

## **BUILDING MODELS AND DEVELOPMENT ROADMAP FOR SUSTAINABLE, RESPONSIBLE TOURISM ENTERPRISES IN THE MEKONG DELTA**

*Mrs. Phan Yen Ly*  
*Director of CanhCam Consulting Media and Event LLC*

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the concept of sustainable tourism is understood as: the conservation of environmental resources and biodiversity; respecting and preserving the culture of local communities; addressing the needs of tourists while providing economic benefits for businesses and local communities.

Sustainable and responsible tourism is a multi-dimensional concept that includes:

- Optimal use of environmental resources, including maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural resources and biodiversity;
- Respect for the social and cultural characteristics of the host community, by preserving their cultural heritage and traditional values, and contributing to mutual understanding and exchange between cultures;
- Ensuring that activities provide economic and social benefits for all stakeholders in a fair manner, including stable jobs and income opportunities, as well as social services for host communities, and contributing to the reduction of poverty.

Green tourism is a type of tourism that operates by minimizing its environmental impact, making a positive contribution to biodiversity conservation, using renewable energy, promoting natural and cultural heritage, and developing environmentally friendly products. This form of tourism aligns with global trends, as countries around the world strive to achieve the Net Zero target. They must significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuel sources, industry, agriculture, transportation, and even in the tourism and travel sectors. Green tourism in Vietnam is also in line with the government's direction, which is working hard to demonstrate the country's commitment to transitioning the economy to a green and sustainable model.

## **A. Global experiences in developing sustainable, responsible tourism towards green tourism**

Many countries have achieved significant success in developing green tourism.

### **1. *Costa Rica: An ecological paradise and sustainable, responsible living as a lifestyle.***

- Diversification of products: Costa Rica is not only famous for its nature reserves but also for developing adventure tourism, cultural tourism, and agricultural tourism.
- Community involvement: Local people are encouraged to participate in tourism activities, create handicraft products, offer tour guide services, and contribute to the preservation of the culture and environment.
- Visitor education: Environmental protection education programs are integrated into tours, raising awareness among tourists.

### **2. *Bhutan: The land of happiness and controlling tourist numbers.***

- Environmental protection priority: Bhutan aims to maintain 60% of its land area as forest. Tourism is developed selectively, prioritizing quality over quantity.
- Cultural tourism: Tourists are offered the opportunity to experience the unique culture, customs, and traditions of the Bhutanese people.
- Sustainable tourism: Tourism activities are designed to minimize environmental impact, such as using renewable energy and reducing waste.
- Tourism tax: A tourism fee of 250 USD per day per person is implemented.

### **3. *New Zealand: The land of natural wonders.***

- Adventure tourism: New Zealand is famous for adventure activities such as mountaineering, hiking, and kayaking, attracting tourists who love exploring nature.
- Biodiversity conservation: New Zealand has many national parks and reserves, where rare animal species are protected.

- Sustainable tourism: the New Zealand government has various policies to support the development of sustainable tourism, such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions and using clean water resources.

#### ***4. Fiji: A resort powered by solar energy.***

Six Senses Fiji is a resort located on Malolo Island. The resort's goal is to produce as little waste as possible and encourages both tourists and locals to follow the rules of reusing and recycling.

- 100% solar energy use.
- Rainwater is collected and filtered through a special system to reduce the use of single-use plastic bottles.
- Waste is processed using a "worm composting system," and various herbs and vegetables are grown.

#### ***5. South Africa – Community participation in local tourism management.***

Mdumbi Backpackers is a business that encourages local communities to be involved in managing and developing sustainable eco-tourism.

- With various on-site sustainable development solutions such as energy efficiency and waste management.
- Mdumbi has a unique ownership model: Local labor, the amaXhosa community association, and TransCape (a nonprofit organization affiliated with Mdumbi Backpackers) all hold shares in the business.

### **B. Experiences in developing sustainable, responsible tourism in Vietnam towards green tourism:**

Vietnam, with its diverse and rich tourism potential, is gradually transitioning to a sustainable green tourism model:

- Hoi An: The ancient town of Hoi An has been very successful in building its image as a green tourism destination, with activities focused on heritage preservation, reducing plastic use, and encouraging visitors to walk or cycle.
- Con Dao: Con Dao Island, with its sea turtle conservation projects and the development of marine eco-tourism, has attracted many nature-loving tourists.

- Nature reserves: Many reserves, such as Phong Nha-Ke Bang and Cuc Phuong, have developed eco-tourism tours, combining tourism activities with nature conservation.

- National parks have initiated the "Green Passport" program for tourists.
- Ho Chi Minh City: "Green on Every Journey" is a consistent message in all events organized by the city's Department of Tourism in recent years, both in Vietnam and during overseas tourism promotion programs, aimed at emphasizing the goal of developing green and sustainable tourism.

### **C. GSTC sustainable tourism standards and efforts to apply them in Vietnam**

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) is a nonprofit international organization that sets global standards for sustainable tourism. These standards are designed to ensure that the tourism industry makes a positive contribution to economic and social development while protecting the environment.

The GSTC standards include four main pillars:

1. *Effective sustainability planning:*
  - Establishing an effective sustainability management system.
  - Setting clear, measurable goals and specific action plans.
  - Ensuring the involvement of all stakeholders.
2. *Maximizing socio-economic benefits for the community:*
  - Creating jobs and increasing income for local people.
  - Protecting cultural heritage and encouraging community participation in tourism development.
  - Ensuring the fair distribution of benefits from tourism.
3. *Cultural heritage development:*
  - Preserving and respecting cultural and natural heritage.
  - Encouraging tourists to experience local culture responsibly.
  - Supporting heritage conservation projects.
4. *Minimizing harmful environmental impacts:*
  - Reducing carbon emissions and using energy efficiently.
  - Managing waste sustainably.

- Protecting biodiversity and ecosystems.

Vietnam, with its great tourism potential, is actively researching and applying the GSTC standards. This effort aims to achieve the goal of sustainable tourism development, environmental protection, and improving service quality.

– ***Benefits of applying GSTC standards:***

- *Image enhancement:* Attracting environmentally and socially conscious tourists.
- *Competitiveness:* Strengthening positioning in the international tourism market.
- *Sustainability:* Protecting natural and cultural resources.
- *Community:* Creating economic benefits for local communities.

– ***Current situation of application:***

- Some tourism businesses and destinations in Vietnam have started applying GSTC standards.
- The Vietnamese government has also implemented policies to support the development of sustainable tourism.
- However, the application process still faces many challenges, requiring efforts from businesses, communities, and the government.

Key factors to consider when applying GSTC standards in Vietnam:

- *Awareness:* Raising awareness about sustainable tourism among stakeholders
- *Support:* Providing technical and financial support for businesses.
- *Coordination:* Ensuring cooperation between management agencies, enterprises, and communities.
- *Training:* Training human resources in sustainable tourism practices.

## **D. Proposed model for the Mekong Delta**

1. Green tourism
2. Community-based tourism
3. Cultural tourism
4. Eco-tourism

## **E. Roadmap for sustainable tourism development of businesses**

*Stage 1: Assessment of the current situation:*

- Evaluate the current impacts of firms on the environment and society.
- Identify strengths and weaknesses.

*Stage 2: Development of strategies:*

- Select priority goals.
- Develop new policies and operational procedures.
- Train employees on environmental awareness and social responsibility.

*Stage 3: Implementation:*

- Implement the proposed action plans.
- Monitor and evaluate progress.

*Stage 4: Continuous improvement:*

- Adjust the plan based on evaluation results.
- Seek new opportunities to enhance the sustainability of businesses.

**Key factors to consider:**

- **Environment:** Minimize carbon emissions, save energy, manage waste, and protect biodiversity.
- **Society:** Create jobs for local people, preserve culture, and support community projects.
- **Economy:** Ensure business efficiency and generate sustainable profits.
- **Customers:** Provide products and services that meet the needs of environmentally conscious customers.

**Specific activities that can be implemented immediately:**

- **Waste reduction:** Use environmentally friendly products, recycle waste, encourage customers to bring reusable water bottles.
- **Energy conservation:** Use LED lights, turn off electrical devices when not in use, and install solar energy systems.
- **Biodiversity protection:** Plant trees, protect wildlife, and avoid littering.
- **Community support:** Purchase products from local households, sponsor education and healthcare projects.

**Challenges and solutions:**

- **Costs:** Investing in sustainable technologies and activities often requires high initial costs.

- *Solutions:* Seek funding sources, collaborate with NGOs, and implement cost-saving solutions.
- *Human resources:* Employees need training and increased awareness of the importance of sustainable development.
- *Solutions:* Organize training programs and build a company culture focused on sustainability.
- *Customers:* Not all customers are interested in sustainable tourism. *Solutions:* Enhance communication and educate customers about the benefits of sustainable tourism.

### **Benefits**

Building a sustainable tourism business is a long-term process that requires continuous effort. However, the benefits to the business are significant, including:

- Improved brand image: Attract environmentally conscious customers.
- Increased customer loyalty: Customers will feel satisfied and want to return.
- Reduced business risks: Enterprises will be less affected by environmental and social fluctuations.
- Contribution to the community: Businesses will become part of the community and contribute to the sustainable development of the local area.

## **F. Proposals for specific programs and activities promoting responsible sustainable tourism for the Mekong Delta**

- Continue to promote tours to key tourism development areas linked with the conservation and enhancement of the values of forests, seas, and biosphere reserves.
- Focus on designing agricultural and eco-tourism products.
- Integrate with the development of local One Commune One Product (OCOP) goods.
- Create a green culinary trend, encouraging restaurants to focus on green dishes with organic ingredients, and communicate information about health and environmental protection.
- Promote the trend of sustainable and comprehensive green tourism development for accommodation businesses. This includes encouraging energy



efficiency, using technology and equipment to reduce electricity consumption, as well as meeting green criteria such as designing rooms with windows to let in natural sunlight, reducing the use of air conditioners, decorating with plants to regenerate air, setting up rooftop gardens or systems for growing clean vegetables, properly managing and processing waste, recycling, and using organic products.

- Focus on developing cultural and historical tourism products that help preserve and promote cultural heritage and traditional values. Additionally, incorporate activities and events that foster cultural exchanges, allowing tourists to experience local culture in a genuine and sustainable way, along with educational programs that help local people better understand their heritage and become more aware of heritage protection.

- Encourage businesses to invest in green transportation means (electric bikes, bicycles, etc).

- Support travel agencies in launching "green tourism" tours, using green transport (electric vehicles, bicycles, boats, etc.) and engaging in green activities that protect nature (planting trees, cleaning up trash, eliminating plastic waste, etc.), participating in handicraft production, learning about traditional techniques, or supporting community-friendly activities. These tours should visit natural heritage sites or destinations related to agriculture, culture, history, and handicrafts. Accommodation should also meet green standards (in eco-friendly hotels), offer green cuisine (using more vegetables and clean food), and be staffed by green tourism professionals who have the knowledge to spread the message of environmental protection, green resources, and cultural heritage preservation.

- Organize festivals and events focused on culture, cuisine, handicrafts, and the environment to help preserve both tangible and intangible cultural values and natural resources.

- Develop tour products aimed at achieving Net Zero, accompanied by awareness campaigns to raise understanding about sustainable tourism, share information on its benefits, and encourage participation in efforts to minimize the environmental impact of tourism.



In addition to focusing on developing green tourism products, the tourism industry and businesses in the Mekong Delta should also continue to implement promotional activities for green tourism, such as organizing fundraising running events for nature conservation; holding online competitions where users create content to raise awareness among tourists about water conservation, minimizing the consumption of natural resources, and reducing single-use plastic waste; organizing a green tourism development idea competition, promoting the development and conservation of natural biodiversity; and creating a green tourism map for the Mekong Delta region, which includes a list of all green tourism destinations encouraging visitors to explore, as well as energy-efficient transportation options.