

PROMOTING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT THROUGH RURAL TOURISM IN VIETNAM**Nguyen Thi Giang**

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ABSTRACT

Rural tourism is emerging as a strong development trend in Vietnam, attracting the interest of both domestic and international tourists. Rural tourism not only contributes to boosting the local economy but also creates jobs, improves the living standards of residents, and preserves traditional cultural values. This article highlights the benefits of developing rural tourism for Vietnam's economy and proposes several solutions to further promote strong economic development through rural tourism.

Keywords:

development, economy, rural tourism, Vietnam.

1. INTRODUCTION

Vietnam, with its rich history and culture, along with magnificent natural landscapes, has become an attractive tourist destination on the world map. In recent years, rural tourism has been recognized as a key economic sector capable of promoting local economic development and improving people's lives. The development of rural tourism not only brings economic benefits by creating jobs and increasing incomes for local people but also contributes to the preservation and promotion of traditional cultural values, handicrafts, and the ecological environment. This is especially important in the context of rapid globalization and urbanization, where traditional values are gradually being eroded.

The Vietnamese government has recognized the importance of developing rural tourism and has issued policies and decisions to boost this sector. One significant step forward is Decision No. 922/QĐ-TTg, which approved the Rural Tourism Development Program in the construction of new rural areas for the 2021-2025 period. This program aims to develop rural tourism destinations, standardize tourism products, and improve service quality while linking them with regional identities and characteristics.

Promoting economic development through rural tourism is not only a crucial strategy to improve the socio-economic life of the people but also contributes to the sustainable development of the country. Therefore, focusing on developing rural tourism should be considered an urgent task requiring adequate attention and investment from authorities and the whole society.

2. KEY FEATURES OF RURAL TOURISM

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: the combination of 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 activities, being close to nature, and experiencing farm life. The unique feature of rural tourism is the combination of natural values and traditional cultural values in rural areas. The development of rural tourism contributes to the preservation of tangible and intangible cultural heritage as well as traditional crafts.

Developing rural tourism in Vietnam is not just a new direction but also an urgent need to promote sustainable development for both the economy and society. Rural tourism development brings new income sources for local people, helping to improve their economic lives. This is particularly important as many rural areas still face poverty and lack of employment. Tourism not only creates direct jobs in the service industry but also boosts related sectors such as agriculture, handicrafts, and support services.

Many Vietnamese rural villages possess precious cultural, historical, and traditional values. Developing rural tourism helps preserve and promote these values while providing opportunities for tourists to access and gain deeper

insights into local culture. This not only contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage but also ignites 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. The development of rural tourism helps diversify tourism products, attracting more tourists with various interests. This helps reduce the burden on traditional tourist destinations that are overloaded and contributes to the equitable distribution of economic benefits from tourism.

If developed in the right direction and with proper planning, rural tourism will help protect the environment and natural resources. Therefore, it can be seen that the development of 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 the people.

3. CURRENT STATE OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FROM RURAL TOURISM IN VIETNAM

Vietnam, with a population exceeding 90 million and ranking as the 14th most populous country in the world, has a rural population comprising 66.9% of its total and nearly 80% of its natural area. The country's diverse history, ethnic groups, climate, land, and geographical location, along with its rich and unique natural and cultural tourism resources, provide excellent conditions for the development of various tourism products, including rural tourism.

In recent years, Vietnam's tourism industry has seen remarkable growth, with the country's tourism competitiveness continually improving on the World Economic Forum (WEF) rankings. The development of rural tourism is a key component and task within the National Target Program for New Rural Development for the 2021-2025 period. This initiative shifts the focus from agricultural production to rural economic development, supporting localities in effectively and sustainably meeting the new rural criteria.

Currently, Vietnam boasts numerous rural tourism products that reflect the cultural characteristics of different regions, from north to south, attracting both domestic and international visitors. Prominent rural tourism tours include visits to Duong Lam ancient village (Hanoi), Moc Chau farm (Son La), Tra Que vegetable village (Quang Nam), agricultural tours in Da Lat (Lam Dong), and orchard tours in the Mekong Delta. Tours also exploit elements tied to the culture and ecology of the Mekong Delta, such as garden tourism, floating markets, and river islets in Can Tho, Vinh Long, and Tien Giang, alongside enjoying cultural activities like don ca tai tu in Bac Lieu, Khmer culture in Soc Trang and Tra Vinh, and fruit and flower festivals in the western region. Coastal, island, national park, and mangrove eco-tourism products can be found in Kien Giang, Ca Mau, and Can Gio (Ho Chi Minh City), with the latest addition being the VinEco Nam Hoi An farm tour, which follows modern, smart agricultural models akin to those in leading agricultural countries such as France, Israel, and Singapore.

Since 2008, numerous farms nationwide, including Ba Vi Countryside Farm, have developed rural tourism models in the vicinity of Ba Vi Mountain. This area hosts four traditional rural craft villages within a beautiful natural space: Dao herbal medicine village, Ba Trai tea village, Van Hoa grass and dairy farm, and the ancient Duong Lam rural village in Son Tay. These new rural tourism models contribute to preserving ethnic cultural values (Muong, Dao), traditional rural community spaces, and natural products. According to the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, many agricultural products such as food, beverages, handicrafts, fruits, and confectionery from rural areas are utilized in the tourism sector's restaurants and hotels. Regional culinary arts, catering to tourists, also play a significant role in promoting rural tourism activities. The tourism supply chain cannot function without rural products, with local farmers' products at tourist sites generating substantial income and serving as an extensive promotional tool.

In the framework of Vietnam-Japan cooperation, in 2013, 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," drawing on the results of Japanese-supported tourism development projects in rural areas of Vietnam: 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 Phu Lang, Dinh To, and Hoa Long (Bac Ninh).

In 2019, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) ranked Vietnam sixth among the top ten countries with the highest tourist growth rates globally. Vietnam's tourism industry is experiencing rapid growth, with a significant increase in international tourists. The 2024 National Tourism Year in Dien Bien, featuring nearly 170 cultural, sports, and tourism events of national and international scale, highlights the unique cultural identity of 19 ethnic groups, including notable historical and cultural sites such as the Dien Bien Phu battlefield, the Shrine of Heroes and Martyrs, and the Dien Bien Phu Victory Museum with its record-breaking Panorama painting, along with

Muong Phang, Pa Khoang, A Pa Chai - Muong Nhe, Hua Pe, U Va, the land of Ban flowers, and recently, macadamia and cherry blossoms.

Recently, the Vietnamese government has been proactive in promoting agricultural and rural tourism development. The Strategy for Sustainable Agricultural and Rural Development until 2030, with a vision to 2045, emphasizes that "Rural tourism development is a fundamental solution and a driving force for building sustainable new rural areas, leveraging the unique advantages and values of agriculture, rural areas, and farmers. Concurrently, new rural areas provide a foundation for diverse and sustainable rural tourism development." The National Target Program for New Rural Development for the 2021-2025 period includes additional components on developing agricultural and rural tourism. On August 2, 2022, the Prime Minister issued Decision No. 922/QD-TTg, approving the Program for Rural Tourism Development within the New Rural Development framework for 2021-2025, setting specific targets for 2025.

Table 1: Specific Targets for Rural Tourism Development in Vietnam by 2025

| Content | Target |
|---|--------------|
| Rural tourism service businesses recognized as meeting tourist service standards | 50% |
| Recognized rural tourist sites digitized and connected on digital tourism promotion platforms | At least 50% |
| Rural tourist sites introduced and promoted | 100% |
| Rural tourist sites using electronic transactions in tourism activities | 50% |
| Owners of rural tourism businesses trained in tourism management | At least 70% |
| Rural tourism workers trained and upskilled in tourist service skills | 80% |

(Source: Decision No. 922/QD-TTg dated August 2, 2022, by the Prime Minister approving the Rural Tourism

Development Program within the New Rural Development framework for the 2021-2025 period) However, the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism highlights that although Vietnam has substantial resources for developing rural tourism, only a few areas can exploit these resources professionally. Most rural tourism activities remain spontaneous, small-scale, and fragmented, often overlapping. The rural tourism products lack appeal and branding, and many areas with similar natural conditions, lifestyles, and community cultures offer repetitive and monotonous tourism products. Particularly, many farmers, accustomed only to agricultural production, lack the skills to serve tourists professionally. As a result, rural tourism products are often simple and do not fully leverage their advantages to attract tourists or increase their spending. The unique rural values, traditional culture, and professional sophistication have not been adequately studied to create high-quality tourism products. Many rural tourism models, exploited for years without investment in innovation, primarily rely on natural ecological environments and thus fail to attract visitors.

High-quality rural tourism products in many localities are limited, often only meeting basic needs for sightseeing, resting, dining, and simple experiences. Tourists' spending on rural tourism products mainly involves purchasing entrance tickets, meals, and accommodations, with limited expenditure on additional services due to a lack of attractive supplementary offerings. Infrastructure and supporting facilities at many rural tourism sites are either underdeveloped or of poor quality. Sanitation and environmental hygiene facilities are often inadequate or nonexistent in many areas.

Collaboration between travel businesses and rural tourism destinations remains limited. Many rural tourism sites struggle to connect with travel agencies to develop and complete rural tourism products and attract both domestic and international tourists. Thus, new approaches are needed to enhance service quality to meet the increasing demands of tourists.

It can be said that rural tourism in Vietnam faces many challenges. While rural tourism promises significant positive impacts on the economy, culture, society, and environment, without proper management measures from the outset, 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.

4. SOME SOLUTIONS TO PROMOTE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT THROUGH RURAL TOURISM IN VIETNAM

Rural tourism plays a crucial role in socio-economic development, contributing to cultural preservation and environmental protection. To fully exploit the potential of rural tourism and promote sustainable economic growth, several specific and comprehensive solutions are required. Here are some key solutions:

Firstly, upgrading infrastructure is the most critical factor. Improving the transportation system, constructing and upgrading roads and bridges, especially in remote areas, will make it easier for tourists to access rural tourism destinations. Additionally, investing in electricity, clean water, telecommunications, and internet systems is essential to ensure that tourists can enjoy basic amenities during their stay. Developing types of accommodation such as homestays, farmstays, and local-themed guesthouses is also a necessary direction. Infrastructure development should also include the establishment of visitor centers, proper signage, and information boards to guide and inform tourists.

Secondly, raising awareness and skills within the local community is a key factor. Regular training courses on communication skills, customer service, homestay management, and other tourism-related skills should be organized. Encouraging local residents to participate in tourism activities, such as becoming tour guides, event organizers, and developing tourism products, not only creates additional jobs but also helps them understand the benefits of tourism for the community. Involving local communities in planning and decision-making processes ensures that tourism development is aligned with their needs and aspirations, fostering a sense of ownership and commitment.

Thirdly, developing diverse and unique tourism products is another important factor. Tourism products should maximize the cultural, traditional, and natural landscape features of each region. For instance, tourism experiences such as becoming a farmer for a day, participating in traditional festivals, or visiting ancient craft villages can offer tourists new and interesting experiences. Diversifying tourism products can include agro-tourism, eco-tourism, and cultural tourism. Creating themed tourism routes and itineraries that highlight the distinctive features of different regions can enhance the overall tourism experience.

Fourthly, support and encouragement from the government and relevant authorities are necessary. Stronger implementation of policies supporting infrastructure development, human resource training, and rural tourism promotion is essential. Financial support and creating favorable conditions for businesses to invest in rural tourism are also necessary measures. Developing tourism links between ministries, sectors, and localities needs to be regular, tight, and synchronized. This will not only create a robust rural tourism network but also promote the development of traditional industries and agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. Incentives such as tax breaks, grants, and low-interest loans can encourage investment in rural tourism infrastructure and services.

Fifthly, tourism businesses should enhance promotion and advertising of historical-cultural relics, scenic spots, and design attractive tourism products and itineraries suitable for different tourist groups and types of tourism. This will help "awaken" the potential for rural tourism development, especially in areas with unique cultural and natural values. Utilizing digital marketing strategies, social media platforms, and online travel agencies can increase visibility and attract a wider audience. Collaborations with international tourism organizations and participation in global tourism fairs can further enhance promotional efforts.

Sixthly, environmental protection and cultural preservation cannot be overlooked. Rural tourism must be developed sustainably, protecting natural resources and not distorting traditional culture. Promoting and educating about environmental protection, respecting and preserving local cultural values is an important task for both residents and tourists. Implementing eco-friendly practices, such as waste management, energy conservation, and sustainable farming methods, can minimize the environmental impact of tourism activities. Establishing guidelines and

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regulations to protect cultural heritage sites and traditional practices ensures that tourism development does not lead to their degradation.

Seventhly, enhancing the quality and diversity of tourism services is crucial. Providing high-quality food and beverage services, offering authentic local cuisine, and ensuring hygiene and safety standards are met can greatly enhance the tourist experience. Developing recreational activities, such as nature trails, cycling routes, and cultural workshops, can attract a broader range of tourists. Encouraging local artisans to produce and sell traditional handicrafts and souvenirs can add value to the tourism experience and provide additional income for the community. Eighthly, improving collaboration and partnerships between stakeholders is essential for successful rural tourism development. Establishing partnerships between government agencies, local authorities, tourism businesses, and community organizations can facilitate resource sharing, joint marketing efforts, and coordinated development initiatives. Creating networks and associations of rural tourism operators can enhance knowledge exchange, capacity building, and advocacy for common interests.

Ninthly, monitoring and evaluating tourism impacts is critical for ensuring sustainable development. Regular assessment of the social, economic, and environmental impacts of tourism activities can help identify areas for improvement and inform future planning. Engaging local communities in monitoring processes can provide valuable insights and promote accountability.

CONCLUSION

Developing rural tourism as a strategic direction in Vietnam holds immense economic, social, and environmental potential. Effectively harnessing this potential not only enhances local incomes and livelihoods but also serves as a strong driver for the country's sustainable development. Current challenges such as incomplete infrastructure, limited service quality, and the risk of negative environmental impacts need to be addressed through comprehensive and coordinated solutions. To tackle these challenges, strategic investments in infrastructure are crucial. Improving transportation systems, constructing and upgrading roads and bridges, especially in remote areas, will facilitate easier access for tourists to rural tourism destinations. Simultaneously, investments in electricity, clean water, telecommunications, and internet connectivity are essential to ensure that tourists can enjoy basic amenities during their stays. Developing various forms of accommodation such as homestays, farmstays, and locally-themed guesthouses also presents a necessary direction. Furthermore, enhancing local community awareness and skills is pivotal. Regular training programs in communication, customer service, homestay management, and other tourism-related skills should be organized. Encouraging local residents to participate in tourism activities, such as becoming tour guides, organizing events, and developing tourism products, not only creates employment opportunities but also deepens their understanding of the benefits of tourism to the community. Diversifying and enhancing the quality of tourism products is another crucial factor. Rural tourism should capitalize on distinctive cultural traditions, local festivals, and unique natural landscapes of each region. For instance, experiential tours like farming experiences, participation in traditional festivals, or visits to ancient craft villages offer visitors novel and enriching experiences. Moreover, supportive policies and incentives from the government and relevant agencies are essential. Robust implementation of policies supporting infrastructure development, human resource training, and tourism promotion needs to be prioritized. Financial support and favorable conditions for businesses investing in rural tourism should also be facilitated. Effective collaboration among ministries, sectors, and localities is critical to creating a strong network of rural tourism, which can boost traditional industries such as agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. Ultimately, promoting economic development through rural tourism in Vietnam is not merely an economic strategy but also a commitment to sustainable development and the preservation of the country's precious cultural and natural heritage. With determination and effort from government authorities, businesses, and communities, rural tourism in Vietnam will continue to thrive, contributing significantly to the overall prosperity and well-being of the nation.

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