

POLICY BRIEF

Formulation of the eco-, leisure tourism plan in protected areas in the period from 2021-2030: good plan decides success

MAIN MESSAGES

Definition of "ecotourism" in Viet Nam's legal documents

Although "ecotourism" has been defined in the Law on Tourism (2017) and mentioned in a number of other legal documents, the content and basic requirements of ecotourism have not been specified or guided. Therefore, the guideline on "formulating eco-, leisure tourism plan in protected areas" of the VNFOREST is of highly important and practical significance.

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The Viet Nam Administration of Forestry (VNFOREST) has just issued the "Guidelines on the formulation of eco-, leisure tourism plans in protected areas in the period from 2021-2030"¹ (hereinafter referred to as the Ecotourism Plan). Management boards of protected areas are requested by The VNFOREST to use these guidelines when formulating their ecotourism plans.

- In the context that ecotourism development activities have not been clearly stipulated in legal documents, the VNFOREST's guidelines form a good technical basis for management boards of protected areas to refer to during their ecotourism planning process. This policy brief highlights a number of issues that management boards and stakeholders need to pay attention to when formulating their ecotourism plan and providing ecotourism services at their sites²:
- Ecotourism should be considered as a multi-purpose tool in forest protection and development. Ecotourism does not only help raise awareness of the public about biodiversity conservation, conservation and unlocking the value of forest resources but also generates additional income to reinvest in nature management and conservation activities. Ecotourism, in addition, creates employment opportunities, better income and equally shared benefits from tourism resources for communities living around protected areas as well as other stakeholders engaged. Furthermore, ecotourism also contributes to the preservation and promotion of local cultural values; helps communities share and communicate their own cultural, traditional values.
- Providing ecotourism services in protected areas is a business that should be profitable. Therefore, management boards need to consider cost versus effectiveness in a cautious manner, taking into account business-influencing factors. A hustle manner in providing ecotourism should be avoided if the forecasts about economic, environmental and cultural, social effectiveness do not show a harmonious perspective.
- Good management of destinations is a key requirement to ensure the social and environmental sustainability of ecotourism activities in protected areas. Managers need to be able to calculate the load capacity of a given forest and have reasonable plans to limit the negative impacts caused by tourism activities.

¹ This document is formulated with the support of the Project "Programme on Conservation and Sustainable Use of Forest Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services in Viet Nam" (GIZ-Bio).

² Verbal note 1183/TCLN-ĐDPH dated 31/8/2021 of Viet Nam Administration of Forestry on the guidelines on formulation of ecotourism plan in protected areas (in short Ecotourism Plan).

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INTRODUCTION

Along with the payment of forest environmental services, managed well, ecotourism will be identified as an activity potentially can tap additional resources for management boards, while helping management boards improve their financial self-reliance in use of their resources, thereby making them less dependent on the State budget and more proactive in the implementation of management, protection, development and conservation of forest biodiversity.

*"Forests are gold, if we know how to protect and develop them, they are very precious."
(President Ho Chi Minh)*

"Managed well, forests are Viet Nam's advantage. Tourism services will make the strength of the economy, this is the motivation, the base to hope for better development of forests, more forests, wealthier biodiversity."⁶

(Dr. Nguyen Xuan Cuong - Former Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development)

However, it should be noted that providing ecotourism services in the true meaning of this term will be much more difficult and challenging than providing conventional mass tourism services. Ecotourism requires service providers to take into account a variety of factors, from human resources to infrastructure, technical facilities, tourism products, demands of tourists while harmonizing complex relationships between related subjects during organization of ecotourism. In addition, in ecotourism, ensured fair sharing of interests with local communities, contributions to conservation of cultural values and biodiversity are prime requirements which have been reflected in this VNFOREST's guidelines.

DISCUSSION

ECOTOURISM IN PROTECTED AREAS IS A MULTI-PURPOSE ACTIVITY AIMED AT PROTECTING, DEVELOPING FORESTS AND PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Understanding properly the concept of "ecotourism"

In Viet Nam, the term "ecotourism" was firstly known in the mid-1990s and was officially mentioned in the 2005 Law on Tourism, according to which, ecotourism is "a form of nature-based tourism, associated with local cultural identity, participated by community with a view to **sustainable development**". In 2017, this definition was revised in the Law on Tourism, according to which, ecotourism is "nature-based tourism, associated with local cultural identity, participated by community, combined with **education on environmental protection**". Compared to the widely recognized standards in the world, the definition of ecotourism in the 2017 Law on Tourism of Viet Nam removes the requirement for "sustainable development" and replaces it with "education for environmental protection". To a certain extent, this definition reflects the actual capacity to provide tourism services in Viet Nam, which is "nature-based" but does not have a full awareness of responsibility for nature protection and conservation for the sake of economic development, society and environment protection in a long-term.

Guidelines on formulation of the ecotourism plan in protected areas sets out principles close to international standards with a view to sustainable development

Compared to the definition of ecotourism of the 2017 Law on Tourism, these ecotourism guidelines set higher requirements with very clear direction to sustainable development and are in line with international practices, accordingly, when developing ecotourism in special-use forests and protection forests, in addition to the principles of compliance with relevant applicable legal regulations, national, sectoral and local development policies, directions and strategies, management boards also need to comply with the following principles:

⁶TCLN. (2019). Minister Nguyen Xuan Cuong: Special-use forests and protection are the core of sustainable development. <http://tongcuclamnghiep.gov.vn/LamNghiep/Index/bo-truong-nguyen-xuan-cuong-rung-dac-dung-phong-ho-la-loi-cua-phat-trien-ben-vung-4107>

- Contributing to the conservation of natural resources and biodiversity of special-use forests and protection forests
- While contributing to raise awareness and binding responsibilities of stakeholders, encourage them to participate in activities related to nature conservation, protection of landscape and plant and animal wildlife species.
- While contributing to tapping the community's cultural identity of the communities, help them develop economy, create jobs from ecotourism activities for communities living in forests and in buffer zones to encourage people to participate in nature conservation and forest development activities.
- Bringing financial resources for the conservation and development of tourist destinations.

In Viet Nam, there are very few ecotourism models that comply to the above principles. The majority of ecotourism models are merely limited within better management mass tourism in beautiful natural landscapes.

Facilitating local communities and people to participate in providing and benefiting from ecotourism services, which helps to limit conflicts of interest while improving the effectiveness of forest protection and development

Ecotourism should be able to support the management, protection, conservation of biodiversity and forest development through diversified and increased financial resources; spread and raise awareness of environmental protection; limit conflicts of interest with communities living in buffer zones, while increasing local people's responsibility in protecting forests – which also means protecting their own income sources.

Many studies have found a number of common barriers that prevent communities from effectively participating in ecotourism activities: 1) people's low literacy and insufficient awareness of ecotourism; 2) insufficient financial support; 3) from community's viewpoint, ecotourism is just seasonal works with seasonal revenue, this fact leads to a weak sense of needed sustainability of ecotourism; 4) the disparity in power over tourism resources and the unattractive benefit-sharing mechanism failing to motivate the participation of communities. The fact that both management board and buffer community involve in provision of ecotourism services is quite common in Viet Nam, especially in beautiful and easy-to-access destinations. However, the extent of public-private cooperation between management boards and private service providers remains limited, as a result, two sides are viewing each other as competitors rather than partners, reducing each other's ability to take advantage of their strengths towards a jointly improved income while protecting resources.

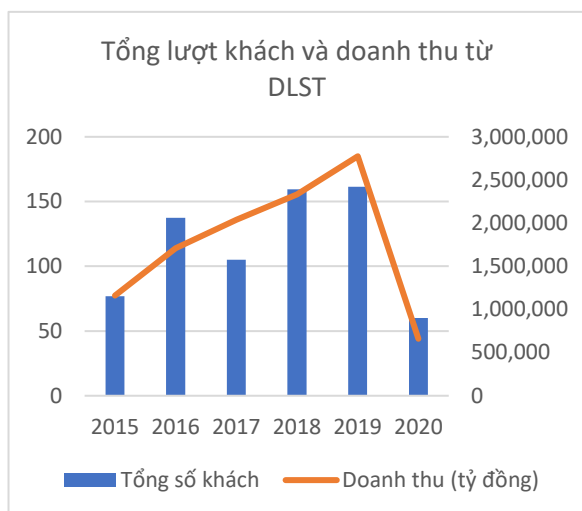
The management boards of protected areas, of course, are unable to handle all of the aforementioned barriers. For example, they cannot fund by their own the development of tourism products and services in the community.

However, management boards can support communities through investment in shared tourism infrastructure and shared tourism products (such as roads to destinations, promotion of destination, etc.); training, raising awareness, enriching knowledge and skills to provide ecotourism services. More importantly, facilitation of people's participation in planning, decisions-making, determining mechanisms for benefit sharing and at the same time, placed responsibilities in protecting of forest resource for tourism will help empower and significantly improve the active participation of communities living in buffer zones.

PROVIDING ECOTOURISM SERVICES IN PROTECTED AREAS IS A BUSINESS THAT SHOULD BE MADE PROFITABLE

"Able to bringing financial resources for the conservation and development of tourist destinations" is one of the principles outlined in the guidelines. The ecotourism activities by management boards cannot only aim to generate sufficient revenue for operational apparatus and environmental education through tourism activities, but also to ensure the creation of income to reinvest in improving the quality of such ecotourism services and also biodiversity and forest conservation and development. To many managers, this is a huge challenge and is unlikely achievable in a short time.

Although the revenue from ecotourism of some management boards seems positive, very few management boards are qualified to provide ecotourism services.



According to the reports from management boards of protected areas, currently, of 167 special-use forests, only 61 special-use forests are having eco-, leisure tourism activities, in other words, less than 37% of all special-use forests are providing this kind of service, not to mention that the service meet the standards of true ecotourism or not.

Tourism services in special-use forests have grown significantly in recent years in terms of both the total number of visits and size of revenue⁷. In 2015, all special-use forests nationwide welcomed over 1.15 million visitors, earning a revenue of VND 77.3 billion. However up to 97.5 % of the total number of visits and 99% of the

total revenue from ecotourism came from about 10 national parks earning highest revenues from tourism services. While, nature reserves, despite accounting for the higher proportion in SUFs, could only receive 2.5% of the total visits and their earning accounted for about 1% of the total revenues from tourism of the whole forestry sector⁸. Income from ecotourism currently accounts for a relatively low and unstable proportion of the management boards' total fund. A survey by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development showed that income from entrance tickets and ecotourism services of all three organizational forms including self-organization, forest environment leasing and co-business accounted for only about 3.43%⁹ of all. Moreover, in 2020, due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the total number of tourists having visited national parks and nature reserves decreased by 66% (to about 900,000 visitors) and total revenue from tourism also decreased by 69% (to about VND 44 billion) compared to 2019.

This shows: i) not all management boards are capable of providing ecotourism services; and ii) there are many risk factors that can affect ecotourism business effectiveness, such as prolonged pandemics. It is challenging for national parks to mobilize sufficiently large and stable revenues from providing ecotourism services to reinvest in conservation in a short time. Therefore, management boards need to sensibly formulate an implementation plan and financial plan, have a long-term strategy, clearly set goals for each specific stage to ensure that the provision of ecotourism services does not affect the resources of other activities. In other words, besides the task of natural resources conservation, the minimum requirement to the tourism services business in protected areas is making no loss.

A full consideration of the factors affecting the effectiveness of ecotourism business, especially investment fund, will help management boards limit risks of inefficient investment.

There are many factors affecting the effectiveness of ecotourism business in protected areas. These factors are already listed in the guidelines and should be fully analyzed by management boards during their formulation of ecotourism plan as the basis for the development of ecotourism, which include biodiversity; typical natural landscapes; potential of cultural tourism; transport system to destinations; management and organization and human resources; infrastructure for tourism; current and potential tourism products; current status of investment possibility to tap investment fund from private sector in the future; current status of tourism promotion; and community participation, etc.

Income from eco-, leisure tourism depends quite a lot on the initial investment in infrastructure and high-quality tourism products. Protected areas have special advantages in terms of natural and cultural tourism resources,

⁷ According to the report "Current State of Ecotourism Development in Special-Use and Protected Forests in Vietnam. Hanoi: Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development VNFOREST" (MARD, 2020), 2015, all SUFs nationwide welcomed over 1,15 billion visitors, total revenue reached 77,3 billion. In the ensuing years, the revenue increased gradually to 114 billion in 2016 and 136 billion in 2017. The number of visitors continue to increase to 2,39 million in 2018 and 2,420 million in 2019; the corresponding revenue reached 155,5 billion and 185 billion.

⁸ MARD. (2019). Current status of protected areas 2017-2018. Internal document.

⁹ Pham Thu Thuy and al (2018). Opportunities and challenges in mobilizing finance to implement Vietnam's Forestry Development Strategy for 2006–2020. Occasional Paper. CIFOR. Hanoi.

but most have many limitations to other factors, in which **low investment level, leading to weak tourism infrastructure are the biggest limitation encountered by management boards**, especially the management boards of nature reserves and protection forests.

On average, investment in infrastructure from the state budget accounted for about 52.48% of the total budget of management boards in the period 2000-2010¹⁰, but is gradually declining and only about 11% per year in the period 2014-2020¹¹ because the majority of management boards have received investment in infrastructure including headquarters and construction works for forest management and protection. In fact, investment in national parks is often higher than that in the other forest categories: the average budget allocated for national parks was 4,5 to 6,75 times higher than that for the others in the period from 2011-2015¹². In the period of 2014-2020, investment in national parks per unit of area¹³ was about 30% higher than that in nature reserves. On average, the budget allocated to national parks managed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development¹⁴ is seven times higher than that of locally managed national parks in 1997-2001 and three times higher than that in 2001-2006¹⁵. This is one of the reasons why the income from ecotourism of national parks very much outnumbers that of nature reserves, in which the national parks managed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development are always among the national parks in the SUF system in Viet Nam earning highest income from ecotourism.

If it is impossible to ensure, or determine the investment fund for tourism infrastructure development, management boards, especially the management boards of nature reserves and protection forests should be very careful and only decide to formulate and implement their ecotourism plan when there is sufficient fund as a prerequisite condition. In the context of limited investment fund from the state budget, mobilizing resources from the private sector through forms of forest environmental leasing and co-business should be considered by management boards. However, it should be noted that these forms of investment require management boards to have good competence in managing destinations. This issue will be discussed in the later part of this document.

Ecotourism-trained human resources are critical to the success of ecotourism activities

The World Economic Forum ranked Viet Nam the 67th out of 136 countries and territories based on 14 tourism competitive criteria, of which, the highly ranked criteria were used as the basis for Viet Nam's tourism development include: cultural resources (ranked 30/136), natural resources (34/136), competitive prices (35/136) and human resources, market of the tourism industry (37/136). Meanwhile, in many protected areas, the frontline human resource in providing ecotourism services are usually rangers who haven't been trained in ecotourism or who are among a few staff received short-term trainings.

This leads to low professionalism in service delivery and very limited ability to attract tourists. If an ecotourism plan is formulated towards self-organization model, management boards need to set forth specific roadmap to train their current human resources and make use of professionally trained human resources from the external labour market.

¹⁰ Pham Thu Thuy and al (2018). *Opportunities and challenges in mobilizing finance to implement Vietnam's Forestry Development Strategy for 2006–2020*. Occasional Paper. CIFOR. Hanoi.

¹¹ Emerton, L et al. (2021). *Review of PA financial status in Viet Nam: 'self-financing' needs, options & ways forward*. Report to Conservation, Sustainable Use of Forest Biodiversity & Ecosystem Services in Viet Nam. Hanoi.

¹² Tran Thi Thu Ha (2018) *Biodiversity Finance Initiative (BIOFIN) Viet Nam – Biodiversity Expenditure Review*. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Hanoi.

¹³ Emerton, L et al. (2021). *Review of PA financial status in Viet Nam: 'self-financing' needs, options & ways forward*. Report to Conservation, Sustainable Use of Forest Biodiversity & Ecosystem Services in Viet Nam. Hanoi.

¹⁴ National parks under the management of MARD include: Tam Dao national park; Ba Vi national park; Cuc Phuong national park; Bach Ma national park; Cat Tien national park; YokDon national park.

¹⁵ Emerton, L et al. (2021). *Review of PA financial status in Viet Nam: 'self-financing' needs, options & ways forward*. Report to Conservation, Sustainable Use of Forest Biodiversity & Ecosystem Services in Viet Nam. Hanoi.

GOOD MANAGEMENT OF DESTINATIONS IS A KEY REQUIREMENT TO ENSURE SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY OF ECOTOURISM ACTIVITIES IN PROTECTED AREAS.

In Viet Nam, there is an absence of policies or guidelines for development of ecotourism in protected areas as a basis for implementation of ecotourism activities. In relevant legal documents there have been a number of provisions on ecotourism activities. However, there is still an absence of detailed regulations and guidelines for implementing mechanisms for co-business, attracting the participation of communities and criteria for evaluating the form of ecotourism. Such policy gap does not only make protected areas management boards perplexed in implementation but also creates a loophole for tourism companies to develop the type of mass tourism in protected areas which is disguised as ecotourism.

Ecotourism activities need to be spatially planned and implemented based on specific plan to minimize negative impacts on the environment, forest resources and cultural spaces around protected areas.

According to the evaluation report of business activities in national parks / nature reserves by VNFOREST in 2017, as many as 56/61 national parks/reserves are organizing ecotourism activities without a plan, 60/61 national parks / nature reserves have not yet had investment plan approved by competent authorities in accordance with relevant legal regulations. The development of unplanned ecotourism is partly responsible for negative consequences such as putting pressure on natural resources and environment, under-qualified tourism services, lack of true ecotourism products¹⁶.

The guidelines of ecotourism plan of the VNFOREST, by requiring management boards to come up with specific and feasible solutions to address each situational risk when providing ecotourism services, will help limit and minimize negative impacts of ecotourism.

Tapping resources from the private sector through forest environmental leasing and co-business models is highly necessary but requires detailed guidelines for management boards to ensure good supervision and management of partner companies' activities.

Currently, ecotourism activities in protected areas are organized in 3 forms: (1) Self-organization (56 forests); (2) Co-business models (11 forests); and (3) forest environment leasing (13 forests). Thus, in ecotourism development, the majority of protected areas have ecotourism in self-organization form (nearly 92%), of which some forests combine self-organization with co-business models or leasing of forest environment¹⁷.

With respect to the self-organization form, management boards of special-use forests have faced many difficulties given the fact that investment for ecotourism business remains very limited, failing to meet the funding demand of these forests for organization, management while special-use forests are normally located in geographically far and remote locations, difficult-stricken economic areas, underdeveloped infrastructure for transport; where human resources have not been basically trained to be able to run ecotourism business¹⁸.

The form of co-business model has shown relatively successful performance in some national parks and nature reserves such as Ba Be, Ba Vi, Cat Tien, Phong Nha Ke Bang, Hoang Lien ... However, due to the absence of detailed guidelines, management boards and companies still encounter many difficulties in establishing co-business models, reaching an unanimity about cooperation agreements and methods of fund contribution to determine the rights and responsibilities of each party in ecotourism management and operation.

The form of leasing forest environment has shown positive points such as: able to attract investment for protected areas, thereby contributing financial resource to conservation; normally, leased forest areas defined in contracts with private companies are often better protected, of which the State does not have to pay for forest protection service, ... However, the form of leasing the forest environment requires management boards

¹⁶ Bui Thi Minh Nguyet. 2018. *Development of ecotourism: opportunity to tap financial resources for biodiversity conservation in national parks of Viet Nam.*

¹⁷ Le Van Lanh, Bui Xuan Truong (2018). *Ecotourism in national parks and nature reserves in Viet Nam: Potential, challenge, and solutions.* <http://vnppa.org/du-lich-sinh-thai-tai-cac-vuon-quoc-gia-va-khu-bao-ton-thien-nhien-viet-nam-tiem-nang-thach-thuc-va-giai-phap.html>. Published on 25/10/2018. Last access on 22/10/2021.

¹⁸ VNFOREST, 2020. *Current status and solutions to develop ecotourism in protected areas in Viet Nam.*

to have good management and supervision capacity in order to ensure that ecotourism projects are built and operated in accordance with relevant legal provisions.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSION

"Protected areas will be supposed to move gradually to financial self-reliance by increasing revenues from forest environmental services and ecotourism development. By 2025, 50% of protected areas will have involved in effective ecotourism activities; been able to attract 15-20% of tourists in Viet Nam annually"¹⁹

*Mr. Nguyen Quoc Tri
Director General of VNFOREST*

In the Vietnam Tourism Development Strategy to 2020, vision 2030, ecotourism is ranked the third priority, after marine tourism and cultural tourism. However, the lack of specific guidelines on ecotourism partly makes this type of tourism develop in an unplanned manner and does not fully meet the requirements.

The forestry sector aims to develop ecotourism into one of the services that provide an important source of revenue for sustainable forest management,

protection and development. However, the most important function of protected areas is to preserve the biodiversity and forest resources, with the newly issued guidelines, the forestry sector has made all requirements clearer and closer to international standards to ecotourism, thereby emphasizing the need to ensure a balance between the goal of mobilizing additional resources for management, protection, development of forests and biodiversity conservation and other sustainable development goals.

Providing true ecotourism is a very challenging requirement and needs to be carefully planned. By providing and fully analyzing the information required in the guidelines, management boards will be able to learn about their actual situation and right outlook to make sound decisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations to Department of Protected Area Management (DOPAM)

- It should be noted that ecotourism is not only a means to increase revenue for management boards. Ecotourism must also be an opportunity of environmental education, mobilization of the participation of the community and other stakeholders and share benefits with them in a fair manner. In many cases, management boards may accept a partial reduction in revenue to facilitate the community's participation in ecotourism activities, thereby binding more tightly the responsibility of the community in protection of forest resources – also tourism resources.
- Although the ambition and expectations of ecotourism development of the forestry sector are huge, the investment in ecotourism should be carefully considered taking into account all factors that can affect the business efficiency, avoiding wasteful and inefficient investments. That the VNFOREST's guidelines requires to provide sufficient information helps management boards have sufficient inputs to decide whether to provide ecotourism services or not, and if so, in which form. Among the factors, management boards should pay special attention to the ability to mobilize investment fund and the roadmap to improve the capacity of the staff involving provision of ecotourism services.
- Management boards must not trade off environmental benefits against economic benefits. In all forms of self-organization or leasing of forest environment or co-business models, management boards must play a supervisory role to ensure that ecotourism services and ecotourism products don't allow the number of visitors that exceeds the load capacity of their protected areas, neither any negatively impacts on high conservation value areas.

¹⁹ TCLN. (2021). Protected areas are core of sustainable development. <http://tongcuclamnghiep.gov.vn/LamNghiep/Index/bo-truong-nguyen-xuan-cuong-rung-dac-dung-phong-ho-la-loi-cua-phat-trien-ben-vung-4107>. Published on 19/12/2019. Last access on 22/10/2021.

Recommendations to the VNFOREST

- Within the framework of the "National Capacity Development Plan for Protected Area System Management to 2025, with a vision 2030"²⁰, the VNFOREST, through the DOPAM, organized a number of training courses for²¹ management boards of protected areas on ecotourism development. VNFOREST should continue to invest in completing the training materials and organize similar training courses in the coming time.
- Guideline on formulation of this ecotourism plan should be widely shared among the agencies responsible for appraising and approving this type of plan especially at the provincial level, including provincial people's committees and related sectoral departments.
- In the three forms of ecotourism organization in protected areas, the form of co-business still encounters with some regulatory obstacles, such as the method of State's fund contribution, State-invested facilities and sharing of benefits between the management board and investors. The VNFOREST should coordinate with relevant agencies in the central and provincial levels to provide specific legal guidelines in the coming time.

²⁰ Decision 626/QĐ-TTg dated 10/5/2017 on approving the "National Capacity Development Plan on Protected Areas System Management to 2025, with a vision to 2030"

²¹ Decision 626/QĐ-TTg dated 10/5/2017 on approving the "National Capacity Development Plan on Protected Areas System Management to 2025, with a vision to 2030"