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Sustainable Tourism Practices in Vietnam: The Influence of Institutions and Case Study of Sapa's Growing Tourism Industry

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**Sustainable Tourism Practices in Vietnam:
The Influence of Institutions and Case Study of Sapa's Growing Tourism Industry**



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Abstract

As tourism becomes increasingly important to Vietnam's economy, and subsequently the development of the country, it will become ever more critical to examine the impact of tourism, including both the positive and negative consequences. The intention of this paper is to continue the analysis of the tourism industry in Vietnam; in particular, this paper considers sustainable tourism, which can be defined as minimizing impact on local culture and environment while simultaneously resulting in economic gains and employment, all while operating in a way that can be continued in the future. As Vietnam is rich in diverse cultures and natural landscapes, the sustainability of tourism is vital when considering the industry as it currently exists.

This paper considers the efforts and impact of two institutions that influence the awareness and adoption of sustainable tourism practices in Vietnam: government and universities. The government is considered as it holds the exclusive responsibility to set laws for tourism and determine new policies. Educational institutions are also considered valuable in the future of tourism practices, as universities are increasingly building their programs in tourism studies that prepare students for future managerial roles in the industry. Finally, this paper examines Sapa, a well-known tourist destination located in the mountainous Lao Cai Province. Particularly, this research focuses on tourism practices that currently exist there and how they have been impacted by local institutions.

This paper concludes with suggestions for further research in the field. The research discussed in this paper is based on only one month of investigation, and there are many areas mentioned which can and should be studied on a more detailed level.

Keywords: tourism, sustainability, culture, environment, institutions, government

Introduction

Tourists are irresponsible. They go along, in their “march of stupidity”, without any notion of accountability for their large, ruinous footprints: the mark of their ignorance and disregard. “[They] are an army of fools, wearing bright polyesters, riding camels, taking pictures of each other, haggard, dysenteric, thirsty” (DeLillo, 2011); at least, that’s how they’re described by esteemed writer, Don DeLillo, in his commentary on contemporary society, *The Names*. He’s not alone in this perception. Tourism has been referred to as an ugly business, one with corrosive tendencies. Indeed, scholars have indicated that the negative connotation associated with tourism has several sources: the stereotype of passivity and unwillingness to adapt to local culture, mass markets that give the tourist the same experience they could receive at home, and the creation of “tourist traps” (Smith 362). But these so-called tourist traps are part of an incredibly fast-growing and profitable industry around the globe. Last year, Vietnam was the host of a record breaking 12.9 million international tourists, representing a 29.1% percent increase from the previous year (Ngan).

It’s no surprise that Vietnam had nearly 13 million foreigners come looking for adventure and vacation with the industry recently seeing such exceptional growth; however, tourism as an economic spearhead is relatively new for Vietnam. In order to understand tourism as it currently exists in Vietnam, it is necessary to recognize the changes it has undergone in the last 50 years in the context of Vietnam’s history.

Prior to the end of the Vietnam-US War, Vietnam was divided into two regions with different political systems. During this time, international tourism was largely limited to delegates who were visiting the country for political purposes (Dao 3). Though the North had established the Vietnam Tourist Company in 1960 under the Ministry of Foreign affairs, foreign

tourists traveling for leisure or business, as well as domestic tourists, were rare (Dao 3). Undoubtedly, this time of extremely tight control over tourism activities by the government, coupled with the fact that Vietnam was in wartime, made for a very poor environment in which the tourism industry could develop. When the disastrous Vietnam-US War ended, Vietnam was ravaged by war, isolated from many western countries, and very poor, all of which were unfavorable conditions for promoting tourism (Dao 3).

A few years after the war, in 1978, the government established the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, VNAT, as a way of managing tourism activities nation-wide; however, the few foreign tourists that did visit were predominantly coming from the Soviet Union (Dao 3). Tourism remained an idle industry.

The Doi Moi Era reforms changed everything. In 1986, Vietnam shifted from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented one, and finally tourism was increasingly recognized as a strategic economic sector (Dao 4). Tourism expanded dramatically in the early 1990s, especially as the government allowed more foreign direct investment, FDI, which substantially built up the industry (Haley 569). The *Law on Foreign Investment* was officially approved in 1987, and luxury, large-scale hotels with international standards of services quickly emerged (Dao 4). Several years later, in 1994, the tourism industry saw two more momentous changes. First, the US embargo on Vietnam was lifted, allowing for many more tourists, especially those seeking business and investment opportunities (Dao 8). Moreover, VNAT was no longer solely responsible for managing all tourism activities within Vietnam, and the industry opened up to a variety of different enterprises, including: private-owned, family-run, collective, and foreign-invested operations (Dao 9). The government took on a more policy-oriented, regulator role while the tourism industry exploded as a major economic sector in the relatively new competitive market.

The numbers provide evidence of this rapid growth: in 1990, there were only about 25,000 foreign tourists who visited Vietnam. Five years later, in 1995, that number skyrocketed to 1.35 million foreign tourists (Haley 596). Also significant was the rise in domestic tourists, from 11.2 million in 2000 to 35 million in 2013 (Dao 1). The government is eager to welcome increasing numbers of tourists, and hopes to see numbers of foreign visitors climb to 17-20 million in 2020 (Ngan).

Though sheer numbers of tourists have been the notorious focus of Vietnam's tourism strategy in the past (quantity as a primary concern, rather than quality), they're starting to gear toward other goals for the future of tourism as well. In 2005, with the passage of the *Law on Tourism* and the shift towards developing tourism as a "spearhead industry" of the economy, Vietnam began to acknowledge tourism as a tool of development and poverty alleviation (Dao 11). In order to make this possible, the *Master Plan for Tourism Development to 2020* calls for a tourism sector that is more professional, improved infrastructure and quality of services, and sustainability (Dao 6). Indeed, "the demand for sustainable, responsible, comprehensive and balanced development is emphasized" (VNAT, 2018). This final point, sustainability, is the predominant focus of this paper.

Sustainable tourism provides an advantageous and positive alternative to the "march of stupidity" that tourists are claimed to partake in. Tourists don't have to be irresponsible and the tourism industry doesn't need to sacrifice culture and the environment for economic gains. Already, Vietnam has begun implementing new policies and goals that include sustainability, and VNAT has increasingly advocated for the effective and sustainable use of resources by communities and the private sector (VNAT, 2018). Generally, in this context, sustainable tourism can be described as an industry "which is developed and maintained in an area (community, environment) in such a manner and at such a scale that it remains viable over an

indefinite period and does not degrade or alter the environment (human and physical) in which it exists to such a degree that it prohibits the successful development and wellbeing of other activities and processes” (Butler 29). However, as this paper will reveal, sustainability is a term that is currently very much up to interpretation within the tourism industry of Vietnam. Indeed, this paper examines who shaped the interpretations that currently exist, why the differences exist among the perspectives of institutions and groups of people, and how despite these differences, sustainability is clearly an emerging priority among all groups.

Methodology and Ethics

Methods

The following research was gathered over a month-long period between two regions of Vietnam: Hanoi, the capital, and Sapa, a town in the mountainous northern part of the country. As a major component of this research was to gain various perspectives, semi-structured interviews were the predominant method of obtaining information. Interview questions were prepared in advance based on the interviewee’s position and experience, but there were also questions and conversations that came up naturally in conversation. The interviews were conducted both in-person and over the phone, depending on the availability of the interviewee. Though all interviewees were Vietnamese, all of the interviews were conducted in English and did not require the use of a translator. In addition to interviews, other important methods included reviewing the literature, participant research, and observational research.

In Hanoi, the focus of the research was predominantly investigating the influence of institutions (mainly educational institutions and government) on recognizing and prioritizing the importance of sustainability in the tourism industry. In terms of the educational perspective, in order to gain an idea of what is emphasized by educators, I interviewed both deans and

professors. These individuals included Dr. Nguyen Duc Tri, Dean of Tourism Studies at the University of Economics in Ho Chi Minh City (UEH) and Dr. Long Pham Hong, Dean of Tourism Studies at the Vietnam National University's University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Hanoi (VNU USSH). Furthermore, several professors from USSH were interviewed, including Ms. Tran Thuy Duong and Dr. Hai Dinh Hong. In addition to those teaching tourism, I also interviewed over a dozen students currently studying tourism at both USSH and Hanoi University. The interviews with students were conducted in a variety of ways depending on the preference of the student: individual, group interviews, and online interviews.

Hanoi was also an opportune location to discover the government's perspective on sustainable tourism. I visited the Institute for Tourism Development Research, ITDR, which is a government body that functions as an advisory board for master planning, scientific research, and promotion strategy for tourism. There, I interviewed Ms. Mai H. Nguyen on how her institute incorporates sustainability. In Hanoi, I also had the opportunity to attend the 2018 Travel and Tourism Summit hosted by the Vietnam Economic Forum, ViEF, and the Advisory Council to the Prime Minister on Administrative Procedures Reform. The subject of this year's summit, which was the largest yet to date, was "Sustainable Development of Vietnam Tourism - Vision to 2030". Speakers included distinguished guests such as Mr. Tran Trong Kien, Chairman of the Tourism Advisory Board, and Mr. Le Quang Tung, Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism.

I also conducted a case study of sustainable tourism practices and impact in Sapa, Vietnam. I visited Sapa on three separate occasions during the course of my research and engaged in a variety of research methods. First, I conducted two in-depth, semi-structured interviews with local ethnic minority women of the Hmong group whose livelihood depends primarily on tourism activities. These women were not related and both interviews were

conducted in English. While in Sapa, I also interviewed an employee of the Sapa Tourist Information Center and took a tour of the Sapa Museum, which includes a brief history of tourism in the area. Finally, I spent time observing Sapa Town, especially near the plaza built by Sun Group, a super entertainment group in Vietnam with amusement and nature parks around the country. I observed and participated in the tourist experience by participating in a trek with a local Hmong woman through three villages with a group of other foreigners and I spent one day observing the Topas EcoLodge, a luxury lodge committed to a sustainable, environment-friendly and community-centered approach.

In both Hanoi and Sapa, I spoke to local, non-profit organizations that promote sustainable tourism. In Hanoi, I interviewed Mr. Cao Dai Hung, who has 18 years of experience working towards sustainable tourism and is currently the program officer for the GREAT Program, which stands for Gender-Responsive Equitable Agriculture and Tourism. In Sapa, I visited Sapa O'Chau, a local non-profit that advocates for and participates in sustainable development through tourism.

Ethics

Fortunately, the topic of tourism is not a very sensitive subject, but several precautions were taken in order to maintain the ethical soundness of the research. First, all names of students and local tour guides have been changed as to maintain and respect anonymity. For those who are referred to by their real name, I explicitly asked permission and received verbal consent to use the names, titles, and institutions of each individual prior to the interview with them. All interviews were conducted during times and at locations which were at the convenience of the interviewee and were recorded on a mobile device with the consent of participants, then later transcribed. I also prefaced each interview with an explanation of who I am, why I am in Vietnam, the purpose of my study, and who would have access to my final research paper. I

encouraged all interviewees to ask for clarification if my questions were unclear and informed them that they could abstain from answering any question and choose to end the interview at any time. I was transparent in my purpose of participating in the trek in Sapa and my visit to the EcoLodge in the Hoang Lien National Park. Finally, I provided my contact information should any of my interviewees want to reach out to me with questions or concerns.

Limitations

There are several important limitations that impact the generalizability and authority of this research. First and foremost, time was a limiting factor. This topic, sustainable tourism, has a wide-ranging scope and while one month of field study revealed interesting perspectives and insights, it was not nearly enough for a subject this vast. Even though the study was limited to the northern region of Vietnam, the amount of time still not suffice to conduct thorough exploration of the subject. Sapa was chosen as a site for more in-depth study; but even there, I had time to access few people and resources. The time it took to commute from Hanoi to Sapa for this additional research also took a toll on my allotted time. As I had to adjust to the specific and sometimes changing schedules of my interviewees, I had to make separate trips to Sapa as opposed to staying there for one longer period of time. The trip from Hanoi to Sapa (and vice versa) can take anywhere from 5.5-7.5 hours, meaning that I lost of a lot of valuable time while I was on the bus (which is the only way to get to Sapa, as there is no airport in the town). On the subject of time, it is also notable to add that the time of year that I was in Sapa could have also impacted what I observed regarding tourism there. It is not reasonable to make sweeping generalizations based on observations when I only witnessed a specific time of year and specific part of the tourism season.

Secondly, though all of interviews were conducted in English, the language barrier was still present and a burden to my interviewees and myself. With more time and resources, it would have been possible to acquire the help of a translator so that some my interviewees could speak in whichever language they were more comfortable with and could express more details in their responses. I noticed that in several of my interviews, I had to reword (or sometimes completely abandon) a question because there was a lack of understanding, and I lacked the language abilities to ask the same question in Vietnamese. In other instances, I realized that sometimes the interviewee would give a response that was somewhat related to my question but not exactly what I was trying to ask about, which further emphasized the gap in understanding between us.

Finally, one of the most significant limitations to my research was how I found interviewees and organizations to interact with. In an ideal study, random-sampling would be used as a way to legitimize and generalize the findings of a study. In my research, I used non-random sampling methods. Chiefly, I used snowball sampling, meaning that I used current contacts in order to establish connections and recruit more contacts who were willing to partake in my research. For example, I reached out to a professor I already knew and she put me in contact with several more professors at her university. I also exclusively used this snowball method in order to reach out to more students. In Sapa, I also employed convenience sampling, simply interviewing and observing who and what was around me and nearby, another type of non-random sampling. One example of this is when I interviewed a woman selling handicrafts in the street because she had already approached me and it was easy to start up a conversation with her. It is also important to note that I did not provide her, or any other interviewees for that matter, with an type of monetary or other compensation for participating in my research.

Though this research was still conducted in a legitimate and ethical manner, it is imperative to recognize these limitations and the implications: the information and perspectives

encountered in this research do not, by any means, represent the viewpoints of all students, professors, professionals, or individuals working or studying in the tourism sector in Vietnam. This research is not exhaustive and not generalizable.

Results and Discussion

Impact of Government

Tourism Marketing

One of the most influential actors in the promotion and actualization of sustainable tourism in Vietnam is the government. Marketing, in particular, is an important responsibility that the government often assumes, for both specific destinations and the nation in its entirety. Currently, one of the platforms utilized by VNAT to popularize destinations is their website, endorsed by and closely connected to the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism. Here, they include the following types of locations: culture, sea tourism, natural and ecological tourism, and sport and recreation tourism. Culture attractions have the majority of destinations advertised by VNAT, with a number of 290 (including hamlets, villages, places of worship, museums, ruins, and markets), followed by 120 natural and ecological areas (national parks, forests, mountains, waterfalls, etc.), 53 in sea tourism (beaches and islands), and 38 in sport and recreation tourism (theaters and tourist areas) (VNAT, 2018).

The high emphasis on cultural sites in comparison to other attractions, like those that are included in sport and recreation (perhaps the less “authentic”, unique-to-Vietnam experiences) as indicated by the numbers, may show an attempt on the part of the government to push tourism in a direction that gives visitors a better sense of Vietnam, the history, and the culture. Cultural tourism can contribute to the sustainability of the industry, especially as it has been seen to

coincide with “the emergence of a broader society wide appreciation of the need to preserve and protect our dwindling cultural and heritage assets” (McKercher 2).

Unfortunately, there are issues with this approach in terms of sustainability. First of all, cultural tourism can actually end up being a “double-edged sword” in some respects. For example, while it can promote conservation of important areas, it can also result in “increased visitation, overuse, inappropriate use, and the commodification of the same assets without regard for their cultural values” (McKercher 2). If cultural tourism activities are poorly executed in the ways described, it actually undermines the sustainability of tourism in those areas. This may be the case for two extremely popular destinations in Vietnam, which are both featured on VNAT’s website: Ha Long Bay and Hoi An Ancient Town. Both of these destinations are designated UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) World Heritage sites (Ha Long Bay is considered a natural site, and Hoi An is considered a cultural site). While this label may, in theory, help these communities preserve these sites because of the requirements of maintaining World Heritage Site status and legal protections, it may simultaneously be doing harm as it attracts huge numbers of tourists.

Having personally visited both of these sites and observed the tourism activities taking place, it appears that these sites may be suffering from mass tourism. To illustrate, in Hoi An, Ancient Town at night was swarmed with tourists. Little row boats filled the small lake and vendors, most of which were selling similar if not the exact same items, were everywhere, beckoning people into their shops and calling out to tourists on the streets. During the day, huge buses crowded the streets, bringing in droves of new incomers. Likewise, Ha Long Bay showed signs of overcrowding. Countless cruise ships carried tourists through the bay, and people lined up in crowds to board the various boats. On the two occasions that we left the boat, there were noticeable issues. In the caves located on one of the islands, I observed graffiti on one of the

walls. Later, when climbing to a lookout point on another island, there were so many people that one could barely move at certain times. Each boat could only let their visitors stay for 40 minutes as the traffic of tourists coming into the island was so intense. Undoubtedly, as tourism continues to grow in Vietnam, the number of tourists in these destinations will rise in unison. VNAT's marketing approach of headlining these sites only increases their visibility to new tourists.

Tourism Strategy

In addition to marketing, the government is also responsible for tourism strategy. Certainly, their approach to tourism and perception of tourism's role continues to evolve. As one scholar suggests, "Governments no longer ask should we encourage tourism -but, rather, how fast can the tourism industry grow?" (Haley 595). Indeed, until recently, this was the apparent singular priority of the Vietnamese Government. According to Ms. Mai H. Nguyen, of the Institute for Tourism Development Research and part of VNAT, five years ago the government was predominantly focused on attracting as many tourists as possible (M. Nguyen, 2018). Even included in official tourism law, one of the stated "Principles of Tourism Development" includes the aim to "develop both domestic and international tourism with a view to attract increasing numbers of foreign tourists to Vietnam" (GOV, 2005). Indeed, throughout my research this strategy was often referred to as a "quantity over quality" approach, which is not aligned with the principles of sustainable tourism.

Fortunately, Vietnam has been gradually transitioning towards including more sustainable practices and policy in their tourism policies. In fact, Ms. Mai H. Nguyen claims that sustainability is a part of all new tourism policies made the the government (M. Nguyen, 2018). She also indicated that at the research institute, they want to focus on a code of conduct for visitors as well as raising awareness for local people. They want to consider environment, economy, and society in a balanced way in order to improve living standards for local people,

create jobs, and bolster the national GDP (M. Nguyen, 2018). Some of these goals already exist in tourism law, such as the obligations of tourists, which include respecting and preserving natural landscapes and the traditional habits and customs in tourist destinations. However, it is one thing to create a policy or law and quite another to ensure that policy is being upheld and observed.

The fact that they are concerned with other aspects of tourism now doesn't mean to say that Vietnam is not as concerned with numbers anymore— they definitely are. At the Vietnam Economic Forum (ViEF) Summit on Travel & Tourism 2018 in Hanoi, numbers— quantity—was still a major theme. From the start, Mr. Le Quang Tung, Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Culture, Sport, and Tourism (which oversees VNAT), emphasized tourism as the “key sector” for the economy, and underscored his pride in the approximate 13 million international visitors Vietnam hosted in 2017 (T. Le, 2018). He also referenced a recent resolution to make tourism the “spearhead” sector for economic development and indicated his hopes for even greater numbers of tourists in the future (T. Le, 2018). Later on in the forum, Mr. Nguyen Xuan Thanh, Director of the Fulbright Economics Teaching Program, also focused on the \$22 billion USD in revenue that Vietnam made in 2017 (T. Nguyen, 2018). This focus on numbers isn't necessarily a bad thing; certainly, the economic gains of tourism are a critical part of sustainability. The good news is that Vietnam seems to be moving away from a strategy that only considers economic gains and towards a strategy that recognizes the importance of other factors that contribute to sustainability.

As a matter of fact, in the opening speech given at ViEF 2018, Mr. Tran Trong Kien, member of the Private Sector Development Committee and Chairman of the Tourism Advisory Board, concluded his statement with the hope that “[our] grandchildren can continue to benefit” from beautiful nature, culture, and resources of Vietnam (K. Tran, 2018). This is a

critical element of sustainability: that future generations can continue to flourish using resources and enjoying an environment and culture that has not been diminished or even destroyed by tourism. The government itself, in written law, defines sustainable tourism as “meet[ing] the needs of the present without harming the ability of the future to meet tourism needs” (GOV, 2005). The weight in this statement, by a government official at a very public event, should not be taken lightly: it is a sign of Vietnam’s changing perspective of what an effective tourism industry should look like. Indeed, sustainability was the theme of this year’s ViEF, for the first time in history. The actual title of the first session was “The Need for Tourism Industry Restructuring and Development Toward More Sustainability”. Included in the audience were 1500+ delegates, including government officials, CEOs, media, and international guests. This 2-day event is an important step towards spreading awareness of the benefits and necessity of a sustainable tourism industry, and that it was hosted by the Advisory Council to the Prime Minister on Administrative Procedures Reform and Private Sector Development Committee is an indication of sustainability as a rising priority in the Vietnamese Government,

Specific Strategic Priorities

Hotels have an important role in sustainable tourism, which the government has realized. In the forum, two destinations were explicitly mentioned as needing sustainability addressed: the aforementioned Ha Long Bay and Sapa. Mr. Kenneth Atkinson, Executive Chairman at Grant Thornton (Vietnam) Limited, spoke on behalf of these sites, noting the pollution of on-shore hotels and overnight cruise ships, as well as the unattractive “construction site” that Sapa has become as a result of all the hotels and restaurants being built, which has diminished both local culture and the landscape (K. Atkinson, 2018). He explicitly mentioned the need for “quality over quantity”, which I also discussed in my interview with Ms. Mai H. Nguyen. She spoke about improving “green tourism” and creating the Green Lotus Hotel Standard as an incentive

for hotels to use eco-friendly products and use practices that don't have a negative impact on the environment (M. Nguye, 2018).

The government is also promoting an agenda to greatly improve the human resources quality in the tourist industry; again, there is a trend towards quality over quantity, the opposite approach of previous tourism strategies in Vietnam. Improving human resources will improve the tourist experience, important to sustainability because it has an effect on whether or not tourists come back and if new tourists will choose Vietnam over other destinations (M. Nguyen, 2018). Right now, Vietnam has a lot of jobs in the tourism agency but very low labor productivity, especially when compared to other industries in Vietnam and when compared to tourism industries in other countries like Thailand and Malaysia (T. Nguyen). At the ViEF 2018, Mr. Nguyen Xuan Thanh advocated for professionals in the industry who do not have just one narrow focus of area or skills that they've studied in higher education; rather, they should have language skills, general knowledge, soft skills, leadership, and professionalism. He also emphasized the importance of diverse backgrounds in studies and practical work experience (T. Nguyen, 2018). This is especially relevant, as the popularity of illegal "cheap tours" in Vietnam has been a consistent issue. In these types of tours, agencies promote a tour that costs \$0 USD. Through deals with shopping retailers and merchants, these agencies still make a profit, but they provide extremely poor-quality experiences to tourists. Moreover, these tours are typically given by unlicensed, knowledgeable tour guides who actually increase misunderstandings about Vietnamese culture and history (M. Nguyen, 2018). This type of poor human resource quality undermines attempts of improving sustainability in the industry.

Finally, the government is beginning to consider changing their targeted market of tourists. In the past, when the strategy was to have as many tourists as possible, the type of tourist wasn't necessarily considered. Now, however, Vietnam is shifting its focus to

high-spending tourists, especially in their larger markets (namely tourists from China, Europe, Japan, and Korea) who will spend longer periods of time in Vietnam (M. Nyugen, 2018). In order to make it easier for tourists from these countries to travel to Vietnamese destinations, some even have visa exemptions (M. Nguyen, 2018). However, it isn't only international tourists that the new strategy is focused on; the objectives for 2020 also include targeting domestic tourists whose purpose of trip is travel and leisure and will have high expenditure on tourism products and services (VNAT, 2013). The emphasis on more spending is particularly key. Vietnam is currently a popular destination for "backpackers", and while the government doesn't necessarily have an issue with these types of tourists, they do recognize that backpackers are typically low-spenders and will therefore not be a priority (M. Nguyen, 2018). Nevertheless, spending will most likely see a general increase for all tourists in Vietnam in the future. When I spoke to Ms. Nguyen of ITDR, she indicated her approval of a system that has been implemented in Hoi An in which attractions that were previously free to visitors now require the purchase of a ticket. Ms. Nguyen sees this a positive change, and a reasonable burden on the tourist because the additional income is both an economic and societal contribution, as it supports the local community. She says this kind of change is especially important in a place like Hoi An where overcrowding and mass tourism are starting to become noticeable (M. Nguyen, 2018).

Another aspect when regarding the market is the interest of tourists. Previously, this was not an overt concern of the government; however, there is an emerging interest in understanding and providing for consumer preferences (T. Vu, 2018). Between 2016 and 2017, tourist participation in "authentic" experiences rose by over 50% (and up to over 100% in some cases) in the following areas: culinary activities, nature immersion, history, and museums (T. Vu, 2018). With this in mind, the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism has been advised to improve "authenticity readiness", preserve natural and cultural heritage, and push the private

sector to infuse more authenticity into their products and services (T. Vu, 2018). This type of change shows potential for benefits on both sides: tourists and the tourism industry. Tourists will get the genuine, local experience they're looking for as opposed to something they could find anywhere, and the tourism industry continues to not only preserve, but also share the culture and beauty of Vietnam in a meaningful and sustainable way.

Overall, the government certainly has big plans for significant changes regarding the tourism industry in the coming years. By 2020, the country aims to develop the industry to not only be a critical economic sector, but also one which boasts high professionalism, modern infrastructure, and diverse tourist products that are "imprinted with unique traditional cultural characteristics" (VNAT, 2013). It is apparent that sustainability is an emerging priority for the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism and that many other influential groups and individuals are advocating to the government on behalf of more sustainable practices and policies. Of course, in the words of Ms. Nguyen, "Government cannot do everything. But we are the pioneer and support [for the tourism] industry to go in that direction" (M. Nguyen, 2018).

Impact of Educational Institutions

How Tourism is Taught: The Perspective of Educators & Administrators

Government isn't the only institution with a significant role in shaping the future of the tourism industry. Indeed, the influence of the government on tourism education has actually weakened as both public and private-owned educational institutions, independent of the VNAT, have started offering higher level courses and majors in tourism (Dao 10). As the tourism industry has grown, so too has the demand for university programs that offer tourism and

hospitality studies, which include postgraduate programs as well (Dao 13). These programs, generally, are meant to prepare individuals for managerial roles in the tourism sector; thus, the way that students study and learn, as well as what educators choose to include in the curriculum, give important insights into the priorities of the industry.

While the government certainly still controls university curriculum to an extent, the institutions and faculty do have the ability to decide a significant portion of what students learn and study. For example, at the University of Economics in Ho Chi Minh City, UEH, each program consists of 120 credits. Of those credits, about 40 are considered fundamental education, are regulated by the government, and “cannot be touched” (T.D. Nguyen, 2018). Of the remaining credits, 40 are regulated at the university level, and the final 40 are determined based on the study/specialty of the student by the faculty, namely the Dean, of that major (T.D. Nguyen, 2018). I had the opportunity to speak with the Deans of Tourism Studies at two of the most well-recognized universities in the two largest cities in Vietnam: Dr. Nguyen Duc Tri of the University of Economics in Ho Chi Minh City (UEH) and Dr. Long Pham Hong of the Vietnam National University, University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH) in Hanoi.

When tourism studies became available at UEH in 1991, it was remarkably different than the program that is currently administered. Back then, the theme was “tourism economics” and tourism was studied almost exclusively as an economic subject (matching the nation’s priorities at that time) and closely following the Soviet Union’s model of education (T. D. Nguyen, 2018). When Dr. Tri was assigned as the division head of tourism at UEH, he implemented some major changes. Observing a big gap in knowledge in tourism management (including that hospitality wasn’t largely discussed in tourism studies), Dr. Tri had an influential role in creating the system

that currently exists. UEH now offers three distinct majors in tourism studies: hospitality and hotel management, events management, and travel management. Additionally, Dr. Tri is in the process of creating another major focused on cruise line management, which is still being developed (T.D. Nguyen, 2018). These new areas of focus, which prepare the future leaders of the tourism industry to think carefully and considerately about the experience of the tourist, indicate a shift in priorities. Of course, the program is still economics oriented, but the curriculum has substantially changed in the last ten years to diversify and improve content quality.

One of the newer themes in the curriculum includes sustainability. However, currently there are only 6 credits, or two available courses, that are offered in sustainable tourism. An example of one of these courses is Wildlife Management, which is meant to increase the awareness of benefits of preserving the environment for animals and biodiversity ((T.D. Nguyen, 2018), which has the added benefit of improving the tourist experience because a healthy and beautiful environment is an attraction for visitors. Dr. Tri indicated that although there are only technically two courses in sustainable tourism, the idea is incorporated into many different courses within the majors, even if it's not explicitly in the title of the class (such as Tourism Planning, for example) (T.D. Nguyen, 2018). One of Dr. Tri's goals for the future is to increase the emphasis on sustainable tourism so that students are not only aware of tourism as economic activity that drives up the GDP, but also how tourism affects social cohesion and culture, especially in the case of ethnic minorities (T.D. Nguyen, 2018).

One other important point that Dr. Tri made about the sustainability of the tourism industry was his hope to promote sincerity in his students. In his perspective, sincerity is

important to sustainability in that it creates motivation to be not only sincere to tourists, but also to the environment and to each other instead of taking advantage of resources and people (T.D. Nguyen, 2018). If those who are working in the tourism sector have sincerity, they will be more responsible for what they do, to others and to the environment, which will contribute to the longevity of resources so that tourism can continue to be productive and Vietnam's culture and beauty can be preserved. Sincerity, according to Dr. Tri also has to do with productivity (an issue the government is also very aware of), time management, and respect for other people's time (T.D. Nguyen, 2018). Sincerity, of course, would not be a subject or a class, but it is something that can be stressed by professors in a variety of tourism-related courses. Perhaps the speakers at ViEF 2018 would agree that sincerity is one of the vital "soft skills" that would help human resources in the sector.

I also spoke extensively with Dr. Long Pham Hong at USSH. His approach has several clear similarities with Dr. Tri's program, including the majors available for study: event, travel, and hospitality management. In the undergraduate program at USSH, there are also two courses specific to sustainable tourism: Eco-Tourism and Community-Based Tourism. However, these classes are optional, or electives, and both of which are usually not filled, indicating a possible lack of interest in the subjects. Like UEH, USSH does try to incorporate the idea of sustainability into other classes, such as Introduction to Tourism, taught by Dr. Hong (H. Long, 2018). Mandatory classes for all students in the tourism program include Marketing, Economics, and Geography Tourism, but the only mandatory class with an obvious link to sustainable tourism is Cultural Tourism.

Where USSH significantly differs from UEH, and where they show their strongest steps towards teaching sustainable tourism, are in their postgraduate programs. In the Master's Program at USSH, sustainable tourism is a compulsory part of the curriculum for all students. Dr. Hong explained that this is this case because students getting their masters in tourism will become "important" people- lecturers, directors, and government employees- and they need to boost their own awareness so that they can influence and inform others as well (H. Long, 2018). Human resources, also important for sustainability, is also a mandatory part of the Master's program whereas it is not included in the undergraduate studies.

Finally, USSH, part of the greater Vietnam National University, is the first and only university in Vietnam to offer a PhD program in Tourism. This curriculum is even more focused on sustainability, with courses that include the following themes: contemporary issues of tourism, ethics in tourism, and issues of tourism business. These courses are relevant because sustainable tourism in Vietnam will depend on individuals first identifying the issues within the industry in order to correct and improve them. Moreover, the fact that a new PhD program like this was created suggests a growing interest in serious tourism studies and research.

A common theme for both the institutions, after speaking to both the Deans and several professors, was the new interest in getting students out of the classroom in order gain real-life experiences. Through field trips and mandatory internships, educational institutions have taken strides towards sustainability in tourism because these types of experiences not only give students practical skills and work experience (important for improving human resources), but also let the students see the downfalls of unsustainable tourism firsthand (and thus see the need for change). For example, Ms. Duong Tran Thuy, lecturer at USSH, explained that a few weeks

ago the faculty took their students to Ban Lac Village in Hoa Binh province to observe tourism practices. These trips are typically mandatory for students, and afterwards they discuss what they've observed as well as role-play situations. In their observation of the community, Ms. Duong says that while there were a lot of good sustainable practices taking place, such as buses not being allowed into the city (tourists has to take bikes to get around), they encouraged students to think about the not-as-obvious effects, like the noise pollution and the impact of the continual presence of so many tourists (T. Duong, 2018). Both Dr. Tri and Dr. Hong agreed that these types of experiences, field trips and internships, were important parts of their respective curriculums.

How Tourism is Studied: The Perspective of Students

In order to gain an idea as to whether or not students studying tourism are aware of sustainability issues and/or are picking up on the attempts of universities to make the subject more visible, I interviewed a number of students from several universities. Though not all of their testimony will be included in this paper, there were several recurring themes in my conversations that are worth mentioning.

None of the students I interviewed have taken a course exclusively about sustainable tourism. Students instead explained that many of their classes consisted of courses focused on management, economics, business law, marketing, tourism geography, and research methodology, among other subjects (T. Thu, 2018). Only one of the students I spoke with takes Eco-Tourism, which is heavily focused on environmental protection; however, the class is taught in English (T. Thu, 2018). It's possible that the fact that it's not taught in Vietnamese may deter students when they are deciding which classes to take, especially as tourism students don't have

to have an extensive knowledge of English as a requirement of the major (they have a few basic courses in English, such as “English for Tourism” (H. Long, 2018)). Some students indicated that they planned on taking a course about sustainability in the future, but also noted that it is a “complicated subject” and that their schedule thus far did not allot enough time for it (L. Phan, 2018).

Students are exposed to education on sustainability in other ways. One such way at Hanoi University is via a “Talk Show Week” given by the tourism faculty on how to make tourism more sustainable, which students are highly encouraged to attend (N. Dang, 2018). Likewise, at USSH, there are conferences, events, and workshops on sustainability; however, these are for professors and students are limited to being part of the audience when there’s room (N. Hoang, 2018). Outside of these kinds of events, students also spoke about the aforementioned trips outside the classroom to see tourism in action. At USSH, the first and second years of study are mostly limited to the classroom; however, later there are several important opportunities that students have to travel and observe/study. One student from USSH, Nam, described some of these experiences to me. On one occasion, he visited Ha Long Bay to learn how they participate in tourism, where he learned how people book and choose their services as well as practiced being a tour guide. Upon returning from the excursion, he and his classmates gave presentations on the impacts of tourism at the destination (both positive and negative), and he presented on issues such as smoke, oil, and pollution (N. Hoang, 2018). He said his classmates have also done case studies on destinations like Ninh Binh. While students may not be taught as much about sustainability in the classroom, they certainly demonstrated that they are aware of these issues when they do trips and case studies like Ha Long Bay and Ninh Binh.

In general, all students I spoke to had awareness of sustainability issues. One term that came up with several students was “mass tourism”, which one student described as being a burden on many of the natural attractions that Vietnam has to offer and a contributing factor of commercialization (L. Phan, 2018). Nam would agree with her, as he too brought up mass tourism as an aspect of the industry that prioritizes quantity of people over quality of services and makes it more difficult for Vietnam to focus on quality (N. Hoang, 2018).

In addition to mass tourism, students also discussed nature and the detrimental effect that tourism can have on the environment if sustainable practices are not implemented. One student from Hanoi University, Nguyet, stated that “when the people want to build some resource, they destroy nature...this is the most negative effect [of tourism]” (N. Dang, 2018). Other students, like Nam, have similar perspectives, and fear that local people are willing to sacrifice aspects of their environment in order to reap the benefits of the economic gains (N. Hoang, 2018). This idea was echoed by another student of Hanoi University, who expressed her disdain that in Vietnam, people don’t seem to care about the preservation of attractions. Her hope is that “when local people recognize the value of these attractions, they will have to protect them” (T. Thu, 2018).

Despite the fact that students are not receiving substantial formal education and lectures on sustainability in university, the students that I spoke to still have an undeniable sense of the importance of sustainable practices and a passion to be a part of the change in their future careers. Perhaps as more courses become available, there will be a larger interest in Vietnamese students to study this topic and pursue careers focused on reform. Nevertheless, these students are noticeably aware of the major issues that Vietnam faces in the tourism sector, and hopefully

they too will be a part of protecting the attractions and destinations that are threatened by unsustainable practices.

Case Study on Sustainable Tourism Practices: Sapa

Background & Concerns Related to Sustainability

In a majority of my interviews, there was one destination that seemed to come up most often when we discussed sustainability issues: Sapa. This town is located in the Lao Cai province in northern Vietnam, and is famous for its mountains (including the largest mountain in Indochina: Fansipan), ethnic minorities, and terraced rice paddies. Relatively recently, only in the last 20 years, Sapa has become a major tourist attraction, which has been made more accessible by a highway that allows visitors to travel there from Hanoi in approximately 5-6 hours. Unfortunately, while locals in the region have benefited economically, the increased tourism has had a profoundly negative impact on Sapa.

I spoke with aforementioned Professor Duong Tran Thuy from USSH regarding her perception of the changes that have taken place in Sapa. Ms. Duong is originally from Lao Cai Province, and lived her entire life there (in close proximity to Sapa) until she attended university. After graduating, she returned to Lao Cai and worked in Sapa for Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, where she conducted research on how tourism impacts local ethnic minorities in the villages surrounding Sapa town. According to Ms. Duong, the most noticeable changes in Sapa started around 2003-2004. Before, Sapa was a “very small town”, with not so many people living in or visiting the area; it was “peaceful”, not crowded, and the environment was healthy (T. Duong, 2018).

The rise of tourism contributed (and continues to contribute) to damage in two major areas: the environment and local culture. Needless to say, sustainability has been highly neglected in Sapa's tourism strategy. Namely, the chief threat to the environment in Sapa is the intense construction that continues to take place. In other interviews, I often heard Sapa being referred to as a "construction site" that is "uncontrollable" and "destructive", which isn't a baseless accusation. While there, I observed countless new structures being built, debris littering the roads (as well as significant amounts of trash in town and in more remote areas where the treks take place), and piles of construction materials on and near the roads. Large, multi-story hotels surround the lake, fill the town, and obscure the view of the mountains on the edge of town.

The construction not only causes a lot of pollution and results in the destruction of trees in the nearby area, but it also minimizes the visibility of ethnic cultures (T. Duong, 2018). Some years ago, Sapa authorities forcibly moved the once popular ethnic market out of the main part of Sapa to make way for other attractions, hotels, and restaurants. This market, which used to be one of the most popular destinations in Sapa, became an expensive retail area with stalls that ethnic minorities were not able to afford. Now, they sell their products on the streets or in other designated areas outside the main part of town, and make very little profit from their efforts (T. Duong, 2018).

I conducted a spontaneous, short interview with one woman selling handicrafts on the street in Sapa town. Zi is a member of the Black Hmong ethnic minority group, when she approached me she was wearing her traditional dress (hand-embroidered clothing dyed with indigo). She lives about an hour outside of Sapa town but commutes every day that she is not

leading treks in order to sell her products, predominantly bracelets and purses. Zi informed me that since the ethnic minorities generally aren't able to sell in the markets now, they have to follow and approach tourists on the street; unfortunately, she has noticed that this practice "scares" or annoys many tourists (Z. Giang, 2018). She says she practices English on her treks with foreigners, but she still has trouble in town trying to sell items, especially as many tourists just ignore her. Because tourism is her only source of income, she has no choice but to try to interact with them and hope she will make a sale or find someone who wants to do a trek (Z. Giang, 2018).

One very serious problem with selling handicrafts in town is that many poor families have turned to using their children as a way of attracting tourists to buy handmade items (usually embroidered purses, bracelets, clothes, etc.) on the streets, despite the fact that this practice is illegal. Children, in my own observations, will walk around the town and approach foreigners, stretching out their arms to let the tourist see their items. Usually, the children are dressed from head to toe in traditional garments and are often carrying an infant on their back. I discussed the issue with Ms. Duong, who revealed that she also studied children's role in tourism of Sapa. According to Ms. Duong, it varies from ethnic group to ethnic group; most of the children selling items on the street are from the Hmong group, the poorest, and will oftentimes have to miss school in order to sell items as tourists are highest in number during school hours (T. Duong, 2018). Parents use their children, according to her understanding, for tourism activities because it's very easy work (compared to if a child had to do heavy labor or agricultural work), it's year-round, and some children actually prefer being in the streets instead of school because then

they can afford small things for themselves, like snacks (T. Duong, 2018). The use of traditional dress is also a way to get the attention of tourists.

While some customs of locals have been threatened by the increase in tourism, wearing the “traditional costume” is not one of them. As tourists want an authentic experience, the ethnic minority tradition of wearing and making their traditional clothing has actually strengthened, because many interact with tourists on a daily basis and therefore wear and display these clothes constantly. The same goes for handicrafts (and using traditional tools to make these handicrafts and clothing) and even traditional medicine: these traditions have not been compromised in a negative way by tourism; if anything, they’ve actually increased (T. Duong, 2018). On the other hand, in her studies, Ms. Doung observed that any tradition that cannot be used to attract a tourist or used in a tourism activity can easily become diminished or disappear, as locals are increasingly interested in the economic gains of tourism and will focus on what can make them a profit instead of what is traditional to their culture (T. Duong, 2018). This is directly against the principles of sustainable tourism, as it shows the erosion of local culture as a direct result of tourism.

Ethnic minorities groups have also had to shift from traditional means of livelihood (such as agriculture) to tourism activities. This may not sound like an inherently bad change, but for many families it was not as much a choice as it was a necessity (T. Doung, 2018). Families who do not participate in tourism are at an extreme disadvantage and struggle significantly worse than those who have started working in the industry by being tour/trek guides, selling handicrafts, and using their homes as homestays for travelers (T. Duong, 2018). Those who choose to stay with agriculture are at a loss because they have increasingly less land to use (H.

Hai, 2018). However, even when ethnic minorities participate, they are often unfairly taken advantage of by tourism agencies in Sapa, which has created significant inequality between the locals and the agencies: “Most of the money goes to the pockets of tourism agencies and they pay the local people very little” (T. Duong, 2018). I myself can attest to this phenomenon. Upon booking a day trek at my hostel in order to observe what a typical trek looks like, I was surprised to find that I was not picked up by an individual of the ethnic minority Hmong group who was supposed to be leading the tour. Instead, I was picked up by a man working for a tourism agency in town, dropped off at the agency, and told to wait until the rest of the group arrived. Finally, a Hmong woman, Mai, arrived to guide us. I was even more surprised to find, at the end of the tour, that I wasn’t meant to pay her, I was to pay my hotel. I was never able to get a clear answer as to how much of the fee I paid actually went to Mai and how much went to the tourism agency.

This type of practice, as further described to me by Dr. Hai Dinh Hong, a professor at USSH, has become typical of Sapa. Locals end up falling victim to “middle-men”- Hanoi businessmen- who end up making most of the profit (H. Hai, 2018). However, Dr. Hai did say that learning English has been beneficial to minority groups because it better allows them to interact and organize tourism activities on their own, so that they don’t need the involvement of such middle-men (H. Hai, 2018). Ms. Duong agreed that English is an important skill that many locals have picked up, and is also advantageous for those selling their handicrafts in Sapa town (T. Duong, 2018). My guide during my trek, Mai, also spoke about how she prioritizes English for both herself and her children. In fact, her increased income from tourism activities has allowed her to give her children formal education in English and she herself has started taking

lessons so that she can read and write in addition to being able to speak the language (M. Ha, 2018).

Mai is exceptionally optimistic regarding tourism in Sapa. Though she also acknowledges the adverse results of the industry taking off in her region, she is also very vocal about the benefits it has brought her and other members of her ethnic group, the Hmong people. She expressed her gratitude for tourists and how she genuinely enjoys interacting with foreigners: it's her favorite part of what she does (M. Ha, 2018). Moreover, she claims that the tourists she interacts with are also interested in her lifestyle, her culture, and her history, which she happily shares with them on treks and while hosting groups at her family's homestay. Having changed her entire source of livelihood to tourism over ten years ago, Mai says she is "lucky", she hasn't experienced any negative impacts of tourism (M. Ha, 2018).

The Role of Institutions in Sapa

For the unlucky ones, the people and the environment that do suffer as a result of the previously mentioned practices in Sapa (most of which do not coincide with the definition of sustainable as discussed in this paper), there are institutions that are trying to make a difference. One of these institutions, of course, is the government. In the center of Sapa town, there is a government-operated Tourist Information Center as well as a free museum on Sapa's history and culture. There, I had a conversation with an employee of the center, who I will refer to as Linh Hoang, and we discussed some of the issues that the local government is trying to address.

Specifically, Linh and I talked about how the local government would like to hold tourists to a certain code of conduct, politely referred to in the pamphlets at the center as "etiquette guidelines". For example, Linh explained to me that tourists shouldn't (and the

government does not allow them to) buy anything from minorities in the streets. Apparently, locals are supposed to sell items in the market, which is only about a kilometer from the tourist center (L. Hoang, 2018). Moreover, we discussed the issue of children selling items in the street, during which Linh emphasized that tourists are never to buy from children because it encourages them not to go to school and to do so is illegal. Of course, as I and countless others have seen, these policies are not actually enforced. Sapa is overrun by street vendors, including dozens of children, and the government has not made attempts to stop this trend nor enforced local children to be in school (Z. Giang, 2018). What's even more conflicting is that the center promotes tourists to (legally) purchase handicraft products as a way to help villages preserve their historical technical skills that are threatened by current-day industrial products, yet they (the government) make it increasingly difficult for locals to have a free space to sell their handicrafts.

This inconsistency between government recommendations and laws around tourism and the actual practices that take place is apparent in other policies as well. To illustrate, the government promotes etiquette that would seemingly be beneficial for the sustainability of tourism, such as asking tourists to respect local culture and customs, not damage cultural relics and historical buildings, not litter, preserve the environment, and not take photos without asking. Yet again, many of these go completely unenforced. During my one-day trek through the mountains outside of Sapa town, I often saw garbage piled up on the sides of the trail, tourists taking photos wherever they pleased, and construction taking place even in more rural areas. It is unclear what role the government really has in Sapa's tourism agency, but it certainly isn't the role of actively and successfully promoting sustainable tourism.

Fortunately, there are other, non-governmental, groups that have seen much more success in facilitating the adoption of sustainable practices in the area. In particular, I would like to discuss two groups that operate in very different ways but towards a similar goal. The first is the Topas Ecolodge, a certified “Unique Lodge” by National Geographic (meaning that it is a destination “deeply” rooted in its community and dedicated to protecting the surrounding habitats and culture), located in Hoang National Park about an hour outside of Sapa (Topas Travel, 2018). Though this is a lodge, distinctly marketed as more luxurious tourism, it has a strong sense of social responsibility. Topas EcoLodge contributes to sustainable tourism by using local products and using a wastewater as to not pollute the local area. They further contribute to the local environment by replenishing the area with indigenous plants and shrubs and using hydropower as a source of electricity (Topas Travel, 2018).

They also show great consideration for the local people. At the lodge, of the 80 employees, nearly all of them are locals from the surrounding villages. In order to ensure that all employees have a safe place to stay, two houses were built just next door for employees to live and rest while they’re working, equipped with the space and facilities for employees to grow and cook their own food if that is their preference. Furthermore, all employees are fully insured and offered educational opportunities, as many do not have formal education when they begin working at Topas (Topas Travel, 2018). They also place an emphasis on the locals- the Red Dao- and their traditional practices. For example, I observed that they offer herbal baths and other traditional medicine services that are from the Red Dao people. Moreover, they offer tours through the surrounding area with local Red Dao guides, which several visitors participated in during my time there. Topas EcoLodge is an excellent example of accommodation that balances

generating a profit with protecting the environment and local people. The one catch is that a visit to Topas EcoLodge is quite expensive.

Sapa O'Chau, another organization that promotes sustainable tourism, combines many of the positive characteristics that Topas exhibits, while also giving tourism products/services at a reasonable price. This social enterprise was founded by a single mother of the Hmong ethnic group, and was the first ethnic minority owned and run international tour operator in Vietnam. They're also the only not-for-profit tour operator in Sapa, which means that any profit they make after covering initial costs goes right back into the community (Sapa O'Chau, 2018).

Sapa O'Chau is now composed of five parts: a cafe, hotel, boarding facility for students, Hmong handicraft store, and tour operation (where most of the revenue is generated). The boarding facility and handicraft store are especially supportive of the local community and show a strong commitment to using tourism for more than just economic gains. At the boarding facility, Sapa O'Chau provides accomodation, meals, and school fees for students who otherwise would not be able to attend high school. At the store, Sapa O'Chau helps women sell their traditional handicrafts so that they can afford to buy food, pay for their children's education, and have a chance at a fair income. It also has the additional purpose of preserving and promoting ethnic minority culture by creating awareness of these traditional handicrafts (Sapa O'Chau, 2018). Finally, Sapa O'Chau reinvests in the community by providing jobs to locals as trekking guides and cafe/hotel staff, improving village schools, and fighting illiteracy in Sapa (sometimes even by hosting English night classes at local hotels) (Sapa O'Chau, 2018).

Both Topas EcoLodge and Sapa O'Chau are strong examples of the impact that non-government and non-educational institutions can have when they work on behalf of

sustainable practices in the tourism industry. Indeed, when speaking with Mr. Cao Dai Hung who has been working with NGOs towards sustainable tourism for the last 18 years, he suggested that NGOs are “critical” to sustainable tourism. While many groups hold responsibility in this sector- the government, the private sector, tourists, etc.- NGOs have a lot of potential for guiding tourism towards reducing poverty, building capacity, increasing the dialogue around sustainability, and bringing stakeholders together (H. Cao, 2018). In Sapa, the collaboration between local government, tourism agencies, NGOs, ethnic minorities, and all other stakeholders will be vital in ensuring a future of tourism that balances economic gains with respect for the culture and the environment. Even though there are organizations trying to make a difference, Sapa currently still shows signs of prioritizing profit and numbers of tourists above all else; hopefully, the emerging priority of sustainability in Vietnam will find its way to this region.

Conclusion

During one of my conversations with a student, he related to me the following expression that a professor had told the class during an introductory level class in tourism studies: Tourism is like a hot fire, it can cook your meal for the day or it can burn down your house. Globally, tourism is becoming a huge force in economic advancement; however, it can come at a great cost. When culture, environment, and resources are recklessly sacrificed in order to attract more tourists, bring in more money, and boost GDP, both the future of tourism and the future of the country is threatened. Economic gains are important, especially in developing countries, but it is crucial to find a sustainable balance when it comes to tourism. Part of sustainability means that

the industry will be able to continue to thrive and continue to generate economic profits in the future; what will be left for tourists to enjoy if careless tourism practices employed now destroy the very aspects of Vietnam that tourists are attracted to?

Though Vietnam has historically applied a tourism strategy solely aimed at numbers, there are positive signs that sustainability, including a deeper concern for the culture and natural environment of the nation, is an emerging priority. Not only is it emerging, but awareness of the importance of sustainability is accelerating quickly. In both the government and educational systems, sustainability is becoming an attractive and recurring theme, as evidenced by the growing number of policies, forums, courses, discussions, and general knowledge on sustainable tourism practices. These two types of institutions are arguably two of the best for advocating on behalf of sustainability, as the government decides (and enforces) policy and universities educate the future leaders and decision-makers of the tourism industry.

Though there are abundant assurances that sustainability is on the rise, the unfortunate reality is that many destinations are still plagued by practices that indicate a very slow transition towards sustainability, if any at all. Sapa is only one of such destinations, and the future of it will depend on how soon these practices are addressed. Though there are organizations working towards better solutions in Sapa, and elsewhere, these organizations cannot create large-scale change on their own. Sustainable tourism must be a priority of all stakeholders if it is to truly be actualized. Tourism does not need to be irresponsible in order to be profitable: if all stakeholders contribute to and care for the “hot fire” that is tourism, it can be controlled and maintained in a way that benefits all.

Further Research

There are several ideas and observations that I came across during my research which were beyond the scope of this particular paper, but would nevertheless be worth studying as they relate to sustainable tourism in Vietnam. For one, I would like to further explore the impact of destinations being designated as UNESCO World Heritage Sites and the subsequent consequences, both positive and negative. Is being deemed a UNESCO Heritage Site ultimately beneficial in regards to sustainability? Are there other sites in Vietnam that are being considered for this?

Next, it would be constructive to further investigate the enforcement of government policies at the provincial level when it comes to laws on sustainable tourism practices. How much freedom do provinces have to determine their own practices and guidelines for sustainability and how do they differ from each other in terms of sustainability of the industry? To what extent does the national government actually make sure that their goals are realized?

While I did have some interaction with NGOs and nonprofits, I would like to conduct more research on how these types of organizations are able to create change. In my research, it seemed that these groups promote sustainable tourism practices by being positive examples; however, it would be interesting to see whether or no there are groups that petition the government (if that's even allowed in Vietnam) for creating and enforcing policy. If they are able to lobby the government for changes, how successful are these attempts?

Finally, I think that it is very important to look more into the impact of Sun Group, a company that owns and operates growing destinations in Vietnam and especially renowned for their cable cars that allow tourists to visit the top of Mt. Fansipan and Ba Na Hills. From my

observations, Sun Group has undertaken several massive construction projects in natural areas (including Sapa), and I would like to get an idea of how both locals and the government perceive this group and their impact on Vietnam's tourism agency.

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