

**LOCAL RESIDENTS' PERCEPTION ON ECOTOURISM
IN CUCPHUONG NATIONAL PARK, NINH BINH
PROVINCE, VIETNAM**

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Abstract

Ecotourism development has become a prominent approach to address socioeconomic concerns in a conservation context. This research attempts to investigate the importance and relevance of ecotourism and assess the awareness and understanding of ecotourism among the local residents in Cucphuong National Park. A structured qualitative interview was used to collect data in five villages in Cucphuong National Park by interviewing the head of the households who knows about ecotourism activities and the impacts. The research showed that most of respondents had positive awareness about ecotourism, especially households who have family member(s) working in tourism industry. The ecotourism development contributed much for local residents' improvement in employment, infrastructure, hospital and education. Besides that, the negative impacts of ecotourism activities were also pointed out as the high fluctuation of price for substantial local products, huge amount of garbage at the peak season or weekend, disappearance of natural sights and replacement of new tourism spots. The information can help local authorities, planners and community decision-makers to have a deep and precise view

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about local perception toward ecotourism in order to suitable policies and long-term plan for improving local living condition and natural resource conservation.

Keywords: *Ecotourism, residents' cognition, local residents, national park, tourism impacts*

1. Introduction

Tourism development is one of the world's largest industries, employing large number of people and this sector is expected to continue to grow. In fact, tourism is often quoted as the fastest growing sector of world trade. The main benefit that tourism holds over other forms of development is that it is capable of reusing the resource, be it wildlife or other attraction, without significantly damaging or changing the resource (Yoon, Gursoy, & Chen, 2001). Following the global tourism improvement, ecotourism has become increasingly popular over the last decade; ecotourism is seen as an opportunity for local people living in tourism destination to gain positive benefits from tourist development and conservation of forest and protected area (Kreag, 2001).

Many local communities recognize that tourism can stimulate changes in social, cultural, environmental and economic dimensions, where tourism activities have had a close connection with the local communities (Archer & Cooper, 1994; Richards & Hall, 2000). However, there are conflicts between local people and park authorities which often leads to the consequence of externally imposed park regulations and has been reported widely in conservation literature (Ap, 1990; Lawson, Williams, Young, & Cossens, 1998; Nepal & Weber, 1995; Sindiga, 1999). It is suggested that successful protected area management will not be achieved without the cooperation and support from local communities (Lankford, 1994; Mehta & Heinen, 2001; Sindiga, 1999) and that local communities must be empowered and involved in making important conservation decisions (*National Parks of Vietnam*, 2001; Newmark & Hough, 2000). To gain local support, the development and implementation of ecotourism and integrated conservation development activities have been advocated throughout the world (Brunt & Courtney, 1999; Burn, 1996; Inskip, 1991). The understanding and awareness of local communities play an important role in order to maintain sustainability and long-term success of the tourism industry (King, Pizam, & Milman, 1993). A major reason for rising interest in the area has been the evidences that tourism leads not only to be positive, but also has the potential

for negative outcomes at the local level (Andriotis, 2004). It is generally felt that community perceptions toward tourism impacts are likely to be an important planning and policy consideration for successful tourism development (Ap, 1992). Numerous studies on community residents' perceptions of tourism impacts have been conducted (Ampbell, 1999; Ap, 1992; Bjork, 2000; Blamey, 1997; Brown, 1998; Dogan, 1989; Eagles, 1992; Eagles & Cascagnette, 1995; Kuvan & Akan, 2005; Lindberg, Enriquez, & Sproule, 1996; Liu & Var, 1986; Obua & Harding, 1997; Pizam, 1978; Ross & G, 1999; Ross & Wall, 1999; Tatoglu, Erdal, Ozgur, & Azakli, 2000; Tosun, 2002; Vogt & Andereck, 2000). However, little research has conducted in Vietnam, especially in Cucphuong National Park, the oldest National Park. Therefore, there is limited understanding of residents' perceptions toward ecotourism and also very few research have been done on the process of tourism in Vietnam. Hence, the purpose of this research attempts to investigate the importance and relevance of ecotourism and assess the awareness and understanding of ecotourism among the local residents in Cucphuong National Park.



Figure 1. Location of Cucphuong National Park

Source: http://wikitravel.org/en/Cuc_Phuong_National_Park (2012)

2. Study area

Cucphuong, in Northern Vietnam, was established in 1962, making it the first National Park in Vietnam. The decision decreed the establishment of a 25,000 ha protected forest. The park receives over 60,000 tourists annually, with the vast majority being Vietnamese day-trippers.

There are five communities with seven villages, within the park boundaries and many more surrounding it. There are approximately 2,200 people living in the park's buffer zone and in the rural areas around the park. The communities within the park contain those people whose lives are dominated by its resources and management. As such, they represent the first line in the parks defense and it is their attitudes and actions towards the park and conservation that will have the most important impact. One hundred percent of the villagers rely on subsistence agriculture and the additional income from limited cash crops and sales of food surplus. Rice is the staple crop and all villagers either grow it for subsistence or sell other crops, particularly maize, in order to buy rice to eat.

Five of the seven villages were surveyed for this study; a sample of 25 households was drawn from the resident households and represented at least one village from each of the five communes (figure 2). A decision on the number to sample at each community was based on the following formula:

$$\text{Communities} = 5 = k$$

$$n = 25 \text{ households}$$

$$n/k = 25/5 = 5$$

Therefore at every community, five households will be approached and interviewed.



Figure 2. Cucphuong study areas

Note: **1.** Cucphuong Community; **2.** Yen Quang Community; **3.** Yen Tri Community; **4.** An Nghia Community; **5.** Thach Lam Community

3. Research methods

A qualitative approach was used to gain an in-depth understanding of local householders' perceptions on ecotourism in Cucphuong National Park. The researcher adopted the method of structuring a qualitative interview from Rubin and Herbert (1995). Three categories of qualitative questions were introduced in this study.

Main Question: Before talking with the interviewee, the researcher prepared several main questions in order to launch and lead the conversation. Main questions may change during the course of the research, as the researcher learns what to ask and whom to ask.

Probes: Probes function as a support to help specify the level of depth the researcher wants. They signal the interviewees that the researcher wants longer and more detailed information. They help the interviewee to keep explaining. Also, they ask the interviewee to finish up a particular answer currently being provided. The researcher may ask the interviewee to clarify opaque or missing data necessary to understand the answer. Probes can indicate that the researcher is paying attention.

Follow-up questions: Main questions establish the structure for the interview, control the questioning on the topic, and relate what is asked in the personal interview to the overall design. Probes elucidate and enlarge the answers, thus making them comprehensible and mark the interviewees about the anticipated level of depth. They also reassure the interviewee that the researcher is attentive to the answers. Follow-Up questions are designed to get the depth that is a gist of qualitative interviewing by furthering themes that are found, describing the context of answers, and surveying the implications of what has been stated.

In order to gather precise data in complicated ethnic minority areas, the researcher recruited a fieldworker-ranger of Cucphuong National Park, who knew the study areas very well and had a very good relationship with local residents. The fieldworker was instructed by the researcher in either approaching the respondents to elicit their participation or monitoring the completion of the interview. At each household, the head of the household, who knows about ecotourism

activities, was asked to participate. During the contact, the researcher would inform about the purpose of the study that the results would be used for academic purposes only, and the respondent was ensured of anonymity. If the respondent could not be contacted during the first visit, a second and a third visit were paid.

4. Findings and analyses

The researchers attempted to approach 25 potential respondents, but were able to complete 20 interviewees only, spreading in seven villages with five communities, the rest of them either refused or gave incomplete interviews. Most households have large families, a typical ethnic minority family. The smallest was a five-member family and the largest has nine members. This is explained by the fact that ethnic minority families still cherish the extended family system. However, conservationists view the growing population of local people and their basic needs as a major threat to the conservation of the protected area.

Table 1. Responses on the member of family numbers

No of Family Members	No of Respondents	Percentage (%)
5	1	5
6	6	30
7	9	45
9	4	20
Total	20	100

The study also revealed that almost all households had their family members working in the tourism industry and some households had two or three family members work in tourism (Table 1). All people who work in the tourism industry are daughters or sons in the family, young labors who are pioneers in local community in doing tourism. Based on the finding, all of the work they do are very simple work, like selling some local goods in souvenir shops, cleaning at small hotels, guest houses or restaurants and work as tourist guides but not really as “guides” just only like leading the way around the park.

Table 2. Response of household having family members work in Tourism industry

Kinds of work	Souvenir shops	Small hotels/ Guest	Restaurants	Tourist guides

	houses			
No of households	4	5	5	3

Ecotourism perception in economic side

The research found that most local people agreed with ecotourism development because they have already seen the role and the contribution of ecotourism in indigenous economy improvement. From what the local people said the researcher could know that the biggest benefits they get are infrastructure improvement and employment, which directly bring them benefit. However, there are still some local people who have family members working in ecotourism but did not think they got a lot of benefits from ecotourism because their family members have to work so hard but get little. They only do simple work for few months at the peak season, because they really do not have any skill or knowledge about tourism. This is a problem that the local government and NGOs also have to know and find ways to help local people overcome.

Besides the road network improvement and employment opportunity, local people also benefit from better health care system and from improved sightseeing around their area. However, local people complained that the ecotourism activities also contributed to the increase in prices of all goods and services because of the increase in demand of these goods as well. For example, before, local people could easily buy some special local food, but now it is too expensive to buy it, because the high demand from tourists. Besides, the income based on ecotourism is not stable; it depends on the tourism season and other economic impacts also. This problem sometimes gets into the ability of local people who have limited knowledge about the market. It also makes them get difficult to prepare their business plans. Besides that, there are few local people who lost their big pieces land and then they become unemployed when government invests in some services for ecotourism activities such as building the hotels, restaurants, artificial lakes, etc. Although the government has already compensated them some money but it still not enough to find a new livelihood.

Ecotourism perception in social cultural side

The study showed that the understanding of local people was changed and their awareness improved through tourism activities. The interview showed that local people have been affected by tourists. They can easily admit the new knowledge in positive ways and more activities between local people and tourists can change their mind about the important role of natural resource and the way to do ecotourism.

However, with ecotourism development, local culture has also been changed greatly, a large number of youth have been living materialistic lives, always want to enjoy the life but do not want to work. The relationship among local people has changed also; they are not as close to each other as they used to be, like when some households become rich, they looked down on the others and become selfish, and not extend help as they used to do.

Following the change of traditional culture, the poaching and cutting of trees continue happening, all interviewees said that they still see some neighbors felling trees, and some time they hunt some wild animals. There are many reasons why some people do that. Firstly, the perception of some local people are still limited, they cannot understand the benefit of forest and environment, they only care about short-term benefit. The second reason is that some local people have very poor living condition but they have to raise big families while they don't have any jobs. One interviewee said that he met one in the market and suggested that he shouldn't do some illegal activities but he said that he would, even when they could be put in prison because it was better than let his children die in poverty. That obviously was a situation difficult to handle. It seems that with hard living condition, it is so difficult to make someone have the clear eyes and do the right things. The third reason is, a lot of tourists have already paid a huge amount of money to buy wild animals and precious trees and it makes the price of wild animals and precious trees very high. With selling only one wild animal or one precious tree, they can have living allowance for several months, and those are main reasons why the illegal activities still happen.

However, all local people who were interviewed, vehemently opposed those illegal activities. They are aware of some disadvantages of poaching and felling trees and they think that if it continues, the natural resources will disappear and then they also have suffered from the disasters of environment. With these problems, it is clear that the government needs stricter

policies in forbidding poaching and felling of trees, because recent policies are not strong enough to forbid illegal activities.

They needed knowledge and skills, so they have a chance to get better work and eventually, better pay. Thus, opening training classes is very necessary, they need to be taught more about environment perception and the skills in doing ecotourism and how they can get used to the new market also.

When studying about the goods and services, the author recognizes that the goods and services there are not diversified and the quality is not really good. The local people recognized this issue and when they were asked about what local people need to do for ecotourism, they said that ecotourism needs an improved accommodation for tourist and guests especially during holidays and weekends. Likewise, with the quality of the goods produced, most were of poor quality, like the t-shirts that most local sellers have. Those shirts looked nice but not durable. This issue should be solved as soon as possible in order for the local market not to lose a lot of benefit from ecotourism.

Ecotourism perception in conservation side

When households were asked about the link between conservation and ecotourism activities, they posited that ecotourism has improved, because there were many projects investing in growing precious trees and establishing many wild animal protected centers with many foreign volunteer experts. Furthermore, through ecotourism development, the government has funded training classes with the purpose of helping local people and tourists get good perception about environment conservation. This show that local residents had awareness about the role of conservation in ecotourism development and the government involvement in preserving the natural resource also. However, ecotourism still has some negative effects on the environment. With a huge number of tourists on the holidays or weekends, the forest capacity for garbage, noise, and other tourist activities exceed the average. Recently, the problem on garbage is getting big, and it often stems from tourists who lack awareness of ecotourism. Lastly, with the improvement of ecotourism sites, big pieces of land were used for building hotels, restaurants, etc, and these, in turn, have direct negative effect on agriculture of the local people.

The difficulties and obstacles, local people have to overcome when taking part in doing ecotourism development

For local people, ecotourism can represent a viable economic alternative. They can participate directly or indirectly in the operation of chalets, hotels, restaurants, and they often have practical local knowledge, which makes them effective nature guides once trained. Local community organizations can act as concessionaires of tourism services, with appropriate administrative training. On the other hand, firstly, local people own substantial land assets with considerable natural and cultural significance, which would be suitable for ecotourism experiences. Secondly, local people possess an extensive knowledge of the land and of the cultural and spiritual significance of the natural environment. They are prepared to share such knowledge with Non-Indigenous people within certain knowledge domains. This would provide an important element to the educative process sought by many Non-Indigenous people. Thirdly, sustainability of the environment has been an integral component of the spiritual, cultural and economic knowledge system of local people for many thousands of years. As a result principally of these factors, ecotourism has been advanced as 'a strategy to help address economic and social problems in local communities, and as an appropriate and effective tool of environmental conservation' (Winner, 2002).

However, in reality, when taking part in ecotouring, the local people in Cucphuong National park have to face many difficulties, the most difficult of which are the lack of knowledge and capital. Most people there have very low education; most were elementary graduate only while most did not even finish elementary school. A quite big number of people is illiterate. The lack of capital is a big obstacle too. Local people have already understood the benefit of ecotourism and they have really wanted to have an opportunity to earn money from ecotourism activities, but they still couldn't, because of lack of money to invest. This accessing finance through normal commercial channels due to lower income and asset levels lack familiarity with the procedures of financial institutions and the inability to prepare formal business and financial plans that are often required (Ap & Crompton, 1998).

From the lack of knowledge and capital, the lack of skill is an evident consequence. The local people really don't have any skills about tourism and would often be very shy when communicating with tourists, especially foreign tourists while this is a natural characteristic of ethnical minority, local people should need to be stimulated more to learn how to communicate with tourists. The participation of community is an essential component in this aspect.

Involvement can range from the individual to the whole community, including a variety of activities, from employment and supplying goods and services, to community enterprise ownership and joint ventures. Ashley and Roe (2003) describe participation as a spectrum from passive to active involvement to full participation, where there is active community participation and venture ownership. To participate more actively, however, would require improving many factors including basic education, skills training, financial credit, market access, supportive government policies and involvement in planning and decision-making.

5. Conclusions

Ecotourism improvement plays the most important role in protecting the natural resources and improving the living condition of local community. With poor land, climate change and lack of proper knowledge, improving the living condition by farming and preserving the natural resources are a lot of hard work. Thus, the ecotourism improvement seems the best tool to achieve two aims: improving the living condition of local community and conserving the natural resources. However, it is impossible to implement tourism activities if the perception of local community is not improved. Therefore, assessing the perception of local people is very important because it can improve ecotourism in right way, and can alleviate the lives of the local people and conserve the natural resource also. Furthermore, the assessment of perception of local people can help local authorities, planners, community decision-makers, tour-operators, and tourism promoters to identify real concerns, and issues in order for appropriate policies and actions to have effect, optimizing the benefits and minimizing the problems.

This research revealed local community had positive awareness and understanding towards ecotourism in general. They have already understood the benefit they can get from ecotourism and the importance of environment in their lives. Their thinking has been changed; now they really want to take part in doing ecotourism, making profit from ecotourism instead of traditional cultivation. They also admitted that if the environment continues being destroyed, their lives will be seriously affected too, like lack of water, poor crop, specially, natural disasters like soil erosion and flood will not be avoided. However, the illegal activities still continues, like poaching and cutting trees in defiance of law and this is a big challenge for local government and ecotourism also.

The study also found out that since ecotourism improved, it contributed a considerable benefit for local community; the biggest benefits were network roads and employment. Through ecotourism local people can work in tourism industry with higher income and more stable and lighter jobs than farming. Contacting with the tourists who come from much improved cities or countries made the perception of local people improved much, now they can easily touch the knowledge outside, and step by step caught up with the civilized world.

Furthermore, many benefits from ecotourism makes local people understand the important role of natural resource for ecotourism development; it means that the perception of local people about preserving the natural resource increased. The benefit about the sightseeing and health care system also is mentioned by local people. Since improving ecotourism, the local government and Cucphuong National Park have implemented many projects about improving the sightseeing and environment many tourism points have been redesigned and redecorated to make them look cleaner and closer with the natural resource thus attracting many tourists. Besides, the tax and fee coming from ecotourism activities has been used to repair and build new hospitals that show that ecotourism really brings back benefits for the local residents.

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