ISDSI was recognized in the US as one



**Lauren learning how to weave.**

of three “best practice” programs by the Institute of International Education (IIE). Now working with a number of colleges and universities in Thailand and the US, and over 20 NGOs in Thailand, ISDSI also runs an active internship program for students and an on-going program for Thai university students.

### **Advantages of place based education**

An American professor, David Orr, in his book *Earth In Mind: On Education, Environment And The Human Prospect* writes that “Natural objects have a concrete reality that the abstractions of textbooks and lectures do not and cannot have.” Exploring the complexity of this “concrete reality” is the core of place-based education. Many times students have remarked how they didn’t *really* understand something until they saw it first hand. The “concrete reality” of compost hot from decomposition or rich, moist high biomass soil also communicates through multiple sensory channels—not just auditory or visual as is the norm in most classroom experiences. Seeing and engaging “concrete reality” allows students to see things in a naturally integrated way so that they can understand the complexity of natural systems. Students thrive in an environment which is complex and rich, and research has

shown that students learn and retain *more* when studying in these environments. By relying on the environment to be a powerful teacher, place-based education helps students to be active and engaged learners.

Natural rhythms (weather, plant growth, etc.) have their own pace. Learning in the natural world of forests and fields forces students (and teachers) to pay attention to the pace of things, instead of moving through abstract content at a pace unrelated to the natural rhythms of the subject. In a course focusing on coastal ecology and mangrove ecosystems, students spend days sea kayaking along the coast. The course requires students to read tide charts to time when to leave the beach and what route to take through the shallow tidal flats and mangrove channels. As one student noted, “I’ve always lived by the sun. Now I’ve learned to live by the rhythms of the moon—something that the fishermen we are staying with now have done their whole lives.” Learning about “the rhythms of the moon” is a key part of knowing both the tidal-based mangrove ecosystem *and* the local cultures that depend on the sea. As David Orr writes, “There are some things that cannot be known or said about a mountain, or a forest, or a river—things too subtle or too powerful to be caught in the net of science, language, and intellect.”



**Sea kayaking the Andaman coast of Southern Thailand.**

Expedition skills (sea kayaking, backpacking, etc.) are not taught on the program as a separate focus in and of themselves, but are key enabling skills allowing students to learn in new ways. For example, to study the upper watershed of a catchment area, students need to be skilled in travel by foot through difficult terrain. Cultural and language skills are important as well, so that students can learn directly from local people, without having to constantly rely on translation and instructors. This allows students to spend time in the forest learning



**Kim leading a group in Mae Hong Son.**

from village elders, or collecting plants for natural dyes with women who practice traditional weaving. It is the combination of expedition and cultural skills which enable place-based education.

### **The role of students and partnerships with local communities**

Partnerships with local communities have been a key part of what has made ISDSI courses successful. As a true partnership, we are careful to ensure that villages that we work with are able to fully participate in the course—from the decisions about what will be taught to smaller (but important) decisions about homestays and scheduling. It would be easy, as an international program, to impose our goals on the communities in which we work. A key

question we ask our partners in each community where we work as we review and prepare for the year's courses is what *they* think are important topics and issues to teach the students. This has led to a strong partnership with local communities, as they are both valued and validated as experts—a role not often offered to people in communities more often marginalized. The diverse cultures and communities of Thailand are rich in knowledge—and place-based education in Thailand would miss a great deal if it did not incorporate local knowledge and perspectives.

An important part of this is the role of our students. Students on ISDSI courses don't come to "help" local communities—they come to learn. Taking the posture of learners rather than outsiders helps allow students to recognize the strength and resilience of local communities. Since local experts are teachers (including village elders, women leaders and others), this not only empowers local communities (who get to teach outsiders rather than being "helped" by them), it allows students to see grassroots

solutions to global problems. In addition, since we run more than one course at a time, each course can be small, with only 10-15 students. Keeping the numbers in the field small is important, as it helps us to minimize our social impact on the communities and provides a better educational experience for the students. Large groups are not only more difficult for local communities to deal with, but present challenges in terms of risk management.

### **Challenges in place-based education**

Taking students outside of the traditional classroom or university setting carries with it added risks and responsibilities. Many of our courses are hours or days away from help if there should be a problem. We

manage these inherent risks in a number of ways. During initial orientation and throughout the program, students are trained in recognizing and dealing with risks in an appropriate manner—including both cross-cultural skills and what to do if someone is injured. All activities with students involve a briefing before the activity outlining what the risks are and what students can do to minimize and manage those risks, since it is obviously better to avoid a problem in the first place. ISDSI instructors are highly trained in dealing with medical emergencies through an 80 hour Wilderness First Responder course that ISDSI sponsors with the Wilderness Medical Institute of NOLS every two years. This training is the standard for NOLS and Outward Bound instructors, and is specifically geared to dealing with life-threatening injury or illness where medical help may be hours or days away. Coupled with this training are written evacuation and emergency management plans, as well as relationships with hospitals, the police and the military for rapid evacuation and care if the need should arise (e.g. helicopter evacuation, etc.). There are excellent resources for emergency care in Thailand, but one needs the training and relationships to access them rapidly in case of an emergency. While we carry satellite phones, professional first aid kits and supplies, even the best plans are useless if the leaders don't have the training, skills, judgment and calmness under pressure to carry out those plans. Thus, investing time and resources in our instructors and students has proven to be the best thing we do for managing the inherent risks of being outside the traditional classroom.

## Conclusion

Place-based education is a powerful way for students to understand the cultures and ecologies of Thailand. While not every program will be able to spend extended time in the field, even short excursions of a day or afternoon can be valuable. Local schools can take advantage of a full academic year for repeated trips out to a local river or forest, building an understanding of place and the natural rhythms of the seasons. Using local community members, especially elders, is an invaluable way to help students understand the history of place and the local wisdom bound up in that experience. Investing the time to do place-based education right is worth it, as it is one of the most powerful ways to teach and learn.

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*More information on ISDSI is online at  
[www.isdsi.org](http://www.isdsi.org).*

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