

Obstacles to the Development of the Eco-Tourism Center in Upper U Minh

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The tourism today has been one of key industries in many countries with a wide range of tours. Of these tours, the eco-ones are considered as the most fashionable when pressure of the city life gives rise to a need to enjoy the nature and a lot of townspeople are ready pay for it. The development of the eco-tourism, however, has led to the damage to the ecosystem and the sustainable development.

In recent years, there have been many opinions about the development of an eco-tourism center in Upper U Minh, a zone rich in ecological resources. This decision must be considered in terms of economic costs and benefits (it will take time to estimate the lost intangible value), and we see the following problems.

1. Tourism can cause damage to the ecosystem and protection of forests

Although the tourism is called "the smokeless industry," that is, it doesn't produce pollutants, it is only correct in its first stage of development with a limited number of tours. The tourism industry today, especially the eco-tourism, tends to damage the sustainable development.

When the tourism develops, many services aimed at tourists also grow and lead to social evils and environmental issues which tend to be out of control. The problems seem hard to solve in Upper U Minh where the general level of intellectual is low and most resident have no knowledge of the environment. The development of tourism could offer business opportunities to local residents and attract people from surrounding districts, which leads to formation of busy trading areas causing damage to the ecosystem. In addition, the task of protecting the forests will meet with serious problems.

2. Low level of public intellectual doesn't allow the development of the eco-tourism

The eco-tourism requires highly ecological awareness among local residents who will help tourists protect ecological resources. In Upper U Minh today, the awareness of forest protection is still low. Statistics from the Upper U Minh Forestry Agency show that number of cases of illegal

exploitation of forest is still high in spite of recent reduction, from 102 cases in 1999 to 58 in 2001, not to mentioned unhandled cases.

In addition, the task of protecting the forest in this zone failed to attract participation of local residents, and relies mostly of a small army of rangers. Thus, the development of the eco-tourism here won't be sustainable because of the lack of forces engaging in the forest protection.

3. Upper U Minh, as a national park, serves not only the tourism but also scientific researches

The national parks are specific areas that aim at (1) protecting the integrity of one or many ecosystems for today and tomorrow; (2) getting rid of exploitation and acts against preservation purposes; and (3) serv-

ing scientific researches, education and tourism on the condition that the environment is protected properly.

In the Mekong Delta, Upper U Minh is the only area of marshy forest containing characteristics of primeval swamp forest on peaty soil. This zone with swamps, forests and canals provides various environmental conditions for many wild animals. In March 2002, a fire damaged over 3,212 hectares of forest. Animal resource was reduced quantitatively and the species could only be recovered in a far future. The Upper U Minh forest houses many rare species of animals and plants, and many of them couldn't exist in a noisy and polluted environment. Their existence is certainly threatened by the development of tourism.

4. Political position of Upper U Minh must be preserved

This zone was a revolutionary base in the wartime and still a strategic position in the national defense. The development of tourism here could pose difficulties for securities forces.

The tourism can bring about many economic benefits without requiring huge investments, but the eco-tourism means huge intangible and social costs. Developing the eco-tourism in national parks must be done carefully in order to save next generations from disastrous consequences. ■

Table 1: Cases of illegal exploitation of forest in Upper U Minh

Year	Cases	Persons involved
1998	82	174
1999	102	219
2000	95	148
2001	58	95

Source: Upper U Minh Forestry Agency 2003

