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Local Ecology, Economic Benefits, and Policy Moderation: Unveiling the Potential for Ecotourism in Hai Duong Province

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ABSTRACT
This study explores ecotourism development potential by assessing the effects of economic benefits and local ecological environments, A quantitative method was utilized in the research to establish the moderating role of the governmental policies and regulations by means of a direct survey employing a 5-point Likert scale. The data analysis involved exploratory factor analysis, moderation analysis, reliability assessment, and descriptive statistics. This research reveals a strong positive impact of economic benefits (β = 0.73) and local ecological environments (β = 0.63) on the developing ecotourism. Meanwhile, the moderating role of government policies & regulatory framework was coefficient of β = 0.55. This finding significantly contributes novel empirical evidence to the interplay between these determinants in shaping the development of ecotourism, particularly in emerging regions as Hai Duong province. The valuable insights provide practical guidance for policymakers to enhance the potential for ecotourism development in Hai Duong province, Vietnam.

Keywords: Potential for Ecotourism Development, Local Ecological Environment, Economic Benefits, Government Policies and Regulatory Frameworks.

INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism has come forth as a sustainable move that will benefit both nature and the economy, mainly in the case of areas with natural and cultural heritage that are exceptionally rich. While large-scale tourism generates revenue for the region, it brings with it environmental challenges, from air and water pollution to waste accumulation and resource depletion. Baloch et al. (2022) state that ecotourism reduces negative impacts and at the same time encourages sustainable practices, minimal social and physical disturbance, and local as well as tourist responsibility towards conservation and cultural appreciation. The province intends to promote ecotourism and agriculture together with its 2021–2030 strategic development plan.

While ecotourism aims to harmonize environmental conservation with economic development, recent studies highlight several limitations. Addressing these challenges requires a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that influence the quality and effectiveness of regional ecotourism development (Ma et al., 2023) .Sustainable ecotourism is made possible through the local ecology, economic advantages, and backing from the government, but at the same time it has to face challenges that include economic leaks, limited government support, low awareness, pollution, conflicts in management, and poor infrastructure (Cabral & Dhar, 2019). The tourism of Hai Duong is not appealing and professional (Duong, 2023), while the forest funding under the Vietnam Forestry Development Strategy 2006–2020 is still not investigated thoroughly (Long & Bui, 2020; Asemconnect Vietnam, 2023).

This research investigates the ecotourism of Hai Duong Province from the perspectives of economic benefits, local ecology, and policy impact, it has the purpose of assessing the economic benefits resulted from tourism, the condition of biodiversity and protection, the impacts of regulations, and the provision of both theoretical and practical support for the growth of sustainability-oriented ecotourism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Potential for Ecotourism Development

Ecotourism refers to an environmentally friendly form of tourism that supports and helps to develop local communities as for its main purposes visiting the natural or cultural sites that are not too much affected by the human presence to admire and learn about nature, live and feel the heritage, and so forth (Alam & Nayak, 2020; Fennell, 2021). It is the ecological requirements of the place and the needs of all, visitors and locals, that make the basis for the planning of eco-tourism. (Lee, 2019). It brings in money, jobs, cross-cultural interaction, and environmental education (Mnisi &

Ramoroka, 2020), but at the same time, it could lead to environmental, social, and infrastructure stress (Xu et al., 2022). The use of eco-friendly approaches can be to the benefit of the community, wildlife conservation, enlightened lawmakers, and habitat rejuvenation (Blanton et al., 2024).

The evolution of ecotourism is influenced by consumer awareness, social reasons, and stakeholder partnerships (Huang et al., 2024; Brundtland Report, 1987; Tanrisever et al., 2024). Local involvement and support, such as those in mangrove boardwalks and eco-parks, a friendly environment, and good communication, are key factors for success (Thompson, 2022; Shi & Chen, 2024).

Anchoring Theorical Framework

Sustainable Tourism Development (STDT)

It is a process and practice that entails (Butler, 1999; Sharpley, 2009). Ecotourism in Hai Duong is based on the replenishment of resources, animal and plant conservation, and the management of areas where nature and people are, with the latter generating social and economic benefits for the community (Hall, 2019; Weaver, 2007). STDT is a strategy that focuses on those factors such as tourism, future needs, fragile ecosystems, stakeholder cooperation, and the use of renewable energy to eliminate the conflict of interest among the environment, the economy, and the community (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Dodds & Butler, 2019; Tverijonaite et al., 2024). It thus posits a managed approach that is a win-win for nature and culture while being a source of local governance (Hall, 2019; Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

Institutional Theory

According to the Institutional Theory (IT), the governments' agendas and the regulatory systems have the power to determine the extent of the organizations' formal and informal environments and thus the organizations' behavior in the case of ecotourism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014; North, 1990). In the case of ecotourism in Hai Duong, policies, community norms, and organizations' behaviors together with the restrictions on sustainable practices are working in tandem (Hoffman, 1999; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Besides, through the multi-level governance, the green practices supported by institutional arrangements and stable incentives have been able to improve local ecological conditions positively, refocusing the resilience to both economic and environmental stressors, and having a great impact on the local ecology (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Oliver, 1991; Peng et al., 2015; Gössling et al., 2012; Gössling et al., 2020; Dredge & Jamal, 2015).

The STDT paradigm postulates that the governmental measures and regulations affect the ecotourism and in turn change the part played by local environmental conditions in the tourism potential. To this end, institutional coherence increases sustainable practices through stable and predictable enforcement, while fragmentation (or regulatory uncertainty) decreases ecological preservation and sustainability (Hall, 2011).

Impact of Economic Benefits

Economic benefits are the positive financial impacts brought about by the measures, investments, or policies in the form of raised income, efficiency, productivity, and overall welfare (Chen & Var, 2010; Bhatta & Drennan, 2003). Tourism boosts the economy via foreign currency, the gradual build-up of capital, and the transfer of know-how, thus improving the cultural and natural resource base, local and national income, job creation, and the proliferation of business (Brida et al., 2020; World Travel and Tourism Council, 2019).

The Capitalist and Neoclassical viewpoints consider ecotourism as a method to temper modernity with nature, and through it, the sustainability of different areas can be achieved by the sharing of benefits amongst different groups, the giving of incentives to the market, and through the economic growth innovations (Porter & Linde, 1995; Honey, 1999; North, 1990; Kim et al., 2019). In other words, even though the market can be a source of problems and injustices that cause damage to the environment (Fletcher, 2011; Marin et al., 2019; Schumpeter, 2013), if the conservation is done based on the market and is well-monitored, both the ecosystems and the economically resilient area can get the most out of it (Honey, 1999). Sustainable tourism in Vietnam has not just been a successful strategy in terms of the number of tourists and their expenditure but has also produced an increase in the economic benefits and the possible development of ecotourism in Hai Duong (Vu, 2021).

After building the theoretical base, we put important angles together and suggest the first hypothesis as follows:

H1: Economic benefits positively impact the potential for ecotourism development.

Impact of Local Ecological Environments

Changes in the environment affect the local loss of ecosystems, extinction of species, and also the disappearance of the indigenous knowledge, cultural and biological diversity, and community resilience (Aswani et al., 2018). Bioregionalism combines political, cultural, and economic to their corresponding natural regions (Hutchinson et al., 2005), whereas the local ecological environment depicts the interaction among species and human impacts (Fuchs, 2024; Santoro et al., 2019). Ecosystems that are healthy and properly managed do not only improve the experiences of tourists but also play a key role in the sustainability of the area and the longevity of the tourism sector (Mearns, 2011; Nahuelhual et al., 2013). Ecocentric viewpoint recognizes all living beings' interdependence and the distinctiveness of local ecosystems as the primary reasons of ecotourism growth (Patwary et al., 2023; Nguyen & Phong, 2020), which in turn, supports conservation and community livelihoods (Satrya et al., 2023), and on the contrary, tourists' perception of environmental degradation has thrown light on the need

for and ethical preservation and sustainability (Holden, 2003). Post-humanist ecotourism encourages biocultural conservation and non-human agency and in doing so, creates the ground for equitable and sustainable development. Capacity Theory emphasizes the need to manage the flow of visitors in a manner that would not only preserve ecosystems but also the tourism viability (O'Reilly, 1986; Buckley, 2005; Monz et al., 2013; Uy et al., 2018), and the Precautionary Principle alongside environmental change theory advocates for the avoidance of developments that are likely to cause irreversible damage to the ecosystems or threaten the sustainability of ecotourism (Foster, 2000; Arrow et al., 1996; Newsome et al., 2012).

On a regional scale, the province of Hai Duong has different ecological types like mountains, wetlands, and farming areas, which makes it a great place for ecotourism to develop. Besides, the Chi Linh Forest is also a factor contributing to such a rich scenario of ecotourism in the province due to its great biodiversity and historical background of medicinal plants (Nguyen, 2019; Cổng thông tin điện tử Đảng bộ tỉnh Hải Dương, 2020).

Through the development of a theoretical foundation, we combine the core viewpoints to formulate the second hypothesis as outlined below:

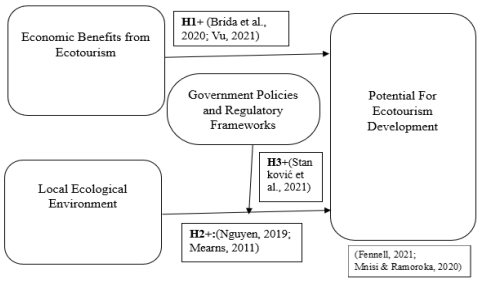
H2: Local ecological environments positively impact the potential for ecotourism development.

Moderating role of Government Policies and Regulatory Frameworks

Government policies are intentional moves to meet social needs that are enforced through rules with a formal and transparent nature which is ever-growing (Abert, 1974; Mishra & Kumar, 2023). By means of the regulations, policies show the distribution of responsibilities and separate the influences on ecotourism into two groups - direct and indirect (Stanković et al., 2021). Besides, good environmental practices secure the habitats, improve the quality of air and water, and make conservation and development coexist, the governance, infrastructure, and community involved (Nguyen, 2021; Özgit & Akanyeti, 2022; Liu & Chamaratana, 2024; Trang et al., 2023). As per the Ecological Systems Theory, community-based ecotourism is a way to manage biodiversity and provide the local population with incomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Khan et al., 2021; Guerrero-Moreno & Oliveira-Junior, 2024).

In Hai Duong, strategic initiatives like Thanh Long Lake integrate preservation with tourism growth (The Anh, 2024; Le, 2024), supporting H3: government policies positively moderate ecological impact on ecotourism potential (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Theoretical Framework Overview



METHODOLOGY

The research employs a quantitative research approach, allowing systematic data collection and analysis to identify, investigate, and validate emerging trends. (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). In addition, this research method depends on statistical techniques to objectively assess data and generate measurable conclusion (Babbie, 2020).

A stratified probability sampling and a 5-point Likert survey were executed to evaluate ecotourism in Hai Duong, consisting of 70% tourists and residents and 30% experts and officials (Bryman, 2016; Brown, 2011). The tourists evaluated the economic gains and the reasons for the visit, the local people assessed the social and environmental effects, the government took into consideration the policy and infrastructure, and the specialists guaranteed the biodiversity and the economic balance. T0 726 participants, a random sample of 385 was surveyed both manually and electronically to provide well-rounded data (Bryman, 2016; Brown, 2011).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reliability analysis

Table 1 Analysis of the dependent construct, "Ecotourism Development"

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.718	4

Item-Total Statistics				
	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted

ED1	8.669	9.576	.527	.608
ED2	8.432	10.194	.505	.562
ED3	7.388	8.755	.509	.530
ED4	9.574	9.050	.587	.619

Source: (The authors, 2025)

Accordingly, survey questions 1, 2, 3, and 4 about the potential for ecotourism development are coded with ED1, ED2, ED3, and ED4 respectively.

Table 1 shows that every dependent variable had adjusted item-total correlation values of at least 0.3. At 0.718, the aggregate Cronbach's alpha was higher than the generally used standard of 0.6 and higher than the alpha values that would be produced if any item were eliminated. Additionally, Cronbach's alpha for each dependent variable remained higher than the corresponding adjusted item-total correlations, even when individual items were excluded. Therefore, no items were discarded.

Figure 2 Experience tourism in the field of sandworms – Tu Ky – Hai Duong (Hue, 2023).

Figure 3 Con Son - Kiep Bac Special National Relic Site with hundreds of relics spread over 8,000 hectares in Hai Duong Province (Nga, 2023).

Figure 4 Mao Dien Temple of Literature (Cam Giang district, Hai Duong) - A historical site worshiping Confucius and honoring great Confucian scholars representing the cultural tradition (Anh, 2018).

Figure 5 Natural ecological environments at Dao Co – Thanh Mien in Hai Duong Province (Hue, 2018)

Figure 6 A typical clean agricultural model, Chi Lang Nam commune (Thanh Mien) has taken advantage of these advantages to develop tourism (Hue, 2018).

Figure 7 Phong Co Farm is the second ideal tourist destination of Chi Lang Nam commune in Hai Duong Province (Hue, 2018)

EFA

Table 2 Factor loading matrix for the two independent variables

Rotated Component Matrixa Component with loading factors	
1	2
EB1 .542 EB2 .567 EB3 .689 EB4 .510	LE1 .568 LE2 .737 LE3 .708 LE4 .607
Factors were extracted and clarified using PCA with Varimax rotation.	
a. Rotation converged in 4 iterations.	

Source: (The authors, 2025)

Here, EB1–EB4 and LE1–LE4 represent survey items 1 through 4 measuring economic benefits from tourism and the local ecological environment, respectively.

All eight dependent variables were included in the rotational component matrix, which organized them into two distinct factors that match the independent variables, as indicated in Table 2. Each dependent variable exhibited a factor loading greater than 0.5. Moreover, a comparative analysis was also conducted for both the dependent and moderator variables.

Multiple linear regression model

Table 3 Coefficientsa

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	8.736	.531		3.811	.000
	EB	.772	.559	.730	3.443	.000
	LE	.685	.625	.630	4.889	.023

a. Dependent Variable: ED

Source: (The authors, 2025)

Where ED: mean of ED1, ED2, ED3, ED4; EB: mean of EB1, EB2, EB3, EB4;
LE: mean of LE1, LE2, LE3, LE4

Table 3 reveals that the significance values (Sig.) obtained from the t-tests for the variables are .000 and .023, both of which fall well below the alpha level of 0.05. The results demonstrate that the independent variables—local ecological environment and economic benefits from tourism—have a significant impact on ecotourism development potential, thereby supporting both hypotheses.

Moderator analysis

Table 4 Analysis of the impact of government policies and regulatory frameworks

Model : 1
Y : ED
X : LE
W : GP
Sample Size: 385
****
OUTCOME VARIABLE:
ED

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	dl1	dl2	p
.669	.628	.521	5.348	3.000	381.000	.000

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	4.765	.246	73.543	.000	5.568	5.121
LE	.622	.387	3.420	.000	.391	.387
GP	.684	.481	4.237	.000	.292	.277
Int_1	.550	.380	4.855	.000	.394	.332

Source: (The authors, 2025)

Where GP: mean of GP1, GP2, GP3, GP4

Table 4 shows a significant interaction (β = 0.55, p = 0.000) between local ecological environment and government policies, indicating that stronger policies enhance ecotourism potential, supporting hypothesis H3.

Discussion

Summary Results

The economic advantages (0.73) and the environmental quality (0.63) are the key elements determining the potential of ecotourism in Hai Duong, while the government policies would be the one to mediate the economic impact at 0.55. Hence, the triplet of research questions gets validation.

Theoretical implication

The research established that the financial benefits and the possible ecotourism in Hai Duong had a strong positive correlation, which was supporting the tourism industry as a driver for growth (Brida et al., 2020; World Travel and Tourism Council, 2019) and was in line with the capitalist and neoclassical theories (Porter & Linde, 1995; Schumpeter, 2013). On the other hand, there was a warning that the financial advantages might be more than the conservation benefits (Fletcher, 2011); however, the results were in favor of the community-based models that share the benefits fairly, and support the ecotourism (Honey, 1999).

The quality of the local ecological environment in Hai Duong, which consists of places like Chi Linh Forest and Tran Dynasty herbal gardens, favorably affects the potential for ecotourism (Mearns, 2011; Nahuelhual et al., 2013; Patwary et al., 2023). Ethical preservation is in line with Holden (2003), yet overly strict limits may restrain the growth of tourism (Foster, 2000). The management of the community based on the ecological carrying capacity is a way to support the sustainable coexistence of biodiversity and ecotourism (O'Reilly, 1986).

It was assumed that the government programs would have a positive moderating effect on ecological intentions for ecotourism, which was exemplified by the initiatives at Thanh Long Lake (The Anh, 2024; Le, 2024), however, according to local stakeholders the implementation was weak (Cabral & Dhar, 2019). The concept of inclusive governance received mixed support (Bramwell & Lane, 2011), whereas zoning and investment incentives facilitated the expansion of ecotourism driven by policy (Liu & Chamaratana, 2024; Guerrero-Moreno & Oliveira-Junior, 2024). The findings reveal that in the absence of required standards or coordinating among the stakeholders, policies only have a moderate impact on the potential of ecotourism (β = 0.55) (Stanković et al., 2021).

Practical Implications

In Hai Duong, economic advantages are the main force behind ecotourism (β = 0.73), and the money obtained from it is used to support the development of infrastructure, resource protection, and the education of

the workforce through the application of inclusive policies (Honey, 1999; Brida et al., 2020). The local economy is significantly boosted by eco-certified and community-managed businesses (Thapa et al., 2022), while the conservation of areas like wetlands, Chi Linh Forest, and Storks Island leads to the development of ecotourism through zoning, managing the number of visitors, and educating people about biodiversity (Holden, 2003; Nahuelhual et al., 2013). Government policies have a moderate impact on this process (β = 0.55), and the focus is on fairness in community planning (Huang, Fang & Wang, 2024; Liu & Chamaratana, 2024).

Limitations

The geographical restriction of this research to Hai Duong province creates challenges for extending the study's findings beyond this provincial context. Although the survey involves a number of stakeholders, the data was only gathered once and is dependent on respondents' impressions, which could provide biased findings. The study examined policy frameworks as moderators but did not differentiate between local and national levels of governance during this analysis.

Future Research Directions

Future research should employ mixed methods, including interviews with officials, operators, and scientists, expand to other provinces for geographic variation, track stakeholder change over time, explore digital and smart tourism tools (e.g. QR trails/virtual reality experiences), and study how specific policies and regulatory frameworks (zoning, eco-certifications, etc) advocate for sustainable ecotourism outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The research evaluated how economic benefits, local ecological environments, and government policies impact potential for ecotourism in Hai Duong Province. Economic benefits were found to be a strong driver of development, when accompanied by inclusive conservation programs, support of wetlands and medicinal heritage forests. Government policies had a moderate impact, primarily because of challenges in implementation and limited community involvement. The research extends STDT in the context of Vietnam and provides useful information on the policy, economic (benefits), and ecological strategies to support sustained rural ecotourism.

Informed Consent Declaration

All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Participation was voluntary, and all respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time without any consequence.

Conflicts of Interest

All authors declare that we have no conflicts of interest

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