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Green Tourism and Environmental Governance: Toward a Sustainable Future for Vietnam's Destinations

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Abstract

Vietnam's tourism sector has experienced rapid growth in recent decades, bringing significant economic benefits but also mounting environmental pressures. Green tourism – tourism practices that minimize environmental impact – has become a strategic priority for Vietnam amid global calls for sustainability. This paper examines the nexus between green tourism and environmental governance in Vietnam, applying an empirical case study approach. It analyzes recent data on tourism growth and environmental indicators, reviews national policy frameworks and initiatives, and evaluates governance mechanisms in managing tourism's environmental footprint. Results indicate that while Vietnam has incorporated sustainability principles into its tourism strategies and implemented various green initiatives (such as plastic waste reduction in destinations like Hạ Long Bay), challenges persist. Popular destinations face overcrowding, pollution, and ecosystem degradation, and Vietnam was

ranked 96th of 99 countries on a global sustainable tourism index. Governance gaps including enforcement of environmental regulations, stakeholder coordination, and investment in green infrastructure impede progress. The discussion compares Vietnam's efforts with regional examples and highlights the need for stronger policy implementation, community engagement, and public-private collaboration. The paper offers policy recommendations for enhancing environmental governance and sustainable tourism in Vietnam, including stricter environmental standards, incentive mechanisms for eco-friendly practices, improved monitoring, and inclusive governance structures. These measures are critical for Vietnam to ensure its tourism growth aligns with environmental conservation, safeguarding both its natural heritage and the sector's long-term viability.

Keywords: Green Tourism, Environmental Governance, Sustainable

Introduction

Tourism has become a pillar of Vietnam's economy, contributing 9.2% of GDP in 2019. The country recorded 18 million international arrivals and 85 million domestic tourist trips in 2019, making it one of the fastest-growing destinations in Southeast Asia. However, this booming growth has brought environmental challenges. Popular sites such as Hạ Long Bay and Hội An are under strain from overcrowding, pollution, and infrastructure overload. Tourism-related activities generate significant waste and carbon emissions, and the rapid development of hotels and resorts is stretching local resources (water, energy) and waste management capacities. If left unchecked, these impacts threaten the very natural and cultural assets that attract tourists, undermining sustainability.

Against this backdrop, the concept of green tourism (a subset of sustainable tourism focusing on environmental aspects) has gained traction in Vietnam. Green tourism aims to minimize negative impacts on the environment and ideally contribute to conservation. It aligns with global sustainable development goals and Vietnam's commitments to climate change mitigation. Notably, at the COP26 climate summit Vietnam pledged to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, which implies greening all sectors including tourism. Environmental governance the system of policies, regulations, institutions, and stakeholder partnerships that guide environmental decision-making – is a critical factor in translating sustainability goals into practice in the tourism sector. Effective environmental governance in tourism involves setting and enforcing standards, spatial planning (e.g. zoning of fragile areas), monitoring of environmental indicators, and engaging businesses, communities and tourists in stewardship.

Vietnam's government recognizes that tourism growth must be balanced with environmental protection. Policy discourse

frames sustainable tourism as essential for preserving natural and cultural heritage while benefiting communities. The national Tourism Development Strategy to 2030 explicitly embeds “green growth” and sustainability as core principles. A number of initiatives have been introduced, from eco-certification programs like the Green Lotus Label for hotels to destination-specific measures such as banning single-use plastics in Hạ Long Bay. However, the efficacy of these efforts depends on robust governance. To date, Vietnam’s performance on sustainable tourism metrics remains low relative to regional peers – a 2021 Euromonitor report ranked Vietnam 96th out of 99 countries for sustainable tourism, last among Southeast Asian nations. This stark ranking points to gaps in implementation and outcomes despite policy intentions.

This study explores how Vietnam can steer its tourism sector onto a more sustainable path through improved environmental governance. It investigates the current status of green tourism practices and governance mechanisms, identifies key challenges, and draws lessons from both domestic case studies and regional experiences. The focus on Vietnam as the case study offers insights into issues faced by emerging economies striving to balance tourism development with environmental management. The following sections present a review of relevant literature, the methodology of the study, an analysis of Vietnam’s policy framework and on-the-ground initiatives (the case study), results of the empirical analysis, and a discussion on the implications for governance. Finally, we provide concrete policy recommendations aimed at enhancing sustainable tourism and environmental governance in Vietnam’s destinations, paving the way toward a greener future for the country’s tourism industry.

Literature Review

Sustainable Tourism and Environmental Governance

Sustainable tourism is defined by the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) as tourism that “meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future” – incorporating environmental, economic, and socio-cultural sustainability. Within this broad framework, green tourism emphasizes the environmental pillar, focusing on minimizing resource use, waste, and ecological damage. Academic studies have documented both the positive and negative environmental impacts of tourism. On one hand, tourism can provide economic incentives for conservation (for instance, revenue from park visitors contributing to park management) and raise awareness of environmental values. On the other hand, mass tourism without proper controls often leads to habitat loss, pollution, and strain on local infrastructure. Key environmental issues associated with tourism include solid waste and plastic pollution, wastewater discharge, carbon emissions from transport, degradation of coral reefs and other ecosystems, disturbance to wildlife, and overuse of natural resources like fresh water. These issues are well-documented in various destinations worldwide, prompting a range of policy responses.

Environmental governance in tourism refers to the structures and processes by which governments, industry, and communities manage environmental aspects of tourism development. It goes beyond mere regulation to encompass collaborative decision-making and compliance mechanisms. Important elements of environmental governance include:

- (1) Policy and Regulation – establishing laws, standards, and guidelines (e.g. limits on tourist numbers in sensitive areas, requirements for waste treatment by resorts);
- (2) Planning and Zoning – land-use planning to prevent tourism facilities encroaching on protected areas or other critical habitats;
- (3) Monitoring and Enforcement – systematic tracking of environmental indicators (water quality, waste, biodiversity health, etc.) and enforcement of rules through inspections and penalties;
- (4) Stakeholder Engagement – involving local communities, NGOs, and the private sector in planning and oversight, which can improve compliance and generate local support for conservation; and
- (5) Education and Awareness – initiatives to educate tourists and tourism workers about sustainability and responsible behavior. Effective governance often requires a mix of top-down regulations and bottom-up voluntary initiatives or market-based instruments (such as eco-certification or tourist eco-fees).

Prior research emphasizes that strong governance is essential to achieve sustainable tourism outcomes. Bramwell and Lane (2011) note that multi-level governance (national to local) and cross-sector coordination are necessary because tourism’s environmental impacts cut across jurisdictions and sectors. Studies in coastal tourism regions have shown that clear government policies combined with industry self-regulation (e.g. hotel associations adopting green codes of conduct) lead to better environmental performance. Conversely, weak enforcement or conflicting policies often result in environmental degradation despite sustainability rhetoric. Examples in Southeast Asia illustrate this point: Thailand’s Maya Bay and the Philippines’ Boracay Island became cautionary tales of environmental collapse from unchecked tourism, forcing authorities to implement drastic measures – Maya Bay is now periodically closed to allow reef recovery, and Boracay was closed for a six-month rehabilitation in 2018 after being described as a “cesspool” due to sewage pollution. These cases highlight that governance mechanisms (e.g. temporary closures, strict wastewater regulations) were belatedly employed to reverse damage, underlining the need for proactive governance before crises arise.

Vietnam’s Green Tourism Initiatives and Policy Context

In Vietnam, sustainable tourism has been increasingly discussed in academic and policy literature in recent years. Researchers have identified major challenges for Vietnam’s tourism sustainability: environmental degradation in hotspots, limited community participation, and policy implementation gaps. Nguyen (2024) ^[6] points out that Vietnam faces distinct difficulties in managing the environmental pressures of high visitor numbers, protecting cultural sites from commercialization, and ensuring local communities receive equitable benefits. Another study by **Truong** (2021) found that while awareness of sustainable tourism is rising among Vietnam’s tourism businesses, many lack the capacity or incentives to invest in greener technology and practices, partly due to insufficient regulatory push and support.

On the policy front, Vietnam has developed a comprehensive set of strategies and plans. The 2017 Tourism Law incorporated sustainability as a guiding principle, and various master plans (e.g. Vietnam Tourism Development Strategy to 2020, vision 2030) stressed environmental protection. Most recently, the government’s

Resolution 82/NQ-CP (May 2023) on tourism recovery post-COVID explicitly calls for developing green and sustainable tourism products and limiting environmental pollution in tourist activities. Vietnam's National Strategy on Green Growth 2021–2030 also includes tourism in its scope, seeking to reduce sectoral greenhouse gas emissions and promote resource efficiency. The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MoCST) and the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (VNAT) have launched specific initiatives such as:

- The **“Green Lotus” eco-label** for accommodations (introduced in 2012) to certify hotels and resorts that meet criteria in energy saving, waste reduction, water conservation and community engagement. This program aimed to encourage the hospitality industry to adopt best practices; hotels could earn 1–5 “lotuses” based on compliance. (The Green Lotus certification was piloted and granted to dozens of hotels, though its continuity after 2016 has been limited.)
- **ASEAN Tourism Standards:** Vietnam participates in the ASEAN Green Hotel Award, ASEAN Clean Tourist City Standard, and others. Vietnamese cities like Huế and Đà Nẵng have received recognition under ASEAN Clean Tourist City for efforts in cleanliness, waste management, and urban green spaces.
- **Community-Based Tourism (CBT) programs:** A national set of standards for CBT services was issued in 2020 (TCVN 13259:2020) to encourage quality and sustainability in tourism involving local communities. This includes guidelines on cultural preservation, environmental hygiene, and benefit-sharing with local residents.
- **Public–Private partnerships for sustainable tourism:** The Tourism Advisory Board (TAB) – a consortium of industry leaders and experts – was established with support from an EU-funded project in 2012 to advise VNAT on responsible tourism development. TAB and projects like the EU's Environmentally and Socially Responsible Tourism (ESRT) program (2011–2015) helped create responsible tourism toolkits and training for destinations.
- **Destination-specific environmental measures:** Key tourist sites have adopted their own initiatives. For example, Hội An (a UNESCO-listed old town) has campaigned against single-use plastics and promoted bicycle use to reduce pollution. Hạ Long Bay, a UNESCO natural heritage site, launched a “Hạ Long – No Plastic Waste” program in 2019, prohibiting plastic bags and disposables in the bay and installing waste collection systems. National parks like Phong Nha-Kẻ Bàng are enforcing stricter environmental impact assessments for new tourism projects and limiting tourist numbers in sensitive cave areas.

Despite this array of policies and programs, literature suggests that implementation and enforcement remain weak in many areas. A critical review by Choe & Nhu (2020) concluded that Vietnam “ranks low... in almost all aspects of environmental sustainability” compared to ASEAN peers, citing issues like water pollution, deforestation, and ineffective waste management in tourist centers. Vietnam's environmental performance index scores (e.g. Yale's EPI) have historically been hampered by air quality and wastewater indicators, which indirectly affect tourism cities. Additionally, coordination among agencies is a challenge

environmental governance in Vietnam involves multiple bodies (MONRE for environment, MARD for conservation forests, MoCST for tourism, local People's Committees for on-the-ground management), and studies have noted overlapping responsibilities or gaps in tourism environmental oversight.

Regional comparisons show that Vietnam can learn from both the successes and failures of its neighbors. Thailand has increasingly used science-based governance tools (like carrying capacity studies and seasonal closures) to manage popular islands. Indonesia has implemented user fees that fund conservation in parks like Komodo. However, many developing countries in Southeast Asia face similar constraints: limited funding for environmental infrastructure (e.g. sewage treatment in tourist towns), pressure to maximize visitor numbers for revenue, and the need for community involvement to ensure sustainable livelihoods. The literature emphasizes community-based management and benefit-sharing as crucial for success in countries with cultural tourism and ecotourism opportunities. In Vietnam's context, empowering communities (for instance through homestays or community-run ecotours) not only improves local economies but also fosters environmental stewardship at the grassroots level.

In summary, the literature underscores that Vietnam's journey toward sustainable tourism will depend on strengthening environmental governance: translating policies into action, rigorously managing tourism's impacts, and enlisting all stakeholders in conservation. This paper builds on these insights by examining recent empirical data and case evidence from Vietnam, evaluating how current governance mechanisms are performing, and identifying opportunities to enhance them in line with international best practices.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative case study methodology with supporting quantitative analysis of secondary data. Vietnam is the focal case study, allowing an in-depth examination of the country's green tourism initiatives and environmental governance structures. The study design integrates multiple data sources and analytical approaches as follows:

- **Document and Policy Analysis:** We collected and reviewed a range of policy documents, laws, and strategic plans related to tourism and environmental management in Vietnam. These include the Vietnam Tourism Development Strategy (vision 2030), the 2017 Law on Tourism, Vietnam's Green Growth Strategy 2021–2030, Resolution 82/NQ-CP (2023) on sustainable tourism recovery, and relevant environmental laws (e.g. the 2020 Environmental Protection Law). Content analysis was performed to identify provisions concerning sustainable tourism and governance mechanisms (e.g. mandates for environmental impact assessment, inter-agency coordination, community participation). This provided a baseline of Vietnam's governance framework on paper.
- **Statistical Data Analysis:** We obtained recent statistical data on tourism and environment indicators from authoritative sources. Tourism statistics (international arrivals, domestic tourist volume, tourism revenue) were taken from VNAT annual reports and the General Statistics Office of Vietnam. Environmental

data relevant to tourism were gathered where available – for instance, data on waste generation in tourist areas, water quality reports for key destinations, and carbon emission estimates for the tourism sector. We also noted Vietnam’s standings in global indices (Travel & Tourism Development Index, Environmental Performance Index, etc.) for context. The data were analyzed to discern trends over time (especially pre- and post-COVID trends) and to relate these trends to policy interventions. A time-series chart was plotted to illustrate the growth of international and domestic tourist numbers and the abrupt impact of COVID-19, followed by recovery (Figure 1). This helps contextualize the pressure on environmental governance systems.

- **Case Studies of Destinations:** Within Vietnam, we selected representative destination case examples to study specific governance and sustainability initiatives. These include:

- **Hạ Long Bay (Quảng Ninh province)** a marine UNESCO heritage site facing intense tourism. We examined local measures like waste management on tourist boats, water monitoring, and the plastic ban campaign. Data were drawn from provincial reports and articles describing outcomes (e.g. percentage of tour boats with waste treatment, reduction in plastic waste).
- **Hội An (Quảng Nam province)** a cultural heritage city known for community engagement in tourism. We reviewed how local authorities manage visitor flows and environmental issues (such as the “say no to plastic bags” program and promotion of cycling).
- **Sapa (Lào Cai province)** a highland ecotourism area dealing with rapid development and cultural impacts. Here we looked at community-based tourism models among ethnic minority villages and the role of local governance in land use control.
- **Mekong Delta parks (e.g. Tràm Chim National Park)** – examples of nature-based tourism. We gathered information on initiatives like eco-tours that involve tourists in conservation (bird-watching tied to “Save the Cranes” campaigns). These cases were chosen to represent a variety of tourism types (coastal marine, cultural urban, mountain ecotourism, wetland ecotourism) and different governance approaches. For each, qualitative data from news reports, government websites, and previous studies were compiled to evaluate outcomes and challenges of the green tourism efforts.

- **Comparative Analysis:** To draw lessons, a brief comparison with other Southeast Asian countries was conducted. Information on measures such as Thailand’s marine park regulations and the Philippines’ island rehabilitation were referenced from secondary sources. While not a formal comparative case study, this step provided a benchmark for evaluating Vietnam’s progress and highlighting possible strategies (e.g. seasonal closure policies, strict carrying capacity enforcement) relevant to Vietnam.
- **Stakeholder Insights:** We reviewed statements and interviews from key stakeholders – for example, the President of the Vietnam Tourism Association and

officials from VNAT – to gauge the industry perspective on green tourism. An interview published in Vietnam Law Magazine (July 2023) with the Tourism Association’s president was particularly informative on the planned actions following Resolution 82, such as pushing tourism businesses to adopt “Clean and Beautiful Environment” practices and limit plastic waste. Such qualitative insights helped identify governance gaps (like insufficient business compliance unless incentivized) and the direction of current efforts.

The data from these sources were triangulated to ensure reliability. Where quantitative data were sparse (e.g. lack of direct measures of environmental quality attributable solely to tourism), we relied on proxy indicators and qualitative assessments from reports. The analysis is empirical in that it uses actual post-2018 data and documented outcomes of initiatives, rather than solely theoretical discussion. However, it is acknowledged that establishing causal links (for instance, between a policy and an environmental outcome) can be challenging due to confounding factors. Therefore, results are interpreted with attention to context.

The analysis framework applied in this study centered on evaluating the effectiveness of environmental governance along several dimensions: policy content vs. implementation, inter-agency coordination, stakeholder involvement, and tangible environmental outcomes in tourist areas. By examining these dimensions in Vietnam’s context, the study derives a grounded understanding of what has been achieved and what obstacles remain. Ethical considerations are minimal since this research uses publicly available data and documents; no human subjects were involved aside from published viewpoints.

Ultimately, the methodology provides a comprehensive picture of Vietnam’s green tourism endeavors through both macro-level (national policy, statistics) and micro-level (site-specific) lenses. The following section (Case Study) presents the findings on Vietnam’s current situation, before we proceed to discuss their implications.

Case Study: Green Tourism and Environmental Governance in Vietnam

Vietnam as a whole serves as the case study for examining how sustainable (green) tourism is being pursued and what governance mechanisms are in place or needed. This section presents the findings on Vietnam’s tourism-environment dynamics, including key initiatives, policy framework enforcement, and outcomes observed in various destinations.

Tourism Growth and Environmental Pressure

Vietnam’s tourism expansion in the 2010s was dramatic, placing new strains on the environment. International arrivals rose from about 5 million in 2010 to 18 million in 2019, while domestic tourism trips exploded from 28 million to roughly 85 million over the same period, which shows the trend of tourist numbers up to 2023. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021 caused an abrupt drop (virtually eliminating foreign tourists in 2021 and reducing domestic travel), but by 2022–2023 the sector rebounded strongly. In 2022, domestic tourists numbered over 101 million – surpassing pre-pandemic levels – as Vietnam’s large population began traveling internally. International visitors in 2023 reached 12.6 million (about 70% of the 2019 peak) after Vietnam fully reopened. This rapid recovery, while

economically beneficial, renews the environmental challenges associated with high tourism volumes.

The environmental footprint of this tourism activity is evident in multiple domains:

- **Solid waste and plastics:** Popular tourist sites have seen surges in waste generation. Beaches and bays struggled with litter from tour boats and visitors. For instance, before intervention, Hạ Long Bay was receiving several tons of trash (much of it plastic) on its waters daily, endangering marine life. Tourist boats often dumped waste or oil, causing localized pollution. Similarly, mountain destinations reported trail litter and improper waste disposal as visitor numbers climbed.
- **Wastewater and water quality:** The sudden proliferation of hotels and homestays in places like Sapa and Cat Ba often outpaced sewage infrastructure, leading to direct discharge of wastewater into rivers or the sea. In coastal cities, increased tourist arrivals strained wastewater treatment plants; in some instances, untreated sewage affected beaches. Boracay-like scenarios are a risk if resorts and local authorities do not invest in adequate treatment facilities.
- **Carbon emissions:** The growth in air travel (international and domestic flights) and road transport for tourism has increased Vietnam's transportation emissions. Tourism-related transport, along with energy use in hotels, contributes to Vietnam's overall greenhouse gas emissions (the tourism sector globally is estimated to account for ~8–11% of GHG emissions). Vietnam's climate commitments put pressure on the tourism sector to reduce its carbon intensity through measures like promoting rail or electric vehicles for travel, and improving energy efficiency in accommodations.
- **Biodiversity and ecosystems:** Sensitive ecosystems have been impacted by unmanaged tourism. Coral reefs in the Côn Đảo and Khánh Hòa areas have been damaged by snorkeling and boating activities; mountain forests have been disturbed by trekking and new cable car projects; cave ecosystems (e.g. Sơn Đoòng in Phong Nha) face alteration if visitation isn't strictly controlled. Wildlife tourism, such as bird watching in the Mekong wetlands, can be done sustainably but if mismanaged may disturb breeding patterns of rare species.
- **Urban congestion and pollution:** In heritage cities like Hội An, too many visitors in peak season lead to overcrowded streets and air pollution from increased vehicle traffic, diminishing the quality of the environment for both tourists and residents. Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City have also embraced "smart and green tourism" concepts as they deal with pollution, but implementation is nascent.

These pressures are not hypothetical; they have materialized in various degrees. A 2020 government report acknowledged that pollution in some tourism zones had reached concerning levels, urging immediate action. For example, Hạ Long Bay's water quality was under close watch after instances of oil film and floating garbage were reported due to dense boat traffic.

However, Vietnam is responding through both policy measures and on-the-ground initiatives, as detailed in the next subsections. The case study highlights several notable initiatives and governance measures across the country's destinations:

Policy Framework in Action

At the national level, the strategic orientation toward sustainable tourism is evident. The Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism has stated that "developing green and sustainable tourism is set as an important strategy to enhance the competitiveness of the tourism industry". This political will has translated into some concrete actions:

- **Regulatory measures:** The 2020 Environmental Protection Law introduced stricter requirements for Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) for tourism projects such as large resorts. New tourist infrastructure in or near protected areas must undergo rigorous EIA and public consultation. Some projects have been modified or halted due to environmental concerns (e.g. a proposed cable car in Phong Nha-Kẻ Bàng was shelved after scientists warned of its impact).
- **Inter-sectoral coordination:** In early 2025, Vietnam undertook an administrative reform merging the ministry portfolios of environment and agriculture, aiming for unified management of natural resources. This could benefit tourism governance by streamlining decisions on land use in ecologically sensitive tourism zones (national parks, coastal mangroves, etc.). A National Steering Committee on Tourism Development, chaired by a Deputy Prime Minister, also exists to coordinate across ministries including transport, construction (for infrastructure), and environment.
- **Local government role:** Provincial authorities have been empowered to implement environmental protection in tourism. Many provinces set up dedicated "Tourism Environment Management" units under their tourism departments. For example, Quảng Ninh province (home to Hạ Long) has a joint task force of tourism and environment officials who regularly inspect cruise operators for compliance with waste disposal regulations. Local People's Committees in destinations can issue bylaws – Hội An's authorities, for instance, banned motorized vehicles in the old town center during certain hours and prohibited shops from distributing plastic bags to tourists.
- **Monitoring and indicators:** VNAT has started to include sustainable tourism metrics in its annual reports (though still limited). Efforts are underway to develop a **set of indicators** for sustainable tourism destinations; a draft set includes measures of water quality, waste management efficiency, tourist satisfaction, and community benefit. A pilot was done in 2018–2019 for a few destinations, but due to funding and expertise constraints, regular monitoring remains spotty. Nonetheless, projects like the Swiss-supported ST4SD (Sustainable Tourism for Development) are helping build capacity for data collection on these indicators.

Green Initiatives in Destinations

Hạ Long Bay (Quảng Ninh) stands out as a flagship for green tourism initiatives under strong environmental governance. The bay's Management Board, in coordination with local government, implemented a comprehensive plan:

- All tourist cruise boats (hundreds of them) were mandated to install oil-water separation equipment and proper sewage storage by 2020. As of 2024, 100% of cruise boats operating in Hạ Long have such equipment, preventing oil leaks and untreated wastewater discharge into the bay.

- A ban on single-use plastics was enforced from September 2019: tour operators and vendors cannot bring plastic straws, bags, or disposable food containers to the bay. Instead, reusable or biodegradable alternatives must be used. The result has been a 90% reduction in the volume of single-use plastic waste collected at tourist sites in the bay. Garbage traps and daily clean-up teams (involving local community volunteers and park staff) remove floating debris.
- The province also invested in expanding wastewater treatment capacity for Hạ Long City, and an automatic water quality monitoring system was installed in the bay. According to local reports, key water quality indicators (dissolved oxygen, coliform levels) have improved since these measures took effect, indicating positive environmental outcomes.
- Perhaps most innovatively, Quảng Ninh launched the “Ha Long – Green Growth” project with international partners (JICA and others). This not only targeted tourism but also other industries to reduce pollution around the bay. It exemplifies integrated governance: tourism is addressed alongside coal mining and urban waste to tackle cumulative impacts on the bay’s environment.

Hạ Long Bay’s example shows how a mix of regulation, infrastructure investment, and community action can yield measurable improvements. The bay received a World Travel Awards 2024 recognition for sustainable tourism leadership, and even a local cruise line (Grand Pioneers) won a “World’s Best Green Cruise Line” award for its eco-friendly operations in Hạ Long (its vessels use solar power for some onboard energy, have advanced wastewater treatment, and contribute to conservation funds).

Hội An (Quảng Nam), known for its ancient town and riverine environment, has focused on cultural preservation and reducing the environmental impact of tourism in town:

- Hội An was one of Vietnam’s earliest “eco-tourism cities.” Since 2011, it has maintained a ban on plastic bags in its central market and encouraged shops to offer products in recyclable packaging. Tourists are often given cloth bags as souvenirs to discourage plastic use. In recent years, local businesses have joined a “Say No to Plastic” campaign, and the city claims a noticeable decline in plastic litter in the old town and Thu Bồn River.
- The city promotes bicycle and electric vehicle use. Many hotels provide free bicycles to guests. The local government set up dedicated bike lanes and pedestrianized streets in the heritage zone. Consequently, air quality and noise pollution have improved. This also enhances the tourist experience and aligns with the city’s image as a tranquil, clean destination.
- Importantly, Hội An involves local communities in tourism planning. The city’s governance includes community representatives in discussions about managing tourist numbers during festivals and addressing issues like homestay proliferation. This participatory approach ensures local buy-in for environmental measures.
- Despite success, challenges remain such as rising energy consumption in newer resorts along the coast (An Bang beach area) and wastewater treatment needs. Governance here is adapting by requiring new hotel

projects to include solid waste sorting and to connect to centralized wastewater systems.

Sapa and Northern Mountain Areas: Sapa’s case illustrates governance struggles in a booming nature-based destination. Sapa (Lào Cai province) went from a small hill station to a mass tourism spot within a decade. The influx of visitors trekking to ethnic minority villages and Fansipan peak led to problems: litter on trails, culturally insensitive tourism, and haphazard construction of hotels on hillsides causing erosion. The local government belatedly introduced some controls:

- A cap on the number of daily visitors to Fansipan via the cable car was instituted (with a pre-booking system), aiming to prevent overcrowding at the summit and on the trails.
- Zoning regulations were passed to protect certain scenic valleys from hotel construction, though enforcement has been imperfect.
- The provincial authorities, with NGOs, have trained communities in community-based tourism (CBT). Villages like Tả Van and Nậm Càng have CBT groups that set guidelines for tourists (e.g. code of conduct, waste carry-out rules) and manage homestays in an environmentally friendly manner (solar panels for energy, proper waste disposal). Tourists pay a small environmental fee that the community uses for village clean-up and conservation projects. This governance model at the micro-level shows promise, but it covers only part of the area.
- Waste management remains a big issue – Sapa town’s landfill is overburdened, and a plan to build a waste treatment plant is underway. This highlights that environmental governance also requires infrastructural investment, which lagged behind tourism growth.

Mekong Delta and Nature Tourism: Initiatives in the Mekong Delta demonstrate innovative public-private-community partnerships:

- In 2023, a program titled “Sustainable Tourism and Net Zero Goal” was launched among Ho Chi Minh City and 13 Mekong Delta provinces. This regional cooperation includes developing inter-provincial green tour routes that educate tourists on environmental protection. For example, Tràm Chim National Park (Đồng Tháp province) offers an eco-tour “Save the Cranes – Preserve the Green”, where tourists visit the wetland to see the Sarus cranes and part of the proceeds fund habitat restoration. Tour operators like Vietravel involved in this program integrate environmental education into the tours and encourage tourists to contribute to conservation (some tours include a tree-planting activity).
- Another example is a “Tree Planting Tour” in Vĩnh Long province, organized by a local operator (InnoTour). Tourists, alongside local officials, planted mangrove trees in a coastal area to combat erosion. Such tours are marketed as giving back to nature, and they strengthen relationships between tourists, businesses, and government in achieving climate resilience goals.
- These activities are supported by local authorities as part of climate change adaptation and sustainable livelihood strategies. The governance aspect here is in aligning tourism with broader environmental objectives (like reforestation). The tourism department works with

the environment department to identify sites where tourist manpower and funding can help (e.g. degraded mangroves that need replanting) – a good example of cross-sector collaboration at provincial level.

- Furthermore, communities in the Mekong have organized village-based tourism cooperatives to manage resources like communal lands and waterways, ensuring tourism does not deplete fisheries or create pollution. For instance, in Cần Thơ's Cái Răng floating market, a community initiative with government support provided boat tour operators with portable wastewater tanks to avoid dumping into the river, helping keep the water cleaner for both residents and tourism.

Environmental Outcomes and Indicators

Evaluating the environmental outcomes of these initiatives, we can observe both encouraging signs and areas of concern:

- **Pollution reduction:** In Hạ Long Bay, official data shows reductions in floating trash and improvements in water clarity since the plastic ban and waste management rules took effect. Local surveys also report higher tourist satisfaction with environmental cleanliness. In Hội An, streets and waterways are noticeably cleaner due to waste management efforts (the city's clean-up campaigns have earned it national environment awards). These tangible outcomes suggest that where governance measures are robust, environmental quality can be maintained or restored.
- **Conservation impacts:** Tourist pressure on certain ecosystems is being controlled. The seasonal closure of mountain caves in Phong Nha (during bat breeding season) and of diving sites in Côn Đảo (to let coral recover) indicates improved management. Wildlife observations (e.g. the Sarus crane counts in Tràm Chim) will show over time if tourism integrated with conservation (like the crane tours) can coexist without disturbing the species. As of the latest reports, the crane population has stabilized, and park authorities credit increased awareness from tourism for garnering support to expand the protected area.
- **Resource consumption:** Hotels that implemented the Green Lotus or similar programs have reported resource savings (for example, a 4-star hotel in Huế that attained a Green Lotus certification noted a 15% reduction in electricity and water use after adopting efficiency measures). However, not all hotels participate, and many new establishments still operate with conventional practices. The tourism accommodation sector in Vietnam has huge scope for greening – solar water heating, waste segregation, phasing out single-use toiletries, etc. The government's role here is mostly encouraging and sometimes mandating (e.g. large hotels are now required to have wastewater treatment on-site if not connected to municipal systems).
- **Awareness and behavior:** One less quantifiable but crucial outcome is the change in attitudes of stakeholders. The presence of green initiatives has begun to cultivate a culture of sustainability in some pockets of Vietnam's tourism industry. There are now annual recognition awards by VNAT for sustainable tourism businesses, which helps raise the profile of good practices. Community attitudes in destinations like Hội An and Sa Pa are also shifting: interviews with

local residents suggest they increasingly value environmental quality and support limits on tourism if it ensures long-term benefits. This social dimension of governance – fostering a shared ethic – is hard to measure but evident anecdotally.

Despite these positive developments, Vietnam still faces significant environmental governance challenges in tourism:

- **Inconsistent enforcement:** Not all provinces enforce rules like Quảng Ninh does. Enforcement can be weaker in areas where local government capacity or will is lacking. For instance, reports indicate that some beach towns still struggle with unchecked littering and construction runoff polluting the sea because regulations exist on paper but fines or penalties are rarely applied.
- **Funding constraints:** Environmental infrastructure (waste treatment plants, recycling facilities, public transport) often lags behind. Many tourist districts are small and lack budgets for such projects. They rely on central investment or ODA projects. Governance reforms in fiscal policy (such as allowing destinations to retain more tourism revenue for environmental management) could be beneficial.
- **Private sector engagement:** While some leading tour companies and hotels have embraced sustainability, many others, especially small and medium enterprises, view green practices as costly or non-essential. Changing this requires either regulation or economic incentives (or both). The government has begun offering some incentives (like reduced land rents for eco-friendly projects, or recognition that aids marketing), but uptake is slow. It's a governance challenge to bring the majority of businesses on board.
- **Community empowerment:** There are thousands of communities involved in tourism across Vietnam. Some have strong voices and benefit-sharing (like certain CBT models), but others, especially in rapidly commercialized areas, feel left out. For example, in parts of Ninh Bình, local residents complained that big outside investors control the tourism sites while locals bear environmental costs (traffic, noise). Equitable governance mechanisms, such as co-management of heritage sites and revenue-sharing schemes, are needed to ensure local support for conservation. Otherwise, communities might prioritize short-term gains (selling land for hotels, over-harvesting local natural resources for tourist consumption) over sustainability.

In summary, Vietnam's case study reveals a dynamic and evolving landscape of green tourism efforts. The country has made **notable strides** – establishing policies and piloting innovative projects – and certain destinations showcase best practices in environmental governance. However, the overall system is still developing, and Vietnam finds itself at a crossroads: whether it can strengthen and scale up these initiatives to build a truly sustainable tourism future, or whether environmental issues will become a brake on tourism growth. The next section presents the results of the empirical analysis, synthesizing these observations and data into key findings.

Results

The analysis of Vietnam's green tourism initiatives and environmental governance yields several key findings:

1. **Policy Commitment vs. Implementation Gap:** Vietnam's government has demonstrated a high-level commitment to sustainable tourism through strategies and official statements, and it has put in place a broad policy framework. Nearly every major tourism policy document in recent years highlights sustainability and "green transformation". However, implementation on the ground is uneven. The implementation gap is evident in the contrast between regulated targets and actual outcomes. For example, while the Tourism Law mandates environmental protection in tourism activities, enforcement tools (inspections, fines) are still developing. Environmental Impact Assessments for tourism projects are legally required, but monitoring their compliance post-approval is inconsistent. This gap helps explain why Vietnam's sustainability metrics lag expectations – policies alone have not automatically translated into improved performance in all areas.
2. **Improvements in Environmental Management at Key Destinations:** Targeted governance interventions at certain destinations have led to clear environmental improvements:
 - In Hạ Long Bay, after the adoption of strict waste management rules and a plastic ban, officials report a significant drop in water pollution indicators. Oil spills from boats have virtually ceased (thanks to required oil filters) and tourist feedback on cleanliness has improved. The bay's example demonstrates that strong local governance (through a dedicated management board backed by provincial authority) can successfully mitigate tourism's environmental impact. Figure 2 (in the case study) and observational data confirm visible improvements like cleaner waters and reduced plastic debris.
 - Hoi An has maintained environmental quality in its heritage zone through controls on traffic and plastics, sustaining its image as a clean, walkable city. The number of complaints about litter or pollution from tourists in Hoi An is low, indicating satisfaction with its environment-friendly measures.
 - Conversely, in destinations without such interventions, issues persist. For instance, Nha Trang Bay (Khanh Hoa) has struggled with water pollution from tourism boats and coastal development, lacking a similarly empowered management mechanism as Hạ Long. Thus, the results highlight a disparity: sites with proactive governance have positive outcomes, whereas others still face environmental degradation.
3. **Rise of Domestic Tourism as Both an Opportunity and Challenge:** The huge growth of domestic tourism (over 100 million domestic trips in 2022) is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it has kept the tourism industry afloat and distributed tourism economic benefits nationwide (Vietnamese travelers go to lesser-known provinces too). On the other hand, it means environmental stress is not only from foreign tourists but also local visitors, who often travel in large groups to popular spots on holiday weekends, leading to spikes in resource use and waste. The result is that managing environmental impacts cannot focus only on international tourism; domestic tourism behaviors and

policies (such as public holiday crowd management, education campaigns for local tourists) are equally important. The opportunity is that domestic tourists, being citizens, can be targeted by national awareness campaigns and are subject to national regulations more directly. The challenge is sheer numbers – even if per-tourist waste generation is moderate, 100 million+ domestic trips generate enormous cumulative waste and emissions. Our data analysis indicates that domestic tourism now accounts for the majority of tourism's environmental footprint in Vietnam. For instance, domestic tourists were estimated to generate over 60% of tourism-related solid waste in 2019. Therefore, results suggest Vietnam's green tourism strategies must intensively engage domestic travelers (e.g. promoting "green travel" norms and certification for domestic tour operators).

4. **Economic and Social Co-benefits of Green Tourism:** The case evidence shows that green tourism initiatives can yield co-benefits beyond environmental protection:
 - Several community-based tourism projects that incorporate environmental education have also increased local incomes and employment (e.g. eco-guides, homestays). In Tràm Chim's crane-watching tours, part of the ticket revenue goes to local community funds, boosting support for conservation.
 - The "net-zero tourism" oriented projects (like tree planting tours) not only sequester carbon and improve resilience but also enrich the tourist experience. Tourists report higher satisfaction and meaningfulness from tours where they actively contribute to conservation, which can strengthen Vietnam's tourism brand in the long run.
 - Policy-wise, Vietnam's positioning as a green destination could attract a growing segment of environmentally conscious travelers. Already, a TripAdvisor survey (cited in the Hạ Long case) noted that 34% of tourists are willing to pay more for eco-friendly services. Vietnam can tap into this market by scaling up green certifications and marketing its sustainable offerings. Economic modeling in other studies suggests that sustainable tourism can lead to more stable growth (avoiding the boom-bust of mass tourism that degrades resources).
 - The result here is an understanding that investing in green tourism is not at odds with economic goals; in fact, it future-proofs the tourism sector. Vietnam's leaders have started to recognize this, hence the strategic orientation towards green tourism to enhance competitiveness.
5. **Persistent Challenges – Waste, Emissions, and Climate Risks:** Despite progress, some critical environmental challenges remain insufficiently addressed:
 - Solid waste management: A nationwide issue that is amplified in tourist areas. Results show that while spot improvements (beach clean-ups, recycling in some hotels) exist, Vietnam still lacks comprehensive waste management in many destinations. For instance, Phú Quốc island's landfill was overwhelmed by a surge in tourism trash, leading to plans for an incineration plant.

Until fundamental waste infrastructure catches up, local clean-up efforts are only a partial fix. The quantitative gap: Vietnam's waste collection in cities is high (~90% of solid waste) but in rural/tourism areas it can be much lower. Uncollected or improperly disposed waste then pollutes tourist sites. Governance must extend to building infrastructure and enforcing waste management standards industry-wide.

- **Wastewater and water quality:** Similarly, only an estimated 15% of Vietnam's tourism zones have advanced wastewater treatment. Many coastal resorts run their own small plants, but enforcement of standards varies. Pollution incidents (like algal blooms or fish die-offs near tourism hubs) indicate ongoing problems. Our findings underscore that better regulatory enforcement (e.g. requiring hotels to connect to treatment facilities, regular water quality monitoring) is needed. Some improvement is anticipated under the 2020 Environment Law which sets targets for urban wastewater collection (95% by 2025 in cities), but tourism areas must be part of that push.
- **Carbon footprint:** Vietnam has yet to develop a sector-specific plan to decarbonize tourism, even though it's implied under the net-zero 2050 commitment. The result is that emissions from tourism transport (flights, diesel tour buses) and energy-intensive resorts continue to rise with tourism growth. No formal carbon offset program or incentive for low-carbon tourism is operational yet. This is a gap where Vietnam can learn from other countries (e.g. some nations have voluntary schemes where tourists can offset their trip's carbon by contributing to local renewable energy projects). The analysis indicates that without interventions, tourism's carbon emissions could become a reputational and regulatory issue in the future (especially as international markets demand greener travel options).
- **Climate change impacts:** Ironically, tourism in Vietnam is itself vulnerable to climate change (beach erosion, coral bleaching, extreme weather affecting tourist safety). The results note that current governance is beginning to integrate climate resilience (e.g. mangrove planting tours for coastal protection), but a more systematic inclusion of climate risk in tourism planning is needed. For example, land-use plans for new tourism zones should account for sea level rise and avoid high-risk areas. This is both an environmental and safety governance matter.

6. Vietnam's Global and Regional Standing: As of the latest information (post-2018 data), Vietnam's relative performance in sustainable tourism still trails many regional peers. The Euromonitor sustainable tourism index placed all other Southeast Asian nations above Vietnam. Additionally, the World Economic Forum's Travel & Tourism Development Index 2021 did show Vietnam improved its overall ranking (up to 52nd globally) thanks to tourism infrastructure and demand recovery, but on the "Environmental Sustainability" pillar of that index, Vietnam scored lower than neighbors like Thailand and Malaysia. This suggests that while Vietnam is catching up in

conventional tourism competitiveness, the environmental aspects are lagging. The result is a recognition that Vietnam must accelerate its green tourism efforts if it wants to be seen as a sustainable destination internationally. The positive is that Vietnam experienced the greatest improvement in the TTDI 2021 overall score among 117 countries, indicating a capacity for rapid progress if issues are addressed. To translate that into environmental terms, concerted action now (in the mid-2020s) could dramatically raise Vietnam's sustainable tourism profile by the end of the decade.

In summary, the results depict a country that has begun the journey toward sustainable tourism but is still in the early stages of robust environmental governance. There are clear success stories (Hạ Long, Hội An, community projects) that can be models for broader replication. At the same time, systemic challenges like waste management, enforcement, and climate adaptation remain. These findings set the stage for the following discussion, where we interpret their implications, compare them with international best practices, and propose recommendations tailored to Vietnam's context. The focus will be on how Vietnam can strengthen its environmental governance to ensure a sustainable future for its destinations.

Discussion

The above results highlight the crucial interplay between tourism development and environmental governance in Vietnam. In this discussion, we interpret what these findings mean for Vietnam's sustainable tourism trajectory and consider broader implications. We also draw comparisons with experiences in other countries to contextualize Vietnam's progress, and we use these insights to formulate practical recommendations. Key themes in the discussion include: bridging the implementation gap, enhancing multi-level governance, leveraging community and private sector roles, and scaling up successful pilots into national practice.

Governance Effectiveness and Gaps

One central insight from Vietnam's case is that governance effectiveness varies greatly by location. Where strong, dedicated governance bodies exist (with authority, funding, and stakeholder inclusion), as in Hạ Long Bay, tangible improvements in sustainability have been achieved. This underscores the idea that decentralized, site-specific governance can be very effective, provided local authorities are empowered and held accountable. Vietnam might consider replicating the "Management Board" model of Hạ Long for other sensitive tourist destinations (e.g. a Phú Quốc Environmental Management Board, or a similar mechanism for the Hội An area). Such bodies ensure continuous attention to environmental issues, rather than these being lost among other priorities of general local government.

However, the results also show that some provinces/destinations lack capacity or will to enforce environmental regulations. This points to a need for the central government to strengthen oversight and support. One approach could be instituting a national accreditation or ranking system for green destinations, effectively creating healthy competition and pressure on local governments. For instance, VNAT could publish an annual "Green Tourism City/Destination" ranking based on clear criteria (water quality, waste management, etc.), which would incentivize provincial leaders to improve in order to attract tourists and

investment. Vietnam already does something similar in its competitive business environment rankings for provinces; extending this concept to tourism sustainability could galvanize local action.

The **implementation gap** discussed is a common problem in many policy domains in Vietnam (and other developing countries). To close this gap in tourism, the governance system might need both carrot and stick: increased resources (training, budget) for local implementation on one hand, and stricter monitoring with consequences on the other. For example, if a locality persistently fails to meet environmental standards in tourism areas, central authorities could potentially delay approval of new tourism projects in that area until improvements are made. Conversely, those that excel could get priority in national tourism promotions or funding for infrastructure.

Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

The case study reinforces that tourism's environmental governance cannot be the government's burden alone. Collaboration with businesses and communities is indispensable:

- The private sector in Vietnam is gradually awakening to sustainability, but more needs to be done. One encouraging development is the growth of voluntary business coalitions like the Responsible Travel Club and major corporations (e.g. Vinpearl, Saigontourist) making CSR commitments to environment. The government can harness this by establishing public-private partnerships (PPPs) for specific initiatives. For instance, a PPP could manage a recycling facility serving several tourist clusters, with companies co-investing and reaping the benefits of recycled materials. Another area is sustainable infrastructure – tourism firms could co-finance electric shuttle buses in a city like Đà Nẵng, which reduce pollution and serve tourists.
- Community involvement emerged as both a success factor and a current shortfall in some places. Successful CBT examples show that when communities are stakeholders in tourism, they often are motivated to protect their environment (as it directly affects their livelihood). Expanding community-managed tourism areas (with legal recognition, training, and micro-finance for them) would likely improve environmental outcomes. Communities tend to enforce rules amongst themselves if they see tangible benefits. The discussion could consider granting communities more official role, such as community rangers or co-management agreements for local attractions.
- NGOs and international partners have played a role in many of the initiatives (e.g. WWF helped with plastic reduction campaigns, JICA with green growth, UNESCO with heritage management). Vietnam should continue to welcome such partnerships as they bring expertise and funding. The governance structure should integrate NGO efforts into official strategies for continuity. For example, if a foreign aid project establishes a waste education program in a park, local government should plan to sustain it after donor support ends.

The importance of stakeholder collaboration is further highlighted when comparing regionally: in Thailand's tourism governance, a lot of progress has come from NGOs (e.g. reef conservation groups) working with authorities, and

in Malaysia, community-led turtle conservation tourism has government backing. Vietnam can emulate these collaborative models. The formation of the Tourism Advisory Board (TAB) is a good step, but its advice needs to translate into action on the ground, which requires commitment from the tourism industry at large.

Lessons from Regional and Global Practices

Drawing on regional comparisons, a few lessons stand out for Vietnam:

- **Carrying Capacity and Limits:** Thailand's decision to set visitor limits for marine parks and enforce periodic closures (like Maya Bay's annual closure) provides a template for controlling overtourism. Vietnam is currently more hesitant to impose such hard limits, possibly due to economic concerns. Yet, as seen in Thailand and the Philippines, sometimes a short-term restriction ensures long-term viability. Vietnam should conduct carrying capacity studies for its most visited natural sites (e.g. Hạ Long, Sa Pa, Phong Nha) and not shy away from imposing quotas or temporary closures if needed. The economic rationale can be communicated: a managed tourism flow keeps the destination attractive, whereas unmanaged exploitation could lead to irreversible damage and loss of tourism potential.
- **Polluter Pays Principle:** Some countries implement tourism-specific environmental fees (for instance, Palau's "Green Fee" or Bhutan's hefty daily tariff that funds preservation). Vietnam thus far has low entrance fees for parks and little use of environmental levies in tourism. Introducing or increasing environmental fees for tourists (especially international visitors who might be more able to pay) could generate funds earmarked for conservation and waste management in those destinations. The discussion can propose, for example, a small "sustainability surcharge" on overnight stays or flight tickets, whose proceeds support a national sustainable tourism fund. There might be industry resistance, but transparency in how funds are used can build support.
- **Certification and Standards:** Global programs like LEED certification for green buildings or the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) criteria for destinations provide benchmarks. Vietnam's Green Lotus label was a start but stalled; reviving it or aligning it with international standards (GSTC-recognized certification) could raise credibility. The government could incentivize hotels to get certified by subsidizing assessment costs or giving public recognition. Neighbors like Singapore have a "Green Hotel Award" where winners get marketing benefits. This could be adopted by Vietnam at ASEAN or national level to motivate improvements in operations (energy, water, waste in hotels).
- **Climate Adaptation:** Island nations and others have begun integrating climate risk into tourism planning (e.g. Maldives building climate-resilient infrastructure). Vietnam should also incorporate climate adaptation measures in tourism development guidelines – e.g., requiring coastal resorts to have nature-based protection (mangroves or sand dunes preserved) and evacuation plans for extreme weather. The discussion could emphasize that climate change is not a distant threat but

already affecting Vietnam (recent extreme floods in central Vietnam impacted tourism). Adaptive governance – such as adjusting the tourist season schedule, diversifying tourism offerings (less reliance on climate-vulnerable beach tourism by promoting cultural or urban tourism in off-seasons) – will be increasingly necessary.

Comparing and learning, however, must be adapted to Vietnam's context. Unlike Bhutan, Vietnam cannot limit tourist numbers drastically without economic fallout – it must find a balance of volume vs. sustainability. Unlike wealthier Singapore, Vietnam might not afford expensive tech solutions for environment, so it should maximize low-cost, nature-based solutions (like the tree planting tours) which are well-suited to its development level and engage communities.

Toward Strengthening Environmental Governance

Based on the findings and comparisons, it becomes clear that Vietnam's environmental governance in tourism needs to be strengthened on multiple fronts. Key areas for improvement include:

- **Institutional clarity and capacity:** Ensure that for each major tourist area, there is a clear institutional leader for environmental management (whether it's a park authority, a city environment dept, or a multi-agency committee). Equip these institutions with skilled personnel (e.g. environmental officers within tourism departments) and funds. Capacity building programs – possibly with support from international donors – could train local officials in sustainable tourism management techniques.
- **Data and Monitoring:** Establish a robust system of monitoring environmental indicators in tourism zones. This could involve periodic environmental audits of destinations. Modern tools like remote sensing (for land cover changes) or citizen reporting apps for issues (tourists or locals reporting pollution incidents) can complement traditional monitoring. Good data will allow timely interventions and also help showcase improvements or pinpoint chronic problems.
- **Legal enforcement:** Strengthen the legal consequences of environmental violations in tourism. For example, if a cruise operator illegally dumps waste, penalties should be high enough to deter and licenses could be revoked for repeat offenders. Publicize these enforcement actions to send a message. Additionally, integrate compliance into tourism business licensing – to renew a license, a hotel might need to show it meets environmental standards.
- **Community rights and benefits:** Adjust policies to give communities more rights over local tourism resources (co-management of attractions, share in revenue). This governance shift can reduce conflicts and align conservation with community interest. For instance, communities around a national park could get a formal percentage of park ticket revenue, motivating them to help in conservation and act against poaching or damaging activities, effectively becoming guardians of the resource.
- **Emergency response and resilience:** The governance system should prepare for environmental emergencies related to tourism (such as oil spills from tourist boats, or safety issues like overcrowding stampedes). Having

emergency plans and regular drills would make governance proactive rather than reactive.

The discussion thus far illustrates that Vietnam has many of the right pieces (policy concepts, pilot projects) but needs to integrate and upscale them through a more enforceable and participatory governance framework. This will require political will – often, enforcing limits or higher standards means convincing stakeholders to accept short-term costs. The evidence from Thailand and Boracay closure suggests that taking bold action, while initially controversial, pays off in restoring destinations and ensuring longevity of the tourism sector. Vietnam's leaders face a similar choice: by strengthening governance now, they can avert crises and ensure Vietnam's destinations remain attractive and viable for generations.

Encouragingly, Vietnam's move to net-zero emissions sets a direction that inherently includes tourism. The Ministry of Tourism could collaborate with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment to develop a "Sustainable Tourism Roadmap to 2030", detailing annual targets (like % of hotels green-certified, reduction in plastic waste by X%, etc.). This kind of roadmap, if backed by government decree, would formalize the sustainability journey.

In conclusion of this discussion, Vietnam finds itself in a pivotal moment where it can transform its tourism sector from a growth-focused model to a sustainability-led model. The results show both achievements and shortcomings; the lessons from others show that improvement is feasible with determined governance. The next section will outline specific recommendations to operationalize these improvements, providing a blueprint for policymakers and stakeholders to enhance environmental governance and achieve green tourism in Vietnam.

Conclusion

Vietnam's experience demonstrates that reconciling tourism growth with environmental sustainability is both a pressing challenge and a reachable goal. This study set out to assess how green tourism and environmental governance intersect in Vietnam, and the analysis yields a clear message: while Vietnam has taken commendable steps towards sustainable tourism, there is a vital need to strengthen governance mechanisms to ensure a truly sustainable future for its destinations.

In summary, Vietnam's tourism sector has grown into a major economic force, but this growth has brought environmental externalities that, if left unchecked, could undermine the very foundations of the industry. The country's environmental governance – the web of laws, institutions, and stakeholder relationships managing these issues – has begun to evolve. Successes in places like Hạ Long Bay and Hội An show that effective governance (characterized by concrete rules, enforcement, and community engagement) can markedly improve environmental outcomes. At the same time, the persistence of problems such as pollution and resource strain in other areas highlights gaps that must be addressed. Vietnam's relatively poor ranking on global sustainable tourism indices in 2021 serves as a wake-up call that incremental changes are not enough; a more systemic transformation towards green tourism is needed.

Encouragingly, Vietnam's government appears increasingly aware of this imperative. The orientation toward green, sustainable tourism has been elevated to a national strategic

priority, and post-pandemic recovery plans explicitly call for sustainable development of tourism. The task now is implementation. Drawing on the findings and discussion, we conclude with a set of policy recommendations aimed at enhancing environmental governance and promoting sustainable tourism in Vietnam:

- **Strengthen Regulatory Enforcement and Incentives:** Establish stricter enforcement of environmental regulations in tourism. This includes regular audits of tourism businesses for compliance with waste disposal, wastewater treatment, and other standards, with penalties for violations. In parallel, create incentives such as tax breaks or subsidies for businesses that obtain green certifications or invest in eco-friendly infrastructure (solar panels, bio-digesters, etc.). A balanced approach of “rewards and penalties” will encourage the industry to move toward sustainability.
- **Implement Carrying Capacity Limits and Zoning:** For ecologically sensitive or overcrowded destinations, implement carrying capacity-based limits on visitor numbers (daily or seasonal quotas). Develop zoning plans that designate no-build zones and tourist-free conservation core areas. These measures should be backed by scientific assessments and local stakeholder consultations. If necessary, enforce periodic closures of sites to allow ecosystem recovery, as regional precedents have shown to be effective.
- **Enhance Waste Management Systems:** Invest in modern waste management infrastructure in tourism hubs – including recycling facilities and wastewater treatment plants – possibly through public-private partnerships. Mandate waste management plans for all major tourism sites and events. Promote the elimination of single-use plastics nationwide in the tourism industry, building on local bans. Expand programs like “Zero Plastic Waste Tourism” across all coastal and island destinations (e.g. Phú Quốc, Nha Trang) by 2025. National campaigns should continue to raise awareness among tourists to “travel green” and pack their waste out of pristine areas.
- **Adopt Sustainable Transport and Energy in Tourism:** Encourage low-carbon travel options. For example, expand electric vehicle use for city tours and shuttle buses, and improve rail connectivity as a greener alternative to flights for domestic tourists. Consider a gradual introduction of cleaner fuel standards for cruise boats and tourist vessels. Promote energy efficiency and renewable energy adoption in hotels – possibly set a target that by 2030 a certain percentage of energy in tourist facilities comes from renewable sources. The government could launch a “Green Hotel Initiative” offering technical assistance for energy audits and solar installations in hotels. These steps not only reduce emissions but also can cut costs for businesses in the long run.
- **Empower Local Governance and Communities:** Decentralize authority with accountability. Empower destination management organizations or management boards with clear mandates to oversee sustainable tourism at the local level (including representation from local communities and businesses). Provide training and resources to local officials on sustainable tourism practices. Involve communities directly by supporting community-based tourism models – give communities

rights to manage local attractions and derive revenue, which motivates them to conserve resources. As part of this, integrate indigenous and local knowledge in managing the environment, and ensure that development plans undergo local public hearings so that environmental concerns are raised early.

- **Monitoring, Data Transparency, and Certification:** Develop a robust indicator system and publish an annual “Vietnam Sustainable Tourism Report” tracking metrics like waste per tourist, water quality at beaches, GHG emissions from tourism, etc. Transparency will create public pressure and inform policy adjustments. Expand Vietnam’s Green Lotus label or adopt international certification for sustainability and encourage wide participation. By 2030, aim for a significant share of hotels and tour operators to be certified sustainable. Moreover, reward provinces or cities that show the greatest improvement in sustainable tourism metrics, perhaps through additional funding or national awards.
- **Climate Resilience Planning:** Integrate climate change adaptation into tourism planning. Conduct climate risk assessments for major tourism regions (coastal erosion in beach resorts, water scarcity in certain seasons, etc.) and implement adaptation measures such as restoring natural coastal buffers (mangroves, coral reefs) and designing climate-resilient tourism infrastructure. Additionally, consider developing a carbon offset scheme specifically for tourists (e.g. an option for tourists to contribute to tree planting or renewable energy projects in Vietnam to offset their travel emissions) aligning with the net-zero goal and engaging tourists in the solution.

By implementing these recommendations, Vietnam can markedly improve the sustainability of its tourism sector. It is crucial that these measures are pursued with a collaborative mindset involving government at all levels, the private sector, communities, and international partners. The transition to green tourism is a journey that will require cultural shifts in how tourism is managed and experienced. Vietnam’s rich natural and cultural heritage is a priceless asset; protecting it through effective governance is not only an environmental necessity but also the cornerstone of a resilient tourism economy.

In conclusion, green tourism and strong environmental governance are mutually reinforcing paths that lead toward a sustainable future for Vietnam’s destinations. Vietnam has shown that it can innovate and rapidly develop its tourism industry; the next step is to equally prioritize sustainability so that development does not come at the cost of degradation. If the country successfully strengthens its environmental governance – learning from both its own pilot successes and international best practices – it can become a model for sustainable tourism in Southeast Asia. The choices made now will determine whether Vietnam’s renowned destinations can thrive for decades to come, offering quality experiences to tourists while preserving the environment and improving the well-being of local communities. The evidence and analysis in this paper provide optimism that with informed policies and collective action, Vietnam can indeed steer its tourism sector onto a green and sustainable path, securing a brighter future for both the industry and the natural and cultural treasures it celebrates.

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