

## **Assessment of Sustainable Ecotourism Development: A Case Study of Gao Giong Ecotourism Park, Vietnam**

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**Abstract:** Ecotourism as a vital niche market in the tourism industry has been embraced by many developing countries including Vietnam. The objective of this study was to exam the Gao Giong Ecotourism Park performance to enhance sustainable ecotourism development in three interconnected aspects: environment, socio-culture and economics. The study was divided into two main stages: the first stage was implemented in 2009 investigating the performance of Gao Giong Ecotourism Park from 2004 to 2009 then proposing strategies. The second stage was to evaluate its 4-year-later performance according to proposed strategies derived from the first study conducted in 2009. Through multi-method approach, results showed that Gao Giong Ecotourism Park made more substantial contributions to both local livelihoods and environmental conservation; however, long-term development strategies (involving local people and entrepreneurs, effective exploration and protecting of natural resources, building a set of indicators for monitoring and control, etc.) was needed to ensure the sustainable development.

*Key words:* Sustainable development, Ecotourism, Multi method approach, Gao Giong Ecotourism Park

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Throughout the world, tourism has been acknowledged as a tool for bringing economic benefits to a country or a specific region (Eccles, 1995). According to Croes (2006) and Scheyvens and Mornsen (2008), tourism spurs economic activity by creating jobs for the community. In fact, tourism is now one of the largest industries and one of the fastest growing economic sectors for many developing countries including Vietnam; therefore, the increasing question how to explore tourism effectively and sustainably has been drawn attention of many governor authorities, researchers and operators.

Vietnam tourism, especially for ecotourism, has high potentials of development and operation but they had not operated and explored all resources effectively in terms of economic, cultural, environment. The lack of sufficient understanding of the ecotourism concept and serious consideration of the ecotourism development strategies and plans; that made the ecotourism had not developed as expected. Ecotourism parks had faced to big challenges and threats of the eco-environment protection, cultural and living standard enurement for the local community.





















entrepreneurs to create permanent jobs for local people. In term of Socio-cultural sustainability objectives of ecotourism, some programs should be implemented to encourage intercultural appreciation and communication between host communities and tourist as well as to enhance local community equilibrium. Next, stakeholders concurred that diversifying ecotourism products and services played an important role in boosting revenue from tourism activities and providing job opportunities for communities, especially it supplemented women employment. Those products and services should be developed based on GGEP advantages (ecosystem, fauna and flora ecosystem, local traditional identities, farmhouse, home stay, festivals, village trade, etc.). That building effective organization structure which could implement, coordinating and controlling business activities or eco-tourism projects was essential. Besides, how to recruit well-qualified personnel at all levels, or organizing training staff sessions and education programs would also be considered by stakeholders.

Finally, about Marketing and Research, it was also the first time in the workshop that local authorities and entrepreneur have mentioned to make use of marketing activities and research to promote GGEP brand. According to perspectives of some of stakeholders, Marketing activities and market research were regarded as useful methods to help GGEP gain popularity and catch up with the tourism market trends.

#### 4.1.3 Proposed Strategy

Ecotourism should be seen in relation to environmental development, economic and social development with the authentic and involving local communities in all stages of the process (Tuğba, 2013). With ecotourism-oriented development, GGEP had to meet the ecotourism requirements or ecotourism principles. These principles should be visualized both for someone who keen on this type of tourism and service providers of ecotourism products (Tuğba, 2013). To become an sustainable ecotourism park with high competitive advantages and high performance (e.g increasing revenue, number of tourist, high living standards of the local), some strategies based on the association of S-O, S-T, W-T, W-O analyzed previously were proposed as follows (see Figure 8):

<p>S-O Proposed strategies for strength and opportunities are:</p>	<p>S-T Strategy of using strengths to reduce threats is defined as the following:</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having appropriate strategies to develop GGEP according to ecotourism model</li> <li>• Improving current product lines and developing new ecotourism products</li> <li>• Establishment of accommodation for visitors which will help in creating jobs to the local people.</li> <li>• Raising the awareness of local people about ecotourism by training, workshops, and campaigns.</li> <li>• Doing market research and building suitable marketing strategies to promote brand to target customers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversifying services/ products which are considered as GGEP's competitive advantages and related to unique culture, beautiful identities, local festivals, cuisine, etc. so as to maintain and preserve local heritages and to generate income to local people as well as to reinvesting in GGEP.</li> <li>• Building effective and efficient operation management system of business activities and environment protection.</li> </ul>
<p>W-O The strategies that may be taken advantages to get over weaknesses by pursuing opportunities are:</p>	<p>W-T Following strategies have been recommended to establish countermeasure plans to prevent threats and dealing with weakness</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Researching and monitoring of ecotourism activities, then having proactive actions to conserve the environment and tourism resources.</li> <li>• Promotion of ecotourism marketing in the tourism market.</li> <li>• Facilitating the tours operated by entrepreneurs with collaboration of the authorities and local people.</li> <li>• Conducting market research to understand demand or interests of customers to have appropriate countermeasures.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing domestic and international collaborative activities to receive support in the field of research and development related to sustainable ecotourism</li> <li>• Investing to improve the quality of infrastructures, hospitality and accommodation centers, medical and health services, increasing access to new technologies and so on.</li> <li>• Environmental education to stakeholders and communities to raise their knowledge of ecotourism benefits and the role of environmental preservation to their livelihoods.</li> </ul>
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Figure 8. Proposed strategies from SWOT analysis

#### 4.2 Evaluation of Gao Giong Ecotourism Park Performance After 4 Years

After 4 years since 2010, GGEP achieved the increasing number of visitors (Nguyen, 2013; Project report, 2014a; 2014b) (see Table 4):

Table 4. Number of visitors from 2010 to 2013

Content	Year				Average growth rate (%)
	2010	2011	2012	2013	
Total	38477	48731	52134	60000	16
Domestic visitors	38094	48249	51441	59059	15
Foreign visitors	353	480	693	941	39

From 2010 to 2013, GGEP experienced the stable growth in number of tourists. In 2013, number of visitors in foreign visitors rose to around 941, while this figure for domestic visitors reach over 59000. With serious consideration to the above mentioned suggestions and adopting proposed strategies, this result consistently demonstrated the efforts of local authorities and other stakeholders in investing and developing GGEP according to ecotourism model. Local authority had spent budget on upgrading infrastructure (e.g building more roads and investing in means of transports like modern buses, new boats, building more convenient accommodations for tourists), improving products/services and first and foremost they had created chances to encourage local people to participate in business and ecotourism activities. Some marketing activities have been conducted to promote the image of GGEP such as incorporating with other tourist companies to organize tours for visitors, posting information on magazines or websites, etc.

Regarding the assessing of the potential development of sustainable ecotourism parks in Dong Thap province, synthesis scale method was taken full advantaged. In fact, to evaluate the potential for ecotourism part, we can make use of a variety of methods; however, synthesis scale is commonly used because it allows the researchers to quantify the indicators, and ranking the natural attractions under the influence of many factors (Trinh, 2013). In case of GGEP, after being rated by 5 indicators including ‘attractiveness’, ‘travel time’, ‘capacity’, ‘location’ and ‘sustainability’, GGEP was ranked amongst first groups compared with other parks (Trinh, 2013) (Table 5).

Table 5. Scores of components and rank of Ecotourism Parks in Dong Thap Province

Names	Scores of components					Total score	Rank
	Attractiveness	Sustainability	Capacity	Location	Travel time		
Tram Chim	12	12	6	8	4	42	1
Gao Giong	12	12	4	8	4	40	1
Rung Tram	9	9	4	8	4	34	2
Xeo Quyt	9	9	2	8	4	32	2
Thap Muoi	9	9	2	2	4	26	3
Con Tien	9	9	2	2	4	26	3
Con An Hoa	9	9	4	6	4	32	2
Con Dong Sang	9	9	2	2	4	23	3
Con Binh Thanh	9	9	2	6	4	30	2
Con To Chau	9	9	4	6	4	32	2
Cu lao Long Khanh	9	9	4	6	4	32	2

In terms of infrastructure, well-equipped hotels and motels with capacity from 4 to 30 visitors per day were constructed. Besides, the balance between the recruitment of know-how labor force and recruiting local staff had partly solved the requirements of human resources development and creating jobs for local people. Regarding services, along with exploring ecotourism destination with ecosystem (1657 - hectare Mangrove indigo forest) and flora and fauna system (Indigoes planted over 10 years, 38 bird types), operators established tourist routes combining between visiting local historical places and enjoying ecotourism sites, and those packet of service lasted from 1 to 2 days. Along with existing services like observing birds, going sightseeing by boats, tourist could enjoy new refreshing experiences such as river fishing, farming using local implements, local dish cooking lessons, visiting traditional craft village and orchards. In many cases, not only experienced tour guides working for Tourism Service Company, but local people would also become a tour guide for visitors. Indeed, Gao Giong Tourism Service Limited Company and local people had cooperated to provide those new packages of service. This was also a sign which indicated that one of the best thing local authorities and private entrepreneur did that they had increased the engagement of the communities in the implementation of ecotourism - related activities (see Table 6).

Table 6. Forms of community involvement in GGEP development

Nature of local involvement	Examples
Employment	Local tour guide Manager or chef Boat riders, instructors in cooking lessons, Employees of tourism company, Household heads, sales assistants, caretakers at local lodge.
Supply of goods and services	Food kiosk, campsite, home stays, boats, farming tools, Producing handicrafts, Celebrating traditional local festivals.

This cooperation would bring more benefits in terms of economics (e.g stable income), socio-culture (e.g community attitudes about tourists and ecotourism, protecting traditional identities) to the indigenous people. Moreover, many local women were also engaged in

tourism related income generation activities. With these positive changes, not only the number of visitors was rising, but the revenue from ecotourism activities was also quite impressive (Nguyen, 2013; Project report, 2014a; 2014b) (see Figure 9). In fact, the increase in the numbers of visitors had led to the increase of revenue there. With the advantages of the available resources such as fresh food like fish or shrimp, tropical fruit, fertile plain landscapes and unique southern culture, etc., the local tourist providers took advantage of them to satisfy visitors and to encourage them to be willing to pay more money for recreational activities there.

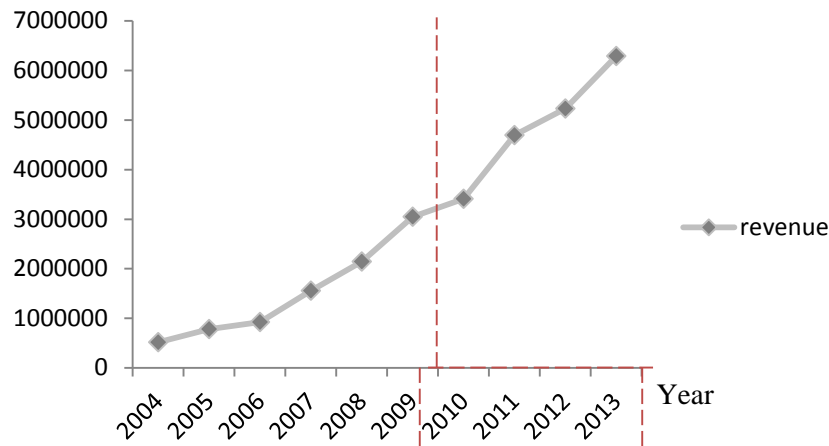


Figure 9. GGEP revenue from 2010 to 2013 compared with revenue from 2004 to 2009

Friendly attitudes, enthusiastic staff, knowledgeable guides were ones that tourists highly appreciated. However, besides those achievements gained by applying proposed strategies, many drawbacks had not addressed. Firstly, training sessions of knowledge and skills on eco-tourism and service style for local people were not organized regularly by entrepreneurs and local authorities. The lack of English proficiency was considered as a barrier preventing local people from communicating with foreign tourists. Education programs for local people and tourist about ecosystem such as building a gallery of fauna-flora with documentation of types of birds in the area and/or establishing a small model depicting the environment impacts on the ecosystem in GGEP, serving students and pupils for research purposes and to encourage the environment protection perception did not carry out. Local authorities did not have proactive actions in building natural ecosystems conservation plans and they had almost depended passively upon the national conservation projects. Although there were non-profit organizations and non-government organizations galore operating in the fields of natural preservation, environment and ecotourism, GGEP did not seize the opportunities to cooperate with them and then implementing sustainable ecotourism development programs. Researching the changes or the trends in ecotourism market so as to have countermeasures or appropriate marketing strategy was not regarded as one of the GGEP highest priorities.

Furthermore, some negative impacts of the development of ecotourism in Gao Giong also occurred. Polluted environment, the destroyed ecosystem from tourist activities, and the change in habitats of animal were the heated problems that had challenged stakeholders. Indeed, local authorities and other stakeholders had to take necessary steps to allocate limited resources in the areas of service in such a way that not only developed Gao Giong according to the ecotourism orientation, but also protected environment and preserved wild animals.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

### 5.1 Conclusion

Ecotourism is a major contributor to socio-economic development and can be used as an effective tool to reduce poverty, mitigating negative impacts of tourist activities on natural resources and protecting environment. The development of ecotourism model in GGEP had triggered interests among stakeholders and it had also laid the foundation for sustainable ecotourism development in future as well. It had received attention based on the positive results it had delivered in terms of visitor numbers and revenue generation. After 10 years of operation from 2004 to 2013, GGEP had gained considerable successes and also presented challenges. This study generally brought to the fact that ecotourism could be used as a strategic tool for poverty alleviation and protection of environment as in GGEP. However, despite having high potentials of ecotourism development, GGEP had not been explored effectively. Available resources (natural resources and human resources) and some new products/services had not been paid more attention to explore effectively and upgrade. The lack of consciousness of saving natural resources, reducing pollution also deterred GGEP operation from sustainable development.

### 5.2 Recommendation

For the sustainable development of GGEP in the future, more specific plans should be considered regarding to three main features: socio-cultural and environmental impacts of tourism. From the findings of this study, the authors recommended some ideas below:

- Developing some new services/products related to ecotourism education such as building a gallery of fauna–flora with documentation of types of birds in the area and/or establishing a small model depicting the environment impacts on the ecosystem in Gao Giong, serving students and pupils for study purpose and to encourage the environment protection perception.
- Training the communities on environmental conservation.
- Encouraging the communities to taking part in the planning and implementation of ecotourism activities, and it then contributes to their welfares.
- The private enterprises should become pro-community development through creating jobs, cooperation and even demand for commodities for their ecotourism business activities.
- Cooperating with NGOs, NPOs to seek consultancy and to be involved in their development programs.

Furthermore, when implementing specific plans for the sustainable development, some unexpected problems might advent and had negative impacts on environment, communities or on business performance; therefore, prior to carrying out the those plans, building indicators to predict, then monitor and evaluate those negative influences was indispensable. This study recommended some indicators as following (see Table 7):

Table 7. Indicators for Monitoring and Evaluation

Content	Indicators
Environment	Number of birds per area Number of fauna and flora per area

	Environment (Water/Land/Air) quality Amount of water resource and energy input Amount of waste generated Sewage treatment
Social-culture	Community awareness and involvement in ecotourism activities Population changes Number of traditional identities/ festivals maintained and explored
Economics	Local people average income Number of local people employed in tourism Number of transportation vehicles per household Number of Entrepreneurs Revenue generated from ecotourism activities Cost structure Changes in local commodities and services price Service quality Infrastructures and facilities Number of well-qualified employees

## 6. LIMITATION AND FURTHER STUDY

On the one hand, particularly in the first part, this study only examined the overall satisfaction of tourists about GGEP ecotourism services and products without conducting intensive study on factors affecting on the tourists' viewpoints why GGEP was considered as an attractive ecotourism destination. Second, the study also ignored the need to investigate other aspects such as the influence of ecotourism on local people's daily living; the establishment of budget plans for investing in new infrastructures; proposing legislative frameworks which encourage and allow communities exploiting and saving ecosystem; and finally, building long term development strategies to avoid conflicts of interest between stakeholders. On the other hand, some solutions were proposed; however, they were general and less specific. Besides, some measures used to collect and analysis the data, for example weights score, potential demand/supply evaluation methods were not applied in this study. Collected data of this study was performed manually with traditional software like excel so the procedure was still time-consuming.

Not only did limitations and challenges mentioned above require further investigation, they also point to the needs in the future research. As recommended, future researches should consider some different aspects of ecotourism development. The proposed solutions should be specific and detailed. Building indicators or criteria (e.g what would be assessed, who would be involved or how to analyze/evaluate them) to rate the ecotourism development prospects and other related concerns for ecotourism areas should also be regarded seriously. Until now, there had been quite a few studies about the performance of ecotourism parks in Dong Thap Muoi areas, Vietnam; as a result, they are recommended to extend research area with a complement of more ecotourism sites so as to preserve regional ecosystems, developing tourism activities and alleviating local poverty.

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## APPENDICES

Table 1. The differences between Gao Giong Ecotourism Park and other indigo forest ecotourism parks located outside Dong Thap Muoi

Content	Gao Giong Indigo Forest	Tra Su Indigo Forest	U Minh Ha	U Minh Throng
Location	Dong Thap	An Giang	Ca Mau	Kien Giang
Area (hectare)	1 657	845	8286	21 107
Recognized by UNESCO	Unrecognized	Unrecognized	The world biosphere reserve zone	The world biosphere reserve zone
Ecosystem	Mangrove indigo forest	Mangrove indigo forest	Mangrove primeval indigo forest	Mangrove primeval indigo forest

Flora and fauna system	Indigoes planted over 10 years, 38 bird types	140 fish types, 81 wild beast and reptile types	250 flora types; 182 bird types 40 wild beast type	252 flora types, 186 bird types
Specific fauna	Nhan Dien		Master copperhead, pangolin, otter	Otter, fish cat, zibet with big spot, squirrel
Service	Magnificent local language Bird-sanctuary field, Fishing and boating, Traditional cuisine, Bicycle, Local music	Fishing, Local food, Studying tour, Convalescence	Entertainment activities, Traditional cultural area, wood village, Raising fauna, fishing, traditional guesthouse, Northern food, Studying tour, Convalescence	Bird-sanctuary field, Primeval indigo, Wild boar Community, otter, Varan, fishing, Studying tour, Convalescence

Table 2. The difference between Gao Giong Ecotourism Park and others in Dong Thap Muoi area

Content	Gao Giong Indigo Forest	Xeo Quyt Ecotourim	Go Thap Monument	Tram Chim national park	Dong Thap Muoi drug preserve area
Location	Dong Thap	Cao Lanh	Thap Muoi	Tam Nong	Long An
Area (hectare)	1657	50	500	7588	1 041
Recognized by UNESCO	Unrecognized	Cultural historical monument recognized 1994 by the government	Cultural historical monument recognized 1998 by the government	One of eight bird preserve park of Vietnam	
Ecosystem	Mangrove indigo forest	Primeval Indigo forest	indigo forest	Primeval Indigo forest	Indigo forest and drug
Flora and fauna system	Indigoes planted over 10 years, 38 bird types	Indigo forest planted over 30 years, 170 flora types, 200 wild beast types, 13 fauna type recorded in Vietnamese Red Book		Indigo forest planted 10 – 18 years, 130 flora types, 231 bird types, 1000 ha of rice, lotus	Planted Indigo, 1000 drug tree types
Specific fauna	Nhan Dien	Sparrow with big beak, Square turtle, Indian python		Red head crane (December May)	Drug tree types
Service	Magnificent local language Bird-sanctuary field, Fishing and boating,	Narrow boating, Local food, Seeing old base	Seeing old base, War monument, Culture, festival monument	Bird sanctuary field, Local food	Studying drug types, Rowing junk, exploring indigo forest by own,

	Traditional cuisine, Bicycle; Local music				fishing, local food
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