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### **Sustainable Tourism in Vietnam: A Social-Ecological Analysis**

Tourism has rapidly developed in Vietnam over the past three decades. Sustainable tourism has received increasing attention from researchers and practitioners. This study synthesizes literature outlining both social and ecological sustainability aspects in the utilization of natural and cultural resources for tourism development. Along with the ecological realm of governing marine and forest resources in tourism, the authors also discuss the social aspects of sustainability concerning cultural heritage conservation, community engagement, and visitor management. The analysis results in a call for a systemic approach to tourism development.

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Key words: Social-ecological systems, resource management, socialist market economy

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## **Introduction**

Vietnam is a developing economy where tourism brings a comparative advantage in development terms. Early modern tourism in Vietnam dates to the colonial period, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. French colonial administrators introduced tourism for the well-being of colonists and as an economic vehicle to achieve the colonial civilization mission, including the establishment of hill stations, seaside resorts, commercial hotels, travel markets, and related agencies. During the years of the Vietnam War (1954–1975), tourism activities were suspended, although travel for political purposes did exist to a limited extent (Bui & Bui, 2022). Immediately after the war, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam employed high-modernist thinking in managing common-pool resources, including tourism (Bui, Pham, & Jones, 2021). The subsequent transition from central planning to the market economy has informed tourism policymaking, particularly in the utilization of marine and forests. Owing to its high level of international integration, and its exceptional vulnerability to changes in global trends while being well-connected to domestic consumption and mobilization of resources for post-war development, tourism mirrors the transitional economy better than any other sector (Bui, Pham, Tran, & Nghiem-Phu, 2022). Being an organic apparatus of the socialist system, socially sustainable forms of tourism, such as pro-poor and community-based, are advocated along with shifting the economy toward market orientation and increasing democracy (Truong, Hall, & Garry, 2014; Truong, 2017).

While many aspects of the development process are still subject to centralized state planning, resource governance for development is highly dependent on the municipal administrators. Thus, sustainability in public resource management remains highly critical (Bruun & Casse, 2013) due to the disparity between planning and the implementation of the plans. The tourism competitive index of Vietnam is at an average level (67<sup>th</sup> worldwide), and the country's environmental sustainability ranks relatively low (129<sup>th</sup> globally) (Dinh et al.,

2019). Rapid visitor growth, declining visitor yields, and rising overcrowding pose further challenges to the objectives for the sustainable development of tourism set out in the Master Plan (Bui et al., 2022). Among various forms of tourism, natural resource-based tourism, including marine tourism and ecotourism are exposed to the critical thresholds of ecological sustainability. Meanwhile, social sustainability is arguably a major concern for cultural tourism.

### **Ecological Sustainability**

With a coastline that stretches over 3,000 km, plus thousands of islands, the marine environment offers great opportunities for recreational activity, but it is at the same time highly fragile (Do & Phi, 2022). Vietnam is also known as one of the world's richest countries in terms of agricultural biodiversity (USAID, 2013), adding to the potential of ecotourism with the country's high biodiversity including plenty of wild endemic species, diverse ecosystems, and beautiful scenery. While various natural resources have been mobilized for mass tourism development in the post-war period, current issues concerning resource planning and implementation of developmental plans along with external threats such as climate change demand reappraisal in the critical discourse on sustainable tourism.

### ***Marine Resources***

The division of policymaking and governance between administrative levels is critical in marine tourism. Tourism planning and policymaking by the central government are directed by the objectives of socio-economic development set by the Central Communist Party Secretariat. Streaming down to municipal levels, provincial officers monitor and implement these policies. While the local authorities and communities play a relatively minor role in decision-making and policy formulation, they are left to deal reactively with the

consequences of the top-down planning policies that are often beyond their administrative capacity (Do & Phi, 2022). This ambiguity results in long-standing issues that cannot be resolved such as overcrowding, shortages of basic resources (i.e., water and electricity), and environmental pollution and destruction. Having investigated the sustainability of marine tourism in the eight South Central Coast provinces of Vietnam, a Delphi study of 43 tourism experts find out that the efficiency in policy implementation is highly dependent on provincial governments' administrative capability. Although the provinces of Khanh Hoa, Da Nang, and Binh Thuan had all introduced monitoring sustainability indexes in tourism development, many indicators show unstable outcomes (Cong & Chi, 2021). Among these coastal provinces, the Quang Nam provincial government has a long and proactive engagement in tourism (Bui, Jones, Weaver, & Le, 2020) also shows the highest involvement in sustainable tourism development for all four indicators (economic, social, environmental, and institutional) (Cong & Chi, 2021).

The negative consequences of inconsistency between resource planning and development implementation are also observable in both touristic islands of Phu Quoc and Con Dao. The islands employ two distinctive models, where a deliberate development approach is implemented for the former, and a cautionary approach is advocated for the latter. Phu Quoc Island has inadequate water supply facilities leading to water shortages in peak seasons, which intensifies excessive groundwater extraction. Lack of wastewater treatment and poor law enforcement further exacerbate environmental degradation (Phong & Van Tien, 2021). Differently, Con Dao Island is an archipelagic tourism destination that interfaces with a broader southeast Asian marine region, continues to be dominated by prison heritage tourism (Hayward & Tran, 2014), and has a focus on terrestrial protected areas components (Khuu, Jones, & Ekins, 2021). Thanks to its significant position in the history of modern Vietnam, and its fragile ecosystem, Con Dao's tourism has been more carefully managed and

monitored by the central and provincial governments toward sustainable development from the initial stages of growth. This cautionary approach has allowed Con Dao to develop at a slower pace and to better manage impacts on local resources, albeit also thanks to it having a smaller land area and being less accessible than Phu Quoc (Do & Phi, 2022).

The central coastal area (from Thanh Hoa to Nha Trang) has a high concentration of seaside resorts, alongside marine and island tourism. The area, however, is vulnerable to tropical storms, floods, and beach erosion resulting from rapid climate change in the Pacific Ocean (Nguyen & Hens, 2019). For instance, changes to the climate affect the coastal destination of Hoi An Ancient Town in three ways: directly from sea-level rise causing coastal erosion in the seaside resort area, indirectly from the increasing severity of floods and storms causing negative impacts on the wooden houses of the heritage asset, and induced impacts resulting from climate change mitigation, which has affected the destination's attractiveness (Bui, Le, & Nguyen, 2017). The ability to adapt to climate change is apparent at the community level. The private sector has reacted independently to protect their properties, while the public sector has been unable to combat climate change owing to a lack of coordination between planning sectors along with limitations of authority and capacity. Similarly, the absence of strategic planning for climate adaptation in the tourism sector in the Mekong Delta has led to tremendous negative effects on tourism businesses in the region. The direction and vision for tourism development in the region remain unclear, hence, tourism businesses in the region cannot play a systematically positive role in the process of infrastructure development and mitigation of climate change impacts (Huynh & Piracha, 2019).

### ***Forest Resources***

The conservation of forests and reforestation have become focal policies since the mid-1990s, together with the emergence of ecotourism in forest-based settings. Since the late 1990s, the emphasis of the national forest policy has shifted from production to protection, including the management of forests for conservation along with local livelihoods and economic development (Pham, Bui, Do, & Jones, 2022). The critical view is that the role of ecotourism is to maximize economic benefits driven by large-scale tourism development at the expense of environmental and social sustainability (Ngo & Pham, 2016). Economic objectives seem to overtake social and environmental sustainability as ecotourism is expected to contribute to financial gains in three ways: pay for environmental services (PFES), entrance fees, and ecotourism services. Although all three forms of ecotourism-driven revenue are designated to be market-based options, the government defines the payment framework, regulates the payment mechanisms, decides the types of services, identifies the buyers and sellers, and ensures that the ‘transaction’ or payment occurs. Low prices for entrance tickets make ecotourism affordable for various social groups, such as students and seniors. On the one hand, it fulfills the social objective of making natural sites accessible to all social classes. On the other hand, the low-price entrance fee challenges the achieving the target revenue set by planners and administrators. Therefore, to meet the requirement of reaching the target revenue planned by the government, national parks only have one option: to allow an unrestricted number of visitors in, without consideration of carrying capacity (Ly & Xiao, 2016). While ecotourism may have served as a mechanism to reduce state budget burdens in the forestry sector, its contribution to forest protection might be limited owing to issues of forest governance. The development of ecotourism in national parks in Vietnam requires radical changes in management structure and awareness of ecotourism as a tool for biodiversity protection. Otherwise, promoting ecotourism services will simply impose more

stressors on current national parks in Vietnam without fulfilling the objective of turning them into an innovative source of financing for protected areas (Pham & Bui, 2020).

The development of ecotourism in Vietnam cannot exclude the local communities inhabiting the forests. The case of Hoang Lien National Park (HLNP), located in the mountainous Northeast region of the country, illustrates the notion of the socio-cultural aspect of ecotourism development in remote areas. The creation of non-agricultural jobs through the development of ecotourism activities in rural areas has been suggested as a viable means to offset pressures on forests. Non-agricultural jobs can also generate additional income for households and encourage the abandonment of less-productive farmland as well as the spontaneous establishment of secondary forests on former agricultural plots (Bui et al., 2021). This links ecological sustainability to the social sustainability of tourism pertinent to cultural destinations, as discussed below.

### **Social Sustainability**

Cultural resources and heritage of national importance have been commodified and politicized through tourism (Bui & Lee, 2015). The relationship between heritage, identity, and tourism is summarized in three ways: (1) heritage contributes to political identity (politicization); (2) heritage supports tourism (commodification); and (3) heritage tourism contributes to the individual's appreciation of places and their political identification (Ashworth, 1994). The plural use of heritage depends on the socio-political and economic context of the respective society (Bui & Lee, 2015). Starting in the 1990s, the growth of the tourism industry and the development of cultural heritage policy in Vietnam became deeply intertwined. The government viewed heritage tourism as a powerful economic and diplomatic tool; consequently, heritage preservation received a great deal of attention relative to other cultural endeavours (Saltiel, 2013). Issues concerning cultural tourism include balancing conservation with development, visitor management, and community engagement.



### ***Conservation and Development***

The social aspect of sustainability stands out in the struggle to balance objectives of conservation and development at UNESCO World Heritage Sites (WHS), such as Hoi An Ancient Town, The Trang An Complex of Landscape, and the Thang Long Citadel. In the case of Hoi An Ancient Town, through the sale of tourist entry tickets to the WHS, the municipal government has been able to restore properties, both state-owned and private, and has transformed the once deteriorating heritage town into a thriving tourist destination. Tourism development has helped lift a generation of residents of the Hoi An Ancient Town WHS out of poverty while generating considerable funds for heritage conservation. However, negative impacts of WHS status include consequences that are both economic (e.g., rising real estate prices) and social (e.g., stricter planning regulations and more tourist congestion). Aggressive museumification of the historic center, together with unfettered development of the buffer zone has thus sent warning signs to WHS planners and site managers (Jones, Bui, & Ando, 2022). Differently, the conservation of Trang An Landscape Complex, a mixed heritage site designated by UNESCO, is attributed to the governance of the heritage site. Tourism had developed in Trang An for decades before UNESCO World Heritage site designation. The site had no comprehensive land-use planning or meaningful heritage interpretation before its designation. The designation of UNESCO World Heritage status serves political and destination marketing purposes but does not necessarily reinforce sustainable development through comprehensive planning and sound interpretation (Bui, Le, & Ngo, 2018). The inscription of Thang Long Citadel was expected the boosting tourism, and result in further international recognition of Vietnam and its governance structure after being designated with World Heritage status in 2010 (Logan, 2014). However, the ambiguity exists in heritage interpretation serving for political identification at the expense of public intellectual accessibility (Bui & Lee, 2015).

### ***Visitor Management***

The study of domestic tourism calls for immediate attention as Vietnamese tourists has distinctive behaviours and preferences which demand careful assessment and planning toward sustainable outcomes. For example, visitation to Trang An is highly seasonal, focused on the first three months of the year, and confined to a well-defined linear network of waterways, with a large proportion of the property receiving few or no visitors. For the Vietnamese, Trang An is part of a pilgrimage route to Huong Tich Pagoda and Bai Dinh Pagoda. Pilgrimage is an annual activity during the festive season of spring (Bui, Le & Ngo, 2018).

Heritage and associated narratives of identity, however, appear differently from the perspectives of domestic and international visitors. According to Richter (1989), formal planning of tourism in developing Asia started around the beginning of the 1970s, and in general, gave greater priority to international over domestic tourism; western over Asian tourists; and up-market over low-spending clientele. The single most important objective was ‘more tourism’. The same has held true for Vietnam at the turning of the millennium, and more recently before the pandemic. The marginalization of domestic tourists lasted a long time until recently and owed to the conventional method of segmentation via a reading of clients’ everyday spending and behaviours (Gillen, 2009). While more attention has been paid to expanding international tourist markets (Bui et al., 2022), domestic tourism in the country has gradually expanded and shaped some unique consumption trends. The development of domestic tourism fits into a wider context of socio-cultural and economic development in Vietnam, where family values and employer sponsorship shape individuals’ travel decisions, reflecting a distinctive pattern in the transitional period from a central-planned to a market-based economy (Bui & Jolliffe, 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted the attention of the tourism business to recognize the importance and potential of the

domestic market, which has a better growth rate and greater spending power than the short-haul international markets (Bui et al, 2022). The domestic market in Vietnam has undoubtedly become the driving force for tourism recovery in the coming years.

### ***Community Engagement***

The socialist system supports alternative forms of tourism such as pro-poor and community-based tourism (Truong et al., 2014). Among pro-poor initiatives, the homestay has often been adopted as a tool to empower the local community and for poverty reduction by targeting disadvantaged groups (Truong, Hall, & Garry, 2014). Community-based tourism (CBT) has emerged as a socially sustainable practice aiming to engage the host community throughout the planning, development, and management of tourism. In Vietnam, CBT emerged as early as the 1990s and has undergone significant expansion in the last few decades, and has great potential to contribute to the sustainable development of ethnic communities in the rural and remote areas of Vietnam. Among various CBT practices, homestays have been initiated from within local communities and have been encouraged and institutionalized by local governments, as found in Hoi An (Bui et al., 2020). Vietnam CBT's fundamental challenges are identified in the areas of marketing, capacity development, and regulation, whilst opportunities are found in the areas of cross-sectoral collaboration, digitalization of tourism, and tourism policymaking. Tourism policies in the (post) COVID-19 period need to further support local CBT projects to build human resources (especially in the areas of marketing and management) to better capture and serve high-value domestic tourists while still maintaining environmental sustainability and the authenticity of local destinations (Phi & Pham, 2022).

### **Towards a Systemic Approach to Sustainable Tourism**

Tourism is a dynamically complex system embracing the interactive relationship between natural and cultural resources and the users of those resource systems (Bui & Saito, 2022).

Despite this, tourism planning is mainly based on forecasting methods that rely on historical data to predict future trends, even though past system behaviour is often a poor indicator of future behaviour. Thus, systems thinking is not a forecasting method, but rather a method used to understand the feedback mechanisms that influence system behaviour over time (Mai & Smith, 2015). Among useful heuristic devices for systems thinking in tourism planning and governance, the social-ecological systems (SES) approach has been proven as relevant to increasing resilience (Bui et al., 2020). This approach has also been congruent to reorienting the focus from a primarily physical historical connection with the past to an ongoing cultural and metaphysical connection—the ‘living heritage approach’ (Poulios, 2014) – that is, valuing spiritual and intangible beliefs even at the expense of the holistic conservation of tangible or material heritage. The systemic approach to sustainability, hence, deserves further attention in tourism research. Future research on sustainability, therefore, demands a viewpoint beyond benchmark indicator practices. More important research on the interdependence between humans and the ecosystem has the potential to provide better insights, crossing boundaries and constraints in resource management for sustainable tourism.

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