

Revisiting Community-Based Ecotourism in the Northern Central Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Ecotourism has witnessed the fastest growth among other types of tourism, and recently been generating substantial revenues for many countries. Although ecotourism has great potentials, it may not necessarily be a mode of sustainable tourism because it can be objected by local communities. As per this fact, a so-called community-based ecotourism has been developed. The present paper aims to synthesize experiences of developing community-based ecotourism in some countries, analyze the operation of ecotourism in the North Central Vietnam (henceforth called NCV), and then extend some solutions to the sustainable development of the community-based ecotourism in NCV.

Keywords: Experience of development, community-based ecotourism, Northern Central Vietnam (NCV)

1. INTRODUCTION

Together with the social development and tourism trends in the world, ecotourism has flourished, generating considerable revenues for many countries. In 2002, ecotourism helped the USA earn USD77 billion (LOHAS, 2005). According to the International Ecotourism Society (TIES), since the early 1990s of the 20th century, ecotourism has thrived rapidly in the tourism industry, reaching a growth rate of roughly 20 to 34 percent per annum (TIES, 2006). However, there is a menace to the nature reserves and sanctuaries caused by mass tourism, so issues related to the sustainable development of ecotourism have been taken into account in many countries. Nowadays, ecotourism must be studied in regard to nature preservation and social responsibility. As was defined by TIES, ecotourism is “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people”.

A true ecotourism is not identical to the natural tourism or mass tourism. Several ecotourism projects in the world have identified one crucial reason hindering the sustainable development of ecotourism, that is, fierce opposition of local community because it does not benefit all people. Therefore, in order for ecotourism to achieve its targets of nature preservation and sustainable development, the community-based ecotourism has been developed. This is also a popular tourism trend nowadays.

As set forth in the master plan for the development of Vietnam’s tourism in the period 1995-2010 and tourism development strategy for the period 2000-2010, NCV, which covers from Quảng Bình to Quảng Ngãi, is deemed as one out of three major tourist attractions in Vietnam. Bestowed with original,

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pristine and diverse natural resources, and various terrains, NCV has a great deal of potentials for operating ecotourism.

In past years, even though ecotourism in many provinces of NCV has flourished, it does not realize their full potentials and starts to reveal some drawbacks (i.e. adverse effects on the natural environment and landscape). Therefore, for the sustainable development of ecotourism in NCV, it is necessary to study and develop the community-based ecotourism.

This issue thus far has attracted concern of some Vietnamese researchers such as Trần thị Mai (2005), Tăng Thị Duyên Hồng (2007), and Nguyễn Quyết Thắng (2010), etc. Yet, they mainly review literatures or sum up the operation of the community-based ecotourism in some tourist attractions of Vietnam, or experience of some other countries. No research has evaluated and systematized the evolution of community-based ecotourism in the world in general and in NCV in particular. Therefore, the present paper is to synthesize, analyze and evaluate the current situation of the community-based ecotourism in NCV, and then provide lessons as well as solutions to its sustainable development.

2. DATASET AND METHODOLOGY

a. Data Collation:

The paper employs the secondary data which describes developments of community-based ecotourism in the world, and numeric data collated from provinces of NCV.

The primary data is collated from the survey which was conducted in 12 natural resource sites in 2010 and early 2011, that is, Phong Nha – Kẻ Bàng; Bạch Mã – Lăng Cô; beaches in Đà Nẵng, Quảng Nam; and others sites in NCV. The number of questionnaires is calculated according to the formula:

$$n = \frac{Ns^2 \times Z^2}{N \times \Delta^2 x + s^2 \times Z^2}$$

Where,

N: The expected number of tourists in the survey term

Reliability level: 95%

$\Delta x = 5\%$

s: standard deviation

There are 1,600 samples, but there are merely 1,216 completed ones (542 samples much more than the sample size calculated in accordance with the above-mentioned formula). Of them, there are 468 international tourists. Besides, the authors also survey 248 households residing in natural resource sites such as Phong Nha National Park, Cảnh Dương Beach (54 samples); beaches of Cửa Tùng and Cửa Việt (32 samples); Bạch Mã National Park, Lăng Cô Beach (62 samples); Non Nước Beach, Ngũ Hành Mount (44 samples); Cửa Đại – Quảng Nam (34 samples); and Mỹ Khê Beach (22 samples). The author did have some quick interviews with 16 experts who are tourism authorities, natural resources managers, and tour providers; and survey 12 resorts in nature reserves and eight travel agencies (e.g. Hương Giang Travel Company, Vitours in Huế and Đà Nẵng, Green Travel Hue – Hue Green Tourism Company, Nhân Thắng Travel Company, VietCircle, SaigonTourist in Huế and Đà Nẵng) which exploit ecotourism and attract 52.9% of eco-tourists of the region in 2009.

b. Methodology:

The paper employs the comprehensive method and library research in combination with statistical methods which will be employed to choose the research site, sample, and extend criteria of analysis.

3. EVOLUTION OF COMMUNITY-BASED ECOTOURISM IN THE WORLD

a. Developing Policies for Community-Based Ecotourism:

Most countries treat the policy development as an essential part for other activities. In Australia, the national strategy for sustainable development of tourism and national ecotourism programs has been drafted since 1992, which emphasize the participatory role of the people.

In Indonesia, some organizations such as Dirjen Perlindungan dan Konservasi Alma (Office of natural preservation and reserve), Ministry of Forestry and Afforestation, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Dirjen Pembangunan Daerah (local development boards), Masyarakat Ekowisata Indonesia (MEI, or Indonesian Association of Ecotourism), and NGOs have taken part in establishment of governing principles for the development of ecotourism in Indonesia.

Of the five governing principles, three most important ones related to community-based ecotourism include (i) relatedness to the local community, (ii) generation of economic benefits for communities directly affected by tourism activities; and (iii) preservation of socio-cultural and religious values of the local people (Anak Agung Gde Raka Dalem, 2002). Furthermore, general guidelines for the development of ecotourism promulgated on April 28, 2000 have also emphasized the community-based ecotourism; and the Indonesia's Environmental Impact Management Agency (BAPEDAL) has introduced numerous policies and sample programs of community-based ecotourism.

b. Implementation of Master Plan of Community-Based Ecotourism:

To implement the master plan of community-based ecotourism is for local community to get access to and enjoy benefits from ecotourism. The Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) of Nepal is established to constrain adverse impacts of tourism on the natural, socio-cultural and economic environments. In this project, opinions of local communities will be consulted and they can involve in the decision-making process. This project is highly appreciated for achieving all its objectives.

The community of Huaorani in the Yasuni Naitonal Park of Ecuador (a biosphere reserve acknowledged by UNESCO) has played successfully their role in the community-based ecotourism. In relevant meetings, they extend a lot of aspects and perspectives on ecotourism, environmental protection, income distribution and management, and training, etc.

c. Educational Development for Local Communities:

The implementation of community-based ecotourism projects in the world has pointed out the important role of educational development which can help local people involve in and enjoy benefits from ecotourism management. In the strategy for development of ecotourism in Thailand, training is set forth in the third principle, “ecotourism must promote educational development and the creation of awareness to maintain the ecosystem of the area rather than just exploit economic growth” (Vunsadet Thavarasukha, 2002).

Most of successful ecotourism projects have emphasized the crucial role of educational development. For instance, the TROPIC Ecological Adventures has established a partnership with the Huaorani

people of Quehueri'ono village in Ecuador and provided them with training programs on the practices of ecotourism, conservation, foreign language, and management. Huaorani cooks are also trained to prepared meals for tourists (Andy Drumm, 1998).

d. Establishment of Appropriate Management Models:

In order to run the community-based ecotourism successfully, it is necessary to employ an appropriate management model. By studying extant models, we recognize that they take either a participatory approach (i.e. the local people are empowered to make decisions and enjoy economic benefits from ecotourism) or a beneficial approach (i.e. the local people can enjoy economic benefits yet are not fully empowered).

In the ecotourism project in the Gunung Haimum National Park (West Java of Indonesia), to preserve and employing biodiversity by empowering the local community, they establish KSM which includes a panel of commissioners who are representatives of handicraft guilds, local authorities, NGOs, national park authority, and a management board to manipulate activities. In terms of organization, KSM is identical to a cooperative of Vietnam. Together with other organizations, KSM has actively involved in disseminating information about environmental protection to tourists and local communities.

Statistics show that the Gunung Halimun ecotourism project did welcome both domestic visitors (some 80%) and foreign tourists in 1998; and each household would enjoy 11% of the KSM's revenue each month (i.e. around IDR178,000 p.a.). In fact, this income is much higher due to extra spending by tourists.

Sua Bali (Gianyar, Bali, Indonesia), a small tourist attraction, was presented with an Award for Socially Responsible Tourism in Berlin of Germany in 1996. Visiting Sua Bali, tourists can learn traditional arts of Bali such as handicrafts, wood carving, cuisine, etc, besides relaxation. They are treated as a member of the community; and in return, they have to pay US\$1 to the conservation fund (Anak Agung Gde Raka Dalem, 2002). Of the aforementioned ecotourism projects, the Gunung Halimun is typical of the participatory approach whereas the Sua Bali is representative for the beneficial approach.

Another model that Vietnam in general and the NCV should consider is the management by associations. This model is very useful in seeking for and receiving supports from sponsors, NGOs, etc.

In the Community Baboon Sanctuary (Belize), under the direct support of Audubon Belize Association, a management board (including representatives of land owners, villagers and the association) is established (R.H. Horwich, D.Murray, E. Saqui, J. Lyon and D. Godfrey, 1998). In addition, there is an advisory board. Supports of the government and other organizations for the infrastructure, training, education, propagation, etc. are often through associations and development projects. Local households are encouraged to build rooms for rent. Other services such as boating, horse riding, guiding, etc. are provided by local people and coordinated by sanctuary rangers.

This model is successful in that it combines associations (as a generic administration unit), advisory board, and board of management (as coordinator of activities). The aforementioned models are very useful for Vietnam in general and the NCV in particular to consult.

e. Environmental Education:

Up till now, experts in ecotourism have asserted the significance of environmental education, which is an indispensable part in the sustainable development of ecotourism. Experiences of other countries have proven that in addition to criteria of environmental protection, it is important to enhance the environmental education via publications, videos, pictures, plays, etc. The Tourism Authority of Thailand in collaboration with other departments has drafted standards for all fields of ecotourism (diving, bird watching, and mountain bicycling, etc.) by which they disseminate education in environmental issues through education centers, films, and handouts, etc. Meanwhile in Belize, people have gained environmental and cultural education via community outreach programs. This has encouraged the sustainable deployment of natural resources and enhanced awareness of cultural heritages in Belize.

f. Miscellany:

In order to further community-based ecotourism sustainably, many countries also attend to other aspects such as investment in development plans, advertising activities, development of community-based eco-tour packages, preservation of local traditions and cultures, etc.

4. LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ABOUT ECOTOURISM IN NCV

a. Community-Based Ecotourism Activities in NCV:

Tourism business in NCV has made good progress in recent years but it was limited to cultural tourism. Number of buyers of eco-tours increased very slowly, equaling only 23% of visitors to this zone.

Table 1: Visitors on eco-tours in NCV in 2005-2010

Indicator	2005	2008	2009	2010	Average growth rate
Eco-tourists	996.8	2,194.5	1,801.7	2,372.5	1.19
Foreigners	367	735.7	597	813.7	1.11
Nationals	620.8	1,458.8	1,204.7	1,558.8	1.20
As % of total visitors	16.1	23.8	19.8	22.0	-

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from related provinces

Investment in ecotourism has increased recently. Collected data show that 12 tourism projects in Lăng Cô, Cảnh Dương and their neighborhoods have been licensed from 2006 up to February 2011. Their total realized capital was estimated at VND11,932 billion. Such efforts as publicity, management of natural resources, and environmental education have been promoted. Besides these achievements, however, many shortcomings and inadequacies have made their appearance and caused damage for the environment and landscape. In certain districts rich in natural resources, ecotourism activities that aim at preserving the environment and natural resources are not fully supported by local communities.

In 2010, along with a survey of characteristics of eco-tourists, we added questions about demand for eco-tours linked with local communities (1,216 eco-tourists) in order to decide whether tourists want to learn about living activities of local communities, and whether they engaged in such activities. Results are presented in Figures 1 and 2.

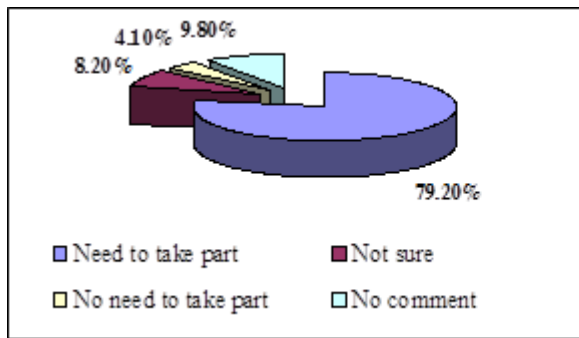


Figure 1: Tourists' demand for chances to learn about local living activities

Source: Authors' survey

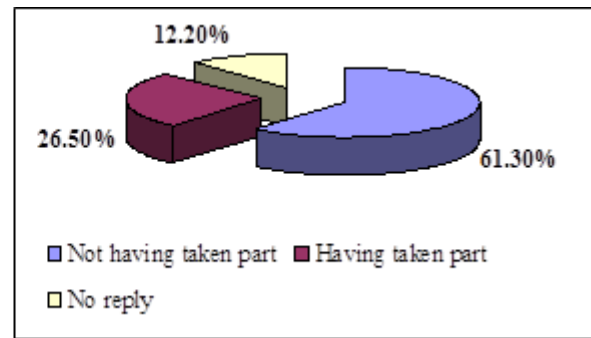


Figure 2: Involvement of tourists in local living activities

Source: Authors' survey

Asked about their impression of participation of local communities, 956 tourists (78.6%) responded and the rest offered no comment (Figure 3). This shows that in their opinion, participation of local community is very low. A survey of 248 households in natural resource sites was also conducted, and results, presented in Figure 4, showed that many households earned no income from tourism while some others could only gained humble sums. Most households that earned some incomes from tourism could not determine how much they earned.

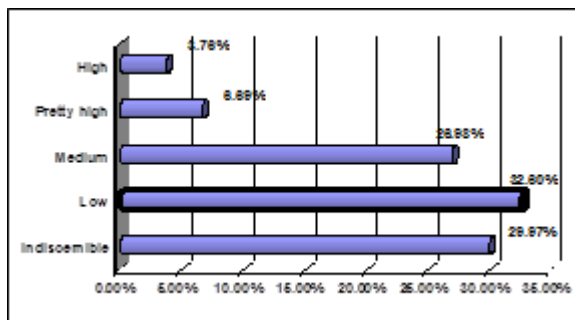


Figure 3: Tourists' impression of community participation

Source: Authors' survey

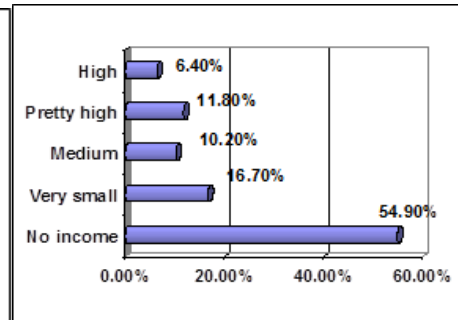


Figure 4: Tourism receipts for community

Source: Authors' survey

Our survey of employment opportunities for local workers in 12 tourism sites in early 2011 shows that growth rate of such opportunities in 2008-2010 varied between 1.14 and 1.41 times. Several enterprises have most of their workforce recruited from local communities, which helps reduce their labor cost. Lăng Cô-Huế Resort for example, an attractive destination for tourists since its establishment in 2002, has most of its workforce of 120 workers recruited from natives of this zone, as shown in Figure 5.

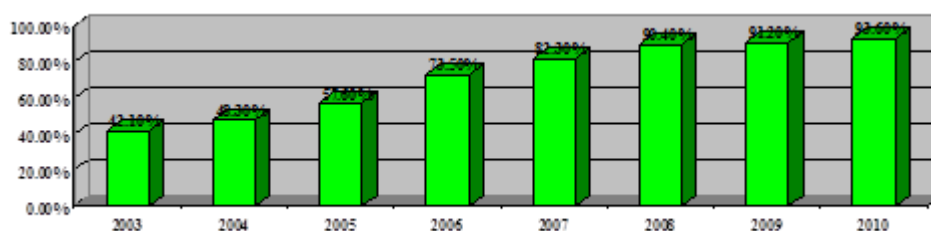


Figure 5: Employment of local workers at Lăng Cô-Huế Resort

Source: Data supplied by Lăng Cô-Huế Resort

Local workers accounted for 93.6% of the labor force at tourism sites in 2010, the rest are usually managers and come from other provinces. The Lăng Cô-Huế Resort is typical of creation of jobs for local workers because this enterprise has adopted a strategy to train its human resources from local residents right after its establishment. In other enterprises in NCV, percentage of local workers is small because of various reasons, such as difficulties in recruiting skilled workers from local communities, or shortage of fund for training, etc.

Our survey of eight tourism enterprises that actively engage in ecotourism programs in NCV shows that only a few eco-tours are linked with local communities and such tours accounts for only 9.3% of offered tours (data gathered from 2009 to March 2010). Our survey of tourists to this zone also reveals that only 41.3% of them (503 out of 1,216 returned questionnaires) heard about community-based eco-tours from tour agencies. This figure is even lower among foreign tourists (173 out of 468 surveyed tourists).

Although incomprehensive, the data show that community-based eco-tours in NCV are not well organized and advertised. In quick interviews with 16 experts and managers whose jobs are related to ecotourism, only two of them said that there was a link at a medium level between tours and local communities, the rest said the link was at a low level or indiscernible.

Results of the survey, although incomprehensive, reveal that ecotourism in NCV is not linked closely with local communities; benefits for such communities are small and not evenly distributed; eco-tours offered to tourists are not well developed; benefits and employment opportunities for local communities, as offered by Lăng Cô-Huế Resort, are still small and rare. This situation causes damage for attractiveness and sustainable development of ecotourism activities. In our opinion, it is about time for authorities to spend more time and energy on development of community-based ecotourism in NCV.

b. Lessons and Recommendations on Development of Community-Based Ecotourism:

From experience of developing community-based ecotourism and existing conditions, we hereby introduce several lessons and recommendations on ecotourism in NCV.

- Developing policies and governing principles on community-based ecotourism: This is one of the most principal tasks that provide legal basis for development of community-based ecotourism. To help the ecotourism develop in tourism sites in NCV, such a legal basis should be in place. Necessary policies are guidelines on community-based ecotourism, policies on protection for the environment and cultural heritage, and encouragement to tourism agencies that serve the good of the community.

Additionally, governing principles of ecotourism should also be promulgated aiming at (1) supporting nature preservation programs; (2) providing local communities with economic benefits; (3) preserving socio-cultural values of local communities; and (4) observing regulations on tourism and environmental protection.

- Implementing plans on community-based ecotourism: When working on zoning plans in NCV, especially in natural resource sites, the governing principle is to delegate more rights to local communities. To achieve this goal, the plan for ecotourism in NCV should be oriented toward local communities. In our opinion, the master plan should be based on the following principles: (1) participation of local communities; (2) protection for natural resources and communal culture; (3) the best use of local resources and materials; (4) development models appropriate to local landscape and characteristics; and (5) sustainable development of benefits for local communities.

- Vocational guidance to ecotourism: To enhance the role and participation of local communities in ecotourism development, local authorities and companies should support and upgrade vocational training among local communities. At natural resource sites in NCV, training courses in tour guiding service, culinary skills, and development of tourism services are much needed. Incentives could be given to companies that engage in this effort. Additionally, authorities should make plan to train officials, especially natives of NCV, specializing in ecotourism management in preparation for long-term development plan.

- Building suitable models for community-based ecotourism management: By examining models in foreign countries and NCV, we suggest that a participatory approach could be taken for wildlife sanctuaries, nature reserves, and national parks. For districts zones for resorts, hotels, and recreation grounds, etc., built and run by enterprises around natural resource sites, a beneficial approach could be taken by local authorities by which they encourage enterprises to employ local workers, products and services for tourists (such as traditional entertainment shows, cookery demonstrations, handicraft training courses, etc.). Such models as “service cooperatives” may be efficient in distribution of benefits among communities. Ecotourism associations may support exchange of experience, publicity, supply of information and training courses, and search for ecotourism development projects financed by local and foreign organizations.

- Promoting environmental education among local communities: Education programs should take various forms because it is difficult to gather the whole community in a place. Besides such activities as distributing handout, giving talks, or launching environment campaigns, education programs may employ interesting and exciting media such as films, pictures, cartoons, and vaudeville shows, etc. Experience shows that enhancing the roles of civic organizations, such as associations of war veterans, farmers, or women, etc., is an effective way to carry out such education programs.

- More investment in ecotourism and supporting activities: central and local governments should increase investment in infrastructure and facilities needed for ecotourism development, study of local resources, and development of traditional handicrafts of local communities, etc. Other necessary activities are advertising local ecotourism, developing community-based ecotourism products, and preserving traditional culture, etc.

5. CONCLUSION

Development of community-based ecotourism may actively support a sustainable development of tourism in NCV. To achieve this aim, implementing consistently all necessary stages, from devising right policies and mechanisms, zoning areas for tourism linked with local communities, training tour guides, organizing reasonable models, giving courses in environment protection, and supporting other tasks is very crucial. For the time being, we recommend central and local governments and tourism authority in NCV to promulgate policies and governing principles on ecotourism to serve as a basis for other efforts. These policies and principles should aim at delegating legitimate rights to, and ensuring actual benefits for, local communities.

In organizing and launching ecotourism activities, managerial methods suitable for local conditions should be developed in order to make such activities sustainable, achieve quickly all planned goals and accelerate the development of tourism industry■

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