SUSTAINABLE TOURISM PARADIGM IN LAO PDR (1986–2004 AD)¹

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Abstract

Since 1986 social and economic reform in Lao PDR has created great change in various aspects. Tourism, which has been accepted only recently in Lao PDR, also plays an important role in the economic development of Lao PDR. As a result, tourism is considered a change in the Lao PDR development paradigm.

The article aims to present a sustainable tourism paradigm, which is an aspect of the development paradigm of Lao PDR since the development of tourism management from 1986. In addition, the sustainable tourism paradigm has influenced different levels of tourism concepts, such as at the Theory and Universal and Regional levels. UNESCO Nam Ha Ecotourism Project, Luang Nam Tha Province, a United Nations development project, is employed as a case study of the sustainable tourism paradigm.

The results of the study indicate: Firstly, the sustainable tourism paradigm in Lao

PRD occurring in the 1980s has emphasized high-value tourism, which consists of culture and tradition protected value; the biodiversity value for providing accommodations for the minority of Lao PDR; an ecotourism network among stakeholders, such as government, entrepreneurs and local communities, participating in activity development; and management tourism as a tool of rural development integration for ecotourism practitioners. Secondly, tourism management is supported by international private development organizations, such as the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the United Nations, (for instance, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)), thus affecting the compatibility of the sustainable tourism paradigm in Lao PDR at theory level. The results reflect the development paradigm as ideology, which needs to be followed up.

Introduction

In 1986, owing to the “New Thinking” or “New Economic Mechanism” policy under the second 5-year economic development plan (1986–1990) (Sirikrai, 2542: XII), focussing on the development of agriculture, industry, energy, trans-border trading and foreign investment (Sirikrai, 2542: XII), the Lao PDR undertook great social and economic reforms that have caused various changes. Moreover, the third national economic and social development plan (1991–1995) included tourism as part of its economic development plan, hoping that the tourism industry could solve the economic problems at that time (Phichit, 2545: 2).

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This is also another major factor leading to the Lao PDR development paradigm shift.³

In other words, in the 1980s, the Lao PDR paradigm shift resulted partly from its identification of tourism as one of the priority development areas. The 'Visit Laos Years 1999–2000' was then launched in the following decade (1999). The program brought 624,432 tourists to the country (ASEAN 2003: website), showing that tourism played a no-less important role in economic development, especially in generating revenue, than other economic-lifting activities.

However, when considering all the countries of equal standing in the ASEAN region, particularly such South-East Asian countries as Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand, it appeared that they all used tourism as a tool for their economic development in the 1980s. Michael Hitchcock, Victor T. King, Michael J. G. Parnwell (1993: 1) accepted that during that period, each South-East Asian country had "tourism for both local and international tourists that was rapidly growing." Most of these countries emphasized tourism industry development due to the cluster of thought about the mass tourism paradigm.

The cluster of thought regarding the mass tourism paradigm among the South-East Asian countries in the 1980s brought about antithesis to another parallel cluster, the

cluster of thought regarding the sustainable tourism paradigm. The 'sustainable tourism paradigm' concept which was initiated from the 1960s to the 1970s resulted in 'parallel' tourism management in South-East Asia in the following decade.

The tourism development of the South-East Asian countries derived from the cluster of thought regarding the sustainable tourism paradigm in the 1980s was varied and inter-related, depending on the level of influence of the concept: theoretical level, universal level, and regional level or level where each country in the region attempted to combine, refine and select its own appropriate tourism management. Furthermore, it depended on the assistance of international organizations that helped with tourism management according to their specified conditions.

To sum up, it can be said that the sustainable tourism paradigm in the Lao PDR has been influenced by all the above factors.

Nonetheless, the evolution of the Lao PDR sustainable tourism is rather unique. Therefore, for clear understanding, its 'background', including its initiation and development, is needed.

This article aims to present the sustainable tourism paradigm which is a part of the Lao PDR development paradigm through 1) the connection and different levels of tourism concept influences: theoretical, universal and regional, 2) the development of the sustainable tourism paradigm between 1986–2004, and 3) the assistance of international organizations. This is to discover what the Lao PDR sustainable tourism paradigm really is.

³ Talking about "paradigm", Seri Phongphit (Phongphit 2547:14–15) defines it as the way of thinking, acting, and valuing on a fact basis or as a basic idea that shapes a way of thinking, acting, and valuing people's way of life. Therefore, both the development paradigm and tourism paradigm in this article can be defined as such.

The connection and different levels of tourism concept influences

It is undeniable that the Lao PDR sustainable tourism paradigm was influenced by external tourism concepts. Therefore, the understanding of external tourism concepts can explain the Lao PDR sustainable tourism paradigm.

Theory-level sustainable tourism paradigm

The existing definitions of ‘sustainable tourism’ at the theory-level are varied, such as alternative tourism, cultural tourism, eco-tourism, cultural and traditional tourism, sustainable community-based tourism, homestay, rural tourism as well as postmodern tourism.

At the theory-level, the sustainable tourism paradigm is believed to have been initiated from the 1960s to the 1970s and to have become well-known among developing countries, especially those in Asia, in the 1980s. Such a paradigm poses a question as to ‘sustainability’ that might not be possible due to tourism activities. Its purpose is to prevent destruction of natural resources, ecology, environment, local economy, community life, culture and tradition as well as identity and minorities, resulting in local participation in management and equal tourism-benefit sharing.

To conclude, the theory-level sustainable tourism paradigm is an ideological one emphasizing the true understanding of sustainable tourism in spite of its various terms. Administration and problems that may arise from inappropriate management are also carefully considered. The most important things in administration are

‘partnership’ or co-operation in planning and operating among the government sector, private sector, and local people, together with other related parties, and the tourists’ correct understanding of sustainable tourism.

Universal-level sustainable tourism paradigm

The information on the sustainable tourism paradigm in this article was obtained from two world tourism organizations: the United Nations (UN), which plays the most important role in sustainable tourism management, and the World Tourism Organization (WTO), which is a specialized agency of the United Nations.

The universal-level sustainable tourism paradigm is similar to the theory-level paradigm in their ideology of sustainable development, that is, an administration which gives importance to local people and comprehensive concept regarding sustainable tourism, tourism management for sustainability, environment and culture preservation, fulfillment of tourists’ needs without negative impacts on environment and culture, local community participation in planning and managing, and equal benefit sharing.

The paradigm at the universal level is regarded as an essential concept that will lead to sustainable tourism under a tourism management ethics framework. This indicates some conditions of tourism development examination by government and private sectors to make sure that environment and local people are not negatively affected. On the contrary, it results in economic and social equality, and sustainable use of tourism resources.

Regional-level sustainable tourism paradigm

The regional-level sustainable tourism paradigm is considered from organizations that play important roles in regional tourism; namely, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA), the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), and Thai-Laos bilateral co-operation on regional tourism.

The regional-level sustainable tourism paradigm can be divided into two major groups as follows.

Regional indirectly-tourism-related co-operation group

This group includes ASEAN, GMS and Thai-Laos bilateration co-operation which focus on 'network' economic development and industrial investment, whereas tourism co-operation is merely a part of the whole, as can be seen from the objective of sustainable tourism that is to relieve poverty in rural areas. Despite the policy on regional sustainable tourism co-operation, many existing projects may be questioned as to whether they can be carried out by the member countries. Moreover, questions may be raised regarding management under the theory- and universal- level concepts of sustainable tourism whose main purposes are nature and environment preservation, and poverty relief in the local community because of political, economic and social differences among member countries.

Regional directly-tourism-related co-operation group

This group includes only PATA, which focuses on sustainable tourism in terms of both concepts and international

management, conforming to sustainable tourism at the theory level and the universal level because such tourism does not aim only at poverty relief but also at community involvement in management, including satisfying tourists and providing them with some knowledge.

In sum, various tourism concepts of the sustainable tourism paradigm greatly influence the Lao PDR sustainable tourism paradigm. As external factors, such concepts are also relevant to the development of the Lao PDR sustainable tourism paradigm.

The development of sustainable tourism paradigm 1986–2004

Apart from the external factors, the Lao PDR sustainable tourism paradigm was also influenced by such internal factors as its development, which can be separated into several periods.

Lao PDR tourism 1986–1989: The beginning of the Lao PDR sustainable tourism paradigm

During this period, on account of the economic reforms under the "New Thinking" or "New Economic Mechanism" policy according to the second five-year economic development plan (1986–1990), followed by the foreign investment protection legislation in 1989 coming from Gorbachev's Perestroika policy of the Soviet Union in 1985, tourism became a principal mechanism for social and economic development as the Lao PDR government expected its tourism industry to solve the country's economic problems (Phichit, 2002: 2). However, in spite of such tourism development, in 1989 the

National Tourism Authority of Lao PDR (NATL) announced 'National Tourism Organization Strategies', which aim for eco-tourism and high-value tourism rather than low-cost tourism, to keep the balance between culture and environment conservation and modern economic development. (Hall and Stephen Page, 2000: 185) This shows the tendency of the sustainable tourism paradigm during this period under the conditions of the development paradigm shift in Lao PDR, which opened up more for investments from the private sector.

Lao PDR tourism 1990–1999: Space competition in the tourism paradigm

This period involves the competition for space in the mass tourism paradigm which was developed from the changes in the development paradigm and the sustainable tourism paradigm supported by the Lao PDR government. Regarding the mass tourism paradigm, Lao PDR attempted to promote a new image of the country through tourism advertisement about it being a 'safe and peaceful country with honest and generous people' in 1998, its participation in EXPO 2000 in Germany in 1998, etc.

It also arranged a variety of tourism activities and tried to co-operate in economic matters and tourism with different countries, both neighbouring and Western, such as Thailand, Vietnam, France, and so on. In addition, in this decade, the Lao PDR government first included its tourism plan in the third 5-year economic development plan (1991–1995), set up a tourism training division, the Tourism & Hotel Management and Training Division, in 1995.

Meanwhile, the Lao PDR sustainable tourism paradigm was significantly developed in several ways as described below.

Support from international organizations

An example is the World Conservation Union (IUCN) in cooperation with the Lao PDR government establishing National Biodiversity Conservation Areas (NBCAs) with the purpose of developing national parks and conserving a diversity of natural resources in 1993. Others are the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) supporting the National Tourism Organization to implement the national tourism development plan and strategies for ecotourism and the human resource development project from 1997–1998 (Yamauchi and Donale Lee, 1999: 4–6), and UNESCO organizing the UNESCO Nam Ha Ecotourism Project in 1999 to promote conservation of Laos' natural and cultural heritages, to involve local communities in the development and management of tourism activities, and to use tourism as a tool for integrated rural development (Yamauchi and Donale Lee 1999: 4–6; UNESCO Regional for Culture in Asia and the Pacific, 2004).

Legislation of the Lao PDR government

The Presidential Decree of the Lao Peoples Democratic Republic on the Preservation of Cultural, Historical and Natural Heritage of 1997 aims to safeguard Laotian historical sites, nature and culture by limiting negative impacts of foreign culture (Yamauchi and Donale Lee, 1999: 4–6; Ministry of Information and Culture, 1997: 5–16). Further, the Environmental Protection Law of 1999 sets necessary guidelines for environmental protection, restoration and preservation in order to

keep people healthy, to preserve natural resources and natural richness, as well as to ensure long-term national economic and social development (STEA; UNDP; NORAD 2001: 3).

Lao PDR tourism 2000–2004: Parallel paradigm between mass tourism and sustainable tourism

During this period, Lao PDR tourism development emphasized sustainable tourism management along with mass tourism. Thus, ecotourism activities could be found in the form of mass activities, as obvious from the NEAT (Nature, Ecotourism and Adventure Travel) project in 2000, which was concerned with nature tourism, ecotourism and adventure tourism. Adventure tourism actually implies increasing the number of tourists, which could be different from other kinds of tourism.

Nonetheless, some tourism activities were limited in their management due to the desire for strict preservation. For instance, in 2001 the Lao PDR government in co-operation with United Nations volunteers launched the Nature Tourist Project (NTP), part of the environmental tourism project in the Forest Conservation Areas of Puozanhae Mountain (Vientiane Times, 2003: website). It also passed laws on environmental preservation such as Decree on the Implementation of the Environmental Protection Law, and Regulation on Environment Assessment in the Lao PDR (STEA; UNDP; NORAD 2002: I, II).

At the same time, mass tourism in Lao PDR in this decade focused on planning and improving infrastructures for tourism, and establishing more co-operation in tourism, investment and knowledge sharing/exchange with neighbouring

countries such as Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia and Thailand. It even hosted the ASEAN Tourism Forum (ATF) in 2004. However, the major tourism activities of the Lao PDR are found to be those contributing to sustainable tourism resources.

It is apparent that the parallel between sustainable tourism and mass tourism in the Lao PDR has led to a new tourism paradigm in which both mass and sustainable tourism activities operate hand-in-hand. It is, therefore, of interest to investigate the concept of the new sustainable tourism paradigm.

International organizations’ assistance with sustainable tourism paradigm

Not only was the Lao PDR influenced by external factors, such as various tourism concepts and internal factors, i.e., its own sustainable tourism paradigm development, but it was also encouraged to concretely manage sustainable tourism activities by international organizations.

At present, several international organizations that assist in the Lao PDR sustainable tourism are from foreign governments, such as the New Zealand government and the German government, and from international organizations, such as the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and UN-based organizations, such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), etc. However, only one organization, UNESCO, supporting the ‘UNESCO Nam Ha Ecotourism Project’, will be used as a case study of the Lao PDR sustainable tourism paradigm.

UNESCO and Nam Ha ecotourism project

The Nam Ha Ecotourism Project is assisted by UNESCO in terms of ecotourism management by which local communities are completely involved through being trained and provided with opportunities to plan, operate, collaboratively learn and fairly share profits.⁴

The reason why this project is called 'Nam Ha' is because it is the name of a river in Luang Namtha province located in the National Biodiversity Conservation Areas (NBCAs) of over 200,000 hectares, which are abundant with natural resources, forests, wild animals and 16 diverse ethnic groups.

However, despite UNESCO's assistance, its existing tourism programs are still under the direction of 'Hong Kan Thongthiew Pracham Khwaeng' or 'Luang Namtha Provincial Tourism Office', which is also 'UNESCO Nam Ha Ecotourism Project Office', due to the socialism system in which all the final decisions are made by the government. And although the private sector is currently allowed to propose tourism programs to Luang Namtha Provincial Tourism Office, the arrangement and the ownership of the programs are

determined by Luang Namtha Provincial Tourism Office.

The ecotourism management processes are described below.

When tourists, most of whom nowadays are Westerners (Americans, British, French and German), want to participate in such programs as trekking, boat trips or village outreach to visit diverse ethnic groups, they have to ask permission and buy tourism programs from Luang Namtha Provincial Tourism Office.

The government official at Luang Namtha Provincial Tourism Office has tourists register and pay reservation fees as specified by each program, with the condition that each tourism program must consist of 4–8 tourists, and not over 8, due to the capacity of each village. If 1–3 tourists are interested in a program and really want to participate in it, they have to pay the fee for 4 persons.

The money received by Luang Namtha Provincial Tourism Office is distributed for village funds, guide allowances, accommodations, office maintenance, etc., all of which are considered tourism development expenses.

Once the tourists have registered, at 9 a.m. the following day, they have to return to Luang Namtha Provincial Tourism Office to get trekking permits and learn about tourism routes as well as regulations, which are like 'moral precepts'. They are also introduced to a lead guide who Luang Namtha Provincial Tourism Office arranges for them. The lead guide is directly paid by Luang Namtha Provincial Tourism Office. After that, the tourists and the lead guide go to the tourism site by the sky-lab (jumbo), again arranged by Luang Namtha

⁴ According to an interview with local people in the community, the reason why all the tourism procedures were handled by foreigners at the beginning was because the local people in the community had no idea then what these foreigners were doing, apart from designing lodges. Later on, when the UNESCO Nam Ha Project was launched, they were then trained as guides and provided precise knowledge of what "ecotourism" is (Khantisouk interview with the author, Luang Namtha, December 16, 2004.).

Provincial Tourism Office. Reaching the site, the tourists stay in lodges constructed by the Lao PDR. The lodges are in the village, but not near the villagers' houses.

In each village, some villagers are guides who help the lead guide. They are assistant guides who can speak some foreign language and village guides who act as trekking leaders because they are most familiar with the area.

Concerning food, the lead guide cooks for the tourists. But the tourists themselves have to buy fresh food from the villagers.

However, in each village, the villagers usually offer local handicrafts to the tourists as souvenirs. And if the tourists want more, they may buy them from the villagers.

The tourism management under the UNESCO Nam Ha Ecotourism Project can reflect the current sustainable tourism paradigm in the Lao PDR in various aspects.

Preservation concept

The 'ecotourism' management at Nam Ha reflects the concept of preservation of primitive tourism resources, such as nature, society and culture, with flexibility. Hence, changes in a local community are accepted under the condition that "changes must be from the community itself." Tourism management thus depends on the actual conditions of the community. At the same time, changes that may be caused by interaction with tourists can be controlled by limiting the number of tourists, training tourists and requesting community volunteers for tourism management (Santasombat, 2001: 5–6). In other words, Lao PDR tourism management prefers "primitive and unchanged" tourism

resources. Therefore, the 'invention' of primitive things in an ecotourism destination is normally found, such as primitive house, primitive culture, and primitive dress. But they are not natural and contradictory to the actual situations and/or non-existent in the community. They are invented to serve the unlimited number of tourists but leave the changes for the villagers to cope with on their own (Smith, 1989: 1–17).

Community rights and community participation in tourism management

Talking to government officials, guides and local people in the Lao PDR we have learned that before the introduction of community-based ecotourism in Nam Ha, the consensus of the local people on their community being a tourism destination on the tourism route was sought. After that, if tourism activities have been carried out, and the community realizes negative impacts on the community, or the community no longer wants to continue, the community members can withdraw their community from being a tourism destination. Moreover, should any community wish to volunteer for tourism management, the Community Board that consists of the village chief (a government official) and its representatives have a duty to examine the trekking permits the tourists receive from Luang Namtha Provincial Tourism Office. Tourists without trekking permits are not allowed to enter the community, and they may even be arrested. Moreover, the Board sends people in the community to the guide-training course and supervise tourists in the community.

The above-mentioned process reflects the importance of community rights in decision-making as to whether they

‘choose’ or ‘do not choose’ tourism as the principal part of their life. Once they agree, the community’s role as a “host” is essential. On the other hand, willingness is a usually question in the mass tourism paradigm. Whose willingness, by whom, local people, NGO, capitalists or government? In some places, the community’s consensus is even ignored. This does not take into account their becoming ‘exhausted’, meaning their being tourism destinations on the country’s major tourism routes as long as tourists want to visit them no matter whether they want it or not. Apart from that, the local community plays no more role than selling souvenirs, dressing up for photograph services, selling food, etc.

Stakeholder preparation for tourism management

Prior to the “ecotourism” management in Nam Ha, UNESCO conducted several training courses to prepare the stakeholders as follows:

- 1) Training government officials for in-depth understanding of ecotourism management and how such tourism can be supported;
- 2) Training the lead and assistant guides in both tour operation and foreign languages;
- 3) Building a community conscience on tourism that preserve environment, society and culture;
- 4) Making the community realize the value of local culture; and
- 5) Training the local people by involving them in the tourism management of the community for their understanding of the role of tourism, the relationship between

local ecotourism and the community as well as how to behave or act towards tourists.

Building tourists’ conscience on community’s tradition respect

This includes providing tourists with the knowledge about the community’s “Do’s and Don’ts” prior to the trip. For example, permission must be obtained before taking photos or touching things in the community; never kiss or embrace in public; or in some communities, the opposite sexes are forbidden to sleep together, with no exception even for couples, etc. Once in Nam Ha an unacceptable event occurred in which the tourists finally agreed to apologize for what they had done. This reflects the way it should be (not the way it is) in building up ‘concentrated’ awareness of some egocentric ecotourists who might feel they can go anywhere or do anything, expecting that local people always forgive them. Instead, they should respect the community’s traditions and rituals, realize and accept the outcome of their own action contrary to the community’s rituals, whether intention or not.

Tourism-related benefit sharing

Acting as the only Nam Ha tourism business center, Luang Namtha Provincial Tourism Office can generate a revenue directly from selling tour programs. The money is then considered the Lao PDR government’s central revenue and is used for different tourism-related expenses, such as guide allowances, communication and transportation development, and lodge construction in the community. Also, a part of this revenue is set aside as a ‘Village Development Fund’ for the community which is a tourism destination. It has been

found that, within 3 years' time since tourism was organized in Nam Ha, some villages have been funded up to 10 million kips (approx. USD 10,256), which is considered a huge sum of money for the economic system in such a small country. Though the Village Development Fund cannot be spent on luxurious items such as motorcycles, pickups, mobile phones, it can be loaned and for agricultural or living purposes with low interest rates, long-term payback plans or agricultural products as payback.

In addition, people in the community definitely get income from selling fresh food and providing cleaning services, especially selling tourists fresh food to be cooked by the lead guide. Each family has its turn to sell fresh food at the market price. It is a "must" that they have fresh food ready for sale when their turn comes. This automatically motivates people in the community to produce agricultural products for sale to the tourists at market price, without considering market demand.

What is interesting is that the ecotourism in Nam Ha does not encourage local people to make souvenirs for sale. Additionally, it forbids the sale of community "antiques". Instead, it urges people to offer tourists models of antiques or home-use handicrafts as souvenirs. In case the tourists want more, local people then sell "what they have" to tourists. This is in line with a "sufficient" style of production, the main purpose of which is for use among family members with the rest for sale. Consequently, it is not surprising to find a lady in Nam Ha wearing gilded silk clothes (rare in urban society but common in the local community) taking a bath in the river.

Such Nam Ha tourism benefit sharing as mentioned above is an important concrete index of the sustainable tourism paradigm. Certainly, we always repeat parrot-fashion that tourism generates income for all parties concerned, from hotel owners, to drivers to farmers according to the cash-flow cycle. Yet, the question is "What should we call what is happening: "benefit sharing" or "benefit screening"?" It is due to the fact that most of the benefits ultimately belong to the "capitalists" like the hotel or restaurant owners or travel agencies who have first priority to earn the benefits while local people get merely a small amount from handicraft or food selling.

Conclusion on current sustainable tourism paradigm in Lao PDR

The sustainable tourism paradigm in the Lao PDR is unique and has focused on high-value tourism since the early 1980s. This shows that the Lao PDR not only expects tourism to be a mechanism for economic development under the mainstream development paradigm but also emphasizes the quality of both tourists and tourism management. As a result, it can be said that the Lao PDR tends to implement a theory- and universal- level sustainable tourism paradigm, which is an ideological paradigm.

Such a sample project as UNESCO Nam Ha Ecotourism, assisted by an international organization, is regarded as a tool driving the management process to be in line with the ideological sustainable tourism paradigm. Nevertheless, since this project was only launched 4–5 years ago and there exists doubt as to how much 'sustainability' in tourism management the external assistance can provide, it is unpredictable in

which direction or how the ideological sustainable tourism paradigm will change.

What may challenge the Lao PDR sustainable tourism paradigm is the following.

The government sector and local people in the community still do not understand what sustainable tourism is, which may affect tourism management and administration in the future.

The approach of the mass tourism paradigm from neighbouring countries and the globalization trend may turn the sustainable tourism paradigm into a mass tourism paradigm, causing such problems as lack of co-operation in mutually solving community problems, local people becoming more selfish and developing money-oriented work attitudes, lack of responsibility for nature and environment preservation and conflicts arising from benefit snatching.

The knowledge of the sustainable tourism paradigm may not be continually passed on to future generations.

The ideological sustainable tourism paradigm is too rigid owing to both the Lao PDR's practice and external influence, which possibly affects the country's development process in other dimensions as well as results in loss of the "nature of tourism", which emphasizes that tourism involves the relationship between humans and experiences.

Observers of the sustainable tourism paradigm have to keep an eye on all this to see what will happen next.

Interview

Chaluemsok, Bounta: Trekking Manager, Luang Namtha Provincial Tourism Office, interview with the author, December 16, 2004.

Khantisouk, Sompawn: Owner and Local Guide, The Boat Landing Guest House & Restaurant, interview with the author, December 16, 2004.

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