

Viet Nam - Colombia Webinar
on “Management in protected areas and national parks”

SITUATION OF MANAGEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION
OF POLICIES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF ECO-TOURISM IN THE
NATURAL RESERVE AREAS IN VIET NAM

Institute for Tourism Development Research

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PREAMBLE

Eco-tourism has been being a tourism development trend that many countries around the world including Viet Nam give much attention to it. This is because its benefits, efficiency and responsibility brings to the social - economic development and environment.

Viet Nam is a country with many potentials and strengths to develop eco-tourism. Viet Nam is one of the countries with biodiversity and diverse eco-systems that is evaluated and ranked high in the world. Viet Nam's biological resource diversity is ranked at 16th place and Viet Nam's biodiversity is classified to be one of the 10 richest centers of the world. Viet Nam has many typical tropical species such as Cheetah, Oak, Flying Weasel, Civet, Loris, Gibbon, Pangolin, Elephant, Tapir, Rhino. And especially in the 20th century, 5 new species of large mammals were discovered all in Viet Nam. Besides species diversity, eco-system diversity and genetic diversity are also very rich. Regarding the terrestrial eco-system, there are typical forest types, most notably the tropical moist evergreen closed forest; tropical dry broadleaf forest type; lowland subtropical humid, broadleaf closed forest type; forest subtype on limestone mountains. Wetland eco-systems are also characterized by coastal mangrove forests distributed throughout the country's coastal areas and peat swamps distributed in the Mekong Delta, including U Minh Thuong and U Minh Ha conservation areas in two provinces of Kien Giang and Ca Mau; Lagoon eco-systems are distributed in the coastal areas of the central provinces from Thua Thien Hue to Ninh Thuan; Coral reefs, seagrasses with different types of coastal eco-systems, especially coral reefs typical for tropical seas and waters around coastal islands are assessed to have very high and specific biodiversity levels.

Along with that, the unique cultural values of the community of 54 ethnic groups with featured cultures, customs and habits create extremely valuable potential for eco-tourism development in Viet Nam.

Viet Nam's tourism development strategy in recent years and especially Resolution 08-NQ/TW (2017) of the Politburo and Viet Nam's Tourism Development Strategy to 2030 approved by the Prime Minister on January 2020 determining the viewpoints and goals of the Party and State are to develop tourism into a key economic sector, in which eco-tourism development is a strategic direction, an important solution to contribute to the implementation of the set goals.

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OVERVIEW OF ECO TOURISM IN VIET NAM

Over the past years, eco-tourism in Viet Nam has developed quite strongly. The number of tourists coming to national parks and protected areas is increasing.

According to the Law on Forestry (2017) and the Law on Biodiversity (2018), Natural Reserve Areas in Viet Nam (NRs) are consisting of National Parks; Natural Protected Areas; Rare Species and Creature Conservation Area; and Landscape Protected Areas located in the special-use forest system, which is mainly used to conserve natural forest eco-systems, forest biological genetic resources, scientific research, historical-cultural relics conservation, beliefs, landscapes combined with eco-tourism; relaxation, entertainment (except for strictly protected subdivisions of special-use forests) and provision of forest environmental services. Currently, Viet Nam has 176 special-use forests with an area of nearly 3 million hectares; including 34 national parks. According to the National Biodiversity Conservation Master Plan to 2020 and with a vision to 2030, Viet Nam will have 219 protected areas.

According to a report by the General Department of Forestry, in 2019¹, there are currently 61 special-use forests with eco-tourism, resort and entertainment business activities, including 26 national parks, 35 natural protected areas and landscape protection zones. Their business operations are in 3 main forms, namely: Management Boards of NPs and NRs organize their own eco-tourism business (currently there are 37 NPs and NRs); Joint venture and association with eco-tourism organizations (currently there are 11 management boards implementing this form) and forest environment leasing (currently there are 13 national parks and protected areas). Some of these, such as Phong Nha Ke Bang National Park or Ba Vi National Park, carry out all forms of eco-tourism service business (self-organization, joint venture, association and forest environment leasing). Up to now, the protection forests have not organized eco-tourism activities.

Many national parks and protected areas are gradually becoming tourist attractions such as Phong Nha - Ke Bang, Cat Ba, Hoang Lien, Tam Dao, Ba Vi, Huong Son, Cuc Phuong, Bach Ma, YokDon, Nam Cat Tien, Ca Mau...

Up to now, there are no separate statistics on eco-tourists. According to the report on statistical results of eco-tourism, resort and entertainment activities in special-use forests of the General Department of Forestry, most visitors to national parks and protected areas are domestic tourists (about 80%). However, there are also eco-tourism destinations that attract a higher proportion of international visitors such as Van Long Wetland Conservation Area. In the period of 2015 - 2019, the national parks and conservation areas received about

¹ Report on management of protection and special-use forests of the year 2019 and measures for sustainable development.

9,768,100 visitors. In 2019 alone this number is about 2,500,000 visitors. The average growth rate of visitors per year reached 21.3%; the total revenue from visitors also grew at a high rate, reaching an average of 24.4%/year. In 2020, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of tourists and total revenue from tourists to Viet Nam in general and to national parks and protected areas decreased sharply.

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In general, eco-tourism in Viet Nam's national parks and protected areas has made certain developments over the years and achieved results that contribute to branding, attractiveness for Viet Nam's tourism. The number of tourists to eco-tourism destinations has increased year by year and has been on the right track for sustainable development. However, the development is not commensurate with its potential. Those trips to the natural areas of Viet Nam is still considered mass tourism, not really eco-tourism. Tourism in large numbers often causes negative impacts on the natural and cultural environment, especially in sensitive areas. The scale and form of organizing ecological activities are still small, investment in eco-tourism development is not high, mainly supported by projects of international organizations with the nature of conservation and improvement of community capacity to participate in eco-tourism in some national parks and protected areas. Tourism activities in many national parks and protected areas are still spontaneous. There have not been specific attractive products. Target markets are not well identified; market segments are not clear. Investment in promotion work and technological advancement and development for eco-tourism is lack. Therefore, it is not attractive and attractive to the market. There has not been a methodical market research and development so the correct target market for this tourism product line has not been identified. There is no specific strategy for eco-tourism development, so planning and zoning for eco-tourism development are still limited and inadequate.

The limitation of the management, partly due to the low awareness of tourists and local people, caused negative phenomena in nature reserves such as: indiscriminate deforestation, illegal hunting of animals, littering at the wrong place, carving tree trunks... The percentage of local people participating in tourism services is still not high.

OVERVIEW OF POLICIES ON ECO-TOURISM DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT IN VIET NAM

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In Viet Nam, the development of eco-tourism in nature reserves is regulated by many legal documents which are issued by different levels/agencies. Basically, eco-tourism activities in nature reserves are specific and interdisciplinary, governed by relevant specialized laws such as the Law on Forestry, the Law on Biodiversity, the Law on Tourism, the Law on Environmental protection..., as well as sub-law documents called to be Decrees,

Decisions, Circulars... which are promulgated by the Government and line Ministries such as Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development; Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism; Ministry of Natural Resources & Environment; Ministry of Finance...

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*** Policies related to eco-tourism development issued by the tourism industry:**

- *Resolution 08-NQ/TW of the Politburo (2017)* said that the important content in the tasks and solutions is "focusing on developing sea and island tourism products, cultural, spiritual and tourism products, eco-tourism and community-based tourism with high attractiveness and competitiveness". This is an important basis for the development of tourism in general and eco-tourism in particular, the priority direction and focus of development of Viet Nam's tourism.

- *The Law on Tourism (2017)* defines: "Eco-tourism is a type of tourism based on nature, associated with local cultural identity, with the participation of the local community, combined with education on conservation and environmental protection". Through this concept, it can be seen that natural landscape areas, national parks and conservation areas are destinations for eco-tourism development. It contains tourist attractions such as rare flora and fauna, endemic species, wild species, high biodiversity, majestic terrain, natural beauty, life, customs community culture and traditions in remote and unspoiled areas.

The Law has defined principles of tourism development in which eco-tourism development plays an important role, contributing to the good implementation of tourism development principles by compatibility in benefit sharing, protect the environment, eco-systems and national cultural identity.

The Law also sets out policies for tourism development. The State shall adopt policies to encourage and support investment activities to develop new tourism products with positive impacts on the environment, attracting the participation of the community; invest in developing eco-tourism products, especially in protected areas. In which, it is emphasized that eco-tourism is a type of tourism based on nature, associated with local cultural identity, with the participation of the local community, combined with education on environmental protection.

- *The Strategy for Viet Nam's Tourism Development to 2030* approved by the Prime Minister in Decision 147/QĐ-TTg dated January 22, 2020 identifies an important content in the solution to implement the Strategy is to develop tourism products in which there is a strong orientation to develop eco-tourism product based on the advantages of natural resources, especially in world biosphere reserves, national parks, nature reserves and protected areas, marine conservation. The Strategy attaches importance to the development of eco-tourism in mangrove forests, garden ecology, cave ecology, rivers and lakes, etc.

The Strategy also gives focus on developing types of eco-tourism products, exploring biodiversity in combination with mountain resorts, sea resort, island and agro-ecological tourism.

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism has also conducted a number of studies on assessing the impact of tourism activities on the environment; assessment of environmental carrying capacity in a number of national parks such as Cuc Phuong, Phong Nha - Ke Bang, Hoang Lien, Tam Dao, Phu Quoc; research, propose policies for tourism development in nature reserves... in order to make recommendations to limit the impacts of tourism activities, and at the same time develop tourism within the limits of the carrying capacity of the environment as well as environments and eco-systems in protected areas.

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*** Policies related to eco-tourism development issued by related industries:**

- *Forestry Law No. 16/2016/QH14, dated November 15, 2017* and guiding documents for the implementation of the Law clearly defines: Specific types of forests and spaces for organizing or combining eco-tourism; Form of eco-tourism business; guidelines of the formulation of projects on development of eco-tourism and resorts in national parks and protected areas; construction management of works serving eco-tourism; relaxation and entertainment; guidelines to relaxation and eco-tourism activities,...

- *Law on Biodiversity No. 32/VBHN-VPQH, dated 10/120/2018* and guiding documents to implement the Law has regulations on conservation and sustainable development of biodiversity. Developing eco-tourism must associate with hunger eradication and poverty reduction, ensuring stable life of households and individuals lawfully living in the conservation area; sustainable development of the buffer zone of the reserve, the national strategy on biodiversity...

- *Decree No. 60/2021/ND-CP dated June 21, 2021* on stipulating the autonomy mechanism of public units in the field of economic and other services: The management boards of national parks and protected areas are public units operating under the financial mechanism of public organizations governed by Decree No. 60/2021/ND-CP of the Government.

- In addition to the policy system promulgated by the Government, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, localities and the Management Boards of national parks and protected areas also promulgate regulations on functions, tasks, guidelines, financial mechanism, etc. to encourage eco-tourism development activities associated with eco-system conservation and biodiversity.

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*** General assessment of policies and policy implementation related to eco-tourism development in Viet Nam**

- On the basis of policies on management and development of eco-tourism in national parks and nature reserves in Viet Nam, eco-tourism activities in national parks and nature reserves have been established with initial successes and significant contributions to the development of the tourism industry in general, as well as to forest protection and biodiversity conservation in particular... However, the implementation process shown many limitations and inadequacies that need to be resolved and removed.

- Policies on eco-tourism development in national parks and nature reserves in Viet Nam which have been stipulated in a number of Laws, Decrees, Circulars, Decisions... initially created a legal corridor for the organization of eco-tourism activities in national parks and nature reserves.

- The system of policies has specified the functions, tasks, powers, organizational structure of national parks and nature reserves, including the functions of management and business of eco-tourism. However, policies for management and development of tourism in nature reserves have not focused on resources for eco-tourism development (financial, human, technology...) leading to limited physical facilities, the lack of basic infrastructure to organize eco-tourism activities, the lack of professional service quality... These limitations have had a significant impact on the tourism development process in national parks and nature reserves.

- The system of policies also has regulations on a number of standards and regulations on the construction of tourism technical facilities within national parks and nature reserves. But additional requirements of policies and tools to manage eco-tourism development in nature reserves are needed such as a system of criteria and standards for the development and recognition of eco-tourism destinations; regulations on carrying capacity; limits of acceptable change or carrying capacity of eco-system, etc... And more specific regulations are needed for other types and activities of tourism being implemented in national parks and natural protected areas, thus contributing to the diversification of eco-tourism products such as scientific research tourism, adventure sports tourism, community tourism, etc.

- The system of policies initially regulated the financial revenue and expenditure from eco-tourism business activities. Especially, the contribution level to the budget of forest environment leasing projects for eco-tourism business activities in national parks and nature reserves has been regulated. More specific regulations and guidelines are needed to carry out activities of joint-ventures organization, tourism business association or forest environment leasing so that difficulties and obstacles affecting the environment and system ecology in national parks and nature reserves could be avoided.

- There should be specific regulations and sanctions to handle violations in tourism development in national parks and protected areas, leading to negative impacts on natural resources and indigenous culture.

- There should be an overall strategy for tourism development in national parks and nature reserves in accordance with the market orientation; strategy to promote biodiversity conservation based on eco-tourism development.

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CONCLUDE

It can be affirmed once again that eco-tourism in Viet Nam in recent years has made certain developments and achieved results that contribute to the branding and attractiveness of Viet Nam's tourism. However, it can be seen that the development is not commensurate with its potential. Recognizing the meaning and importance of "eco-tourism that is the key to poverty alleviation and environmental protection", Viet Nam always identifies eco-tourism as a priority orientation in the tourism development strategy. And this orientation is also of special significance in the context of tourism development after the control of the Covid pandemic and tourism development towards a model of green growth - green tourism, thus making a positive contribution to the sustainable tourism development. Viet Nam's tourism industry is and will try our best to turn the potentials into advantages of promoting eco-tourism development, contributing to tourism recovery and development as well as turning Viet Nam into a truly eco-tourism destination on the world tourist map./.

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