

## **Case Study: Phuket Hotels Association**

### **ENABLING HOTELS TO SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH VOLUNTARY COLLECTIVE ACTION**

Tourism, and the related hospitality sector, is a major contributor to plastic waste in Thailand. The country welcomed over 39 million tourists in 2019, according to the Tourism Authority of Thailand's (TAT) Tourism Intelligence Centre, impacting the environment and producing a colossal volume of waste. With a tourism industry worth upwards of USD 62 billion and more than 10,000 hotels in the country, this sector is arguably one of the most damaging in terms of plastic waste generation in Thailand.

Plastics are widely used in hotels to support travelers' requirements for convenience and aesthetic appeal as well as sanitary concerns. From the cups, straws, coffee lids, shampoo bottles, amenity kits, water bottles, and room minibars, to the hotel breakfast buffets, event spaces, and back of house activities, plastics are ubiquitous in the industry, with single-use plastic one of the key sources that accelerate the rapid degradation of the environment.

#### **A. Background: Phuket and Phuket Hotels Association**

Phuket remains as one of Thailand's leading leisure destinations. Airport passenger arrivals in 2018 exceeded a record nine million, patronizing 1,000 registered hotels and licensed establishments, and generating almost 950 tons of waste per day, according to its local officials<sup>1</sup>.

In Thailand, people living within 50 kilometres from the coastline generate about 1.2 kilogrammes of waste per person per day, of which 12 per cent is plastic<sup>2</sup>. For the coastal communities in places like Phuket, improperly discarded plastic bags present a huge challenge. Aside from representing a missed opportunity to recover, reuse and recycle plastic, this also negatively impacts the communities' waste streams, contributing to various nuisances to the environment.

Launched in 2017, Phuket Hotels Association (PHA) was formed to raise the profile of Phuket and to build a strong brand identity in international markets. In promoting the island, PHA assists and educates environmental best practices to reduce any harmful impact that tourism has on the island and helps to raise money to educate residents through the association's scholarship fund.

Furthermore, PHA leads and supports its 74 members in addressing sustainability – individually and more collectively – so that their operations do not negatively impact the very resources on which the island depends on for its wealth and economic development.

#### **B. The Strategy**

##### ***How did PHA rally its members to sustainability commitments and visible efforts and results?***

As a non-profit, non-commercial association, PHA relies on membership fees as their sole source of income. Members pay between THB15,000 and THB49,000 per annum depending on the number of rooms sold.

Majority of the association's member hotels are international brands, hotel chains, as well as all the island's five-star and MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Events) hotels.

Given its limited resources, PHA thus needed to be systematic in its approach in determining what programs would be relevant and most useful, taking into account its members' needs and capacity

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/phuket-resorts-beaches-tourism-growth-infrastructure-environment-12137920>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thephuketnews.com/phuket-plastic-pollution-problem-51839.php>

and the objective of better management of plastic used. In 2018, PHA surveyed members' plastics use and then began looking at ways to shrink their plastics footprint.

Activities included:

- **Knowledge-sharing and education.** Continuous training and education, and capacity building are made available for its members' staff and personnel, especially on the environmental impacts of their specific roles in hotel operations.
- Knowledge and awareness-building for PHA members was supplemented by providing **access to experts**. In 2018, Dr. Marisa Jablonski, an expert on waste, was hired to help members determine the environmental footprint of their hotel operations (measure plastic use, food waste, etc.). This five-part program ultimately helped 65 associated hotels reduce their plastic straws by 1.6 million and their plastic water bottles by 4.4 million.
- **Continued measurement and monitoring.** Partnerships with research organizations like the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), were established. In 2019, visiting students from the institute supported hotels in monitoring the wastes that were generated and evaluating measures in place. Findings indicated that there seems to have been more a reduction in the use of plastic items, rather than an increase in the use of items with recycled content.
- **Sharing best practices.** PHA engaged its members to map out a list of their trusted suppliers who sell environmentally-friendly products. [The Great Big Green Hotel Guide](#), an e-book on sustainability practices, was launched during the Phuket Hotels for Islands Sustaining Tourism (PHIST) event in September 2019. This provided an effective information-sharing platform on substitutes for plastic and processes and potential cost savings.
- **Events.** PHA launched knowledge-sharing opportunities in 2018 with **PHIST**, showcasing sustainability products and services, and offering attendees a mix of expert panels and thematic discussions covering topics on destination development, ocean health and impacts, hotel sustainability governance, community tourism, and global trends on sustainability. This year's virtual PHIST event is scheduled on 15 September 2020.
- **Community Training Activities.** Campaigns such as the **People.Planet.Phuket** were launched to educate local communities and visitors about the importance of the 3Rs – Reduce, Reuse and Recycle. Training materials such as an edited version with Thai subtitles of *A Plastic Ocean*, was used to effectively capture the audience's attention. PHA also collaborated with local academic institutions such as the British International School Phuket (BISP) on developing a Thai version of a licenced book called *A Happy Green World*.

The [Happy Green World Foundation](#) develops environmental educational materials on waste, water and energy for children all over the world.

## C. The Challenges

**Confidentiality.** One of the key results of the PHA survey developed for its members was the need for each hotel to conduct an operations review, which could lead to the institution of a baseline for the amount of plastic being used and potentially being wasted in the hotels. Because of the sensitivity of this information, PHA pacified its members' hesitation by signing confidentiality agreements, confirming non-disclosure so as not to expose its members. Using this approach, initial resistance was minimized, and members understood and eventually participated.

**Limited available alternatives for non-plastic/recycled materials.** For many properties, they face limited options for cost-efficient, sustainable alternatives for their plastic amenities. In addition, hotel brand standards can be a barrier to selecting replacements for current products used, thereby limiting what can be considered.

**Management support.** Buy-in and support from the hotel owners and general managers (GM) is critical in leading the hotels toward the path of sustainability. PHA enlisted GMs and owners to commit to PHA's environmental goals for Phuket and to their own properties' objectives, realizing that by engaging top management, sustainability thinking can cascade better within the organizations.

**Communications challenges** and the competitive nature of the industry. PHA established real-time communication among its members through mobile applications such as LINE, to educate and improve their awareness on sustainability.

## D. Impacts

- Hotels which switched from using plastic drinking water bottles to glass bottles attained cost savings. One hotel for instance was able to stop the use of almost 660,000 single use drinking water bottles, equivalent to THB 500,000 net savings annually. This positive experience opened opportunities for other hotels to convince management to take similar action and support alternatives for these amenities.
- Pledges during PHIST 2018 resulted in a 51% decrease of plastic bottles used, equivalent to 4.4 million plastic bottles, in the first six months of 2019.
- Consumer satisfaction is highly visible through guests' comments on TripAdvisor, word of mouth and either verbal or written feedback to the respective hotels for taking eco-conscious efforts in their operations.
- Reduction in plastic waste going to the landfill: PHA hotel members have already reduced the volume and types of single-use plastics in operation and eliminated the use of plastic water bottles in their guest rooms in 2019.
- Through the USAID programme, PHA supported the education of about 20,000 hotel employees increasing employment opportunities for these staff.
- PHA also provided access to over 100 suppliers for its members, which, because of their environmental and sustainability products, provide multiple benefits to local communities in terms of health, gender equality and poverty reduction.

## E. Lessons Learned

As Thailand's first organized hotel association, PHA has played a pioneering role in implementing the value and behaviour change guidance on the ground, and supporting the key lessons learned to exhort members to collective action:

- Involve decision-makers who are already convinced and are supportive of what PHA is doing for the environment.
- Clearly demonstrate cost savings and have the evidence of projected numbers/data to support these claims. Hotels face challenges with their owners, especially in nudging them to make sustainable changes. The availability of data provides a better opportunity to secure their approvals and support.
- Work with the culture. Opportunities for communication, using both formal and informal channels, and in a pre-competitive, non-threatening environment, must be established among decision-makers and key operations personnel, which can support scale and critical mass.
- Minimize plastic through continuous improvement (an agenda being pushed by PHA) and regularly setting new targets – and encourage members to comply.
- Provide members access to best-practices through experts and platforms such as the PHIST and [SEA circular](#) roundtables.
- Efforts toward plastic reduction is magnified with effective associations and partnerships, as collective results become more empowering when more stakeholders address the issue.
- Collective approach as a united force through commitment – an individual hotel signed pledge
- Offer hotel members the tools and supporting devices; provide training and other learning opportunities to make the transition to more sustainable operations, effective.

## F. What's Next? - Moving Forward

PHA will expand on Brand Phuket to include sustainability and improved plastic management as well as disseminate information on government schemes and bailout support. Together, these activities will not only provide a measurable environmental benefit, but will also increase resource and waste management, as well as enhance health and the general well-being of the industry who are already experiencing the effects of plastic pollution in the environment.

With the current COVID-19 crisis, this collective approach becomes even more critical as it may yet provide the opportunity to give sustainability efforts a boost in the arm, with hotels looking at sustainability in the island's bouncing back strategy. It is still very early days but PHA wants its member hotels to focus more on how they can contribute to the transition of a more sustainable economy post-pandemic.

*What will PHA and Phuket hotels be doing while waiting for the reopening of the island to tourism?*

Through PHA's collaboration with Hotel Resilient, a COVID-READY certification exclusive to PHA members, the initiative which was officially launched in **Phuket on 12 June**, demonstrates PHA's emphasis on promoting hygiene, health and safety of hotel guests and staff as it prepares its members for the new normal.



## MEMBERSHIP

### Join Hotel Resilient and enjoy many benefits

Sign up for free on Hotel Resilient and start using our free tools, including the COVID-READY Audit and e-Learning program.

**Join as a member, and enjoy many more benefits:**

- ✓ Free COVID-READY e-Certification with membership
- ✓ Access to all COVID-19 Resources
- ✓ Full access to the multi-faceted Hotel Resilient Standards, Handbook and Audit
- ✓ Access to all our e-Learning Modules and online resources
- ✓ Access to Webinars and our Trainings

Beyond COVID, the Hotel Resilient Framework provides a path to disaster and climate resilience. Go beyond the COVID-READY Audit and use our comprehensive online solutions to analyze and manage your risks from multiple hazards, potential to rise.

**Your partner in resilience through COVID and beyond**

## NEWS

### Phuket gets COVID-READY with Hotel Resilient

Prior to re-opening to tourists, hotels in Phuket are taking extra steps to improve the safety of guests during this dynamic pandemic situation. Hotel Resilient has been working with the Phuket Hotels Association to ensure a smooth implementation of the COVID-READY Standards in the Thailand context. As a result of this collaboration effort, the Phuket Hotels Association confirms commitment to endorse Hotel Resilient COVID-READY Certification to all of its 70 member hotels. Key findings such as these are critical to destinations re-opening safer and sooner than later.

### Hotel Resilient Webinar!

Join us Monday May 25th at 10am Central European Standard Time for a free webinar that will introduce you to the COVID-READY standards, software and training material. See details on our website.

### Free membership offer for destination leaders!

Hotel Resilient is collaborating with hotel industry leaders in select destinations to improve the ability of hotels to meet the COVID-READY Standards. For collaborating partners, Hotel Resilient is offering free trial memberships for a limited time. See if you qualify for the program by emailing us at: [info@hotelresilient.org](mailto:info@hotelresilient.org)

*“Nothing should go back to normal. Normal wasn’t working. If we go back to the way things were, we would have lost the lesson. May we rise up and do better.”*