

Ecotourism - Potential and Sustainable Development Strategy of Moc Chau

Nguyen Thi Thu Ha, Do Thi Hoa Nha

(*Department of Economics, Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA), Vietnam*)

Corresponding author: Nguyen Thi Thu Ha

ABSTRACT: Moc Chau is a district in an ethnic minority area, with difficult socio-economic conditions, but has a very diverse ecosystem with many beautiful natural landscapes, unique traditional culture and a rich agricultural system, therefore, ecotourism is the key to local development. The study analyzed the status of ecotourism development in this district. Some limitations have been pointed out such as problems in transport infrastructure and tourism businesses; human resources. The study has proposed a number of recommendations to enhance ecotourism development in Moc Chau district in the coming time.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Development, Sustainability, Tourism, Vietnam.

I. INTRODUCTION

Development is one of the inevitable laws of humanity, of all times, of all countries. Because along with the increase in population, the needs for life and culture taken from the environment and ecosystems are increasing. To meet those needs, the economic development is required. The inevitable consequence of development is that natural resources have been exploited to serve these economic development needs, destroyed ecosystems and degraded environmental quality. Tourism is an economic sector whose activities also have significant negative impacts on natural resources and the environment. The concept of "sustainable tourism" is still being researched and developed to find out the causes of the decline in tourism's attractiveness due to the degradation of environmental resources in order to bring economic benefits not only for the tourism industry but also for the local community. A key strategy for socio-economic development in general and for the tourism industry in particular is the development of sustainable eco-tourism models.

The development in many countries show that focusing on developing natural tourism or ecotourism is a lucrative business with many development prospects and plays an important role in attracting foreign currency. As a type of responsible tourism, in addition to economic benefits, ecotourism also brings many other great benefits such as contributing to the goal of preserving the natural environment, indigenous cultural values, and developing local community. Recognizing the important significance of ecotourism, the Vietnam Tourism Development Strategy always identifies ecotourism as a priority type of tourism for development. This orientation also has special meaning when tourism development is also moving towards a green economy, actively contributing to sustainable development and responding to the impacts of climate change in Vietnam. Moc Chau is a mountainous, highland and border district, located in the Southeast of Son La province, 180km northwest of Hanoi. With rich natural landscapes, diverse ecosystems, fresh environment, cool climate and diverse and unique customs and cultural beauty of ethnic groups, Moc Chau is one of the most attractive destinations in the Northwest region. Taking this advantage, Moc Chau district has promoted the development of eco-tourism, thereby contributing to protecting the landscape environment, diversifying types of services, and increasing income for ethnic minorities in the region. In 2022, the number of tourists to Moc Chau is estimated to reach 1,568,000 people, including about 800 international visitors, social revenue is estimated to reach 1,724.8 billion VND (Moc Chau District People's Committee, 2022). However, these results are still very modest compared to the district's tourism potential. Moc Chau tourism has only been initially exploited. Investment and promotion have not really received proper attention, so tour tours have not been formed and are not operated professionally. To clearly see the potential of ecotourism as well as its contributions to sustainable development for the local economy and society, this study focuses on analyzing some ecotourism products and models of Moc Chau district and some of its socio-economic impacts on the locality in recent years. The study

also points out a number of existing limitations in local eco-tourism development, from there, proposes a number of policy solutions to overcome these limitations to promote the development of eco-tourism of the locality.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Hector Ceballos-Lascurain, a pioneering researcher on ecotourism, defined ecotourism for the first time in 1987 as follows: "Ecotourism is that tourism that involves traveling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specific object of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural aspects found in these areas".

Another definition by Martha Honey (1999), "Ecotourism is Travel to fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas that strive to be low impact and (usually) small scale. It helps educate the traveler; provides funds for conservation; directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and fosters respect for different cultures and for human rights".

In Vietnam in 1999, within the framework of a workshop on developing a national strategy for ecotourism development, the following definition was given: Ecotourism is a form of nature tourism with a high level of education on ecology and the environment, have a positive impact on the protection of the environment and culture, ensure financial benefits to local communities, and contribute to conservation efforts. In 2009, Le Huy Ba also introduced the concept of eco-tourism "Eco-tourism is a type of tourism that considers specific and natural ecosystems as the object to serve the tourists who love nature, sightseeing, enjoying landscapes or studying ecosystems. It is also a form of close and harmonious combination between the development of tourism economics with introduction of the beautiful landscapes of the country as well as education, propaganda, protection and development of the environment and natural resources sustainably". In the 2005 Tourism Law, there is a rather brief definition: "Eco-tourism is a form of tourism based on nature, associated with local cultural identity with the participation of the community for the purpose of sustainable development".

According to the revised Vietnam Tourism Law (2017): "Eco-tourism is a type of tourism based on nature, associated with local cultural identity, with the participation of the community, combined with education. on environmental protection".

According to Patterson (2002), characteristics of an ecotourism business are that it: Have a low impact upon a protected area's natural resources and recreation techniques; Involve stakeholders (individuals, communities, ecotourists, tour operators and government institutions) in the planning, development, implementation and monitoring phases; Limits visitation to areas, either by limiting group size and/or by the number of groups taken to an area in a season; Supports the work of conservation groups preserving the natural area on which the experience is based; Orients customers on the region to be visited; Hires local people and buys supplies locally, where possible; Recognizes that nature is a central element to the tourist experience; Uses guides trained in interpretation of scientific or natural history; Ensures that wildlife is not harassed; Respects the privacy and culture of local people.

While the details vary, most definitions of eco-tourism boil down to a special form of tourism that meets three criteria: it provides for environmental conservation; it includes meaningful community participation; it is profitable and can be self-sustained.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study uses secondary data collected from official reports of Moc Chau district People's Committee and official websites. Primary data were collected from a survey of local tourism managers and tourists in Moc Chau district. The study conducted interviews with all tourism management staff (37 officials) and 277 tourists (sample size was calculated according to the Slovin formula with an overall study population of 900,000 tourists on average annually in the period 2020 - 2022). The interview focused on assessments of the current status of ecotourism development in Moc Chau district. The 5-level Likert scale is used to measure the assessment levels in the study.

IV. FINDINGS

4.1. Results of ecotourism development

Moc Chau's tourism in general and ecotourism in particular have achieved positive initial achievements in recent times, and state management of tourism activities in the area has received attention. The number of domestic and international ecotourism visitors is constantly increasing each year; The ecotourism market is increasingly expanding, key ecotourism products are gradually being formed; Technical facilities serving ecotourism receive investment attention; Tourism propaganda and promotion, introducing the potential and advantages of ecotourism development are focused; Training and fostering tourism human resources activities are gradually receiving attention; Income from tourism services is also gradually increasing.

Developing ecotourism associated with preserving and promoting cultural values and historical relics, creating links to exploit and develop intra-district, intra-province and inter-province tours and routes.

Table 1: Results of ecotourism development in Moc Chau district, 2020 - 2022

Criteria	Year 2020	Year 2021	Year 2022	Compare 2021/2020		Compare 2022/2021	
				+/-	(%)	+/-	(%)
1. Number of tourists (Thousands of people)	691	441	1568	-250	-36.18	1127	255.56
2. Revenue (Billion VND)	750.1	484.8	1724.8	-265.3	-35.37	1240	255.78
3. Number of labor	2251	2124	2875	-127	-5.64	751	35.36
4. Number of tourist service businesses	587	608	608	21	3.58	0	0

Source: Moc Chau Tourism Steering Committee (2022)

Because 2020 and 2021 are greatly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, many ecotourism development targets of Moc Chau district are quite low. In 2022, because the pandemic has been well controlled, the tourism industry in general and ecotourism in particular, along with many measures to develop the tourism industry, Moc Chau has achieved many achievements, surpassing previous years. In 2022, the number of tourists coming to Moc Chau is estimated to reach 1,568,000 people (an increase of 255.56% compared to 2021), including about 800 international visitors, social revenue is estimated at 1,724.8 billion VND (increased by 255.78%). Total revenue reached 1724.8 billion VND (up 255.78% compared to 2021). The number of labor participating in ecotourism activities in the district in 2022 is 2875 people, an increase of 35.36% compared to 2021. The number of tourists increased, but the number of visitors staying long term and using local products and services is quite small.

4.2. Ecotourism models

Ecotourism models of Moc Chau district are quite diverse, in which outstanding tourism models can be divided into 5 groups including: Natural tourism models; Community-based ecotourism; tourism model associated with traditional culture, historical sites, culture; Agricultural experience tourism; Tourism is associated with traditional crafts.

Table 2: Number of ecotourism models exploited by resource tourism in Moc Chau district, 2020-2022

Criteria	Year 2020	Year 2021	Year 2022	Compare 2021/2020		Compare 2022/2021	
				+/-	(%)	+/-	(%)
1. Natural tourism	7	7	7	0	0	0	0
2. Community-based ecotourism	3	4	4	1	33.33	0	0
3. Tourism model associated with traditional culture, historical sites, culture	25	25	26	0	0	1	4
4. Agricultural experience tourism	15	16	18	1	6.67	2	12.5
5. Type of tourism associated with traditional crafts	2	3	4	1	50	1	33.33
Total	52	55	59	3	5.77	4	7.27

Source: Moc Chau District Party Committee (2022)

Moc Chau district has many tourist attractions and beautiful landscapes, typically there are 7 tourist destinations: Bat Cave (in the center of Moc Chau town), Ban On Ngu Dong (Nong Truong Moc Chau town), Forest Ban Ang pine (Dong Sang commune), Dai Yem waterfall (Muong Sang commune), Pha Luong peak (Chieng Son commune), Song Da, Xuan Nha nature reserve. Currently, Moc Chau district has 4 main community tourism products, which are community tourism villages: Ban Ta So (Chieng Hac commune); Doi village (Tan Lap commune); Vat village (Muong Sang commune); Ang village (Dong Sang commune) with its landscape and living environment still retains its daily life and culture, along with traditional handicrafts that can be exploited to create valuable tourism products. bringing new sources of income and livelihoods to many ethnic households. Moc Chau District People's Committee encourages organizations and individuals to build and form agricultural experience tourism destinations such as: Hong Kong Ecotourism Area (Ang village, Dong Sang

commune), Moc Suong tourist destination (Tan Lap commune), Models of tea hills, tea gardens, and beautiful fruit gardens serving agricultural tourism and experiential tourism (Plum garden, Mango garden, Grapefruit garden, Orange garden, Passion fruit garden, Longan garden, Avocado garden...)

4.3. Tourism business infrastructure

The system of technical facilities serving tourism in Moc Chau is increasingly being completed and enhanced. There have been large corporations investing and building attractions, amusement parks, and tourist accommodation facilities to meet the needs of tourists visiting. However, currently, accommodation establishments and tourism services are small-scale, not diverse in type, and not highly professional; in undeveloped tourist areas, attractions, entertainment and cultural services; lack of shopping services and entertainment spots to attract tourists. In 2022, Moc Chau district has 271 accommodation establishments (including 01 resort, 01 4-star hotel, 02 3-star hotels, 03 2-star hotels), with up to 264 unrated accommodation establishments. Room occupancy capacity of accommodation establishments reaches 35-50%, and that of restaurants and eateries reaches 50-60%. On peak occasions, room occupancy reaches 80 -90%, restaurants and eateries reach 90% or more. Currently, the district has 12 tourism businesses, 325 food service establishments, and many entertainment establishments.

Table 3: Number of homestays in Moc Chau district in 2022

Commune/town	Number of homestays	Proportion (%)
1. Moc Chau town	6	7.59
2. Nong Truong town	9	11.39
3. Dong Sang commune	56	70.89
4. Muong Sang commune	1	1.27
5. Tan Lap commune	7	8.86
Total	79	100

Source: People's Committee of Moc Chau district (2022)

A typical type of accommodation facility in ecotourism is Homestay. In recent years, this model has tended to develop, increasing the number and quality of homestays in the district, 79 homestays account for 29.2% of the total number of accommodation establishments, especially in Dong Sang commune with 56 homestays (accounting for 70.89%).

4.4. Human resources for ecotourism development

Moc Chau district's ecotourism human resource by the end of 2022 has about 2,875 employees, of which employees with intermediate degrees or higher in majors account for about 40%, with tourism professional certification accounts for about 12%, and the rest are unskilled employees (48%). The average income of employees is about 5-6 million VND/month.

The above statistics show that up to 48% of employees have not received professional training, only 12% of employees have received training in tourism operations. Therefore, it is very necessary to organize training courses to improve professional qualifications in tourism, especially ecotourism for local employees.

4.5. Investment capital for ecotourism development

Moc Chau District People's Committee directs the synchronous and effective implementation of key tasks and solutions to improve the business environment, enhance competitiveness (PCI index, DDCI index) and management efficiency and district-level public administration (PAPI index). The district creates favorable conditions for investors to survey and establish projects in the area. As a result, in recent times, the district's investment environment has improved significantly, and investment attraction has achieved many encouraging results. Moc Chau has become one of the ideal destinations for investors inside and outside the province.

In the period 2020 - 2022, the total investment capital for ecotourism development in the district is 4,173 billion VND for 12 projects, the average capital/project is 1,128,834 billion VND. In 3 years, 2021 attracts the most investment projects, 6 projects, double that of 2020. In 2022, although the number of projects is less, the average investment capital/project increases 156.33% compared to 2021.

4.6. Involvement of the local community

One of the criteria demonstrating socio-economic development in general and the tourism industry in particular is the extensive and effective participation of the local community. Especially for ecotourism, exploiting natural tourism resources and indigenous cultural values requires the participation of the local community. When people participate in

ecotourism development activities, in addition to having more jobs and more income, they also have the responsibility to sustainably protect local tourism resources.

The survey results show that there is a difference in the opinions of the two subjects. Management officials have a higher level of assessment, saying that people have actively participated in ecotourism development activities, participated in many tourism services, diversified services, and are conscious of protecting resources and good environment. Only the quality of services provided by people is not highly appreciated (3.4 points). As for tourists, they only appreciate the number of people participating in ecotourism activities, but not the quality of the service (3.2 points), saying that the service is not rich and diverse (3.3 points) and said that people are not really aware of protecting resources and a good tourism environment (3.4 points).

V. CONCLUSION

Moc Chau has a huge potential for eco-tourism with a system of beautiful natural landscapes, unique traditional culture and a rich and attractive agricultural ecosystem. In recent years, local authorities have grasped this advantage and implemented many programs, as well as attracting and implementing investment projects to develop eco-tourism in a sustainable manner, contributing to the budget. Locality while improving the income and quality of life of local people, maintaining and preserving local natural resources and cultural resources. However, the results analyzed above show that, compared to that great potential, the number of ecotourism tourists is still very limited. The biggest obstacle that can be seen is the limitation of transportation infrastructure as well as tourism infrastructure (restaurant systems, hotels, entertainment systems...). Although people's participation is positive, due to their low educational level and lack of professional training in tourism, the effectiveness of their participation is quite limited. Although the local government has a policy of welcoming investors, being flexible, dynamic, and helping businesses, the number of local investment projects is still very limited compared to expectations. The cause of this problem is due to inadequacies in overlapping policies on land, site clearance, and investment attraction. To overcome these difficulties, aiming to further develop ecotourism in Moc Chau district in the coming time, the study proposes a number of recommendations as follows:

- Develop infrastructure to serve tourism in a synchronous manner. Create a list of high-end tourism resort projects to attract investment and implementation; promote sustainable tourism; Prioritize high-end standard resorts (resorts, 4-star hotels or higher) to meet the needs of conference and event tourism and large-scale, modern conference and seminar activities. Build a high-quality information system about the attractiveness of investment in tourism in Moc Chau for investors. Build introduction channels and invite investment: Create websites including illustrative videos, discussion forums, and updated reports, to promote and introduce Moc Chau's potential in terms of strengths, market size and segmentation, forecast and need for technical facilities for tourism.

- Develop and improve human resource capacity. Review and standardize training documents on industry services such as vocational skills content, community tourism development toolkit, and destination knowledge training modules. ; digital and social marketing, visitor services, hospitality, media, product development. Organize training and foster knowledge and skills for the community to participate in tourism business and contribute to promoting destinations and tourism images of the district and each commune/town.

- Build ecotourism models worthy of natural resources, culture, agriculture and related experiences. Building and developing resorts according to each stage's targets in areas rich in natural landscapes such as: tea hills, grassland conservation areas and other natural mountain and forest areas, product solutions This goes hand in hand with solutions to attract investment. Construction and development of entertainment areas with highland characteristics according to targets in each stage. Develop eco-tourism programs associated with sports and programs oriented to attract foreign visitors. Build agricultural experience tourism models, introduce tourism programs associated with agricultural products combined with purchasing agricultural products, and pay attention to the work of building a set of guidelines to standardize the model of agricultural experience tourism.

- Promote propaganda, promotion and branding of Moc Chau eco-tourism. Building a unique brand to create a difference based on the main strengths of nature, national culture, agricultural experience, organic agricultural products combined with culinary culture, four-season fruits. Building a representative image for "Moc Chau Plateau", organizing competitions to create titles - symbols of Moc Chau tourism.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Ba, L.H. (2009). *Ecotourism*. Science and Technics Publishing House.
- [2]. Ceballos-Lascurain, H. (1987). *The future of ecotourism*. Mexico Journal.13–14.
- [3]. Honey, Martha. (1999). *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?* Washington, DC: Island Press.
- [4]. Moc Chau District Party Committee (2021). *Moc Chau district tourism development project to 2025, orientation to 2030*. No. 02-DA/HU. March 15, 2021.
- [5]. National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (2017). *Law on Tourism*. Law No. 09/2017/QH14, June 19, 2017.
- [6]. National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (2005). *Law on Tourism*. No. 44/2005/QH11.

- June 14, 2005.
- [7]. Patterson (2002). *The Business of Ecotourism: The Complete Guide for Nature and Culture-Based Tourism Operations*, Rhinelander, Wis.: Explorer's Guide Publishing Second Edition.
- [8]. People's Committee of Moc Chau district (2022). *Report on the implementation of socio-economic development in 2022; Socio-economic development plan for 2023*.
- [9]. Steering Committee for Tourism Development of Moc Chau District (2022). *Report on results of implementation of tourism development tasks in 2022, directions and tasks of tourism development in 2023*.

**Corresponding author: Nguyen Thi Thu Ha¹*

¹(Department of Economics, Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA), Vietnam)