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In what direction should Bến Tre tourism develop? This is a question that the provincial leadership and economic experts are much interested in. This paper introduces Bến Tre tourism, from its potentials to development solutions which are regarded as an important itinerary in the socio-economical strategy of the province, which re-affirms the economic structure of Bến Tre. In writing this paper the authors have used analytic statistical approach, descriptive comparison, especially the authors have had a survey of 200 enterprises operating in the field of tourism so as to try to find out what tourists thought about tourist products and the potential and elements having impact on Bến Tre tourism. Besides, the authors have also made use of secondary data supplied by the Bến Tre Cultural, Sports, and Tourism Department, and Bến Tre Statistics Office, among others.

With a natural area of 2,360.2 square kilometers on even terrain full of rich and bushy orchards along large rivers entangled by a system of canals favorable for waterways, Bến Tre is an islet province having lots of tourist potentials, especially ecological tours. However, in reality, this advantage of Bến Tre has not been fully exploited when the number of tourists visiting Bến Tre is

still scanty, services have not yet developed, tours are not carried out professionally, and economic efficiency is still not high... In order to develop the local inherent potentials of this very attractive “smokeless” industry, it is necessary to analyze affecting factors, find out the current state of operation, point out the orientation and propose solutions to achieve that orientation. This is a useful task not only for the draftsmen of the province’s economic development policy but also for those who are interested in and deeply loved this brave Đồng Khởi native country.

1. From potentials for development

Bến Tre province has lots of dunes such as Phụng dune, Quý dune, Ốc dune, Tiên dune, Hồ dune...then Vàm Hồ grove of birds, and the 8-village area in Châu Thành district which are very attractive tourist sites. The image of the traditional coconut trees in addition to sea potentials, islands, waterways, countryside...shows that the natural tourist resources of Bến Tre have common features of the waterways Mekong Delta but at the same time they also have their own characteristics very favorable for ecological tourist development, and resort tourism.

Moreover, Bến Tre is more attractive with Chợ Lách village producing potted plants, Mỹ Lăng vil-

lage producing rice waffle, Sơn Đốc deep fried paste and many village guilds producing fine arts and handicraft products from coconut trees at Phung dune, Châu Thành, Hưng Phong, and Giồng Trôm districts...

Bến Tre has many original places of cultural and historical interest appreciated all over the country such as Bến Tre Museum, headstones and monuments in memory of the country's heroes, patriotic personage and intellectuals: Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, Nguyễn Thị Định, Võ Trường Toản, Sương Nguyệt Anh, and Trương Vĩnh Ký, etc. In Bến Tre there are also well-known sites such as Định Thùý guerilla village, Vàm Khâu Bàng historical site. Also in Bến Tre many ceremonies are still observed like the making-offerings ceremony at the temple, the ceremony of making offerings to the whales, the fruit trees festival during Đoàn Ngọ Tết (on the fifth of the fifth month of the lunar year). All of these show that humane tourist resources of Bến Tre are plentiful, bearing lots of historical traditions and because of this it is very favorable to develop cultural tourist.

In Bến Tre, infrastructure and the socio-economical development have been growing relatively quickly in recent years, especially the completion of Rạch Miễu bridge is a great advantage in attracting investment capital as well as in developing trade and service, among which is tourist.

2. To actual operations

First of all, we have a look at the scale of the growth of tourists throughout the past years. In 1995 the total number of tourists visiting Bến Tre was only 91,090; in 2008 the number rose to 415,247 increasing 4.56 times compared with 1995, an average of 14.47% increase annually. In the first half of 2009, despite the effect of the global economic crisis and difficulties in the local economy, more tourists kept coming to Bến Tre and their number amounted to 293,350. The degree of the increase of tourists coming to Bến Tre is fluctuating and it is partly because of new de-

velopments in the global and regional economies. (Table1).

Table1: The speed of growth of the number of tourists-1995-2008

Year	In-country tourist		International tourist		Total	
	Number	Increase (%)	Number	Increase (%)	Number	Increase (%)
1995	75,740	2.58	15,350	11.34	91,090	8.34
1996	105,410	39.17	12,230	-20.33	117,650	29.16
1997	122,860	16.55	19,620	60.43	142,480	21.10
1998	115,160	6.27	26,900	37.10	142,060	-0.29
1999	103,310	10.29	41,920	55.84	145,230	2.23
2000	97,060	6.05	58,060	38.5	155,122	6.81
2001	146,900	51.35	103,160	77.68	250,060	61.20
2002	152,670	3.93	109,660	6.30	262,330	4.91
2003	166,900	9.32	85,640	-21.90	252,540	-3.73
2004	170,500	2.16	110,530	29.06	281,030	11.28
2005	186,960	9.65	126,050	14.04	313,010	11.38
2006	206,104	10.24	139,140	10.38	345,244	10.30
2007	221,860	7.64	155,173	11.52	377,010	9.21
2008	241,140	8.69	174,107	12.2	415,247	10.1

Source: Bến Tre Cultural, Sports, and Tourism Department

In 1998, 1999 while the number of tourists visiting countries in the region decreased considerably on account of the 1997 financial crisis in South East Asia, the number of international tourists coming to Bến Tre increased remarkably. This is because of the following factors: firstly, tourist sites along the Tiền river have been largely developed and many tourist tours have been put into operation; secondly, it is because of the co-operation with HCMC in the purpose of attracting more tourists to come to Bến Tre, and thirdly, the financial crisis in the region does not have much effect on the Vietnamese economy. From the above-mentioned reality, we can see that in the current globalization setting, if one is able to seize one's opportunity, one can help make the risk of one country to become the fortunate opportunity of the other. In 2003 alone, following the consequences of the terrorist attack on the USA in September 2001 and especially because of the spreading SARS, the number of international

RESEARCHES & DISCUSSIONS

tourists coming to Vietnam in general, and in Bến Tre in particular, reduced considerably.

Figures in the above table show that the number of international tourists coming to Bến Tre increases much faster than that of Vietnamese tourists. From 1995 to 2008, while the number of international tourists increases 10 times, the number of Vietnamese ones increases less than 3 times. Therefore, how to attract more tourists from all over the country to come to Bến Tre is a matter that should be taken into consideration.

Bến Tre tourism has had positive contributions to the economy of the province in a way that turnover is more and more increasing, and the value of tourist products accounting for an increasing share in the trade and service sector, thus making Bến Tre's GDP develop. (Table 2)

Table 2: Tourist receipts and budget income from Bến Tre tourism

Year	Tourist receipts		Trade & service products		Tourism	
	Value (VND million)	Increase (%)	Value (VND million)	Percentage in GDP %	Value (VND million)	As % of trade and service sector
1995	10,900		630,300	18.39	16,250	2.58
2000	32,000	193.60	1,096,220	20.24	62,200	5.67
2001	39,600	23.75	1,202,070	20.51	68,700	5.72
2002	45,500	14.90	1,396,600	21.66	80,530	5.77
2003	56,700	24.62	1,674,050	23.28	89,370	5.34
2004	67,900	19.75	2,034,870	23.46	100,750	4.95
2005	83,200	22.53	2,550,530	25.66	134,900	5.29
2006	104,300	25.36	3,280,800	29.67	189,900	5.79
2007	129,400	24.06	3,872,700	30.56	219,900	7.31
2008	161,180	24.55	5,410,100	31.75	395,200	7.30

Source: Data from Bến Tre Cultural, Sports, and Tourism Department

In the net turnover structure, receipts in food and service account for the biggest share, then receipts in accommodation, transportation, shopping, and finally in traveling account for lesser ones. However, this structure has more or less been changing throughout the years.

Table 3: Net turnover structure of Bến Tre tourism- 1995-2008 (%)

Year	Net turnover	Food	Accommodation	Transportation	Shopping	Traveling
1995	100,00	68,94	15,53	1,65	5,06	8,82
2000	100,00	55,66	10,58	3,81	17,10	12,85
2001	100,00	46,00	11,85	5,28	15,32	21,55
2002	100,00	49,35	11,12	6,85	14,13	17,20
2003	100,00	48,25	11,70	12,07	11,12	16,87
2004	100,00	47,56	16,80	6,32	14,47	13,57
2005	100,00	51,90	18,36	13,88	13,89	1,97
2006	100,00	51,10	16,90	15,01	14,00	2,99
2007	100,00	51,90	18,36	13,88	13,72	2,14
2008	100,00	48,78	17,41	13,45	18,14	2,22

Source: Data from Bến Tre Cultural, Sports, and Tourism Department

Table 4 below shows the estimations of tourists about Bến Tre tourism products in a survey of 115 tourists, among whom 47 are international tourists and 68 are in-country ones (hand-out forms are 200, out of which there are 137 returns- only 115 returns contain adequate data to be properly processed). The ratings are as follows: lowest assessment accounts for 1 point and the highest one equals 5 points and processed with Excel software.

Table 4: Assessment of tourists about Bến Tre tourist products

Standards	Average point
Local fine arts and handicraft	3.87
Local specialties	3.77
Sight-seeing tours	3.45
Resort tours	3.43
Ecological tours	3.52
Conference seminar tours	3.30
Historical and cultural interest tours	3.43
Countryside tours	3.61
Topic-related tours	2.96
Shopping tours	2.93

Source: Survey of the study group.

Results from tourists' assessment show that, in general, Bến Tre's tourism products are graded at average levels, the highest of which is about fine arts and handicraft products but its mark is only 3.87. Topic-related and shopping tours are not yet developed. According to tourists' estimations, the Bến Tre's tourism products are rather monotonous, lack highly special features, overlap each other, have low quality and operate on small scales. So, investment in organizing special, attractive tours with high quality is a "must" in the orientation of tourism development of Bến Tre province.

3. Affecting factors

In studying the affecting factors, with secondary data and information collected from various sources, the authors have found out that Bến Tre tourism has not yet developed well on account of the following reasons: accommodation facilities are still scanty and are of low quality; transportation means are few in number and are not diversified; tourism personnel are still not qualified enough as well as not very much professional and there is a risk of the environment being violated. Those are the problems that need handling so that Bến Tre tourism can develop more effectively and steadily.

Moreover, the factors affecting the Bến Tre tourist operations have been examined more thoroughly based on the assessment of the tourists.

Table 5: Assessment of tourists on potentials and affecting factors of Bến Tre tourism

Standards	Average point
Climate	3.80
Waterways resources	4.03
Forestry resources	3.46
Geographical position	3.66
Cultural heritage	4.00
Local customs and traditions	3.68
Local people's hospitality	3.75
Architectural constructions	3.44
Popular festivals	3.39
Accommodation facilities	3.50
Recreation and entertainment	2.94
Transportation means	3.33
Infrastructure:	
Communication, information, electricity, water supply, health care	3.30
Local people's sense of protection for the environment	3.44
The art of cuisine	3.65
Employees' service	3.80
Employees' professional attitude (professional and foreign languages levels)	3.46
General prices relating to tourism	3.51
Tourist safety	4.01

Source: Survey of the study group

The above table shows that the assessment of tourists on the potentials, and the factors making up and affecting Bến Tre tourism is on the average and fair levels. The factors concerning waterways resources, cultural heritage, and tourist safety are rated well by the tourists (above 4 points). This is the very strong point and advantage of Bến Tre tourism that need to be maintained and developed. Infrastructure for tourism is rated on the average level with a mere 3.3 points. These are the problems that require the attention of managers at all levels, that is, more investment should be

made to upgrade the infrastructure as well as various facilities so as to develop the tourism business. Recreation and entertainment services are rated poorly (2.94 points). Truly speaking, in reality, there has not been a large-scale recreation area at the service of both tourists and local people.

4. Solutions for development

The province's tourism has set up the objective of attracting 780,000 tourists in 2015 and of developing steadily. Currently, because of the weaknesses of Bến Tre tourism, it is necessary to point out and carry out the following solutions in synchronization.

Firstly, attract more strongly investment sources for tourist development: The act of attracting investment capital for tourist development is a very important step aimed at upgrading local infrastructure and installing equipment and technical facilities for Bến Tre tourism. Besides the allocation from the state budget which needs increasing, the province should have plans to attain ODA preferential capital resources, to ask for tourism supporting funding from the government and at the same time the province should also mobilize other sources from local as well as overseas economic sectors such as capital from enterprises, from the bank, from the public, and from joint ventures, etc. In order to do so, it is necessary to set up tourist promotion centers so as to provide information and self introduction on the media about feasible projects that aim at attracting local and foreign investors to invest in tourism. The province should keep on socializing tourism development, encouraging and providing favorable conditions for other economic sectors to take part in the tourism business. It is also necessary to simplify administrative procedures, develop supporting services, and create an open business climate to attract investors.

Secondly, diversify tourist products: In addition to putting emphasis on original and spear-headed tourist products on the coconut trees, Bến Tre needs to invest in the development of supplementary tourism products such as shopping tours, health care tours, sports tours, and entertainment tours. These tourism products help increase the competitiveness and the attraction of the leading tourism products as well as fully exploit the local

tourism potentials and at the same time insure the steady and sustainable development based on the ability to resist against complicated developments from within and out of the country which could affect the tourism. Moreover, it is necessary to give priority to large-scale projects which consist of various tourism products on the same site. Bến Tre could realize these projects on different sites such as areas on Phụng dune, Ốc dune, and in Mỹ Thạnh An commune. Besides, it is necessary to establish trade centers to introduce original and traditional products made by the province's fine arts and handicraft guilds.

Thirdly, enhance the tourism promotion and publicity: In order to help make people all over the country as well as people the world over get to know the tourism potentials of Bến Tre, it is necessary to carry out well propaganda operations, to put the image of Bến Tre, especially places of scenic beauty, on the media such as in the press, on television and the Internet. It is also necessary to set up, as soon as possible, a system of guidance and information centers to inform people of Bến Tre's tourism and tourism potentials at public places, at important crossroads, especially in the areas of Châu Thành district and Bến Tre town. At the same time, tourist representative offices should be established at local and foreign key markets.

Fourthly, speed up the training of human resource for tourism: At first, it is mandatory to carry out investigation on the estimation of the current capability of the cadre staff and to confirm the need of stating objectives for tourism, hence to make plans for training tourist staff. There should also be a diversification in training courses at all levels, from schools and vocational centers in charge of training professionally tourism personnel in order to meet the requirements of the local authority, to training centers providing short-term training courses. Experience-exchanging seminars should be organized for tourism staff both in the country and in foreign countries, especially for management personnel and enterprises' leadership. The province should try to obtain support from the human resource development project of the General Tourist Office funded by EU.

Fifthly, protect the environment to ensure sustainable development of tourism: It is necessary to make plans for tourism development in accor-

dance with the socio-economic master-plan of the province as well as with that of the whole region. The appropriate point of view in making this plan is to reasonably and effectively exploit the potentials resources but the ecological system must be maintained to insure sustainable development. Any tourism development projects should be carefully considered and should contain sound arguments and should never do harm to the environment, both naturally and socially. Moreover, it is necessary to effectively overcome environmental incidents in areas having great tourist potentials. In order to insure sustainable tourism development Bến Tre should organize training courses aimed at giving its cadres skills in management, technological science, and professional know-how so that they can be more aware of the environment and of the relationship between the environment and the socio-economic development. They should also have good knowledge of the environment law and governmental regulations concerning the protection for the environment. At the same time, in order to make people become aware of the protection for the environment, it is necessary to carry out well propaganda operations in the media, organize gatherings and seminars discussing the environment topic, thus improving the community life and creating more jobs for people living in areas having tourism potentials.

Sixthly, improve the effectiveness of governmental management and policy mechanism relating to tourist: The content of this solution consists of:

- Setting up specialized agencies in charge of developing tourism at key areas such as Châu Thành district, Bến Tre township (now a third grade city), Ba Tri and Chợ Lách districts.
- Composing and publishing legal documents concerning tourism such as regulations of managing tourism areas in the province, regulations of

managing plans, regulations of building tourism constructions...

- Having plans to educate, train, recruit and build up human resource for tourism industry.
- Completing, as soon as possible, detailed plans for key tourism areas, thus making a basis for investment and investment attraction.
- Establishing, as soon as possible, the province's tourist association consisting of provincial enterprises operating in tourism which should have close links to the Mekong Delta tourism associations and to tourism associations nationwide.

At present, Bến Tre is no longer an "oasis" as it used to be, thanks to the Rach Miếu bridge that has been already put into operation and in the near future, Cổ Chiên and Hàm Luông bridges would be built on National Route 60. If the potentials of Bến Tre are to be exploited based on its geographical position, its natural landscapes, its historical and cultural traditions, Bến Tre tourist, with its original products unable to find anywhere else, would surely have a great leap in its development and deserve to be the spearhead sector in the provincial economy. Bến Tre would be very attractive with its clean and green ecological tourism areas, and with its hospitality which would be able to attract not only local tourists to come here to enjoy ideal weekends but also foreign tourists when they set foot on Vietnam, on the Mekong Delta■

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