



Sustainable Tourism in the South of Vietnam from the Tour Guide's Viewpoint

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, sustainable tourism development has gained attention and been adopted as a policy and planning approach by many governments around the world. However, while the concept of sustainable tourism development is widely considered integral to successful tourism development, there remain a range of problems which mitigate against positive sustainable tourism development outcomes. These include a lack of clear understanding of the key stakeholders in implementing sustainable tourism development and secondly, not all stakeholders have the same level of interest in sustainable tourism development and may be less active or not active at all. An essential element for sustainable tourism development in any tourist destination is the participation of active stakeholders and their collaborations. Among them, the tour guides play a major role but seem not to be paid attention as much as other stakeholders like the authorities, travel agencies or tourists. This paper aims at exploring the tour guides's point of view on sustainable tourism. The primary data collection involved in-depth interviews undertaken with 10 tour guides and data were analyzed using content analysis. From the tour guide's viewpoint, it seems like there has not been enough care and activities from other stakeholders concerning sustainable tourism. The result also shows the tour guides's sound awareness of sustainable tourism and their environmental friendly behaviors.

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the major sectors in international trade and one of the main wealth creators for many countries. Over the last decades, tourism has experienced continued growth and increased diversification becoming one of the fastest developing economic sectors in the world (UNWTO, 2013). While tourism is a major force for development, it has a lot of negative aspects, such as environmental pollution, ecological degradation, climate change, social dislocation, loss of cultural heritage, and economic dependence. With the intention of minimizing the negative impacts of tourism and enhancing its positive contribution, sustainable tourism has become a vital approach to tourism development in the modern world.

The UNWTO has defined sustainable tourism as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities" (UNWTO, 2013). Sustainability implies that tourism resources and attractions should be utilised in such a

way that their subsequent use by future generations is not compromised.

Since the 1990s, sustainable tourism development has gained attention and been adopted as a policy and planning approach by many governments around the world (Pigram & Wahab, 1997 in Dabphet 2013). Aligned with the importance of sustainable tourism perception, the roles of different stakeholders in the sustainable tourism process have also been aware of as an essential element in the drive towards sustainable tourism. However, while the concept of sustainable tourism development is widely considered integral to successful tourism development, there remain a range of problems which mitigate against positive sustainable tourism development outcomes. These include a lack of clear understanding of the key stakeholders in implementing sustainable tourism development and secondly, not all stakeholders have the same level of interest in sustainable tourism development and may be less active or not active at all (Dabphet, 2013).

There appears to be a strong belief that working together can yield significant benefits and there also appears to be

consensus amongst those working towards sustainable development that the involvement of different interest groups is crucial to help address the multi-dimensional concerns of a more holistic development approach (Maiden, 2008). An essential element for sustainable tourism development in any tourist destination is the participation of active stakeholders and their collaborations (Sandaruwani & Gnanapala, 2016). Among them, the tour guides play a major role but seem not to be paid attention as much as other stakeholders like the authorities, travel agencies or tourists.

Tourist guiding has an important and multifaceted role in contemporary tourism (Rabotic, 2010). The World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations (2005) defines a tourist guide as a person who guides visitors in the language of their choice and interprets the cultural and natural heritage of an area (Sandaruwani & Gnanapala, 2016). The role of the tourist guide is complex and diverse, consisting of numerous “sub-roles” (Holloway, 1981, in Rabotic, 2010), some of which are information provider, social facilitator, cultural host, motivator of conservation values, interpreter of the natural and cultural environment or even teacher or instructor, safety officer, ambassador for one’s country, public relations representative or company representative, entertainer, problem solver, confidant and counsellor (Rabotic, 2010). Though the tour guide’s role in tourism activities have fully been aware of and discussed popularly, their role as an independent stakeholder in sustainable tourism development seems not to be taken into account widely. In other words, while the main stakeholders in the field of tourism entrepreneurs like tour operators, airline companies and hotel industry “find themselves in the focus of academic interest, tourist guides are neither prominent nor interesting enough for the scientific analysis” (Rabotic, 2010b).

This paper aims at exploring the tour guides’s point of view on sustainable tourism, finding out how they perceive on sustainable tourism, what they do about it and how they see other stakeholders’s contribution.

Although sustainable tourism consists of three aspects including the environment, the economy and culture, within this paper, only the environmental aspects is considered and discussed.

METHOD AND THEORY

A qualitative research approach for this study was chosen because qualitative methods are especially useful in discovering the meaning that people give to events that they experience (Merriam, 1998) and because qualitative interviews result in thick descriptions of the subject being studied (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Once potential participants had been identified, an e-mail or Facebook message was sent to them to inform them of a description of the research study, research procedures, risks and benefits of participation in the study, participant rights,

and protection of confidentiality. When the potential participant agreed to join the study, an appointment was set up for the interview. The interviews were taken in September and October, 2019.

Interviews of participants concluded when data saturation occurred and the information received from the interviewees began to be redundant (Merriam, 1998). At this point, a total of 10 tour guides working for travel agencies in the South of Vietnam have been interviewed. All destinations mentioned by the participants were limited to the provinces in the South of Vietnam only.

With participant approval, the interviews were audio-recorded to ensure a complete transcript. On analyzing the data, the researcher named the categories, coded the transcripts, and placed sections in labeled folders representing each categories. A table was developed to compare various coded interviews.

According to Freeman (1984, p.46 in Dabphet 2013), a stakeholder is ‘any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation’s objectives’. Stakeholder theory is popularly applied to analyze the role of different stakeholders in the field of sustainable tourism. According to this approach, each group of stakeholders is a critical component of the tourism destination due to the fact that the initiatives and thoughts of stakeholders are external to the strategic planning and management processes (Dill, 1975, in Dabphet 2013).

This theory has been applied to the tourism sector on many occasions, based on identifying key players to collaborate and participate in planning and tourism development, thereby making these processes more participatory and entailing a higher level of mutual agreement (Sautter and Leisen, 1998; Williams *et al*, 1998; Medeiros de Araujo and Bramwell, 1999; Yuksel *et al*, 1999; Cheyne and Barnett, 2001; Álvarez *et al*, 2001; Cespedes *et al*, 2003; Sheenan and Ritchie, 2005, in Francisco 2013).

With regard to the environment, it may be suggested that stakeholder theory sets out an appropriate theoretical framework for analysing environmental management, considering the fact that environmental issues are specific objectives for some particular stakeholders, whether these are secondary stakeholders, such as NGOs or other members of society in general, or primary stakeholders, such as investors, employees, etc. (Fineman and Clarke 1996, in Francisco 2013).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Demographics of Participants

The results of this qualitative study are based on interviews of 10 tour guides, all of whom voluntarily participated in the study.

Six out of ten participants are male. The age of the participants is from 23 to 35 (mean 28.7), the seniority is from 2 – 12 years. Three out of ten has master degree (they

are all male and working part-time as a tour guide, the remain are full-time).

Among ten tour guides, two major in domestic market only, two in inbound, the other six are flexible.

The travel companies which the participants work for include both small and big, famous and non-famous tourism entrepreneurs.

Tour guide’s awareness of sustainable tourism

All participants have quite adequate knowledge on the concept of sustainable tourism, they all mentioned the current and future impacts and needs, half of them talked about it in an “academic” way indicating all three aspects - economic, social-cultural and environmental factors

In academic way, sustainable tourism is doing tourism with positive impacts on the environment, society and economy. In a simple way, sustainable tourism is doing tourism without harming the future (Male, age 35, master).

Sustainable tourism is to preserve and promote environmental, social, cultural, economic values so that it will develop without going backward and after 10-20-30 years or more it still has not been lost (Female, age 23, bachelor).

Every participant had learnt about sustainable tourism the first time from lectures since they were at the university and continued to have more information through mass media.

Having knowledge, information and concern, all the respondents consider sustainable tourism development important to very important.

Making tourism sustainable is vital. Tourism resources have their limit and need time to be rehabilitated. Hyper exploitation would lead to exhaustion (Male, age 29, master).

When being asked about the responsibility of sustainable tourism, the tour guides mentioned many subjects, some said all stakeholders in tourism, some indicated several main stakeholders.

The responsibility of making tourism sustainable belongs to all stakeholders, at the macro level, it’s the policy of the Government, at the micro level, it’s the responsibility of the travel agency, the tour guide and the local community (Male, age 29, master).

The tourists are also responsible for making tourism sustainable if they want to preserve the tourism environment for themselves and their next generations in the future (Male, age 27, bachelor).

4 out of 10 mentioned the important role of a tour guide, but like the “small players” with minor acting role.

The result seems to show a high-level perception of the tour guides on sustainable tourism. Recent studies on sustainable tourism also show same level of awareness of different stakeholders like customers (Hiere, 2018) local community (Harun et al. 2018) local government officials (Kruja D. & Hasaj A 2010). But again, to the best of our knowledge,

there has not been study on the tour guide’s perception of sustainable tourism.

While “both theoretical analysis and practical observation suggest that tour guides are in a strong position, with tremendous opportunities, to exert their influence on experience management, resources management and local economy promotion so as to facilitate tourism development along a sustainable direction” (Hu 2007 in Rabotic, 2010b), not many tour guides in this study consider themselves important subjects in implementing sustainability in tourism. For the root of sustainable tourism knowledge of the tour guides, all started from courses at the university and continued with the mass media, this finding implies the roles of those two institutions which should be fully aware of and promoted. This finding also supports the study of Dabphet (2010) that educational involved in providing a better understanding of tourism and sustainable tourism development (Dabphet, 2013). While sustainability is not receiving significant attention within the curriculum of university and in particular within hospitality management programs (Deale & Barber, 2010), this finding shows how important and effective it is to include sustainability into the university curriculum.

Tour guide’s behavior regarding sustainable tourism

The behavior that all the tour guides in this study did in order to show their concern on sustainable tourism is to propagate and guide their tourists. They used their chances of guiding to add information on environment protection. They also knew that their action would speak louder than their words. Some environmental friendly behaviors they took are saying no to littering, nylon bag and disposable products. Some even took part in environmental protection education tourism program and some mentioned making video clip to share on their personal media account.

I try to reduce using disposable items, I bring my own cloth bag to avoid nylon bag, use public transport and share the environment information to my tourists (Female, age 34, bachelor).

After the tour or the team building activities, I am the one who collect all the garbage that the tourists left (Female, age 23, bachelor).

I try to transmit the information to the tourists while guiding them on the destination, and if you want them to listen to you, you have to do it yourself first. I also take part in some environmental protection education tourism programs and gaining more information on this issue (Male, age 35, master).

All of the tour guides said they do these as they themselves realize how important sustainable tourism is but not because they are requested to do by any one.

In the survey on responsible tourism among package tourists in Great Britain (Goodwin & Francis 2003, in Rabotic, 2010b), the way tourists can give support to local community was perceived by the surveyed as the duty of

tourist guides, and in the case of American tour operators for Kenya (Pennington-Gray et al 2005, in Rabotic, 2010b), the tour operators think that tourist can be educated on responsible behavior owing to the guide service on the spot. Two main subjects directly related to the tour guides (i.e tourists and tour operators) consider them important resource for transmitting, guiding and educating sustainable tourism values to the tourists. The tour guides in the study seem to realize this and practice it in different ways.

Tour guide’s assessment of other stakeholders concerning sustainable tourism

On the tour guide’s overall assessment, tourist destinations in the South of Vietnam have recently paid some little attention to sustainable tourism but mostly limited to having more garbage can and littering announcement.

Most of the destinations here (the South of Vietnam) seem to pay attention to sustainability but actually they still care more about their profit (Male, age 29, master).

At the destinations I come to in the South, the easiest thing or maybe the only one thing to observe is the warning signs for environment protection (Male, age 35, master).

As far as I know, there have not been any concrete policy by the authority at the destinations but some signs on littering preventing, and the signs are very small and hard to recognize, the tour guides have to show and guide the tourists on this. If the authority manage and control too strictly, word-of-mouth from the tourists may prevent potential one in the future (Female, age 25, inbound/outbound/domestic).

This find supports previous literature that only a few kinds of tourism are being developed with sustainable tourism in mind in Vietnam..., the implementation of solutions and application of policies for sustainable tourism have not been taken seriously, thus making the concept unpopular with local stakeholders. Only some tourist companies are involved in this development seriously, and thus not many people encounter sustainable tourism (Le, 2016).

In terms of the travel agency (here are the tourist companies which the participants belong to or work for the longest time in case they are freelancers), all respondents mentioned some kinds of company’s policy, regulation or program like saying no to wet tissues, nylon bags and plastic bottles, using environmental friendly gifts for customers, requesting their employees (i.e tour guides) to remind and guide the customers or to do garbage collection after team building activities. However, those policies, regulations are unwritten and informal, the tour guides are only encouraged to do those things without support, rewards or punishments.

My company has not used wet tissues for customers for about 3 years now, it’s good for the environment. But the company does not support or has alternative, many customers still ask for that, so we have to bring the wet

tissues ourselves in case the customers request (Male, age 27, bachelor).

For all the companies I have worked for, there are no policy or regulation, they just encourage us to do so, no rewards, no punishment (Male, age 35, master).

To this point, previous research also showed that most local businesses in Vietnam have not been equipped with sustainable tourism principles and sustainable tourism here has not been considered by most tourism businesses. Most small tourism businesses do not consider sustainable tourism development necessary as they tend to focus on short-term benefits and have financial difficulties (Le, 2016).

While the participants were aware of the benefit that the travel agencies may gain from their sustainable activities (i.e image marketing and tourist attraction as some of them mentioned), 5 out of 10 referred to some difficulties carrying out those activities like low awareness or less concern of the tour guides or the react of the customers (when they are told not to do littering or when they do not receive wet tissue, water bottle from the tour guide as they expected).

The difficulty is some tour guides have not been aware of the need for making tourism sustainable, what they care more is their income. When the company post the information of sustainable tourism on their website, some tour guides do not even have a look. The program has a top-down flow and when it reaches to the tour guides at the bottom, it becomes weak (Male, age 29, master).

Existing literature show that “the industry bodies are part of sustainable tourism development process from the beginning as poorly planned tourism can cause environmental conditions to worsen in an area and in turn, affect their businesses” (Swarbrooke 2001; Lewis 2006; Creaco& Querini 2003 in Dabphet, 2013) and “tourism operators have recognized that promoting conservation and sustainable tourism development can maintain the cultural and biological integrity of the places, enhancing the quality of the product they are selling and improve their reputation and their repeat business (Dabphet, 2013).

Concerning accommodation facilities, from the tour guide’s viewpoints, recently there have been more hotels taking sustainable tourism into account with some activities like having slogan to remind tourists saving water and energy or not to litter/smoke, using glass bottle of water instead of plastic, using environmental friendly decoration or using electricity car for tourist transport. The higher class (i.e 4-5 star hotels and resorts) and the homestays which aim at serving inbound tourists are observed to have more of those activities.

It depends on the targeted market, for the 4-5 star hotels, their customers are the one who have more money and high perception, so they have to try to meet the need of their customers, including their demand of environmental protection (Male, age 33, bachelor).

For the small hotels, hostels or homestays, it is difficult for them to think about sustainability, they have to care about their interest first, using cheap and disposable things will lower their cost (Male, age 29, master).

Erdogan and Baris (2007) argue that the hotel industry is a key element in the tourism industry and therefore has a crucial position in protecting and preserving the environment as hotels use huge amounts of energy, water and other sources (Eggeling, 2010). Sustainable practices not only help to preserve the environment but help to reduce cost. In other words, fair profit for the tourism makers will be created as well as the environment will be protected appropriately (Eggeling, 2010). Whereas, this study found that not many stakeholders in the hospitality industry involve themselves much into the process of sustainability. This finding is in line with previous researches which argued that the hospitality industry is in general not really aware of sustainability (Cavagnaro and Gehrels 2009 in Eggeling 2010) and only few hospitality businesses implemented sustainable practices in their daily routines (Bader, 2005 in Eggeling, 2010).

Regarding tourist’s behavior, to the tour guide’s eyes, there are little concern on environment from domestic tourists while inbound tourists seem to pay much attention to this, especially tourists from Western countries.

If some Vietnamese tourists wonder why they are not distributed the wet tissues and even ask for that, the inbound tourists are very happy about it. When my company has garbage collection program, the inbound tourists are eager to join (Male, age 27, Bachelor).

On leaving the bus, the Western tourists always bring their own rubbish down and even keep the trash until they can find the trash bin. It’s different from our Vietnamese tourists behavior (Male, age 33, inbound)

Significantly, Vietnamese tourists act differently at home and being abroad. While domestic tourists may litter or smoke (where there is “No Smoking” sign) popularly, outbound tourists seem to follow strictly the tour guide’s instruction or the law/regulation of the international destination they go to. The reason given by most tour guide is that they (the outbound tourists) are afraid of being fined, other reasons includes desire of keeping the national’s image or simply following the native residents.

My outbound tourists always follow strictly the rules of the native destinations. They are so afraid of being fined, the fee is very high and the law is hard, the international destinations manage it very well (Male, age 28, bachelor).

On the way, I tell them some facts on the bad behaviors of the tourists and orient them to avoid making bad image of the Vietnamese people, they are happy to do that or sometimes they forget to obey but when they see the local people stand peacefully in a line, they are ready to queue (Male, age 28, master).

There are some differences point of views of the tour guides in domestic tourist classification as to sustainable tourism awareness and behavior. Whilst some saw older people to have better awareness and behavior on environment, others found youngers to have more adequate information so as to have more environmental friendly behaviors. For other characteristics, higher educational background and income tourists are observed to have better awareness and behavior on environment.

The old people have better perception on environmental protection and usually take themselves as models of behavior for educating their offspring (Female, age 25, inbound/outbound/domestic).

Young people nowadays are affected by the mass media and have better perception on environmental issues, they may follow the trends like using grass straw or reusable water bottle. Their advantage is they can be updated much more and faster than the older generation (Male, age 35, master).

It depends, but commonly the higher education background the customers have, the better perception they show, for the normal workers, they only want things to be convenient for them (Male, age 35, master).

According to Shamsub H. & Lebel L. (2012), sustainable behaviour was found to be associated with region where a tourist comes from, income level of the country where the tourist resides and their profession. By analyzing 29 academic articles published in the top three tourism journals (Journal of Travel Research, Annals of Tourism Research, Tourism Management) and the top sustainable tourism journal (Journal of Sustainable Tourism), Dolnicar et al. (2008) found that 50% of those studies indicated higher education as characteristics of environmental-friendly tourists, this number for high income is 31 percent, for older age is 13 percent (Dolnicar et al. 2008).

Tour guide’s suggestion for more sustainable tourism

The tour guides wished to have more strict sanctions for damaging environment, more garbage can and more environmental education program especially for tourists and local people.

There should be more garbage can at the destination and way of punishing any one who do harm for the environment (Male, age 28, bachelor).

If you do littering in Singapore, you will be fined strictly, even be imprisoned. But if you do it in Vietnam, there will be nothing happen, that’s why the tourists here can throw the garbage every where they want (Female, age 25, bachelor).

As I have told you about the garbage collection tour, we should have more of that, have more CCTV and strict sanction to prevent people from littering (Female, age 34, bachelor).

Disposal behaviors often take places in a social setting and are shaped by the actions and interactions of multiple individuals, not just the litterers. For example, people are less likely to litter in a cleaner environment and are more likely to litter where others do so (Zero Waste Scotland, 2012 in Nguyen & Nguyen, 2015). The review literature also reports extensively on public claims their littering behaviors is caused by lack of bins and the absence of litter bins is a factor which can make people feel that littering behavior is acceptable (Zero Waste Scotland, 2012 in Nguyen & Nguyen, 2015). The number of bins and their spacing interact with laziness and convenience to influence instances of littering or proper disposal. Moreover, strict sanctions also have positive effect on controlling littering. International evidences suggest that fines or other punishments can be significant enough threat to prevent people from littering (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2015).

Some tour guides suggested the travel agency to conventionalize their sustainable program or activities, have rewards for tour guide on their task accomplish regarding environmental protection and use environmental friendly gifts for their tourist customers.

It would be great if the company have rewards, especially financial one, for tour guides if they get good feedback from the customers regarding sustainable tourism perception and behavior (Male, age 29, master).

The travel agency should change the gift for customers, instead of T-shirt, travel pillow or raincoat, they should use thermos bottle to encourage the tourists reduce using disposable bottle and straw (Female, age 23, domestic).

As stated above, none of the tourism companies mentioned in this study has formal or written policies, regulations on sustainable tourism, at least to the tour guides’s side and the tour guides are only encouraged but freely to decide whether to act sustainably. Even though all the tour guides participated in this study are willing to be sustainable themselves but it would be more effective if they are formally supported or rewarded to do so.

Limitation

Firstly, the number of participants in the study (10) was small and carried out in the South of Vietnam only. A larger pool of participants may have produced different or additional themes.

Secondly, the study focused exclusively on the environmental aspect of sustainability. For a more expansive look inside sustainable tourism, social-cultural and economic aspects should be considered.

Thirdly, only some stakeholders have been mentioned, they are the ones who are familiar with or easy to observe by the tour guides. The others (authorities, social organizations, academic institutions etc.) were not referred to as they are quite macroscopic or alien to the tour guides’s eyes.

CONCLUSION

This paper aims at exploring the tour guides’s point of view on sustainable tourism. The result showed that all participants seem to have adequate perception as well as consistent behaviors toward sustainable tourism. The study result also revealed that sustainable tourism (environmental aspect) in the South of Vietnam has just been implemented straggly at a not very high level from different stakeholders. Not only solutions for more effective implementation of sustainable tourism should be taken but from the study’s findings, it is also argued that greater recognition needs to be given to the wide range of ways that the tour guides engage in the sustainable tourism development process.

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