

Some Difficulties and Suggestions for Sustainable Marine Eco-tourism in Vietnam and Japan: Case Studies of Vân Đồn District, Quảng Ninh Province and Akkeshi Town, Hokkaido

Noma Haruo¹, Trần Đức Thanh², Trần Thị Mai Hoa²

¹*Kansai University, Japan*

²*VNU University of Social Sciences and Humanities*

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Abstract. The paper deals with the difficulties in developing sustainable marine eco-tourism based on analysis of current situation in two case studies in Japan and Vietnam. Akkeshi Town is located in the northeastern part of Hokkaido, where the natural resources are abundant, such as the Ramsar inscribed wetland, the existence of big mammals such as seals. However, the town is facing the decrease in the number of visitors after a high expectation in the 1990s due to an out-of-the-way place. Vân Đồn District, on the other hand, is a new and prospective project in the government's policy to stimulate the economy of the coastal zone of Quảng Ninh. It owns a national park that offers a lot of natural resources but a proper way is yet to be found to make it conform with the exploitation of tourism industry. Besides the diversity in geographical features, it is also the habitat of some kinds of tortoises and other special animals. Nevertheless, both cases have similar paradoxes in tourism development, first from the objective contexts (e.g. the competition with their neighboring areas that have quite similar natural resources) and secondly, from the subjective paradigms (e.g. the high seasonableness and dependency on natural conditions). How to minimize the difficulties to support the development of ecotourism is the question that needs correct answers. Based on the authors' experience in tourism industry, some solutions are suggested, including co-operation within local tourism, the proactive leadership of local government, the business model for sustainable management, as well as considering the interaction relationship between mass tourism and ecotourism as a solution for current development.

Keywords: Ecotourism, sustainable tourism, tourism management, Vietnam, Japan.

1. Introduction

Coastal and marine areas have always been noticed as important but complex zones for any government of those countries that have a large area of marine territory like Japan and Vietnam. For the nature of a coastal zone, which offers a

wide range and a variety of natural resources, tourism development is often integrated in local development strategies to take advantage of this fruitful industry. However, as two sides of a coin, inappropriate application of tourism may also lead to undesirable effects, as well as many other conflicts. To make tourism eco-friendly, many governments have stated to encourage the orientation for sustainable tourism and ecotourism development (Vietnam Prime

* Corresponding author. Tel: 84-988793489
Email: thanhtdn@yahoo.com

Minister, 2010; Japan Ministry of Environment, 2008). Nevertheless, it is more an ideal than a reality to achieve what is truly called “sustainable tourism”. If it is true that “practice makes perfect”, then valuable lessons from other areas and other countries is worth considering.

In this paper, the authors focus on the development of marine tourism in two case studies in Japan and Vietnam. Based on two case studies in Akkeshi Town (Hokkaido, Japan) and Vân Đồn (Quảng Ninh Province, Vietnam), the authors discuss difficulties of ecotourism development in coastal regions, and suggest oriented solutions for a better application of ecotourism and sustainable tourism in marine areas. The learnt lessons are expected to give a second thought for strategy-makers of local development based on tourism industry.

2. Basic concepts

2.1. Ecotourism development

As tourism studies need a multi-disciplinary approach, the authors apply several approaches at the same time, including the supply-demand approach in economics, tourism system approach in tourism geography, tourist behaviour approach in sociology and psychology, etc. Particularly, the authors regard ecotourism as “philosophy of sustainability in tourism industry”. In other words, to be ecotourism, it must satisfy three key criteria (Fig. 1).

Moreover, to develop “genuine ecotourism”, a community-based approach is highly recommended in ecotourism projects. In coastal and marine areas, fishermen's participation is indispensable for the success of local tourism industry. As a result, a solution will emphasize the co-existence between fishing and sea protection.

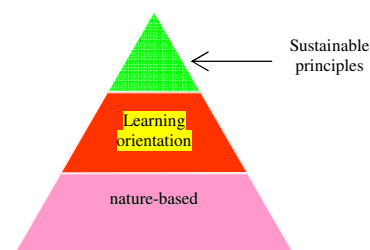


Fig. 1. Three key criteria of ecotourism.

2.2. Marine ecotourism

Few research papers mentioned marine ecotourism as a separate topic from various schools of thought in ecotourism. In fact, marine ecotourism concept refers to geographical classification of ecotourism development in coastal and marine areas in comparison with that of terrestrial areas. It covers ecotourism development in foreshore, offshore and coastal zones [1].

Main marine ecotourism activities are sea-based (particularly focusing on mega fauna and “opportunistic sightings” or opportunities to observe typical animals). Nevertheless, land-based activities are also acceptable and are considered as a substitute for sea-based activities in case of unfavourable conditions of local weather. Furthermore, non-wildlife based activities (e.g. those focus on unique cultural and heritage characteristics of coastal regions and communities) are also considered a form of ecotourism.

In comparison with terrestrial ecotourism, marine ecotourism is more dynamic, open and sensitive as marine wildlife is “highly mobile”, “remote and diffuse”. Pollutions and bad impacts are more serious and widespread due to “interconnectivity” by water environment, almost non-spatially compartmentalized [1]. Tourism resources are more likely to be in modified condition.

Fishermen are the main component of villagers living in marine ecotourism destinations. In comparison with people in remote mountainous areas, they are more open and more sensitive to tourism business. However, their income is less stable in terms of seasonality, endangered by the increasing impacts of global issues such as global warming.

3. Research areas

3.1. Akkeshi Town (East Hokkaido, Japan)

Akkeshi Town has the total area of 739km², with the population of 11,164 people (2008) (population density is 15 people/km²), is the habitat for 4,441 households. Most of them are fishermen. 31.8% of the labor force work in agriculture, forestry and fishery (23.8% of which work in fishery), 23% in industry and construction, 45.2% in service sector (2005). 60% of fishermen are males. The main product is seaweed or kelp.

Akkeshi Town was selected as the first place to conduct a case study for several reasons. First, it was recommended by Ubakata (2006) as a town rich of natural resources in its

prefectural parks. Notably is a vast area of wetland that was inscribed in the Ramsar Convention and had been continuously protected by a number of NPO and environmental organizations.

3.2. Vân Đồn District, Quảng Ninh Province, Vietnam

Vân Đồn is made of over 600 islands and small islets in the northeast of the Tonkin Gulf. It has the total area of 553.2km², with the population of 41,447 people (2008) (population density 75 people/km²). 76.8% of the labor force work in agriculture, forestry and fishery (25.7% of which work in fishery), 6% in industry and construction, and 17.2% in service sector (2005). The specialty product is “*sa sung*”. The income of the community is unstable.

The place has been noticed since the Vân Đồn Economic Zone was settled up and a vast investment for infrastructure was started. With the special position, tourism and recreation industry of Vân Đồn seems to be a focus lens in many regional master-planning strategies. However, in the contrary to prospectively projected, tourist arrivals in the last period just had a slight increase.

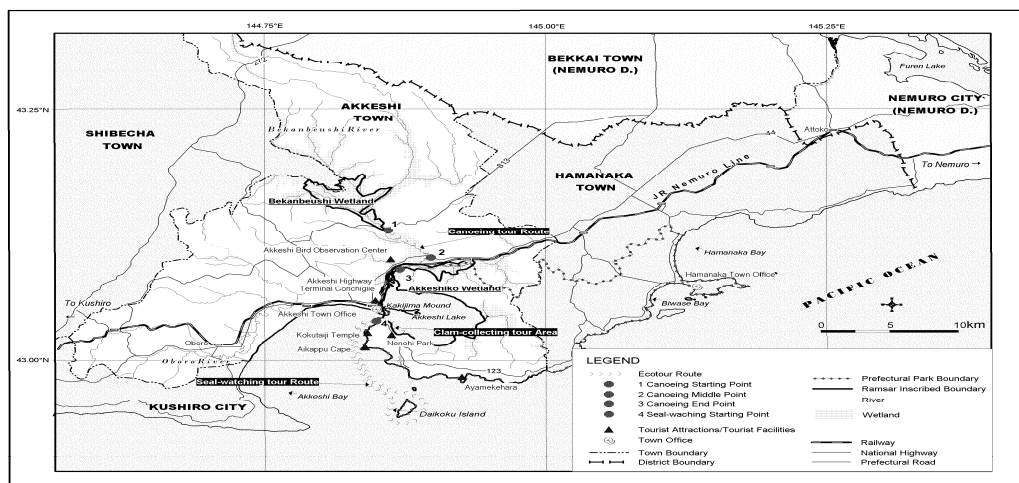


Fig. 2. Akkeshi Town and its eco-tours.
(Source: Trần Thị Mai Hoa, PhD dissertation)

within Hokkaido, and over 90% were one-day visitors. Foreign tourists were exceptionally few, less than a hundred people per year, accounting for only 0.03% of all tourists per annum.

The tourist season is from May to November with peak in August. In winter, the tourist number is exceedingly low.

4.3. Three ecotours

Ecotourism in Akkeshi Town is under the control of a complexity of agencies. While Department of Local Development takes charge of tourism facilities improvement and promotion (such as organizing festivals and events, delivering tourist information, etc.), NPO and environmental organizations care for preserving the Ramsar resources and environmental education trainings. In Japan, managing eco-tours is the responsibility of individuals and cooperative enterprises. Due to the lack of big tour operators, ecotours in Akkeshi Town are managed by an franchise enterprise, called Conchiglie, founded in 1994. It, in fact, is a terminal for by-passers to take a

rest and consume local souvenirs. Nonetheless, unlike other simple bus terminals, it functions a complex role, i.e. a tourist information center, local food restaurant, environmental exhibition room, conservation center, etc. under a united director board. Being a self-control enterprise, Conchiglie is partly municipality-owned, and works hand in hand with the local government for environment conservation. Its strategy is to “activate Akkeshi Town”.

Three tours that Conchiglie is operating can potentially be ecotour programs. They are river touring by canoe or canoeing tour, seal watching tour, and clam-collecting tour. Other reasons for recognizing them as part of ecotours are they are all new forms of tours that were just born in the 1990s (1995 for canoeing tour, 1998 for seal-watching tour, and 1999 for clam-collecting tour); and their number of tourists they serve are limited as against to the large number of mass tourism.

Table 2 highlights basic information, and figures 4 and 5 illustrate the situation of business and the seasonality of such tours.

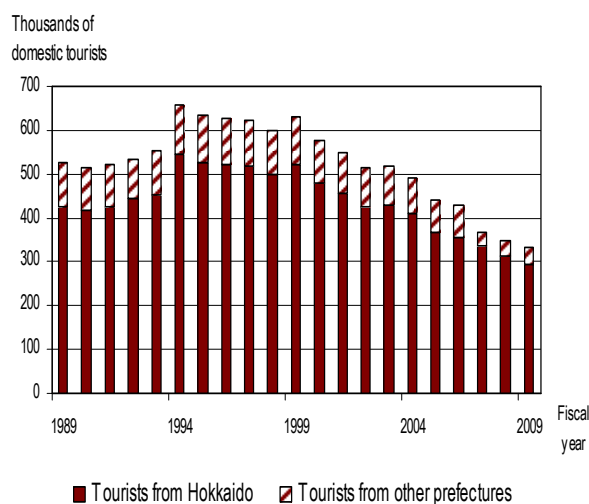


Fig. 4. Domestic tourists to Akkeshi Town (period 1989 to 2009).

Source: Akkeshi Town statistics.

Table 1. Domestic visitors to Akkeshi by tourist places and tourist attractions (fiscal year 2009)

Places of interests	Tourists from Hokkaido	Tourists from other prefectures
Parks and gardens	88,323 (29.39%)	15,790 (42.88%)
Wetland	5,532 (1.84%)	3,464 (9.41%)
Museums and historic sites	27,738 (9.23%)	4,667 (12.67%)
Festivals and special events	4,933 (1.64%)	25 (0.07%)
Food and souvenir shops	173,966 (57.89%)	12,875 (34.97%)
Total	300,492 (100%)	36,821 (100%)

Source: statistics of Department of Local Development (Akkeshi Town 2010), the authors compiled.

Table 2. Three ecotours in Akkeshi Town

Name of tour	Average hours	No. of months in operation	Maximum no. of participants	Price (per person)	Tour guides	Supervisors
Canoeing	2 hours (2 times/day)	6 months (1st May. to 31st Oct.)	40 people (2 people and 1 instructor per canoe)	JPY8000 (4-10 people); JPY5000 (11-40 people)	One man (a carpenter and canoeing maker)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Conchiglie ▪ NPO: Bird Observation Center
Seal-watching	1.5 hours (2 times/day)	6 months (1st May. to 31st Oct.)	No limitation (max. 10 people and 1 guide/boat)	JPY5000 (apply for 5 people upwards)	Four fishermen (in their thirties, fifties)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Conchiglie
Clam-collecting	Not specific	3 months (mid-Apr. to mid-July)	No limitation	JPY2000	Volunteer fishermen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Conchiglie ▪ Agricultural Association Cooperatives

(Source: Conchiglie brochure of experience tour and interviews).

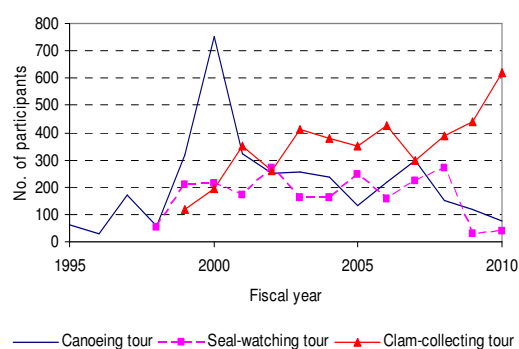


Fig. 5. Three typical ecotours in Akkeshi Town. Source: Conchiglie statistics

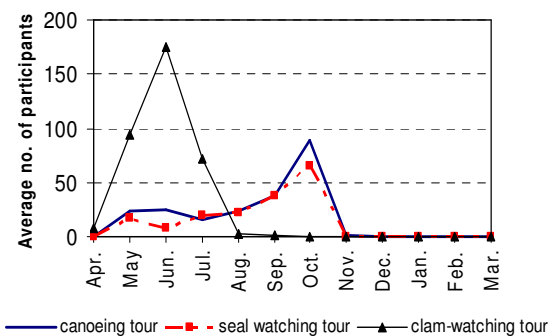


Fig. 6. Tourism seasonality of three ecotours by the average participants by month from their operation year. Source: Conchiglie statistics

5. Tourism development in Vân Đồn District, Quảng Ninh Province

5.1. Natural resources

The natural resources that are valuable for ecotourism development concentrates in Bai Tu Long National Park, which stands out as one of the only seven National parks in Vietnam that located both on land and sea. The park is famous for its bio-diversity of six ecosystems, including broad-leaved evergreen tropical forests on limestone and on soil islands, littoral ecosystems, shallow water ecosystems, mangrove ecosystems, and coral ecosystems [7].

However, the competitive advantages of Vân Đồn are their unspoiled beaches and marine landscapes, with both karst-formed islands as a continuance of Hạ Long Bay's geomorphologic feature, and soil-covered islands, which dominate the region.

For Vietnamese tourists, Vân Đồn is attractive not only by nature, but also by cultural and archaeological resources, such as the complex of Quan Lan monuments (i.e. "Đình-chùa-mieu-nghe" or community house, temple, shrine and joss-house) and its related festivals at spring. Besides, traditional

handicrafts, specialties and cuisines, and people's lifestyle that were 'colored by waves and winds of the sea' are also invaluable resources to diversify visitors' experience on these lovely islands.

5.2. Tourism situation

The figures of tourist arrivals have showed an upward tendency in the last 10 years (Fig. 3). For example, in 2001 year, the district hosted only 30,000 visitors, but in 2007 year, the number of visitors rocketed to around 276,000. About 90% of visitors were domestic. Main inbound tourists were from Europe, China, etc.

5.3. Ecotours

Ecotours have often appeared in papers but not really been implemented in practice. Only researchers and students of universities are their eco-tourists. Other favorable activities for mass markets are beach-related activities (e.g. sun-

bathing, swimming), festivals, and religious and historical places visiting.

Economic benefit flows into the hands of a few households who open accommodation for tourists and supply basic demand like food and beverage, transportation in offshore islands. Though their profit tends to increase, they have to compete unfairly with outsiders, and consequently, there seem to be a big room for "economic leakage". Environmental impacts are to be increasing in accordance with the growth of new infrastructure and tourism facilities.

6. Difficulties for ecotourism development in two cases study, and suggested solutions

6.1. Challenges of marine ecotourism development in both cases study

The two cases study, though in different countries, illustrate similar difficulties of ecotourism development in marine and coastal areas.

Table 3. Number of registered accommodations in Vân Đồn (period 2001-2007)

Items	2001	2004	2005	2006	2007
No. of registered accommodations	10	12	35	40	42
(in which qualified standard)	-	-	-	-	21
No. of registered rooms	80	330	381	424	551
(in which qualified standard)	-	-	-	254	329

Source: Department of Culture, Tourism and Sports, Vân Đồn District (2008).

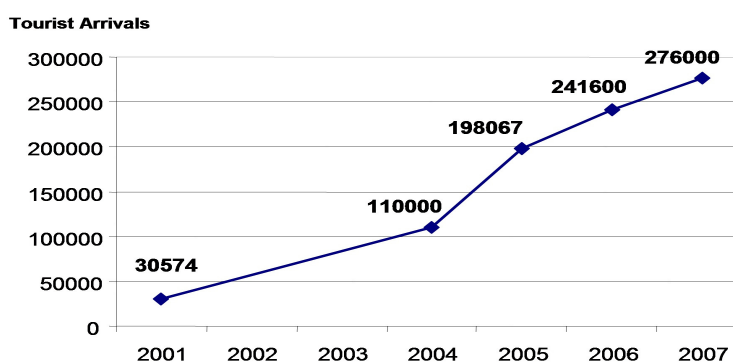


Fig. 7. Tourist arrivals in Vân Đồn District (period 2001-2007).
Source: Department of Culture, Tourism and Sports, Vân Đồn District (2008)

Firstly, there are difficulties coming from the paradox of marine tourism itself. Marine tourism and coastal tourism has a high demand but suffers a distinctly seasonal pattern. For example, in the Akkeshi case, seal-watching tour and canoeing tour are highly concentrated on warmer season from April to October, with high peaks on April-May, and September-October. The same pattern can be observed in beach relaxation among tourists to Vân Đồn, with a peak for Vietnamese tourists in late April to June, and for foreign tourists in October-November. This characteristics is dominated by the weather condition, thus, it is hard to make a change. Another difficulty of marine tourism development comes from the “interconnectivity” as mentioned earlier. For example, the Akkeshi’s fishermen suffer from the fertilize and wastes of dairy farms running directly from the upper hills to Akkeshi Lake, which reduce the productivity of aquaculture.

Secondly, it is the difficulty brought about by the ecotourism paradox itself. The type of original ecotour is not very popular for the majority of domestic tourists. As a result, it leads to the impact of niche market, and low economic return. On the other hand, if the managers try to widen its tourist demand, they have to lower the fence of environment conservation, which conflicts with the principle of ecotourism: the responsible tourism for the environment. Akkeshi Town, for example, has a very limited number of participants to their three ecotours in comparison with the total

tourist arrivals (less than 1%). For Vân Đồn, that number is much lower as ecotours have not officially come into operation for all tourists.

Thirdly, it is the competition from famous tourist attractions nearby. In the case of Akkeshi, the total number of tourists is going downward as the town could not develop a distinguishable tourism image from other surrounding areas. Canoeing tours is a common form of activity in almost every wetland that is easy to find throughout the region. Thus, in comparison to infamous wetlands like Kushiro, Nemuro, etc., Akkeshi Wetland is more popular for local residents than for tourists from other prefectures. Moreover, if compared with Shiretoko (a World Natural Heritage to the north since 2005 year) or Akan tourist attractions, Akkeshi is much less famous, and tourism industry has little room to develop due to the unavailability of infrastructure. Vân Đồn, though given high expectation, suffers similar issues, both from the competitiveness of surrounding places, types of tourism, and from the inconvenient access.

As a result of these difficulties, it is easy to explain why the income increased by tourism activity is so small in both cases study. In Akkeshi, the interviews with 3 tour-guides re-confirm that participating in ecotours does not help them earn money for their living but a “volunteer” activity. For the Vân Đồn case, the number of non-participation in tourism activity is about 80% (see Table 4).

Table 4. Survey on added income from tourism-related activities to household income

Village	No. of households surveyed	Added income from tourism (households)				Not participated households	
		1-10%	11-30%	31-50%	Over 50%	No. of households	%
Minh Chau	52	5	1	5	0	41	79%

(Source: Questionnaire survey in March, 2010).

6.2. Suggested lessons for marine ecotourism in Vietnam

a. Critical issues for ecotourism development in Vietnam, case study of Vân Đồn

Related to this topic, Quach Mai Hong [4] pointed out that the main challenges for the development of ecotourism in Vietnam are: i) lack of knowledge about ecotourism; (ii) lack of training for ecotourism staff; (iii) difficulty in achieving environmental protection in the face of poverty, and (iv) lack of funds to improve tourism installations. Some similar opinions are also reported in a report of FUNDESCO, an NGO that has implemented many projects at national parks of Vietnam [7,8].

We can summarize the main difficulties in Van Don as follows:

- *Limitation in public awareness of ecotourism concept:* in our survey in 2009 year, most of local people (93%) vaguely think of ecotourism as a nature-based activity as simple as going to a beach, swimming and playing. Another large number refused to answer because they “have heard about it” but can’t figure out what it is or “don’t care about it”.

- *Lack of environmental practice:* this is partly because environmental regulations, though not few in number, have not been strictly enforced and obeyed. In Vân Đồn, for example, the situation can be observed, and the reason, as the board of Bai Tu Long National park explains, is the lack of human resource, budget against the vast and complex of the allotted territory.

- *Hindrance from the social acknowledgement of tourism and ecotourism:* For many rural areas in Vietnam, tourism is still considered to be related to social evils, prostitution and HIV-AIDS. This unhealthy opinion of tourism in general and ecotourism in particular is not at all

rare. In fact, a casual talk with a village’s municipal official in a drinking party reveals his viewpoint that prostitution should be recommended if Van Don’s tourism is to develop, which amazed the authors. Concerned the quality of an accommodation for tourists, local people in Minh Chau village believe that tourists want to live in big hotels rather than in their daily houses, which prevent them from participating in local tourism industry.

- *Insufficient concern of the Central Government:* though Vietnam held the “Ecotourism Development Strategy” Conference in 1999 year, ecotourism has not received a sufficient concern of the Central Government such as an Ecotourism Law as in Australia, for instance. Suntikul et al. [8] criticized that “government indifference and corruption, lack of involvement of locals in planning and the fact that most promoters of tourism tend to be large non-local concerns still serve as barriers to eco-tourism development (Cresswell & McLaren, 2000; Wurm, 1999). At the governmental level, responsibilities, interdependencies and interests are often indistinct or redundant, complicating the administrative process and the efforts of conservation organizations (Phan et al., 2002; Wurm, 1999)”. It stays value for the case of Vân Đồn.

- *Lack of institutional framework and cooperation and the overlapping in responsibilities:* Many comments by ICEM [5] or Sage & Nguyen Cu (2001) (cited in ICEM [5]) when point out the reasons for the “disappointing” performance of ICDP in Vietnam, addresses the “poorly defined and/or overlapping institutional and administrative responsibilities, particularly in the buffer zones of SUFs [Special Use Forests]” as one of the big issues. For the Vân Đồn case, the cooperation and collaboration between the

People Committee, the Forest Guards, and the National Park board shows many overlapping as well as faults.

- *Conflicts in land use*: In Vietnam, only the Government has the ownership of land. As a result, the development of tourism projects, often in peripheral areas, may easily lead to the conflicts of land use because of “lack of involvement of locals in planning” [8]. In the case of Vân Đồn, the conflict appears between Bai Tu Long ecotourism resort in Cai Bau mainland and fishermen on the usage of the beach for tourists and for “illegally” shipworm digging. Similarly, the beach in Minh Chau village, which is just few hundred meters away from the settlements of Minh Chau people, was taken out of the local’s use, when the land is hired by another resort owner, who got one-year contract with the National Park management board.

b. Solutions

Under that overall conditions, developing a truly ecotourism destination is a challenging task. The authors will recommend some orientational suggestions based on the lessons from Akkeshi Town and Vân Đồn District, to partly solve the three aforementioned difficulties in the earlier part.

For the disadvantage of seasonality, the most available solution is to diversify the activities and tour products to overlap shallow seasons. The solution Akkeshi has done is creating a new tour that is less weather-dependent and also represents the competitive advantage of the local seems to take effects. Thus, Vân Đồn Tourist managers should look for other products that distinguish Vân Đồn with the neighborhoods. Experience tours on “*sa sung*” digging skills seem to be highly applicable in the case of Vân Đồn as the tourists can go all year round. Another possible

product is “visiting jelly-fish processing” which is much less weather-dependent, and often occurs at February or March, off the mass tourist’s high peak. However, it requires advanced and continuous efforts to make such tours into reality, such as tour-guide training, marketing, demand detecting, etc. Consequently, a local association who takes charge of local tourism business is a must.

Secondly, to make ecotour no longer a niche market, it is necessary to make the change on ecotourism awareness among policy-makers, tourism managers, and also local communities. Rather than a typical tour to un-spoilt regions, the adaptable approach of “experiential tour” like that of Japan can be a suitable one for Vietnam. Daily-life with his surrounding environment, instead of purely nature, can take the center point of such experiential tour to increase the chance of participation for local people. Another solution that combines ecotourism with mass tourism, applying “ecologicalizing techniques”, is worth considering. Those techniques includes resizing and minimizing tour groups, reducing tourist consumption, making use of available infrastructure and lodging, increasing the functions of a tourist facility, etc. Take the case of Akkeshi for example. All three ecotours are promoted by one organization in the Conglie Complex. This complex is also occupied as a tourist restaurant, tourist information center, local retail sales and souvenir selling, environmental educational center, and so on. In Vân Đồn, we can make use of the educational center, sponsored by earlier conservation project, to be a future tourist center, local restaurant or souvenir selling point. This center has an ideal location for such a task.

Thirdly, it is clear that ecotourism could not healthily develop without the development

of traditional tourism. The more other types of tourism available, the more possible ecotourism development can achieve (but the vice versa may not be true). Thus, the view on the relationship between ecotourism and other tourism forms should be shifted from a competitive relationship to a win-win relationship. This is most likely effective for newly developed destinations, where the abundance of natural resources to offer for tourists is quite modest, such as rural areas and economically undeveloped regions. This assessment goes unanimously with a previous comment of Weaver [10] on ecotourism in less developed countries. The encouragement of big investors from other areas to invest and do business in Vân Đồn is obviously a good strategy to create foundations for the development of sustainable tourism in the future (if it is responsibly and well-managed). However, the local government at the same time should give ways for the locally-owned small business to participating in this new field, as they will be the long-life consistent owner of Vân Đồn.

Reasonably, by cooperating with other traditional tourism, “ecotour” can take advantage of the informative and various channel of traditional tourism to increase their target market. In other words, we should think of *the change in management instead of the change in tour type that touches the key issues of ecotourism principles*.

We have highlighted the process that tourism managers in Vân Đồn should consider to successfully achieve sustainable marine tourism development in the district:

1. Establish a committee to discuss about tourism development at local scale, including local government members, local tourism

businesses, representatives of local communities, National Park manager, etc.

2. Under the unanimity of this committee, draft the rule and regulations for ecotourism management in Vân Đồn, adaptable to the regional development plan; and to establish local tourism association.

3. Local tourism association continues to create the network of coordinators at smaller scale and look for new and possible tour products.

4. Select most competitive tour products and do the advance marketing and other pilot tests, and then promote the tour if appropriate.

5. Manage the output, input investment to make the business economically effective and socially effective.

We hope that by setting up this local tourism association, it will shed the lights for the development of ecotourism and sustainable tourism in Vân Đồn in general and in other regions in Vietnam in particular.

7. Conclusions

Marine areas are one of the main foci for the development of ecotourism to fight against the boom of mass tourism and its harm to the environment deterioration. With the widespread tendency of ecotourism by nature, marine and coastal zones have become more important destinations in order to attract foreign exchange in both developing and developed countries. However, to steward the development of ecotourism toward a sustainable form, the involvement of local communities in marine and coastal zones - is a key to success.

Focusing on the two case studies, the authors emphasized the major difficulties of marine ecotourism development in Japan and

Vietnam, and suggested orientational solutions based on the co-existent relationship between fishermen and their habitat, the win-win relationship between ecotourism and other types of tourism, including traditional tourism for the case of Vân Đồn.

It is also learnt that ecotours and ecotourism forms in practice are varied as long as it satisfies the positive "triple bottom line" (Buckley, 2003). A country, hence, can flexibly and creatively adopt the concept to suit its own condition. But the government and particularly, the local government have to fulfill their function as an agent to balance the profit among shareholders in order to get the equilibrium point that the society is expecting.

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