



Poznań, 20.08.2025 r.

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REVIEW

of the doctoral dissertation by M.A. Toai Anh Le

“A Study on the Status of Ecotourism Development in the Binh-Tri-Thien Region, Vietnam”

Supervisor: Prof. Leszek Butowski, Associate Supervisor: Łukasz Quirini-Popławski, PhD

RECENZJA

rozprawy doktorskiej mgr. Toai Anh Le

**pt. „Studium rozwoju ekoturystyki w regionie Binh-Tri-Thien, Vietnam” wykonanej
pod kierunkiem prof. dr. hab. Leszka Butowskiego oraz dr. Łukasza Quirini-Popławskiego**

1. Basic Information about the Candidate

According to the attached documentation, Mr. Toai Anh Le obtained a Master’s degree in Geography in 2018 from Hué University (Vietnam). He specializes in socio-economic geography and spatial management. Since 2018, he has been a lecturer at the Faculty of Geography, Hué University. Between 2013 and 2025, he is the author of two and co-author of six publications (including three listed in the Polish Ministry’s register of scientific journals and peer-reviewed conference proceedings). He has also participated in 15 scientific conferences.

2. Evaluation of the Doctoral Dissertation

2.1. Evaluation of the Structure of the Doctoral Dissertation and the Literature Used

The structure of the dissertation is logical and clear, and it follows a standard research framework. The dissertation comprises 369 pages. It includes an Introduction and nine main chapters, each divided into subchapters. The entire work is well-documented and richly illustrated, containing 66 tables and 53 figures. The final part of the dissertation includes appendices related to the research tools - Appendix A (Questionnaire, English version) and Appendix B (In-depth Interview) - as well as photographic documentation from the field research, comprising a total of 15 pages. The bibliography consists of 669 English-language sources, spanning 53 pages. These sources provide a solid theoretical and empirical foundation for the research problem undertaken. Both the structure of the dissertation and the selection of literature are evaluated positively. A minor inconsistency is the lack of numbering for the first chapter

("Introduction") and the absence of a list of appendices. However, this does not hinder the readability of the work, which is presented in a very clear and accessible format.

2.2. Evaluation of the Aim, Methods, Results, and Practical Applications

The objective of the study, presented in the introduction as: "*The primary goal is to identify priority issues that need resolution and propose sustainable development strategies*" (p. 17), was formulated in very broad terms. The research problem was defined as follows: "*What is the potential for ecotourism development in the BTT region, and which strategies are most effective for its successful implementation?*" (p. 27). It was accompanied by three research questions and three related hypotheses (pp. 29–30):

1. **RQ1:** What are the factors influencing the potential for ecotourism development in the Binh-Tri-Thien region? **Hypothesis 1:** Ecotourism development in the BTT region is shaped by a combination of internal and external factors.
2. **RQ2:** What are the strengths and weaknesses (internal), as well as opportunities and threats (external), for the development of ecotourism in the Binh-Tri-Thien region? **Hypothesis 2:** The strengths of ecotourism in the BTT region lie in its rich biodiversity, cultural heritage, and unique natural landscapes, while the weaknesses include limited infrastructure, insufficient investment, and a lack of skilled workforce.
3. **RQ3:** What are the most viable strategies and pathways for promoting sustainable ecotourism development in the Binh-Tri-Thien region? **Hypothesis 3:** The most viable strategies and pathways for sustainable ecotourism development in the BTT region must be based on a balance between economic feasibility, social inclusiveness, and environmental conservation.

(On page 189, in Table 6.12. *Research Hypotheses*, the author formulated an additional eight hypotheses for the social research component). Next, the *Research Goal and Objectives* were presented in detail (p. 31). In formulating the main assumptions of the study (research problem, main objective, specific tasks, and hypotheses), the author adopted a deductive approach, which is evident throughout the entire work. I evaluate both the structure of this introductory section and the scope of the research objective positively.

The study applies research methods appropriate to its objective (pp. 33-35). Its novelty lies in a holistic approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methods to assess the current state of ecotourism, along with the use of SWOT/TOWS analyses to develop strategies. The findings contribute to the theoretical foundation of ecotourism and offer practical guidance for sustainable management and development by policymakers, organizations, and individuals. The research concept was presented in Figure 1.4 *Research Framework Design* (p. 41) and discussed in detail with regard to the development of the conceptual framework of the study, including the *Case Study Sites Chosen for the Research*.

The results of the research and analyses were used to formulate the *Ecotourism Development Strategy for the Binh-Tri-Thien region*. This original concept, described in Chapter 8 of the dissertation, has significant practical value. One can agree with the author's statements that the chapter presents not only general strategies but also explains how to implement them, providing stakeholders with

appropriate actions to enable the sustainable development of ecotourism while addressing challenges and seizing emerging opportunities. The strategies proposed in this chapter may serve as a valuable guide for creating effective ecotourism development pathways tailored to the unique characteristics and actual conditions of the BTT region.

I positively evaluate the selection of research methods in relation to the stated objectives of the study. In my view, the methods applied by the author effectively led to the achievement of the intended outcomes, providing not only valuable insights but also significant practical implications.

3. Evaluation of the Doctoral Dissertation Section

Chapter 1. „Philosophical Foundations and Methodological Approach” - provides a strong foundation for the dissertation by clearly outlining the philosophical assumptions underlying the study's ontology and epistemology. The author establishes a coherent theoretical framework that guides the research and clarifies its perspective. A key strength of the chapter is its methodological approach, particularly the use of triangulation - combining quantitative and qualitative methods—which enhances the credibility and depth of the analysis. The research problem, main hypothesis, research questions, working hypotheses, and objectives are logically and clearly presented. The author defines the spatial scope and acknowledges research limitations, demonstrating methodological rigor and self-awareness. The chapter also outlines the methodological design, including data collection methods (both primary and secondary) and research tools such as surveys, interviews, and statistical analysis techniques. Notably, the attention given to ensuring the reliability, accuracy, and objectivity of the results reinforces the chapter's value as a solid introduction and foundation for the entire dissertation. In sum, Chapter 1 is well-organized, methodologically sound, and reflects the author's solid research competence.

Chapter 2. „Theoretical Foundations of Ecotourism Research” is organized into several subsections addressing the following topics: the concept of sustainable development; sustainable development in Vietnam; the concept of sustainable tourism; sustainable tourism in Vietnam; the concept of ecotourism; ecotourism in Vietnam; and a bibliometric analysis that presents the broader global context of ecotourism research. The chapter provides a solid theoretical basis for the study by tracing the evolution of the ecotourism concept and exploring its practical applications from both historical and contemporary perspectives. By situating ecotourism within the wider frameworks of sustainable development and sustainable tourism, the chapter offers valuable context for understanding its role in current academic debates and practical implementations. Drawing on an extensive literature review, the chapter combines a bibliometric analysis with a qualitative synthesis of key sources. Notably, Table 2.1 (*Chosen Definitions of Ecotourism*, pp. 55-57) offers a well-organized overview of definitions, complemented by a concise summary of the development phases of the ecotourism concept. This dual approach allowed the author to identify research gaps, which subsequently informed the formulation of the research problem, hypotheses, and research questions presented in Chapter 1. Although this chapter forms the theoretical foundation of the study, it is placed

after the methodological chapter. This structure reflects the author's rationale to first present the philosophical and methodological framework. In practice, both chapters were developed concurrently, which helped maintain coherence between the identification of the research problem and the literature review. From a structural perspective, the text includes sections such as "Summary of Chapter 2" that are neither numbered nor listed in the table of contents, which should be considered incorrect. The data presented in *Table 2.3. Top 10 Authors with the Highest Number of Articles* and *Table 2.4. Top 10 Authors with the Highest Number of Citations* are not directly related to the research problem and, in my opinion, could have been omitted. Overall, the chapter is clear, well-structured, and grounded in relevant scholarship. Beyond presenting existing approaches to ecotourism, the author also offers critical insights by identifying limitations and areas requiring further investigation. This enhances the academic value of the study and supports its positioning within ongoing scholarly discussions. In conclusion, Chapter 2 effectively supports the overall research design by bridging theoretical insights with the study's practical orientation.

Chapter 3. „Tourism in Vietnam” includes the following subsections: *Historical Approach*; *Contemporary Factors Influencing Tourism Development*; a detailed analysis of tourism in Vietnam in the context of *International Tourism Receipts in Southeast Asia*; *Tourism in Vietnam: Statistical Outlook*; and *Tourist Infrastructure*. Several subsections have been distinguished in the text but are not included in the table of contents, e.g. *Tourism Competition in Southeast Asia* (p. 101), *Climate Change* (p. 103), *The COVID-19 Pandemic* (p. 106). Chapter three provides an overview of the current state of tourism development in Vietnam and serves as a foundation for more detailed analyses of tourism - particularly ecotourism - in the BTT region, presented in later sections of the study. The author examines both internal and external factors influencing the development of the tourism sector, offering a broader context for understanding how ecotourism is evolving and may continue to develop in Vietnam. The chapter also includes key statistical data, such as tourist arrivals, tourism revenues, infrastructure, and human resources. The analysis is based primarily on secondary data, giving the chapter the character of a well-structured literature-based overview. Despite the absence of primary research, the author succeeds in presenting a coherent picture of the tourism landscape in Vietnam within its regional and international context. This chapter plays an important role in the overall structure of the study, laying the groundwork for subsequent, more focused analyses in the BTT region. By outlining the national context, it enables a better understanding of the potential and significance of ecotourism development in a specific geographic area. In summary, Chapter 3 is a clear, well-documented contribution that effectively links the national tourism framework with the study's later regional focus.

Chapter 4. „Tourism in the Binh-Tri-Thien Region” focuses on analyzing the current state of tourism in the Binh-Tri-Thien (BTT) region, serving as a foundation for further assessment of the potential for ecotourism development. The author reviews key factors influencing tourism growth in the region, including natural, social, economic, and political conditions. The chapter also utilizes statistical data on tourist numbers, revenues, infrastructure, and human resources, providing a reliable overview

of the tourism sector in BTT. The analysis identifies strengths and weaknesses of tourism development in the region and forms a basis for subsequent discussions on ecotourism potential and the formulation of appropriate strategies, which will be expanded upon in later sections. The content is clear, logically organized, and well-grounded in the local context. It serves as an important link connecting the national tourism overview with more detailed regional studies.

Chapter 5. „Ecotourism in the Binh-Tri-Thien Region: Organizational and Statistical Overview” presents an analysis of ecotourism in the Binh-Tri-Thien (BTT) region, focusing on its legal framework, organizational structure, and existing forms of activity. Based on secondary data, it offers a comprehensive overview of the current state of the sector. The chapter includes a review of relevant regulations, management models, and local practices. Due to the lack of specific statistical data on ecotourism in the BTT provinces (“there is no specific statistical data on ecotourism in the provinces within the BTT region” – p. 148), the analysis relies on information about ecologically valuable areas and general tourism indicators such as visitor numbers, revenue, and promotional activities. This material allows for an assessment of the sector’s current level of development, identification of key challenges, and definition of conditions necessary for future growth. The chapter also serves as a foundation for the field research presented in the following section, reinforcing the overall coherence and analytical value of the dissertation.

Chapter 6. „Mapping Ecotourism Potential, Case Study Selection, and Field Research Methodology” is a key component of the dissertation, presenting the methodology for designing and conducting field research. Its structure is built around three main components: the spatial assessment of ecotourism potential, the selection of representative case study areas, and the methods of collecting and analyzing primary data. The first section discusses the process of mapping ecotourism potential in the Binh-Tri-Thien (BTT) region using GIS tools and a multi-criteria approach - both standard methods in geographical analyses of tourism. The selection and evaluation of criteria play a critical role in determining the outcomes of this assessment. These criteria are summarized in Table 6.2. *Thematic Layers Classification* (p. 156). Some of the assumptions made are debatable. For instance, the analysis assumes that higher elevations (>1500 m) are highly suitable for ecotourism. While the author references existing literature, the adopted scale raises concerns - e.g., under such criteria, coastal areas may appear to have low suitability, potentially misrepresenting their actual tourism potential. Based on the spatial analysis, four areas were selected for in-depth case studies. Field research was conducted in three phases. The following sections of the chapter present the research hypotheses (Table 6.12. *Research Hypotheses*, p. 189) along with detailed descriptions of data collection, analysis, and processing methods. The chapter is well structured, although a more synthetic approach to some sections could have improved clarity. The introduction reiterates the chapter title (“Chapter 6 is structured into three main parts...” - p. 153), which could be refined for conciseness. Conclusion: Chapter 6 serves as a vital link between the theoretical and empirical parts of the dissertation. Particularly noteworthy are the clear visualizations of thematic layers (Figures 6.2 - 6.12) and the locations of the selected case studies (Figure 6.13).

The application of advanced geoinformation tools and professional methods in both field and social research demonstrates the author's solid research competencies.

Chapter 7. „Field Study Results and Their Discussion” represents the culmination of the empirical part of the study, presenting the results of field research based on both survey data and interviews. By integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches, the author offers a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The quantitative analysis covers aspects such as travel characteristics, tourist satisfaction - examined using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) - and the level of local community involvement in ecotourism initiatives. These findings are interpreted in relation to the respondents' demographic profiles, which enhances both the coherence and interpretative validity of the results. Complementing this, the qualitative component draws on interviews with site managers and conversations with local residents. These insights enrich the analysis by providing contextual depth regarding stakeholders' attitudes, expectations, and perceptions of ecotourism's real-world impacts. The integration of both data sets within a single chapter significantly strengthens the credibility of the findings and enhances the practical relevance of the conclusions. The author effectively demonstrates how ecotourism affects tourists, the local community, and other stakeholders involved in the tourism ecosystem. From an editorial perspective, one suggestion for improvement would be to ensure that the sample size ($n = \dots$) is clearly indicated when presenting survey data - for example, in Table 7.1. *Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Tourist Sample* (p. 195). Overall, the chapter is methodologically sound and well-structured, offering a valuable contribution to understanding the functioning and impact of ecotourism in the Binh-Tri-Thien region.

Chapter 8. „Strategies for Ecotourism Development in the Binh-Tri-Thien Region” - summarizes the entire study by presenting strategies for the development of ecotourism in the Binh-Tri-Thien (BTT) region. It is based on the analysis of both primary and secondary data, as well as an assessment of the region's potential. The core tool used is a combined SWOT/TOWS analysis, which identifies strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to ecotourism. Based on this, specific strategies tailored to local social, environmental, and economic conditions were developed, accompanied by detailed implementation recommendations. This chapter serves as a practical guide for decision-makers, local governments, and stakeholders, offering realistic and regionally grounded proposals for sustainable ecotourism development. It represents a valuable contribution from both scientific and practical perspectives.

Chapter 9. „Final Conclusions, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research” - concludes the dissertation and marks the final stage of the research process. It presents the key findings on the development of ecotourism in the Binh-Tri-Thien (BTT) region in a clear and objective manner, addressing both the critical influencing factors and the proposed strategies, while also acknowledging the study's limitations. The chapter revisits the research assumptions formulated in Chapter One, evaluating the extent to which the research objectives were achieved and the hypotheses (H1–H3) were

confirmed. This reinforces methodological consistency and allows for a critical assessment of the effectiveness of the applied research framework. The author also reflects on the variation in the length of the individual chapters, which results from the specific nature of the topics discussed. This variation is presented as a conscious and logical aspect of the dissertation's structure, contributing to its overall coherence. A significant contribution of this chapter is the identification of directions for future research. The author highlights areas that warrant further investigation, taking into account evolving local and global contexts. These suggestions offer valuable insights and serve as a foundation for continued academic inquiry in the field of ecotourism. In summary, the chapter demonstrates methodological maturity and thoughtful self-reflection, providing a professional and well-integrated conclusion to the dissertation. The author has successfully met the initial research objectives and meaningfully addressed the hypotheses.

4. Evaluation of the doctoral thesis and related discussion issues

The discussion points, raised in relation to individual chapters, mainly concern the following issues.

- **Research procedure framework.** In the introduction, the author presents a graphical outline of the dissertation's structure (Figure 1.1, p. 21). However, the diagram would be more effective if it included the identified knowledge gaps, corresponding research questions and objectives, and clearly distinguished the literature review and study area description from the author's original findings. A more complete structure would also link the main objective with specific tasks, methods, partial results, and the final outcome - offering a clearer and more comprehensive roadmap for the dissertation.
- **Thesis Structure and Editorial Issues.** The structure of the thesis requires greater consistency. Since all chapters, including the conclusion, are numbered, the introduction should also be numbered accordingly. The dissertation includes numerous titled sections - such as "*Summary of Chapter 2*" - that are neither numbered nor listed in the table of contents, which is a formal shortcoming. Similarly, several subsections (e.g., *Tourism Competition in Southeast Asia*, p. 101; *The COVID-19 Pandemic*, p. 106) appear in the text but are omitted from the contents. All titled sections should be properly included in the table of contents. Moreover, the list of appendices is missing, despite their inclusion of important research tools and photographic documentation. From an editorial perspective, improvements could also be made in the presentation of data. For example, in Table 7.1. *Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Tourist Sample* (p. 195), the sample size ($n = \dots$) should be clearly stated.
- **Precision of topic presentation.** The author employs a clear deductive approach, moving from general concepts to more detailed explanations. However, many sections could be more concise and focused. Data in Table 2.3 (*Top 10 Authors by Number of Articles*) and Table 2.4 (*Top 10 Authors by Citations*) are not directly relevant to the research problem and could be omitted. The thesis could

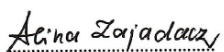
be more concise overall; for example, some repetition occurs, such as at the beginning of Chapter 6, where the content repeats the chapter title (p. 153).

- **Methodological issues in assessing tourism potential.** The assumptions used to evaluate land suitability for ecotourism are open to debate. In Table 6.2, *Thematic Layers Classification* (p. 156), higher elevations (>1500 m) are rated as highly suitable for ecotourism, while lower elevations (0–200 m) are considered least suitable. Similarly, slopes less than 5° are deemed highly suitable, whereas those over 37° are rated least suitable. Although the author cites literature sources for this classification, these assumptions remain questionable. For example, applying this scale results in coastal areas being rated as having very low suitability for tourism development, which may not accurately reflect their true potential.

By way of summary, I assess Mr. Toai Anh Le's doctoral dissertation very positively. The author demonstrates a strong ability to formulate the research problem, select appropriate methods, plan and conduct original research, and analyze secondary data with both skill and reliability. Overall, the structure of the dissertation is logical and well-organized. Particularly noteworthy is the comprehensive literature review, which provides a solid theoretical foundation for the study. The data bank is meticulously prepared and incorporates the most recent statistical information. The findings offer both cognitive value and practical relevance. Importantly, the candidate demonstrates academic maturity by acknowledging the limitations of the conclusions and by outlining meaningful directions for future research.

5. Final Conclusion

In my opinion, the doctoral dissertation by Mr. Toai Anh Le, titled "*A Study on the Status of Ecotourism Development in the Binh-Tri-Thien Region, Vietnam*," meets the requirements for doctoral dissertations as specified in Article 187 of the Act of 20 July 2018 – Law on Higher Education and Science (Journal of Laws of 2018, item 1668, as amended). The dissertation presents an original solution to a current scientific problem, and its author demonstrates both extensive theoretical knowledge and the ability to independently conduct scientific research. Therefore, I recommend that Mr. Toai Anh Le be admitted to the next stages of the doctoral procedure in the discipline of Socio-Economic Geography and Spatial Management.



/Alina Zajadacz/