



## Discover the views of the Local Community on Sustainable Tourism Development in SaPa, Vietnam

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**Abstract:** Sustainable tourism development is increasingly becoming an important topic in Vietnam, as the tourism industry continues to develop and expand. Local communities, especially those living in popular tourist destinations such as Sa Pa, can be greatly affected by tourism activities. Therefore, it is important to understand their views on the impact of tourism on their communities and environment and their perceptions of sustainable tourism practices. This study, which aims to explore the views of local communities on sustainable tourism development in Sa Pa, includes: perceptions of local government leaders; tour organizers; and people living in Sa Pa town about the impact of tourism on the community and the environment? How are they aware of sustainable tourism practices? What are the main factors affecting the attitudes of local communities towards sustainable tourism development in Sapa?.

**Key words:** Tourism development, sustainable development, Sa Pa tourism.

### 1. Introduction

Tourism has become a significant contributor to Vietnam's economy, with increasing numbers of visitors arriving each year. However, tourism can also have a negative impact on the environment, culture, and local communities. Sustainable tourism development has emerged as a response to the negative impacts of tourism, with a focus on balancing economic growth with social and environmental sustainability.

Sustainable tourism development aims to promote responsible, equitable and sustainable tourism. It emphasizes the importance of preserving natural and cultural heritage, promoting community empowerment, and ensuring the well-being of local communities. Sustainable tourism development helps to minimize the negative impacts of tourism on the environment and culture. This includes reducing the carbon footprint of the tourism industry, protecting cultural and natural heritage, and minimizing the relocation of local communities. In addition, sustainable tourism development can contribute to economic growth and development. It can create jobs, increase income, improve infrastructure and services.

Finally, sustainable tourism development can promote sociocultural exchange, promote cross-cultural understanding, and promote peace and harmony among communities.

Sa Pa is a popular tourist destination in northern Vietnam, known for its picturesque scenery, ethnic minority communities and rich and diverse cultural heritage. However, the rapid development of tourism in Sapa has also had negative impacts on the environment and local communities. These include deforestation, soil erosion, waste management issues, and displacement of local communities. Local governments and non-governmental organizations have taken steps to promote sustainable tourism development in Sapa, including the implementation of ecotourism and community-based tourism initiatives. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives has not been as expected, and the views of the local community on sustainable tourism development in Sapa have not been considered thoroughly. There have been a number of studies on sustainable tourism development in Vietnam in recent years. For example, Nguyen et al., (2019) investigated challenges and opportunities for sustainable tourism development in the Mekong Delta region. They recognize that community engagement and stakeholder engagement are critical to promoting sustainable tourism development. Pham et al., (2020) explore the impact of ecotourism on local communities at Dong Van Karst Plateau Geopark in northern Vietnam. They found that ecotourism has a positive impact on the economy and environment, but also raises concerns about social and cultural changes. These studies emphasize the importance of promoting sustainable tourism development in Vietnam and the need to consider people's perspectives and local experiences in sustainable tourism development. Meanwhile, research on sustainable tourism development in Sa Pa seems to be limited, especially exploring the views of local communities on sustainable tourism development in Sa Pa, which has not been thoroughly explored.

Therefore, this study was conducted to consider the views of local communities on sustainable tourism development in Sa Pa, in terms of: awareness of local government leaders; tour organizers; and people living in Sa Pa town about the impact of tourism on the community and the environment? How are they aware of sustainable tourism practices? What are the main factors affecting the attitudes of local communities towards sustainable tourism development in Sapa? Thereby, providing insight into the effectiveness of current sustainable tourism initiatives and identifying areas for improvement. This study can contribute to the literature on sustainable tourism development in Viet Nam, filling the gap in research on the views of communities and local experiences in sustainable tourism development.

## 2. Research Methods

This study uses qualitative research methods to explore the perceptions and perspectives of local communities, including: local authorities, representatives of tourism companies, and residents on the impact of tourism on their communities and the environment? How aware are local people in Sapa about sustainable tourism activities and do they believe that these activities are being implemented effectively? Finally, what are the key factors that influence the attitudes of local communities towards sustainable tourism development in Sapa? The sample in this study was selected through intentional sampling, focusing on Sa Pa Town Office of Culture; tour organizers; and people living in Sa Pa town. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 8 subjects (including: 4 residents; 2 officers of Sa Pa Town Culture Department; and 2 tour organizers to Sa Pa). The interviews were conducted between February 2023 and April 2023 on the basis of face-to-face and telephone interviews lasting from 30 minutes to 45 minutes each, the contents of the interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Data is analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key topics and samples emerging from interviews.

## 3. Research results

Interviewees were asked a number of open-ended questions about local community perceptions in Sapa about the impact of tourism on their communities and their environment? How aware are local people in Sa Pa of sustainable tourism practices and do they believe these are being implemented effectively? What

are the main factors affecting the attitudes of local communities towards sustainable tourism development in Sapa? And what measures did they use to address these challenges?

*For the local community's perception of the impact of tourism on their community and environment, the interview results show that:*

Sapa has become a famous tourist destination of Vietnam for many years, attracting domestic and international tourists with its natural beauty, diverse ethnic culture and unique landscapes. However, tourism also brings different impacts on the community and environment in Sa Pa.

On the positive side, tourism has contributed to the development of the local economy by creating job opportunities and generating income for the local community. It has also helped preserve and promote the cultural heritage of ethnic minority groups in Sapa, as many tourists are interested in learning about their traditions and lifestyles.

However, tourism also causes some negative impacts on the environment and communities in Sa Pa. The rapid increase in tourism activities has put pressure on natural resources in the region such as water, land and forests. The large number of visitors to Sa Pa also leads to the degradation of the natural environment, including deforestation, soil erosion and pollution. The increasing influx of tourists has also led to changes in Sa Pa's socio-cultural environment, with some traditional customs and values being lost or commercialized for tourism purposes.

The causes of the situation are complex and multifaceted. The main reason is due to the rapid increase in tourism activities due to the increasing demand for travel and the increasing popularity of Sapa as a tourist destination. The lack of sustainable tourism planning and management also contributes to the negative impact of tourism on the environment and local communities.

To address these issues, local authorities, tourism companies and people in Sapa need to take a proactive approach to sustainable tourism development. This can be done by enforcing policies and regulations that prioritize environmental protection, community engagement, and cultural preservation. For example, local authorities can limit the number of tourists allowed in certain areas, regulate tourism activities to minimize negative impacts, and promote responsible tourism activities by tourists. Companies can push travelers to practice responsible tourism, such as minimizing waste and using environmentally friendly products. They can also partner with the local community to develop community-based tourism initiatives that bring economic benefits to the community while preserving cultural heritage. Another approach is to involve the local community in the tourism planning and decision-making process. By encouraging community participation in tourism development, they can have a voice in shaping the tourism industry in a way that benefits both the community and the environment. For example, local governments can encourage the development of community-based tourism initiatives that allow local residents to showcase their cultural heritage and traditional practices while bringing economic benefits to the community. Companies can work with local communities to develop sustainable tourism practices that benefit both the community and the environment. By encouraging local communities to participate in decision-making and planning, tourism operators can ensure that tourism benefits are shared equitably and that Sa Pa's cultural heritage is preserved for future generations. Moreover, it is necessary to promote the education and awareness of tourists and local communities to reduce the negative impact of tourism on the environment and the community. Tourists are educated about responsible tourism practices, while local communities are educated about the importance of preserving Sa Pa's natural environment and cultural heritage. Finally, local governments can invest in sustainable infrastructure and technologies to reduce the environmental impact of the tourism industry. This includes the development of renewable energy sources, waste management systems, and sustainable transportation options.

*Regarding the awareness of local people in Sapa about sustainable tourism activities and evaluating the effectiveness of these activities, the research results show that:*

According to the residents of Sa Pa town, they are aware of sustainable tourism activities through various channels such as social networks, tourism brochures and community meetings. There are a number of sustainable tourism activities being implemented in Sa Pa, such as promoting eco-tourism and supporting community-based tourism.

However, they do not believe that these activities are being effectively implemented. One of the major challenges is the lack of awareness and participation of local people in sustainable tourism activities. Many residents still prioritize short-term economic benefits over long-term sustainability. In addition, local authorities and tourism companies need to do more to educate and encourage local communities to participate in sustainable tourism initiatives.

In order to develop Sa Pa tourism sustainably and effectively, a number of solutions need to be implemented. Firstly, local people need to be educated about the importance and benefits of sustainable tourism. This can be done through workshops, training sessions, and community meetings. Secondly, local authorities and tourism companies should actively encourage and encourage the local community to participate in the decision-making process related to tourism development. By engaging local residents, governments and tourism companies can create community-based tourism initiatives that benefit both tourists and local communities. Moreover, tourism companies should also consider the impact of their activities on the natural environment and take measures to minimize the harmful impact on their environment. For example, companies could encourage tourists to bring reusable water bottles instead of single-use plastic bottles or use public transport instead of their own cars.

In summary, sustainable tourism development in Sa Pa needs the cooperation of all stakeholders, including local people, authorities and tourism companies. By attracting and educating local communities, implementing sustainable tourism practices, and minimizing environmental impacts, Sa Pa can become a truly sustainable and effective tourism destination.

*For the main factors affecting the attitudes of local communities in sustainable tourism development in Sapa, the interview results show that:*

An official of Sa Pa Town Culture Office said that the main factors affecting the attitude of local communities towards sustainable tourism development in Sa Pa are the lack of education and awareness, economic dependence on tourism and cultural differences between tourists and local people. Firstly, many locals may not fully understand the concept of sustainable tourism and its benefits. They may prioritize short-term economic benefits over long-term sustainability due to a lack of education and awareness on the subject. Second, local communities in Sa Pa rely heavily on tourism for their livelihood, which can lead to a conflict of interest between economic interests and environmental protection. For example, local residents may engage in unsustainable tourism practices such as fishing on excessive streams or deforestation to serve the needs of tourists and earn extra income. Finally, cultural differences between tourists and locals can also influence the attitudes of local communities towards sustainable tourism development. Tourists may not fully understand the cultural and social norms of the local community, which can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts. Therefore, it can negatively impact local people's perception of tourism and lead to resentment towards tourists. To address these issues, Sa Pa Town Culture Office can implement various initiatives. Firstly, it is possible to develop educational programs to raise the awareness of local people about the importance of sustainable tourism and its benefits to the community. Second, it is possible to work with tourism companies to promote sustainable tourism practices and encourage responsible tourist behaviors by tourists. This could include initiatives such as promoting ecotourism, encouraging waste reduction, and respecting local customs and traditions. Finally, parties can participate in cultural exchange programs to promote mutual understanding and



respect between tourists and local people through cultural activities. This can help overcome cultural differences and reduce misunderstandings and conflicts.

In addition, representatives of travel agencies and companies organizing tours to Sa Pa town, said that the main factors affecting the attitude of local communities to sustainable tourism development, including: Firstly, lack of communication and consultation: The local community may not have been fully consulted and informed about the benefits and impacts of sustainable tourism. This can lead to misunderstandings and negative attitudes towards tourism development. For example, if a new hotel or resort is built in the area without the involvement of the local community, they may feel that their land and resources are being taken away. Second, the allocation of economic benefits: The allocation of economic benefits from tourism is also an important factor affecting the attitudes of local communities towards sustainable tourism development. If the benefits of tourism are not distributed fairly or if the local community is not directly involved in tourism activities, they may feel that tourism development does not benefit them. For example, if the majority of tourism revenue goes to large tour operators or hotel chains, while locals take only low-paid jobs, they may view tourism development as unfair and exploitative. Third, cultural preservation: Local communities in Sa Pa have a rich culture and unique lifestyle, and they may fear that tourism development may threaten their cultural heritage. Tour operators must consider local cultural norms and values, and ensure that the cultural heritage of the local community is preserved and promoted. Fourth, environmental impacts: The environmental impacts of tourism development can also affect the attitudes of local communities towards sustainable tourism. Tour operators must consider the impact of tourism on the local environment and take steps to minimize any negative impacts. For example, if a hotel or resort is built in an ecologically sensitive area, it can lead to deforestation, pollution, and loss of biodiversity, all of which can affect the livelihoods of local communities. To address these factors and promote sustainable tourism development in Sapa, tour operators must work closely with local communities to ensure that they are involved in decision making and benefit from tourism activities. This can be achieved through community-based tourism initiatives, in which local people are directly involved in the provision of tourism services and receive a fair share of the economic benefits. Communication and consultation with local communities is also essential to ensure that tourism development is consistent with their cultural and environmental values. Finally, a focus on sustainable tourism practices, such as ecotourism and responsible tourism, can help minimize negative environmental impacts and promote the long-term sustainability of tourism in Sa Pa.

Meanwhile, local people in Sa Pa believe that the main factors affecting community attitudes towards sustainable tourism development include: Firstly, lack of understanding and awareness: Many local people are not fully aware of the concept of sustainable tourism development and its importance to the community and the environment. This lack of understanding can lead to a negative attitude towards sustainable tourism initiatives and practices. For example, some local residents may view waste management or resource conservation activities as inconvenient and unnecessary, not realizing the long-term benefits to their own environment and quality of life. Second, limited economic benefits: While tourism may bring economic benefits to the community, some residents feel that they do not benefit equally or adequately from the development of the industry. This can lead to resentment and a lack of support for sustainable tourism initiatives.

For example, some residents may feel that they are not receiving fair compensation for their land or services, or that the profits generated by tourism are not being reinvested in the community. Thirdly, cultural preservation: Sa Pa has a unique rich cultural heritage of the region. Local residents may be concerned about the impact of tourism on their cultural traditions and lifestyles, and may be hesitant to support sustainable tourism initiatives that they feel could threaten these traditions. For example, some residents may feel that certain tourism activities, such as large-scale festivals or events, do not respect their cultural values and practices. Finally, there is a lack of community participation: sustainable tourism

development requires the participation and participation of local communities. However, some residents may feel that their voices are not being heard or that they are not being involved in the decision-making process related to tourism development. For example, some residents may feel that they are not consulted about tourism projects or that their input is not taken into account when making decisions about the development of the industry. To address these factors, it is important to raise awareness and education about sustainable tourism development, ensure that the economic benefits of tourism are shared more equitably among communities, and encourage local people to participate in decision-making processes related to tourism development. In addition, it is important to ensure that sustainable tourism practices respect the cultural heritage and traditions of the community.

#### 4. Conclusion

The research results show that, while tourism brings economic benefits to the community, it also brings negative impacts on the natural environment, social environment and economic environment. Local residents expressed concern about the degradation of the natural environment, cultural goods and loss of traditional values. Regarding sustainable tourism practices, participants demonstrated awareness and understanding of the concept of sustainable tourism, but they considered that these practices were not effectively implemented in Sapa. The main causes of this problem are the lack of cooperation and coordination among stakeholders, inadequate education and training, and the lack of strict enforcement of regulations. The main factors influencing the attitudes of local communities towards sustainable tourism development in Sapa are their socio-economic status, education level, cultural identity and awareness of the benefits and costs of tourism development. Research shows that efforts should be made to involve local communities in the decision-making process and prioritize their needs and interests in sustainable tourism development plans. Overall, this study highlights the importance of engaging local communities in planning and implementing sustainable tourism development to ensure that tourism development in Sa Pa is not only economically sustainable but also socially and environmentally sustainable.

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