

4 Tourism Planning in the Central Highlands: Policies and Practices

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Introduction

This chapter discusses the gaps between planning for sustainable tourism and the reality of resource allocation and their utilization for development. The study is based on the case of Đắk Lắk province located in South-central Vietnam. The area is not only the most populous province in the Central Highland Region, it also has the highest ratio of ethnic diversity in the country; 49 out of 54 ethnic minority groups find their homes there. Regional richness in cultural resources has derived from ethnic group lifestyles in harmony with the environment of mountains, highlands, powerful rivers and waterfalls.

The Đắk Lắk's Tourism Development Plan in 2016–2020 (Đaklak's People's Committee, 2012) has major problems of tourism development in the province. First, it is the issues in relation to tourist markets. The short length of stay and very small number of international tourist arrivals are challenges facing tourism planners. The number of domestic visitors is also relatively low compared to other provinces in the South-Central area, and are concentrated only in Buôn Ma Thuột and its adjacent areas. Second, current tourism products are limited in range and repetitive in pattern.

Third, there are problems of unequal distribution and limited multiplier effect of tourism incomes in local communities. Đắk Lắk's tourism development has faced numerous challenges. The social challenges are coming from the urgent needs for conservation of ethnic cultures and lifestyles that made up the unique tourism products of the region, such as lifestyles linked to elephant nurturing and riding. Environmental challenges driven by deforestation and climate change causing depletion of water and rainforest also require immediate attention. Owing to the diversity of tourism resources in the area, however, a one-size-fits-all approach to tourism development has not been effective, and there is a heightened need to develop specific tourism niches in specific localities.

Along with the national strategy emphasis on sustainable tourism development since the 2010s, there is a need to reorient tourism development and to introduce new forms of tourism that could better utilize the regional resource abundance. Based on the theories of sustainable tourism development and planning in the Vietnamese context, this chapter provides a comprehensive spatial analysis for tourism development in Đắk Lắk province. The study

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aims to draw practical implications for tourism planning and product development for the area.

Towards Sustainable Development of Tourism

For many developing countries, tourism often brings a comparative advantage in development terms. Tourism-led growth theory has placed tourism in the development strategy for half a century, along with the evolution of development paradigms of modernization, dependency, neoliberal, sustainable and alternative development (Bui and Dolezal, 2020). Modernization and neoliberal perspectives are implicit in the many debates over tourism's impacts in developing countries, being the default mode of thinking for policy makers (Telfer and Sharpley, 2015). Critiques of modernization can be noticed, building on the argument that tourism does not foster independence, but rather creates dependencies on foreign exchange, capital, visitors and assistance (Holden *et al.*, 2011). Those who are opposed to both capitalism and mass tourism are inclined to support sustainable and alternative development, paving the way for paralleling concepts of sustainable and alternative tourism to emerge.

Akin to the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals, sustainable tourism rhetoric has embraced holistic and ambitious goals as a 'triple-bottom line' approach that purports to address economic, environmental and socio-cultural impacts concurrently (Elkington, 1998). Generally, sustainability should consider the wide range of tourism impacts by including economic and socio-cultural factors along with environmental ones (Sharpley and Telfer, 2002; Mowforth and Munt, 2015). Critically, Sharpley and Telfer (2002) contend 'the often-rhetorical commitment to the principles of environmental protection and conservation are subordinated by the primacy of economic growth, forming the ideological basis for mainstream sustainable development theory' (p. 253). Another critical viewpoint is that the 'triple bottom line' is very difficult to operate as a management strategy (Jenkins, 2015). For example, economic impact arising from tourism is immediate, when tourists arrive and begin spending. Socio-cultural and environmental changes take much longer to

emerge and are difficult to control and manage. While the concept of sustainable development can enable the articulation of specific benchmarks and indicators, it is ambiguous, prone to misappropriation, manipulation and 'green-washing' (Harrison, 2015).

Following the introduction of sustainable tourism is the concept of alternative tourism, that refers to anything which is not mass tourism, including 'nature based', 'backpacking' and 'pro-poor tourism' (Harrison, 2015). The accompanying ambiguity on matters of implementation and context, argued to confer advantageous flexibility (Hunter, 1997), is reflected in the evolving relationship between sustainable tourism and mass tourism. However, both large-scale mass tourism and small-scale (alternative) tourism can be sustainable or unsustainable depending on their destination and planning/management context (Weaver, 2014). This understanding has betted an emergent convergence argument, whereby mass and alternative tourism are seen to be situated merely as 'ideal type' polarities with reality characterized by hybridity. But alternative tourism is not mass tourism and will never replace it (Aramberri, 2010).

Policy and planning for sustainable tourism should reflect the opportunities, conditions and constraints of the planning zone at country or sub-country level. Four major issues in tourism planning can be outlined in the context of developing countries (Jenkins, 2015). First, governments primarily plan for tourism development. Second, the type, scale and location of tourism developments are crucial decisions in creating a sustainable sector. Careful evaluation of projects is required to optimize economic returns and to minimize negative socio-cultural and environmental impacts. This is an exceedingly difficult area of analysis and one which can be influenced by political considerations. Third, any development will depend on the availability of the necessary infrastructure. Fourth, the assurance of 'equitable distribution' of benefits is only an ideal outcome and is based on altruism rather than reality. Linking the theoretical debates on the policies for promoting sustainable tourism in Vietnam, the following section sets the contextual background for field investigation.

Sustainable Tourism Policy and Planning in Vietnam

The concern for sustainable tourism was addressed in the first *Master Plan for Tourism Development 1995–2010* (VNAT, 1994) under the technical assistance from the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and approved by the Prime Minister in 1995. The plan for 15 years of development set economic, social security, environmental and cultural objectives to be achieved through tourism development. According to this plan, the territory of Vietnam was divided in three tourism zones and 11 tourism sub-zones. Different zones develop distinct tourism products based on the resources in an area. Since then, the method of tourism zoning by resources has been established and has remained the main method of planning for tourism throughout the past 30 years.

The centralized mechanism for tourism and development in Vietnam aligned with Jenkin's (2015) contention of the ultimate role of government in policy making and planning. The mobilization of resources for development-led growth of the tourism sector is prioritized. The concern for sustainable utilization of resources was not yet stated in this resolution. The second *Master Plan for Tourism Development to 2020 with Vision to 2030* (VNAT, 2013) provided a roadmap for accelerating tourism development by economic objectives (e.g. contribution to GDP, market expansion, modernization) along with other objectives of social and environmental sustainability emphasizing the preservation of traditional values and environment protection. The development of tourism in Vietnam has achieved the goals of increasing visitor numbers and making a significant contribution to national GDP (see Chapter 3, this volume). The World Economic Forum Tourism Competitiveness Index in 2017 ranked Vietnam the 67th globally, on par with the average of the rest of its regional competitors (World Bank, 2019). However, Vietnam's weakness is in the area of environmental sustainability (129th globally), although as a whole the South-east Asia region also performs very poorly in this dimension. The World Bank Group report (World Bank, 2019) raises the concern that rapid visitor growth, declining visitor yields, and rising overcrowding pressures imposes important challenges that

will need to be addressed to ensure that future tourism growth is more sustainable, inclusive, and geographically balanced.

Furthermore, Vietnam has emphasized a more structured planning approach to the tourism sector with master plans at both the national level and municipal levels (World Bank, 2019). However, adherence to these master plans has often proved problematic, potentially undermining tourism development objectives and sustainability (Daklak's People's Committee, 2012). Under this circumstance, the authors of the current study conducted empirical research to investigate the gaps between tourism planning ordered by the nation state, but designed and implemented at the municipal level in Đắk Lắk province, and the reality of tourism development under the sustainable direction in the plan.

Đắk Lắk Tourism Planning

Đắk Lắk is located in the centre of Tây Nguyên (the Central Highlands), accessible to and from Gia Lai and Lâm Đồng, to and from the South Central Coast and Cambodia, connected to Khánh Hòa province through Highway 26 and Lâm Đồng through Highway 27 and Highways 14, 14C (see Fig. 4.1).

The province has Buôn Ma Thuột airport, operating domestic flights. Đắk Lắk province is the most populous area in the Central Highlands. As of 2017, the population is recorded as 1.8 million, accounting for 32.9% of the whole region's population. The distribution of the population is uneven, more than 50% of the population is concentrated in Buôn Ma Thuột city, the municipal capital. Đắk Lắk has the highest ratio of ethnic diversity in the country; 49 minority groups (out of 54 in Vietnam) inhabit the area, where the Kinh accounts for 70% of the population and the remaining 30% belongs to the other 48 minority groups, including 12.9% Êđê, 3.3% M'Nông, Thái, Tày, etc. These groups also preserve a variety of unique ethnic cultural values, with one UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list member – the *Cultural Space of Gong Culture* in the Vietnam Highlands, 32 historical cultural sites, and more than seven festivals from the 49 minority groups residing in the area (Duong, 2020). The outstanding natural resources of the region are Yok Đôn and Chư Yang Sin national parks, and five other



Fig. 4.1. The location of Đắk Lắk province and the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Map courtesy of Thuy T. Duong.

protected areas, preserving unique tropical flora and rare animals. Basaltic eruptions have also left traces in numerous volcanoes and caves. The resulting volcanic soil and mild plateau climate make it favourable for the region to develop a wide range of agricultural products, including high-value perennial crops. The mountainous and plateau terrain upstream of the Sêrêpôk, Ba, Ea H'leo rivers create 17 waterfalls, in addition to the system of volcanoes and caves. On the basis of these resources Đắk Lắk's Tourism Development Plan in 2016–2020 (Đaklak's People's Committee,

2012) identifies four major types of niche sustainable tourism as discussed below.

Major Forms of Sustainable Tourism Considered for Planning

Ecotourism

Vietnam Tourism Law (GOV, 2017) defines ecotourism as a form of tourism that takes place in natural settings intertwined with local cultural

identity, involves local communities, and engages educational activities for environment protection. In the national tourism development strategy, ecotourism is considered to be the most important approach to navigating the development of sustainable tourism (see Chapter 6, this volume on ecotourism in Vietnam's protected areas). On the one hand, ecotourism in many cases has contributed to the conservation of nature, where tourism activities take place, and to the conservation of local culture by creating sustainable livelihoods (i.e. financial incentives) for local communities in the area. Ecotourism can also help to raise tourist awareness of environmental and cultural sustainability via educational elements of the activities (Buckley, 2009; KC *et al.*, 2020). On the other hand, as ecotourism relies heavily on natural resources and opens up environmentally sensitive areas to tourists, poorly planned and managed ecotourism can create many negative impacts. These range from overcrowding, pollution of air/water, disturbing local wildlife, flora and fauna to the destruction of the whole delicate ecological system (e.g. Boracay island, the Philippines) (Chirenje, 2017). There may also be potential power conflicts between external developers and local communities, which result in raising the cost of living, commodification of cultures, and displacing indigenous people out of their ancestral lands (Valle-García, 2014). With its richness of natural resources, ecotourism is on the top of the range of tourism products being proposed for Đắk Lắk.

Wellness tourism

Wellness tourism engages travellers in various physical, psychological or spiritual activities (e.g. yoga, meditation, body massage, spa) in order to enhance their health and well-being. The global wellness tourism market has grown to US\$639 billion in 2017 and has become more popular in Vietnam in the last decade (Vietnamnews, 2019). This research defines wellness tourism in its 'green' manifestation, intertwining wellness-seeking motivations in an ecotourism setting, the so-called eco-wellness tourism. Eco-wellness tourism is defined as tourism activities utilizing natural resources (e.g. forest and fresh/mineral water, fresh climate and clean environment) for health enhancement and stress relief. Hence

similar issues to ecotourism can also be observed in eco-wellness tourism, especially in relation to impacts to the environment and the responsible behaviours of tourism suppliers and tourists. In the context of mountainous regions, land/spatial suitability and the proper selection of potential areas for wellness tourism are also important to ensure the success of this tourism niche (Pan *et al.*, 2019). The topography and diversity of natural resources and favourable climatic conditions make this option of development feasible for the province.

Cultural tourism

Cultural tourism is defined by UNWTO (2017) as 'a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination'. In Vietnam, cultural tourism is seen as tourism which takes advantage of cultural diversity and uniqueness and contributes to the preservation and promotion of traditional culture as specified in *Vietnam Tourism Law* (GOV, 2017). These positive impacts can be achieved through the inter- and cross-cultural exchanges which can promote cultural understanding and increase community pride, and the provision of economic/social incentives for the revitalization of cultural traditions and practices (e.g. traditional handicrafts and performances) (Esman, 1984; Kumar, 2017). Cultural tourism is extremely relevant to Đắk Lắk, as diverse minority ethnic cultures (both tangible and intangible) are distinguished attractions of the Central Highlands of Vietnam. However, the utilization of culture as a tourism resource may lead to misrepresentation or commodification of local cultures, a loss of authenticity and reinforcing stereotypes if it is not planned and managed properly (Macleod, 2006; Tolkach and Pratt, 2019).

Agri-tourism

Agri-tourism utilizes the agricultural resources available for leisure activities via the involvement of and interaction with local farmers. This form of tourism brings economic benefits

to local communities and raises awareness of agricultural activities among visitors. Mostly taking place in rural areas and contributing to diversify local income, agri-tourism in developing countries is often linked to a pro-poor tourism approach, which aims to increase 'net' tourism benefits to the economically poor population (Phi *et al.*, 2018). In principle, agri-tourism creates value-added agricultural products and can take place at small scales ranging from households to cooperatives, agricultural villages and fields that directly involve local farmers (peasants) in an area. Regardless of the scale, for agri-tourism to be successful, there needs to be good coordination among suppliers of agri-tourism products and services (beyond individual actions) in order to develop strong links between tourism activities and specific resources in local ecosystems and cultural identity (Contini *et al.*, 2009).

To what extent do these four proposed types of tourism match the geographical resources and current tourism activities in our study area? Without precise understanding of the resource-development matching in Đắk Lắk, spatial planning can be hindered in its effectiveness in guiding future tourism development.

Study Methods

The current study utilized geographical surveys using quantitative assessment tools and geographic information system (GIS) methods. Accordingly, the geographical survey method was employed in Study I and the quantitative survey method was employed in Study II. The combination of these methods is justified for its relevance to tackling the problems in managing resources and preserving natural and cultural values while allowing tourism to develop its full potential. In Study I, MapInfo 12.0 software was used to project a tourism resource map matching the resources and potential tourism activities. This map provides a visual zoning solution being used for the visitor and resident survey in the next step. Data input for this GIS analysis was collected from secondary data provided by local officers and the first author's fieldwork. Then the characteristics and conditions of each zone were matched to relevant

types of sustainable tourism which the province has considered to develop. The outcomes of Study I were presented in maps of resource zones and resource-product matching tables. In Study II, drawing on the zoning solutions from Study I, the researchers developed a questionnaire to collect tourists' feedback on geographical conditions and resources for tourism in these geographical zones. Survey questions used a five-point Likert scale. Sources for questionnaire items are shown in Table 4.1. Visitors were surveyed at different destinations in Đắk Lắk province. In 2018, 468 survey responses from tourists were collected. In addition to the tourist survey, surveys of locals were also conducted that targeted groups who provide accommodation, elephant riding services, kayaking, small travel agencies and souvenir shops (197 respondents). At the end of 2018, a total of 665 survey questionnaires were collected from locals in Đắk Lắk. Survey data were analysed using SPSS 20 software. In the final stage of analysis, the findings from Study I and Study II were integrated when the current tourism products were projected on the backdrop of resource assessments to highlight possible outcomes towards maximization of resource potentials while accomplishing the goal of sustainable tourism development. Consequently, suggestions for tourism planning adjustments were then drawn from the analysis.

Findings

Study I. Geographical zones and tourism resources

Based on assessment of resource distribution and condition in the province using geographical zoning methods, possible resources for tourism development were stratified into five zones (see Fig. 4.2).

Zone 1: Semi-Plateau of Buôn Đôn – Ea Súp

The area spans over two municipalities of Buôn Đôn and Ea Súp. The Êđê group accounts for 70% of the ethnic minorities' population, in addition to a small number of H'Rê, M'Nông, H'Mông and Nùng inhabiting the area. The main livelihoods in the region are agriculture, forestry and

Table 4.1. Geographic conditions and resources visitors were asked about in the survey questions.*
Compiled by the authors.

Items for consideration in the questionnaire	Source for items
Evaluation of tourism resources	
Diverse geographical terrain	Wang <i>et al.</i> (2015)
Fresh and cool climate	Yan <i>et al.</i> (2017)
Diverse biological resources	Philemon (2015)
Green, clean environment	Yan <i>et al.</i> (2017)
Effectiveness of biodiversity conservation	Generated from local resource survey
Attractiveness of elephant tourism activities	Philemon (2015)
Special cultural, historical and festival values	Philemon (2015); Yan <i>et al.</i> (2017)
Noise pollution in tourist season	Generated from local resource survey
Conservation of local culture and handicrafts	Generated from local resource survey
Crowding in festive seasons	Generated from local resource survey
Monotonous tourism products	Generated from local resource survey
Losing traditional values	Generated from local resource survey
Evaluation of tourism facilities	
Clean water supply	Tosun (1998)
Convenient and large-scale parking	Tosun (1998)
Quality of transportation	Tosun (1998)
Quality of restaurants	Tosun (1998)
Convenience and variety of souvenirs	Tosun (1998)
Quality of amusement and entertainment	Tosun (1998)
Quality of healthcare facilities	Yaakop (2013)
Priority for protection of resources and environment	
Elephant protection	Generated from local resource survey
Historical and cultural heritage conservation	Castellani and Sala (2010)
Conservation of ethnic culture in Êđê, M'Nông, Gia Rai villages	Generated from local resource survey
Biodiversity conservation in national parks and nature reserves	Castellani and Sala (2010)
Waste collection	Castellani and Sala (2010)
Environment education	Castellani and Sala (2010)
Periodical treatment for environment	Castellani and Sala (2010)

*Tourists who took part in the survey were asked to rank each item using a five-point Likert scale.

tourism. The largest national park in Vietnam, Yok Đôn is home to many globally endangered species and has the richest bird fauna in Indochina. The region's biological diversity and its natural features, and the Êđê group's cultural traditions and lifestyles are the background to some harmonious human–nature activities

such as taming elephants, housing architecture and costumes.

Zone 2: Buôn Ma Thuột Plateau

This is the third largest volcanic plateau in the Central Highlands and has an area of



Fig. 4.2. Map of the five geographical zones in Đắk Lắk province. Map courtesy of Thuy T. Duong.

3000 km². From Buôn Ma Thuột, visitors can get around to other destinations. In terms of ethnic diversity, the dominant group, the Kinh inhabits the urban area of the plateau. The Êđê ethnic group originally settled there many generations ago, living in villages ringed around suburban areas. The traditional arts, performance and lifestyles of diverse ethnic minorities are major features for the annual Central Highland Gong Festival (see Fig. 4.3). Climate and soil conditions of the area are suitable for perennial crops such as coffee, pepper, avocado and cashews, the major livelihood for inhabitants of the area. In addition, the Ea Ral Habitat Conservation Area is another potential site for ecotourism activities.

Zone 3: Low Altitude Mountains of Chư Dju – M'Đrăk Highland

The main ethnic groups living in the area are the Gia Rai, M'Nông, Kinh, Mưòng, Dao, Nùng and H'Mông peoples. Major economic activities are afforestation and agricultural production (planting perennial crops). There is Ea Sô Nature Reserve (27,800 ha in Ea Kar district), suitable for developing ecotourism, while coffee and pepper plantations have potential for agri-tourism.

Zone 4: Central Plain of Krông Ana – Krông Păk – Ea Kar

This region is located in between Buôn Ma Thuột Plateau and the high-altitude mountains of Chư Yang Sin. Its topography is made up of accumulated deposits and eroded river valleys and hills. The distribution of ethnic groups is diverse throughout the area with the M'Nông in Krông Ana and Lak, the Kinh and Nùng in Krông Bông and the Êđê in Ea Kar. Scenic landscapes, festivals and elephant riding activities are among the resources for tourism development. In this lowland area, wet-rice agriculture and aquaculture are the major economic activities. The area has diverse terrain and attractions with more than ten water landscapes (waterfalls and lakes), such as the Đray Nur – Đray Sáp Thượng Waterfall and Lắk Lake. This region also has a pleasant and fresh climate.

Zone 5: The Average – Low Altitude Mountains of Chư Yang Sin – Chu Ru

The Chư Yang Sin Mountain (2442 m, the second roof of the Central Highlands), and many mountain peaks higher than 2000 m (Chư Mư, Vọng Phu, etc.) are found in this region. The cultural values link to the main ethnic groups living



Fig. 4.3. An ethnic festival. Photo courtesy of Thuy T. Duong.

along the mountainous parts of the area. The lowland area is the home of the Êđê, M'Nông, Kinh and M'ông. Meanwhile, the less populous groups such as the Tày, Thái and Gia Rai live at altitudes below 1000 m, and the H'Mông people live in areas 1100–1500 m high. The main livelihood of locals depends on forestry (forest plantation and production), cultivation of industrial and food crops (sugarcane, cassava, maize, wet rice) and aquaculture. Forest conservation and reforestation are given priority. The evergreen forest in many mountainous areas offers a pleasant climate for ecotourism as well as wellness-ecotourism.

Matching geographical zones to tourism types

In analysing the concentration of tourism activities by the five geographical zones, the authors identified the following patterns:

1. Agricultural tourism takes place at coffee farms, fruit and bonsai gardens in Buôn Ma Thuột city and Cư M'Gar (Zone 2). Agritourism activities (Zone 1) add secondary
2. Wellness tourism is being experienced mostly in the area of Lắk Lake (Zone 4) and in spa resorts located in Buôn Ma Thuột city (Zone 2). At a smaller scale, there are resorts in the low mountain area of Zone 3.
3. Ecotourism is the major type of tourism that utilizes the resources of various water-front landscapes, national parks and reserves. The sites for ecotourism are: Yok Đôn National Park and Buôn Đôn Ecotourism Area (Zone 1), trekking in Chư Yang Sin National Park and Nam Kar Nature Reserve (Zone 5), Lắk Lake Ecotourism Area, Dray Nur – Dray Sáp Thượng Waterfall (Zone 4), and Akô Đông Ecotourism, Dầu Nguồn, Đồi Thông, Bùn Nước Amarin, Suối Ông, M'Đrăk (Zones 2 and 3).
4. Cultural tourism has its typical products including the *Cultural Space of Gong Culture* in the Central Highlands designated as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list member, historical relics, ethnic

activities in sightseeing of cultural landscapes, such as short visits to coffee farms, orchids and ornamental plant gardens.

Table 4.2. Matching geographical zones with types of tourism. Compiled by the authors.

Geographical zones	Types of tourism			
	Agri-tourism	Wellness tourism	Ecotourism	Cultural tourism
Zone 1: Semi-Plateau of Buôn Đôn – Ea Súp	○		○	○
Zone 2: Plateau of Buôn Ma Thuột	○	○		○
Zone 3: Low Altitude Mountains of Chư Dju – M’Đrăk Highland		○	○	
Zone 4: Central Plain of Krông Ana – Krông Păk – Ea Kar		○	○	○
Zone 5: The Average – Low Altitude Mountains of Chư Yang Sin – Chu Ru			○	

festivals, and leisure activities engaging with elephants, and unique cultures of the Êđê, M’Nông and Gia Rai’s ethnics across all zones. Currently, cultural tourism has only been developed in Zones 1, 2 and 4. The matching of geographical zone and types of tourism is shown in Table 4.2.

Current tourism activities are highly concentrated in the urban area (Zone 2), where all four forms of tourism are present in the city of Buôn Ma Thuột (cultural tourism) and its suburban area (ecotourism, wellness and agri-tourism). Concentration of tourism activities is found in Zone 1, where Buôn Đôn offers cultural tourism and the surrounding areas have developed ecotourism and agri-tourism. In Zone 4, the Central Plain, tourism development has taken place around the Lắk Lake. Currently, limited ecotourism activities have been initiated in the Ea Sô Nature Reserve (Zone 3) and Chư

Yang Sin National Park (Zone 5). In other words, potential resources in Zone 3 and Zone 5 have not yet been utilized for tourism development. In the meantime, tourism activities in Zones 1, 2 and 4 are rather simple and repetitive.

Study II. The reality of tourism development across the five zones

Tourist evaluation of resources

Domestic tourists accounted for more than 95% of the total number of visitors in 2018. International tourists increased at a slower pace compared to domestic tourists. Between 2000 and 2018, international tourists increased from 7,825 to 41,752, but accounted for only 4.8% of the total number of visitors to the area (see Fig. 4.4). Across the five zones, tourists

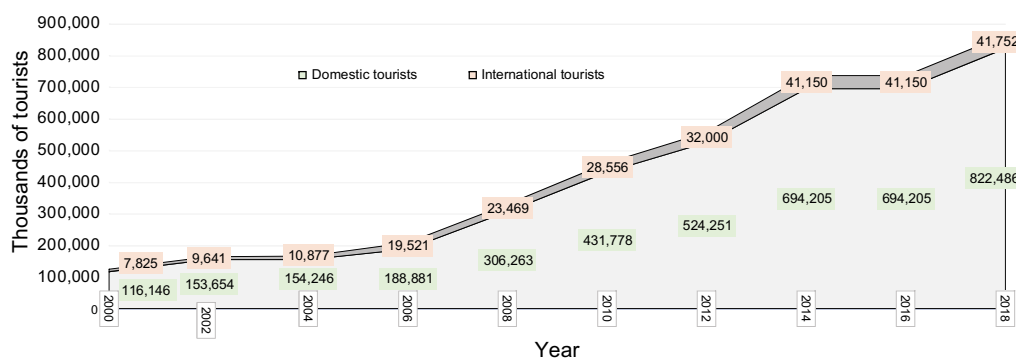


Fig. 4.4. Number of visitors to Đắk Lắk (2000–2018). Pink values are the number of international tourists, green values are the number of domestic tourists. From Daklak’s People’s Committee, 2019.

Table 4.3. Tourist evaluation of resources. Compiled by the authors from fieldwork data in 2018 in Đắk Lắk.

Evaluation criteria*	Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3	Zone 4	Zone 5
Diverse geographical terrain	3.48	4.39	4.05	4.53	4.68
Fresh and cool climate	2.65	4.08	4.35	4.05	4.69
Diverse biological resources	4.39	2.04	4.13	4.19	4.72
Green, clean environment	4.02	4.01	4.06	4.06	4.32
Effectiveness of biodiversity conservation	4.59	3.08	3.93	3.97	4.58
Attractiveness of elephant tourism activities	4.76	2.56	2.75	4.67	4.06
Special cultural, historical and festival values	3.27	4.86	3.97	4.39	3.98
Noise pollution in the tourist season	3.06	4.39	2.69	3.78	3.80
Effectiveness of the conservation of local culture and craft villages	3.87	4.82	3.00	4.16	3.01
Crowding in festive seasons	4.88	4.75	2.98	4.35	2.95
Monotonous tourism products	2.04	2.30	4.38	3.86	4.29
Losing traditional values	4.62	2.46	2.80	3.09	2.38

*Rating on a five-point Likert scale.

concentrate in Zone 2, in particular Buôn Ma Thuột city welcomes 30% of the total visitor arrivals. Zone 1 (mainly in Buôn Đôn) received around 9% of the overall visitor volume. The Lắk Lake and Dray Nur Waterfall in Zone 4 shared only 5% of the total visitor arrivals in 2017. In the period from 2005 to 2019, even though the length of stay of domestic tourists incrementally increased only by 4.83%, the daily expenditure increased by 300% from Vietnamese dong (VND) 350,000/day in 2005 to VND 1,050,000/day in 2019. International tourist expenditure doubled from US\$30 (approximately VND 600,000/day) in 2005 to US\$66 (VND 1,320,000/day) in 2019.

Visitor evaluation of tourism resources in the five zones was conducted in 2018 using a set of questions about the geographic conditions and resources shown in Table 4.1. The results of the visitor survey are shown in Table 4.3.

- Zone 1: Tourists are interested in tourism activities linked to elephants (4.76), biological diversity (4.39) and the environment (4.02). Visitors rate the effectiveness of biodiversity conservation at a relatively high level (4.59). However, visitors are

highly concerned at the deterioration of traditional values (4.62) and overcrowding in the festive seasons (4.88).

- Zone 2: The value of ethnic culture, traditional craft villages, unique festivals are the main attractions (4.86) in addition to the basalt plateau (4.392). However, noise and overcrowding during the tourist season (4.75) are major concerns for tourists.
- Zone 3: The region attracts tourists by its cool, fresh climate (4.35), the Ea Sô Nature Reserve (4.13), the waterfall system (4.05) and the pristine environment (4.06). However, tourism has yet to be developed in the region due to a shortage of investment and promotion.
- Zone 4: Visitors are attracted by its diverse terrain with water landscapes, pleasant climate and the green environment in addition to the unique culture of the M'Nông ethnic (4.39) group, and elephant-related leisure activities (4.67).
- Zone 5: The place is endowed with mountains that are attractive because of a typical mountain ecosystem (4.72), cool and fresh climate (4.69), and biodiversity

Table 4.4. Tourist evaluation of facilities. Compiled by the authors from fieldwork data in 2018 in Đắk Lắk.

Evaluation criteria*	Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3	Zone 4	Zone 5
Clean water supply	3.06	4.07	3.97	4.59	4.01
Convenient and large-scale parking	4.54	4.03	3.59	3.87	3.01
Quality of shopping	4.02	4.67	3.88	4.15	3.02
Quality of restaurants	4.28	4.75	3.04	4.39	4.11
Convenient shopping and variety of souvenirs	4.14	4.46	3.76	4.06	3.23
Good quality of amusement and entertainment facilities	3.58	4.36	2.97	3.40	2.95
Quality of healthcare facilities	2.79	4.25	3.48	4.17	2.98

*Rating on a five-point Likert scale.

conservation and environmental protection (4.58), and the mountains are ideal locations for developing ecotourism and resorts. Two protected areas of Chu Yang Sin National Park and Nam Kar Nature Reserve are well reserved, however, these are rather difficult for tourists to gain access to, thus tourism products remain relatively simple (4.29).

The survey results show that Zones 1, 2 and 4 generally received higher scores on the quality of tourism facilities, while in Zones 3 and 5 the facilities are underdeveloped (see Table 4.4). Except for the urban area (Zone 2) that has established entertainment and healthcare facilities, other areas received relatively low scores on these items. The areas with great potential (Zone 3 and 5) thanks to the mountainous terrain, nevertheless still suffer from accessibility problems, hence the investment in tourism facilities has yet to be encouraged.

Local evaluation of economic and socio-cultural impacts of tourism

COMMERCIAL SERVICES. Households participating in the survey are those who sell food (63.3%), beverages (30.3%), and souvenirs and clothing (13.3%). The shopkeepers live in Buôn Ma Thuột city (23.3%), Lắk district (20%), Ea Kar district (10%), Buôn Hồ town (10%), and a smaller number residing outside the province. The tourist services offer opportunities for local employment especially for women. Opening a shop requires micro-finance, where 73.3% of the respondents state that they only need VND 5–10 million, while 37.02% need less than VND 5 million

(see Fig. 4.5). Local income, however, varies. These micro-businesses attract the participation of ethnic minority groups. Of the respondents 46.7% state that income from tourism accounts for less than 40% of the household income, 33.3% of the respondents answer that this proportion is 40–70%, and 16.7% of respondents admit that 80% of the total household income is from commercial tourism services. During the festive and tourist season in summer, shops selling food and beverages in major tourist areas (e.g. Buôn Ma Thuột city, Buôn Đôn district, Krông Ana district, Lắk district) generate an income of VND 15–25 million/month in 1–3 months/year, but souvenir shops bring in VND 5–10 million/month. However, shops in remote areas, such as Zone 4 of Cư M'gar district, and M'Drăk district, the shopkeepers benefit less than VND 2 million/month.

ACCOMMODATION SERVICES. The price of accommodation in Đắk Lắk ranges from VND 180,000 to VND 2,000,000/room/night and the price is increased by 1.5/2 times during festival seasons and in the first 3 months of each year. The number of employees working for accommodation services varies from two to three employees at a motel to 20–40 employees at high-end hotels and resorts. Accommodation services at Đắk Lắk are gradually integrating events (68%), healthcare services (25.3%), entertainment (26.5%) and shopping (14.28%) onto their portfolios. However, only 20% of all accommodation services cooperate with tourism agencies, restaurants and destination management boards. Supporting products provided by the accommodation sector are cuisines using local specialties

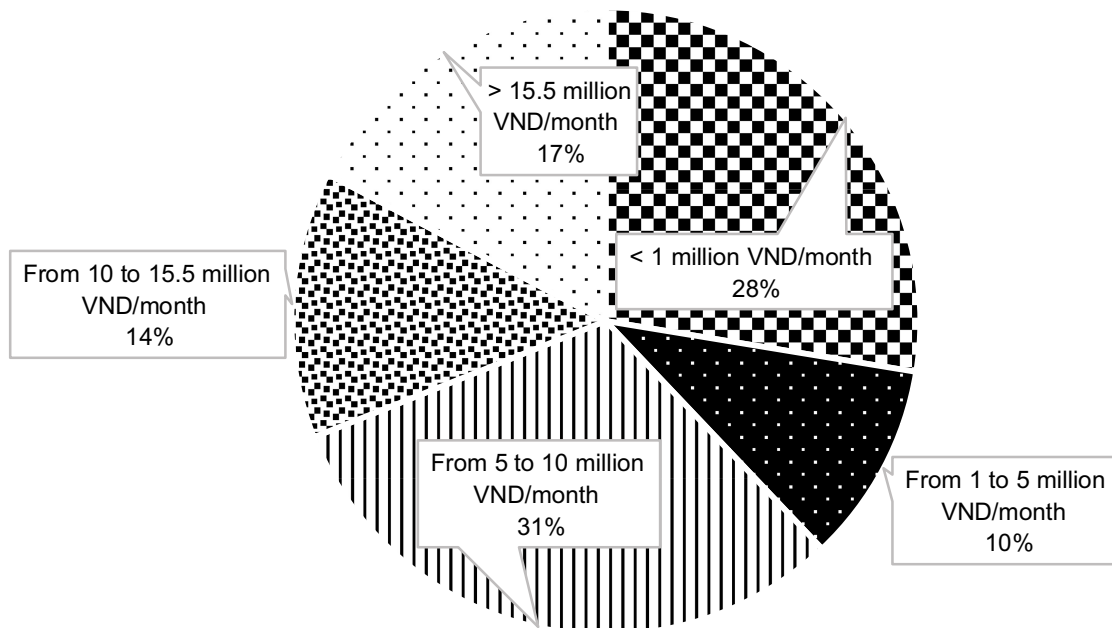


Fig. 4.5. The distribution of income from tourism. Authors' compilation from fieldwork data in 2018 in Đăk Lăk.

(33%), liquor (21.4%) and ethnic cultural items. The challenges that accommodation providers are facing include lack of visitors after the first 3 months of the year (100%), and lack of high-quality labour in the tourist season (92%). Local accommodation providers would like to have support in tourism promotion (100%), training (75%) and more incentives to expand their businesses (67%).

Homestay owners who participated in the survey are those who live in the ethnic villages of Êđê, M'Nông, Gia Rai, Dao, Nùng and Thái, found in Buôn Ma Thuột city (28.5%), and in remote areas of Lăk, Buôn Đôn and Cư M'Gar districts (14.28%). The price of homestay ranges from VND 150,000/night to VND 500–600,000/night and varies in accordance with room space, location and target customers. Homestays in ethnic villages offer an authentic cultural experience to foreign visitors, but a lack of foreign language skills, and certification issued by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism are major barriers for expansion. Therefore, 86.9% of all homestay owners expect to receive further training on foreign language and tourism-related skills (75.8%) in addition to financial support (59.2%).

ELEPHANT RIDING SERVICES. This service has attracted many tourists in Buôn Đôn, Lăk Lake and Nam Kar Nature Reserve. The elephants have fairly long-life expectancy (45.5% of all the elephants are 50–85 years old, while 10% are about 10–12 years old). Their main food is elephant grass, bananas, sugarcane, maize (corn) bran and the price for one serving is around VND 200,000–250,000 per elephant. Most of the food (90%) is grown by the family, while the remaining 10% is bought from other people in the same village. The fee for riding elephants is about VND 150,000–250,000 per person.

Survey results show that 75% of the elephants serve between 20 and 30 tourists/day. The elephants are overworked, easily get tired and suffer from diseases in their digestive and visual organs. A village revealed that for many years, there have been no baby elephants born naturally in that village. Local households recognize the issues of animal abuse, when they suggest that 'elephants should not overwork', and emphasize 'the need to have financial subsidies for local people to pay for elephant food', and demand 'a particular policy that protects elephants'. In the long-run, elephant ageing and raising concerns on animal ethical issues

Table 4.5. Local evaluation of the priority for conservation and protection of resources (expressed as a percentage of respondents who took part in the survey). Compiled by the authors from fieldwork data in 2018 in Đắk Lắk.

Criteria	Very few priorities	Less priority	Medium priority	Quite a priority	Very high priority
Elephant protection	–	–	2.74	18.68	78.58
Historical and cultural heritage conservation	–	10.43	24.17	57.14	8.26
Conservation of ethnic culture in Ede, M'Nông, Gia Rai villages	0	12.63	22.52	28.02	36.83
Biodiversity conservation in national parks and nature reserves	0.54	2.74	13.18	42.85	40.69
Waste collection	–	4.9	25.27	45.6	24.23
Environment education	–	8.2	38.46	36.81	16.53
Periodical treatment for environment	1.64	15.38	28.02	39.01	15.95

have meant that the elephant riding service has declined significantly and might disappear in the near future. Lately, the elephant riding service, however, has been suspended.

LOCAL AWARENESS OF THE NEED FOR RESOURCE CONSERVATION AND PROTECTION. Table 4.5 shows the local awareness of the need for environment protection. The results show that protecting elephants is highly prioritized (97.26%), followed by protecting the ecosystem in national parks and protected areas (83.54%), preserving cultural values (64.85%), and conserving cultural and historical heritage (65.4%). Collecting waste is also prioritized (69.83%) but periodical environment treatment is still limited (17.02% answered that this is not a priority). Meanwhile, the effectiveness of campaigns on environmental conservation remains low.

Discussion

Đắk Lắk is considered to be a relatively remote and not-easy-to-access area for international tourists when the only airport in the province operates domestic routes. International tourism accounts for less than 5% of the total visitor arrivals to the area, therefore, Đắk Lắk remains primarily a domestic destination. Moving in the direction of sustainability, four forms of tourism are planned for the area. Spatial analysis was carried out to classify possible resources for tourism development into five zones and

match these to appropriate forms of alternative tourism. The tourist opinions on evaluation of resources and local survey of tourism product offerings that were conducted in the five zone areas provide a testimony for the planning of tourism development.

Although Đắk Lắk's resources for tourism are abundant and varied, with a great potential to accommodate all four alternative forms of tourism, the current state of tourism development shows imbalance in distribution and inefficiencies in utilizing the resources. Tourism activities are mainly concentrated in Zone 2, around Buôn Ma Thuột city, and expand only to the nearby area of Zone 1 and to some limited extent in Zone 4. While visitor spending has increased, perhaps because of the relatively high rate of inflation in the country, the length of stay has not increased over the years, showing that tourism activities remain unattractive and do not contribute to extending tourist stay in the area.

The unique *cultural tourism* experience by interactions with elephants, however, has been at the edge of extinction. First, the elephants' natural reproductive capacity is gradually declining, while the number of domesticated elephants is decreasing. Second, Yok Đôn National Park has signed an agreement with the Animals Asia Foundation not to promote the elephant riding service; visitors can only 'watch' the elephants. Đắk Lắk has one UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage item – the *Cultural Space of Gong Culture*, but this has yet to be utilized effectively

for branding regional cultural tourism. While all five zones have rich resources derived from the 49 ethnic groups living there, cultural tourism is still in its rudimentary development. There are limited homestay places where visitors can integrate and experience ethnic cultures. There are no cultural centres or regional museums where tourists can learn about the ethnic groups living in the area, to appreciate and consequently to experience them. Much work remains to restore, embellish and build cultural institutions in the central villages of the ethnic minorities Êđê, M'Nông and Gia Rai.

The option of *ecotourism* seems to be dominant; all five zones show diverse resources along with their unique terrain and topography, from plains to semi-highlands, and highlands that have low-to-average mountain ranges with different climate zones. Currently ecotourism is concentrated in Zone 1 near the Sêrêpôk river and several waterfalls. The utilization of such mountain resources for tourism remains limited though. The development of sustainable tourism that utilizes natural resources, however, is facing other challenges. Among these are the

hydropower dam construction projects altering water flow in rivers, deforestation in the upstream areas causing droughts and lowering the water level in many lakes, making the region suffer shortages of water. Furthermore, illegal deforestation has long been a threat to biodiversity. Also, the tourism industry's competitiveness is relatively low compared to other industries such as cultivating and processing agricultural products, therefore local tourism attracts little attention in terms of both capital and policies.

Resources are under-valued for *agri-tourism*. In all five zones, there are significant agricultural production sites for perennial crops and other unique, high-value agricultural products, such as coffee (see Fig. 4.6). However, to date the limited agri-tourism is being offered mainly in Zones 1 and 2. These activities have the potential to be established in other zones, where local communities can benefit from value-adding to agricultural products from this type of tourism. Effective branding for agri-tourism can utilize Buôn Ma Thuột's self-claimed status as the coffee capital of Vietnam. The Buôn Ma Thuột Coffee Festival has been organized for 15



Fig. 4.6. A coffee farm. Photo courtesy of Thuy T. Duong.



Fig. 4.7. Geographical zones and tourism resources. Map courtesy of Thuy T. Duong.

years and could be used for agri-tourism branding focusing on coffee culture and art.

The Central Highlands, with a favourable climate and mountain environment for *wellness tourism*, have yet to be utilized for development. Wellness tourism could utilize various waterfront resources, such as waterfalls, lakes and forests. The mountain areas, with a cool climate and diverse ethnic cultures, have the potential to be developed into mountain resorts for wellness and cultural tourism. Not too far from Hồ Chí Minh city, Đắk Lắk could be an ideal location for wellness tourism if resources are properly utilized. These opportunities have been highlighted in research on mountain development in South-east Asia (Jones *et al.*, 2021). Mapping geographical resources and potential forms of tourism is shown in Fig. 4.7.

Conclusions

Overall, Đắk Lắk wants to shift tourism away from urban centres by planning for alternative forms of tourism utilizing natural and cultural resources. However, the current state of tourism development is still very much dependent on mass tourism for the domestic market. This

trend is obvious when tourists stay for relatively short periods, concentrate in very few areas, and participate in a limited range of activities. Tourism products are similar in types and forms. While niche tourism has received attention, the demand for niche tourism products such as agri-tourism, wellness and ecotourism has not yet been researched properly. The current stage of alternative tourism, however, links to mass domestic tourists coming in the 3-month festive seasons that echo Harrison's (2015) contention that alternative tourism is dependent on mass tourism.

The tourism planning and policies in Đắk Lắk reflect all four points mentioned by Jenkins (2015). First, only central and municipal governments plan for tourism development, often in coordination with Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (VNAT). This centralized role and excessive planning approach for tourism was identified also in the World Bank report (2019). Second, because spatial planning is researched by scientists under government command, the type, scale and location of tourism development are decided by them to ensure the sustainability of tourism development. Ideally for the government, development should optimize economic returns

and minimize negative socio-cultural and environmental impacts. The current situation of tourism in Đắk Lắk shows that some areas are excessively developed, while other areas with resource abundance are relatively under-developed. However, regional development has deeply been influenced by political considerations, thus, the decision to develop is not in the hands of local administrators. Third, the development of tourism is subject to the availability of the necessary infrastructure. The mountain areas are relatively poor in facilities, making it

difficult to attract and utilize resources there. Fourth, the question of who should benefit from tourism remains unanswered. Although ethnic minorities are encouraged and given opportunities to participate in the tourism supply chain, the major barriers of training and language proficiency may hinder their accessibility and participation in tourism services. Moreover, tourism only contributes 1.5% of the GDP for Đắk Lắk, much less than agriculture. Thus, shifting from agriculture and forestry to tourism still has a long way to go.

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