

The case study: Maya Bay finally gets a rest

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Maya Bay finally gets a rest

In March, Thai authorities announced they were closing the country's famed Maya Bay to allow it a brief respite. The secluded cove - with translucent waters, white sands and limestone cliffs - shot to fame as the picturesque setting for *The Beach*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio. Since then between 4,000 and 5,000 visitors have been turning up on its shores daily.

Experts have said 77% of Maya Bay's coral is at serious risk, mainly from damage by boat anchors. The planned four-month break this year - from June to September - cannot fix that.

So, is it too late to save Maya Bay?

Bangkok-based marine scientist Thon Thamrongnawasawat does not think so.

"If we thought it was too late, we would do nothing," he told the BBC. "We closed one island, called Koh Yoong, three years ago, and the corals there are growing very well. We will use the same practice in Maya Bay and try to transplant some coral as well."

Thailand closed dozens of dive sites to tourists in 2011. Koh Yoong, in the Phi Phi island chain and Koh Tachai, in the Similan Islands National Park, have also been off-limits to visitors since mid-2016.

Elizabeth Becker, author of *Overbooked: The Exploding Business of Travel and Tourism*, said: "I think it makes sense to close islands. However, there are huge economic pressures on Thailand, especially during these difficult political times. Tourism has been key to Thailand's economic development so Thai businesses and officials are afraid any curtailment of tourism would imperil the Thai economy."

Mr Thamrongnawasawat thinks this is why it has taken so long to take action at Maya Bay. "If you are in a country that earns more than 22% of GDP from tourism, you will understand how hard this was. Most people did not think this could really happen."

When Maya Beach reopens, it will have a new daily limit of 2,000 tourists a day and boats will no longer be allowed to cross the shallow reef. It will also close again for four months next year.

However, Worapoj Limlim, the head of the area's national park, told the *Phuket News* that he was not sure how he would enforce the new ban, and he might need back-up to add to the small team that already patrols the shores.