Sustainable Community-based Ecotourism Development Strategy for Soc Trang Province, Vietnam

TRAN PHI HOANG
Industrial University of Ho Chi Minh City
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Abstract

     Sustainable community-based ecotourism development has become one of the great endeavors for many provinces in Mekong Delta (Vietnam), especially in Soc Trang province, in the face of the severe impact of the climate change and rising sea levels. This study is conducted to identify factors that influence the sustainable development of community-based ecotourism in Soc Trang Province. Research results are made by qualitative and quantitative research. Starting from the interviews with experts and group discussions, a model of research with a questionnaire consisting of 33 variables for a survey of 396 foreign customers to Soc Trang Province is identified and developed. The research results show that there are 5 groups of factors that influence the sustainable development of community-based ecotourism in Soc Trang province as follows: (1) particular attraction, (2) Behavioral control perception, (3) Local residents, (4) Natural ecological conditions, and (5) Tourism Infrastructure. Based on this research, groups of solutions are proposed to build a sustainable eco-tourism development strategies for Soc Trang Province.

Keywords: Particular attraction, Behavioral control perception, Local residents, Natural ecological condition, and Tourism Infrastructure.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mekong Delta is one of the richest agricultural regions on earth, supplying large quantities of rice, shrimp, fish, vegetables and fruits to Vietnam and the world. However, currently, this land is one of the three deltas that has been affected by the heaviest climate change in the world. Human impacts from the upstream, such as dams (in China, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia), have been continued reducing the flow of water downstream of the Mekong Delta (the part through the Tien and the Hau River before they flow into the East Sea) to repel salt water into the sea, causing serious saltwater intrusion. Changing the flow regime to the Mekong Delta, especially during the dry season, has also reduced sedimentation for agricultural production and increased extremely climatic conditions. Excessive groundwater extraction causes not only land subsidence but also sea water to enter the land. Every year the area of cultivated land is infected saltwater up to 1.8 million hectares. Many areas are always flooded about half of the area and flooding lasts from 1 to 6 months. Erosion reduces the area of coastal and riverine mangroves. Tens thousands of kilometers of rivers and seaside landslide are blown off, causing houses to be swallowed by water. Some coastal belts take up to 150m deep in a year. Sea level rises unexpectedly, overflowing into the field and some are more than 80km making plants and crops die completely. Thousands of households, many of whom have cultivated here over generations, are worried that

their livelihood will soon be over. More than 4m high embankments have been set up all over the places with the purpose of protecting people and crops from floods, however, these dykes have completely changed the natural ecosystems of the area. The dyke system has also blocked alluvium into the fields. The poor and the landless have no land to farm, no fish to catch, so on. Mekong Delta has 13 provinces, with more than 18 million people living in this area have heavily been affected by climate change. Soc Trang province is one of the most severely affected. Among them, ethnic minorities (like the Khme, Hoa) are considered the most vulnerable. (Alex Chapman, The Conversation, University of Southampton, UK, 2015).

Soc Trang province has over 399,500 Khmer people, accounting for 30.71% of the province's population. Most Khmer people live in rural areas. The poverty rate of Khmer people according to Vietnam standards now accounts for 41.2%. The situation of production and life of ethnic minority are very difficult. The percentage of poor households is high, a large proportion of Khmer ethnic minority is living in temporary houses, many households have no land for cultivation, lack of means of production. 20% of Khmer people do not use electricity, 24% of Khmer people do not use clean water, the rate of children dropping out early is still common. Over the past 15 years, more than 2 million people have migrated to major cities. The natural advantages of Mekong Delta in general and Soc Trang in particular have gradually changed, which fundamentally changes the production patterns and people's habits. According to experts, it is necessary to quickly and strongly change the economic structure for adaptation to climate change in Soc Trang province.

In the past, there have been many socio - economic development plans in Soc Trang province but these plans are small, inconsistent, lack of linkage and short-term. It is therefore necessary to have a long-term, overall orientation for the transition in socio -economic development of Soc Trang to the challenges of climate change. Sea level rise tends to be irreversible, and its effects are inevitable. Therefore, the best solution for this province is to make a transition to a model of economic development, production patterns, production scale, land use and sustainable development. Most experts believe that the focus of developing a community-based ecotourism model in Soc Trang is one of the options that localities need to select because of their potential.

Community-based ecotourism is a type of tourism based on the diversity of ecological environment, traditional craft villages, human values and the encouragement of community participation to tourism business for tourists at destinations (David Lahm, World Tourism Association, 2012). Unlike normal ecotourism, community-based ecotourism, besides bringing visitors to the natural landscape, visitors can experience the life of local people, traditional customs and habits, traditional craft villages; mix with indigenous cultural identity, tangible and intangible heritage of local communities; encourage communities at destinations to participate in tourism activities. The great significance of community-based ecotourism is to help local people conserve, preserve and enhance the values of nature and humanity at the destination; encourage the participation of ethnic minorities (Khmer) in tourism activities; help them to earn more income, reduce hunger, reduce poverty and strive to develop the family economy; help improve the material life and the essence; avoid alcohol, gambling, theft, prostitution; and avoid moving to large cities.

Soc Trang is an area with great potential for tourism development such as spiritual tourism, cultural tourism, festive tourism, ecotourism and especially ecotourism. In this province, there are many famous tourist attractions such as Mahatup Temple, Srolon Temple, Buu Son Pagoda, La Han Pagoda; there are many

festivals such as Ooc Om Boc Festival, Ngo Boat Race, Nghinh Ong Festival, Con Waterfall Festival, green islets, orchards and thick rivers and canals; there are many traditional villages with rich and varied cuisines; many ethnic villages still preserve architecture, cultural identity and traditional customs unique. However, the province does not know how to exploit these potential because tourism development of this local was still limited in the past few years. There are many reasons such as tourism products are not diversified and poor. They are lack of depth, lack of distinctive and outstanding compared to other destinations; the accommodation is limited; transportation infrastructure is weak and inconsistent; Lack of recreational services to keep visitors etc. Consequently, the attractiveness of foreign visitors to this destination is poor. In the year 2017, more than 1.2 million tourists came to Soc Trang, but most visitors mainly went there and returned in the day. They did not consider this province as a destination for vacation and stayed many days, so the revenue from tourists was not much. Therefore, it is neccessary to develop a sustainable eco-tourism strategy for Soc Trang province.

2. LITERATURE REVIEWS

2.1 Sustainable Development Strategy

From the beginning of the 70s of the 20th century the term "sustainable development" was mentioned. Sustainable development is the development that meets its present needs without negatively affecting future generations. Muller considers sustainability in terms of economic benefits, health, culture, the well-being of local people, the protection of natural resources, and the satisfaction of tourists. Meanwhile, the term "sustainability" is referred to as "a condition of tourism based on the principles of sustainable development, taking full account of its current and future economic, social, and environment impacts". According to experts on sustainable development theory, there are now over 200 different definitions but in general , sustainable development consists of three key development areas including: (1) economy; (2) sociocultural; and (3) environment; and it has two levels: (1) planning and management to achieve key objectives; and (2) particular actions and critical measures of the objectives; Many studies have been demonstrated the direct impact of sustainability on the competitiveness of the sector. In addition, sustainability is an important variable incorporated into business strategies of stakeholders in the tourism industry [15]. Sustainable development, therefore, is an interesting topic and attracts the attention of many scholars in the travel industry worldwide.

2.2 Customer Satisfaction

The satisfaction of customers is increasing, many organizations are aware of its importance to their survival and development. The relationship between customers' satisfaction, customer relationship retention and organizational profitability is tight. For decades, many scholars have been studying in depth the customers' satisfaction and organizational development strategies. Consequently, many organizations have put their customers' satisfaction at their goal of their business. There are many definitions of customers' satisfaction. Johnson et al. defined it as a customers' assessment of the difference between their expectations before using and their actual perception after using a product or service. In fact, customers often have certain expectations before using a product or service. If it meets their expectations, they will be satisfied with it.

Their level of satisfaction depends on the difference between their expectations and perceptions. Oliver has defined customers' satisfaction as the customers' response.

According to Philip Kotler, customers' satisfaction is the level of a person's feeling from comparing the results obtained from the consumption of a product or service with their expectations. Satisfaction depends on the difference between the results received and expectations, if the actual results are lower than expected, the customer is not satisfied, if the actual results match the expectations, the customer will be satisfied. If the actual results are higher than expected, the customer is very satisfied. Customer expectations are formed from experience, from friends, colleagues, and personal information from sellers and competitors.

Satisfaction is a comparison between the actual benefits and expectations. If the actual benefits are not as expected, the customer will be disappointed. Even if the actual benefits expected to meet with the customer set, it will be satisfied. If the benefit is higher than the expectations of customers, it will create a problem of higher satisfaction or satisfaction exceeded expectations. In line with Terrence Gordon HG Levesque and McDougall (1996), satisfaction of customers is the perceived status of the customer or the service provider after having used the service. Oliver (1999) and Zineldin (2000) then stated more specific, customer satisfaction is the emotional response or the whole feeling of the customer to the service provider based on comparison the difference between what they receive with previous expectations.

2.2.1 Particular attraction

Almost tourist destinations have "their own charm". According to David Halm, the attraction of the destination could be a mountain, a coastal fishing village, a traditional village, a peaceful countryside, a place of special biological diversity, a peaceful countryside, a unique architectural work, a cultural relic, a custom, an orchard homeland, etc. that their values last long and make them different. According to the experts, if they do not have "their own charm", create " their attraction" to have sustainable development strategies.

According to the experts at this conference, if enterprises and destinations increase the investment rate for this factor, it is likely that the number of visitors will increase in a corresponding proportion. In the competition context, the wisdom of every business, every destination is simply to create customers' satisfaction higher than their competitions. Customers' satisfaction influences brand loyalty of each business and each destination. The real factor in determining customers' loyalty is the value. Customers' value creates satisfaction and customers satisfaction level. The information about customers satisfaction level to a destination reduced is an expected warning signal about losing customers and decreasing market share in the future.

Hypotheses 1 (H1): "Particular attraction" has a positive influence on tourists' satisfaction.

2.2.2 Tourism infrastructure

Tourism infrastructure is a set of tangible elements of physical and technical infrastructure for exploiting of tourism potential such as accommodation, hotels, restaurants, shopping positions, entertainment, transportation, airports, piers, architectural works etc. [10.30]. Tourism infrastructure is one of the important factors for tourism development. Good tourism infrastructure will create favorable conditions to attract tourists or vice versa, which will slow down tourism industry development [10,31]. Modern architecture may not appeal to visitors, but a traditional rural home

used as a tourist accommodation can be an important factor for rural tourism growth [32,33]. In Soc Trang, many ethnic minority (Khmer) have numerous traditional houses with unique architecture that can accommodate customers staying as traditional houses in other localities; however, recently none of these could serve tourists. Meanwhile, it is not difficult for tourists to find good hotels and inns close to these tourist destinations. It is a waste of tourism resources. According to experts at the conference, if these factors are taken into and "tourism infrastructure" investment is also increased, the amount of tourists will follow corresponding rate.

Hypotheses 2 (H2): "Tourism infrastructure" has a positive influence on tourists' satisfaction.

2.2.3 Behavioral control perception

Community-based ecotourism has provided ethnic minority communities with development opportunities, nonetheless, it has negative impacts for example it is easy for the youth to lose their traditional cultural identity, imitate the culture of visitors coming from another place, especially the West, etc. Therefore, the development of community-based ecotourism will ensure the conservation, preservation and promotion of traditional values and ethnic identities (such as the Khmer, Chinese). According to experts, besides encouraging the participation of local communities in tourist business activities at destinations, it is advisable to have more lively activities to raise awareness among tourist businesses, local authorities and visitors on the conservation, preservation and promotion of natural and human values at destinations. Any positive or negative impact of " Behavioral control perception " on community-based ecotourism is not small and can easily be seen. The better "Behavioral control perception" businesses and authorities have, the better sustainable tourism activities develop and vice versa.

Hypotheses 3 (H3): "Behavioral awareness" has a positive influence on tourists' satisfaction.

2.2.4 Natural ecological conditions

This is a significant factor for developing tourism in rural areas. Natural ecological conditions in Soc Trang province are also relatively diverse and plentiful, such as orchids, bird gardens, forests, and so on. Nevertheless the local authorities and business organizations did not make the most what they have to develop. In addition, if they do not develop in proper way, various negative effects may happen such as people destroy forests to sell land, sell trees, get timber for tourist business; change production model; environmental pollution; Noise pollution, etc.

Hypotheses 4 (H4): "Natural ecological conditions" has a positive influence on tourists' satisfaction.

2.2.5 Local residents

Man is also an extremely important element in the tourism industry. Local residents living and working in a destination will create a unique cultural environment for that destination [10,27,40]. Positive attitudes from local people do not only make the tourists happy, but also promote the culture and image of local integration. The success of a tourist attraction depends much on human factors, including (1) intimacy, fun and enthusiasm of local people; (2) the involvement of staff in the tourism industry (tour guides, souvenir staff, hotel staff, artisans, etc.). Similarly, Ryan and Devar found a positive relationship between interpreters' ability in place and customers' retention

rate. In addition, Ulus and Hatipoglu showed that many studies proved that effective management of human factors helps organizations or destinations achieve sustainable outcomes.

Hypotheses 5 (H5): "Local residents" has a positive influence on tourists' satisfaction.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study was conducted in three phases. In the first phase, qualitative research was conducted such as relevant research findings, information collected, and expert interviewed to create a list of factors influencing sustainable development strategies for ecotourism in Soc Trang province. To confirm the rationality of the factors that influence the sustainable development strategies for eco-tourism in Soc Trang Province, 10 experts were interviewed at the Mekong Delta Science Conference and twenty-five tourists of five groups in five different destinations in Soc Trang province were discussed. To complete survey questionnaires, 120 foreign visitors at 5 destinations in Soc Trang province were surveyed before they became the official survey. The time for survey period was 3 months (from February 2024 to May 2024). Official questionnaires were sent directly to 440 tourists at that places during their rest time. And 396 valid questionnaire were collected. It took every visitors from 5 to 7 minutes to complete the survey with random sampling method. The survey period was in the peak season when foreign tourists came to Soc Trang so the consultation of visitors was also favorable. In the second phase, the following activities are carried such as verification of scale reliability with Cronbach's Alpha coefficient and exploratory factor analysis. According to Hair et al., (2006) the sample size must be at least $\geq$ m x 5, in which m is the number of observed variables. So, with 33 variables observed in this study, the sample size should be at least $\geq$ 165. All data collected from the questionnaire were coded, processed by using SPSS 20.0 software. According to Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), the observed variables have a cumulative coefficient greater than 0.3 and a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient is greater than 0.6 to ensure reliability of the scale. The purpose of exploratory factor analysis is to minimize and summarize the data. This method is based on the factorial extraction (Eigenvalue), factor analysis is appropriate and the observed variables in the whole are correlated when the total deviation is> 50%, the KMO coefficient is in the range of 0.5 to 1, Sig coefficient. $\leq$ 5%, the loading factors of all observed variables are> 0.5; The weight difference λiA- λiB are> 0.3 (Nguyen Dinh Tho, 2011). In the third phase, two components were implemented: (1) EFA and (2) model testing by Modeling analysis.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The survey included 396 people. In which, 186 were male, 202 were female and 8 were others. The research shows that visitors know this destination through "Travel agencies in the country of the tourists" accounted for 44.7%. The results of this study and the statistics of Soc Trang Tourism Department at the Can Tho Workshop show that marketing activities of Vietnamese authorities and tourism companies are still poor. Statistical results show that most visitors came there once (accounted for 96.72%). This also shows that attraction destination in Soc Trang is not really attractive for visitors to come back.

4.2 Checking the reliability of the scales

Table 1. Results of Cronbach's Alpha

Variables	Code	Factors	Cronbach's Alpha
Independent variables	PA	Particular attraction	0,721
	EC	Natural ecological condition	0,785
	LR	Local residents	0,782
	BC	Behavioral control perception	0,795
	TI	Tourism Facilities - Infrastructure	0,823
Dependent variable	SD	Sustainable Development Strategy	0,793

Source: The researcher's collecting data and SPSS

The results of the scale test show that the scale is very high with Cronbach's Alpha> 0.7 and that the coefficients of the total variables of this factor are equal (> 0, 3), all scales are acceptable. And from that point, Exploratory Factor Analysis is carried out in the next step.

4.3 Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

Table 2. Results of KMO & Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.869
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	2241.181
	df	231
	Sig.	.000

Source: The researcher's collecting data and SPSS

The extraction factor (Eigenvalue) is greater than 1 and should be retained. The coefficient KMO = 0.869 is in the range of $0.5 \leq KMO \leq 1$, factor analysis is appropriate. Test Bartlett with Sig. = .000, indicating high level of significance. The factor loading values of all these observation variables are greater than 0.5 and are accepted.

Table 3. Results of factor analysis

Component	Initial Eigenvalues		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	5.988	27.220	27.220
2	1.842	8.372	35.592
3	1.628	7.400	42.992
4	1.601	7.278	50.270
5	1.307	5.942	63.414

Source: The researcher's collecting data and SPSS

The results of factor analysis show that the total variance deviation is 63,414%> 50%, which means that drawn factors account for 63,414% of the model, while the remaining 36,586% is explained by other factors; therefore the scale is acceptable.

4.4 The results of multivariable regression analysis

Table 4. Pearson's correlation analysis table

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Correlations			Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Zero-order	Partial	Part	Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	.645	.341		1.890	.060					
	X1	.258	.021	.332	3.453	.000	.435	.290	.189	.715	1.324
	X2	.210	.046	.359	2.813	.005	.415	.155	.097	.802	1.117

X3	.193	.048	.249	1.367	.000	.569	.334	.220	.724	1.244
X4	.249	.045	.278	3.071	.000	-.517	-.272	-.176	.367	1.104
X5	.370	.047	.437	4.840	.000	.552	.311	.204	.446	1.041

Source: The researcher's collecting data and SPSS

The results of the regression analysis show that tourists' satisfaction for Soc Trang's ecotourism destination is significantly affected by five factors, including Tourism Infrastructure, Behavioral control perception, specific attraction, Natural ecological condition and Local residents. Since the p values are less than 0.05, hypotheses in the formal study model from H1 to H5 are accepted.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Thus, the factors in the research model affect the attractiveness of visitors to the community-based ecotourism in Soc Trang province and the level of impact are in order as follows: (1) Tourism Infrastructure: β = 0.437, (2) Behavioral control perception: β = 0.359, (3) Particular attraction: β = 0.332, (4) Local residents: β = 0.249 & (5) Natural ecological condition: β = 0.278. The results of this research are the basis for proposing recommendations to increase the attractiveness of foreign tourists to ommunity-based ecotourism destination in Soc Trang province in the coming time.

The research results also reflect the actual situation of tourism development in Soc Trang province over the past time. The "tourism infrastructure" factor has the worst satisfaction due to the fact that the ways to the tourist destinations are weak and lack of synchronism; Accommodation facilities are too simple to meet the requirements of foreign visitors; Lack of quality tourist stops and environmental hygiene, etc. Behavioral control perception for local people, especially those engaged in tourism business activities are very limited, so visitors rate this factor at a low level. Visitors have not noticed the particular attraction of the destination Soc Trang compared to other destinations in the Mekong Delta, while the potential tourism Soc Trang has its own characteristics. Based on the results of the study, proposals are recommended for policy makers and tourism managers as following:

Firstly, it is necessary to have a strategy for investment in tourism infrastructure in long term and sustainable for Soc Trang Province; to invest in tourism infrastructure for Soc Trang province in the direction of convenience, courtesy, culture, civilization, harmony and friendliness with the natural landscape, ethnic cultural space, especially the Khmer and Chinese; to avoid duplication and hybridization with foreign cultures that are not suitable for ethnic culture. It is necessary to invest and upgrade facilities at the destinations (such as Doi Pagoda, Chen Kieu Pagoda, Ma Nuoc Pagoda, Kh'leang Pagoda, Khmer Ethnic Museum, Tan Long Island, Nga 5 floating market, entertainment, shopping, wharves, docks, toilets, etc. Especially, houses of ethnic minority groups (Khmer, Hoa) with special architecture standardized serves tourism.

Secondly, tourist development must ensure the preservation, embellishment and promotion of natural landscape, architecture and traditional cultural values of the Khmer and Chinese ethnic minority groups which makes them attractive to tourists compared to other destinations. It is advisable to raise awareness for local people who engage in tourism business, local authorities and tourists on natural landscape values, architecture and cultural identity to make Soc Trang civilized, safe, peaceful, friendly and hospitable destination.

Thirdly, the leaders in the tourism industry of Soc Trang province should discuss with the remaining 12 provinces of Mekong Delta to build their own tourism development strategies. If Soc Trang wants to become a destination of the Mekong Delta, the locality must create its own "attraction". Specifically, it is necessary to build attractive tourism products and services with unique characteristics, to avoid overlapping with other destinations which create a highlight in the development of tourism. The province needs to mobilize internal and external resources, invite tourism experts, investors, businesses and scientists to study thoroughly before developing a sustainable tourism development strategy.

Fourthly, Vietnam in general and Mekong Delta in particular have been among the group of countries most affected by the world's climate change published by the United Nations. Along with Haiti, India and Sri Lanka, Vietnam has suffered from unusually severe weather and it does not have enough time to overcome the consequences for many years. Natural disasters, floods, sea level rise, landslides, subsidence, climate change have threatened the infrastructure and life quality of people, especially in coastal areas such as Soc Trang. Impacts of climate change have been occurring severly in Mekong Delta and Soc Trang for many years. Mekong Delta and Soc Trang are no longer fertile, gentle land, blessed with a rich natural ecosystem as rich as before that has changed a lot. One of the sustainable development measures for this locality is the development of community-based ecotourism. Community-based ecotourism development does not only build the local economy, avoid impacts which depends on several natural ecological conditions, but also conserves and preserves natural landscape ecological values.

Fifthly, the development of community-based ecotourism aims to bring in more income, improve the material and spirit of rural people, especially the most vulnerable ethnic minority communities like Khmer, Chinese; contribute to limiting social evils such as drugs, smoking, prostitution, robbery, unemployment, deforestation and free migrants which make pressure on population growth in big cities; preserve and promote the values of traditional craft villages, customs and cultural identities of their respective nationalities; Community-based ecotourism development must link to local people and give them opportunities to grow and manage so that they are conscious of conserving, preserving and promoting these values. In addition, it is necessary to improve the knowledge, professional, skills and foreign languages for local people to serve tourists better.

In general, the results show that the tourists's appreciation for the variable means that visitor satisfaction is not high. The results of this quantitative study are similar to those of the authors. This is the basis for policy makers to have more detailed and in-depth solutions.

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