
**SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN CAN THO CITY:
A QUALITATIVE APPROACH**

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Abstract: Aiming to propose solutions for sustainable tourism development in Can Tho City, this study has adopted a qualitative approach to clarify key bottlenecks in the city's tourism sector that hinder sustainability. Through focus group discussions and expert consultations, the study has identified bottlenecks related to economic benefits, environmental and tourism resources, and socio-cultural aspects. Based on these findings, the study has proposed several solutions to promote sustainable tourism in Can Tho City, including ensuring fair economic benefit distribution, protecting the environment and tourism resources, and preserving community culture.

Keywords: tourism development, sustainability, qualitative approach, bottlenecks.

1. INTRODUCTION

Can Tho is a centrally governed city of Vietnam, the busiest and most developed city in the Mekong Delta region, serving as the economic, cultural, social, medical, educational, and commercial center of the entire area (Hai et al., 2023). Can Tho City has abundant potential for tourism development, with a dense network of rivers and canals, year-round lush orchards, numerous festivals, traditional craft villages, and valuable cultural and historical relics (Son et al., 2023). Its tourism resources are closely linked to the riverine landscape (Nguyen & Mai, 2021). Endowed with diverse and abundant tourism resources, the city has developed a variety of tourism types that are highly favored by both domestic and international visitors, including river tourism, MICE tourism, ecotourism, cultural and historical tourism, and community-based tourism. Popular destinations include Cai Rang Floating Market, Con Son Community Tourism Area, My Khanh Tourist Village, and Ong De Tourist Village. In 2024, Can Tho welcomed 6.3 million visitors (an increase of 6% compared to the same period in 2023), with over 3.1 million overnight visitors (up 5% compared to the same period in 2023), and a total tourism revenue of VND 6,226 billion (up 15% compared to the same period in 2023).

Over the past decade, although Can Tho's tourism industry has achieved relatively stable growth and development, several key criteria must be carefully considered and evaluated to ensure sustainability. Several bottlenecks are becoming apparent from the perspective of sustainable tourism development: the tourism service supply chain lacking strong connections and a balance of economic benefits among participants; incomplete tourism infrastructure; insufficient breakthrough initiatives for tourism development; negative impacts of tourism growth on resources and the natural environment; and limitations in preserving and promoting cultural values. These bottlenecks have directly affected the sustainable development of Can Tho's tourism sector. Therefore, it is essential to research and assess the current situation to identify appropriate solutions for orienting sustainable tourism development in Can Tho City in the future.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable tourism development should achieve harmony among economic, social, and environmental aspects (Buckley, 2012). To date, there are various perspectives on sustainable tourism development. According to Butler et al. (1993), sustainable tourism development is a process that develops and is maintained in a certain space and time, without reducing the adaptive capacity of the environment while preventing negative impacts on long-term development. Sustainable tourism leads to a mode of managing all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs are met while maintaining cultural integrity and the essential ecological processes (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005). Sustainable tourism development is the process of developing tourism products to meet the current needs of tourists, the tourism industry, and local communities without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Machadol, 2003). Thus, sustainable tourism development must ensure three aspects: economic benefits, environmental protection, and preservation of community culture (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005).

The topic of sustainable tourism development has attracted the attention of many domestic and international researchers. Based on the literature review, most research results confirm that the sustainable development of a tourist destination relates to three aspects: economic benefits, environmental protection, and socio-cultural preservation. The study by Jahan and Rahman (2016) indicated that essential factors for sustainable tourism development include support service conditions, service quality, impacts of tourism, participation of residents and stakeholders, responsibility levels, natural resources and environment, and tourists' knowledge. Similarly, Rodríguez Díaz and Espino Rodríguez (2016) demonstrated that resources and supply, recreation and management, culture, security, hotel incentives, and low costs are important factors influencing sustainable tourism development at destinations. In Vietnam, research by Ngan & Hai (2022) confirmed six factors affecting sustainable tourism development in An Giang Province: economy, society, environment, tourism resources, tourism products/ services, and infrastructure. The study by Huong & Ngan (2023) identified five factors affecting sustainable tourism development in Nghe An, ranked as follows: infrastructure, tourism service quality, community participation, tourism human resources, and tourism resources.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study has applied a qualitative approach using the following analytical methods: content analysis, participatory rural appraisal (PRA), and key informant panels (KIP). Step 1: The content analysis method was used to synthesize theoretical foundations and related empirical research results to identify appropriate approaches. Step 2: The PRA method was used to collect information related to the current state of tourism development and bottlenecks hindering sustainable tourism development in Can Tho City. PRA sessions involved participants in the city's tourism service supply chain, including tourism managers, travel agency executives, destination managers, local community members engaged in tourism development, and supplementary tourism service providers. Step 3: The study continued with KIP (interviews with six experts). The consulted experts included tourism researchers and tourism service managers. The expert consultation results serve as an important scientific basis for guiding solutions for sustainable tourism development in Can Tho City.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Current situation of tourism development in Can Tho City

From 2020 to 2021, the COVID-19 outbreak caused a major shock to Can Tho's tourism sector. International tourist arrivals, an important revenue source, dropped to nearly zero. Traditional tourism activities such as the floating market and orchard tours were disrupted. However, instead of passively accepting the downturn, Can Tho's tourism sector made timely adjustments. The city focused on stimulating domestic tourism, encouraging local travelers to explore the charm of the "riverine orchards." Ecotourism and community-based tourism products received significant investment. Homestay and farmstay models became popular, attracting visitors from Ho Chi Minh City and nearby provinces seeking safe, nature-friendly retreats. This period laid the groundwork for more sustainable and in-depth tourism development.

From 2022 to 2023, after the pandemic was controlled, Can Tho's tourism rebounded strongly. Tourist arrivals, especially domestic ones, grew impressively. The city seized the opportunity to diversify tourism products. River tourism and MICE tourism became the city's spearhead products. Cultural events and

festivals such as the Southern Folk Cake Festival and the Lantern Festival were organized on a large scale, attracting large crowds. Can Tho also focused on upgrading infrastructure, with the emergence of many 4-star to 5-star hotels and luxury resorts catering to high-end tourism market segments.

From 2024 to 2025, Can Tho aims for sustainable tourism development and a gradual return to the international market. Tourism products are built on the strengths of local culture and the unique ecological values of the riverine region. The city prioritizes training high-quality human resources and improving tourism service quality. In addition, tourism promotion and marketing have been intensified through digital platforms and international tourism fairs. Can Tho is also actively linking with neighboring provinces and cities to form inter-regional tourism service supply chains, creating richer experiences for tourists.

Table 1: Can Tho tourism statistics, 2020 - 2024

Year	Visitors (million)	Revenue (VND billion)	Notes
2020	5.6	3,169	Severely affected by COVID-19; sharp drop in visitors and revenue compared to 2019.
2021	2.1	1,375	Peak of the pandemic; tourism activities almost frozen.
2022	5.1	4,117	Post-pandemic recovery; impressive growth in visitors and revenue.
2023	6.0	5,420	Continued growth, meeting and exceeding many targets.
2024	6.3	6,226	Stable growth, indicating sustainable recovery and development.

Despite achievements, Can Tho's tourism still faces challenges: an incomplete service supply chain, exploitation not closely tied to resource conservation, and environmental pollution at destinations. Nevertheless, with the right steps, Can Tho's tourism is expected to continue growing strongly and sustainably in the coming years.

4.2 Sustainable tourism development aspects in Can Tho City

In recent decades, Can Tho tourism industry has grown and developed positively. However, from the perspective of sustainable development, there remain certain limitations and challenges. Based on the results of PRA, the city's sustainable tourism development aspects can be evaluated as follows:

Economic benefits

The fair sharing of benefits among participants in the tourism service supply chain remains a difficult challenge. Tourism has made significant contributions to the city's economy by improving the efficiency of travel companies and tourist sites, creating jobs, diversifying livelihoods, and increasing income for local communities. However, weak linkages among supply chain actors have led to unfair benefit distribution. The economic returns to local communities providing tourism services have not been adequately ensured and do not match their level of investment.

Tourism investment has been uneven, leading to disparities in the effectiveness of returns for stakeholders. The pace of investment has been positive, reflected in improved tourism infrastructure and spillover effects to other economic sectors. However, funding is inconsistent across regions and sectors, with especially limited investment in river tourism infrastructure. This has hindered the growth of the city's distinctive tourism products.

There are also risks regarding tourists' perceived value, due to issues with quality control and pricing. The city has implemented incentive programs and policies to attract investment from multiple economic sectors and maximize community resources. However, challenges remain in monitoring and managing small-scale tourism businesses (e.g., substandard guesthouses, unregulated homestays, unsafe tourist transport, and

food service points lacking hygiene standards). Additionally, uncontrolled price hikes during peak seasons and discriminatory pricing between international and domestic tourists persist as ongoing problems.

Environmental and tourism resources

Tourism exploitation has not been fully integrated with the conservation of the city's tourism resources. Sustainable tourism inherently requires avoiding negative impacts on natural resources, in general, and on protected areas, in particular. However, rapid growth in the tourism sector has attracted large numbers of domestic and foreign visitors. During peak seasons, overcrowding at certain sites has led to environmental pollution and ecosystem damage. Overuse of tourism sites has reduced service quality and undermined both investment effectiveness and the sustainability of resources.

Waste generated by tourism activities poses a significant challenge to sustainable development, particularly in river-based tourism. Pollution in waterways at floating markets is on the rise, caused by multiple actors - including traders, tourism staff/guides, and a segment of tourists who lack environmental awareness. Equally important is the insufficient investment in landscape and infrastructure protection.

Environmental impact assessments for tourism projects and sites are infrequent and ineffective. The tourism industry has not fully assessed the degradation of tourist sites or the extent of ecological damage. At popular destinations, high activity levels - especially during peak seasons - have caused unavoidable environmental harm, including water and air pollution, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion.

Cultural-social aspects

One of the greatest challenges to sustainable tourism is "cultural pollution." Sustainable tourism should not harm the social or cultural fabric of communities; rather, it should respect and uphold local traditions. In reality, some degree of negative cultural impact is inevitable, especially from tourists whose behavior is excessive or disrespectful.

The rapid growth of tourism has led to the commercialization of artistic activities. Some local artists and artisans, instead of focusing on improving their craft, have prioritized "performing" for commercial purposes, reducing the artistic integrity of traditional professions.

Spiritual culture is a distinctive aspect of life in the Mekong Delta and Can Tho, playing a vital role in community development. However, the proliferation of spiritual tourism sites without deep investment in experiential value - combined with surges of visitors during festivals at temples, pagodas, and heritage sites without proper guidance or crowd management - has diminished the sense of sacredness.

4.3 Solutions for sustainable tourism development in Can Tho City

Based on the results of the assessment of the city's sustainable tourism development aspects, combined with expert consultation, the study proposes solutions for sustainable tourism development in Can Tho city as follows:

Sharing economic benefits fairly

Firstly, improve the tourism service supply chain, improving the quality of linkages between actors participating in the supply chain, promoting harmonious cooperation and benefit sharing among members in the chain. The tourism industry should connect actors participating in the tourism service supply chain. Cooperation between parties participating in the supply chain needs to ensure harmonious benefits and reasonable risk sharing. In particular, to develop sustainable tourism, it is necessary to focus on ensuring the economic benefits of the community participating in tourism services.

Secondly, develop programs and policies to attract investment towards the distribution of economic value from investment efficiency with spillover effects. Programs to encourage investment in tourism development need to be synchronous. The city's tourism industry needs to diversify investment forms through encouraging socialization and public-private partnership (PPP). Pay special attention to encouraging investment in potential areas for tourism development, investing in necessary fields to complete the tourism service supply chain, especially river tourism.

Thirdly, improve the quality of tourism services, along with pricing services, following the perceived value of tourists for each type of service and each tourism product. The city's tourism industry needs to improve the effectiveness of management and control of service quality and prices of tourism service providers. Public disclosure of service quality, commitment to correct service prices must be strictly implemented to ensure reliability in service quality.

Protecting the environment and tourism resources

Firstly, always ensure a harmonious relationship between resource exploitation and conservation. The primary concern is the assessment of the impact of projects and tourist areas on local tourism resources. This is an essential task, directly affecting the sustainable development of tourism. The tourism industry needs to coordinate with relevant units to provide accurate results on the immediate and long-term impacts of projects and tourist areas. It is necessary to ensure that projects have the lowest impact and have solutions to restore and conserve tourism resources and the ecological environment.

Secondly, complete tourism infrastructure related to the system of landscape and tourism environment protection. For community tourism destinations, it is necessary to socialize to protect the tourism environment. For tourism service providers, it is necessary to require a waste control system to ensure minimal impact on the surrounding environment. The top priority is to complete the waste control and treatment system at the city's typical tourist destinations, including Ninh Kieu wharf (night market area) and Cai Rang floating market.

Thirdly, raise awareness of environmental protection and tourism resources for all components participating in providing and using tourism services. The city's tourism industry needs to coordinate with media units and associations to diversify forms of environmental protection propaganda for the tourism community and tourists. Action programs to protect the environment and tourism resources need to be implemented regularly in a variety of forms.

Preserving community culture

Firstly, always preserve the local cultural identity, avoid cultural imports that are not suitable with the traditional customs of the locality. The tourism industry should educate tourists about culturally sensitive behaviors in public places. Tourism service providers need to inform tourists, especially foreign tourists, about the quintessence of national culture, customs, and cultural codes of conduct of the locality. This both creates excitement for tourists who want to learn about local customs and practices, and limits excessive innovation by tourists when coming to the land of Tay Do.

Secondly, always promote the preservation of traditional cultural and artistic identity. The role of artists and artisans is important in conveying the cultural and artistic messages of traditional professions to tourists. Each artist and artisan needs to focus on improving their skills, bringing traditional and artistic culture into tourism services in a professional manner, and enhancing the value of local art. This helps achieve two main goals: attracting and retaining tourists, and promoting local traditional cultural arts.

Thirdly, enhance spiritual and cultural values in the community, contributing to preserving the solemnity of spiritual tourist destinations. The management and enhancement of cultural values at spiritual destinations need to be well implemented, on the one hand, improving the quality of existing famous spiritual tourist destinations, on the other hand, it is necessary to strictly control the development of spontaneous spiritual tourist destinations with superstitious phenomena. During festivals, there needs to be coordination and support from relevant functional units to ensure solemnity, sacredness, and well serve the needs of tourists to experience spiritual culture.

5. CONCLUSION

Sustainable tourism development is an inevitable direction for Can Tho's tourism industry. While the city still has a long way to reach all sustainability standards, this is the most appropriate development path. To achieve this goal, the city needs to closely coordinate with relevant units, especially the participation of agents in the tourism supply chain. To affirm the spearhead economic sector and move towards sustainable tourism development standards, the city's tourism industry needs stronger, more determined, and more synchronous investment.

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