



Developing ecotourism: International experiences and lessons for Vietnam

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Abstract

Ecotourism is an important component of sustainable tourism. More and more countries consider ecotourism as one of their national socio-economic development goals. In addition to helping preserve ecosystems and biodiversity, ecotourism also contributes to creating jobs and income for people and boosting the local economy. In Vietnam, there are not many policies for ecotourism development, which in the long run leads to fragmentation and lack of uniformity. This research will focus on understanding the role of ecotourism in protecting the environment and local communities. By analyzing secondary data on countries' experiences in developing ecotourism, including: Serengeti National Park (Tanzania), Galapagos National Park (Ecuador), The Toledo Ecotourism Association (Belize), Nam Et-Phou Louey National Park (Laos) and The Kapawi Ecolodge (Ecuador), research results found values that Vietnam can learn their efforts to develop ecotourism. Thereby, providing some management implications for the Government of Vietnam in maintaining and developing sustainable national ecotourism.

Keywords: cotourism, ecosystem, environment, local community, sustainable tourism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

According to Population Reference Bureau, ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that protects the integrity of the ecosystem and generates economic benefits for local communities in encouraging conservation. In the connection between population and environment, ecotourism is an innovative way to combine the goals of ecological conservation and economic development.

Ecotourism has an extremely positive impact on the community, it helps reduce pressure on the environment and limits the exploitation of natural resources for tourism. Ecotourism has come to the fore as a form of tourism that can minimize the physical, social and cultural damage of tourism to the environment (Yildirim & Tekeli, 2023). Ecotourism focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, landscapes, flora, fauna and habitats, as well as indigenous cultural artifacts. Ecotourism helps community development by providing alternative sources of livelihood for local communities that are more sustainable. According to the United Nations Environment Program, ecotourism takes place in natural environments rooted in three basic principles: conservation, community and education.

Three basic principles in ecotourism

Ecotourism not only contributes to local economic development but also encourages the preservation of traditional values and natural landscapes (Özcan et al., 2009). Countries around the world pay more

attention and have policies to develop ecotourism. According to Traveloka, the Top 10 ecotourism destinations in the world include: Komodo National Park, Way Kambas National Park and Raja Ampat (Indonesia), Serengeti National Park (Tanzania), Great Barrier Reef (Australia), Gunung Mulu National Park (Malaysia), Jeju Island National Park (South Korea), Galapagos Islands (Ecuador), The Himalayas (Nepal), Kinabalu National Park (Malaysia).

On the other hand, ecotourism is often combined with other types of outdoor activities and other types of cultural and recreational tourism (Amanda et al., 2019). Estimates by the World Travel and Tourism Council show that ecotourism is growing at a rate of 10-15% per year.

Recent research by Donohoe & Needham (2006) shows that the following factors influence ecotourism development: (1) nature-based, (2) preservation/conservation, (3) education, (4) sustainability, (5) distribution of benefits and (6) ethics/responsibility/awareness. Conservation approach in ecotourism can be divided into four steps: Setting priorities, Developing strategies, Taking action and Measuring success.

CONSERVATION

Ecotourism emerges as a beacon of hope for safeguarding and enriching the world’s biodiversity. This approach aims to offer long-term, sustainable solutions by fostering responsible travel that minimizes environmental impact while providing economic benefits to local communities.

COMMUNITY

Ecotourism serves as a catalyst for positive change. It helps increase employment opportunities for local and indigenous communities. When well-executed, ecotourism can fight against global social issues (like poverty and inequality) and fund sustainable development projects.

EDUCATION

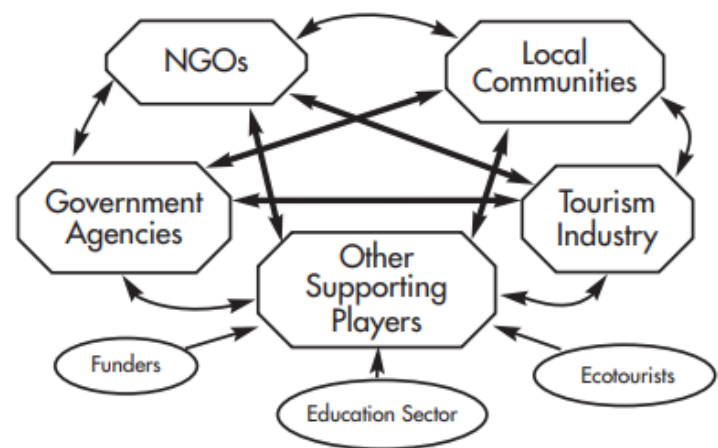
Ecotourism not only offers a unique opportunity to experience breathtaking landscapes and encounters with wildlife, but also to gain invaluable knowledge and appreciation for the natural world. Education is an important element of responsible ecotourism.

Four steps conservation approach in ecotourism

(Source: Drumm et al., 2005)

Approach	Detail plan
Setting priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify targets (eg. priority species)• Set goals for number and distribution of conservation targets• Assemble information and relevant data• Design a network of conservation areas to meet goals
Developing strategies (Conservation Area Planning)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Systems (the conservation targets)• Stresses (eg. soil erosion)• Sources of stresses (eg. tourism-related impacts)• Strategies<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Identify and evaluate possible tourism related threat mitigation strategies- Identify and evaluate ecotourism development potential• Stakeholder consultation• Success measures- Establish indicators for success
Taking action	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Prepare agreements with partners• Build partner capacity• Provide training, technical assistance and resources<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Tourism-based conservation finance- Threat mitigation- Community enterprise development.
Measuring success	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Biodiversity health• Threat abatement<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Success of mitigation strategy• Partner capacity• Financial management• Adjust priorities, strategies, workplans (through participation in annual budget and goal setting)

Promotion of local livelihoods through ecotourism has been widely considered as an important policy instrument for biodiversity conservation (Madhumita & Bani, 2015). According to the United States Agency for International Development, tourism development is associated with the responsibility to preserve and promote natural areas, including preserving the environment and improving the well-being of local community. Research by Kiper’s (2013) shows that ecotourism is a type of environmentally responsible tourism that aims to explore and experience wild nature, while contributing to conservation and sustainable development. Ecotourism often takes place in natural areas that are relatively pristine, little affected by humans such as forests, mountains, seas, lakes, rivers,...



▲ Ecotourism partnerships needed for success
(Source: Drumm et al., 2005)

For ecotourism to be optimally effective, conservation area staff must be able to work and understand local communities, government agencies, travel operators, travel agent, tour guide. Reserve staff must be able to guide some conflicting interests of all ecotourism participants so that they work together for the benefit of the reserve and its conservation goals. In some cases, it may be useful for NGOs to take on this role, often at the request of protected area management.



Ecotourism is part of the protected area management strategy. Through identifying the tensions, sources and real threats to the natural and cultural integrity of the region, the level of ecotourism activity depends on the priorities of local area managers. In general, ecotourism is a type of tourism that is important to the environment and local communities, thereby promoting understanding of different cultures. Ecotourism development strategies are designed to minimize impacts on the environment and local community.

2. INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE IN ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Serengeti National Park (Tanzania)

Serengeti National Park is one of the most famous national parks in the world, which is located in northern Tanzania. The park is known for its breathtaking landscapes, rich fauna and the world's largest migration of herbivores.

Serengeti National Park is an important tourist destination in Tanzania. The park attracts millions of visitors each year, bringing significant income to the local economy. Visitors spending on accommodation, transportation, guided safaris and local products spurs job creation and income generation for local communities. Serengeti National Park is committed to maintaining a delicate balance between tourism, wildlife and ecological sustainability by the following solutions:

Firstly, promote responsible tourism. Serengeti National Park promotes reduced ecological footprint through sustainable tourism initiatives, educating visitors about wildlife conservation and encouraging ethical behavior when observing wildlife.

Secondly, cooperate with local communities. Serengeti National Park empowers local communities through capacity building, training and opportunities to directly participate in the tourism value chain. It both benefits the community's livelihood and enhances the sense of ownership and responsibility for the conservation of the park's natural resources.

Thirdly, improve local infrastructure investment through increased development of roads, airports and accommodation services. Besides, encouraging scientific research, innovation and technological advancement in the park can further enhance conservation efforts and visitor experiences.

Fourthly, establishing partnerships with international organizations, conservation agencies and tourism agencies can strengthen Serengeti National Park's position as a global leader in nature tourism. Collaborative efforts in promoting national parks, sharing best practices and leveraging resources can further enhance the

status of national parks, attract more visitors and promote exchange knowledge to develop sustainable tourism.

2.2 Galapagos National Park (Ecuador)

Galapagos National Park represents responsible tourism model development. Nestled on the equator, 1,000 kilometers off the coast of Ecuador, the Galapagos Islands are a living laboratory of evolution and a haven for unique wildlife. Recognizing the extraordinary value of this ecosystem, the Galapagos National Park was established in 1959, followed by the creation of the Galapagos Marine Reserve.

While the park's official creation happened in 1959, active management and tourism didn't begin until 1968. A collaboration between park administrators and tourism representatives recognized the need for responsible tourism to preserve the islands' unique characteristics. In management strategies, a comprehensive management plan, implemented in 1974, established visitor sites and tourism zones. The park service, along with the Charles Darwin Research Station, implemented a licensed naturalist guide system in 1975, ensuring visitor education and enforcing park regulations.

Despite the challenges, the initial visitor limit of 12,000 per year was quickly surpassed, reaching a current level of approximately 100,000. Efforts to establish a carrying capacity proved challenging due to the complex nature of tourism in the park. Instead of a fixed limit, park authorities focused on managing individual site capacities and closely monitoring visitor impact. Additionally, increased entrance fees allowed the government to capture more revenue for conservation efforts.

In marine conservation, illegal fishing in the marine reserve led to the adoption of participatory management, where stakeholders collaborate to manage the marine ecosystem. This approach resulted in a Special Law for the Galapagos in 1998, addressing marine reserve and tourism issues.

The Galapagos National Park's story highlights the continuous effort to balance responsible tourism with conservation. Through collaboration, education and adaptation, the park has established a sustainable model for preserving this irreplaceable natural treasure. Although tourism in the Galapagos predates the concept of ecotourism, the park has evolved to closely represent its principles. This success is the result of collaboration between park managers, tourism industry representatives and the local community, ensuring the future protection of this unique ecosystem.



2.3 The Toledo Ecotourism Association (Belize)

One of the experiences in ecotourism development comes from the community-based approach to ecotourism in the Toledo district of Belize. The Toledo District in southern Belize boasts a unique mix of cultures, with Creoles, Garifunas and Mayans sharing its lush rainforests and rich heritage. Despite its beauty, the region remains one of the poorest in Belize, with residents relying primarily on farming and fishing. However, tourism has emerged as a potential source of income, albeit limited by accessibility and minimal development.

Recognizing Belize's growing reputation as a nature tourism destination, local residents formed the Toledo Ecotourism Association (TEA) in 1990. Their "Village Guesthouse and Ecotrail Experience" program equips communities to plan, develop and manage guesthouses. A key feature is a rotating system that distributes tourists among participating villages, ensuring equitable economic benefits and minimizing environmental impact. Currently, about 12 of the 30 villages actively participate, with varying levels of experience. An impressive 80% of tourism revenue stays within the community, directly benefiting service providers. The remaining 20% goes to TEA, supporting health, education and conservation projects, along with administrative and marketing expenses.

While visitor numbers remain modest at around 500 annually, the program shows promise. However, challenges have emerged. Original TEA members who invested heavily in the project feel new members should contribute similarly. Additionally, the concern exists that expanding tourism income to more villages could dilute individual profits. To address these concerns and increase revenue, TEA is expanding its marketing efforts. This necessitates strengthening the association's administrative capacity to manage the growing responsibilities of monitoring tourism's impact on residents and the environment.

In essence, the Toledo Ecotourism Association demonstrates a successful community-driven approach to sustainable tourism development. Balancing economic benefits with cultural preservation and environmental responsibility remains key as the program continues to evolve.

2.4. Nam Et-Phou Louey National Park (Laos)

The Nam Et-Phou Louey National Park (NEPL) is one of the largest and most biodiverse protected areas in Laos. NEPL showcases a unique approach to ecotourism that ensures equitable distribution of benefits among participating villages. This model focuses on two key activities: Service provider groups and Ecotourism Benefits Fund (EBF).

With service provider groups, each participating family can join only one service group, providing diverse employment opportunities. Fees are pre-determined and transparent, ensuring fair compensation for services like guiding, cooking and accommodation. These wages are supplemented by a bonus system based on visitor satisfaction and wildlife encounters, further motivating service providers. All payments are distributed directly to villagers in the presence of visitors, fostering trust and transparency.

With EBF, this fund pools a portion of tourism revenue and distributes it annually to all ecotourism villages based on the number of households. Instead of individual cash payments, the EBF supports small-scale development projects chosen by each village through a democratic voting process. This approach ensures the fund caters to the specific needs and priorities of each community. Past projects funded by the EBF include a medicine bank, school infrastructure improvements, water sanitation projects and micro-finance initiatives.

To ensure long-term sustainability, the NEPL model incorporates both positive and negative incentives. In positive incentives, participation in service groups provides alternative livelihoods, reducing dependence on unsustainable resource use. The bonus system further incentivizes conservation efforts and responsible behavior towards wildlife. Additionally, the EBF enables communities to invest in projects that improve their quality of life and well-being. In negative incentives, to deter rule-breaking, any household caught violating the protected area's regulations risks losing their position in the service groups. At the same time, villages involved in violations face a reduction in their annual EBF allocation. Therefore, it discourages illegal activities and promotes collective responsibility for conservation.

Overall, the NEPL ecotourism model demonstrates a successful approach to balance economic development with environmental protection. By combining equitable benefit sharing with strong incentives and disincentives, the program empowers communities to become active stewards of their natural resources while improving their livelihoods. This model holds valuable lessons for other ecotourism initiatives seeking to achieve both conservation and community development goals.



2.5 The Kapawi Ecolodge (Ecuador)

Kapawi is an innovative ecotourism project located in the remote southeastern corner of Ecuador, inhabited by the indigenous Achuar people. This project provides an example of how private capital investments can be integrated with minimal environmental and cultural impacts into a local community, even in cultures that still function in primarily non-monetary economies.

A model of sustainable ecotourism about Kapawi lodge in the Ecuadorian Amazon rainforest. This project is run by CANODROS S.A., an Ecuadorian tour operator, in collaboration with the Achuar people. For sustainability, Kapawi minimizes environmental impacts by using technologies like solar energy, trash management and black water treatment. For economic benefits, this project provides direct employment for Achuar people and generates income through tourism activities and sales of handicrafts. For cultural preservation, Kapawi respects and encourages the Achuar political system and incorporates their knowledge about their culture and environment. In the long term, this project aims to transfer ownership and management to the Achuar people over a 15-year period, sharing benefits and providing them with the know-how and installations to manage the project independently after time has expired.

Besides, Kapawi contributes to the creation of a not-for-profit organization that supports Achuar projects aimed at improving their ability to manage integration with the modern world and defend their lands. Kapawi emphasizes training Achuar people in various skills to ensure long-term autonomous management of the project. Project minimizes environmental impacts such as solar energy, waste management and black water treatment. Kapawi has created jobs for Achuar people and generated income through tourism activities and sales of handicrafts, respects and promotes Achuar culture and traditions.

In general, Kapawi is a successful model for sustainable ecotourism that benefits both the local community and the environment. It demonstrates how private capital can be invested in a way that respects local cultures and promotes self-determination.

3. LESSONS FOR VIETNAM

Vietnam is one of the countries with the highest biodiversity in the world, with 13,000 species of flowers, more than 15,000 species of animals and three recently discovered species of megafauna. Vietnam's national/world species ratio is 6.3%, much higher than the global average. Recently, the socio-economic report for 9 months of 2023 that the General Statistics Office (Vietnam Ministry of Planning and Investment) announced, in the first 9 months of 2023, Vietnam's service and tourism sector grew by 6.24%, contributing up to 53.34% in the overall growth of the economy's GDP. Based on the online tourism statistics database of the Vietnam National Authority of Tourism, ecotourism

in our country has over 30% international visitors and nearly 50% domestic visitors.

It can be said that our country has many foundations to develop ecotourism. For example, as reported by Vietnam National Authority of Tourism, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, the Mekong Delta provinces have a lot of potential in building and developing ecotourism models such as: Tan Lap Floating Village Ecotourism Area (Long An), Con Phung Tourist Area (Ben Tre), Khmer Cultural and Tourism Village, Ba Dong Beach Tourist Area (Tra Vinh), Sa Dec City (Dong Thap), Cai Rang Floating Market (Can Tho), Phong Dien Garden (Can Tho), Wind Power Field (Bac Lieu), Chau Doc Market, Tra Su Melaleuca Forest (An Giang). Some lessons learned for the development of ecotourism in the future are as follows:

Firstly, the Government agencies need to cooperate with each other to ensure sustainable ecosystem protection. Taking the typical example of the development policy of Galapagos National Park (Ecuador), the model shows the connection between tourism managers, tourism industry representatives and local communities. This connection process will help orient ecotourism development more synchronously and consistently among localities.

Secondly, establish a national ecotourism development monitoring agency. Vietnam can learn this model from the Toledo Ecotourism Association (TEA). For long-term development of ecotourism, the Government is required to build a monitoring agency to strengthen management and ensure responsibility for the impact of tourism on environmental protection and local community welfare.

Thirdly, develop community capital, especially private capital for ecotourism development. The community is the subject of ecotourism, so it is necessary to raise community awareness about the role of community capital in ecotourism development. From there, the community will actively participate in mobilizing and using community capital effectively. Similar to the Kapawi Ecolodge (Ecuador), the connection of ecological projects with indigenous communities brings many values in economic efficiency, environmental efficiency and social efficiency. The government needs to develop programs



and policies to support the development of community capital, such as preferential loan support, vocational training support,... to help the community have favorable conditions to mobilize and use community capital effectively.

Fourthly, it is necessary to affirm that local infrastructure is an important factor to attract tourists, especially eco-tourists. Therefore, improving local infrastructure and enhancing partnerships with international organizations will contribute to sustainable ecotourism development. In the case of Serengeti National Park (Tanzania), ecotourism requires relatively complete infrastructure to serve tourists, including: transportation, electricity, water, motels, restaurants, amusement parks, entertainment,... Improving local infrastructure will help tourists easily access ecotourism destinations, while improving the quality of tourism services, creating an interesting experience for tourists.

Fifthly, management agencies need to periodically evaluate results to allocate appropriate resources in each locality. Besides, consider the experience of The Nam Et-Phou Louey National Park (NEPL) in empowering communities to become active managers of natural resources in localities. This ensures that local people will receive fair compensation for related services and a salary sufficient to cover their daily lives. At the same time, establish a positive reward system to encourage conservation efforts and responsible behavior towards wildlife in each local community.

On the other hand, the establishment of local ecological support funds, similar to the Ecotourism Benefits Fund (EBF), is also a long-term solution for people to access healthy national financial resources. In addition, in Vietnam, the policy bank model including the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies (VBSP) and Vietnam Development Bank (VDB) can combine with local ecological support funds in connect to promote loans aimed at conservation and community development.

4. CONCLUSION

According to the Resolution 08-NQ/TW of the Politburo, the goal is that by 2030, tourism in general and ecotourism in particular will become a key economic sector, contributing to strongly promoting the development of other industries and fields. Vietnam belongs to the group of countries with the most developed ecotourism industry in Southeast Asia. In particular, each locality builds its own ecotourism development project.

With much development potential, ecotourism plays an active role in protecting the environment and indigenous communities. Through the experiences of other countries in developing ecotourism, the article summarizes some lessons for Vietnam in developing a sustainable tourism economy and contributing to change the landscape and environment, improving the material and spiritual cultural life of local communities ■

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