

THE FUTURE OF VIETNAM TOURISM IN A (POST) COVID-19: BACK TO MASS TOURISM OR TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY?

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected Vietnam's tourism industry and caused unprecedented losses. After the COVID-19 pandemic, should Vietnam's tourism industry recover towards a more sustainable tourism model or return to the former overdeveloped mass tourism model is a question that needs to be studied thoroughly. This study analyzes the impact of mass tourism development, the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism industry, and directions for sustainable recovery to ensure a better future for Vietnam's tourism industry, thereby contributing more positively to the overall prosperity of the economy. The research results can be considered a valuable reference for Vietnam's tourism management units in finding solutions for adaptation and sustainable development of the post-COVID-19 tourism industry.

Keywords: tourism, post-COVID-19, mass tourism, sustainability, Vietnam.

1. Introduction

Tourism is an important economic sector that has contributed significantly to the economic development of Vietnam. In the period 2015 - 2019, the tourism industry, on average, annually contributes over 10% to the total GDP value of the ministry of the economy [1, 2]. However, the massive development of tourism during this time has also caused significant negative externalities such as the degradation of natural ecosystems, increased dependence on livelihood activities associated with tourism, cultural identity decline, environmental pollution, increase in greenhouse gas emissions significantly affect the development of the tourism industry in the future [3]. Besides, in 2020 the world has witnessed an outbreak of the most significant pandemic ever seen in history, the COVID-19 pandemic. The global epidemic has forced governments to close borders and impose travel restrictions and strict lockdowns, affecting world tourism's supply and demand-side [4]. The response policies of countries to the pandemic quickly "frozen" the entire tourism industry in the world and Vietnam. According to the World Tourism Organization report, in 2020, the number of international tourists has decreased by 74% (reduced by about 1.1 billion arrivals), the revenue dropped by about 1.3 trillion USD, 100 - 120 million workers are at risk of job loss compared to 2019. Overall, the

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world tourism industry has “regressed” for 30 years because of the COVID-19 pandemic [5]. In Vietnam, the tourism industry is also severely affected. Most travel companies were forced to close their operations temporarily, and tour guides were unemployed; accommodation establishments, restaurants, and entertainment services had to close with the whole country to fight the epidemic of significant damage and loss.

The COVID-19 pandemic, on the one hand, has caused significant damage to the tourism industry but can also be seen as a rare and invaluable opportunity for Vietnam's tourism industry to rethink and recover on the path of development inclusive, sustainable, more responsible for the future. Therefore, the objective of this study will focus on discussing the main contents of negative impacts of mass tourism on sustainable development, effects and development trends of Vietnam's tourism industry after COVID-19; and propose orientations and solutions to transform the tourism industry towards sustainability, contributing to the shared prosperity of Vietnam's economy in the future.

2. Content

2.2. Research methods and data

Qualitative research is the method used in this article. In the context that the COVID-19 pandemic is still complicated on a global scale and its impact on socio-economic - environmental aspects is still not clearly defined, qualitative research through in-depth interviews, group discussions are considered to be relatively suitable to uncover essential ideas that can go beyond the mere statistical analysis of quantitative research methods [6, 7]. The author conducted semi-structured interviews with ten experts in the tourism industry to better clarify the impacts of mass tourism on sustainable development, effects, and development trends in Vietnam post-COVID-19, as well as other bases, to propose orientations and solutions for sustainable development of Vietnam's tourism industry after COVID-19.

In terms of data, the study mainly uses primary and secondary data:

- Primary data is collected by the author through interviewing ten experts (including experts from the Ministry of Planning and Investment, Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, Institute of Tourism Development). The experts are highly qualified people with long-term research and management experience in tourism who can provide helpful information with the author's research. Interviews were conducted between August and September 2021. Due to the complicated situation of the COVID-19 epidemic, the discussions were all driven by the author online through the software zoom cloud meeting or google meet. After the brief introduction, the experts answered questions related to the impact of tourism on sustainable development, effects and development trends of Vietnam's tourism industry after COVID-19, and suggestions for sustainable transformation of the tourism industry after the pandemic.

- The secondary data collected by the author includes data on sustainable tourism development, tourists, revenue, and employment in the tourism industry before and during the epidemic from the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, and researches, reports of reputable individuals and

organizations have been published for analysis to serve judgments and evaluations in their study.

2.3. Research results and discussion

2.3.1. The impact of mass tourism on sustainable development

Vietnam has rich natural and human tourism resources combined with a favorable location that has become an attractive destination globally [8]. In 2019, Vietnam welcomed over 18 million international tourists, surpassing Indonesia (16.1 million), rising to the fourth position in Southeast Asia, after Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore (19 million). The tourism industry contributes over 9.2% of GDP, creating 2.9 million jobs, including 927 thousand direct jobs. In 2015 - 2019, Vietnam's tourism industry achieved a high growth rate, averaging 22.7% per year [9, 2]. The World Tourism Organization ranks Vietnam sixth among the ten countries with the fastest tourism growth globally [2].

The pursuit of a strategy to increase the number of tourists purely in many localities in Vietnam has put intense pressure on the landscape environment of the attractions. Because pursuing a plan to increase pure tourists will entail investing in large-scale infrastructure development, adding more hotels, resorts, and accommodation facilities. *“The negative impacts on the environment of Vietnam's tourism industry originate mainly from the construction and operation of infrastructure (resorts, amusement parks...). The widespread investment in the development of large-scale infrastructures to serve tourists, especially in unplanned ecologically sensitive areas, has disrupted valuable natural landscapes and replaced them with artificial landscapes, encroaching on the core areas of many marine protected areas and heritage sites, threatening natural resources, increasing water resource use, energy consumption, environmental pollution, and degradation biodiversity reduces attractiveness at attractions”* (Interviewer No.2). Besides, the rapid increase of pure tourists on a large scale that exceeds the load capacity of the environment has made the amount of waste from tourism activities increase day by day. At tourist attractions in Vietnam, solid waste is generated from various sources such as accommodation and food service areas, sales service counters, and tourist activities. Waste from tourist areas and attractions is still mainly transferred to centralized landfills, and most of them do not have standard solid waste treatment areas. Wastewater generated from entertainment activities, hotel areas, restaurants, restrooms, and guest accommodation is also one of the issues of concern when the number of tourists exceeds the load capacity. Most of the wastewater from tourist facilities has not been treated up to standards before being discharged into the environment, except for accommodation establishments, high-class restaurants, and the remaining tourist service establishments or only preliminarily treated through the settling tank or discharged directly into the environment, causing increasing pollution. *“Untreated wastewater from accommodation facilities and tourism services is directly discharged into the environment, increasing the organic level of coastal seawater. In coastal waters, tourist transport boats, recreational facilities, water sports, coral exploitation for souvenirs, etc., also degrade the ecosystem's tropical climate. As a result, Vietnam's famous beaches are facing the risk of serious seawater pollution”* (Interviewer No. 3).

Changes in the natural landscape and increased environmental pollution are the causes that reduce the attractiveness and quality of tourism services, making tourists have a bad impression of the tourist image at the destinations come. According to a study by the World Bank (WB, 2008), each year, Vietnam is losing at least 69 million USD in income from the tourism industry due to facilities with poor sanitation treatment systems. *“Environmental pollution also reduces the attractiveness of the tourism industry. Changes in natural biodiversity and increasing amounts of solid waste, especially plastics, have resulted in fewer and fewer tourists visiting beaches and coastal areas”* (Interviewer No. 8).

2.3.2. Impacts and trends of Vietnam's tourism development after COVID-19

In January 2020, Vietnam recorded the first case of infection, and the number of COVID-19 diseases tends to increase continuously over time [11]. In the face of the rapid outbreak of the pandemic, the governments of many countries, including Vietnam, have closed their borders, implemented social distancing. At the same time, the increased fear of disease among tourists has seriously affected the tourism industry, thereby changing the behavior of tourists, forming new tourism trends to adapt to the post-pandemic period.

2.3.2.1. Impact on tourists and revenue

Following the high growth momentum in 2010 - 2019, entering 2020, Vietnam's tourism industry welcomed a record number of international visitors in January, reaching 1.9 million arrivals, up 32.8% over the same period last year (see Figure 1). The new beginning has created expectations for a successful year of Vietnam's tourism industry, exceeding the target of welcoming 20 million international visitors in 2020. However, due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of tourists in Vietnam's calendar has seriously declined. Compared to 2019, in 2020, Vietnam's tourism industry only received 3.8 million visitors, down 79.5%; domestic arrivals reached 56 million, down 34.1% (see Figure 2).

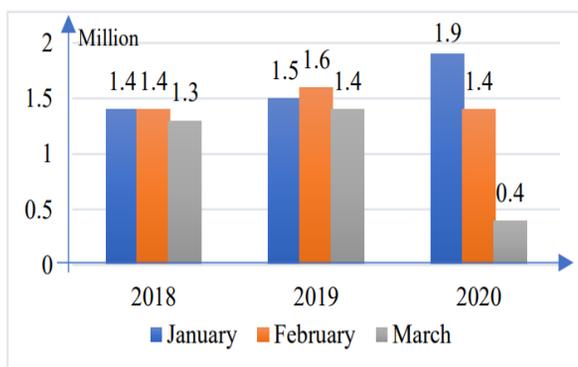


Figure 1. Number of international visitors to Vietnam compared in 3 months and from 2018 - 2020



Figure 2. The change in the number of tourists of Vietnam in the period 2016 - 2020

(Source: [9,10])

Following the downward trend from 2020, in the first six months of 2021, international visitors to Vietnam were estimated at only 88.2 thousand arrivals, down

97.6% over the same period last year. The number of domestic tourists in the first six months of 2021 also decreased sharply in all provinces, with the number of arrivals nationwide receiving 30.5 million [10].

Due to the rapid decrease in the number of tourists, the total revenue from tourists in 2020 also decreased sharply. In 2020, Vietnam's revenue from tourists will only reach VND 312,000 billion, down 58.7% compared to 2019. In the first six months of 2021, Vietnam's total tourist revenue decreases, reaching only about 134,000 billion, down 24.2% over the same period in 2020 [10].

2.3.2.2. Impact on accommodation and travel business

The prolonged COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected thousands of tourism businesses in Vietnam. Through 04 epidemics, tourism businesses have fallen into a state of exhaustion, no longer have the resources to maintain minimum operating conditions. Although interested by the Government, ministries, and branches, the implementation of support policies for the tourism industry in recent years is still tricky to access. Tourism businesses are falling into a more difficult situation than ever. Many companies are forced to change their business models or cut staff. Difficulties pile up when most companies have debts with banks, almost unable to pay in the current period.

For travel businesses: In 2020, only 201 travel businesses applied for new licenses, down more than a third compared to the number of new ones in 2019 (725 enterprises), while the number of companies using for a further license recovery increased three times. In 2020, over 338/2519 international travel businesses were applying to have their licenses revoked, 90% of them closed. Large enterprises only arrange about 30% of staff on duty at the company, and employees are given unpaid leave or reduced to 80% of salary [10]. Entering 2021, in the context that tourism businesses are still facing many difficulties, the outbreak in the community on the occasion of the Lunar New Year, the occurrence of April 30 and May 1, made the tourism industry, tourism businesses were heavily affected (people and tourists simultaneously postponed and canceled tours). Currently, the number of travel businesses applying to have their travel business licenses revoked accounts for nearly 30% of the total number of licensed companies, now only about 2,200 firms have travel business licenses nationwide, of which a lot of businesses are still closed or shut down due to lack of tourists.

For accommodation and catering businesses: In the revenue structure of Vietnam's tourism industry, accommodation and catering services in tourist accommodation establishments account for nearly 50%, so the loss of tourists' accommodation facilities is enormous. In May and June 2021, tourist accommodation establishments have almost no guests, except for quarantine establishments. By the end of June 2021, the number of tourist accommodation establishments nationwide will be 37,000, with 780,000 rooms. The average occupancy of the whole country in the first six months of 2021 is only 15%, in many places below 10%. Many establishments, after a period of moderate operation, had to close [10].

2.3.2.3. Impact on tourism employees

Tourism employees are the group of employees most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has put employees in a more difficult situation than ever. According to preliminary surveys by the VNAT, nearly 90% of tourism employees are

currently unemployed (of which 62.5% of workers are unemployed in 2020, 37.5% continue to be unemployed in the beginning year 2021). Now, tourism employees who have lost their jobs have all moved to other jobs trying to find new jobs such as real estate business, online business, teachers... however, life is still challenging many difficulties. The laborers still in the profession accounted for a tiny proportion, with the salary being cut much compared to before.

2.3.2.4. Development trend of Vietnam's tourism post-COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis has changed the needs of travelers and led to many changes in travel behavior and trends. The trend of using digital technology and sustainable tourism products will be the primary trend. *“The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the trend of tourists wanting to book tours directly with suppliers through online services, requiring businesses to quickly implement digital transformation and apply using new technologies in providing tourism products and services”* (Interviewer No.1). After the pandemic, tourists will pay more attention to health safety, hygiene, travel insurance, avoiding crowded contact, the demand for high-class resorts in open spaces, and a significant increase in the establishment. *“After the pandemic, the tourism industry will open up new trends that need businesses to move to adapt. Travel safety will become a primary concern for visitors”* (Interviewer No.2). The movement of traveling close, shortening the time of vacations, travel plans are built close to the time of the trip and can be changed more flexibly than before. Another trend is also clearly formed in Vietnam that instead of prioritizing price, customers will prioritize safety and choose high-quality tourism products; the tendency to want to travel to sea and nature increases rapidly; Guests decide to go for a short trip, close to where they live, and 70% choose to go with a small group of friends.

2.3.3. Solutions to transform Vietnam's tourism industry towards sustainability after COVID-19

According to experts, it may take the next 2 to 5 years for Vietnam's tourism industry to recover compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the tourism industry needs to have a specific roadmap for each stage, each target market, and this strategy requires the synchronous coordination of all stakeholders. Based on the priority roadmap for recovery. *“The Government needs to study and develop a system of specific mechanisms and policies corresponding to each period to address the priority targets [...] in the immediate future, the state needs to develop it. solutions, mechanisms, and policies to support businesses in finance, human resources, and communication to promote the domestic tourism market.”* (Interviewer No. 9). *“Developing tourism in a green and sustainable direction is an inevitable trend to recover and develop Vietnam's tourism industry after COVID-19”* (Interviewer No. 2,3,6). To realize the transition from mass tourism to adaptive and sustainable green tourism after the COVID-19 pandemic, it is necessary to have synchronous coordination of stakeholders with specific measures such as:

2.3.3.1. Public authority

- Promulgating policies, making strategies and plans to recover the tourism industry after the pandemic in a sustainable way with the participation of stakeholders,

including the state, tourism associations, businesses, and local communities reside.

- Develop a financial investment mechanism to restore natural ecosystems, minimizing the impacts of climate change on tourism activities. Financial support for green infrastructure projects, green tourism with low greenhouse gas emissions, and environmental friendliness.

- Training to raise awareness and skills of staff in tourism management agencies about e-tourism, green tourism, sustainable tourism, and digital transformation trends in tourism.

- Conduct digitization and digital transformation in tourism, establish a “smart tourism ecosystem” in tourism management and operation. Promote digital marketing, actively deploy smartphone applications combined with digital maps in promoting post-COVID-19 destinations.

- Develop a “Set of green tourism criteria”; issue certificates of green tourism products such as “Green tour,” “Green hotel,” “Green restaurant,” “Green resort”....

2.3.3.2. Travel agencies, hotels and resorts

- Educating and training tourists and staff to raise awareness, change behavior about green tourism, increase the use of renewable energy, save energy, use equipment and means of transport low greenhouse gas emissions.

- Building a recycling waste management system, saving water use, using renewable energy to replace fossil energy.

- Open training classes to improve the level of local communities on tourism, encourage people to participate more in local tourism activities, and share benefits with the regional community localities in tourism exploitation.

- Coordinating the development of a local organic food system, eliminating food waste, investing in organic products, prioritizing local suppliers in the responsible tourism chain.

- Innovating and designing high-class resort tourism products (sea, mountain); ecotourism, green tourism interested in sustainable development, close to nature; travel care and health training; slow and relaxing experiences, community tourism; adventure travel; freedom of discovery experiences that meet the requirements of post-pandemic travelers.

3. Conclusion

This study summarizes the development status, impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and solutions to develop Vietnam's industry towards sustainability. Our research has shown that the massive development of mass tourism activities in Vietnam has caused adverse impacts on environmental sustainability. At the same time, the decrease in the number of visitors, revenue, and employment rate in the tourism industry also shows the severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Vietnam's tourism industry in recent years. Therefore, sustainably developing tourism, improving tourism's resilience before the pandemic is an inevitable trend, a wise choice for Vietnam's tourism industry in the future.

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