

Potential of Developing Community-based Ecotourism in Van Don District, Quang Ninh Province

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Received 5 October 2010; received in revised form 22 October 2010

Abstract. Ecotourism is said to be a high prospective trend in tourism development. Theoretically, it addresses the triple bottom line of the World's pressing issues. Nevertheless, the reality does not usually come up to expectations. Very few case studies were proved to be successfully adopted. One of the reasons is the weakness in terms of community approach, particularly in developing countries. In Vietnam, the problem is even more serious due to the fact that residents are rarely aware of their right in tourism planning and their responsibility towards the environment, as well as a shortage of a common information channel among a local government, tourism enterprises and citizens. As a result, the development of the so-called ecotourism destinations, which have wildly boomed, has little to do with benefit-sharing with local people, who are assumed to be the key to sustainable development. By assessing the potential of community-based ecotourism in Van Don, focusing on Bai Tu Long National Park, this paper will suggest some guidelines for the establishment of an ecotourism site at the very early stage in order to avoid distorted development. Efforts are made to emphasize on a more proactive role the inhabitants should play in the tourism industry to improve their own life as well as their native land.

Keywords: ecotourism, community approach, Bai Tu Long, National Park, Van Don.

1. Introduction

Ecotourism, as an alternative form of mass tourism, has been a heated topic for numerous scientific papers since its boom in the 1990s. In practice, however, due to failure to fully adopt ecotourism principles, many countries have experienced an ecotourism development with flaws, which "is far from perfect" [1], usually with a total or partial neglect of a community sense [1, 2]. With a view to emphasizing the

essential role of local participation for sustainable tourism, scientists termed it community-based ecotourism (CBET or CBT) and tried to differentiate it with the "purely" natural resource-based ecotourism.

Located in the east and southeast of Quang Ninh province, the Northeastern region of Vietnam, Van Don district prides itself not only of the critical geo-political position (situated in the Gulf of Tokin, on the seaway between Vietnam and China), but also of its richness in tourism resources. Consisting of over 600 islands and isles along Bai Tu Long Bay - an

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indispensable part of the World Heritage Halong Bay – Van Don is endowed with a high level of biodiversity of rainforests, marshland and marine ecosystems, and a variety of scenic landscapes. Added to them are Van Don's historical and cultural values, such as the archaeological items representing Vietnam's prehistory of "Halong Culture" [3], the remains of the first-known trading harbor in the nation's history, and many festive activities performed annually besides ritual and historical sites.

In 2006, the government passed a policy that designated Van Don as one of the targeted regions to develop the Northern Economic Zone in particular and the whole Northern Region as a whole [4, 5]. According this favorable policy, Van Don is targeted to turn into "a high-quality coastal and marine eco-resort" by the year 2020 [6]. Recently, the Prime Minister passed a master planning of Van Don Economic Zone, in which ecotourism development are highlighted, in 2009.

Almost right after the 2006 policy; however, Van Don has faced a risk of being a "mass" destination. Traffic congestions and highly accelerated price have become common phenomena in high tourist seasons. "Flocks" of tourists rushed to Van Don's sandy beaches and recreational resorts every summer. Leaving behind them were kilos of waste; and degradation of the natural environment. Symptoms of social conflicts among tourism shareholders and non-shareholders in the destination also arose here and there.¹ In short, the "infant" tourism development in Van Don seemed to develop with little concern for

sustainability but a rush for benefit-seeking, notably before the approval of the master planning.

To cope with these threats, it is suggested that Van Don should take more careful steps for ecotourism development, starting with a master planning for land use, which should be made known to the public, and an enforcement of environmental laws and conservational tools. Moreover, a community approach should be emphasized. As a result, choosing community-based ecotourism seems to be an appropriate method to address the "triple bottom line" [7] of poverty alleviation, natural conservation, and economic growth. This article will assess the potential to establish this form of tourism in the research area and suggest some guidelines towards a more proactive role of the inhabitants in the tourism industry to improve their own life as well as their native land.

2. Community-based Ecotourism Approach – Principles and Preconditions

The concept of ecotourism is relatively new, hence, a controversial notion [1,2,8,9]. It is "variously defined by different interests" [8], reflects subjective expectations of the definers. There are basically two major approaches that are accepted by many scholars, both national and international. On the one hand, ecotourism is regarded as "a sustainable *form* of natural resource-based travel that focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, and which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non consumptive, and locally oriented (control, benefits and scale)" [1]. Similarly, Vietnamese Tourism Law (2001, amendment in 2005) stated that ecotourism is a nature-based *form* of travel, closely related to local culture, based on community participatory approach, for sustainable development [10]. This approach is

¹ Interview conducted in October 2009 with a resort's manager showed his annoyance to local fishermen who tried to trespassing his designated beach to search for "sa sung" or "moi" (sipunculoideas – a typical and high-value seafood of VanDon), an activity which they used to do for their living, but now suddenly forbid without advance notice or negotiation.

a “hard dimension” of ecotourism. On the other hand, ecotourism is said to be a specialization of sustainable concept in tourism [9]. This “soft” approach is most represented by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES)², which views ecotourism as a philosophy for tourism development when identifying the organization’s mission: “*TIES promotes responsible travel [referring to ecotourism] to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people*” on its official website. Depending on how it is defined, ecotourism was claimed to make an economic contribution of as much as 20% of world travel market (Frangialli 1997, cited in [1]) or modestly of 2-4% of global tourism respectively (UNWTO 2002, cited in [1]). In this article, the former approach applies for establishing small-scale ecotourism villages while the latter approach is used for orientation and suggestion for Van Don’s tourism as a whole.

Though the way for a unanimous concept of ecotourism seems longer to go, some fundamental principles have been established. Five basic criteria suggested by the Quebec Declaration³ [11] are:

- nature-based product,
- minimal impact management,
- environmental education,
- contribution to conservation,
- and contribution to community.

Although some authors added further features like low-impact, reliance on parks and protected areas, interest in nature, responsibility

[1,9] the five criteria above are the fundamental. A more condensed concept of ecotourism can be: *a form of nature-based tourism that helps conserve the destination’s environment by well-controlled management with regards to sustainability and the involvement of the local community.*

According to the Quebec Declaration, ecotourism itself includes local community. However, the role of local people seems vague and passive. To emphasize the contribution of residents to a tourism process, scientists developed “community-based ecotourism”, which, as the words suggested, is an employment of the community approach in ecotourism. Community-based ecotourism “takes the social dimension [in ecotourism] a stage further” [2], focuses on the proactive parts that the community should play in the growth of tourism activities in their home town.

With reference to the preconditions for community-based ecotourism set by WWF (2001) [2] and the criteria for establishing ecotourism in National Park of Vietnam [12] in the context of the study area, the following elements are considered the key to successful community-based ecotourism in Van Don:

- a) Attractiveness of ecotourism resources;
- b) Accessibility to the resources;
- c) Positive behavior of local community towards tourists and tourism activities;
- d) Community’s tourism capability to supply basic tourism services (i.e. accommodation, food and beverage, transportation);
- e) (Potential) demand in tourist market, and a sustainable management.

From a geographical tourism point of view, the above features could be classified into pushing and pulling forces for tourism where tourism resources appear to be the centre of it.

² The International Ecotourism Society (founded in 1990) is nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting ecotourism. The TIES currently has members in more than 90 countries, representing various professional fields and industry segments. Available online at www.ecotourism.org

³ The Quebec Declaration is considered as “the top-level output” [7] of the International Year of Ecotourism (IYE), a name of a world summit organized by The United Nations on sustainability in 2002 in Canada.

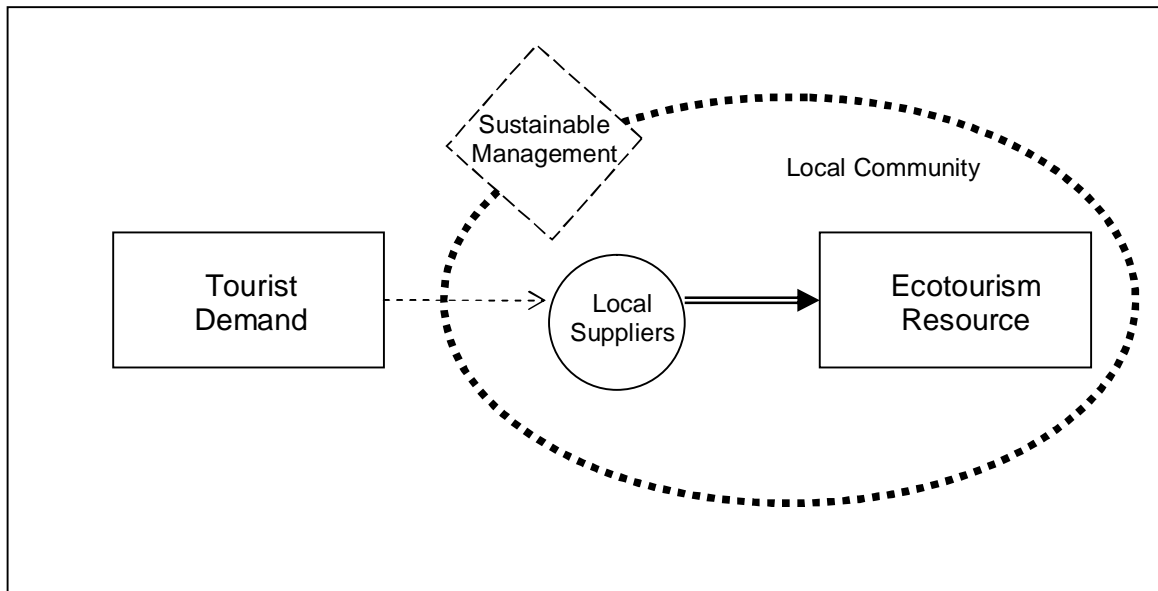


Figure 1. Elements for Community-based Ecotourism Development in Van Don, Quang Ninh.

These elements are, of course, not the only ones, but the important for the ecotourism development with a community approach. Besides, other factors to set a background for tourism development are the political stability, the infrastructure condition such as water and electricity supply, telecommunication, roads and so on. In this paper, the authors will pay attention to the above fundamental conditions with some reference to other general factors when necessary.

3. Accessing Community-based Ecotourism in Van Don District, Quang Ninh Province

As mentioned, the first and foremost pulling force for a place to become a tourist destination is its resource attraction. With regard to ecotourism from the “hard” dimension, the attractions should be taken care of by an in-charge organization, which is officially granted by laws. It explains why the so-called

ecotourism projects are mainly initiated in National Parks or Protected Areas worldwide [8, 12]. As not many of these programs have been successful [8], it is advised that ecotourism program commence in small scale rather than large [1, 8]. As a result, the local community who are close to the “core” of a tourist destination has the best chance to take part in tourism activities. In the case of Van Don District, two communes next to Bai Tu Long Nation Park seem to be the most appropriate for developing community-based tourism. Consequently, the following assessment focuses on these communes, namely Minh Chau and Quan Lan, although overall evaluation is also made for the district as a whole.

3.1. Ecotourism resources

Van Don District, with a central city in Cai Bau island, is regarded as “a terminal” for many

tours starting within and without Quang Ninh Province. Situated offshore not far from the mainland of Cai Rong, Bai Tu Long National Parks and the surroundings represent for the characteristics of the district in both natural and cultural resources.

Natural resources

The natural resource that is valuable for ecotourism development concentrates in the protected areas of Bai Tu Long National Park, which stands out as one of only seven national parks that have both territorial and marine areas. The park is composed of islands and islets with the average height of less than 300m above the sea level. The topographical features are complicated and diversified by the interaction between land and sea, creating many hydrographical passages. Ocean currents have the direction of either Northwest-Southeast or Northeast-Southwest [3].

The park is famous for a bio-diversity. Scientists have defined six ecosystems in the park, including broad-leafed evergreen tropical forests on limestone and on soil islands, littoral ecosystems, shallow water ecosystems, mangrove ecosystems, and coral ecosystems [3]. Statistics in 2008 confirmed over 1909 species of flora and fauna, of which 881 species are sea species. 72 species of fauna and 30 species of flora were listed in Vietnam's Red Book (2007, (cited in [13]) such as *Cycas balansae* (Tuế đá vôi), *Radix marindae officinalis* (Ba kích), *Ardisia sylvestris Pitard* (Lá khô), *Smilax glabra* (Thỏ phục linh) and Serow (*Capricornis sumatraensis*), Rhesus macaque (*Macaca mulatta*), and "Phuong hoang dat". The biodiversity - in genes, species, and ecosystems - is a favorable condition for developing a variety of nature-based tourism activities and ecotours.

Landscape sightseeing is another product that Van Don can offer to visitors. What distinguishes Bai Tu Long Park from approximately 30 other national parks in Vietnam, first and foremost, is the co-existence of two types of formation: karst islands, as a continuance of Ha Long Bay's geomorphologic feature, and the islands covered by soils, which dominate the region. This illustrates long and complex geological evolutions of Van Don District. A combination of the two distinct formations is visible in Tra Ngo Island, where two layers are smoothly contiguous to each other. Visitors coming from Cai Rong harbour to visit offshore islands and vice versa can experience the interesting and changing scenery. Some of the caves and grottoes in Bai Tu Long Bay, as scientists have certified, are not less magnificent than those in Ha Long Bay at all. In addition, crystal-like sandy beaches, many of which last for several kilometers, is another treasure that its neighbouring districts like Ha Long city feel envy of. Remarkable beaches are Son Hao, Quan Lan and Minh Chau, all of which are offshore islands. To a certain degree, they are kept unspoiled thanks to their relatively separated situation from crowded settlements. Escape-seekers (a type of tourists who travel to escape from the bustle and hustle of their daily life) may find them ideal and relaxing destinations as well.

Cultural and archaeological resources

Both tangible and intangible cultural resources are rich in the buffering area of the National Park - where over 24000 people currently reside (2006). This area has been an old settlement for generations; and many historical and cultural relics that demonstrate the villages' long history still remain. Remarkably is the complex of Quan Lan monuments (i.e. 'Dinh-chua-mieu-nghe' or community house, temple, shrine and joss-

house). The outstanding of those constructions are the time-resistant materials, aesthetic and historic value, as well as the intactness of four ritual symbols that are typical of a Northern village. Nonetheless, the existence of these constructions is threatened by storms, termites, and time – their inevitable enemies. Hopefully, funds raised from tourists visiting the Quan Lan festival can contribute a large proportion to preserve the relics, which the current tight budget of the government can hardly do.

Archaeologists have unearthed a number of ceramics relating to the trading activities between Vietnam and Asian countries when Van Don was regarded as a famous port under the Ly Dynasty (in the 12th century). Excavated items of ancient time in some caves in the Park and its buffering zone like Soi Nhu, Ha Giat, Tro; moreover, have proved an early settlement of human beings in Van Don. Still, scientists are looking forward to further proofs on Asian cultural interactions in Van Don, as well as a glorious history of the frontline land. Developing ecotourism is supposed to support for the excavations while protecting and promoting this value through responsible interpretation.

Besides, traditional handicrafts, specialties and cuisines, and people's lifestyle that were 'colored by waves and winds of the sea' are also invaluable resources to diversify visitors' experience to this lovely island.

3.2. Accessibility

As a half-island, Van Don is quite accessible by road. It is thanks to the generous infrastructure investment of the government recently, notably by the constructions of successive bridges of Bai Chay Bridge and Van Don bridges in 2002. Traveling time is reduced dramatically from 4-5 hours by ferries to an

hour or more by buses to commute between Ha Long City and Van Don. Inter-district road systems and intra-district traffic such as main road along the Cai Bau main island (Road Number 334) as well as roads in some offshore islands have been thoroughly upgraded. A public bus starting from the center of Cai Rong to Ha Long City (about 50 km southwest) also came into operation, reducing pressures on inter-provincial buses of short-distance passengers while stimulating and satisfying the demand of weekend-travelers, notably students and miners, from nearby districts. Some corporations have operated additional highway buses with more reliable timetables to meet the increasing demand of commuters and travelers from the densely populated provinces like Ha Noi (the capital), Hai Phong, Ha Nam to Quang Ninh, including Van Don and vice versa. Van Don has gradually become an ideal terminal for on the significant route between Hanoi – Mong Cai (a mouth to China).

The accessibility of offshore islands by sea has been improved by the reinforcement of local ports and transports. Boats from Cai Rong main harbor to offshore islands have doubled their frequency and capacity to twice a day and 30-40 passengers each time. Express boats to busy offshore islands like Quan Lan, Thang Loi save travel time further more to only 40-50 minutes instead of 2-3 hours by normal boats. Further to the south, departing from Hon Gai Harbor (Ha Long City) are once-a-day boats to offshore islands of Van Don, which creates a good connection to bring tourists from Halong Bay – the World Natural Heritage – to Van Don. The journey takes approximately 4-5 hours. However, some tourist boats were originally fishing boats, reconstructed to carry passengers, and have been temporality or partly used for tourism purposes when demand rockets up in peak seasons. As a result,

specialized facilities for tourists' safety are not well-equipped. Itineraries are based on tourists' request rather than initially regulated. Price and quality, thus, wildly fluctuates, which leaves room for unfair competitions. To solve this situation, a community approach in ecotourism development in Van Don is required, as a good ecotourism development will accelerate the formation of volunteer associations to tackle conflicts among themselves for the smoothly operation of the tourism system. In the case of boat-drivers, if they were organized within an organization, they would have been better specialized, saving more time, energy, and money, without competing for tourists, by means of alternate labor division.

In terms of accessing by air, in a few years to come, when an international airport is constructed as designed, Van Don will hopefully be approachable by plane too. The idea of railways connecting the main island with Lang Son – Tien Yen routes and with Ha Long was also considered.

3.3. Behavior toward tourists

In Van Don, *Kinh* people, the majority of the Vietnamese, predominates, accounting for 88.7% of the population of Van Don (2007).⁴ Other ethnic minorities are San Diu, Dzao, Tay, Hoa, San Chi, Cao Lan, Muong, Nung, however, their settlements are widely dispersed and their population is considerably low. The culture of those ethnic groups, though some maintaining typical festivals and rituals, seems to be highly affected by the *Kinh* through generations of interaction. Consequently, Van Don's people are not remarkable for indigenous culture like that of Sapa, for example, but characterized by their hospitality. "Hospitable"

and "open-minded" ("*phong khoáng*") [14] are the very words to describe the island inhabitants. Interviews with a number of residents in island communes like Thang Loi, Ngoc Vung, Ban Sen and questionnaires done in Minh Chau, Quan Lan communes supported the statement (see Table 1).

Table 1. The willingness to welcome guests in QuanLan and MinhChau communes

Commune	Willing	Quite willing	Not willing
Quan Lan	82%	10%	8%
Minh Chau	76%	15%	9%

(Source: the result of the study)

Moreover, people in Van Don generally have good sense of commerce due to their early exposure to trading activities. These are favorable conditions of Van Don to get involved in a community-based approach with a high rate of households participating in tourism industry.

3.4. Local capability to supply necessities for ecotourism activities

From an ideal viewpoint of Valene Smith (1994, cited in [1]) who sees 'small as beautiful', the current facilities in Van Don are sufficient for eco-tourist's daily use. Interviews with a group of 6 foreigners, 3 from Finland, one from England and a couple from Germany, aging from 26 to 48, who spent 2 days home-stay in a house of Quan Lan island, found out that most of them (5/6) agreed that this type of accommodation was acceptable, though better hygiene was expected; 4 of them enjoyed the home-made food by the housewife; and all of them appreciated the "authenticity" of their trip.

For accommodation, many households in the far islands have transferred their living to a modern semi-detached or detached house. More and more three-story or four-story houses have

⁴ Source: calculated based on the statistics of the Department of Statistics of VanDon District.

been built with spare rooms for visitors. The number of registered local-owned hotels and guest-houses in Quan Lan and Minh Chau was seven in 2008 (see table 2) though the real households involved much more. The level of hygiene has been improved by the use of

modern toilets. Nevertheless, they are much less competitive to nearby high-standard resorts invested by outside corporations owing to the weakness in marketing in terms of both quantity and quality.

Table 2. Number of accommodations and number of rooms divided by ownership (up to 2008)

	Number of Accommodations	Number of Rooms	Properties' size	Average number of rooms
Locally-owned hotels, guest-houses	7	50	6-13 rooms	7
Non-locally owned hotels and resorts	4	81	10-34 rooms	20

(Source: based on the number and addresses of registered accommodations in Van Don district, statistics of Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Van Don, 2009)

Furthermore, real eco-tourists are rare in comparison with relaxation seekers, who enjoy high-quality services. Added to it is the lack of national electric supply in offshore islands, which increases the comparative rate of fixed cost in room rates, and accelerates the absolute cost. Consequently, local-owned accommodations also fail to supply for niche market of money-conscious visitors such as students. Thus, income from providing home-stay or local-owned accommodations is low and seasonal. However, this situation can be more optimistic with the help of the government on infrastructure's improvement, i.e. electric supply, and the increasing tourism demand when the Economic Zone completes its second period of investment. Nevertheless, local people should prepare step by step to obtain their segment in the tourism market share.

In terms of food and beverage, the local people's capacity is now restricted, but there is likelihood of more job opportunity for local labour in the near future. Not many households are willing to supply food and beverage due to the risk of a fluctuated number of travelers. During the fieldwork in 2009, the number of

local-owned food and beverage suppliers is limited to three households for Quan Lan commune. None of them had professional trainings. For home-stay families, if required in advance, they can prepare meals for the guests, and dishes are as simple as their daily meals. Another difficulty for food and beverage suppliers is a lack of a food market, typically inland products like as households only produce sufficient food and vegetables for their family. Seafood is usually sold right after they catch or transport to the main harbor in exchange for selling other food and products. However, by the keen business sense of the locals in addition to the stimulation from the park's management board, many residents started sending their children to vocational centers to obtain basic restaurateur skills, giving greater opportunities for the ecotourism development in the vicinity of the national park.

3.5. Potential for Eco-tourism Demand and Sustainable Management

The number of visitors to Van Don has increased at a high rate, and it is optimistic to

say that the figure will be multiplied (see Table 3). Based on the estimated rate of eco-tourists in the tourist arrivals (2-4%) [1] and the projected tourist arrivals of Van Don up to 2025, the figure of responsible tourists is about

40,000-80,000 in 2025. This number is widely fluctuated due to many other factors including environmental awareness of visitors, which is in turn highly affected by tourists' nationality, education, income, etc.

Table 3. Tourist arrivals to Van Don from 2004 to 2009 and estimated number for 2025

Number/Year	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2025 (estimate)*
Inbound visitor arrivals	930	1,120	1,500	2,119	2,750	3,500	1,292,130
Domestic visitor arrivals	109,070	196,947	240,100	273,881	283,750	346,500	972,187
Total	110,000	198,067	241,600	276,000	286,500	350,000	2,223,940

(Source: Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Van Don District and (*) Report on Master Planning of Van Don Economic Zone 2009)

However, current situation in Van Don shows that tourism activities in Van Don are mainly sea-related and considerably poor in models. Environmental interpretation is barely provided.

In terms of sustainable management, up to the research period, the Management Board of Van Don Economic Zone has been founded. However, it focuses on infrastructure and construction reinforcement rather than conserving natural environment. Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, under the administration of Van Don People Committee, claimed to propagate the charming of natural and cultural value of the district through mass media and exhibitions. However, due to the low budget and the shortage of human resource, what was done were vaguely targeted and low effective in comparison to what had been expected.

The board of Bai Tu Long National Park seems the most active and responsible agency for ecotourism development. With financial support from non-organizations, many environmentally friendly activities have been

implemented such as publishing a guide book of Bai Tu Long National Park (one version in Vietnamese and one in English), operating an official website to introduce about the Park and related activities, maintaining a Community Education Center in Minh Chau, providing short courses on tourism skills, etc. However, obstacles are a lack of staffs that are knowledgeable, professional and skilful to control and run ecotours. Moreover, the challenge of fund also blocked these efforts.

4. Suggestions

4.1. Utilizing and protecting the resources for ecotourism

As analyzed, Van Don, particularly the National Park and its vicinity, has great deal of attractiveness for the success of ecotourism. It is high time managers made plans to exploit these resources to develop the Van Don's economy. Nevertheless, further studies and projects on historic, geological, biological and cultural value of the resources should be done

before eco-tours can properly be operated. Possible tours are:

- One-day tour observing ecosystems of the mangrove forest, visiting the coastal area with typical tides: Cua Hep – Lo Ho – Mang Khoi

- One-day tour visiting broad-leafed ever-green ecosystems on limestone island: Tra Than – Cai De underground cave – Ong Huong; Cai Quyt – O Lon – Van Lau

- One-day visiting coral ecosystems and marine life in Mang Khoi

- Overnight tour and specialized tour based on these attractions (if possible).

Managers should note that 1) these tours should start at easily accessible places (near harbors, stations, bus stops, etc.) and involve stops-by or services where the locals can get involved in such as aqua-cultural places, souvenir shops or handicraft factories; 2) these tours should guarantee the safety and satisfaction of tourists and generate an adequate information on conservation as well as improvement in awareness; 3) these tours should be oriented to connect to famous tour-routes such as Hanoi - Halong bay, Hanoi - Cat Ba, Hanoi – Mong Cai. Moreover, to improve the efficiency of these tours, the public should be informed and able to give comments; and more pilot tours should be done.

At the same time, the control and assessment of visitors' impacts are necessary as "Prevention is better than cure". Recommended measurements are carrying capacities, limits of acceptable change (LAC), etc. Not only on-tour guiding (by tour-guide, sign-post, etc.) but also regulations/laws should be imposed to minimize the visitors' impacts.

Zoning and guidelines for building new routes within the sensitive ecosystems should be implemented from the beginning to prevent negative changes to the natural environment.

For example, utilizing the existent trails or contemporary water divides for trekking instead of making new ones; using natural, environmentally friendly materials for consolidating roads, and so on.

4.2. Encouraging and directing the participation of local community in tourism

The roles that local community can play are many and varied. Managers should decide what levels they must achieve in different stages of the development. In the beginning, local people should be encouraged to join small business like home-stay, specialties supply, and simple transportation, with the priority for the two latter. One suggestion is to open a locally owned complex of restaurant and souvenir shops to supply food and cuisines near main harbors or tourist centers.

To reduce negative price competition, which happens so often in Vietnam's tourism industry, local suppliers should be oriented to create associations, in which rules and regulations are mutually adopted with observation from local government, which has successfully applied in other destinations like Tam Coc, Bich Dong (Ninh Binh). Initial supports in terms of human resources for running the business should not be neglected.

Managers should give more opportunities for local participations in the tourism industry by bridging the gap between tourists and local communities. Making local people ready to participate in ecotourism can be achieved by encouraging policies for pioneers as well as labour trainings and environmental education. One suggestion is to create a representative "ecotourism commodity" for each commune or a group of communes, as recommended by a Japanese policy called "one village one product". A potential pattern is establishing

“floating village” model as in Ha Long commune [14] or the “fishing village” in Minh Chau.

Furthermore, public should be noticed, informed and given the right to comment, modify or even reject a tourism project, particularly which has significant influence to their life. Agreement of the community must be set by written documents in order to raise the responsibility of the residents in implementing and re-evaluating the projects. The highest level of local community approach is where locals partake in tourism management. Though it needs a long run, it is not unachievable goal once local residents are aware of it.

Considering the environmental conservators of local residents, the active role should be orientated by raising the pride of their own resources by campaigns, competitions, and so on, with the target at young generation.

4.3. Managing the market and educating the tourists

It is said that tourists come to Van Don mostly for relaxation in the beaches and related activities [15]. Thus, they can hardly be called eco-tourists. Researchers argued that no travel is faithfully called eco-tour, such as no traveler is so-called eco-tourist because “ecotourism is much an ideal or mission than real thing” [1]. As a result, it is more optimistic to turn leisure seekers in Van Don into seemingly eco-tourists by making them know of and more responsible for the environment. This is the task of a managerial board. In the Van Don’s case, advisable methods include:

1) Setting a priority target at small groups and high income market and adjusting other non-sustainable markets;

2) Managing the number of visitors and the frequency of tours to sensitive resources;

3) Educating to polish tourists’ attitudes and responsibility.

Concurrently, attention to tourists’ demands should not be ignored. Questionnaires on tourists’ satisfaction and feedback boxes should be more widely distributed. Volunteer households and locally owned companies should be made approachable to meet tourists’ need for “authenticity”. Opportunities to have face-to-face contacts and purchase home-made or locally-made products should be intensified.

In order to achieve that, establishing an appropriate organizational structure is essential. Ecotourism development in Van Don is now seriously lack of leadership. Often, the priority targets of using National Parks’ resources in Vietnam are different between the local government and the park managerial board: the former takes care of administrative business while the latter notices the conservation. Therefore, it will be ideal if the combination takes place. A good model in Japan is the establishment of a private section called Tourism Association, which consists of representatives of tourism enterprises (tour operators, souvenir-shop owners, and hotel managers) and local people. It creates a platform for tourism-related agencies to discuss and probably arrive at a compromise under the supervision of the governors. It will take time to assess the effect of this model in Vietnam but at least, it gives organizers a thing to consider.

4.4. Adopting other general tourism stimulating measures like promotion and marketing, facilities and infrastructures upgrading. Particularly, human resource training, focusing on both professional skills and foreign languages, is much required, in order to overcome the problems of labour shortage.

However, before anything can start, it is still fundamental to look for an agency that can set up the framework for the ecotourism industry. For the recent situation in Van Don, the board of National Park is recommended for this position. The mechanism can resemble, but not necessarily imitate, the successful structure as in Cuc Phuong National Park, as the local people in Van Don are obviously more active partners in tourism business. Selective members of the community are nominated to the management board. Nonetheless, in a developing country like Vietnam, if community-based tourism is to succeed, local officials are indispensable members because of their increasing power in the whole community.

5. Conclusion

Assessing the criteria for community-based ecotourism development in Van Don shows the possibility to develop responsible travels. Firstly, the very factors for the pulling forces of this destination are clarified by the variety of typical natural landscapes, bearing in which are the evolutions of geological changes, the exchange of biological systems, and the aesthetic value. The attractiveness of natural resources is enriched by numerous historic, archaeological items, national heritages, traditional festivals and rituals, which are inherited from generation to generation. Secondly, the government's commitment to upgrade infrastructure, promote tourism, and the investments of many tourism enterprises are the outside forces to move the wheels of Van Don's tourism forward. Thirdly and importantly, the approval and the eagerness of local community to engage in tourism is the motivation for developing community-based tourism.

Despite these advantages, tourism in Van Don can be no longer sustainable if an overall framework and regulations to balance the economic benefit and conservation are not to be set up. Balance is the key to a long-life span of a travel destination. Suggestions for the development of ecotourism include the initially top-down management with support from local governments, the strong promotion for more responsible visitors, and the ecological economic models for the community.

Though these suggestions are sketchy and require further studies before implementation, they give notices for a better ecotourism development and pre-warnings of the mistakes that are easily made.

Acknowledgements

This work was completed within the framework of the Vietnam National University research project, code No. QGTĐ 06-04. The authors would like to express their sincere thanks.

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