



Local community participation in ecotourism development: a qualitative analysis in the Binh-Tri-Thien region, Vietnam

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Abstract. Ecotourism is a sustainable tourism form that emphasizes the harmonious relationship between human and nature, with local communities playing a key role in providing services and protecting natural resources. Using semi-structured interviews conducted at various ecotourism sites in the Binh-Tri-Thien region (Central Vietnam), this study has illuminated the role of local communities in fostering ecotourism development. Communities actively contribute by offering distinctive services and products while preserving cultural values, safeguarding the environment, and fostering sustainable relationships with visitors. The findings reveal that local communities play key roles as tour guides, providers of accommodation services, and producers of handicrafts, generating income and promoting cultural exchange. However, barriers such as skill deficiencies and gender inequalities continue to limit the participation of certain groups, particularly women. While cultural and environmental preservation is given considerable attention, the risk of traditional cultural erosion remains significant, especially among ethnic minority communities. Based on these insights, the study recommends expanding the scope of research and integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to enhance the reliability of findings.

Keywords: ecotourism, community participation, qualitative analysis, geo-environmental, Vietnam.

Introduction

Ecotourism is a form of sustainable tourism that emphasizes the harmonious relationship between humans and nature, as well as the preservation of culture (Weaver, 2001; Fennell, 2020; Singh et al., 2021). It highlights the critical role of local communities in providing services, managing activities, and protecting natural resources (Butowski, 2021; Khaledi Koure et al., 2023; Le & Nguyen, 2023). The relationship between ecotourism and the environment is characterized by a two-way interaction. On one hand, the natural

environment serves as the foundation for ecotourism development (Xiao, 2024). Pristine ecosystems, scenic landscapes, and biodiversity are key attractions that determine the appeal of a destination (Quirini-Popławski, 2011). On the other hand, ecotourism contributes to environmental protection and noninvasive socio-economic development (Hunt et al., 2015; Xu et al., 2022; Dayour et al., 2024). Low-impact activities such as hiking, kayaking, and cycling are prioritized over exploitative or destructive practices. Economic benefits from ecotourism can be reinvested into nature conservation programs, waste management improvements, and climate change mitigation projects (Tilavova et al., 2024). This relationship not only safeguards natural resources but also enables local communities to reap long-term benefits. Revenues generated from ecotourism may be utilized for resource management, restoration, and ecosystem research (Zoysa, 2022). Moreover, ecotourism raises community awareness about the importance of natural resource conservation (Stone & Stone, 2022; Samal & Dash, 2023). Educational programs can be integrated with tourism activities allow visitors to better understand the fragility of ecosystems and the necessity of protecting them. Simultaneously, this tourism model promotes sustainable consumption by utilizing renewable resources such as solar energy and rainwater (Metwally, 2019; Sahoo et al., 2024). Despite its evident benefits, ecotourism faces risks of environmental degradation if not managed properly (Das & Chatterjee, 2015; Baloch et al., 2023). Effective management is crucial to balance tourism demand with environmental conservation while ensuring the sustainable use of natural resources. The Binh-Tri-Thien (BTT) region located in central Vietnam, exemplifies an area with significant potential for ecotourism development (Nguyen et al., 2022). However, the BTT region encounters challenges that threaten its sustainability. Rapid increases in visitor numbers can lead to overcapacity in protected areas, diminishing the pristine quality of landscapes and exerting pressure on ecosystems.

According to Garrod (2003) and Kunjuraman et al. (2022), the success of ecotourism relies on the active participation of local people in balancing the conservation of the environment with the sustainable use of natural resources, ensuring both the well-being of the community and the health of the ecosystem. As residents living directly within natural resource areas, they not only play a critical role in environmental protection but also significantly contribute to providing tourism services. Activities such as organizing tours, guiding visitors, and offering local products have brought substantial economic, social, and cultural benefits to the region (Kunjuraman et al., 2022; Hafezi et al., 2023; Khaledi Koure et al., 2023). Moreover, community participation strengthens sustainability in tourism management. When local communities fully understand and align with development goals, they become active guardians of natural and cultural values, fostering a strong bond between human and the environment (Hatma Indra Jaya et al., 2024). This relationship is mutually interactive; the environment provides essential resources and services that support the livelihoods of local communities, while active community participation ensures the sustainability of these resources (Neefjes, 2000). By adopting conservation practices and engaging in sustainable tourism activities, local communities not only protect ecosystems but also enhance their cultural heritage and social cohesion (Roseland, 2000; Fennell & Weaver, 2005). For instance, in the context of ecotourism, communities often participate in reforestation projects, wildlife monitoring, and cultural preservation initiatives, activities that directly contribute to environmental resilience (Butowski, 2019; Suryawan et al., 2024). In return, these efforts improve community livelihoods through increased tourism

revenue, job opportunities, and enhanced infrastructure. Such a dynamic fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility among community members, ensuring that they view the environment not merely as a resource to exploit but as a legacy to be preserved for future generations (Flint, 2013). Furthermore, empowering local communities through education, capacity building, and equitable benefit-sharing is essential to cultivating a profound and enduring connection between people and the environment, thereby laying the foundation for sustainable development (Wondirad, 2017; Tiwari et al., 2024).

Previous studies on ecotourism have achieved significant results, particularly in identifying sustainable development principles, the role of local communities, and the impact of ecotourism on the natural environment (Das & Chatterjee, 2015; Sahoo et al., 2024) for many regions of the world including: Bali (Suryawan et al., 2024), Cameroon (Harilal et al., 2021), Indonesia (Lasso & Dahles, 2023), Iran (Khaledi Koure et al., 2023), and Thailand (Palmer & Chuamuangphan, 2021). Many studies have emphasized that community participation is a critical factor in ensuring sustainability and maintaining a balanced relationship between humans and the environment, with models like Community-Based Ecotourism being successfully implemented in various regions (Stone & Stone, 2022; Hafezi et al., 2023; Kunjuraman, 2024). In Southeast Asia, countries have implemented community-based ecotourism as a solution to promote sustainable tourism development. According to the research by Pornprasit & Rurkkhum (2019), increasing economic benefits for local stakeholders plays a critical role in encouraging natural resource conservation and enhancing community participation in Thailand. Meanwhile, Arifianto et al. (2023) indicate that the development of local communities has become a significant trend in ecotourism activities in Indonesia, contributing to the sustainability and self-reliance of these regions. Similarly, research conducted in Malaysia has highlighted the positive outcomes of community participation in responsible tourism activities (Khaledi Koure et al., 2023). According to Phelan et al. (2020), the purpose of this model is to protect natural resources, promote economic development, and reduce poverty within communities. By encouraging individuals to preserve rather than exploit local resources, community-based ecotourism provides alternative income for local residents and contributes to sustainable development by enabling communities to manage their resources through sustainable practices (Eshun & Tichawwa, 2020; Esparza-Huamanchumo et al., 2023). Researchers have also underscored the role of communities in conserving natural resources through monitoring and sustainable management of tourist destinations (Garrod, 2003; Stone & Stone, 2022; Hafezi et al., 2023). However, previous studies on local community participation in ecotourism reveal significant gaps, particularly in addressing geo-environmental aspects and the relationship between humans and nature. Some research lacks an integrated approach that combines geographical, ecological, and socio-cultural factors, leading to an incomplete evaluation of overall impacts (Yee et al., 2021). The long-term effects of ecotourism on the environment, culture, and community adaptability to environmental challenges are often overlooked (Suryawan et al., 2024). Additionally, the educational role of ecotourism in raising environmental awareness among tourists and local communities has yet to be effectively leveraged (Sander, 2012). These gaps necessitate further research to propose specific and feasible solutions for promoting sustainable community-based ecotourism.

This study aims to bridge the research gap in community-based ecotourism by conducting a qualitative study focused on assessing the potential for ecotourism develop-

ment and the level of local community participation in the BTT region. This is an area characterized by a deep interdependence between the local community and the natural environment, where ecotourism serves not only as an economic driver but also as a crucial contributor to conservation and sustainable development. The primary objective of this study is to analyse the local community's perceptions of ecotourism development potential in BTT and to examine how they participate in ecotourism activities. These activities influence both socio-economic aspects and play a direct role in preserving natural resources and cultural heritage. To achieve this objective, the study will focus on two main areas: (1) evaluating the potential for ecotourism development in BTT region and (2) analysing the extent of local community involvement in ecotourism activities. First, the study will assess the potential for ecotourism development in BTT region from the perspective of local residents, including their perceptions of natural and cultural tourism resources, opportunities and challenges in ecotourism development, and the necessary conditions for ensuring the sustainable growth of this sector. Second, the study will analyse the level of local community participation in ecotourism activities through six aspects: 1) Engagement in providing ecotourism services; 2) Participation in planning processes, monitoring environmental impacts, and ensuring compliance with sustainable tourism regulations; 3) Involvement in training programs for tour guiding and capacity-building initiatives; 4) Contribution to the preservation of natural and cultural heritage; 5) Engagement in tourism promotion efforts, including marketing and advertising ecotourism products; and 6) Participation in building a friendly and welcoming tourism image. By clarifying these aspects, this study will provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the local community and ecotourism in the BTT region.

Study area

The Binh-Tri-Thien region spans a vast area of 17,647.1 km². The geo-environmental aspects of the BTT region not only determine the economic activities of the community but also highlight the need for careful planning in ecotourism development. Due to the limited research time and the vastness of the BTT region, the study selected representative locations, focusing specifically on two main types: national parks and areas developed for community-based ecotourism.

The Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, stands out as a geological treasure with its vast cave system and dramatic karst landscape (Ly & Xiao, 2016; Selcuk et al., 2023). This unique geographical environment not only attracts ecotourism but also provides essential water resources and fertile land for nearby agricultural activities. Similarly, the Bach Ma National Park, with its highland ecosystems, supports numerous wildlife species and serves as a critical water source for surrounding communities, reinforcing the region's ecological linkages (Hong & Saizen, 2019). However, despite its rich biodiversity, these sites need sustainable management to balance conservation with the economic needs of local communities, as many rely on forest products for their livelihoods. The selected community-based ecotourism destinations, the A Nor Waterfall and the Ngu My Thanh Village, further highlight the interaction between the environment and local livelihoods. The A Nor Waterfall, with its pristine waterfall system, attracts tourists and supports traditional agricultural activities of ethnic minorities (Le, 2024; Phan

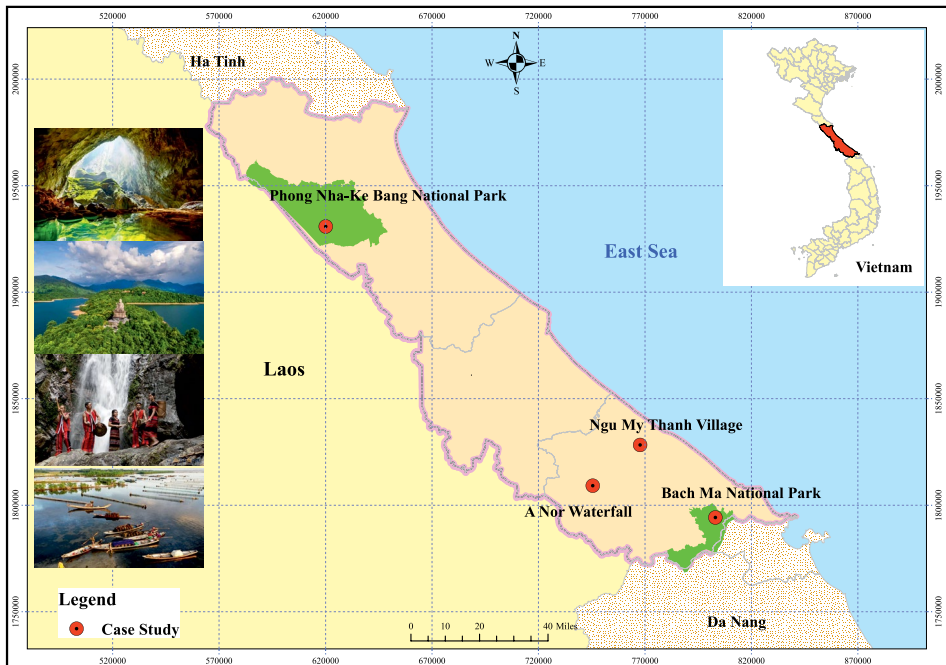


Figure 1. Location of Case Studies

et al., 2024). The Ngu My Thanh Village, with its rich cultural and coastal heritage, benefits from sustainable tourism initiatives that integrate traditional fishing practices and local cuisine into the visitor experience. However, these tourism sites are also vulnerable to natural disasters, including landslides and floods, which can disrupt local livelihoods and infrastructure, particularly during the monsoon season. This designation not only highlights the region's unique natural value but also presents opportunities to expand responsible and environmentally friendly tourism practices.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach to collect and analyse data, focusing on exploring the participation of local communities in the development of ecotourism in the BTT region. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection tool. This method combines the flexibility of unstructured interviews with the systematic approach of structured interviews, allowing for a deeper exploration of important and underlying information (Magaldi & Berler, 2020; Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

The research process was developed through a series of clearly determined steps to ensure comprehensive and reliable data collection (Figure 2). First, the selection of interview participants was based on specific criteria, including: (1) their level of knowledge and experience in ecotourism activities; (2) their role within the ecotourism development system in the BTT region; and (3) the extent of their influence or connection to the lo-

cal community. The main groups included: (1) local managers, such as national park and cooperative managers; (2) tourism service providers; and (3) local residents. This selection aimed to ensure representation and reflect the diversity of community participation in ecotourism activities. Next, the interview topics and questions were systematically designed, focusing on key areas while remaining flexible to encourage participants to share their perspectives and experiences naturally. The main topics included: 1) Awareness of natural values and ecotourism potential; 2) The role of local communities in resource conservation and the development of tourism services; 3) Economic, social, and environmental benefits of ecotourism; and 4) The relationship between the community and the natural environment in the region. Based on these topics, open-ended questions were developed to further explore the participants’ experiences, perspectives, and thoughts.

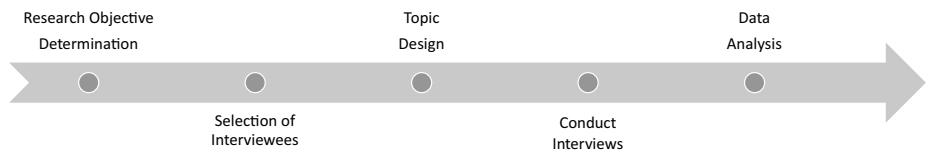


Figure 2. The in-depth interview process at the Binh-Tri-Thien region

Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, depending on the willingness and detail of the information provided by the participant. All interviews were recorded with the participants’ consent to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data. The number of interviews was determined based on the principle of data saturation, which is a key criterion in qualitative research. According to this principle, data collection ends when additional interviews no longer provide new or significant information relevant to the study (Alshenqeeti, 2014; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The principle aligns with methodological guidelines, which suggest that 15 to 30 interviews are typically sufficient for in-depth qualitative studies (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). As a result, 31 semi-structured interviews were conducted from July to September 2023 and from July to September 2024. Finally, the collected data was analysed in detail to identify patterns, relationships, and key information. The analysis results not only provide insights into the participation of local communities but also contribute to proposing solutions for sustainable ecotourism development in the BTT region.

Results and Discussion

Profile of Respondents

The demographic characteristics of the local community representatives, as presented in Table 1, with the majority being male (71%) and females accounting for only 29%. Regarding age distribution, the largest group falls within the 29-48 age range, followed by the 49-65 age range, while smaller proportions are represented in the 18-28 and over 65 age groups. In terms of educational attainment, the community demonstrates a high level of education, with more than half holding university degrees and a significant portion achieving postgraduate qualifications. The remainder primarily completed secondary

Table 1. Sociodemographic aspects of local communities' interviewees

Demographics	Description	Quantity (people)	Percent
Gender	Male	22	71.0
	Female	9	29.0
Age	18-28 years old	5	16.1
	29-48 years old	13	41.9
	49-65 years old	10	32.3
	>65 years old	3	9.7
Level of education	Primary	2	6.5
	Secondary	9	29.0
	University	17	54.8
	Postgraduate/master/PhD	3	9.7
Professional activities	National park managers	5	16.1
	Cooperative managers	4	12.9
	Tourism business owners	7	22.6
	Households	15	48.4

education, and only a very small proportion has primary-level education. The interlocutor also reflects diversity in occupational roles. Nearly half are engaged in family-based activities, while others work in tourism enterprises, national park management, or cooperative organizations. Finally, most interviewees were born and raised in their hometowns, indicating a deep connection to the locality in both physical and cultural terms.

Potential for Ecotourism Development in the Binh-Tri-Thien Region in the Eyes of Respondents

All interviewees agreed that the ecotourism destinations in the BTT region possess unique geo-environmental values, forming a foundation for sustainable ecotourism development. They commonly emphasized that many ecotourism sites in the region are characterized by their distinct ecosystems and natural heritage.

"The Phong Nha-Ke Bang cave is like a natural geological museum, holding the mysteries of millions of years of formation. I have lived and worked here for many years, but I have never grown tired of exploring it" (I3, F35y, Member of the Phong Nha-Ke Bang national park managers).

"The Bach Ma park has a high level of biodiversity with unique primeval forests. We are eager to share this beauty with the world" (I5, F41y, Member of the Bach Ma national park managers).

Furthermore, the interviewees highlighted that the BTT region is home to many ethnic minorities, each with its unique traditional culture. This represents a vital cultural resource for developing ecotourism that integrates community experiences and indigenous

¹ I: Interviewer; F: Female; M: Male; y: years old.

cultural preservation. Festivals, customs, and traditional crafts can become appealing tourism products, attracting visitors who are passionate about cultural exploration.

“The beauty of the A Nor site is undeniable. Fortunately, it was recognized as an ecotourism destination based on community involvement in 2022. This is an opportunity for us to implement activities that have been planned for a long time” (I10, M43y, *Member of the A Nor cooperative managers*).

“The Ngu My Thanh village is rich in maritime culture, with traditional fishing activities and unique cuisine” (I13, M34y, *Member of the Ngu My Thanh cooperative managers*).

Despite its significant potential, the relationship between humans and the environment in the context of ecotourism development in the BTT region faces numerous challenges in management and sustainable conservation (Truong, 2022). Interviewees in the Phong Nha-Ke Bang park highlighted that residents in buffer zones continue to rely on natural resource exploitation for their livelihoods, placing considerable pressure on the ecosystem. Illegal logging and wildlife poaching persist, threatening ecological balance and leading to the decline of rare and endangered flora and fauna species.

“Although we know it’s not ideal, many families still have to go into the forest to gather firewood for cooking, as there are no alternative energy sources. Particularly, for the sake of making money, many continue to hunt wildlife. Honestly, we find it difficult to address such situations because they are economically very poor” (I3, F35y, *Member of the Phong Nha-Ke Bang national park managers*).

According to interviewees at the Bach Ma National Park, one of the major weaknesses in ecotourism development is the lack of well-developed infrastructure. Notably, overcrowding during peak seasons exacerbates environmental pollution, diminishing the area’s appeal. These opinions are consistent with those presented by Le et al. (2022) who state that poor transportation networks, the absence of quality public transit systems, and insufficient utility services negatively impact visitors’ experiences.

[...] Our transportation system is very old, originally built during the French colonial period. Last year, due to heavy rain, the road leading to the top of the Bach Ma Mountain was severely landslided. We had to close for six months” (I6, M51y, *Member of the Bach Ma national park managers*).

Interviewees from the Ngu My Thanh Village highlighted that natural disasters, particularly floods and storms, pose the greatest challenge to the area’s ecotourism potential. During each rainy season, the village frequently faces severe flooding, which damages tourism infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and public facilities. This not only increases maintenance and repair costs but also diminishes the visitor experience, especially for international tourists from regions less affected by natural disasters. Additionally, some households in the Ngu My Thanh Village have invested in homestays to accommodate tourists but struggle to maintain stable operations due to frequent disasters. For example, following the floods in late 2023, many homestays were forced to cease operations for nearly a month, suffering both property damage and a significant loss of income. Furthermore, severe storms exacerbate soil erosion and the loss of protective forests, negatively impacting the ecosystem and natural landscape. This degradation diminishes the village’s pristine beauty, which is a key attraction for ecotourism.

"Every time the rainy and stormy season comes, the locals live in constant fear. Roads are flooded, houses are damaged, and life is disrupted. Last year, after the storm, most of the homestays were flooded, and all their belongings were lost" (I12, F49y, Member of the Ngu My Thanh cooperative managers).

"Natural disasters not only cause material damage but also affect the mental well-being of the locals. After every storm and flood, people have to start over. This reduces their enthusiasm for developing tourism" (I13, M34y, Member of the Ngu My Thanh cooperative managers).

Finally, all interviewees mentioned that the issue of tourist overcrowding during peak seasons at ecotourism destinations such as the Ngu My Thanh Village, Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park, and Bạch Mã National Park presents a significant challenge to the sustainable development of tourism in the BTT region. The increase in the number of visitors places pressure on infrastructure, especially transportation and visitor areas, leading to overcrowding that is inconvenient for both tourists and the local community. Another serious issue is environmental pollution, as the amount of waste significantly increases due to a lack of environmental awareness among some tourists. This not only impacts environmental quality but also threatens the valuable ecosystems of these areas. Managing and monitoring tourism activities also becomes challenging when the number of tourists is too high, increasing the costs and resources required to maintain environmental protection regulations and ensure security.

"During peak season, the number of tourists visiting this areas increases significantly, which causes many problems for us. The roads become crowded, and the visitor areas become overloaded. More tourists mean more waste, which leads to environmental pollution if some tourists lack awareness of environmental protection" (I22, M52y, Member of the Phong Nha-Ke Bang households).

Local Community Participation in Ecotourism Activities in the Eyes of Respondents

Local community participation in ecotourism activities include providing ecotourism services, actively participating in management and supervision, and engaging in training and capacity building initiatives. Furthermore, local communities contribute to the preservation of natural and cultural environments, take part in tourism promotion efforts, and help build a friendly and welcoming image for visitors.

- Providing Ecotourism Services

The interviewees unanimously recognized that ecotourism not only brings economic benefits but also enhances the relationship between humans and the natural environment in the BTT region. The primary involvement of local communities in ecotourism activities includes offering diverse services, such as homestay accommodations, culinary experiences, tour guiding, and the production of handicrafts. These findings align with the results of previous studies by [Kunjuraman et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Stone & Stone \(2022\)](#). Interviewees mentioned that they provided a more stable source of income compared to traditional occupations such as agriculture or fishing. Some families noted that income from tourism has significantly improved their quality of life and reduced financial burdens, allowing them to build more comfortable homes and upgrade infrastructure within the village.

“Previously, my family only engaged in agriculture, with very unstable income. Since shifting to running a homestay, life has become much more stable” (I2, M51y, *Member of the Bach Ma tourism business owners*).

“Ecotourism has brought us great economic opportunities. Not only do we have additional income, but we can work from home without leaving our hometown” (I7, M39y, *Member of the Ngu My Thanh tourism business owners*).

“Thanks to tourism, I can earn a more stable income compared to fishing before. We have been able to repair our houses and upgrade many things in the village” (I15, M54y, *Member of the A Nor tourism business owners*).

Ecotourism has also created numerous new job opportunities for family members, particularly during peak tourist seasons. Beyond providing accommodation services, they can participate in other activities such as preparing food and selling local products. These jobs typically do not require high professional qualifications but demand hard work and adaptability. Another benefit mentioned by residents is the flexibility in job selection. Previously, their only options were farming, forestry, or fishing. However, with the growth of tourism, they can now combine both sectors. During peak seasons, they can focus on tourism, and when tourist numbers decline, they return to agricultural work. This combination enables residents to maximize their resources and time while ensuring more sustainable incomes.

“During the peak tourist season, the whole family takes on extra work, from cooking for guests to selling handicrafts. The income is much better compared to just farming” (I3, F44y, *Member of the Phong Nha-Ke Bang national park managers*).

“Tourism allows me to make the most of my time, as I can farm when I’m free and earn extra income from serving tourists. Life is much more stable” (I21, M30y, *Member of the A Nor households*).

Although income from tourism is higher, the workload has also increased significantly, especially during peak seasons. Households operating homestays must devote substantial time to serving guests, cleaning rooms, preparing meals, and interacting with tourists. Some interviewees admitted that the work can sometimes be overwhelming, leaving them feeling exhausted and without time for traditional activities or family commitments. This highlights that while the economic benefits are evident, the development of tourism also demands significant sacrifices in terms of time and effort from local residents.

“During peak season, when the guests arrive in large numbers, my children and I have to work continuously with little time for rest. The work is exhausting, but we cannot stop because the income is good” (I8, F36y, *Member of the Ngu My Thanh households*).

According to Wang et al. (2021), ecotourism also provides opportunities for local residents to build a deeper connection with their living environment. Some interviewees expressed that being busy with tourists gives them a more meaningful life. Additionally, through these activities, they feel a sense of pride in their cultural identity and strengthened connections to their community and natural surroundings. However, the interviewees agreed that language barriers are their greatest challenge when communicating with foreign visitors. This limitation can lead to misunderstandings in interactions and reduce the effectiveness of tourism services.

"My homestay has become an essential part of the village. I am very happy to share my living space with tourists and explore the beauty of nature with them" (I17, F54y, Member of the Bach Ma households).

"Often, we only know how to greet with simple phrases, and the conversation doesn't go further [...]. We need more English language classes to communicate with tourists" (I22, M52y, Member of the Phong Nha-Ke Bang households).

When asked about gender issues in participating in ecotourism activities, most interviewees felt uncomfortable answering. According to [Elshaer et al. \(2021\)](#), gender differentiations between men and women in ecotourism, particularly in mountainous areas with a significant ethnic minority population, is an important but often overlooked topic in sustainable tourism studies. In these regions, local culture, traditions, and socio-economic conditions greatly influence the roles and positions of men and women within the community and the ecotourism sector. In Vietnam generally, and the BTT region specifically, many ethnic minority communities in mountainous areas assign roles based on traditional norms and gender-based division of labor ([Tran & Walter, 2014](#)). This division significantly affects how men and women engage in ecotourism activities. Interviewees noted that men often take on roles such as tour guides, tourism managers, or those responsible for construction and maintenance of infrastructure (e.g., shelters, trails). Men are seen as community representatives when interacting with tourists, particularly in areas requiring knowledge of forests, wildlife, and nature exploration. In contrast, women typically occupy supporting roles, such as preparing food, cleaning, or crafting products (woven fabrics, jewelry) to sell to visitors.

"Traditionally, women like us have been accustomed to household chores and taking care of the children. Going into the forest or being a tour guide has always been men's work. I'm also not used to interacting with strangers, especially tourists. It feels strange to me" (I8, F36y, Member of the Ngu My Thanh households).

"I find it unfair that men are always given priority. We can also do other jobs well besides housework. I would really like to be a tour guide like the men, but there aren't many opportunities. I think it's because I have children and limited health, so I'm not prioritized" (I27, F24y, Member of the Ngu My Thanh households).

- Participation in Management and Supervision

The majority of interviewees reported that they had been invited to participate in discussions on ecotourism development, particularly in areas directly related to their livelihoods, such as the A Nor Waterfall and the Ngu My Thanh Village. However, this level of participation remains limited and is mainly advisory rather than decision-making. Most projects are initiated by the government or large tourism organizations without the consultation or involvement of local communities. This reflects a limitation in the decentralization of decision-making and the allocation of responsibilities among stakeholders, particularly when community participation is often limited to providing feedback rather than having decision-making power. This creates an imbalance of power between local communities and tourism development organizations, similar to [Duong et al. \(2024\)](#) findings, leaving the people feeling that they have no control over issues directly related to their lives and livelihoods.

"We were invited to meetings but only to listen, as our opinions were not applied. They think they are smarter and have a broader vision than us. But this is our homeland, and we also have a responsibility to protect it" (I4, F20y, Member of the A Nor tourism business owners).

Only the interviewees from the Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park mentioned that local people working in the tourism sector are those who continuously monitor and engage with the industry, making them experts in identifying whether any facilities are lacking. For example, if there is a shortage of campsites, sanitation facilities, or trash bins, it is the locals who report these deficiencies to the authorities, who then support the construction of additional facilities. They write observation reports, which may include complaints and feedback from tourists to highlight specific areas that need development. The government then assesses the situation and supports development projects within the available resources. However, this model still relies on whether the community's voice is heard and whether prompt action is taken by the authorities. If their input is acknowledged but no concrete improvements are made, this process may lead to a loss of trust in the effectiveness of participation.

One issue raised by some interviewees is that the selection of households to participate in business projects was not conducted fairly, leading to disputes and dissatisfaction. This reflects a situation where the process of community participation is sometimes opaque, lacking equitable distribution of benefits, which undermines the motivation and sustainable involvement of the community. For example, at the A Nor Waterfall, seven households registered to operate homestay businesses, and each was supported with 600 USD for purchasing bedding, linens, and renovating their homes and gardens. However, the selection of households for participation in the business was unclear, causing significant controversy among the households.

"Myself and many other households were very disappointed when we were not selected to participate in the homestay project. We are all poor households with many children. I wonder if there are clear criteria for selection" (I30, F55y, Member of the A Nor households).

In summary, the limited participation of the community in crucial decisions related to eco-tourism affects not only economic benefits but also negatively impacts the human-environment relationship. When community voices are overlooked, local residents may lose motivation to protect local resources. Conversely, empowering them with management roles often strengthens their environmental stewardship, as natural resources form the basis of their livelihoods and sustainable tourism development.

- Participation in Training and Capacity Building

Mayaka & Akama (2007) make the point that training and capacity-building programs have played a significant role in improving the human-environment relationship by equipping local communities with essential knowledge and skills. In key areas such as the Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park and the Bach Ma National Park, international development projects have implemented training courses on tourism skills, resource management, and foreign language communication. According to interviewees, the management teams in these areas also organize specialized courses on first aid, emergency response, and communication skills for interacting with tourists. These courses are often provided free of charge, along with material support such as life jackets, boat paint, and equipment

for kayaking activities. Additionally, safety regulations, such as mandatory life jackets and restricted transportation on certain tourist routes, have been established, contributing to a safe and sustainable experience.

"The first aid course was very useful, especially when working in the tourism environment. I feel more at ease knowing I can handle emergency situations" (I29, M25y, Member of the Phong Nha-Ke Bang households).

"They (National Park staff) provided fuel, life jackets, and boat paint after the storms passed [...]. We are grateful for that" (I25, M42y, Member of the Bach Ma households).

However, access to these programs remains uneven across regions. At the A Nor Waterfall, the interviewees note that the local community reported a lack of necessary support from authorities, particularly in addressing storm damage. Damaged pavilions and tourism infrastructure were not promptly repaired, disrupting business activities and increasing environmental pressure due to ineffective management.

"The storms have damaged many facilities, but we have not received any support from the authorities" (I28, F36y, Member of the A Nor households).

Furthermore, due to the limited number of training programs and the lack of consistency in their implementation, only a small portion of the local population has access to capacity-building and training courses. This has created significant disparities in the community's ability to participate in ecotourism activities. Research findings also highlight that challenges in ecotourism projects arise from a lack of local skills and insufficient support for community-based project management. This is particularly evident in the capabilities of national park management teams and cooperatives, who are deeply involved in ecotourism development. These limitations become apparent when they encounter challenges related to the complexity of ecotourism and the specialized knowledge required for effective management, such as understanding ecological impacts, implementing sustainable practices, and marketing suitable tourism products.

"I participated in a training course organized by a non-governmental organization, where I learned how to welcome tourists and develop homestay services. Unfortunately, not everyone has the same opportunity as I did" (I19, M23y, Member of the A Nor households).

"Some members of the cooperative received training, but they could not apply much of it in practice due to the gap between the training program and real-world situations. This is a concerning issue" (I23, M45y, Member of the Ngu My Thanh households).

- Participating in the Preservation of Natural and Cultural Environments

This findings are similar to those of [Baloch et al. \(2023\)](#) and [Cavalheiro et al. \(2020\)](#), the increasing number of visitors to tourist destinations has placed significant pressure on the local environment and community culture. One of the most critical issues is the uncontrolled waste generated due to the lack of awareness among certain tourists. This situation forces local communities to spend considerable time and resources on cleaning efforts, particularly after peak tourism seasons.

"Many tourists litter carelessly, leaving us to spend a lot of time cleaning up after each tourism season, remarked a community member" (I24, M25y, Member of the A Nor households).

Interviews reveal notable differences among destinations in perceiving the impact of ecotourism on local cultural identity. Respondents from the Bach Ma National Park affirmed that tourism does not alter the cultural identity of their regions; rather, it provides an opportunity to showcase traditional culture to visitors. Cultural activities such as festivals, cuisine, and handicraft villages are highly appreciated, fostering a sense of pride among local residents. Tourists not only bring income to the community through purchasing handicrafts but also create opportunities for cultural exchange. Locals feel that visitors introducing their own cultures does not disrupt local customs; on the contrary, it promotes cross-cultural interaction and mutual understanding. Visitors come not only to explore the natural landscapes but also to learn about local culture. They enjoy traditional festivals, local cuisines, and handicraft villages, which instills in us a sense of pride in our cultural identity.

“We find it normal for tourists to bring their own culture here. It is part of cultural exchange. What matters is that we preserve our unique identity” (I17, F54y, Member of the Bach Ma households).

In contrast, interviewees at the A Nor Waterfall, especially from ethnic minority groups, expressed that tourism development has not significantly benefited them. Some ethnic groups reported having to alter or adapt their rituals, traditional attire, and lifestyles to suit tourists’ preferences, leading to a loss of authenticity and originality in their culture. Additionally, they face restrictions on traditional activities like farming and hunting due to environmental protection regulations, resulting in the gradual erosion of cultural values such as forest and land worship practices. Changes in living conditions, such as being relocated to brick and tile houses, have further weakened traditional values – the problem mentioned in the study of [Hong & Saizen \(2019\)](#). This indicates that ecotourism development does not always align with cultural preservation.

“We are no longer allowed to cut trees or clear forests for farming to protect the landscape diversity of the World Heritage site. Without land for cultivation or hunting, our livelihoods have become difficult, and our traditional cultural values, especially forest and land worship, are fading away” (I9, M34y, Member of the Phong Nha-Ke Bang households).

“We are not accustomed to living in brick-and-tile houses close to each other without gardens. Our customs are different” (I14, M68y, Member of the A Nor households).

Another issue highlighted in the interviews was cultural conflict between local communities and international tourists, particularly regarding clothing and behavior. In traditional villages like the Ngu My Thanh Village and the A Nor Waterfall, respondents expressed discomfort with tourists, especially international visitors, wearing revealing clothing that is inappropriate to the local culture. They noted that such behavior not only makes locals uncomfortable but also influences the younger generation, causing them to shift their views on traditional cultural values. The interviewees suggested implementing clear signage and regulations regarding dress codes and behavior to protect local culture and customs.

“Their revealing clothing is too inappropriate. Many children in the village have started mimicking these styles, which is upsetting” (I30, F55y, Member of the A Nor households).

"We want tourists to understand and respect our culture. They should learn about local customs before coming here. Clear signs and regulations on dress codes and behavior are necessary in public areas" (I27, F24y, Member of the Ngu My Thanh households).

Additionally, the interviewees reported an increase in security issues, including theft and harassment, since the influx of tourists. Previously, the area was very peaceful, but now residents feel uneasy about rising disorder, particularly at night.

"Our village used to be very peaceful. Since more tourists arrived, security has become more complicated. There have been thefts, making people feel unsafe" (I29, M25y, Member of the Phong Nha-Ke Bang households).

In response to these growing security concerns, local communities have implemented several measures to maintain order and safety. Community self-management teams have been established to conduct regular patrols, especially in crowded public areas, to promptly prevent violations. Additionally, informational signs and notices are placed at various locations to remind tourists about respectful behavior and safeguarding personal belongings. Apart from cultural and security concerns, tourism activities have also had negative environmental and social impacts. Noise pollution from tourist activities has become a significant nuisance for local communities. Some areas, such as the Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park and the Bach Ma National Park, have implemented strict regulations to limit nighttime noise to protect wildlife and ensure a tranquil environment. However, in many other areas, noise control remains poorly enforced.

"The noise from tourist groups, especially at night, makes it hard for us to sleep and disrupts our daily lives. I know the national park has banned noise after 9 PM, and violators are expelled" (I22, M52y, Member of the Phong Nha-Ke Bang households).

- Engaging in Tourism Promotion

Wani et al. (2024) highlight that tourism promotion is not solely the responsibility of management agencies but is closely tied to the local community – those who live and interact directly with the natural and cultural environments at the destination. Interviewed residents contribute significantly to tourism promotion through word-of-mouth, social media, and direct interactions. Stories about local life, customs, and personal experiences help forge close connections with tourists while leaving a strong impression of the area's culture and natural beauty. Additionally, photos and videos showcasing festivals, landscapes, or unique aspects of daily life can attract tourists' attention, especially when shared on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok.

"We are proud to share stories about our homeland. Visitors enjoy listening to our stories; they can sit for hours, fully engaged. Sometimes, this becomes the motivation for us to continue our work" (I10, M43y, Member of the A Nor cooperative managers).

"Social media is an excellent bridge that connects us with tourists. Posts and short videos about daily life have introduced many people to the beauty of our hometown" (I17, F54y, Member of the Bach Ma households).

However, local communities face several challenges in participating in tourism promotion. Many community members lack knowledge about using modern communication tools

to create engaging content for international audiences. As a result, the region's tourism image is not widely or effectively conveyed to target customers. The lack of professionalism in promotion, limited collaboration with media agencies, and insufficient resources to develop large-scale campaigns have hindered tourism development in these areas.

"If someone could guide us on how to write posts or produce professional videos, the tourism image here would definitely gain more attention" (I14, M68y, *Member of the A Nor households*).

"We really want to promote the A Nor Waterfall to the world, but the budget is very limited. Foreign tourists often search for information online, but our website is very basic and lacks details" (I11, M48y, *Member of the A Nor cooperative managers*).

- Building a Friendly Tourism Image

Pasanchay & Schott (2021) make the assertion that local communities play a significant role in this effort through acts of hospitality and their friendly interactions with tourists. Interviewed residents also participate directly in cultural activities, such as organizing traditional festivals, showcasing local cuisines, and sharing stories about the community's history and culture. These experiences foster a sense of connection for visitors, enabling them to appreciate the unique cultural values preserved by the area. Warm welcomes from the locals create a comfortable and enjoyable atmosphere, encouraging tourists to return or share positive experiences with others. In particular, in ecotourism destinations where local communities are closely tied to the natural environment, hospitality and cultural exchanges enhance mutual understanding and respect between tourists and the indigenous community.

"When visitors arrive, we always strive to make them feel at home. This helps them have wonderful experiences and share positive feedback about us with their friends" (I9, M34y, *Member of the Phong Nha-Ke Bang households*).

"Tourists enjoy participating in festivals or experiencing the daily life of local people. It makes their trips more memorable" (I17, F54y, *Member of the Bach Ma households*).

However, certain factors reduce the effectiveness of these efforts. One prominent issue is environmental pollution, particularly the increasing waste in tourist areas. While communities may engage in cleanliness and environmental conservation activities, the rising number of visitors often exacerbates pollution, negatively impacting the destination's friendly image.

"I am very concerned about the growing amount of waste in tourist areas. While the increase in visitors benefits the economy, poor management will leave significant environmental consequences for our community" (I24, M25y, *Member of the A Nor households*).

"The lack of trash bins and guidelines for waste separation worsens the pollution issue. We need more infrastructure to address this problem" (I18, M31y, *Member of the Ngu My Thanh households*).

Another challenge is inappropriate behavior by a small portion of the community. Although most residents are warm and welcoming, unprofessional conduct or unfriendly attitudes from a few individuals can harm the destination's overall image. For instance, there have been cases of disrespect toward tourists or exploitation of their lack of knowledge

to charge unreasonable fees. These actions not only diminish the sense of friendliness but can also damage the area's reputation.

"We deeply regret hearing tourist complaints about inappropriate behavior in some cases. These actions do not represent our entire community. Just one person's misconduct can lead to negative perceptions of the whole community" (I21, M30y, Member of the A Nor households).

"There are instances where locals take advantage of tourists' lack of awareness to charge unreasonable fees. We hope the authorities will implement better controls to prevent such issues" (I23, M45y, Member of the Ngu My Thanh households).

Conclusions and Limitations

This study highlights the importance of ecotourism in fostering a harmonious relationship between humans and nature while serving as a sustainable strategy to balance environmental conservation and socio-economic development. The findings indicate that the potential for ecotourism development in the BTT region is highly regarded by the local community, owing to its rich natural and cultural resources. However, to ensure sustainable development, appropriate conditions must be in place to guarantee that ecotourism brings long-term benefits to the community without compromising environmental integrity or cultural heritage. Moreover, the level of local community participation in ecotourism activities is evident in multiple aspects. The community not only provides tourism services such as accommodation, tour guiding, and handicraft production but also actively engages in management and environmental conservation monitoring. Additionally, they play a crucial role in training programs and capacity-building initiatives, enhancing awareness and skills in ecotourism practices. Furthermore, community involvement in tourism promotion and the development of a friendly destination image has significantly contributed to the attractiveness of the region to visitors.

However, the study also identifies several challenges that need to be addressed to optimize community participation. Language barriers and gender inequalities in task allocation remain significant obstacles, particularly for women. Additionally, cultural erosion is becoming an increasing concern, especially among ethnic minority communities such as those in A Nor Waterfall, where traditional rituals are gradually fading. Moreover, local communities have expressed an urgent need for clearer regulations regarding tourist behaviour, appropriate dress codes, and more effective measures to ensure security and environmental protection. Overall, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the local community and ecotourism in the BTT region. To ensure the sustainable development of ecotourism, stronger support from the government and stakeholders is required to improve infrastructure, enhance community capacity, and implement appropriate management and conservation policies.

The study also highlights existing challenges and limitations. First, due to time constraints and the extensive area of the BTT region, the survey was limited to a selection of ecotourism sites. This resulted in gaps in data collection and analysis, restricting the ability to comprehensively assess community participation across the entire region. Furthermore, the study primarily employed qualitative methods without integrating

quantitative data, which could have provided a more holistic evaluation of the factors influencing community involvement in ecotourism development. These limitations are partly due to the fact that this study is only a component of a larger research project aimed at comprehensively evaluating various aspects of ecotourism development. Future research is recommended to expand the scope of surveys and integrate both quantitative and qualitative data. Such an approach would offer a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of geo-environmental aspects and the complex relationships between humans and nature in the context of ecotourism.

Unless otherwise stated, the sources of tables and figures are the authors', on the basis of their own research.

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