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Review of the doctoral dissertation

by Anh Toai Le

entitled: *A study on the status of ecotourism development in the Binh-Tri-Thien region, Vietnam*

Author's background

Mr. Anh Toai Le holds a Master's degree in Geography, obtained from Hue University, Vietnam. He is currently employed as a lecturer in the Faculty of Geography at Hue University.

Significance of the research topic

The relationship between tourism development and the value of natural assets is close and reciprocal. Areas with exceptional natural qualities attract large numbers of tourists worldwide, and the market value of the nature-based tourism sector continues to grow. In the academic literature, there are various conceptualizations of nature-based tourism. Among these, the concept of *ecotourism* emerged in public and scholarly debate in the 1980s. The extensive discussion of ecotourism in multidisciplinary tourism studies, including the multitude of definitional proposals for this phenomenon, has resulted in a conceptual blurring of this term. The understanding of ecotourism today spans a spectrum – from highly commercialized educational trips such as safaris, through guided tours to places and areas of natural value, to various forms of “exploratory-spiritual” trips involving self-restraint in fulfilling tourists' own needs. Against this background, Mr. Anh Toai Le undertook an important but – scholarly speaking – challenging research problem.

As the area of research and studies on ecotourism development, he chose the Binh-Tri-Thien region located in central Vietnam. This choice was rational both because of the richness of subtropical flora and fauna and the diversity of landscapes with above-average cognitive value, as well as due to the feasibility of obtaining relevant research material. The development of nature-based tourism in this region has not so far been the subject of comprehensive analysis; therefore, the results of Mr. Anh Toai Le's research fill a notable knowledge gap.

Research objectives, research questions, and hypotheses

The principal aim of the study was to assess the level of ecotourism development in the Binh-Tri-Thien region (Vietnam) and to develop strategic pathways for its sustainable development. The specific objectives were:

- to diagnose the state of ecotourism development in the studied region through the analysis of direct and indirect factors influencing its potential;
- to identify and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to the development of ecotourism in the region;
- to propose strategies and solutions for the sustainable development of ecotourism in the Binh-Tri-Thien region, based on the principles of balancing economic benefits, protecting natural resources, and ensuring community engagement.

Regarding the main research objective, the Author posed the following research questions:

- What factors influence the potential for ecotourism development in the Binh-Tri-Thien region?
- What are the internal strengths and weaknesses, as well as the external opportunities and threats, for the development of ecotourism in the Binh-Tri-Thien region?
- What are the most effective strategies and pathways for promoting the sustainable development of ecotourism in the Binh-Tri-Thien region?

The dissertation also presents one main hypothesis and three working hypotheses. The main hypothesis states: "*The Binh-Tri-Thien region has significant potential for the development of ecotourism*" (p. 27).

The working hypotheses are as follows (pp. 29–30):

Hypothesis 1: Ecotourism development in the Binh-Tri-Thien region is shaped by a combination of internal and external factors. Internal factors include natural and cultural resources, tourism infrastructure, and community engagement, while external factors include government policy, competition from other ecotourism destinations, and broader socio-economic conditions.

Hypothesis 2: The strengths of ecotourism in the Binh-Tri-Thien region lie in its rich biodiversity, cultural heritage, and unique natural landscapes, whereas weaknesses include limited infrastructure, insufficient investment, and a lack of skilled labor.

Hypothesis 3: The most realistic strategies and pathways for the sustainable development of ecotourism in the Binh-Tri-Thien region must be based on a balance between economic viability, social inclusiveness, and environmental protection.

I believe that in exploratory research—such as presented in this dissertation—the formulation of hypotheses is unnecessary and may be regarded as a methodological shortcoming. In the present case, the specific objectives and corresponding research questions are sufficient to define the main goal. The so-called “hypotheses” in the dissertation are, in essence, premises – selected considerations guiding the author’s approach – rather than scientific conjectures in the strict sense. I wish to emphasize that a hypothesis is not an assumption, but a scientific supposition concerning the occurrence of phenomena or facts closely related to the research problem.

Data sources

The primary data were derived from survey research involving a sample of 491 domestic and international tourists participating in ecotourism trips, supplemented by 35 interviews with tourism development stakeholders in the study area. These surveys were conducted between 2022 and 2024.

The research also draws upon an extensive body of secondary data relating to the natural environment, cultural values, socio-economic conditions, and statistics on tourism flows and infrastructure.

Structure of the dissertation

The dissertation comprises 369 pages, including appendices. The bibliography contains 637 items. The work also includes 67 tables, 53 figures, and 16 photographs.

The structure is coherent and clear, with a logical arrangement of chapters:

- Chapter 1 presents the research problem, main hypothesis, research questions, working hypotheses, and research objectives.
- Chapter 2 contains a review of the scientific literature and a bibliometric analysis.
- Chapter 3 presents the state of tourism development in Vietnam.
- Chapter 4 focuses on tourism in the Binh-Tri-Thien region.
- Chapter 5 includes an analysis of legal regulations governing ecotourism development, the management approach, and the characteristics of various ecotourism activities.
- Chapter 6 presents an assessment of the results of mapping the tourism potential of the region, including a brief description of places particularly attractive for ecotourism development.
- Chapter 7 reports the results of tourist surveys and interviews with local tourism stakeholders.
- Chapter 8 offers the Author's strategic proposals for the development and promotion of ecotourism in the region.

The final chapter summarizes the main findings of the research.

Substantive evaluation

In pursuing the research objectives, the Author conducted various types of analyses, including an assessment of the Binh-Tri-Thien region's natural and cultural potential for ecotourism development, an examination of the satisfaction of ecotourists, and a diagnosis of the attitudes of local tourism stakeholders.

The findings indicate that the most promising areas for ecotourism development are protected areas, their buffer zones, and locations with well-preserved local cultural values. In my opinion, the identification of these sites could have been done without the GIS-based analytical procedure, although from a cognitive perspective the spatial distribution of the analysed

categories is geographically interesting. The analysis of “ecotourism potential” completely omitted tourism infrastructure, which is an important component of the tourist potential.

The Author also determined that the key factor for tourist satisfaction is visiting naturally attractive sites (direct contact with nature), and that tourism development is expected by local communities and authorities because of expected economic benefits.

The strategic analysis showed that the prospects for tourism development in the Binh-Tri-Thien region carry significant risk due to the occurrence of natural disasters and the low level of tourism (ecotourism) infrastructure development.

Overall, the research topic is addressed exhaustively. The research results are of clear scholarly value, highlighting the specific context of tourism development based on high-quality natural assets. The Author identified the determinants of ecotourism development in the Binh-Tri-Thien region from the perspectives of the region’s potential, tourist demand and preferences, engagement of authorities, tourism businesses, and residents, as well as from the perspective of weather instability and disaster risk.

The work demonstrates the hallmarks of comprehensive geographical analysis in regional tourism studies.

Its primary shortcoming lies in the absence of an explicit, author-defined interpretation of “ecotourism”. As already noted, this concept is interpreted in various ways in the academic literature, and it would have been beneficial for the understanding of the analyses and strategic proposals presented if the Author had clearly defined what he means by “ecotourism.”

I also do not understand the sense of formulating four different ecotourism development strategies (“conservative,” “aggressive,” “competitive,” and “defensive”), since all of them must be implemented, as the actions they contain are complementary. In strategic thinking, the spatial and functional linkages between “ecotourism” attractions and major mass tourism centres (e.g., Hue City, Quang Binh) were entirely omitted. It is likely that a considerable proportion of ecotourism trips are organized as optional trips for tourists staying in these centres.

Finally, in the PLS-SEM analysis of tourist satisfaction, the absence of comparative intergroup analyses (domestic vs. international tourists) or the testing of moderating variables (e.g., demographic characteristics) represents a missed opportunity for deeper insight.

My remarks, however, are intended as points for academic discussion and do not diminish the scholarly merit of the dissertation.

Conclusion

The dissertation represents an original and methodologically sound solution to a significant scientific problem. The doctoral candidate planned and conducted his own research in accordance with current methodological standards. Having read the dissertation, I find that the doctoral candidate:

- demonstrates extensive knowledge of the relevant literature, particularly regarding the concept and development of ecotourism;
- possesses the theoretical grounding necessary to interpret empirical findings;
- is capable of designing and conducting field research;
- is proficient in various analytical techniques, including GIS, qualitative and quantitative interviews, statistical analysis, and SWOT analysis;
- shows strategic thinking skills in the context of tourism development;
- is able to draw substantive conclusions and critically reflect upon his own results

Accordingly, I find that the dissertation *A Study on the Status of Ecotourism Development in the Binh-Tri-Thien Region, Vietnam* meets the requirements for doctoral dissertations as defined in the Act of 20 July 2018 – Law on Higher Education and Science (Journal of Laws 2023.742, as amended). I therefore recommend to the Scientific Council for the Discipline of Socio-Economic Geography and Spatial Management at the Commission of National Education University in Kraków that Mr. Anh Toai Le be admitted to the subsequent stages of the doctoral procedure.



/Miroslaw Mika/