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Development Detours: Landscape Genealogy Framework for Post-Pandemic Ecotourism in Northern Laos

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ABSTRACT

After two years of sporadic lockdowns, northern Laos has fully reopened to travelers. However, communities have shown indifference to ecotourism recovery that provides ecological services; prioritized alternatives such as rubber concession are diminishing indigenous sociocultural values and turning ancestral soils into exploitative grounds in exchange for economic returns. Disappearance of historical traces may ultimately homogenize communities' indigenous sociocultural significance. In light of such fragility, *Development Detours* offers an adaptive framework of landscape genealogies by using two tailored formulas externally and internally. The proposal constructs resilience by detouring development progression, interconnecting nodes of chronicle as a rework of presence. Two villages along the Nam Tha River, namely Sin Oudom and Khon Kham, were selected for their ongoing frictions. While formula one emphasizes "differences" between livelihoods by reconnecting nonlinear spatio-temporality into discursive viewpoints, formula two delineates "collectiveness" by acknowledging myths, traditions, and legacies of practices as a celebration of identities. By utilizing account as a forward-minded approach, history is adapted to the present.

KEYWORDS

Post-pandemic Development; Ecotourism; Landscape Genealogies; Indigenous Resilience; Eco-trekking; Northern Laos

HIGHLIGHTS

- Proposes a post-pandemic tourism recovery framework basing on landscape genealogies
- Concession and resettlement alternate how people value their land
- Resists homogenization from rubber concession by reviewing its impact on landscape
- Practices indigenous activities to build indigenous resilience in resettled area

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1 From Lockdown to Opening Up

An annual economic growth of 3.8% is expected in 2022 as Laos finally announced its reopening to international tourists, overdue by the continuous outbreak of COVID-19[1]. There were multiple times when the growth rate had almost reached zero, with tens of thousands undergoing job loss and business closures. Specifically in Luang Namtha Province, both visitor arrivals and hospitality revenue had plunged about 80% in 2020[2], leaving many traveling agencies in idle. In response, a multiphase scheme was set to make Laos return to its conventional operation[3]. The recovery is noted to be "compound" due to "long-standing macroeconomic imbalances"[4], such that the tourism industry must recognize its fragility in order to build resilience for future development.

2 Landscape Genealogies

2.1 Practicing the History of the Present

In Michel Foucault's discourse of power, genealogy is an explicit and conscious approach that reveals implicit systems of the present.①

① Foucault's questions to power were continuously evolving, such progression of Foucauldian theories is often particular to certain issues and had addressed only to a specific event. Thus the above explanation may not fully imply landscape practices and is drawn only from an academic basis.

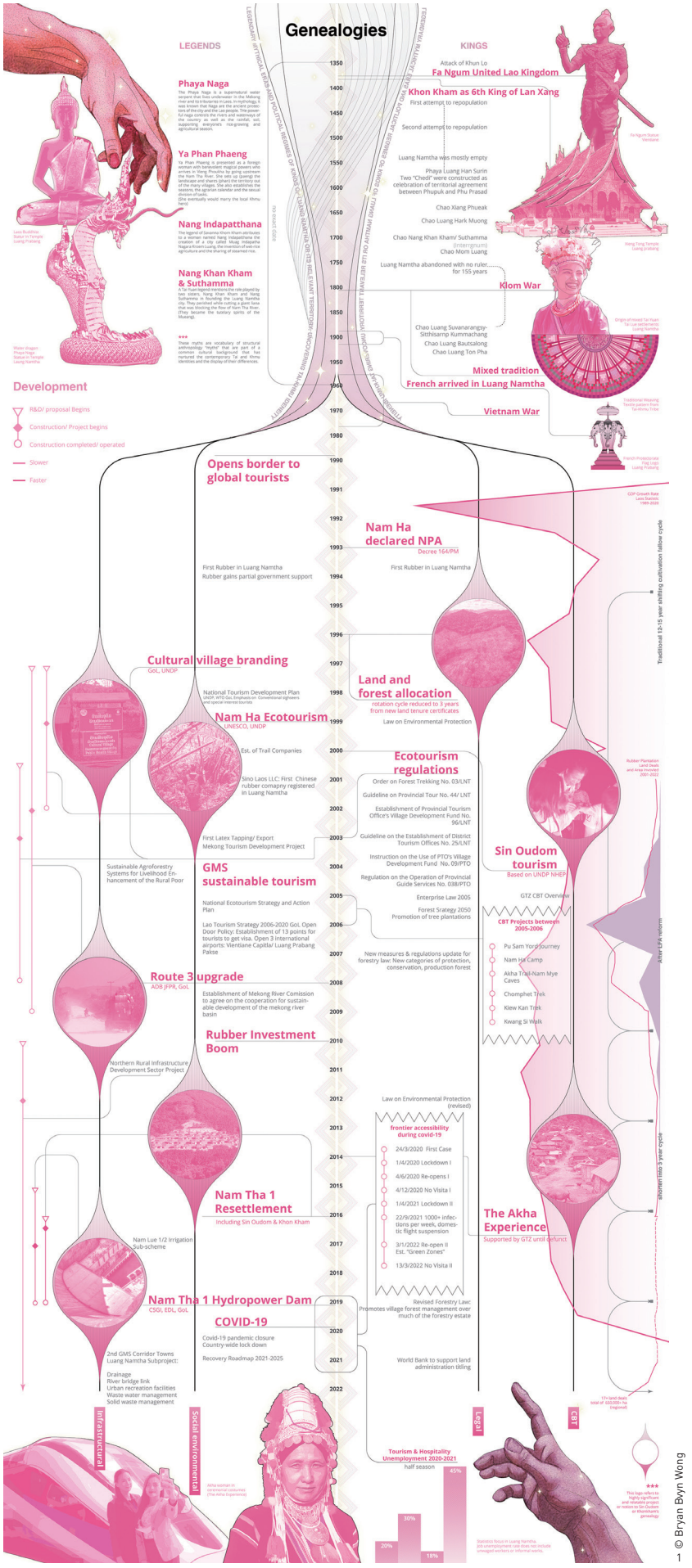
Drawn by a recollection of past developments and paradigm shifts, discursive yet selective moments of histories are joined into traces layered by ideologies and statements. This process is a non-linear reflection aimed at showing “descent” and “emergence” that influences what continues to shape our world[5], thereby referring to knowledge’s possibility of dispersal at a given set of time of a certain system of rules[6]. When genealogy is practiced on landscapes, inspection on the ground is seen as multidimensional. Understanding of the land becomes fragments of histories, where various forms of rationality will form an effective criticism on control[7]. In Laos, these powers are predominantly exercised by development banks, multilateral institutions, and private investors. Where communities’ perceptions of their land are situated along with development progression, locals’ understanding of their ancestral grounds are limited or angulated by specific events such as concessions and constructions.

2.2 Power of Development

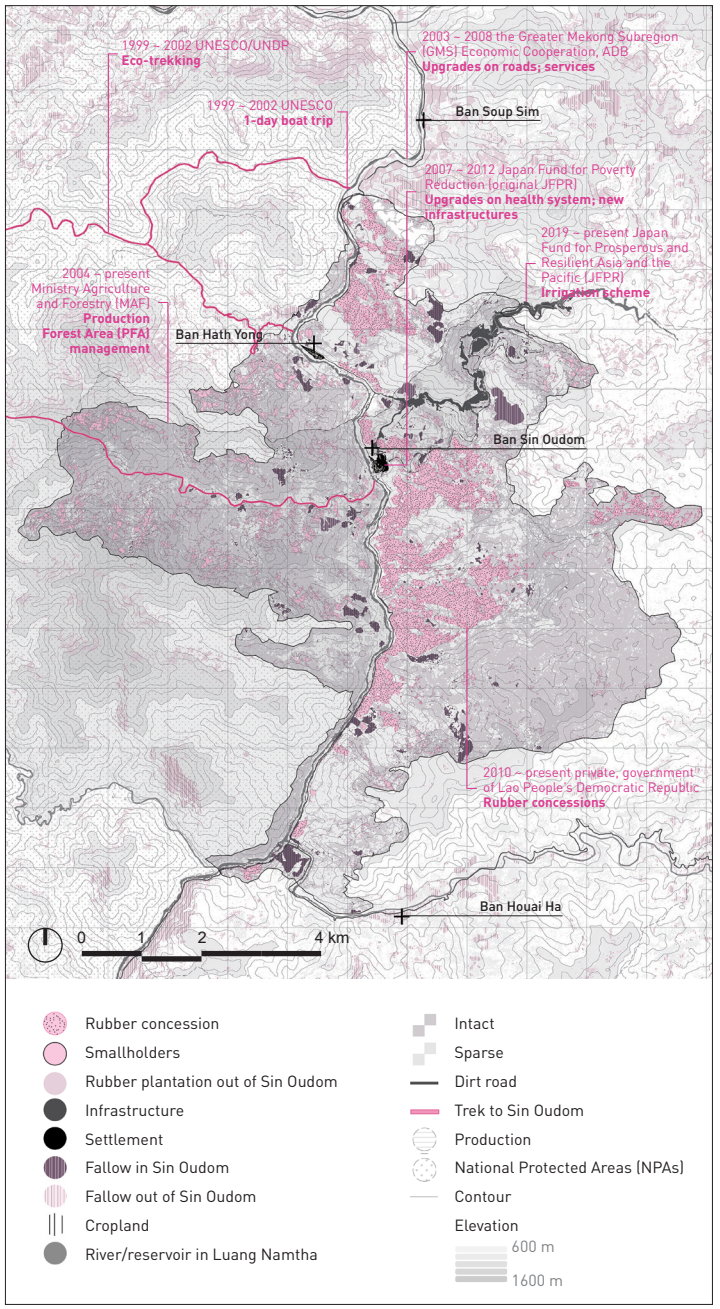
Developments in Laos have shifted in investment resource and speed in recent years. This attitude arises from Lao reformation to overcome poverty by productivity. As one of the largest infrastructure projects in Laos in recent years, the construction of Nam Tha 1 Hydropower Dam lasted merely four years including its resettlement package. Such rush in progression is juxtaposed with previous groundworks that emphasized on slowness: the Nam Ha Ecotourism Project had spent eight years of community partnership[8] while the Asian Development Bank-funded national Route 3 upgrade spent over a decade on environmental impact assessment[9] (Fig. 1). Slowness is important when it comes to clarifying complexities of systems: whether development has fully addressed their intentions and has acknowledged its sociocultural significance to impacted communities[10]. This at least grants safeguards to construction calibrations, allowing power dynamics to be deconstructed. However, if speed up such process, junctures of history will be disconnected for power to be untraceable and may homogenize sociocultural significance of communities.

3 Development Traces in Two Villages Along Nam Tha River

This project prepares northern Laos with an alternative framework of landscape genealogies by tailoring two formulas for typical 9-person private tours in response to the post-pandemic ecotourism recession. With the formulas adapted into two villages,



1. Genealogies and developments around Ban Sin Oudom and Ban Khon Kham in northern Laos



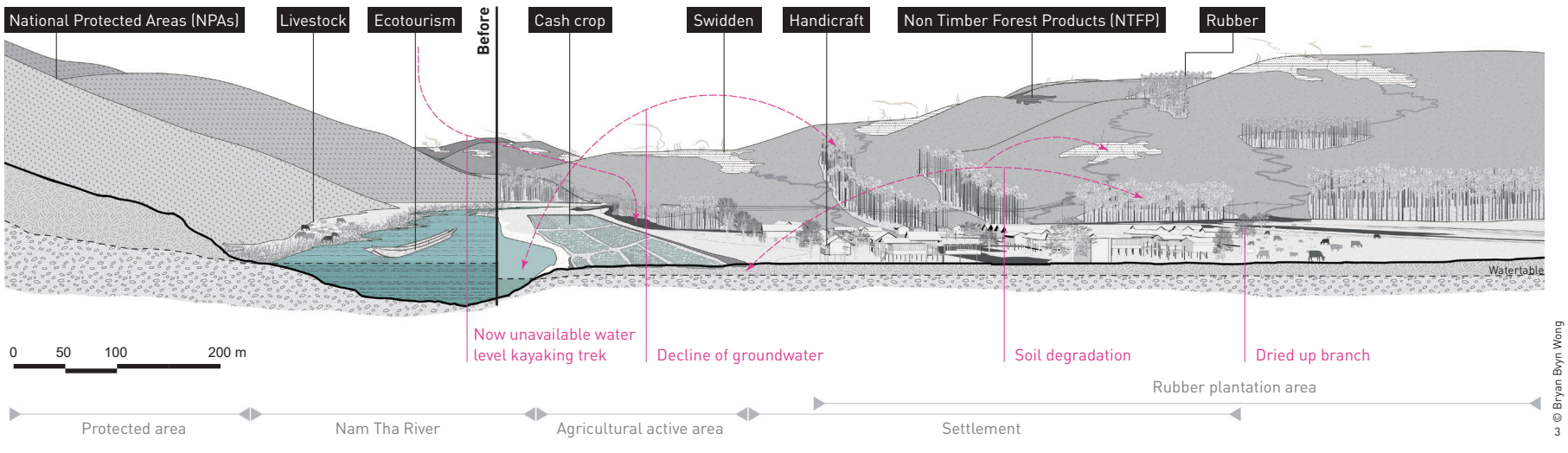
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the proposal constructs resilience by exposing and interconnecting landscape disappearance across spatial and temporal dimensions and introduces these linked development traces by detouring through the landscape. Ban Sin Oudom and Ban Khon Kham experienced serving eco-lodges and tours while dealing with development forces. They are paired to juxtapose differences—Sin Oudom with a long history of concession and Khon Kham recently resettled—that are best to demonstrate the two proposed formulas externally and internally.

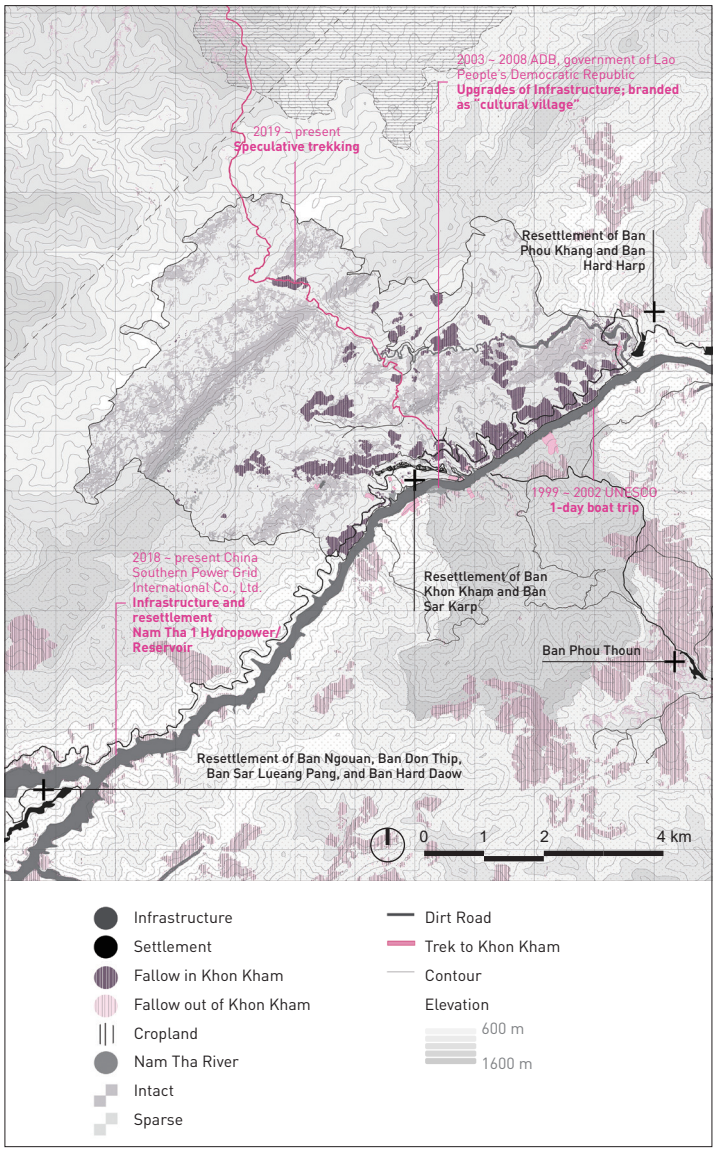
3.1 Ban Sin Oudom and Rubber Concessions

Ban Sin Oudom ("Ban" means "village" in Laos) is about 15 km away from Luang Namtha's city center and has a long history of serving tourists with eco-lodging. Rubber concessions/plantations have negatively affected the hydrology and ecosystems of the village. Although rubber concessions started around the area before 2000, it was only until 2002 for the first latex tapping to be exported for sale.[11] Today, rubber plantations are seen expanding on the arable land every year and the swidden fields are shrinking at every other 3 ~ 5 years of rotation around the village. Rubber concessions have substantially replaced shifting cultivation as the main source of income in Ban Sin Oudom (Fig. 2). Although receiving high praises for securing revenue promises, these shifts are accelerating the loss of biodiversity and reduction of watersheds due to monoculture. An irrigation dam construction commenced around early 2019 has later stopped trajectories from flowing into river branches within the village area, further lowering the water table. Soil degradation reduces the harvest of non-timber forest products,

2. Ban Sin Oudom with rubber concessions and development traces
3. Section of Ban Sin Oudom before and after rubber concessions



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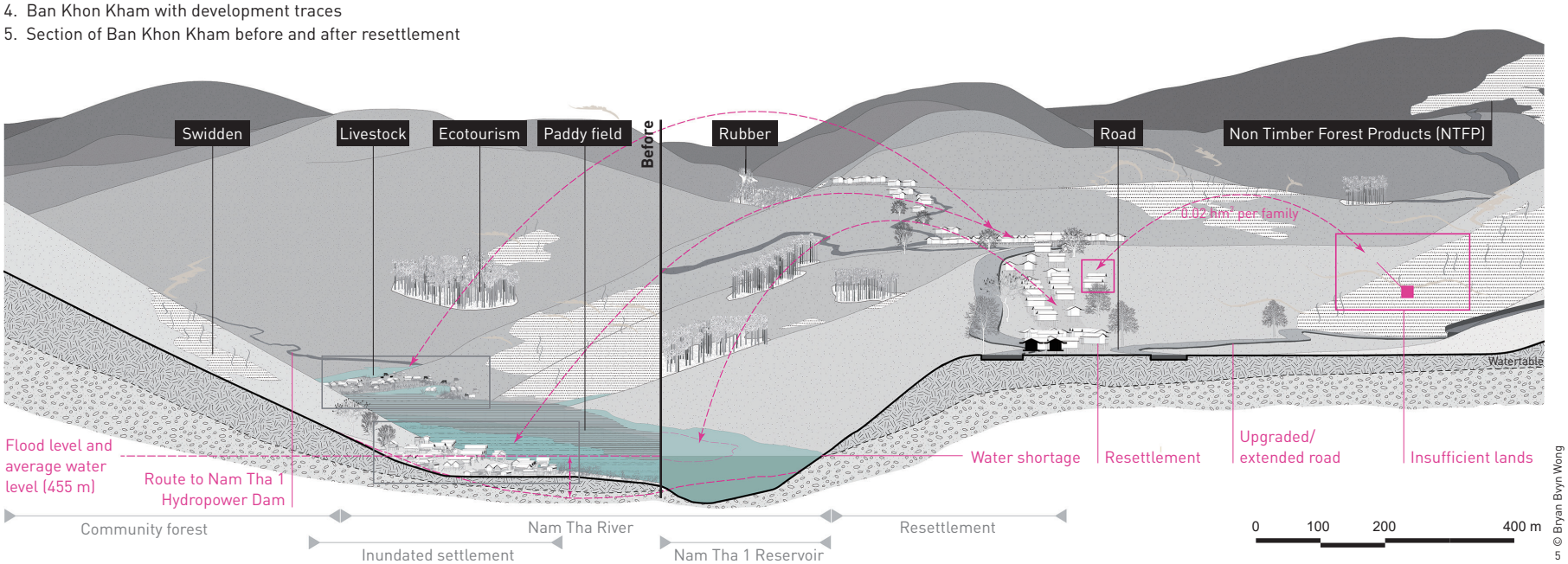
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further compromising other forms of livelihood for latex tapping. With livelihood shifting from one to another, degraded lands not only disrupt the environment but also deteriorate scenic values and cultural identities of the village. Continuous exploitation of resources will remove past traces, forbidding the redefining of "Sin Oudom" (Fig. 3).

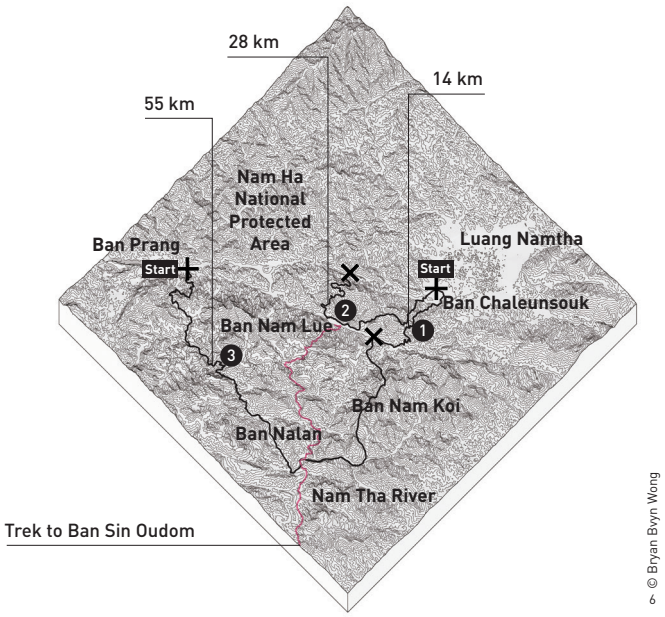
3.2 Ban Khon Kham and Resettlement

Ban Khon Kham is named after the sixth king of Lan Xang[12] and shares similarities with Sin Oudom in serving eco-lodging and providing Nam Tha River's kayaking and boat traveling. Unfortunately, the village, along with other ten villages including the neighboring Sar Karp, was forced to relocate. To deal with flood, the official operation of Nam Tha 1 Hydropower Dam in 2019 inundated the original settlements (Fig. 4). Here livelihoods are drastically altered, as most of the lowland agricultural practices and ecotourism services are being replaced. Radio Free Asia later portrayed the struggles of the villagers in their new home: the urgency of water shortage and frustration toward seeking farmable lands for rice or slash and burn[13]. Instabilities of the new settling signify not only public concerns on livelihood sustainability and land security, but also their attitudes of reluctance and disempowerment. As Ban Khon Kham is physically removed from its ancestral lands, the communities' collective memories and culture are the only defense of their legacy. The village then is particularly weak to power influences, easily fragmented to deploy development progression on their resettled lands, i.e. homogenizing indigenous culture (Fig. 5).

4. Ban Khon Kham with development traces
5. Section of Ban Khon Kham before and after resettlement



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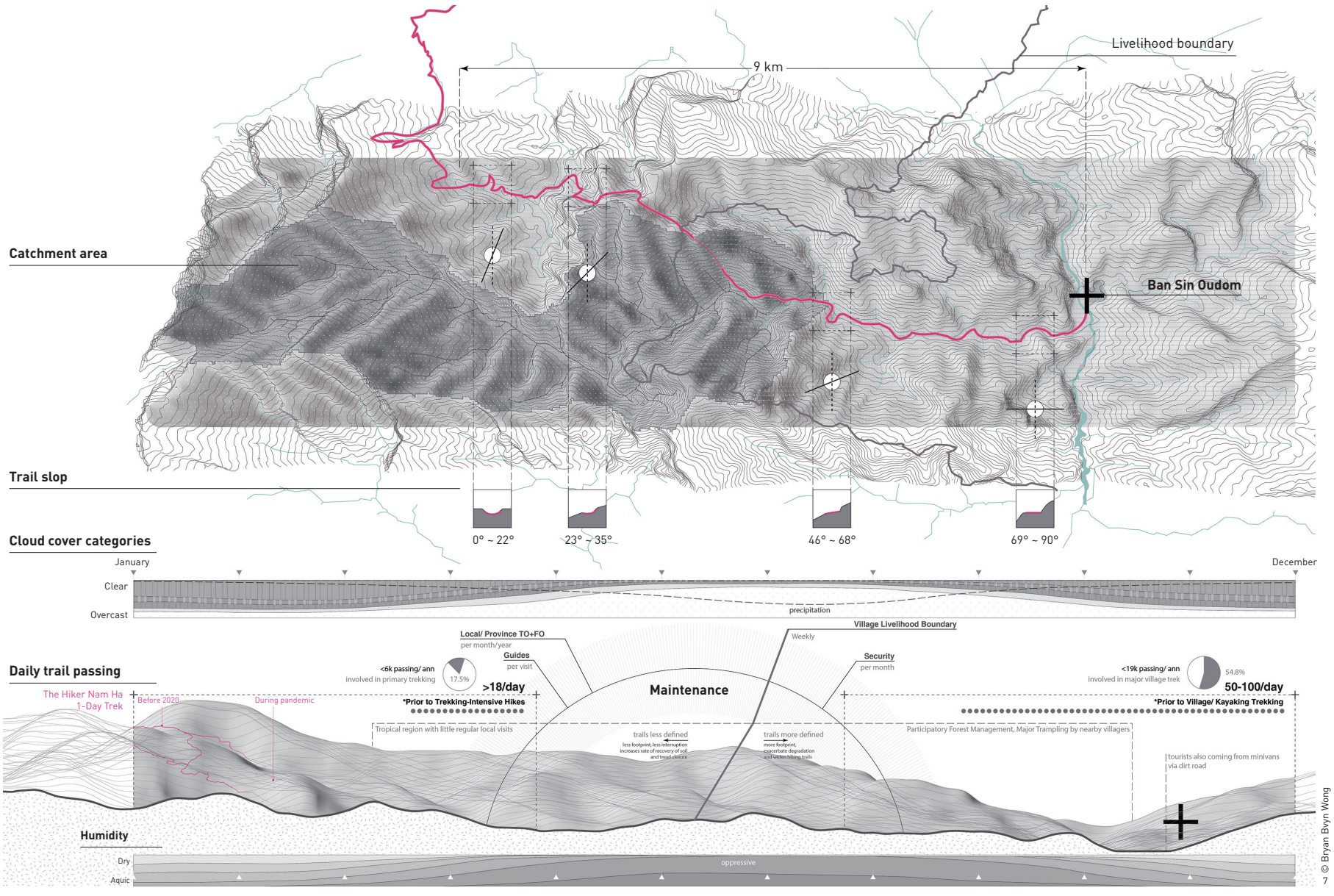
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4 Selective Disappearance and Re-emergence in Ecotourism and Indigenous Communities

4.1 Existing Eco-trekking Operation in Luang Namtha City

"The Hiker" is a Luang Namtha-based travel agency aimed at providing premium quality eco-tours with shared responsibilities with local communities[14]. In this project, Nam Ha trek (1 day), Nam Ha Camping (2 days), and Hunter Trail tour (3 days)—the three most popular tours were chosen for comparison. This comparison looked into the efficiency and capacity that each tour can cover and handle, which could suggest a balance between the length

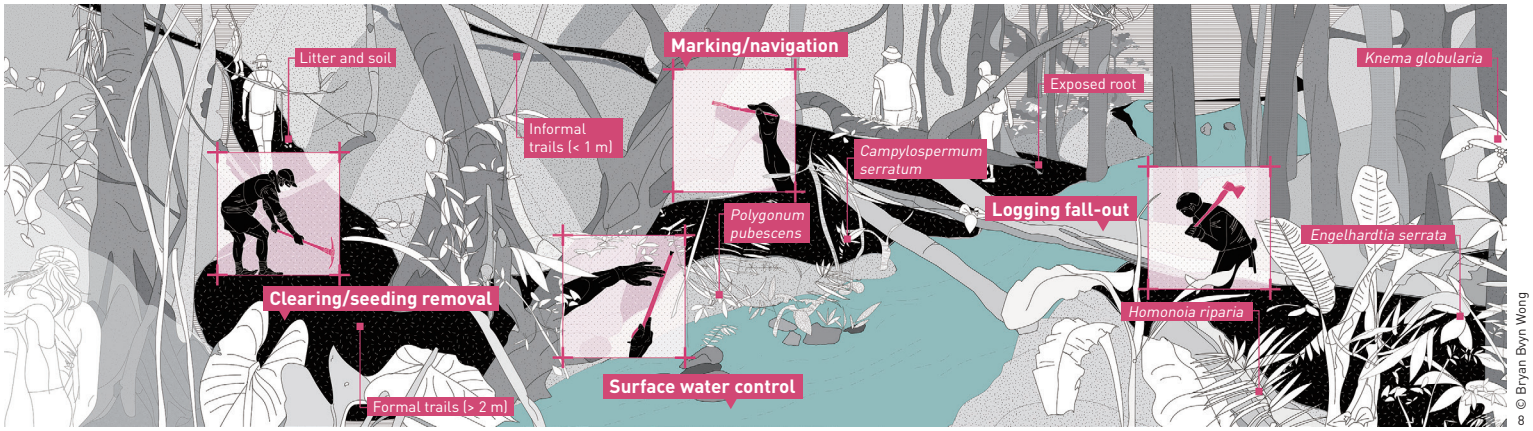
6. Existing eco-trekking operation at "the Hiker"
7. Physical trek shifts during the pandemic



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8. Maintenance complexity and fragility of forest trails
9. Temporal disappearance and expansion in Ban Sin Oudom and Ban Khon Kham

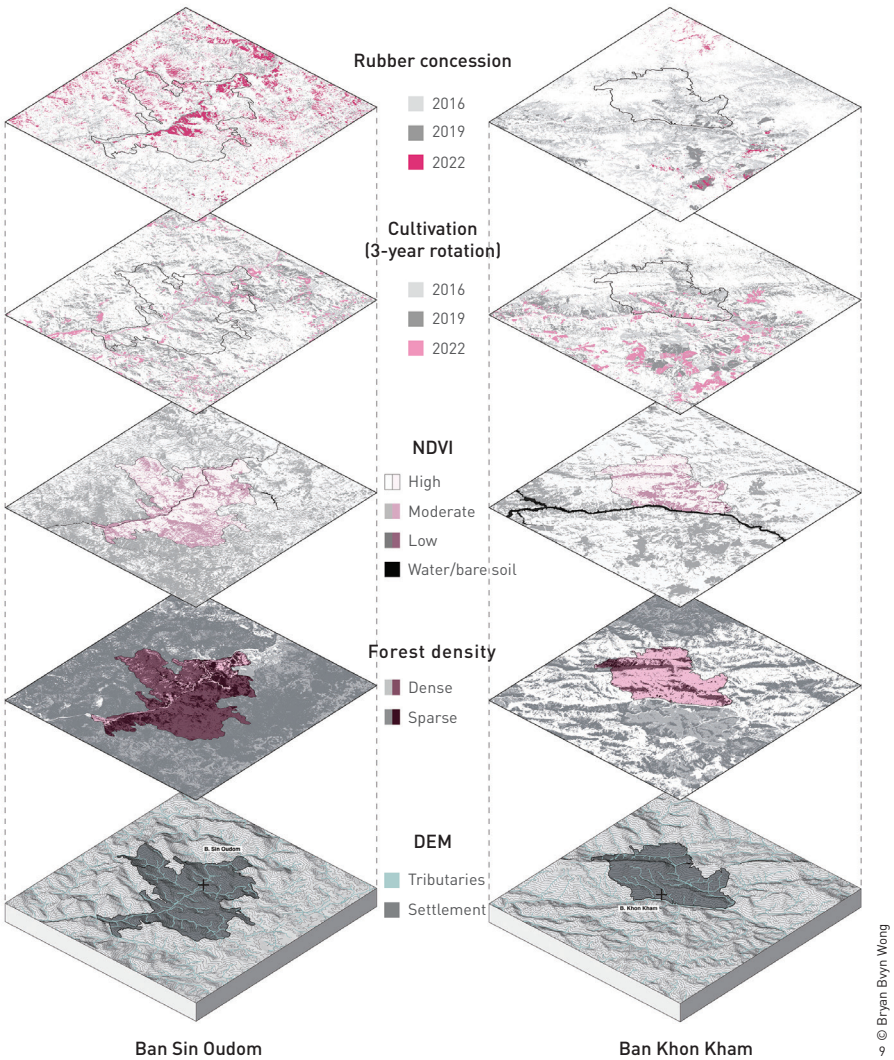


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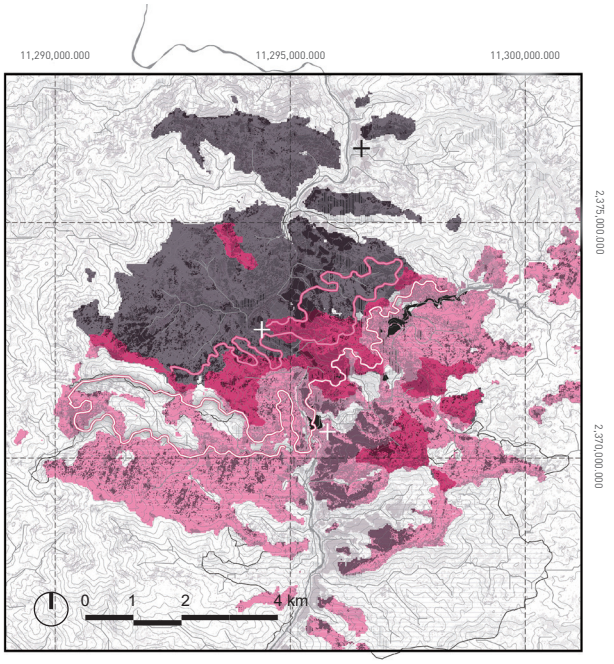
and the amount of programs of a tour in the proposed formulas. While the 1-day tour is too short a trekking experience, the 3-day tour is more fruitful in its program (with an extra visit to another tribe). However, the short and rapid itinerary to Ban Nam Koi on the second day of the latter tour will leave visitors little impact or impression of the village and could be canceled. The 2-day tour not only allows visitors an immersive experience in one village, but also incorporates the most resources possible—bamboo hut stay, village lodging and tribe tours, summit sightseeing, etc. A 2-day itinerary is thus easily adaptable and is most rewarding to villagers and visitors in northern Laos. The guides of these tours are responsible for not only basic navigation, but also housekeeping, accounting, cooking, and elaborating (Fig. 6).

4.2 Physical Trek Shifts During the Pandemic

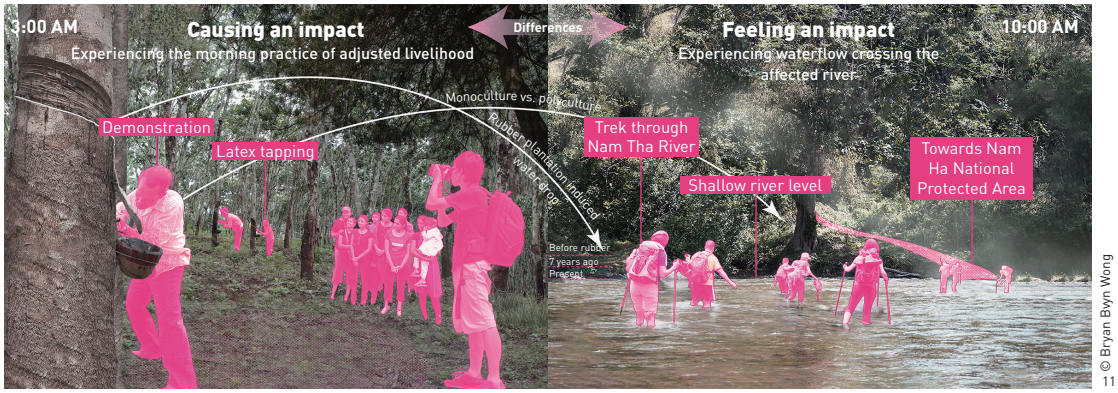
Physical treks are seen disappearing and reappearing. Factors including slope alignment, soil composition, drainage performance, and climate concerns have all added up to influence the operation of a trail (Fig. 7). When travel agencies were closed during the pandemic, all forest treks were left without any pass. The idle period is beneficial to vegetation recovery, though plant recolonization may take decades to complete from organic matters on track surface[15]. Trail maintenance is regularly required to ensure the availability of routes. As stated in revised Article 148 of Law on Forestry of Laos[16], provincial offices are responsible for trail management and inspection. Unfortunately, the management is fragmented—not done on a frequent basis, meaning that water measurement, soil control, or illegal hunting survey may be done per annum, while other works like trail clearing or seedling removal have no particular parties in charge (Fig. 8). With these fragilities added up to eco-tours, there is a long way from keeping treks to be fully-functional.



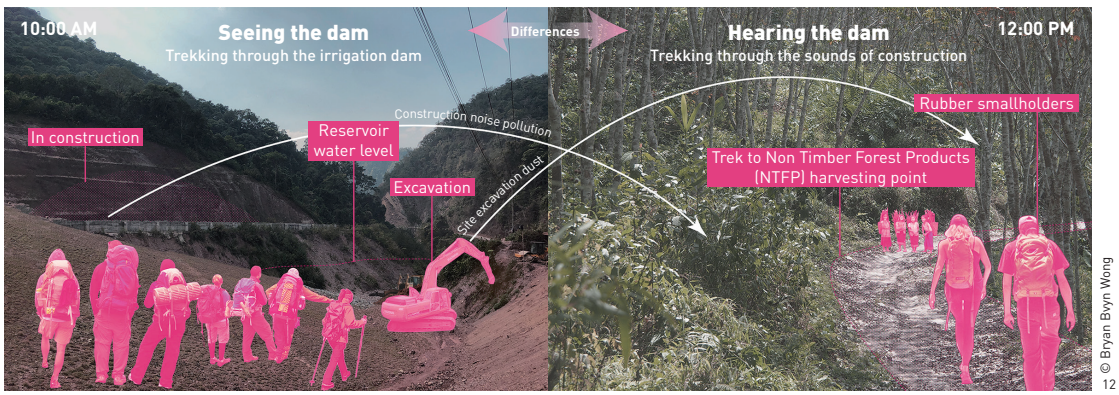
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10. Formula 1: Itinerary and viewshed differences
11. Perception differences toward rubber concession
12. Perception differences toward construction

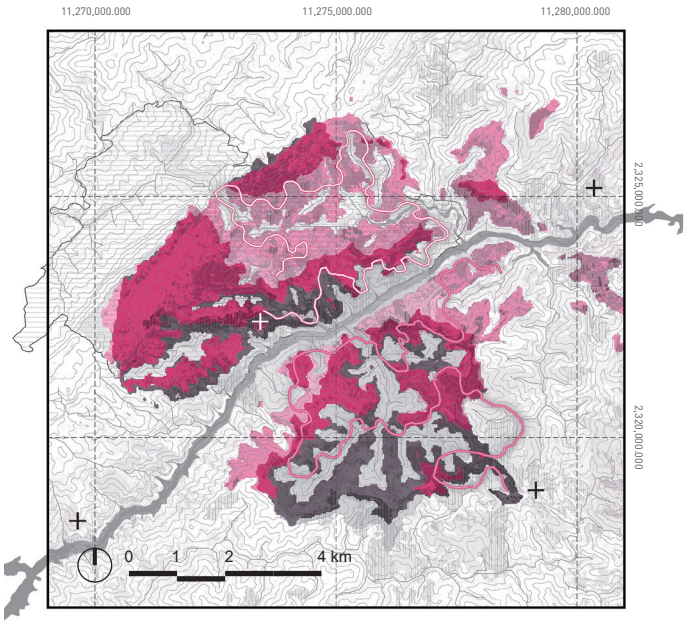
4.3 Temporal and Spatial Shifts of Livelihood Plots

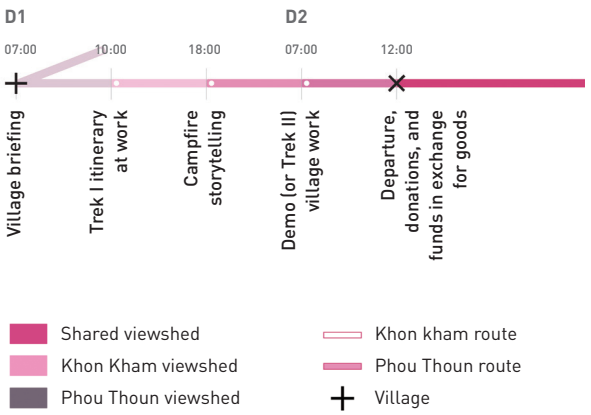
Community lands are static. Satellite imageries of 2016 ~ 2022 show that the rubber concessions are being expanded and replacing opium; the rotational practices fallow cycles in Ban Sin Oudom and the swidden fields in Ban Khon Kham continuously diminished. Disappearance and regrowth of land are seen at an interval of three years, hereby the locals moved from one piece of land directly to its adjacent after. Traces of the past are successive to the present, making shifting practices sequential and manageable (Fig. 9).

5 Review and Practice Landscape Differences and Resemblance for Indigenous Resilience

5.1 An Adaptive Framework

In this project, tourism is not only a tool for economic uplift, but also a method for building indigenous resilience. Villages are required to exercise livelihood with no commercialization addition, in hopes of exposing visitors to grounded truth of specificity. Past community-based experiences have further concluded the priorities of stewardship over tourism resources for success[17]. A genealogy that traces power struggles and landscape displacements of these villages can disseminate those complex information to its audience. It is challenging to situate visitors solely on discursive meanderings of history, nor should they be "learning" it. Instead, this framework aims to reveal history by itself, through one's understanding of "differences" between livelihoods—by reconnecting nonlinear spatio-temporality into discursive viewpoints; and "collectiveness"—by acknowledging legacies of culture as a celebration of identities. Such frameworks are adaptable to all villages, as long as they preserve histories of their communities, physically or psychologically; and are only particular to their own culture.





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13. Formula 2: Itinerary and viewshed differences
14. Perception resemblance through reviewing nostalgia
15. Perception resemblance through practicing culture

5.2 External Differences in Shared Viewpoints of Parallel Villages

Formula 1 emphasizes differences between indigeneity by contrasting perceptions of lands' genealogy. Each tour will happen across two nearby villages running with parallel itineraries, where visitors will be split into two groups. As the trails they gone through vary, their perception of the landscape will differ. Visitors will be encouraged to draw on conversations after they gather back up, which is integral for them to acknowledge viewpoint differences (Fig. 10). For instance, while some may experience rubber by early latex tapping at 3 a.m.; the others in the other village will not participate in any concession deals, but only experience monocropping-inducted water drop once they travel across the river towards the forest (Fig. 11). In another case, some may understand Ban Sin Oudom's irrigation dam by stepping into the construction site, while others can consider it simply as an unseen disturbance (Fig. 12). The formula values "indigenous differences" as collective resilience and acknowledgment, preventing notions of subtleties from being generalized.

5.3 Internal Resemblance of Retrospective Practices

Formula 2 highlights collectiveness, where the program acknowledges sociocultural significance through intangible recollections of myths, folks, and traditional practices. Instead of paired neighboring villages, the formula is specific to resettlements where ancestral lands are alienated. To deal with abstraction, fragments of memories recall a holistic review of the past by accounting genealogy with cultural intangibles (Fig. 13). The notion of "loss" had indeed historically been of concern. If locals' offspring grow up without knowing the names of fish or birds as their parents do, the power of the myths and magic may be attenuated and forgotten, as these narrative conventions are no longer

powerful in shaping the material world[18]. To prevent cultural homogenization, we embrace the recalls of sounds, spaces, stories, and craftsmanship into practice (Fig. 14). By evoking nostalgia and conserving values into modern motifs, villages will remain a "work in progress" (Fig. 15). Continuing legacies remind the people of their own cultural identity while the past defend their unforeseeable future.

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迂回发展：基于景观谱系的老挝北部后疫情时期生态旅游框架

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摘要

近两年来，老挝的宏观经济深受新冠肺炎（COVID-19）疫情影响，北部琅南塔省的旅游业也遭受重创，迫切需要制定产业复苏计划以促进长远发展。当地居民对土地价值的认知与近年来老挝正在施行的“以生产力克服贫困”的改革政策一致：相较于将土地应用于复兴生态旅游业并提升生态系统服务价值，他们更倾向于将土地应用于其他产业，如经营橡胶种植园，以直接获取经济回报。然而，这样的发展模式会大大消耗这片世代相传的土地，磨灭祖先们在这片土地上留下的痕迹，最终造成本土社会文化的同质化。

“迂回发展”项目基于景观谱系理念提出适应性生态旅游框架，以避免上述本土社会文化的同质化。项目以位于琅南塔省的两个村庄——具有较长特许经营史的辛乌多姆村和近期搬迁的坤康村——针对当地典型的九人生态旅游项目定制了两套方案。首先开展多维度考察，记录当地社区居民生存方式与文化思维的变迁。考察发现，这两个村庄居民的生计模式在过去六年间发生了巨大的改变，当地文化价值面临巨大威胁。随后通过比较当地三个颇受欢迎旅游项目的活动内容和运营情况，发现为期两天的行程最有助于合理安排游览时间和活动内容，在帮助当地居民开发和保护本土价值的同时，也可为游客创造精彩的体验。研究发现，由于缺乏定期维护，林间步道受坡度、土壤成分、排水性能和气候条件影响较大。同时，土地使用情况跟随休耕周期（三年）而变化。最终，本项目提出通过迂回发展来构建本土韧性，串连上述动态节点、组织游览路线。其中，方案一强调生计间的差异，即“外部差异”：在游览过程中，游客们被分为两组，分别体验不同的生计，而后互相交流分享各自对景观的看法。方案二专为搬迁安置点设计，关注本土价值的延续，即“内部相似性”：在游览中融入民俗文化体验、历史情境展示等活动，唤起人们对本土文化身份的认同，进而更好地展望未来。这两套方案被分别应用于辛乌多姆村和坤康村。本文所提出的适应性框架适用于老挝北部的所有村庄，在应用时应遵循各村庄自身的发展历程，以避免社会文化的同质化。

关键词

后疫情时期发展；
生态旅游；
景观谱系；
本土韧性；
生态徒步；
老挝北部

文章亮点

- 基于景观谱系建立老挝北部后疫情时期生态旅游业复苏框架
- 特许经营和移民安置改变了人们对土地价值的认知
- 通过体验橡胶特许经营对景观所造成的影响，感知社会文化的区域差异
- 开展本土文化活动以建立移民安置区的本土韧性

编辑　周佳怡，王颖