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SWOT ANALYSIS OF GREEN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN HA GIANG

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ABSTRACT

This study conducts a SWOT analysis of green tourism development in Ha Giang, a northern province of Vietnam, to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges in the context of current tourism development with a focus on sustainable development. The research shows that green tourism in Ha Giang has rich natural resources, cooperation between stakeholders, a unique cultural identity, a unique selling proposition and high-quality products as its strengths. However, green tourism also faces weaknesses such as inadequate infrastructure, seasonal fluctuations, limited marketing efforts and constrained budgets. In terms of opportunities, green tourism can benefit from the growing demand for eco-tourism, increasing interest in green tourism, potential public-private cooperation, diversification of tourism services and support from the government and international organizations. However, developing green tourism in Ha Giang also faces challenges such as: limited awareness, competition from other destinations, environmental challenges and insufficient government support. The study proposes several strategies to address these weaknesses and challenges, such as raising awareness through education and training, improving infrastructure and marketing, diversifying tourism services, and strengthening government support and public-private partnerships. The research uses qualitative methods by consulting secondary data sources. The findings of this study provide insight into the potential of green tourism in Ha Giang as a sustainable economic development strategy for Vietnam and other developing countries with rich natural resources and cultural heritage.

KEYWORDS: tourism, green tourism, Ha Giang, tourism development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Green tourism is an important aspect of sustainable tourism, focusing on the conservation of resource areas, land, and wildlife (Gurung, 2015). Developing green tourism not only helps maintain the current state of the tourist environment, but also creates and improves it, such as supporting local people in protecting species of animal or plant that are about to become extinct. Therefore, many countries have developed branding strategies for tourist destinations, such as "Smurf Village" in Spain; "Enjoy Limfjorden" in Denmark; "Witches in Southern Spain" in Spain (Biljana & Vlatko, 2017). These countries aim to build their rational image towards creating a green environment, and

promoting sustainable and responsible tourism. As early as 1982, the term "green tourism" - Shinrin - yoku, which means "bathing in the forest" or "absorbing fresh air", was coined in Japan. This term refers to immersing oneself in the fresh air of nature and connecting with nature through activities such as walking, relaxing, meditating, and breathing clean air. Gradually, the term green tourism has garnered more attention from many researchers.

The purpose of this study is to conduct a comprehensive SWOT analysis of green tourism development in Ha Giang, focusing on its potential to contribute to green economic development. The analysis will provide a better understanding of the implementation and sustainability of green tourism by identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, as well as key success factors and challenges affecting green tourism development in Ha Giang. This research will expand current knowledge on sustainable tourism and rural development, especially green tourism in Vietnam, while providing insights into the potential benefits and limitations of green tourism to stakeholders, including local communities, tourists and policy makers. The study will utilize both a thorough review of relevant documents and primary data obtained from interviews with key program stakeholders.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study will use qualitative research methods, specifically a case study design, to conduct a SWOT analysis of green tourism in Ha Giang province. The case study method is appropriate for this research as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the program within its specific context, providing rich and detailed data (Yin, 2018).

Secondary data collection methods:

Primary data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in green tourism activities in Ha Giang. Purposive sampling techniques will be used to select participants with knowledge and experience related to green tourism activities. Interviews will be conducted in Vietnamese, recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Secondary data will be collected by reviewing relevant literature on sustainable tourism, green tourism, tourism, green tourism development and SWOT analysis. The literature review will provide a theoretical foundation for the study and help identify key success factors and challenges associated with green tourism development.

Data analysis

Data collected from interviews and document reviews will be analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a flexible and iterative method that allows for the identification and discovery of patterns and themes in data (Braun, 2019). The analysis will consist of several stages, including familiarization with the data, coding, generating themes, and reviewing themes.

Validity and reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, several strategies will be used. First, member checking will be used, whereby transcripts will be sent back to participants to verify and confirm the accuracy of the data. Second, data triangulation will be employed, collecting and analyzing data from multiple sources to enhance the reliability of the findings. Finally, the researcher will maintain a reflective journal to record any biases or assumptions that may influence the interpretation of the data.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Result

3.1.1. Strength

- **Abundant natural resources:** Ha Giang is an ideal location to develop green tourism and develop tourism thanks to its rich natural resources. The province is known for its breathtaking landscapes, fresh climate, distinct regions (northern western and central) and abundant water resources. The diverse terrain includes rivers streams and forests, creating a haven for biological diversity. Ha Giang situated in the northernmost part of the country, hold a crucial strategic position both economically and politically. In addition to its natural beauty, Ha Giang boasts rich and diverse natural and cultural resources. The complex terrain can be divided into three regions based on geographical location, which has facilitated the development of tourism activities tailored to the region's unique conditions (Sở Văn hóa Thể thao và Du lịch tỉnh Hà Giang; , 2019). These mountain ranges create watersheds and winding rivers, enhancing the province's allure for tourists (Nguyễn Thị Phương Nga; Nguyễn Xuân Trường, 2018).

One of Ha Giang's other strengths is its ecotourism resources. The province's rich and diverse vegetation includes rare species such as chestnut, reed, sycamore, ironwood, and mahogany, as well as wildlife like tigers, leopards, muntjacs, and black bears. Ha Giang is recognized as a typical natural reserve of Rocky Mountains in northeastern Vietnam. The lush flora and fauna, particularly in the lowland districts, provide a captivating landscape for tourists, while the province's scenery remains wild and unspoiled (Nguyễn Thị Phương Nga; Nguyễn Xuân Trường, 2018); (UBND tỉnh Hà Giang, 2015)

As of December 2022, the Department of Culture, Sports, and Tourism of Ha Giang reported 91 cultural heritage sites, with 31 ranked at the national level and 30 at the provincial level (Nguyễn Thị Phương Nga; Nguyễn Xuân Trường, 2018); (UBND tỉnh Hà Giang, 2015).

Ha Giang is also renowned for traditional crafts such as the linen weaving of the Mong people in Quan Ba, Dong Van, and Meo Vac; paper making by the Dao people in Bac Quang; silver carving by the Dao in Xin Man; and flute making by the Mong in Meo Vac, Ta Co Van village. These sophisticated handmade products from craft villages are a cultural resource that aids in developing tourism centered

around visiting traditional craft villages, thereby diversifying the province's tourism offerings (UBND tỉnh Hà Giang, 2015); (UBND tỉnh Hà Giang, 2017).

The cuisine of Ha Giang offers a memorable experience for visitors. In 2023, as part of the "Build and develop Vietnamese culinary culture into a national brand" project, the province had three honored culinary dishes. The distinctive cuisine, including dishes like thang co, men men, Dong Van dried beef, smoked pork, and au tau porridge, adds to the province's appeal, attracting tourists with its unique flavors (Nguyễn Thị Phương Nga; Nguyễn Xuân Trường, 2018); (UBND tỉnh Hà Giang, 2015).

- Cooperation between relevant parties: Cooperation between stakeholders is a significant strength in green tourism development in Ha Giang. This partnership creates a network of support that promotes knowledge sharing and innovation, which are critical to the program's success. Cooperation among stakeholders in Ha Giang is facilitated by establishing a coordination mechanism, including tourism businesses, the Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Ha Giang province, and local people (Sở Văn hóa Thể thao và Du lịch tỉnh Hà Giang, 2023). These agencies work together to promote and develop sustainable green tourism in the province. Furthermore, cooperation between stakeholders provides opportunities for capacity building and learning, especially for small-scale local tourism workers. By participating in tourism activities, local people can gain knowledge and skills about green tourism development, resource protection, and economic efficiency, thereby improving livelihoods and enhancing overall competitiveness (Sở Văn hóa Thể thao và Du lịch tỉnh Hà Giang, 2023).

Ha Giang is also promoting the expansion of cooperation with neighboring countries through border gates to attract international tourists. The province actively participates in annual activities and events within the framework of bilateral and multilateral cooperation programs with localities that have potential tourism markets and neighboring provinces, especially the 6 Viet Bac provinces and 8 expanded Northwest provinces (UBND tỉnh Hà Giang, 2021). Additionally, the province coordinates with embassies, allowing foreign reporters to record and introduce Ha Giang's tourism and culture. Ha Giang proactively links and expands cooperation with countries in the global geopark network, calling for investment from countries such as Japan, Malaysia, France, Germany, Canada, and Australia, and strengthening cooperative relations with other geoparks regionally and globally.

- Unique cultural identity: Ha Giang province's unique cultural identity can be leveraged to enhance the green tourism program. According to (Nguyễn Thị Phương Nga; Nguyễn Xuân Trường, 2018), (Nguyễn Văn Hà, 2019), Ha Giang is home to many ethnic minorities, each with its own culture, traditions, and festivals. With the unique culture of 19 ethnic groups and Each ethnic group has its unique festivals, cultural traditions, and culinary culture, creating a special attraction for tourists, Ha Giang offers an extremely attractive cultural picture for tourists (Nam, 2011).

Furthermore, the province is famous for traditional crafts such as weaving and embroidery passed down through generations. These cultural assets provide valuable resources for developing tourism

products that showcase local heritage and provide visitors with authentic and memorable experiences. By integrating local culture into its green tourism program, Ha Giang can differentiate itself from other destinations and attract more tourists looking for unique and meaningful experiences.

High-quality products: One of the main benefits of green tourism development in Ha Giang is the ability to maintain the integrity of local culture and life and preserve natural resources. Developing green tourism ensures the quality and safety of the products consumed by visitors, enhancing their overall experience. It helps tourists and locals view their responsibility to protect the environment objectively while supporting the local economy, preserving cultural diversity, and conserving natural diversity.

In general, the high-quality product aspect of green tourism activities aims to create products that satisfy tourists by being close to nature and providing fresh air. Ha Giang's goal is to build a province that retains its identity while ensuring economic development. Creating high-quality tourism products is a priority for Ha Giang province and aligns with the goals of the Central Government.

3.2.2. Weaknesses

- **Limited awareness:** The awareness issue here is that tourists' awareness of protecting the environment, protecting cultural resources as well as the awareness of indigenous residents in tourism development must be associated with conservation still weak. Ha Giang is home to 19 different ethnic minorities, so the awareness of local residents here is still limited.

Green tourism is still a relatively new concept, especially for domestic tourists. Despite efforts to promote green tourism, awareness levels among potential tourists remain relatively low. This could be due to limited marketing and advertising activities, particularly on digital platforms, which could help reach a wider audience. According to research by Booking.com, many people are interested in traveling to natural destinations and escaping overcrowded tourist spots, but they do not fully understand green and sustainable tourism. Overall, addressing limited awareness is crucial for the success of green tourism in Ha Giang.

- **Limited infrastructure:** Limited infrastructure is a significant weakness of tourism activities in Ha Giang, particularly for green tourism. The province lacks adequate support facilities to enhance tourists' overall experience. There is a shortage of accommodation options, with mainly small hotels in the core area of the stone plateau, which provide only basic services and do not cater to high-demand guests. There is also a lack of restaurants, cafes, and souvenir shops, which are mostly small and medium-sized, offering limited choices for tourists (Sở Văn hóa Thể thao và Du lịch tỉnh Hà Giang, 2023). This can deter potential travelers who seek a complete experience with access to all necessary amenities. The lack of infrastructure may be due to limited investment in green tourism activities and the complex terrain that makes access to tourist destinations difficult. Consequently, the development of accommodation and supporting facilities remains stagnant. According to Tran (2018), lack of

infrastructure is one of the main challenges for tourism development, especially green tourism. This limitation hinders tourism development and reduces opportunities for local businesses to benefit from tourism-related activities.

- **Seasonal fluctuations:** Seasonal fluctuations are a significant weakness of green tourism activities in Ha Giang. The number of tourists depends on the seasonal cycle, with higher numbers during dry weather and the Buckwheat Flower Festival from September to November (UBND tỉnh Hà Giang, 2015). However, at other times of the year, visitor numbers are much lower, leading to reduced revenue for locals and other stakeholders. Seasonal fluctuations can also affect the overall tourist experience, as green tourism involves engaging with natural resources, cultural experiences, and various tourism activities. According to (Nguyễn Thị Phương Nga; Nguyễn Xuân Trường, 2018)), seasonality is one of the main challenges for rural tourism development in Vietnam.

- **Limited marketing:** Despite the potential of green tourism to offer high-quality products, limited marketing is a significant weakness. This may be due to a lack of awareness among potential tourists. Many visitors may not be aware of green tourism's unique programs or services, making it challenging to attract them. Additionally, there may be a lack of promotional materials such as brochures, videos, or social media campaigns. Competition from other tourist destinations in the area can also be a challenge. Ha Giang is home to many popular attractions, and visitors may prefer these established destinations over the newer green tourism activities. To address these marketing challenges, local governments and stakeholders need to invest in promoting green programs.

- **Expense:** The cost of a green travel program can be a significant barrier for budget-conscious travellers. Visitors may face higher prices for unique experiences such as guided tours of flax weaving zones, tours of the Nho Que River, or experiencing mountain passes in Ha Giang. Additionally, the cost of producing local products can also raise prices for tourists. Green tourism development in Ha Giang is still in its early stages, particularly in the Dong Van karst plateau, and other activities are still developing. The program's small scale and fragmentation, along with a lack of collaboration between different tourism destinations, limit the potential for a coordinated approach to green tourism development. Knowledge sharing and mutual learning are needed to create a more comprehensive and closely linked green tourism activity, rather than competing individually.

3.2.3. Opportunities

- **Increasing Demand for Ecotourism:** Green tourism development in Ha Giang has the potential to capitalize on the growing demand for ecotourism experiences, offering visitors a deeper connection with nature and the local community. The trend for sustainable and responsible travel is growing worldwide, with more travellers seeking destinations that offer environmentally friendly and socially responsible experiences. Green tourism focuses on nature and community connections, helping tourists quickly access this type of tourism. By highlighting sustainable and responsible practices, the program can attract visitors interested in supporting local communities and reducing their environmental

impact. The program can differentiate itself from other tourist destinations in Vietnam by offering unique ecotourism experiences. Additionally, the program can promote this trend by partnering with other innovative ecotourism initiatives in the area and promoting itself through sustainable tourism networks and associations. This can attract more visitors interested in ecotourism and build a reputation as a leading ecotourism destination in Vietnam.

- **Growing interest in green tourism products:** Tourism products must be diverse to meet the varied needs of tourists. Tourism activities are often associated with visiting, experiencing, or relaxing in places with attractive, unique, and novel landscapes. For green tourism, the role of natural landscapes is even more critical because green tourism emphasizes natural elements such as unique landscapes, diverse flora and fauna, and the purity of the local ecosystem. Additionally, there is an emphasis on experiencing and discovering local culture in Ha Giang's districts. This combination of natural landscapes and cultural experiences is crucial for green tourism and promotes tourism development in general and green tourism in particular in Ha Giang.

- **Potential for public-private cooperation:** In a public-private partnership, a government or public sector agency cooperates with private sector organizations or individuals to achieve a common goal. For green tourism development in Ha Giang, partnerships could include collaboration with private businesses in the tourism industry, such as tour operators, travel agencies, and hotel service providers. Through these partnerships, the program can leverage the marketing capabilities and expertise of private sector partners to promote its ecotourism offerings to a wider audience. Additionally, public-private partnerships can facilitate the development of new tourism products by utilizing the resources and knowledge of private sector partners. For example, private sector partners may have expertise in developing and marketing niche tourism products, such as agritourism, ecotourism, or cultural tourism. By cooperating with these partners, green tourism in Ha Giang can diversify tourism services and attract more tourists. Furthermore, public-private partnerships can help improve existing infrastructure in the area, such as roads, transportation, and accommodation facilities. The private sector can invest in these infrastructure projects and benefit from the increased tourism traffic generated by the program. This creates a win-win situation for both public and private sector partners. By exploiting the potential of public-private cooperation, green tourism in Ha Giang can overcome challenges and develop into a successful ecotourism destination in Vietnam.

- **Diversify tourism products:** Green tourism requires the diversification of tourism products, balancing natural tourism resources with cultural tourism to improve the quality of offerings. Cultural experiences, such as traditional music and dance performances or local craft workshops, can be included. By combining these activities, the program can attract more visitors and enhance the overall visitor experience. This approach aligns with the sustainable tourism trend of providing authentic and enriching cultural experiences that connect visitors with local communities. By combining these activities, green tourism in Ha Giang can differentiate itself from other ecotourism destinations and offer a more comprehensive experience for visitors.

Support from the government and international organizations: The development of green tourism in Ha Giang can benefit from support from the Vietnamese government and international organizations in promoting sustainable tourism. Green tourism in Ha Giang, with its sustainable orientation and the advantage of the UNESCO-recognized Dong Van Karst Plateau Global Geopark, is receiving significant attention from the government and international organizations. Ha Giang can leverage this support to access resources and expertise for development. For example, the program could seek funding from governments and international organizations to improve infrastructure or market its products. The program can also partner with these organizations to access technical assistance and training on sustainable tourism practices to ensure long-term viability.

3.2.4. Challenge

- Limited Awareness and Understanding of Green Tourism: Limited awareness and understanding of green tourism is a potential threat to the success of green tourism in Ha Giang. Green tourism is still a relatively new concept in Vietnam and globally; many tourists do not fully understand the benefits of green tourism activities. Additionally, the higher costs and prices associated with green tourism may make some consumers hesitant or unwilling to participate. This lack of understanding and willingness to pay higher prices can create challenges for promoting green tourism development in Ha Giang. Tourists may not be willing to pay high prices for green tourism products if they do not understand the value and main benefits of this type of tourism.

- Competition from other destinations: Competition from other destinations is a major threat to the success of green tourism in Ha Giang. Green tourism activities are developing in many other provinces such as Ninh Binh, Quang Binh, Quang Ngai, and Da Nang. This makes attracting tourists to green tourism in Ha Giang more difficult. These areas may have better infrastructure, stronger marketing campaigns, or more attractive destinations that draw more tourists. This competition could reduce the number of tourists coming to Ha Giang to experience green tourism, negatively impacting local farmers and businesses that rely on tourism for their income. Overall, competition from other destinations is a significant challenge to implementing green tourism activities in Ha Giang and will require focused efforts to differentiate and promote the unique services of the area to attract and retain tourists.

- Environmental challenges: Environmental challenges are a significant threat to the success of green tourism in Ha Giang. Implementing strategies for sustainable tourism development requires the active contribution of locals and tourists through environmental protection awareness. Currently, as tourism is starting to develop strongly in Ha Giang, environmental pollution is becoming a challenge. Household waste, waste from tourism activities, noise pollution, and the carrying capacity of resources are issues of concern. Additionally, climate change and natural disasters pose significant threats to tourism activities in Ha Giang due to the inherently difficult road conditions. Extreme weather events such as floods, droughts, or storms can damage crops and infrastructure, disrupting supply chains and negatively impacting the tourism-dependent industry. Furthermore, climate change can affect water

levels in rivers, forests, and ecosystems, such as changes in temperature, rainfall, and soil fertility, which can impact the quality and quantity of crops grown in the area. Overall, environmental challenges such as climate change and natural disasters are significant threats to the success of green tourism in Ha Giang.

- Lack of Government support: The lack of government support is a significant threat to the success of green tourism in Ha Giang. If the government does not prioritize or support the industry, attracting the investments and resources needed to grow and promote the industry may be difficult. One of the big challenges for green tourism in Ha Giang is the lack of specific policies and regulations supporting green and sustainable tourism activities. Although there are some general policies and regulations applicable to green tourism in Vietnam, there is no comprehensive policy framework that specifically addresses green tourism. Furthermore, the lack of government support can also lead to a lack of funding and resources for tourism development, especially in raising awareness among local people in Ha Giang. Ha Giang is a mountainous district with more than twenty ethnic minorities, where the level of education is low, and many people do not speak Vietnamese fluently. Thus, they need more state support for hunger eradication, poverty reduction, and raising awareness.

3.3. Discuss

The SWOT analysis of green tourism development in Ha Giang highlights several strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that can impact its success. One of the main strengths is the region's rich natural resources, including diverse flora and fauna, and a favorable natural environment and climate. Collaboration between stakeholders, including locals, businesses, and government agencies, is another strength that can help promote sustainable tourism practices and ensure success in building green tourism. The region's unique cultural identity and unique selling propositions, such as the production of handicraft products and traditional costumes of the indigenous people, can also be leveraged to attract tourists interested in authentic cultural experiences.

However, the program also faces several challenges, including limited awareness and understanding of green tourism among tourists and local residents, and competition from other destinations with similar green tourism programs. Additionally, environmental challenges and lack of government support may hinder the growth and development of the tourism industry in Ha Giang.

Limited awareness and understanding of green tourism can be addressed through targeted marketing and education campaigns that highlight the benefits of green tourism for both the environment and personal health. Collaboration between stakeholders can help leverage the region's unique selling propositions and create a distinctive brand that stands out from competitors. Additionally, investing in infrastructure, such as transportation and accommodation, can help overcome seasonal fluctuations and attract more visitors year-round.

To take advantage of the opportunities presented by the growing demand for ecotourism and the increasing interest in this new form of tourism, public-private partnerships can be leveraged to attract financial resources and investments. Diversifying tourism offerings can also help attract a broader range of visitors, including those interested in wellness tourism and cultural tourism. Government support is crucial in providing a supportive policy and regulatory environment to encourage the development of the tourism industry.

To address the challenge of limited awareness, it may be necessary to focus on educating consumers and tourists about the benefits of green tourism. This can be done through various channels, such as marketing campaigns, educational programs, and partnerships with local schools and community organizations. It is also important to promote the health and environmental benefits of green tourism, as well as the economic and social benefits for local communities.

To mitigate the threat of competition from other destinations, it may be necessary to focus on developing Ha Giang's unique strengths and services in green tourism. For example, Ha Giang can focus on promoting the cultural and historical significance of its ethnic characteristics, from costumes and cultural activities to traditional festivals, to overcome seasonality in tourism. Additionally, Ha Giang can develop partnerships and cooperation with other regions to promote cross-location tourism and take advantage of each region's strengths.

Addressing these challenges requires that the government prioritize and support the development of the tourism industry in Ha Giang by providing policies and regulations to promote green tourism development in key localities with attractive resources and conditions. This can be achieved through the development of specific policies and regulations that support tourism, as well as through the provision of capital and resources to support the industry's growth. Additionally, the government can support the industry by providing training to local people, enhancing the local workforce to improve its own tourism product.

4. CONCLUSION

In summary, the SWOT analysis of green tourism development in Ha Giang highlights several strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges that need to be addressed to ensure the sustainable development of the industry. Rich natural resources, cooperation between stakeholders, unique cultural identity, distinctive selling propositions, and high-quality products are key strengths that can be leveraged to attract more tourists to the area.

However, limited awareness, inadequate infrastructure, insufficient marketing, and the high costs associated with organic products are key weaknesses that need to be addressed. To seize the opportunities presented by the growing demand for ecotourism, the increasing interest in green tourism products, the potential for public-private partnerships, and the diversification of tourism services, Ha Giang needs to overcome these weaknesses and promote its strengths.

Increased public education, investment in infrastructure, and government support for the industry can help address issues related to limited understanding of green tourism, competition from other locations, environmental challenges, and the lack of government support. By applying a comprehensive approach to solving these problems, Ha Giang can develop green and sustainable tourism, contributing to the region's green economic development.

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