

Trapped in Place: Changing Mobility Patterns and Lifestyles of Thai Moken

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Abstract: Mobility restrictions, cultural preservation, and intersectional marginalization are interrelated challenges that profoundly affect indigenous and nomadic populations. Restrictions on their movement through national borders, conservation measures, and development policies disrupt long-established spatial practices, economic systems, and kinship networks. While cultural preservation is essential for maintaining collective identity, it is often complicated by external interventions such as the commercialization of cultural heritage, state assimilation initiatives, and the pressures of globalization. The Moken, a traditionally semi-nomadic seafaring people of the Andaman Sea, are a prime example of these intersecting dynamics. Their experiences therefore provide an excellent case study for examining the intertwined dynamics of mobility, identity and marginality in today's maritime Southeast Asia. Field research conducted from November 2024 to March 2025 on the islands of Surin and Phayam has shown that the Moken's way of life has gradually shifted toward sedentarism. In this article, we argue that the preservation of the Moken's valuable cultural knowledge, both in terms of their profound understanding of their maritime environment and their sustainable use of natural resources, depends crucially on maintaining their "semi-nomadic" identity. However, as their ancestral habitat continues to shrink, they are at risk of losing not only their centuries-old identity but also their valuable cultural practices. This article focuses on the question of what remains of traditional spatial concepts and mobility patterns today and what new patterns have emerged because of changing living and environmental conditions.

Keywords: Moken, spatial mobility, spatial identity, semi-nomadism, climate change

Moken – A once “Hidden Minority” in the Focus of Media and Science

Research on indigenous mobility has evolved from descriptive ethnographic studies to critical analyses of how mobility is shaped and constrained by political, ecological, and legal frameworks. Early anthropological studies conceptualized mobility as a defining feature of

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many indigenous societies, particularly maritime and nomadic groups (Chou, 2003; Sopher, 1965). More recent scholarships redefine mobility as a socially and politically mediated practice rather than a fixed cultural characteristic (Anthias, 2023; Charsley & Hoellerer, 2025; Fazal & Lee, 2023). From this perspective, the mobility of indigenous people functions both as a strategy for securing livelihoods and as a claim to space, sovereignty, and identity; a claim that is increasingly being challenged by the establishment of state borders, conservation measures, and capitalist development (Jerrems et al., 2024).

In Thailand, similar tensions have been documented among both coastal and upland communities whose ways of life conflict with national park management and tourism (Nitivattananon & Srinonil, 2019; Phongchiewboon et al., 2020). These debates are closely related to discussions about mobility, as spatial freedom is often a prerequisite for the continuation of culturally embedded practices such as foraging, seasonal migration, and maritime subsistence. The Moken people of southern Thailand are a prime example of an indigenous coastal community that once practiced a semi-nomadic lifestyle. They are increasingly confronted with overlapping forms of marginalization, including legal invisibility, resource rights exclusion, and stigmatization as a “backward” or “rootless” population (Bennett & Dearden, 2013; Chou, 2003).

The Moken in Thailand belong to the Chao Lay (people of the sea), which also includes the Moklen in Phangnga Province and the Urak-Lawoi, who live from Phuket southward to Satun (Arunotai, 2017, p. 4-5). The Moken have lived along the Andaman Sea for centuries but were historically marginalized, portrayed as poor, underdeveloped, and avoiding outsiders. Traditionally, they navigated the waters in covered boats that served as both accommodation and transportation (Arunotai, 2006, p. 140-141). The most important historical reasons for the development of their semi-nomadic lifestyle are often cited in the relevant literature as fear of slavery, plundering, and piracy, for example, by Thais, Malays, and Burmese, who also sailed these waters (Ivanoff, 2014, p. 98-100).

It was only after the events surrounding the 2004 tsunami that the Moken came to the attention of the international media and the global public, but interest in this population group also skyrocketed among several scientific disciplines (Arunotai, 2017, p. 4). The 2004 tsunami thus represented a decisive turning point from a scientific perspective. Colonial ethnography of the 19th and early 20th centuries was initially supplemented in the second half of the 20th century by maritime anthropological work (e.g., Sopher 1965; Sather 1975, 2006), linguistic work (Kraisame, 2018; Larish, 1999), and studies on the maritime subsistence economy of the Moken (Ivanoff 1989, 1992). After 2004, the focus of research shifted increasingly to climate vulnerability, cultural knowledge as a means of coping with climate change, marginalization, the impact of tourism, and human rights issues (e.g., Arunotai, 2017; Boutry & Ivanoff, 2024).

Within this broader intellectual landscape, the present study traces how the Moken have experienced profound transformations in their mobility and livelihoods following increased territorial regulation, conservation enforcement, tourism development, and climate change. Building on field research, we aim to reveal the mechanisms by which national park boundaries, citizenship policies, climate change, and economic pressures reconfigure everyday movement and social organization (Grimalt-Alvaro et al., 2025; van Balen, 2025). The Moken case thus provides a powerful lens through which to explore the broader theoretical concerns of Indigenous mobility, cultural identity, and intersectional marginalization.

Marginalization of Moken as an Intersectional Problem—Some Conceptual Remarks

In general, the prevailing view in academia, politics, and the mass media is that the Moken’s traditional cultural knowledge must be preserved at all costs. However, all these noble intentions remain mere lip service unless it is clear how much of this traditional indigenous

knowledge still exists and is still considered useful by those affected today. How can the transmission of cultural knowledge to the younger generation be ensured, and what opportunities are there to combine or supplement modern methods with traditional knowledge? What kind of empowerment is necessary or possible to keep future generations of the Moken in their ancestral habitat and offer them desirable prospects for the future? In recent decades, the “Chao Lay” have faced increasing pressure to settle down. As the older generation, which still led primarily mobile lives, is gradually disappearing, this research offers a valuable opportunity to document their unique cultural knowledge, which may offer insights for future generations.

In this study, we start from the basic assumption that the Moken’s increasingly restricted mobility over time not only threatens their traditional way of life and economy but also ultimately endangers their cultural identity and, thus, the usefulness of their traditional knowledge. The questions at the heart of this article are to what extent mobile ways of life are still possible under today’s conditions and what economic, social, and cultural consequences result from the (most forced) transition to a more sedentary way of life.

Intersectionality and marginalization are key frameworks for analyzing social inequality and exclusion. We use the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) as a framework for analyzing the complex problems and threats to which Moken’s traditional way of life is increasingly exposed. Crenshaw originally coined the term “intersectionality” to describe how multiple social identities, such as ethnicity, class, and gender, overlap, especially in systems of oppression or privilege (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1296). The concept challenges single-axis analyses, but critics argue that it can become conceptually vague, focuses too much on identity rather than structure, and is challenging to apply empirically (Nash, 2008). Marginalization, on the other hand, describes the processes by which individuals or groups are excluded from full participation in society. Recent research uses intersectional analyses to examine how multiple inequalities reinforce marginalization in areas such as spatial mobility, economic participation, education, health care, and development policy (Baird et al., 2021).

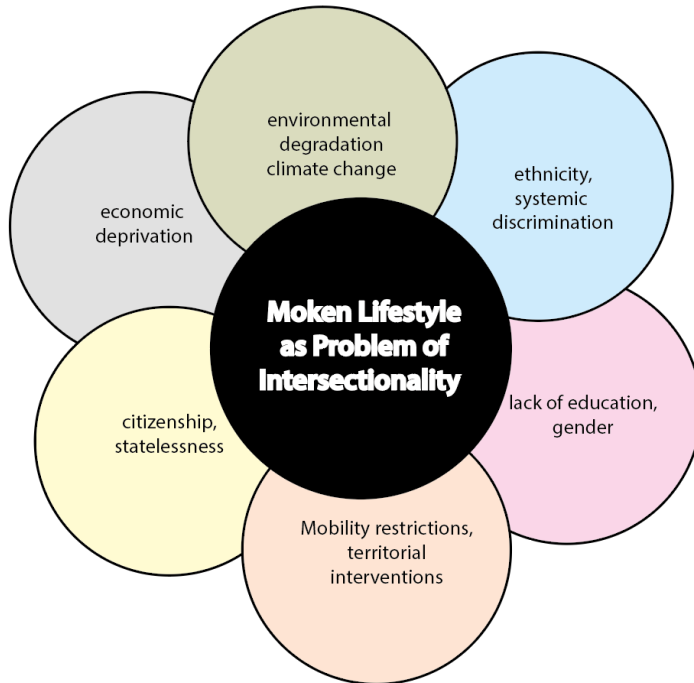
In this paper, we use a slightly modified version of the concept of intersectionality to shed light on how different axes of structural inequality and identity in the lives of the Moken on Surin Island and Phayam Island are not only additive but also overlapping and complexly intertwined (see also Angelucci, 2017). Possible overlapping axes of marginalization that need to be analyzed can be found among the Moken, for example, in ethnicity and cultural identity: their non-Thai, traditionally animist ethnic identity marks them as “others” in a dominant Thai-Buddhist nation-state. As a result, their cultural practices, language, and animistic spirituality are often despised and disparaged by the broader society and the state. In addition, many Moken still do not have official Thai citizenship, which makes them stateless. Without identity documents, however, they are unable to fully exercise many civil rights, such as unrestricted access to education, healthcare, land rights, and much more. In this way, ethnic identity and legal invisibility reinforce each other, marginalizing them in terms of access to fundamental rights.

However, the main problem is the ongoing restriction of their mobile lifestyle and the resulting increase in poverty and economic marginalization. In this regard, we assume that the economic marginalization of the Moken is partly due to their semi-nomadic lifestyle and their exclusion from the formal labor market, and that restrictions on fishing and marine park zones, often motivated by ecotourism or conservation measures, have significantly contributed to the displacement of traditional livelihoods. Following, we assume that their indigenous knowledge systems are not only unrecognized but criminalized under modern regulations, which points to how poverty, ethnicity, and politics interact. Finally, gender inequality among the Moken is also an intersectional issue, although this aspect is not the focus of this paper. Thus,

intersectionality reveals the complex marginalization of the Moken, which extends beyond individual issues such as citizenship, social status, and poverty (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Moken Marginalization – A problem of Intersectionality



Note. Source: own depiction

Although this article focuses on mobility restrictions and their consequences, we also attempt to address the intersectionality of economic marginalization with certain aspects of the other problem areas mentioned above.

Methodology

This study draws on findings obtained during field research conducted among the Moken communities on Surin and Phayam Islands in southern Thailand between November 2024 and April 2025. The field research activities are part of a transdisciplinary consortium project involving three universities: Wageningen University in the Netherlands, the University of Vienna in Austria, and Mahidol University in Thailand. The primary objective of the Thai sub-project was to examine the role of Moken cultural heritage in climate change adaptation and mitigation. (for further information, see <https://www.cuhemo.org>).

Two main methods were used for data collection: multi-sited ethnography (MSE) and participatory learning and action (PLA). Following Marcus (1995), MSE was used to capture people, artifacts, social practices, and meanings of nature. The present analysis is largely based on data collection grounded in established qualitative research methods (Table 1), including observation and a combination of semi-structured, in-depth, and narrative interviews. These approaches were employed to capture both broad thematic insights and personal life histories among Moken community members of diverse ages, genders, and mobility statuses, including those who temporarily stayed with relatives on the island. PLA was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of spatial and temporal patterns of community mobility and livelihoods. The approach encompassed a range of spatial (mobility mapping and transect walks), temporal (seasonal calendars), and relational methods (problem tree), which could be readily integrated

with multisite ethnography. All data collection was conducted in Thai and, when necessary, in Moken through an interpreter fluent in both languages and subsequently translated into English.

Table 1

Data Collection on Surin and Phayam Islands (November 2024-April 2025)

Data collection methods	Number of participants (person)		Key issues in data collection
	Surin	Phayam	
Interview (semi-structured, in-depth, and narrative interviews)	12	10	Lived experiences, cultural beliefs & practices, mobile lifestyle, and perceptions of livelihood, identity, and social relations
Transect walks	4	3	Spatial patterns of land use, housing, natural resources, and livelihood practices.
Mobility mapping	6	5	Movement patterns of Moken people pertinent to their mobile livelihood, seasonal and climate change.
Seasonal calendar	4	4	Patterns of Moken's activities associated with cyclical changes in their ecosystem and understand how ecological, social, economic, and migration aspects of their lives and wellbeing change throughout the year.
Problem tree	6	5	Problems and impacts related to political, social, livelihood, and climate change issues affecting the Moken community

Note. Source: own design

Thematic analysis was used to identify and interpret patterns of meaning in the data, focusing on how shifting forms of mobility shape and are shaped by the Moken's cultural identity, livelihood practices, and marginalization. Both inductive and deductive coding were applied: inductive coding allowed themes to emerge from participants' narratives of movement, belonging, and adaptation, while deductive coding was guided by theoretical concerns with Indigenous mobility, cultural identity, and intersectional marginalization. Through iterative synthesis, the analysis generated overarching themes that reveal the dynamic interplay between mobility, identity, climate change, and structural constraints in the Moken's everyday lives. Throughout this process, the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti was used to efficiently organize, store, and retrieve the coded data.

The study protocol was approved by Central Institutional Review Board, Mahidol University, Thailand (COA. No. MU-CIRB 2024/261.1710). All the procedures were performed in compliance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

The Moken Communities Under Study – Current Geographical Habitat and Environment

Surin Island in Phangnga Province and Phayam Island in Ranong Province are home to significant Moken populations that share a similar way of life and a progressive trend toward sedentarization. The Moken on Surin Island live within a marine national park, whereas those on Phayam Island reside on private land. In this paper, we assume that these differing living

conditions shape distinct ways of life and adaptation strategies, and that the factors influencing their respective socio-cultural environments also vary.

Phayam Island

The Moken community on Phayam Island is located at the western tip of Khao Kwai Bay. They reside in a small settlement on land purchased by a Christian foundation, allowing them to establish their homes in the area. The bay with its 3.5-kilometer-long beach, is a popular destination for tourists and is therefore surrounded by various tourist facilities such as resorts, entertainment venues, and restaurants. Resorts and tourism businesses on Phayam Island started to emerge just prior to the tsunami. The Moken village itself, home to approximately 45 households, has also become one of the island's attractions (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Location of the Moken Village on Phayam Island



Note. Google Maps. Map data ©2025 Google, modified by the authors.

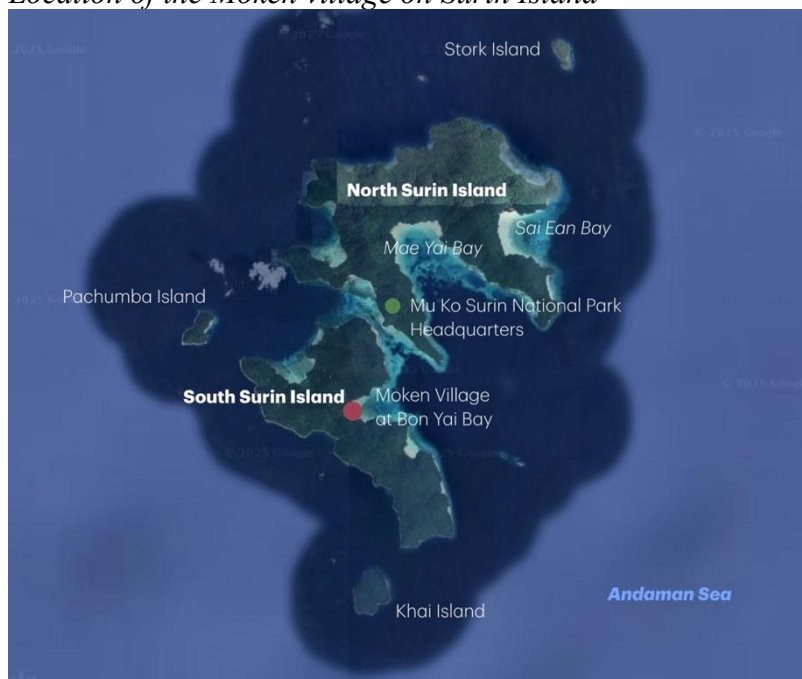
The island falls under the jurisdiction of the Phayam Island Subdistrict Administrative Organization, which is responsible for local governance and administrative functions. Unlike Surin Island, Phayam Island is accessible year-round. However, the areas off the coast of Phayam Island, some other islands, and surrounding regions are designated as a protected zone within Mu Ko Ranong National Park, which limits the Moken's seafaring activities essential to their livelihood.

Surin Island

The Moken settlement on South Surin Island is in Bon Yai Bay on the west coast of the island and is part of the Surin Islands National Park. The community currently consists of about 70 households and includes a school, a health center, and a small souvenir market. The village, which is located entirely within the national park, was rebuilt after the 2004 tsunami, merging two previously separate communities: one from Bon Lek Bay on South Surin Island and one from Sai En Bay on North Surin Island (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Location of the Moken village on Surin Island



Note. Source: Google Maps. Map data ©2025 Google, modified by the authors.

The Moken on Surin Island have undergone profound changes, especially since the 2004 tsunami, transitioning from a semi-nomadic, sea-based lifestyle to a settled life on land. The change in the living conditions of the Moken on Surin Island has been more drastic than that of the Phayam Moken: the fact that they live in a marine national park not only has a strong influence on their settlement and social structure, but also significantly restricts their economic activities and access to traditional maritime resources. The result is a growing dependence on tourism.

The factors influencing the transition from a formerly mobile to a now more sedentary way of life and the consequences of this will be examined below.

“Sea Nomads”? Changing Mobilities, Changing Lives—An intersectional Problem

The Moken’s traditional mobility patterns have always been strongly seasonal. Knowledge of weather conditions, wind, and waves was crucial for choosing their routes at sea and for determining where and when they could fish and gather marine resources without exposing themselves to excessive danger. This traditional knowledge was essential for their survival and was passed down orally from generation to generation, and this is still partly the case today.

Their detailed knowledge of maritime conditions and natural environment also formed the basis for the development of annually recurring spatial mobility patterns and associated subsistence activities such as fishing, harvesting seafood, and hunting and gathering during land

stays. The Moken “seasonal calendar” distinguishes between two seasons, the dry season and the monsoon season, which in the past determined the annual rhythm of life for the Moken. Their traditional seasonal calendar thus determines not only the division of the year but also the organization of daily life, spiritual practices, and decisions about routes to fishing grounds, anchorages, and settlement sites. The extent to which these cyclical mobility patterns still exist today, how they have changed in contrast to the past, and with what consequences will be discussed below.

The mobility patterns of the Moken at the two research sites are analyzed across two broad time periods: before and after the 2004 tsunami. The tsunami represents a clear break in the mobility behavior of the Moken and reflects the shift from a semi-nomadic, strongly maritime-oriented lifestyle to increasingly sedentary and land-based lifestyles.

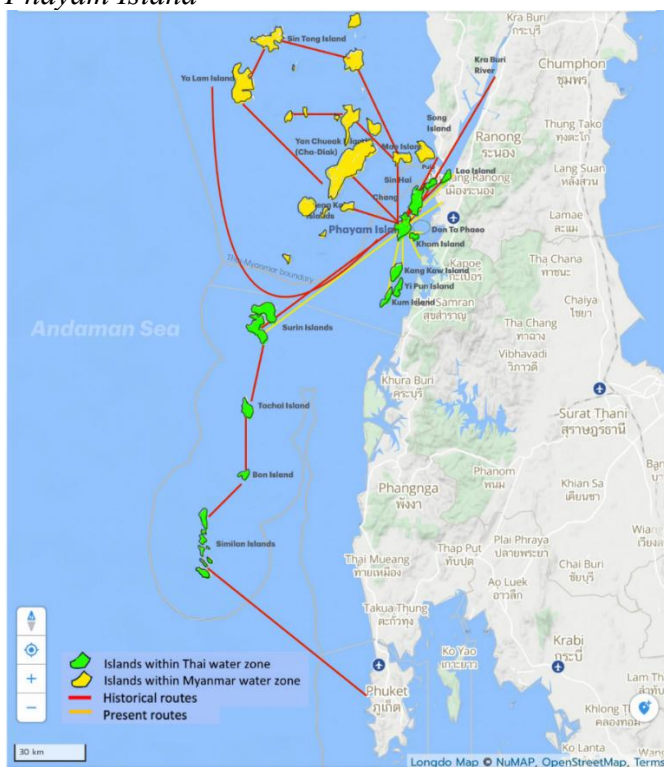
Pre-Tsunami Patterns of Marine Travel

Around 70 to 80 years ago, most Moken families lived on their Kabang-boats for most of the year and pursued a mobile lifestyle primarily focused on the sea. Following the respective monsoon cycles, seasonal and regional variations in fish stocks, and spiritual calendar events, they undertook long boat trips on the Andaman Sea, heading for different islands and coastal areas. As an elder male Moken on Surin Island described his way of life when he was young:

When I was young and still living in Burma, if making a living became difficult, we often moved with the wind. The west wind took us to the Thai side, and the east wind blew us back to the Burmese side. Moving was a normal part of Moken life; we had to follow the seasons to find food. We never stayed in one place.

Figure 4

Patterns of Spatial Mobility Then and Now – Old and New Travel Routes of the Moken on Phayam Island



Note. Source: Longdo Map. Map data ©2025 Longdo Map, adapted by the authors.

In general, the mobile lifestyles and the routes of the Moken on both Islands were similar. During the dry season, the sea was mostly calm, allowing for extended boat trips to fish, dive for sea creatures, or visit memorial sites and former ancestral estates. However, this season was not only a peak in spatial mobility but also a time of cultural exchange with other groups. During the monsoon season, on the other hand, the Moken's spatial mobility was usually severely restricted by heavy rainfall, strong winds, and high waves, resulting in a decrease in long-distance and deep-sea sailing. Foraging then shifted to coastal areas to adapt to choppy seas and limited visibility. At that time of year, Moken families usually headed for sheltered bays, anchored their boats there, and erected temporary shelters on land. The main anchorages and temporary settlements were large islands or bays in Thailand or Myanmar that offered shelter from monsoon winds.

Typically, foraging routes were concentrated in certain areas, with some sites used for generations and holding cultural significance. The Moken emphasized the importance of these sites for food security and the preservation of traditional ecological knowledge. Based on this knowledge, they classified islands by size, shape, use, and the marine zones they contain, depending on resource availability and their cultural perceptions of the area. They have developed specific names for different archipelagos and individual islands in their own language—a nomenclature that serves navigational purposes and functions as a knowledge system for identifying resource-rich areas. In an interview, a middle-aged man on Surin Island commented:

The Islands we used to dive for shellfish and sea cucumbers, were Pu Lao Lor Tung, Pu Lao Ba Yan, Pu Lao Tae Hang, Pu Lao Lam Tae, and Pu Lao Lam Yang. Traveling to find seafood depended heavily on the wind and sea conditions. We sailed step by step, moving from one place to another as needed, sometimes staying for 15 days, sometimes only 3 days, before returning to the same area.

The Moken's detailed environmental knowledge underpinned both their traditional way of life and their survival in a challenging natural environment. Their skill in locating fishing and foraging areas and navigating by celestial signs such as stars and the sun allowed them to move freely at sea. Longer stays on the Myanmar side were also quite common, either to visit relatives or collect maritime resources, which were scarce in the Thai side. This historically mobile lifestyle, grounded in extensive environmental knowledge, contrasts sharply with the current restrictions on mobility and the decline of marine resources the Moken face today.

Current spatial mobility patterns: Changed routes – changed lives

The mobility mapping carried out on both research sites clearly illustrates the transition from a traditionally semi-nomadic, sea-based lifestyle to increasingly sedentary, land-based ways of life over the past few decades. As shown in Figure 4, the current travel routes (yellow lines) of the Moken on Phayam and Surin Islands have been drastically reduced compared with historical routes (red lines).

As for the Moken on Phayam Island, the northernmost point of their route ends at Ko Song in Myanmar, where they sometimes visit relatives. The northern route along the Kraburi River is now obsolete, and no Moken sail on this route anymore. A Moken man recounted:

We sailed along the river and caught fish and shellfish to sell and exchange with the villagers on the banks. We just kept going, looking for food, stopping at some places for two or three days. I still remember my father tying up the boat under the Sam Sip Bridge. When the number of sea animals decreased, we continued moving. Later, we didn't go

that way because the Thai people in that area said it was their place to make a living.

Over time, Thai settlements encroached further into the once-empty river and riverbank areas. The places where the Moken used to find food and temporarily moor their boats were no longer available to them.

The traditional southern sea route to Rawai Beach in Phuket has also shortened considerably over time, making Surin Island the furthest destination in recent years. Several Moken families from Phayam Island are related to the Moken community on Surin Island, and many travel there not only to visit relatives but also to earn a living from tourism. Shipping in Myanmar's waters has now almost entirely ceased, especially to the smaller islands of the Mergui Archipelago, where the Moken used to collect palm leaves, sea cucumbers, and shellfish. Although territorial boundaries were established early on, travel was still possible, as soldiers often let them pass. Border controls were tightened in the early 1990s as commercial fishing boomed on the Thai side, and Thai fishing boats frequently traveled to Myanmar because its waters were more productive, leading to frequent disputes between the two countries.

Currently, the Moken's travel routes no longer extend from Phayam Island to distant islands. Instead, they are limited to the area surrounding Phayam Island, which has become their permanent home. Most of their sea routes now lead to nearby islands in Ranong Province, such as Lao Island, Sin Hai Island, and Chang Island.

Despite losing much of their unrestricted mobility at sea, the Moken on Phayam Island still enjoy a relatively high degree of freedom to earn their livelihood compared to the Moken on Surin Island. Many islands in their area have not been designated as national parks. Nevertheless, they often compete with Thai fishermen for fishing grounds. Several islands in the region also face environmental problems, including garbage and polluted seawater. One Moken man on Phayam Island commented:

There aren't many crabs or fish around Lao Island anymore—too much garbage in this area.

In addition, although some coastal regions are not officially protected, they are inaccessible for economic activities because they border Thai resorts that attract tourists and do not tolerate the Moken in their vicinity. A Moken woman recounted:

“We were prying shellfish clinging to rocks along the shore where we've always gathered, but the Thai resort owner came yelling at us, cursing us, saying we were greedy like dogs coming to dig for shellfish to eat.”

Moreover, traveling by boat to distant islands to earn a living has become a significant investment, as modern boats require fuel. The further they travel, the greater the risk—there is no guarantee that the catch will cover the fuel costs. Many Moken do not own their own boats but share fuel costs with others or pay for part of the fuel with their catch.

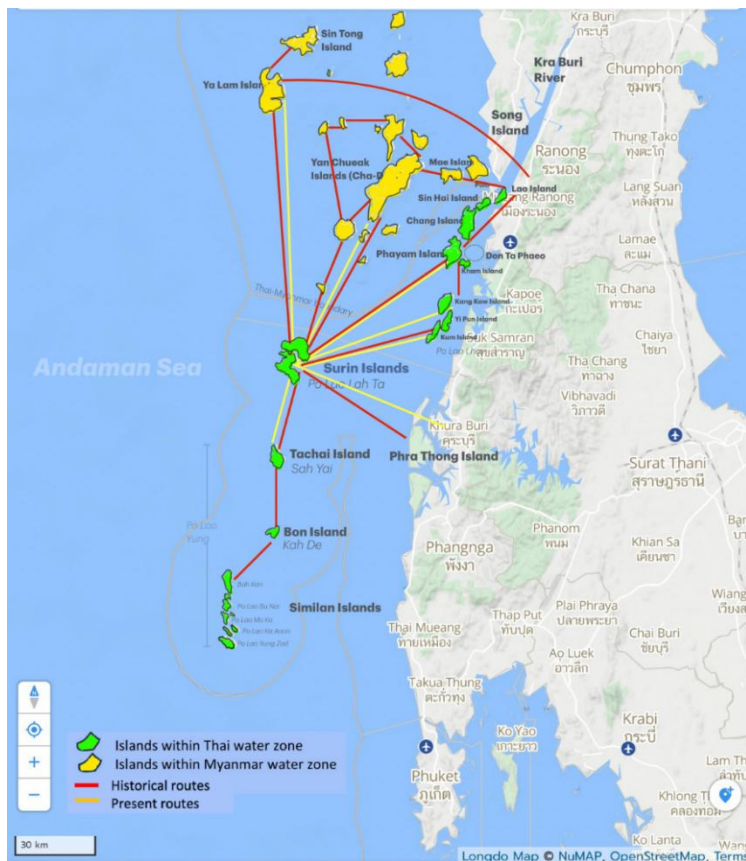
As with the Moken on Phayam Island, the traditional fishing and foraging grounds around the Surin Islands have shrunk considerably from what they used to be, and the sea routes the inhabitants travel are correspondingly shorter (Figure 5). In the past, they even reached the distant Similan Islands to gather marine resources. However, such long journeys are no longer possible because much of the area has been designated as national parks or reserves. Authorities have also imposed strict limits on subsistence activities within the Surin Islands, reducing access to the entire island area as it used to be they can now cultivate only a few locations.

These restrictions not only reduce the Moken's food supply but also undermine their ability to maintain houses and settlements on land. Previously, they relied on natural materials, such as palm leaves from surrounding areas, for roofing. Today, most palm-rich zones have been designated as forest reserves and are no longer accessible. The same limitations apply to

timber needed for boats and house construction. As a result, Moken households in Surin increasingly must buy costly building or repairing materials from the mainland. To cover these expenses, they rely on the growing tourism industry and increasingly harvest and sell marine products during the monsoon season when tourism is suspended.

Figure 5

Patterns of Spatial Mobility Then and Now – Old and New Travel Routes of the Moken on Surin Island



Note. Source: Longdo Map. Map data ©2025 Longdo Map, adapted by the authors.

In addition to spatial constraints, seasonal changes—particularly during the monsoon— affect their way of life. Although limited maritime activities are still possible at certain times during the monsoon season, increasingly unpredictable weather conditions and strong winds have made foraging at sea more dangerous and unreliable. As a result, the Moken generally limit their foraging to nearby islands and stay there for shorter periods than in the past. After gathering seafood, the Moken often travels to the coastal town of Kuraburi to sell their catch. From Surin Island, this journey takes about three to four hours by longboat but can take five to six hours in rough seas.

Currently, this traditional knowledge conflicts with industrialized fishing and restrictive nature conservation and environmental protection measures through the establishment of national parks, especially on the Surin Islands. As the state promotes settlement and the development of aquaculture, the Moken’s flexible way of life is increasingly threatened, despite its inherent sustainability. Other studies have also pointed out that much of this knowledge is at risk of being lost due to increasing pressure from modernization and settlement (Maulidyna et al., 2021; Sanglir, 2019). The effects of climate change are also altering the marine environment on which they depend, making it increasingly difficult to maintain their traditional

knowledge. In addition, younger generations are gradually losing their traditional seafaring skills and ecological knowledge as they encounter mainstream society. Today, many Moken men are employed by large Thai fishing companies because of their diving and fishing skills. As our interviewees told us, some Moken working in the fishing industry suffer from serious health problems. For example, they were pushed to dive with oxygen tanks to depths beyond what their traditional skills could safely accommodate, which placed severe strain on their bodies. The fact that many Moken who worked for large fishing companies were forced to fish with dynamite was also mentioned in an interview, as one Moken man on Phayam Island described:

We were instructed to use dynamite to quickly catch large quantities of fish. Many of us felt remorse and pain over our actions, as we knew that we were destroying the natural resources of the sea. We had no choice but to follow the investor's instructions. We didn't know how we would feed our families if we didn't do this.

External Political Pressure on the Moken's Mobile Way of Life

The traditional semi-nomadic way of life of the Moken has recently come under pressure not only from restrictions on their traditional range of mobility and the resulting limitation of their maritime economic activities, but also increasingly from an ever more complex web of external forces. The crisis of the traditional lifestyle and culture has thus also become a crisis of intersectionality. The most important external factors include territorial and regulatory interventions by the state, the establishment of a national park on Surin Island, the lack of Thai citizenship, and increasing mass tourism in the Moken's ancestral habitat. Cultural changes due to growing contact with the majority society and the increasing ecological impacts of advancing climate change are also among the external factors threatening the survival of the traditional Moken way of life. However, they are not the subject of this paper.

Territorial Interventions by the State

With the official demarcation and declaration of territorial waters in 1982, stricter measures were introduced to control traffic in the sea zone between Thailand and Myanmar. Since formal maritime borders were established, the Moken's freedom of movement has been restricted and is subject to immigration laws, border controls, and national sovereignty. Many Moken, especially those without formal citizenship, risk arrest or deportation if they cross these invisible borders. The designated territorial waters have restricted the Moken's access to their traditional fishing grounds and culturally significant islands. Areas that were once used for food gathering and fishing are now on the "wrong side" of the state border, restricting access and destroying their maritime cultural landscape.

The border has also divided Moken families and communities, some of whom live on the Mergui archipelago in Myanmar and others on the Thai islands. This has weakened social cohesion and made it difficult to maintain traditional exchange relationships. However, some secretly cross the waters to meet their relatives on the Burmese side, and vice versa.

The Establishment of the Surin Islands National Park

At around the same time that Thailand and Myanmar agreed on their shared maritime border, the Thai government also recognized the region around the Surin Islands' great ecological diversity and its importance. In 1981, the Thai government declared the Surin Islands a protected area and officially established the Surin Islands National Park. The park consists of

five islands located a few kilometers south of the maritime border with Myanmar and about 100 kilometers north of the Similan Islands, another ecologically important marine national park. The protected status of the Surin Islands has contributed to the conservation of natural resources. However, it has also brought new administrative and regulatory challenges for the Moken community within the park boundaries. After the islands and surrounding areas were declared a national park, they fell under the jurisdiction of the Marine Parks Division of the Royal Thai Forest Department. The superintendent oversees the islands and surrounding waters and is stationed on the island with his staff, or at the national park office in the coastal town of Kuraburi. Phayam Island is not part of the national park's protected areas, which is why the use of natural resources for the Moken on Phayam Island is far less restricted than on Surin Island.

The consequences of these government regulations, which at first glance appear sensible and worthy of support, are enormous for the Moken. Long-standing economic and cultural practices are now a point of contention with the national park authorities, who consider them violations of the regulations for protected areas. From the park administration's perspective, the Moken's use of natural resources should be strictly limited to personal consumption. Consequently, park officials actively prevent any commercial trade in marine products harvested by the Moken, whether through middlemen or direct sales to tourists. A middle-aged man on Surin Island reported:

In the past, when we lived on boats, we would collect shellfish, pry for shellfish, and gather sea cucumbers. That was before the national park was established. Afterward, some areas were restricted, and we could no longer do these activities as before.

Surin Island has been a national forest reserve since 1971 and a nature reserve since 1976. Regulations within the reserve, therefore, prohibited the felling of trees for the construction of houses and boats, as well as the collection of plants and animals. Due to these restrictions, it was impossible to build and maintain traditional Kabang-boats, and the Thai government's sedentarization policy forced the Moken to abandon their long-standing semi-nomadic way of life in the Andaman Sea. They moved into stilt houses on designated islands or in coastal areas and from then on lived mainly from fishing (Suzuki, 2015, p. 49). A middle-aged man on Surin Island expressed his frustration: "The national park has limited both the areas and the livelihoods of the Moken people. They prohibit hunting animals or using certain natural resources. The ways to earn our living have become limited."

Whether this strict interpretation of nature conservation policy is justified from the perspective of ecological sustainability is now increasingly being debated (Human Rights Watch, 2015, p. 16-17). It is argued that although the Moken live in a designated protected area, they should be granted regulated access to natural resources to earn their livelihood. Use for commercial purposes should also be permitted to a limited extent, provided that these activities are carried out in a sustainable and environmentally friendly manner.

Initial steps to enable the Moken and other Chao Lay groups to continue their traditional way of life have already been taken. In 2010, the Thai government passed a cabinet resolution setting out the following objectives (Cheva-Isarakul & Sperfeld, 2023, p. 536): the fundamental right to live in their ancestral settlements, the designation of special zones for community activities in the socio-cultural sphere, the possibility of using natural resources on various islands, and the establishment of special fishing zones. Although around a decade and a half has passed since this cabinet decision, discussions with members of the Chao Lay Andaman Network show that the well-intentioned aims formulated in the resolution have so far hardly been translated into concrete political measures. However, the members of the network continue to work tirelessly to ensure that the planned important measures are fully implemented, as one member assured us in an interview conducted in Kuraburi in November 2024:

I just came from Bangkok. We gathered and set up a rally in front of Government House to submit a letter urging the implementation of previous resolutions. Each time a new government takes office, we must act – otherwise, we risk being forgotten once again.

The Impact of Climate Change

Climate change poses one of the greatest threats to Indigenous coastal communities. Although the Moken do not use the term “climate change” as it is understood globally, they are familiar with it through modern media and have observed its tangible effects on their surroundings. Our interviews with Moken community members on both islands revealed profound environmental transformations reshaping their environment and traditional livelihoods.

Changing Weather Patterns

Moken respondents consistently reported shifts in seasonal and weather patterns. Unusual rain cycles, stronger winds, and increasingly unpredictable storms were among the most frequently mentioned changes. These conditions make it difficult to plan fishing trips or follow traditional sea routes. Altered wind patterns have disrupted navigation and maritime activities. The rise in lightning incidents and storm unpredictability has further restricted traditional fishing and shellfish gathering, forcing communities to adapt by temporarily pausing or relocating their activities.

Rising Sea Levels and Coastal Erosion

Both Surin and Phayam Islands have experienced noticeable annual increases in sea level. Low-lying Moken settlements are increasingly affected by flooding and erosion. On Phayam Island, residents expressed concern about the stability of concrete-framed houses built in erosion-prone areas, while traditional wooden stilt houses remain more resilient. Coastal erosion has also intensified. On Surin Island, sandy shorelines have been replaced by exposed rock as waves increasingly erode the coast. Elders recall that areas now covered in stone were once white sandy beaches. These physical transformations vividly demonstrate the pace and visibility of environmental change.

Declining Forest and Marine Resources

Changing weather and temperature patterns have also affected both marine and forest ecosystems (Kraisame & Thawornpat, 2023). On Surin Island, residents reported a decline in forest products once used for food, medicine, and daily needs. Resources such as rattan, bamboo shoots, herbs, and wild fruits have become increasingly rare. Even honey, yams, and wild vegetables are now difficult to find. In marine environments, coral bleaching has disrupted fish habitats and food chains. Warmer sea temperatures have caused severe coral damage, reducing populations of fish, crabs, and shellfish. Changes to the seafloor following the 2004 tsunami have made some areas deeper and more challenging to access, while seawater has become increasingly turbid and polluted.

The Moken’s environmental knowledge provides a vital perspective on climate adaptation. As rising seas, unpredictable weather, and ecosystem decline continue to disrupt their traditional rhythms, the Moken’s heritage—rooted in mobility, observation, and harmony

with nature—is being both challenged and transformed. Their experiences underscore that environmental change is not only ecological, but also cultural.

From Indigenous People to Thai Citizens: Issuing Certificate of Citizenship

Another serious issue that continues to complicate the legal status of the Moken in Thailand is the lack of citizenship for many of them. Without citizenship, they are deprived of fundamental rights, including property ownership, voting, and proper access to government services such as public healthcare and education. Obtaining Thai citizenship is made difficult not only by administrative barriers but also by aspects of Moken cultural practices.

A major obstacle preventing many Moken from obtaining Thai citizenship, as they repeatedly told us, is the lack of documentary evidence proving their birth on Thai soil. In the past, most Moken were born on boats or at home with Moken midwives, so no official birth certificates were issued. They also have no other written records, as the Moken do not have their own written language; knowledge is passed down orally, and systematic record-keeping has never been a cultural priority. As a Moken woman on Surin Island explained in an interview: “We have no written script. Everything was based on memory, passed down through oral tradition—stories, songs, and tales [...] That's why there were no written records.” Additionally, the language barrier remains a significant challenge in communicating with state authorities, especially for older Moken who have difficulty speaking Thai, making meaningful interaction with officials extremely difficult.

Another significant reason for the still relatively high proportion of Moken without citizenship is that they simply consider acquiring Thai citizenship irrelevant and do not actively seek it. The granting of citizenship is not only associated with rights, but also with obligations, such as compulsory military service, compulsory education, and the obligation to learn and use the Thai language. However, obligations of this kind are diametrically opposed to the traditional ideas of many Moken about an ideal way of life, which is characterized by unrestricted freedom of movement at sea, extensive independence, and freedom. Until recently, this resulted in a general aversion to acquiring Thai citizenship.

In recent years, however, attitudes toward acquiring Thai citizenship have changed, especially among younger Moken, as we have found in numerous conversations during our field research. It is now recognized that, in an environment where interaction with the broader society and communication with authorities are inevitable, the advantages of being a Thai citizen clearly outweigh the disadvantages. As a result, increasingly Moken are currently seeking to obtain identity cards, as a member of the community committee told us in an interview on Phayam Island:

Now, Moken wants to get ID cards, but we don't know what to do. Not long ago, staff on the mainland said they would take care of it and told me to collect birth certificates and other supporting documents. I collected documents for them. So far, there's still no update.

The lack of citizenship is also negatively affecting the Moken economically. As already mentioned, the traditional Moken economy has been in decline for some time due to restrictions on the use of marine resources and subsistence fishing. As a result, most Moken are now forced to seek employment in other, external sectors of the economy. Typical new fields of employment for the Moken today include wage labor in the commercial fishing industry and jobs within the national park or in hotels and tourism companies. However, without ID cards, opportunities for finding employment are limited, or undocumented Moken are only employed at wages that are well below average. In interviews on Surin Island, some women also told us that their husbands had no choice but to take on dangerous work with fishing companies and that some had lost their lives in the process, leaving them to care for their families alone.

Applying for identity cards for the Moken is further complicated by the tradition of adoption, which was common in the past. It is not uncommon for families to adopt children from other households and treat them as their own biological children. In such cases, clarifying the resulting unclear family relationships and checking the available documents requires a great deal of time and complicated research, which significantly delays the application process (Samlee-on & Sriroikam, 2022).

The Thai government recently launched special initiatives to solve the Moken's registration problems by sending officials to the concerned regions to promote registration campaigns. These initiatives seem to be bearing fruit, as the proportion of Moken with Thai citizenship has increased significantly in recent years. According to our field research, around half of the Moken living on Surin Island already have a Thai identity card (44 percent). In contrast, on Phayam Island, the corresponding figure is significantly lower, at less than 20 percent. However, many Moken remain unclear about the steps required for successful registration and the deadlines that must be met. More clear communication and comprehensive information from the authorities is therefore urgently needed. Communication is further hampered by the fact that many Moken still spend most of their day at sea and sometimes even sleep on their boats, which makes it much more difficult to contact the authorities.

Tourism—Two Sides of a Coin

The first ethno-tourism activities were recorded in the mountainous tribal areas of northern Thailand in the mid-1970s, and a few years later, the first signs of tourism appeared in the Moken settlements on the Andaman Sea. However, the big tourism boom did not begin until after the 2004 tsunami, when the Moken received international attention for their response to the natural disaster, and their settlements became important mass tourist attractions virtually overnight.

On both Phayam and Surin Islands, tourism has generally become the most important factor in the local economy in recent years and now represents an important source of income for the Moken in both locations—albeit under very different conditions. Tourists come to Surin Island mainly for the underwater world, to dive and snorkel, and to visit the Moken village and possibly stay overnight. Optional overnight stays on Surin Island are now also an integral part of many tourism companies offering tours to Surin Island. However, the average length of stay is short, with most travelers staying only one or two nights.

Tourism on Phayam Island, on the other hand, is characterized by both a significantly longer length of stay and a different guest structure. Typical visitors to Phayam Island are backpackers or families who usually spend several days or sometimes even several weeks on the island. For these groups of guests, visiting the Moken village is not necessarily the main reason for their stay, but rather an optional activity to be enjoyed during their relaxing beach vacation.

Reactions to this development within the Moken communities are divided. While the younger generation tends to view the increase in tourism positively, as it provides them with important additional sources of income, many older Moken are highly critical of its impact on their community. In their view, regular contact with tourists is contributing significantly to the ongoing decline of their traditional way of life and culture, as one man on Surin Island reported:

“Tourism has become the main source of income, while fishing plays a subordinate role due to the high costs and lower yields”.

It cannot be denied that Tourism has become an increasingly significant component of the Moken economy, offering both opportunities for income generation and challenges related to cultural commodification and social vulnerability. On the Surin and Phayam Islands, Moken households participate in guided tours and handicraft sales, which provide cash revenue that

complements subsistence fishing and foraging. Tourism enables households to access markets and goods previously unavailable through traditional livelihoods. In some cases, it allows younger generations to remain within the community rather than migrating for wage labor.

However, the integration of tourism into Moken livelihoods is shaped by structural constraints. The community's legal status and limited land and resource rights often restrict their control over tourism infrastructure and revenue streams. Furthermore, cultural performances and handicraft production risk being decontextualized, reducing living traditions to commodified representations for visitors (Husa, 2019; Trupp, 2014).

Gender-specific division of labor is also common among the Moken in tourist activities. Traditionally, men engage in offshore fishing, boat construction, and navigation, while women focus on nearshore foraging, household maintenance, and ritual practices. However, state interventions, especially tourism development, have reshaped these patterns. For example, men's traditional mobility is constrained by marine park regulations, which limit access to offshore fishing grounds and reduce opportunities to exercise cultural knowledge. Meanwhile, women increasingly participate in tourism by working for the national park and producing handicrafts, often in addition to their household responsibilities. This gender-specific pressure highlights asymmetrical experiences of marginalization: men are losing traditional spheres of influence, while women are confronted with an intensification of their work.

Closing Thoughts: From “Sea Nomads” to Tourist Guides and National Park Rangers? Survival Chances of a Minority Trapped in Place

As we have shown so far, the situation of the Moken on Surin and Phayam Islands illustrates how mobility, livelihoods, gender, and tourism interact and give rise to different experiences of marginalization within a community. An intersectional approach shows that vulnerabilities arise from the interplay of multiple axes of identity and structural constraints, such as statelessness, gendered work expectations, and limited access to territorial and economic resources. Moken men and women experience these burdens differently. Men face restrictions on traditional maritime activities and the transmission of knowledge due to mobility restrictions. Women, on the other hand, must cope with additional burdens from housework and participation in the tourism industry. These gender-specific differences illustrate how intersectionality deepens understanding of marginalization by highlighting the multitude of factors that influence who is most affected by structural changes and how they adapt.

Although Moken's cultural heritage is indeed threatened to some extent by loss and destruction, the findings of this paper paint a more complex picture. As our interviews have shown, although many Moken are concerned that their traditional socio-cultural knowledge and ancestral cultural practices are increasingly falling into oblivion, they do not consider this process irreversible and are trying to develop strategies to preserve at least some of their mobile cultural practices for the present.

Fundamentally, adapting to changing circumstances is nothing new for the Moken. Numerous studies have documented their resilience and the development of adaptation strategies against threats to their way of life that have been imposed on them from outside for centuries (e.g., Arunotai, 2006, 2017; Hoogervorst, 2012; Ivanoff, 1997; Sopher, 1965; Suzuki, 2015). Observations and conversations we conducted during our research stays also revealed several indications of adaptation processes and considerable resilience among the Moken in our study areas.

So, if the goal is to enable the Moken to remain in their traditional habitat and to preserve, value, and utilize their cultural knowledge in the best possible way, how could this be achieved? From the perspectives of diversity and intersectionality (Angelucci, 2017; Johnson

et al., 2022), the current situation of the Moken presents itself as follows. Due to their overlapping identities (Table 2), the Moken face multiple forms of marginalization.

Table 2

Multiple Intersecting Identities – The Case of the Moken

Identity or Status	Disadvantages Faced
Ethnic minority, indigenous status	Systemic discrimination, loss of traditional habitat
Mobile culture, statelessness	Lack of legal rights (property, education, healthcare), restriction of movement
Economic deprivation	Loss of traditional sources of income, lack of formal income, high poverty rates
Geographic isolation	Limited infrastructure and access to government facilities

Note. Source: own design

According to the intersectionality approach, when multiple forms of discrimination or disadvantage intersect, the result is not simply the sum of their adverse effects, but a new, specific process of discrimination that can have completely different and unexpected consequences for a person or group (Angelucci, 2017, p. 3). To ensure that the most vulnerable are not excluded from certain programs or measures, it is crucial to examine how different identities and systems of marginalization interact. For instance, before Thailand recognized the right to education for all children in 2005, Moken children were systematically excluded—not only because they lacked birth certificates, but also due to the absence of culturally and linguistically appropriate education, their statelessness, geographical isolation, and poverty (Human Rights Watch, 2015, p. 14). Theoretically, it is therefore essential to pay particular attention to the interaction between the various axes of discrimination and marginalization in inclusive development approaches. In practice, however, implementing such intersectional, inclusive solutions proves extremely difficult.

In any case, there seems to be a fundamental willingness in today's official Thailand to allow the Moken to remain in their habitat and integrate them into mainstream society. In our view, however, there is still a lack of understanding that the Moken in Thailand must not only be granted legal certainty and respect for their cultural identity, but also, above all, be involved in decision-making processes concerning measures and regulations that affect their land and livelihoods. The priority among the measures that should be taken and that form the basis for all further measures is the granting of Thai citizenship. This not only entails legal security and the possibility of claiming state benefits, but also the recognition of their rights of use for their traditional settlement and marine areas under Thai law. It would also be helpful to designate protected areas where sustainable practices, such as traditional fishing and the gathering of other marine resources, are permitted. In such zones, care must also be taken to ensure that the Moken's activities take precedence over tourist activities such as diving and snorkeling (currently, the opposite is often the case). Likewise, rather than simply employing members of the Moken community for a few hours, they could be meaningfully involved in the care and management of local resources within the park, working alongside park authorities and receiving an appropriate return.

Furthermore, it is not enough to emphasize the importance of the Moken's traditional ecological knowledge in development plans and media reports; it must also be officially recognized as part of nature conservation planning. Initial steps in this direction have already been taken with the establishment of a small museum and visitor center on Surin Island, where, at the time of our field research, exhibitions on the heritage of the Moken were on display, some

curated in collaboration with the community. The oldest members of the community play an important role in these cultural preservation projects by sharing orally transmitted myths, songs, traditional skills such as boat building, and other knowledge with both the younger generation and visitors. However, with the death of the older generation, the Moken language and customs are increasingly at risk of disappearing. It is therefore essential to promote funding for culture-related programs such as storytelling and the performance of traditional songs. During our research stays, for example, we observed efforts to pass on traditional songs and myths to the younger generation and thus preserve them, for example, through community gatherings where young Moken could listen to the stories and songs of their ancestors. This strategy seemed to be at least partially effective, although some younger Moken later emphasized in informal conversations that, while they appreciated the old songs and stories, they preferred current Thai pop songs from the charts and Thai television series.

A particular problem is how to deal with the steadily growing tourism industry in the study area. On the one hand, tourism offers important income opportunities, not only for the Moken but also for other inhabitants of the region. On the other hand, the first signs of overtourism are already apparent: the constantly increasing number of visitors is putting pressure on marine ecosystems and disrupting life in the Moken villages (see also Arunotai, 2006, 2017; Suzuki, 2015).

One way to give the Moken more control over their own habitat and prevent displacement by external tourism developers would be to support them in setting up their own tourism businesses. This would require increased training for Moken as ecotourism guides, park rangers, and cultural mediators, as well as support for community-led, culturally sensitive, environmentally sustainable tourism businesses. A basic prerequisite for such initiatives to be successfully implemented or even possible is access to microcredit or cooperative financing for Moken-run businesses (e.g., handicrafts, private accommodation, traditional foods). Initial steps in this direction have already been taken on Phayam and Surin Islands, for example, in the form of simple stalls selling Moken handicrafts or mobile vendors (often children) offering their wares to arriving tourists.

Finally, there remains the central problem that overshadows all others: the lack of participatory decision-making. The Moken remain largely excluded from political decisions that affect their lives. It is essential to ensure that the Moken are represented in park committees, community councils, and local authorities so that in the future, development or conservation plans in their areas cannot be adopted without informing those affected. Demands like these may sound like a pipe dream, but similar projects have already been at least partially successful in other parts of the world. The indigenous Bakaya people, who have successfully participated in the management of the Nouabale-Ndoki Park in the Republic of Congo (Nicolon, 2024), the joint management of the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park by the Anangu Aboriginal people and the Australian authorities (Australian Government, n.d.), and similar projects in the Amazon basin (World Economic Forum, 2024) are promising examples.

In conclusion, the Moken case highlights the importance of applying intersectional frameworks to Indigenous studies. It illustrates how marginalization operates across social, legal, and environmental dimensions. Additionally, we believe the knowledge we gained from our field research on Surin and Phayam islands is applicable beyond Thailand. It provides valuable insights into global conversations about Indigenous rights, mobility management, and the ethical incorporation of cultural heritage into tourism and development projects.

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Authors Contributions

Author 1 (corresponding author) conceived and supervised the research project and contributed to writing, review, and editing of the manuscript. Author 2 (first author) conducted the research, prepared the original draft, and led the review and editing of the manuscript. Authors 3–4 contributed to the research and to manuscript review and editing. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The study protocol was approved by Central Institutional Review Board, Mahidol University, Thailand (COA. No. MU-CIRB 2024/261.1710).

Informed Consent form

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study. Written consent was requested; however, for participants who were unable or unwilling to provide a signature or thumbprint due to limited formal education or cultural concerns, the study was explained in their mother tongue and verbal informed consent was obtained. Participation was entirely voluntary.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical and privacy considerations.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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