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SOME SOLUTIONS TO PROMOTE RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN VIETNAM**Ly Liet Thanh¹,**¹Van Hien University, Vietnam**Nguyen Thi Huong²**²Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration, Vietnam**ABSTRACT**

Developing rural tourism in Vietnam is becoming an important and promising trend within the country's sustainable economic development strategy. With its rich agriculture, diverse culture, and beautiful natural landscapes, Vietnam's rural areas are not only a source of food and raw materials for the entire nation but also an ideal destination for both domestic and international tourists who wish to explore traditional rural life, experience agricultural activities, and enjoy peaceful and fresh environments. However, despite its great potential, rural tourism in Vietnam has not yet fully developed and has not exploited its inherent advantages. Identifying effective solutions to promote rural tourism development is urgent, not only to increase income for rural residents but also to preserve and enhance the unique cultural and natural values of Vietnam's rural areas. This article analyzes the current challenges in developing rural tourism and proposes several specific and feasible solutions to promote sustainable development in this field, contributing to the overall growth of Vietnam's tourism industry.

Keywords:

Rural tourism, tourism industry, sustainable development, Vietnam.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism is a type of tourism that creates service products for tourists primarily based on agricultural production activities. Currently, there are many concepts of rural tourism worldwide, but they generally encompass four main aspects: combining tourism and agriculture; attracting tourists to participate in rural-related activities; aiming to increase income for farmers; and providing tourists with opportunities for recreation, physical and mental exercise, close encounters with nature, and experiencing rural life. The unique feature of rural tourism lies in the combination of natural and traditional cultural values in rural areas. Developing rural tourism contributes to the preservation of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage as well as traditional crafts. Developing rural tourism in Vietnam is not only a new direction but also an urgent need to promote sustainable development for both the economy and society.

Developing rural tourism brings new sources of income for local people, helping to improve their economic livelihoods. This is particularly important in the context where many rural areas are still facing poverty and lack of employment. Tourism not only creates direct jobs in the service sector but also stimulates related sectors such as agriculture, handicrafts, and support services. Many Vietnamese villages possess valuable cultural, historical, and traditional values. Developing rural tourism helps preserve and promote these values while providing tourists with opportunities to access and gain deeper understanding of local culture. This not only contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage but also fosters national pride and conservation awareness within the community.

Currently, Vietnam's tourism industry is facing fierce competition from countries in the region and around the world. Developing rural tourism helps diversify tourism products, attracting a broader range of tourists with various interests. This helps alleviate the pressure on traditional tourist spots that are becoming overcrowded and contributes to a more equitable distribution of economic benefits from tourism. If developed correctly and with proper planning, rural tourism will also contribute to environmental protection and the conservation of natural resources. Therefore, it is evident that developing rural tourism is a necessary and important step for Vietnam, helping to promote economic development, preserve culture, protect the environment, and improve the quality of life for local residents.

2. Current Status of Rural Tourism Development in Vietnam

Vietnam is the 14th most populous country globally, with over 90 million residents. Rural areas account for 66.9% of the population and nearly 80% of the nation's natural land. The country is characterized by its rich history, diverse

ethnic groups, varied climates, fertile lands, diverse terrains, and strategic geographical location. These abundant and unique natural and cultural tourism resources provide excellent conditions for developing various tourism products, including rural tourism.

In recent years, Vietnam's tourism sector has experienced significant growth, with its competitiveness steadily rising in the World Economic Forum (WEF) rankings. The development of rural tourism is a crucial component of the National Target Program for New Rural Development for the 2021-2025 period. This program emphasizes shifting the focus from mere agricultural production to broader rural economic development, assisting localities in meeting new rural standards effectively and sustainably.

Vietnam has successfully established rural tourism products that reflect the cultural characteristics of different regions from north to south, attracting both domestic and international tourists. Notable rural tourism destinations include Duong Lam ancient village (Hanoi), Moc Chau farm (Son La), Tra Que vegetable village (Quang Nam), Da Lat agricultural tourism (Lam Dong), and garden tours in the Mekong Delta. These tours highlight cultural and ecological elements specific to each region, such as garden tours, floating markets, and islets in Can Tho, Vinh Long, and Tien Giang; cultural performances like "đờn ca tài tử" in Bac Lieu; Khmer culture in Soc Trang and Tra Vinh; and fruit and ornamental flower festivals in the western region. Coastal, island, and national forest ecotourism products are available in Kien Giang, Ca Mau, and Can Gio (Ho Chi Minh City). Recently, the VinEco Nam Hoi An farm tour has introduced modern and intelligent farming models, following the rural standards of leading agricultural countries such as France, Israel, and Singapore.

Since 2008, numerous farms across Vietnam, including Ba Vi countryside farm, have pioneered rural tourism models near Ba Vi mountain. This region boasts four traditional rural craft villages nestled in a stunning natural setting: the Dao herbal village, Ba Trai tea village, Van Hoa grass-growing and dairy farming village, and Duong Lam ancient Vietnamese village in Son Tay. These innovative rural tourism models play a vital role in preserving the ethnic cultural values of the Muong and Dao communities, maintaining traditional rural community spaces, and promoting natural products. The Vietnam National Administration of Tourism highlights that various agricultural products, including food, beverages, handicrafts, fruits, and confectionery from rural areas, are extensively utilized in the tourism industry's restaurants and hotels. Leveraging regional and local culinary arts to serve tourists significantly enhances rural tourism activities. The tourism service supply chain heavily relies on rural products, and the sale of these products at tourist destinations generates considerably higher revenue than ticket sales alone. This acts as a powerful promotional tool for these sites, showcasing the unique offerings of rural Vietnam to a broader audience.

In the context of Vietnam-Japan cooperation, the Institute for Tourism Development Research, in collaboration with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), compiled and published the "Practical Handbook for Rural Tourism Development in Vietnam" in 2013. This handbook is based on the outcomes of Japan's tourism development support projects in rural Vietnam, covering areas such as Duong Lam (Hanoi), Phuoc Tich and Thanh Toan (Thua Thien Hue), Hong Phong (Hai Duong), Dong Hoa Hiep (Tien Giang), Tabhing (Quang Nam), and three craft villages in Bac Ninh: Phu Lang, Dinh To, and Hoa Long. Moreover, these rural tourism models not only preserve cultural heritage but also offer immersive experiences that attract tourists seeking authentic interactions with local traditions and lifestyles. For instance, visitors to the Dao herbal village can learn about traditional medicinal practices, while those at Ba Trai tea village can participate in tea harvesting and processing. Similarly, Van Hoa's grass-growing and dairy farming village provides insights into sustainable agricultural practices, and Duong Lam village offers a glimpse into ancient Vietnamese architecture and way of life. These efforts are complemented by community-based initiatives that empower local residents, providing them with opportunities to benefit economically from tourism while fostering a sense of pride in their cultural heritage. Workshops and training programs are regularly conducted to enhance the hospitality skills of locals, ensuring high-quality service for visitors and promoting sustainable tourism practices.

In addition to local initiatives, international collaborations, such as those with JICA, bring valuable expertise and resources that enhance the development and promotion of rural tourism. The "Practical Handbook for Rural Tourism Development in Vietnam" serves as a comprehensive guide, offering practical solutions and strategies for integrating rural tourism into broader economic development plans. This collaboration exemplifies how international support can amplify the impact of local efforts, leading to more sustainable and inclusive growth in the tourism sector.

In 2019, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) ranked Vietnam 6th among the top 10 countries with the fastest-growing tourist arrivals worldwide. Vietnam's tourism is in a phase of rapid development, with high growth in international tourist arrivals. The National Tourism Year - Dien Bien 2024 will feature nearly

170 programs and events showcasing unique cultural, sports, and tourism activities on a national and international scale throughout the year. Dien Bien Province, with the cultural identity of 19 ethnic groups, is known nationwide and internationally for its unique historical, cultural, and scenic sites, such as the Dien Bien Phu Battlefield Special National Historic Site, the Temple of Heroes and Martyrs, the Dien Bien Phu Victory Museum with its Asian record-breaking Panorama painting, Muong Phang, Pa Khoang, A Pa Chai - Muong Nhe, Hua Pe, U Va, and the land of Ban flowers, as well as the recently famous macadamia nuts and cherry blossoms.

However, the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism also points out that although Vietnam has many resources for developing rural tourism, few areas can be professionally exploited. Most rural tourism activities are still spontaneous, small-scale, fragmented, and repetitive. Rural tourism products have not yet truly captivated tourists and have not been branded effectively. Some regions with similar natural conditions, lifestyles, and community cultures produce overlapping and monotonous rural tourism products. Particularly, most farmers are only familiar with agricultural production and lack the skills to professionally serve tourists. Most rural tourism products are still very simple, not fully utilizing their advantages to attract tourists or increase their spending. The value of indigenous rural culture, traditional identities, and sophistication have not been thoroughly researched to create high-quality products for tourists. Many rural tourism models have been exploited for years but have not been renewed, relying mainly on the natural ecological environment and thus losing their appeal to visitors.

High-quality rural tourism products to serve tourists are still scarce in many localities. Some products only meet the basic needs of sightseeing, resting, eating, and simple experiences. Tourist spending on rural tourism products mainly involves entrance fees, meals, and accommodation, with little spent on ancillary services due to the lack of appealing supplementary services. Infrastructure and supporting facilities at many rural tourism sites are not fully developed or maintained at the required standards. Sanitation facilities and environmental cleanliness in many areas do not meet requirements, and some places lack restrooms altogether.

The cooperation between travel businesses and destinations offering rural tourism activities is limited. Many rural tourism sites struggle to connect with travel businesses to develop and complete rural tourism products and attract domestic and international tourists. Therefore, new approaches are needed to improve service quality to meet the increasingly high demands of tourists.

It can be said that rural tourism in Vietnam faces many challenges. While it promises many positive impacts on the economy, culture, society, and environment, without proper management from the start, it can also lead to negative consequences such as increased living costs, pollution and waste, rising crime rates, loss of community identity, and degradation of cultural values.

3. Solutions to Promote Rural Tourism Development in Vietnam

Rural tourism plays a crucial role in socioeconomic development, contributing to cultural preservation and environmental protection. To enhance the development of rural tourism in Vietnam, the following comprehensive measures should be implemented:

First, upgrading infrastructure is the most critical factor. Improving transportation systems, building, and upgrading roads and bridges, especially in remote areas, will facilitate easier access for tourists to rural destinations. Additionally, investment in electricity, clean water, telecommunications, and internet infrastructure is essential to ensure tourists can enjoy basic amenities during their stay. Developing accommodation types such as homestays, farmstays, and local-style lodges is also necessary to provide diverse and appealing options for tourists.

Second, raising awareness and skills within the local community is a key element. Regular training courses on communication skills, customer service, homestay management, and tourism-related skills should be organized. Encouraging local people to participate in tourism activities such as guiding, event organizing, and developing tourism products not only creates more jobs but also helps them understand the benefits of tourism for the community. This participation fosters a sense of ownership and pride among locals, enhancing the overall quality of the tourist experience.

Third, diversifying and creating unique tourism products is another important factor. Tourism products should maximally exploit the distinctive culture, traditions, and natural landscapes of each region. For example, tours that allow tourists to experience farming, participate in traditional festivals, or visit ancient craft villages will offer new and interesting experiences. These unique offerings can distinguish one rural destination from another, making them more attractive to a broader range of visitors.

Additionally, implementing effective marketing and promotional strategies is crucial. Creating a strong brand identity for rural tourism destinations can attract more visitors. This includes utilizing digital marketing platforms such as social media, travel blogs, and tourism websites to reach a wider audience. Collaboration with travel

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agencies and tour operators to design attractive travel packages and offers can also boost tourist inflows. Developing partnerships with international organizations and participating in global tourism fairs can further enhance the visibility and appeal of rural tourism destinations in Vietnam.

Another essential solution is fostering innovation and entrepreneurship in rural tourism. Encouraging locals to start their own tourism-related businesses, such as craft shops, local cuisine restaurants, and adventure tour services, can create a vibrant tourism ecosystem. Providing training and support for entrepreneurial activities, including access to microloans and business development services, can empower rural communities to take an active role in tourism development.

Furthermore, support and encouragement from the government and relevant agencies are essential. The implementation of supportive policies for infrastructure development, human resource training, and rural tourism promotion needs to be strengthened. Financial support and creating favorable conditions for businesses to invest in rural tourism are also necessary measures. Government initiatives can include tax incentives, grants, and loans to stimulate private sector involvement in developing rural tourism infrastructure and services.

Finally, environmental protection and cultural preservation are indispensable elements. Rural tourism should be developed sustainably, protecting natural resources and maintaining traditional cultural values. Raising awareness and educating both locals and tourists about environmental protection and respecting and preserving local cultural values are important tasks. Sustainable practices such as waste management, energy conservation, and promoting local traditions and crafts ensure that tourism benefits both current and future generations.

In conclusion, with the implementation of these comprehensive and sensible solutions, the development of rural tourism in Vietnam can significantly enhance the living standards of rural residents while contributing to the sustainable growth of the tourism industry and the national economy. By focusing on infrastructure, community engagement, product diversification, government support, and sustainability, rural tourism in Vietnam can thrive and become a model for other countries to follow.

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