

# Sustainable Tourism Development: Perspectives of Locals and Tourists in Ha Giang Province

Nguyen Quang Thuan<sup>1</sup>, Nguyen Chien Thang<sup>2</sup>, Le Van Hung<sup>3</sup>, Bui Duc Hoang<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Central Theoretical Council.

<sup>2</sup> Institute of European Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

<sup>3</sup> Vietnam Institute of Economics, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

<sup>4</sup> Ha Giang Department of Science and Technology.

Email: ncthang69@yahoo.com

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**Abstract:** Ha Giang is a province with many advantages and plenty of potential for tourism development. In recent years, the tourist industry has made significant contributions towards the region's economic development, and job creation for the local workforce, especially for ethnic minority households. However, there are also negative effects of tourism, including the interference with the natural landscape, emergence of more social evils, and the bringing of some insecurity to public order. By surveying local households and businesses, and tourists coming to the region, as well as discussions with local state management agencies, the authors, via this paper, aim to provide a more comprehensive analysis of sustainable tourism development in the province.

**Keywords:** Tourism, sustainable development, Ha Giang.

**Subject classification:** Economics

## 1. Introduction

Located in the far north of Vietnam, Ha Giang Province is a mountainous region at the northeast-northwest cultural crossroads, blessed with great potential for tourism development.

*Regarding the value of its natural landscape*, Ha Giang's northern highlands (including the four districts of Quan Ba, Yen Minh, Dong Van, and Meo Vac) are home to many famous landmarks, such as: the Ma Pi Leng Pass and the Nho Que River

(in Meo Vac District), Sa Phin Commune also known as "Heaven Gate" (in Dong Van District), and Can Ty Village and Co Tien twin mountain (in Quan Ba District). The above mentioned four districts are located in the Dong Van karst plateau geopark which was recognised as an official member of the Global Geoparks Network (GGN) on 3 October 2010.

The vast natural landscape of the western and southern areas includes waterfalls, rivers, streams, and lakes such as Tien Waterfall in

Xin Man District, Thuy Waterfall and Quang Minh Lake in Bac Quang District, Tien stream which is 2km from Ha Giang City, the Gam River in Bac Me District, and the Hoang Su Phi rice terraces, to name but a few.

*Regarding the community culture*, the province is home to 19 ethnic minority groups living together in harmony, each with specific cultural features. They include the Mong, the Dao, the Pa Then, the Co Lao, the Lo Lo, the Bo Y, the Phu La, and the Pu Peo.

*In terms of cultural and historical values*, many cultural heritage elements and historical sites have received State recognition such as Dong Van ancient street, the historical cultural relics of the Vuong clan, the Lung Cu Flag Tower and the surrounding scenery in Dong Van District; Trong Con revolutionary sub-area historical relic site, Bac Quang District; Nan Ma historical relic in Xin Man District; memorial 468 (named after peak 468) - the monument to the heroes in memory of the fighting to protect the border; and the Vi Xuyen martyrs' cemetery.

With the advantages and such potential, the Ha Giang authorities have brought in many supporting policies and created a business environment<sup>5</sup> to promote sustainable tourism development. Measures include: providing financial support for businesses and organisations investing in tourism projects, such as accommodation establishments of three star quality or above; developing community-based tourism; investing in environmental protection measures; installing standard toilet facilities throughout the province at tourist areas and attractions, along routes and at scenic stops, in entertainment areas, and parks; providing financial support to develop solid waste treatment projects; and investing in human resource development.

Thanks to many supportive policies, Ha Giang's tourist industry is showing encouraging signs, such as a rise in the number of overnight tourists which increased from 443,409 in 2015 to 768,953 in 2019; and increased revenue from accommodation from VND 35.456 billion to VND 49.874 billion for the same period (Ha Giang Provincial Statistical Office, 2020). However, despite this positive progress, tourism development also comes at a price, impacting negatively on certain aspects such as: public security, social evils, the environment and the tourist landscape, as well as the lives of local people.

Responses/feedback of the local community, domestic and international tourists visiting Ha Giang Province have been analysed and assessed, relating to aspects on sustainable tourism development. These include: income, prices for services, public infrastructure, employment, ethnic minority cultures, public order and security, social evils, waste pollution, and the living environment. This assessment came from analysing (i) a survey of 150 operations representing the tourist sector (including accommodation services, catering, transportation, and sales and marketing), and the workforce across 11 districts/cities of Ha Giang Province, plus 159 tourists, (118 domestic and 41 international visitors) from six countries (Israel, France, the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, and Belgium); and (ii) discussions and in-depth interviews with state management officials at all levels, and several enterprises and households in the province's tourism industry including the seven districts of Bac Quang, Vi Xuyen, Quan Ba, Dong Van, Quang Binh, Hoang Su Phi, and Xin Man.

## **2. Sustainable tourism development**

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), sustainable tourism is defined as “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities.” In other words, sustainable tourism development should have a resource management plan that helps people satisfy economic, social, and aesthetic requirements while maintaining cultural integrity, biodiversity, and development of ecosystems.

The positive aspects of tourism include: contributing to the state budget, generation of profits for investors, job creation and income for the local workforce. However, tourism inevitably exploits resources and can lead to undesirable consequences. According to the UNWTO (2017), the tourist industry plays an important role in economic and infrastructure development, job creation and poverty reduction, but it also brings many challenges. It can affect sustainable production and consumption, resource management, the environment, biodiversity, and climate change. Therefore, appropriate management and development policies should be applied to minimise the unwanted effects.

According to Theo McKercher (1993), tourism is an industrial activity that consumes resources, and generates waste. Therefore, a specific infrastructure system is required to ensure the preservation of natural resources.

McKercher pointed out that tourism is a private sector dominated industry involving

investment decisions based predominantly on maximising profit with little attention paid to social objectives or ecological protection; and that tourism activities mainly import clients rather than export the industry’s products. Thus, these localities are undoubtedly affected by tourist activities.

Meanwhile, Khan et al. (1990) believed that tourism brings many benefits to societies through wider entertainment options and instilling a sense of satisfaction in people around the world. However, it also has a number of social implications such as encouraging drugs, prostitution, and human trafficking. If badly managed, the gains from tourism, particularly those enjoyed by poor countries (third world countries), could be tiny compared to the losses sustained from increased exploitation of natural resources and the environment (Cater, E. and Goodall, B., 1997, pp.85-89). Thus, Butler (1997) and Laws (1995) argued that regulations and control are required to ensure the sustainability of tourism development and to strike a balance between quality and sustainability of tourist destinations. According to Pham Trung Luong (2002), sustainable development of the tourism industry requires the rational management and use of resources, the reduction of waste into the environment, and marrying tourism development with the conservation of diversity. The tourism development process should be consistent with overall socio-economic planning; pay attention to benefit-sharing with local communities; include local community participation in tourism development; have regular consultation with the local population and stakeholders; focus on training to raise

awareness of environmental resources; ensure responsibility in tourism promotion and advertising; strengthen links in tourism development; and attach importance to the results of tourism development research.

Based on research findings, Welford et al. (1999) argued that the missing element in most tourism development proposals is the link between supply (e.g. tourist agencies) and demand (i.e. tourists); therefore, policies and actions are required to reduce the 'upstream to downstream' negative pressures.

### 3. Assessment of local people on sustainable tourism development

#### 3.1. Economic sustainability aspect

Impact on household income. In recent years, tourism development in Ha Giang Province

has brought significant changes to family economic advancement of many households, particularly the incomes of households and people working directly and indirectly in localities which welcome large numbers of tourists. Results of the household survey revealed a rapid increase in recent years in the income of households participating in the tourist industry in the active tourist localities such as Hoang Su Phi, Xin Man, Quan Ba, Dong Van, and Meo Vac. Up to 57.7% of surveyed households opined that their income had increased sharply, while the remaining 42.3% said that their income had grown at a faster rate compared to when they had not participated in tourism activities. About 40% of households in districts with less tourism potential, such as Bac Quang, Bac Me, and Vi Xuyen, saw little change to their income levels.

Table 1: Assessment of Local People on Impact of Tourism Development on Household Income (%)

	Whole province	Area 1	Area 2	Area 3
Significant decrease	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Decrease	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Unchanged	36.5	39.7	30.5	0.0
Increase	60.8	58.7	64.4	42.3
Significant increase	2.7	1.6	5.1	57.7

Notes: Area 1 - the tourism centre area (Ha Giang City, Vi Xuyen, Bac Quang, Bac Me); Area 2 - Dong Van karst plateau geopark tourism area (Quan Ba, Yen Minh, Dong Van, Meo Vac); Area 3 - the northeast tourism area (Xin Man, Hoang Su Phi, Quang Binh).

Source: Calculations from the survey results of the research project "Holistic solution for the development of tourism products and destinations in association with optimising the values of Ha Giang in sustainable tourism development", coded DTXH.HG-06/18.

*Impact on traffic infrastructure.* Although Ha Giang Province tends not to be overly crowded with tourists, and because most visitors typically travel by private transport, it means great pressure is placed on the province's traffic infrastructure. While national transport infrastructure programmes have rapidly facilitated the country's transport network in general, urban and rural transportation within Ha Giang Province and connections with other centres and regions are still time consuming due to the lack of connecting highways and regional airports. Transportation between local tourist attractions is also fairly difficult, especially during the rainy season when many places become inaccessible to larger size passenger buses (e.g. 30 to 45 seater coaches). The transport network is a weak link in Ha Giang's tourism development, and hence a reason why tourists tend to travel independently or in small groups. A large proportion of household responses in the survey believed that tourism development contributed to improved infrastructure (47.3% noted overall improvement and 8.25% great improvement), while a small percentage felt that the industry harmed the transport infrastructure.

Table 2: Assessment of Local People on Impact of Tourism on Traffic Infrastructure (%)

	Whole province	Area 1	Area 2	Area 3
Significantly deteriorated	1.37	0	3.51	0
Deteriorated	21.23	22.22	24.56	11.54
Unchanged	21.92	20.63	21.05	26.92
Improved	47.26	49.21	45.61	46.15
Significantly improved	8.22	7.94	5.26	15.38

Source: See Table 1.

*Impact on public space.* As the scale and speed of the tourist industry development in Ha Giang Province have not put too much pressure on the general infrastructure of tourist attractions (if there is any pressure then it is low and localised, and at a certain point in time), there is also little effect on public living spaces. Tourism development is even a source of funding for the provincial budget to support investment in the renovation of public spaces. The results of the household survey are fairly close to the reality in Ha Giang's districts.

However, in order to adapt for the industry's further development in the long term, the provincial authorities should plan for, and invest in creating public spaces that take into consideration the number of visitors, in order to avoid overcrowding and to minimise the negative impact on the local population's living standards and quality of life.

In general, the surveyed households believed that tourism development had had a relatively positive impact on the overall development of the province despite it not being very strong or across all households.

The majority (93.2%) opined that tourism has a good and very good impact on the general development of the locality. However, for tourism to be turned into a spearhead

industry, it needs to be taken in a long-term and sustainable direction to avoid over development that may damage the province's existing tourism potential.

Table 3: Assessment of Local People on Impact of Tourism on Public Spaces (%)

	Whole province	Area 1	Area 2	Area 3
Significantly deteriorated	0.69	0.00	1.79	0.00
Deteriorated	12.41	14.29	14.29	3.85
Unchanged	22.76	15.87	19.64	46.15
Improved	48.97	58.73	44.64	34.62
Significantly improved	15.17	11.11	19.64	15.38

Source: See Table 1.

Table 4: Assessment of Local People on Impact of Tourism on Overall Development of Localities (%)

	Whole province	Area 1	Area 2	Area 3
Very bad	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Bad	0.7	0.0	1.7	0.0
Unchanged	6.8	6.4	5.1	11.5
Good	62.2	58.7	64.4	65.4
Very good	30.4	34.9	28.8	23.1

Source: See Table 1.

### 3.2. Social sustainability aspect

*Job opportunities.* In recent years, the tourism development in Ha Giang Province, especially in the districts of Dong Van, Meo Vac, Quan Ba, and Hoang Su Phi, has created a relatively high number of direct and indirect jobs. The main groups to benefit include businesses/household enterprises (in

the accommodation, transport, travel, and catering sectors, etc.), staff employed in tourism enterprises/households, and in the services sector and product development for tourism activities. The number of employees working in the accommodation and food services sectors increased from 3,593 in 2015 to 6,442 in 2019 (Ha Giang Provincial Statistical Office, 2020). Although financially

well-off and business-savvy investors/ household businesses are better at exploiting opportunities for direct business investment, opportunities also exist for those households

which have fewer advantages. For example, the development of homestay and community-based tourism has encouraged ethnic minority households to enter the industry.

Table 5: Assessment of Local People on Tourism-related Job Opportunities (%)

	Whole province	Area 1	Area 2	Area 3
Very difficult	1.4	0.0	3.5	0.0
Difficult	3.4	1.0	3.5	7.7
Unchanged	12.2	8.0	8.6	19.2
Easy	72.1	46.0	72.4	69.2
Very easy	10.9	8.0	12.1	3.9

Source: See Table 1.

The survey revealed that the majority of respondents believed tourism-related job opportunities have increased somewhat in recent years. Up to 83% of respondents said they found it easy and very easy to find employment. The respondents who stated that it was easier to find job opportunities came from areas with thriving tourist industries like Dong Van, Meo Vac, Quan Ba, and Hoang Su Phi compared to those in locations with less favourable conditions for tourism development, such as Bac Quang, Bac Me, and Vi Xuyen.

*Impact on the culture of ethnic minority people.* In light of increasing and strong integration, many long-standing traditional and cultural characteristics of ethnic minority people have changed. This is reflected most drastically and clearly in their customs; architecture, house building materials, construction, and design; and traditional rituals. The change in such cultural features is influenced by internal and external factors.

For example, the residential architecture and customs of some ethnic minorities in Dong Van District show Chinese traits due to the influence of locals working in China. Some ethnic minorities, especially those in the border districts and frontier areas, where people cross over to China to work, are significantly influenced by Chinese cultures via audio/video discs, radio, and television; for example, the culture of the Zhuang ethnic group (information shared in group discussions with Dong Van District officials, 2019). Besides, many ethnic minorities gradually adapt their customs and style of clothing due to the influence of the ‘majority’ Kinh people through the development of mass media and trade networks.

On the other hand, however, the tourism industry also plays an important role in restoring, conserving, and preserving the unique traditional ethnic minority cultures. Many traditional ceremonies are now held more often such as the initiation ritual (*lễ cấp*

*sắc*), or the Fire Dance festival (*lễ hội nhảy lửa*), while a number of traditional ethnic minority houses have been preserved and restored (information from in-depth interviews and group discussions with district management officials, Ha Giang, 2019). Traditional cultural features are one of the most important factors that attract domestic and international visitors to the province. Identifying the industry potential of tourism, the provincial authorities have provided many support mechanisms through implementing policies and providing

resources to help preserve the traditional characteristics of the local people.

The household survey results showed that tourism development has basically had a positive effect on ethnic minority traditional cultures, with nearly 70% responding positively and only 7.8% giving negative replies. Respondents believed that the lifestyle and culture of tourists who visit the region, and, through their close interaction with ethnic minority people, can affect the way the latter dress and talk.

Table 6: Assessment of People on Impact of Tourism on Culture of Ethnic Minorities (%)

	Whole province	Area 1	Area 2	Area 3
Very negative	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Negative	7.8	9.8	8.9	0.0
Unchanged	23.2	19.7	16.1	48.0
Positive	61.3	63.9	64.3	48.0
Very positive	7.8	6.6	10.7	4.0

Source: See Table 1.

Table 7: Assessment of Local People on Impact of Tourism on Social Evils (%)

	Whole province	Area 1	Area 2	Area 3
Significantly increased	0.7	1.6	0.0	0.0
Increased	53.1	54.8	58.6	36.0
Unchanged	33.1	27.4	32.8	48.0
Decreased	11.7	14.5	8.6	12.0
Significantly decreased	1.4	1.6	0.0	4.0

Source: See Table 1.

The early stages of urbanisation and development often emphasise the social evils

brought to the area by both short- and long-term visitors (from in-depth interviews and



group discussions with provincial and district level management officials, Ha Giang Province, 2019). According to the survey results, about half of the households stated that social evils are on the rise, particularly in areas experiencing rapid urbanisation like Ha Giang City, and Dong Van karst plateau, while it is believed that localities with a lower level of urban development, like Hoang Su Phi, Xin Man, and Quang Binh, have seen little increase in social evils. Discussions with officials in local areas also revealed social evils were uncommon with a low rate of increase and with little effect on tourists.

*Crime rates.* It is believed that tourism development may impact on crime rates and

affect public order and security - a trend which has been on the rise in recent years. More than half of the respondents believed that tourism development had brought in with it a rise in crime in recent years; this response was similar across areas 1, 2, and 3 as shown in Table 7.

The increase in crime impacts on the orderliness and security of the region. About 44.5% of the households believed tourism development is harmful in this respect. They opined that tourists may include people who break the law in other provinces or those who take advantage of tourists to ignore the law. Moreover, the security situation and public order in Ha Giang Province should be placed under strict control given it is a border province.

Table 8: Assessment of Local People on Impact of Tourism on Crime Rates (%)

	Whole province	Area 1	Area 2	Area 3
Significantly increased	4.2	1.6	8.9	0.0
Increased	49.0	50.8	46.4	50.0
Unchanged	35.0	34.4	37.5	30.8
Decreased	11.2	13.1	7.1	15.4
Significantly decreased	0.7	0.0	0.0	3.9

Source: See Table 1.

### 3.3. The environmental sustainability aspect

*Positive impact.* To improve the living environment and public spaces, many policies have been brought in, and measures taken, by the local authorities, such as planning and implementation, rubbish collection, placing rubbish bins in public areas to help reduce littering, and to create a green, clean, and relaxing environment to attract tourists.

There have been significant changes in mindset in communes and villages with households operating homestay businesses. People are more aware of environmental sanitation, such as cleanliness, rubbish collection, the construction of homes and livestock barns, and the village landscape. Some households are knowledgeable in using and recycling local natural materials to make furniture, and construct rooms and

bathrooms such as those in Ho Thau Commune in Hoang Su Phi District, Lo Lo Chai cultural village and Lung Cu Commune in Dong Van District.

*Negative impact.* Research from the survey showed that the outcome of planning and construction investment may negatively impact on the ecosystem if long-term development is not taken into account (e.g. the renovated restaurant at the Ma Pi Leng Pass, or plans for the new Lung Cu cultural and eco-tourism complex of non-material significance). It can be seen that planning and construction of buildings and projects based in the province's tourist centres lack individualism; there is no distinction in designs and implementation compared to those in other centres and towns in lowland provinces. Urban-oriented localities are not appealing to tourists.

At the time this paper was published, Ha Giang Province lacked a wastewater collection and disposal system; while outlets such as restaurants and hotels, as well as private households, were still discharging wastewater into the environment. Public toilets and rubbish bins were dirty and not used sufficiently. There was inadequate public environmental awareness, and dusty roads littered with rubbish in tourist town centres remained quite a common sight.

Survey results revealed that local people believed tourism development could harm the natural landscape, with up to 44.5% evaluating the impact as negative and very negative. However, many others (42.3%) saw tourism as being positive for the natural landscape as it was a local occurrence.

Table 9: Review of Local People on Impact of Tourism Development on Natural Landscapes and Ecosystem (%)

	Whole province	Area 1	Area 2	Area 3
Very negative	3.5	1.6	3.6	7.7
Negative	41.0	43.6	41.1	34.6
Constant	13.2	14.5	8.9	19.2
Positive	38.9	35.5	44.6	34.6
Very positive	3.5	4.8	1.8	3.9

Source: See Table 1.

Regarding the impact on the natural environment, respondents believed the effects to be more negative than positive. Up to 62.3% evaluated the industry as negative and very negative, while positive and very positive reviews accounted for only 27.4%.

Households opined that in the more urbanised and tourist-centred areas such as Ha Giang City, Dong Van Town, and the Dong Van karst plateau area, the environment would be more negatively affected than remote areas such as Hoang Su Phi and Xin Man.

Table 10: Review of Local People on Impact of Tourism Development on Environment (%)

	Whole province	Area 1	Area 2	Area 3
Very negative	3.4	1.6	6.9	0.0
Negative	58.9	59.7	62.1	50.0
Unchanged	10.3	11.3	5.2	19.2
Positive	24.7	24.2	25.9	23.1
Very positive	2.7	3.2	0.0	7.7

Source: See Table 1.

#### 4. Assessment of tourists on sustainable tourism development

##### 4.1. Economic sustainability aspect

International visitors believed that accommodation costs were relatively expensive compared to quality, with 30.8% and 12.8% commenting that rates were expensive and very expensive respectively. Meanwhile, the majority of domestic tourists considered accommodation to be fairly affordable for Vietnamese people. The differing opinions could be that many foreign visitors to Ha Giang Province are backpackers on a tight budget, hence the reason they considered accommodation to be fairly pricey (results from the survey and in-depth interviews, 2019). In fact, however, accommodation costs are not costly and are even cheap compared with similar tourist areas like Sapa and Da Lat.

Regarding food and drink, both international and domestic tourists considered prices to be quite reasonable, and even cheap. This is understandable because most tourists who took part in the survey stayed and ate with the locals, or chose to frequent local restaurants.

Also, the price of food and drink in tourist locations, especially in the community-based tourist areas and rural homestays is not too high (even cheap) compared to the income of tourists, especially those from overseas.

Although the price of food is considered fairly cheap, quality remained an issue, especially for foreign tourists. According to the survey, up to 34.2% of international tourists viewed food quality in Ha Giang Province to be bad and very bad, while 34.2% said it was acceptable. Meanwhile, more positive responses came from Vietnamese tourists - 49.2% said the food was good and 13% commented it was very good. It is likely the quality of food appealed more to the Vietnamese palate due to familiarity with the culture, cuisine, and appetite. Additionally, domestic tourists mainly travel for few days while international visitors tend to stay in the region longer which may also explain why they get bored quickly of the local cuisine viewing it as not sufficiently varied. Results from the survey also highlighted that daily meals provided by homestays tended to revolve around a few dishes such as chicken, pork, beef, and simple processed foods. To attract tourists, especially those from abroad,

restaurants, hotels, and the locals should understand better the appetite, tastes, and the cuisine culture of different tourist groups in order to help improve the quality of services.

Table 11: Reviews of Tourists on Accommodation and Catering Prices Compared with Quality (%)

	Domestic tourists		Foreign tourists	
	Food services	Accommodation	Food services	Accommodation
Very expensive	0.0	0.0	7.5	12.8
Expensive	14.8	8.2	12.5	30.8
Affordable	56.6	59.8	52.5	46.2
Cheap	16.4	22.1	22.5	10.3
Very cheap	12.3	9.8	5.0	0.0

Source: See Table 1.

To ensure the sustainability of tourism development, tourism products and locations should instil post-trip satisfaction in visitors. To this end, visitor feedback on the satisfaction levels, particularly on price, will help the Ha Giang authorities better understand whether or not they are offering attractive tourist products and to be able to make appropriate changes and adjustments to ensure long termsustainable development.

#### 4.2. Social sustainability aspect

Foreign tourists also rated safety and security levels lower than domestic tourists. Only 51% of foreigners thought the province was safe and very safe in areas where they travelled, while domestic tourists rated safety at 78%. Traffic issues are a particular and typical concern for foreigners travelling around Vietnam.

Table 12: Assessment of Tourists on Security, Safety and Social Evils (%)

Assessment on security, safety	Domestic tourists	Foreign tourists	Assessment on social evils	Domestic tourists	Foreign tourists
Very unsafe	0.0	4.9	Very often	0.0	0.0
A little unsafe	3.3	19.5	Often	0.8	10.0
Fairly safe	18.9	24.4	Quite often	8.3	5.0
Safe	50.8	43.9	Seldom	39.7	40.0
Very safe	27.1	7.3	None	51.2	45.0

Source: See Table 1.

In terms of social evils, most tourists believed that they seldom encountered social evils at tourist attractions in Ha Giang Province. About 51% and 45% of domestic and international tourists respectively commented that they had not experienced or witnessed social evils at places they visited. Yet the remainder of tourists surveyed believed they had more or less come across social evils at tourist destinations. The survey results are similar to the discussions with local authorities on the topic of social evils resulting from tourism development.

#### 4.3. Environmental sustainable aspect

Compared with domestic tourists, international visitors made quite a different evaluation on the environmental status at tourist attractions. They believed the environmental situation to be quite bad with 43.9% highlighting pollution as an issue while only 19.5% and 2.4% of respondents felt areas were clean and very clean respectively. According to the results of in-depth interviews, international tourists said that they saw rubbish disposed of indiscriminately along roads and in public places. Meanwhile, domestic tourists reviewed environmental quality quite well with 45.5% commenting it was clean and 24% very clean.

Table 13: Assessment of Tourists on Rubbish and Wastewater Situation (%)

	Assessment of rubbish levels in the living environment		Assessment on wastewater	
	Domestic tourists	Foreign tourists	Domestic tourists	Foreign tourists
Very polluted	0.8	39.0	0.8	17.1
Polluted	11.6	4.9	12.3	36.6
Normal	18.2	34.2	25.4	22.0
Clean	45.5	19.5	39.3	22.0
Very clean	24.0	2.4	22.1	2.4

Source: See Table 1.

The quality of the surrounding living environment is an essential element in attracting international tourists, especially the high-income groups. Living standards set and environmental quality enjoyed in European countries and the United States, for example, are much higher than those experienced in Vietnam. Therefore, the difference in the assessments between the two groups is to be expected. To change the habits and awareness

of people in how to protect the environment, the Ha Giang authorities need to introduce training programmes (from pre-school children to the entire population) to raise awareness on environmental protection. This is probably a long-term and the most sustainable solution since only when awareness is raised will people appreciate not throwing rubbish out on the streets or littering public places despite a lack of rubbish bins. In addition, the state also

plays an important role by imposing sanctions, prioritising investment, and employing better enforcement measures for wastewater, and rubbish collection and disposal.

A large proportion of tourists, especially foreigners, believed that there was a lack of rubbish bins at tourist attractions. Up to 20% and 35% of foreign tourists argued there were few rubbish bins or none at all. Domestic tourists also had a poor assessment of the waste problem but were less pessimistic compared to their international counterparts.

The survey revealed that a much higher number of foreign visitors (more than 50%) believed wastewater to be a pollutant, while domestic visitors had a much more positive view with 75% of respondents rating wastewater as clean and very clean. This positive assessment might come from the fact that in the past, households used to raise their livestock close to living quarters or under their stilt houses; however, tourism expectations have significantly changed their behaviours as now they keep their livestock and living areas far apart.

In the future, to avoid the negative impact on the environment, tourist centres with a high concentration of inhabitants and tourists like Ha Giang City, Dong Van, Quan Ba, and Hoang Su Phi districts should soon implement planning for, and construction of, wastewater collection and disposal systems.

Currently, the urbanisation process and the number of tourists are not too overwhelming; thus, the landscape still retains its pristine natural look. This is a major advantage for the province and the most attractive draw for tourists. However, in recent years, the local economy and tourism development have begun to affect the landscape and tourist spaces. This includes investment in the

construction of projects that break the natural landscape, and the mixture of modern and traditional architecture (e.g. concrete houses side by side with stilt and earthen houses).

According to the survey, the majority of tourists - 66.4% domestic and 45% international - reviewed tourist spaces to be fairly organised overall. However, there is still a relatively high rate of foreign tourists who assessed the tourism environment and the ecological landscape to be unsuitable (30%) while the corresponding rate amongst domestic tourists is lower (5.7%). From this reaction, the provincial and district authorities should attach importance to the natural landscape and common spaces during planning and approving investment projects to attract visitors.

The space planning of tourist attractions plays an important role in enticing visitors. Many places with few natural advantages can still be attractive if there is suitable infrastructure planning and construction, and buildings sympathetic to the natural ecosystem. The construction of infrastructure works which impact minimally on the natural environment, together with integrating cultural and traditional characteristics of the ethnic minorities and the natural landscape, will create more attractive spaces for tourists.

## 5. Conclusion

The sustainable tourism development survey of households, businesses, and tourists in Ha Giang Province has revealed a number of key positives and limitations, as follows:

*Positives.* Tourism: (i) creates jobs and generates income through business activities that directly or indirectly involve the industry

such as accommodation, catering, transport and travel, and other services (e.g. handicrafts, processed agricultural goods, specialty products of the region); (ii) helps restore and preserve traditional cultural values and characteristics of the ethnic minorities which are gradually changing and integrating; and (iii) contributes to the improvement and raising awareness of environmental protection, especially among households directly involved in tourism-related businesses.

*Limitations and weaknesses.* (i) The planning and development of urban and tourist spaces, the construction of houses, and infrastructure works have not reflected what is needed for tourism development. For example, architecture in tourist centres is not sympathetic with the region's ethnic-cultural characteristics; (ii) the traffic network between regions, provinces, and tourist destinations is difficult and time-consuming; (iii) respondents argued that public spaces were not all that clean citing dusty areas littered with rubbish; and (iv) tourism has also negatively impacted on public security, orderliness, and the level of social evils.

## Notes

<sup>1, 2, 3, 4</sup> This paper was published in Vietnamese in *Phát triển bền vững Vùng*, số 3, 2020, then developed into this English version. Translator: Nguyen Thu Phuong. Language editor: Stella Ciorra. This paper is the result of the research topic on the "Holistic solution for the development of tourism products and destinations in association with optimising the values of Ha Giang in sustainable tourism development", coded DTXH.HG-06/18.

<sup>5</sup> Decision No.16/QD-UBCK dated 05 October 2017 of the People's Committee of Ha Giang Province

providing details of some articles in Resolution No.35/2016/ND-HDND dated 21 July 2016 of the Provincial People's Council specifying several supporting policies for tourism development in Ha Giang Province; Decision No.529/QD-UBND dated 28 March 2018 of the People's Committee of Ha Giang Province approving the Plan on Development of Human Resources for Tourism in Ha Giang up to 2025; Project No.03 approved by the Provincial People's Committee in Decision No.1244/QD-UBND dated 04 July 2017 on approving the Project "Conservation and promotion of values of intangible cultural heritage in the List of National Intangible Cultural Heritage" and "Restoration and preservation of a number of traditional festivals of ethnic minorities in the 2017-2020 period".

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## Appendix: Descriptions of the Tourist and Household Survey Sample

### *Tourists survey sample*

Figure 1: Age Distribution of Interviewed Domestic Tourists

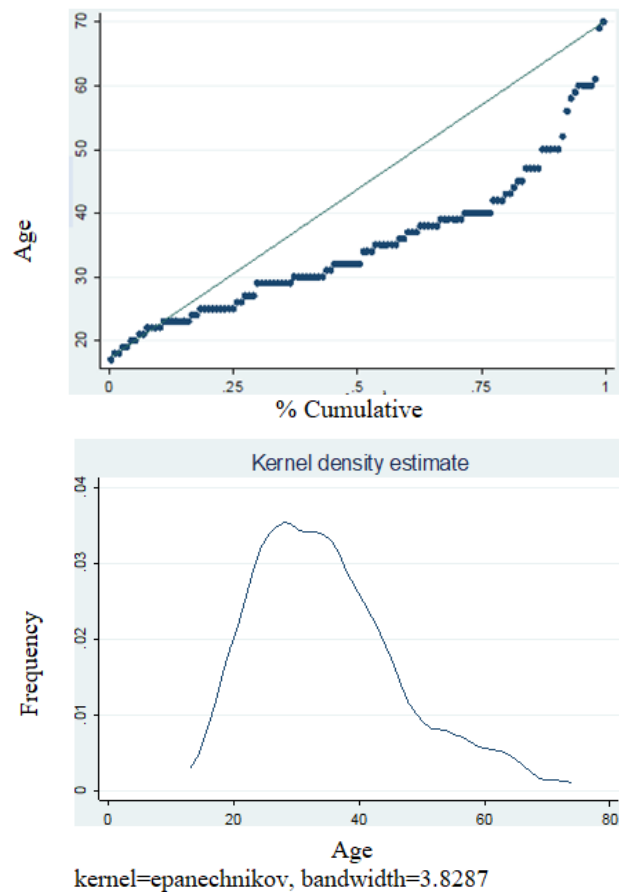
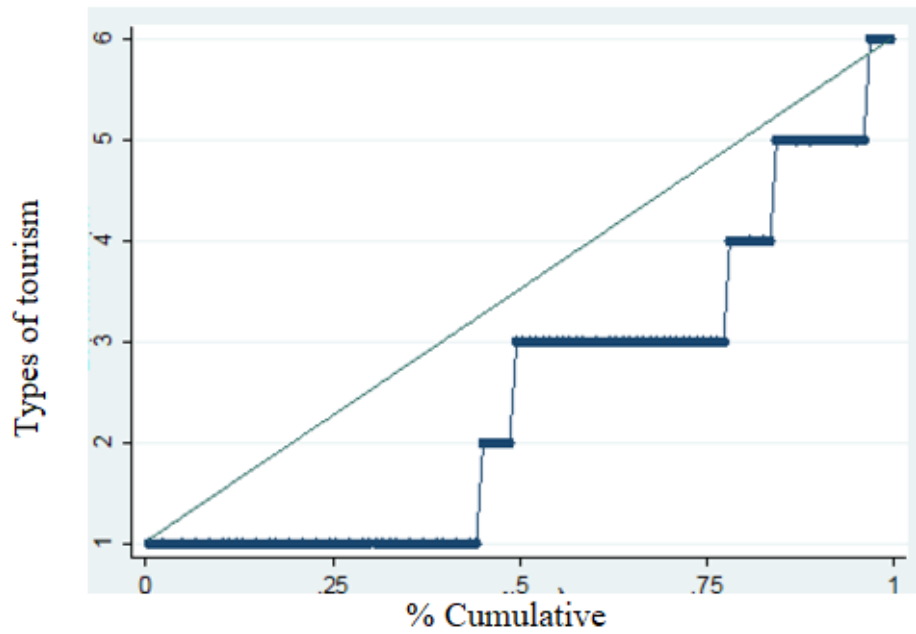




Figure 2: Main Types of Tourism Chosen by Domestic Tourists



Notes: 1. Community-based tourism; 2. Religious tourism; 3. Cultural tourism; 4. Historical tourism; 5. Ecotourism; 6. Entertainment tourism

Figure 3: Age Distribution of Foreign Tourists

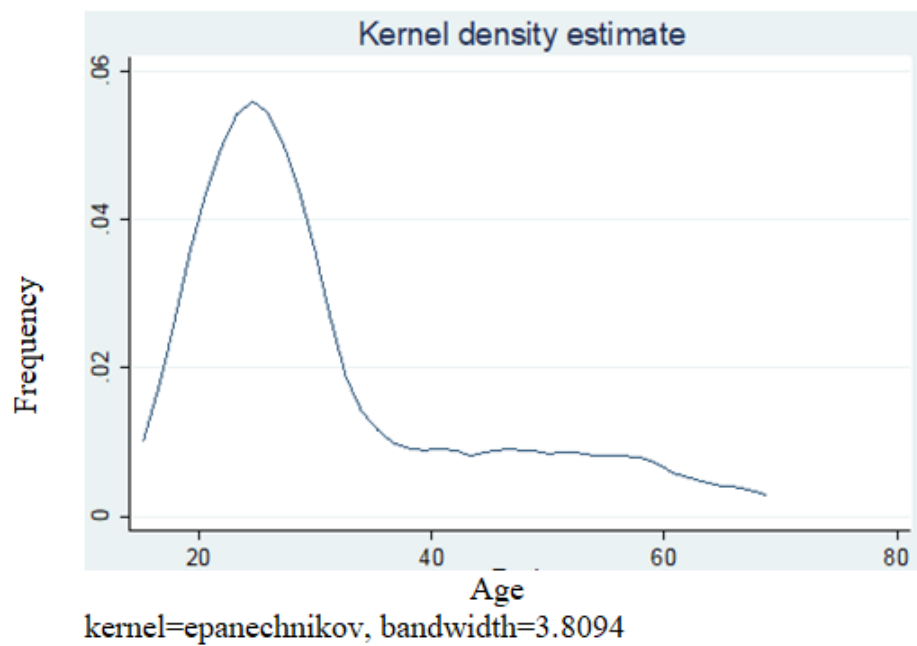
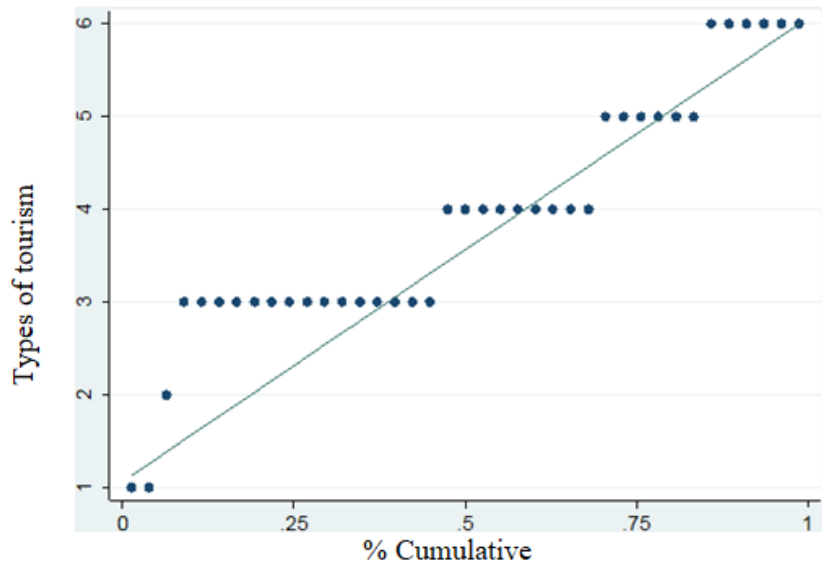


Figure 4: Main Types of Tourism Products Chosen by Foreign Tourists in Ha Giang Province



Notes: 1. Community-based tourism; 2. Religious tourism; 3. Cultural tourism; 4. Historical tourism; 5. Ecotourism; 6. Entertainment tourism

### *Sample of household survey*

Table 1: Structure of Household Respondents by Districts

		Responses	Percentage (%)
1	Ha Giang City	39	26.17
2	Vi Xuyen	10	6.10
3	Bac Quang	6	4.03
4	Bac Me	9	6.04
5	Quan Ba	10	6.71
6	Yen Minh	15	10.07
7	Dong Van	20	13.42
8	Meo Vac	14	9.40
9	Xin Man	9	6.04
10	Hoang Su Phi	10	6.71
11	Quang Binh	7	4.70
	TOTAL	149	100.0