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Developing Ecotourism – A Strategic Solution for Socio-Economic Development in Thai Nguyen Province, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT
This article looks closely at how ecotourism can be a smart way to help Thai Nguyen Province in Vietnam grow in a way that is good for both people and the environment. By evaluating the natural, cultural, and human sides of Thai Nguyen to understand what's working and what's not. They look at places like Nui Coc Lake, ATK Dinh Hoa, and Tan Cuong tea area, which are special because of their unique natural settings. The study gives a list of practical ideas to help make the best use of what the area has, improve the ecotourism experience, and make sure the environment stays protected, local culture is kept alive, and people in the community benefit.
Keywords: Ecotourism, sustainable development, Thai Nguyen, socio-economic development, development solutions.

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, ecotourism has become an important part of Vietnam's tourism sector, especially as the country moves towards a green and circular economy.Ecotourism is all about protecting nature, helping local communities, and improving living standards. Because of this, it plays an important role in the long-term development plans of many areas, including Thai Nguyen.

Thai Nguyen has a rich history and culture, along with a wide variety of natural environments that make it a good place for ecotourism.Places such as Nui Coc Lake, ATK Dinh Hoa, Than Sa – Phuong Hoang Nature Reserve, Tan Cuong tea region, Kem Stream, and Phuong Hoang Cave are special because they show the unique character of the Northern Midland region. However, ecotourism in Thai Nguyen is still in its early stages and hasn't reached its full potential yet.

This article aims to give a clear, scientific view of how ecotourism can help Thai Nguyen develop economically and socially.It looks at the strengths, current situation, and problems, and offers solutions to help develop ecotourism in a sustainable and effective way for the future.

II. CONTENT

1. Potential for ecotourism development in Thai Nguyen Province

First, Favorable Natural Conditions:Favorable Natural Conditions: Thai Nguyen has a variety of landscapes, a mild climate, clean forests, lakes, caves, and plenty of natural mineral springs. Popular places like Than Sa – Phuong Hoang Nature Reserve, Mo Ga Stream, and Nui Coc Lake have great potential for ecotourism, offering chances for relaxation, adventure, and hands-on experiences.

Second, rich cultural, historical, and humanistic values:The province has traditional craft villages, such as Tan Cuong tea and Trai Cau pottery, along with folk festivals and historical sites like ATK Dinh Hoa, Duom Temple, and Xuong Rong Temple.The presence of different ethnic groups, including the Tay, Nung, San Diu, and Dao, adds to the cultural and ecotourism offerings.

Third, Strategic location:Thai Nguyen is located in the Northern Midland region and borders provinces known for their tourism potential, such as Hanoi, Bac Kan, and Lang Son.This helps in developing tourism routes that connect different regions.

2.Current status of ecotourism development in Thai Nguyen

2.1. Achievements

Various ecotourism models have started to attract tourists, including the Nui Coc Lake tourism area, tea-picking experiences in Tan Cuong, and community-based tourism in Dinh Hoa and Vo

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Nhai.Travel companies and local authorities have worked together to create ecotourism-cultural-agricultural experience tours, especially during holidays and Tet. Recent successes include:

Significant increase in tourist arrivals: In 2023, the province welcomed around 2.498 million visitors (2. 478 million domestic and over 20,000 international). By 2024, the number of visitors reached 3. 4 million, which is a 39. 5% increase, with international tourists exceeding 150,000.

Surge in Tourism Revenue: Revenue reached about VND 2,100 billion in 2023 and went beyond VND 3,000 billion in 2024, an increase of 44%.

Development of Key Ecotourism Sites: Nui Coc Lake remains the most visited site, drawing tens of thousands of visitors daily during holidays, like over 15,000 during 2/9 holiday.

Thai Hai Stilt House Ecotourism Village, one of 32 globally recognized quality tourism villages, is an interesting Tay ethnic community in the suburbs of Thai Nguyen City. Other attractions, such as Phuong Hoang ecotourism area, Tan Cuong tea region, ATK Dinh Hoa, and community models in La Bang and Hoang Nong, attract 11,000 to 35,000 visitors annually.

2.2. Improvements in infrastructure and services

Several investment projects have been carried out, including the Nui Coc Lake national tourism area and routes connecting historical sites at ATK.Specific efforts include upgrading the road between Nui Coc Lake and Tan Thai Golf Course, building a 40-kilometer road around Nui Coc Lake, and expanding and improving roads to ATK Dinh Hoa, connecting to Tuyen Quang.

Standardization of accommodation, dining, and cultural experience services is taking place, with active involvement from local communities.Key actions include providing VND 5 billion per community tourism site to enhance the environment, train people, and improve infrastructure; setting up thousands of billboards, signs, and promotional materials; organizing press trips and familiarization tours to involve media and travel agencies; and creating over 1,000 books and 40,000 brochures. Eleven recognized community tourism sites have been developed, with many homestays reaching nearly full occupancy during weekends, holidays, and Tet.

2.3. Limitations and challenges

First, there is no comprehensive ecotourism plan.Without a clear, long-term strategy, it is hard to coordinate ecotourism with cultural and community-based tourism.

Second, regional connections and unique tourism products are limited.While some unique offerings exist, they do not form a clear chain, and connections between different regions are weak. The province also lacks a well-known ecotourism brand.

Third, the tourism workforce is not enough or not skilled enough.Although overnight visitors make up 38–40% of total arrivals each year, the number of workers and the quality of services are not enough to meet the needs. In remote areas, there is a lack of trained staff, and there are not enough people who can speak foreign languages or have the necessary skills and expertise.

Fourth, promotion and digital communication are limited.Even though there have been improvements in 2024 and early 2025, digital channels are mainly limited to Facebook and websites. There is no official app or regular international events.

3. Key issues for ecotourism as a strategic solution for socio-economic development in Thai Nguyen Province

First, creating jobs, improving income, and promoting sustainable poverty reduction: Ecotourism should focus on the community, helping local residents change their economic structure and reduce reliance on traditional farming.Developing homestays, working as tour guides, and selling local products create many job opportunities locally.

Second, preserving and promoting cultural and ecological values: Well-planned ecotourism helps protect forests, water sources, and the traditions of indigenous ethnic groups.It also increases community awareness about preserving cultural identity and living environments.

Third, contribution to new rural development and ecological urbanization: Ecotourism serves as a catalyst for improving infrastructure and promoting supportive services. It enhances quality of life and fosters sustainable urbanization processes.

4. Basic steps for developing sustainable ecotourism in Thai Nguyen Province

Solution 1: Creating a plan for ecotourism growth: Check and change the tourism plans so they match the features of each area with nature.Focus on building roads, electricity, water, and phone services at places where tourism could happen.

Solution 2: Making connections between regions and working with businesses: Make travel routes that connect different provinces, like Thai Nguyen, Phu Tho, and Lang Son.Get businesses to help build eco-friendly hotels, farms for tourists to stay in, and community-based tourism projects.
Solution 3: Training people and using technology for communication: Offer training to improve skills in tourism, learn foreign languages, and become better tour guides.Use technology more to run, advertise, and sell ecotourism trips through websites and apps.

Solution 4: Combining nature protection with tourism growth: Use ways of running tourism that are kind to the environment and promote eco-friendly products.Run strong campaigns to help communities and visitors care for forests, rivers, waterfalls, lakes, and other naturalareas.

III. CONCLUSION

Ecotourism is not just a green industry, but also a way to develop in many ways, bringing money, culture, and environmental benefits.Thai Nguyen has the right natural, social, and human resources to develop ecotourism, if the right plans are made.Growing ecotourism needs to go hand-in-hand with protecting nature, keeping local culture alive, improving people's lives, and creating a friendly, sustainable image for Thai Nguyen.This is not just about the economy, but also about building a better, balanced way of living between people and nature in the province's future.

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