



Received: 03-09-2025
Accepted: 13-10-2025

International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies

ISSN: 2583-049X

Developing Green Tourism Toward Sustainable Growth in Vietnam

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62225/2583049X.2025.5.5.5103>

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Abstract

Vietnam's tourism sector has expanded rapidly, contributing around 6.4% of GDP. As such growth creates both economic opportunities and environmental pressures, a shift toward green tourism is imperative. Green tourism defined as tourism that rationally exploits natural resources with minimal negative impact aims to harmonize ecological

protection with socio-economic development. This paper provides a comprehensive examination of green tourism in Vietnam. First, it presents a theoretical overview of sustainable tourism and the concept of green tourism, emphasizing the "triple bottom line" of people, planet, and profit.

Keywords: Green Tourism, Sustainable Growth, Vietnam

1. Introduction

Tourism is a major economic asset for Vietnam, creating jobs and income, broadening cultural perspectives, and benefiting communities. The industry's growth has been remarkable – pre-pandemic millions of international and domestic visitors each year contributed significantly to GDP and livelihoods. However, this growth has generated environmental pressures. Iconic destinations such as Ha Long Bay, Phu Quoc, Hoi An Ancient Town, and the Mekong Delta's eco-zones face overcrowding, pollution, and ecosystem stress. Unchecked mass tourism can degrade these assets and even deter future visitors, so attention has turned to sustainability.

Globally, authorities emphasize that tourism must align with sustainable development. United Nations and ASEAN officials stress a people-planet-profit approach: tourism "supports development far beyond GDP" by creating jobs and infrastructure, but it must prioritize environmental protection. In 2025, Vietnam joined this consensus. Leaders stated that sustainable action must "put people and planet first", reframing tourism as a creative economy linking culture, environment and innovation. Accordingly, Vietnam has begun integrating green principles into tourism policy. The government has announced targets such as achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, and agencies have issued guidelines on eco-friendly tourism development. Initiatives like the "Visit Vietnam" digital tourism platform and the national "Travel to Love" campaign reflect a commitment to responsible, nature-based tourism. Nonetheless, translating these visions into practice remains challenging. This paper examines Vietnam's journey toward green tourism, covering theoretical foundations, the current tourism landscape, and the ecological and economic impacts of green tourism. It identifies successful models and critical obstacles, and it offers recommendations on policy, governance, investment and human-capital development to support sustainable green tourism growth in Vietnam.

2. Theoretical Framework

The concept of **sustainable tourism** is grounded in the broader idea of sustainable development satisfying present needs without compromising future generations. The World Tourism Organization defines sustainable tourism as activities that "can be maintained, or sustained, indefinitely in their social, economic, cultural and environmental contexts". **Green tourism** can be viewed as a subset of sustainable tourism with special emphasis on environmental protection. It involves environmentally conscious travelers and providers that offer nature-based experiences and use resources rationally to avoid ecological damage. In Vietnam, green tourism has been described as tourism that uses natural resources rationally to limit negative impacts on the living environment.

These concepts coalesce around a tourism "triple bottom line" of social, environmental and economic outcomes. For example, Vietnam's official tourism messaging emphasizes the "People-Planet-Profit" paradigm: cultural and community well-being,

environmental quality, and economic viability must all be addressed. Likewise, the ASEAN sustainable tourism framework lists five interrelated goals: sustainable economic growth; social inclusion; resource efficiency and environmental sustainability; cultural and heritage preservation; and resilience/adaptation. Key characteristics of green tourism identified in the literature include: **Environmental focus:** The natural environment is central to the tourist experience. **Low-impact operations:** Tourism businesses manage resources to minimize ecological impact (e.g. reducing water use and waste). **Conservation contribution:** A portion of tourism revenue is dedicated to nature protection and biodiversity conservation. **Responsible behavior:** Tourism providers and visitors are encouraged to behave responsibly and increase their environmental awareness.

Together, these principles aim for a tourism system that “achieve[s] a balance between ‘healthy’ environment, heritage integrity, social well-being and economic benefits”. Green tourism thus promotes sustainable use of local resources, minimal waste, and active community involvement, aligning economic development with ecological stewardship.

3. Current Situation Analysis

Vietnam’s tourism sector is diverse and growing. Major destinations include coastal resorts (e.g. Da Nang, Nha Trang), heritage cities (Hue, Hoi An) and natural areas (Ha Long Bay, Phong Nha, Cat Ba). High-profile sites like Ha Long Bay, Phong Nha-Ke Bang and Hoi An have become icons of Vietnamese tourism, drawing millions of foreign and domestic visitors each year. This popularity reflects Vietnam’s rich natural landscapes and cultural heritage, but also creates management challenges. In recent years, inbound tourism has recovered post-COVID, with over 12 million international arrivals in 2023, moving toward the 17–18 million target of pre-pandemic levels. Tourism is projected to account for roughly 6–7% of GDP, underlining its economic importance.

Simultaneously, the ecological footprint of tourism is growing. Overcrowding and waste have led to visible environmental issues. Ha Long Bay, a UNESCO World Heritage site, faces serious pollution from tourism-related waste. Recent clean-ups collected thousands of cubic meters of garbage from the bay, and studies report that its coral diversity has halved over past decades. Although recovery efforts (such as fishing bans and plastic reduction) are showing some coral regrowth and the return of dolphins, water quality and ecosystem health remain fragile. Hoi An Ancient Town, another UNESCO site, suffers from plastic litter and overcrowding, threatening its historic streetscapes. In urban centers and resort zones, the hospitality industry consumes vast amounts of water and energy and generates substantial waste. For example, local authorities report that tourism-related activities can account for roughly 40% of Hoi An’s solid waste. Meanwhile, infrastructure has lagged: Ha Long City treats only about 40% of its wastewater, so sewage often contaminates the bay. Overall, the balance between economic development and resource management remains precarious.

In contrast to crowded hotspots, Vietnam’s rural and community tourism areas present a mixed picture. The Central Highlands, the Mekong Delta and northern highland provinces boast rich ecological and cultural assets, but often

lack basic infrastructure. Poor roads, limited clean water and inadequate sanitation hinder eco-tourism opportunities. Nonetheless, **community-based tourism (CBT)** has emerged in many ethnic-minority villages and rural districts. In these initiatives, local people host homestays, guide tours and sell handicrafts, aiming to preserve cultural heritage while earning income. For example, Nam Dam village in Quan Ba (Ha Giang province) is cited as a successful model: of its ~60 Dao ethnic households, 26 operate homestay tours, earning about VND 45 million per year each on average. Such projects demonstrate the potential of green tourism to empower remote communities. However, most CBT efforts face constraints: inconsistent technical support, limited funding, and difficulty accessing tourism markets.

Government initiatives to date have begun to address these issues. Nationally, policies restrict development in ecologically sensitive zones and offer incentives for eco-friendly tourism operators. Eco-certification programs encourage hotels and tour companies to reduce single-use plastics, conserve energy and manage waste sustainably. Provincial governments have also taken action: Quang Ninh province, for instance, consciously shifted its tourism strategy from “brown” to “green” over a decade ago, developing tourism as a “smokeless industry” while integrating Ha Long Bay conservation into its planning. Other regions promote unique models e.g. Lao Cai’s ethnic-culture tourism, Ca Mau’s mangrove eco-tours, and Hue’s heritage-conservation tourism. Still, the impacts of tourism’s growth both positive and negative – underline the need for stronger planning and management. Vietnam now stands at a crossroads: it possesses world-class tourism assets, but realizing their value for sustainable development will require addressing pollution, capacity and governance gaps. With its diverse and comprehensive benefits as analyzed, green tourism has become an important development direction for Vietnam’s tourism industry. The Vietnam Tourism Development Strategy to 2030, as approved, sets out specific orientations for developing tourism toward green growth and sustainability. The solutions and approaches mentioned in this strategy aim to protect the environment, preserve cultural heritage and natural resources, and effectively respond to climate change. The following are some key highlights of the strategy:

- **Application of technology:** The strategy proposes the use of technology to manage resources, control pollution and environmental incidents, promote and build tourism brands, and apply green and clean technologies in tourism activities.
- **Environmental protection:** The strategy focuses on raising awareness and consciousness of resource and environmental protection in tourism; formulating and implementing projects and tasks related to environmental protection in the tourism sector; strengthening the effectiveness of state management in environmental protection; and improving adaptability and mitigation of climate change impacts.
- **Use of renewable energy and clean technology:** The strategy encourages tourism service businesses to use clean energy, recycle and reuse products, and apply clean technologies to minimize environmental pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

Having such a sustainable tourism development strategy demonstrates the Vietnamese Government’s concern for environmental protection and its commitment to ensuring

sustainability in tourism development. The implementation of the solutions and directions set out in the strategy will play an important role in building a green and sustainable tourism industry. In recent years, Vietnam's tourism sector has shown positive signs, as many localities, travel companies, and hotels have focused on developing green tourism. The emphasis on community-based tourism, garden tourism, and marine-island tourism reflects the diversity and creativity in harnessing the tourism potential of each locality.

The development of garden tourism in Hue and marine-island tourism in Nha Trang can be taken as typical examples of the creative and sustainable exploitation of local tourism potential. Tourism activities in Hue and Nha Trang are designed and operated responsibly to ensure the protection of natural landscapes, minimize negative impacts on the environment and resources. Regulations and guidelines on green tourism management are applied to ensure that tourism exploitation is carried out sustainably, without harming the environment or depleting important natural resources.

In addition to protecting the environment and resources, the development of garden tourism in Hue and marine-island tourism in Nha Trang also creates opportunities for economic growth and improvement of local livelihoods. Local residents can participate in the tourism industry as tour guides, providers of cultural and traditional services, thereby contributing to income generation and job creation. This also serves as a driving force for the development of related local industries, including agriculture, food processing, and handicrafts.

The development of garden tourism in Hue and marine-island tourism in Nha Trang not only brings economic benefits but also helps raise awareness and consciousness of environmental and marine resource protection. Tourists participating in these tourism activities can experience and better understand the value of unique natural landscapes and the importance of protecting them. They can visit and explore distinctive cultural, natural, and biosphere heritage sites while enjoying a clean and peaceful environment. Through these experiences, tourists recognize the importance of conservation and environmental protection, thereby forming attitudes and behaviors that support environmental stewardship in daily life.

Such green tourism activities also help create awareness of the need to maintain a balance between economic development and environmental protection, thereby contributing to a sustainable future for both local communities and tourism.

The transition toward green tourism among many enterprises in the tourism industry is also an important step. The development of green tour packages and the achievement of green certification for hotels ensure that tourism activities are carried out responsibly and in line with sustainability principles. Green tours are designed to make the most of renewable resources, minimize waste, and reduce negative environmental impacts.

At the same time, obtaining green certification for hotels ensures that accommodation establishments comply with standards and regulations on energy conservation, waste management, sustainable water use, and environmental protection measures. Green certification not only builds customer confidence and trust but also serves as a powerful marketing tool that attracts environmentally conscious

tourists.

Examples of good implementation include Buffalo Tours, a leading travel company in Vietnam that has developed green tours aimed at exploring and protecting important natural areas. They have created travel itineraries with minimal environmental impact, providing opportunities for tourists to interact with local communities and raising awareness of environmental conservation.

Similarly, An Lam Retreats, a high-end resort provider, has committed to green tourism and the creation of sustainable travel experiences. The resorts of An Lam Retreats are located in stunning natural environments and have adopted environmental protection measures such as using renewable energy, waste management, and biodiversity conservation.

In conclusion, the transition of tourism enterprises toward green tourism models helps reduce negative environmental impacts while enhancing tourists' awareness and sense of responsibility for protecting the environment and maintaining the sustainability of destinations.

Vietnam possesses extremely rich and diverse natural and cultural-human tourism resources, which constitute favorable conditions for the development of green tourism. On the other hand, Vietnam is also one of the countries most heavily affected by climate change and rising sea levels. Therefore, it is even more essential for us to promote green tourism, thereby contributing to the development of a sustainable green economy.

In recent years, several localities, travel companies, and hotels have paid attention to green tourism development. For example, some Northwestern provinces, Quang Binh, and Nghe An have developed community-based tourism; Hue has promoted garden tourism; Nha Trang has strengthened marine and island tourism; and several Southern provinces have expanded orchard and riverine tourism. Many travel companies have designed green tours, and hotels have obtained green certifications.

However, tourism activities still face several issues that hinder the proper development of green tourism. Specifically, tourism development has not been closely linked to the effective exploitation and utilization of resources, resulting in low resource efficiency; there has been limited integration with environmental protection; and climate change factors have not been sufficiently considered. The rapid and unplanned expansion of tourism has caused many negative impacts on the tourism environment. An increasing number of accommodation and tourism facilities have been constructed on islands without proper planning, raising the risks of coastal erosion and marine ecosystem degradation. Untreated wastewater discharged directly into the environment from hotels and tourism services has aggravated nearshore marine pollution. Furthermore, social vices, cultural intrusion, and limited environmental awareness have reduced the economic effectiveness of tourism and adversely affected the image and sustainable development of Vietnam's tourism industry. These are major challenges for tourism in the coming period.

The underlying cause of these problems lies in the lack of comprehensive understanding of green tourism development among state management agencies, tourism enterprises, and local communities. The tourism sector has not yet developed or promulgated comprehensive guidelines, criteria, or environmental impact assessment systems for tourism activities, particularly for tourism businesses. This leads to

confusion in practical implementation. In addition, there has been no comprehensive and systematic study assessing the environmental status of tourism in Vietnam to serve as a basis for proposing rational exploitation solutions and ensuring environmental sustainability. Consequently, Vietnam's tourism still lacks distinctive green tourism products at various levels, especially at the national level, to attract international tourists.

Moreover, for short-term economic purposes—seeking to reduce costs and increase profits—many tourism companies have neglected environmental protection and long-term sustainability. Instead of conducting surveys, market analyses, and assessments of supply and demand to design appropriate tourism products aligned with the trend of green tourism, they have “copied” existing tour programs from other companies. This situation remains quite common in Vietnam's current tourism product development practices.

Directions and Solutions for Green Tourism Development in the Future:

The Resolution No. 08-NQ/TW dated January 16, 2017 of the Politburo on “Developing Tourism into a Key Economic Sector” emphasizes requirements related to sustainable tourism development. It states:

“Innovate perceptions and thinking on tourism development; restructure the tourism sector to ensure professionalism, modernity, and sustainability in accordance with the laws of the market economy and international integration. Tourism development must ensure harmony between growth objectives and the safety and sustainability of the ecological environment, as well as social and human stability, so as to avoid causing harm or adverse impacts on cultural heritage.”

Vietnam is a country endowed with diverse ecosystems and world-renowned natural heritages that must be preserved and conserved. Therefore, environmental protection requirements in tourism are of particular urgency and importance.

Under Decision No. 147-QĐ/TTg dated January 22, 2020, approving the “Vietnam Tourism Development Strategy to 2030,” the Government identifies the focus as:

“Developing high-quality, diverse, distinctive tourism products with high added value and enriched visitor experiences based on the resource advantages of each region and locality, consistent with market demand, and enhancing Vietnam's tourism competitiveness. Along with that, strongly developing Vietnam's key tourism products and advantageous sectors associated with major tourism development areas—particularly prioritizing sea, island, and resort tourism, as well as marine sports and entertainment—in accordance with the orientation of the Strategy for Sustainable Development of Vietnam's Marine Economy.”

In recent years, tourists visiting Vietnam have shown a growing preference for sustainable tours, eco-labeled hotels, destinations, services, and products that are environmentally friendly. This is a global trend, particularly among travelers from Europe, North America, Japan, and Thailand, who are highly conscious of safety and health and increasingly seek to reconnect with nature.

According to research by the SNV Netherlands Development Organisation, 52% of tourists prefer booking

tours through travel agencies that maintain good working conditions, participate in environmental protection, and support local charity activities. A study by TripAdvisor indicates that 34% of tourists are willing to pay more for environmentally friendly hotels and sustainable tourism options (WEF), while 50% of international tourists are willing to pay more to support companies that benefit local communities and conservation efforts (CESD and TIES). Therefore, tourism accommodation establishments should implement and promote environmentally friendly programs and services to attract such customers.

Based on the strategic and policy orientations of the Party and the State as well as global tourism trends, it is evident that green tourism development has become a crucial strategic objective for Vietnam's tourism sector to enhance competitiveness in the context of international integration. To successfully implement this strategy, several key solutions are proposed:

1. Raise awareness and provide training on green tourism—first and foremost for managers at all levels, from state agencies to tourism enterprises and sectors related to tourism, as well as for local communities—on the content, meaning, and importance of green tourism development.
2. Translate awareness into concrete actions by incorporating green tourism principles into planning, project appraisal, and implementation of tourism development programs nationwide, from central to local levels. These programs should be based on systematic studies of distinctive natural and cultural resources, with special attention to World Heritage sites and local cultural traditions, linked with the new rural development process.
3. The State should develop and promulgate a “Green Tourism Criteria Framework”. Based on this framework, management agencies and tourism enterprises can apply the criteria in investment, planning, and business operations. It will also serve as a basis for recognizing green tourism products such as “green tours,” “green hotels,” “green restaurants,” and “green resorts.”
4. The State should continue to expand and participate actively in international conventions on environmental protection, climate change adaptation, and green economy development. Collaboration with UNESCO should be strengthened to better preserve, promote, and publicize Vietnamese culture to the world. Vietnam should also rapidly adopt green knowledge and clean technologies from the global scientific community and countries with advanced green tourism industries, applying them appropriately to Vietnam's context.
5. Both the State and enterprises should invest adequately and intensify promotion and communication on green tourism across society and among tourists through various channels and media, in order to build the image of “Vietnam – A Green Destination”, friendly and appealing to visitors.

Although Vietnam has considerable potential for green tourism development, this form of tourism remains at an early stage. For many countries, including Vietnam, green tourism is still a relatively new concept and practice, both in terms of management and resource exploitation for tourism purposes. Therefore, enhancing awareness, and formulating appropriate strategies and solutions for green tourism

development are essential and of great importance to ensure the sustainable future of Vietnam's tourism industry.

4. Discussion

Green tourism yields a range of ecological and economic benefits. On the ecological side, promoting nature-based travel and stricter environmental standards helps conserve Vietnam's biodiversity. For example, funding for national parks and bans on harmful practices have enabled coral reefs to recover and dolphins to return in parts of Ha Long Bay. Destinations that actively reduce plastic waste and pollution – such as Hoi An and Co To, which have launched plastic-free initiatives – see improved ecosystem health and visitor satisfaction. Moreover, sustainable tourism practices can attract an emerging market of eco-conscious travelers: one hotelier in Hoi An observed that as more tourists seek to “protect the environment,” adopting green practices makes his business more competitive.

Economically, green tourism can boost local livelihoods and rural development. It diversifies incomes beyond traditional farming or fishing and tends to keep spending within host communities (through homestays, local guides and crafts). In a well-managed scenario, revenue-sharing with local people helps reduce poverty. For instance, the Nam Dam community in Ha Giang achieved a stable tourism income of ~VND 45 million per household (~US\$1,800) annually. At the national level, the tourism sector has been a significant contributor to employment and GDP: ASEAN data show that pre-pandemic travel and tourism generated 12.1% of the region's GDP and employed 42 million people. Vietnam's own tourism, centered on its natural beauty and culture, was expected to exceed 6% of GDP by 2024. In this context, greening tourism means aligning this economic driver with sustainability goals, so growth today does not undermine long-term prosperity.

However, existing tourism impacts also reveal serious challenges. Uncontrolled growth has produced notable environmental harms: millions of visitors have strained Vietnam's fragile ecosystems and infrastructure. Plastic and solid waste from tour boats and hotels litter natural sites (a UNESCO report found tourism accounted for ~40% of the solid waste in Hoi An). Overuse of resources by hotels and resorts depletes water supplies and overwhelms waste systems. In Ha Long City, only about 40% of wastewater is properly treated, so domestic sewage still pollutes waterways. Socially, overcrowding and over-commercialization threaten the cultural authenticity of destinations. Finally, gaps in policy and governance exacerbate these issues: enforcement of regulations is often weak and coordination among agencies and communities remains fragmented. Rural tourism areas, in particular, suffer from lack of infrastructure (roads, utilities) and marketing support. Many CBT initiatives remain small-scale or stalled due to limited training and financial support.

Despite these obstacles, Vietnam has piloted some promising models. Beyond Nam Dam, the Quang Ninh example is instructive: a decade ago it intentionally reoriented from “brown” growth to green growth, treating tourism as a “smokeless industry” and explicitly tying development to Ha Long Bay's conservation. National programs – often in partnership with UN or development agencies – have introduced eco-standards, waste-reduction campaigns, and even digital tools (e.g. virtual assistants) to promote responsible tourism. Community homestay

networks in the mountains and deltas offer models for engaging local people. Regionally, ASEAN initiatives like the Ecotourism Standard and Sustainable Tourism Roadmap provide frameworks and benchmarking for Southeast Asian countries. These examples show that sustainable practices can be both environmentally sound and economically attractive.

In summary, green tourism in Vietnam offers a synergistic win: it helps protect natural and cultural capital while generating broad-based economic benefits. Achieving this synergy, however, depends on overcoming current gaps – reducing pollution at its source, investing in infrastructure, enforcing regulations, and fully involving local communities. The analysis above underscores that while green tourism carries clear advantages, realizing those advantages requires coordinated action across government, industry and society.

5. Conclusion

Developing green tourism in Vietnam represents a critical strategy to align the country's economic ambitions with environmental stewardship. This paper has highlighted that sustainable tourism – balancing ecological protection, community benefit, and economic growth – is both necessary and achievable. Vietnam possesses unique natural and cultural resources that can underpin a high-quality tourism sector, but preserving them requires concerted effort. As one observer noted, a genuine green transition “cannot stop at slogans or short-term campaigns but requires long-term commitment from government, businesses and travelers alike”. Moving forward, Vietnam must deepen implementation of sustainable practices across all levels of the industry. Only by doing so can tourism truly become a lever for sustainable development, ensuring that future growth in this “smokeless industry” benefits all stakeholders and conserves the heritage that makes Vietnam attractive.

Based on the analysis above, the following recommendations can support Vietnam's transition to sustainable green tourism: **Enhance policy and governance frameworks.** Adopt clear national guidelines (e.g. integrating Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) criteria) to align tourism with sustainability goals, and strengthen enforcement of environmental regulations. Coordinate tourism development across sectors (environment, transport, culture) to avoid fragmented efforts.

Invest in green infrastructure: Expand waste-water treatment, solid waste recycling, renewable energy and clean transportation in key destinations. For example, invest in electric buses and rail links for tourists, and support eco-lodges equipped with solar power, rainwater collection, and low-impact waste systems.

Support community-based tourism: Provide funding, training and market access to community tourism projects so local people capture benefits. Improve basic infrastructure (roads, clean water, internet) in rural and ethnic-minority areas to make these destinations more viable. Encourage partnership models that ensure fair profit-sharing with host communities.

Build human capital: Offer systematic training programs for tourism operators, guides and local officials on sustainable practices. Raise public awareness through campaigns (for example the “Travel to Love” responsible tourism campaign) to encourage travelers and businesses to

adopt eco-friendly behaviors and reduce waste.

Promote green standards and incentives: Expand eco-certification (or an eco-labeling system) for hotels, restaurants and tour operators. Provide tax breaks or grants for businesses that reduce plastic use, conserve energy/water, or source products locally. For heritage sites and protected areas, implement visitor limits or entrance fees that fund conservation efforts.

Foster partnerships and innovation: Collaborate with international donors, NGOs, and the private sector to pilot sustainable tourism projects (e.g. public-private nature-tourism ventures). Develop a national “green tourism code” of practice (as called for by leaders) and digital tools (virtual assistants, online booking platforms) to streamline information and reduce paper waste.

Engage regionally and globally: Align with ASEAN sustainable tourism frameworks and UNWTO guidelines to adopt best practices. Participate in regional ecotourism standard and certification efforts, and share knowledge through tourism forums. International cooperation can help Vietnam access technical expertise and funding for sustainable initiatives.

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