

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN RAMSAR SITES IN VIETNAM: CURRENT STATUS AND ISSUES

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Abstract: Sustainable tourism development in Ramsar sites is an important direction for harmonizing wetland conservation with local socio-economic development. This study assesses the current status of sustainable tourism development across nine Ramsar sites in Vietnam based on the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) Destination Criteria. The study uses 778 valid responses from four stakeholder groups, including 473 tourists, 250 local community members, 35 experts/managers, and 20 tourism businesses. The results show that cultural sustainability received high ratings from local communities (4.29/5) and tourists (4.09/5), while businesses gave relatively lower ratings to the use of local suppliers (3.55/5) and local labour (3.60/5). However, important gaps remain in strengthening local economic linkages, managing tourism carrying capacity, protecting cultural values, and improving ecological risk management. The findings highlight differences in sustainable tourism performance among the nine Ramsar sites and suggest the need for site-specific management approaches. The study provides a comparative basis for strengthening destination governance, local value chain integration, equitable benefit-sharing, and risk and carrying capacity management in Vietnam's Ramsar sites.

Keywords: sustainable tourism, wetlands, Ramsar, stakeholder perceptions, destination sustainability

I. Introduction

Wetlands are highly important ecosystems that provide essential services, including biodiversity conservation, water regulation, and carbon sequestration (Secretariat of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, 2012; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005; Convention on Wetlands, 2025). However, economic development, overexploitation, and climate change are posing serious threats to these ecosystems (Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, 2018).

In this context, the Ramsar Convention (1971) established the principle of “Wise Use” to harmonize the conservation and sustainable exploitation of wetlands that have international importance.

Vietnam has nine Ramsar sites with significant biodiversity, landscape, cultural, and tourism value. These sites offer considerable potential for ecotourism and environmental education, but tourism development also poses challenges related to conservation, carrying capacity, benefit-

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sharing, and stakeholder participation. Recent international studies have therefore emphasized the assessment of sustainable tourism, community participation, and stakeholder engagement in wetland tourism and management (Samal & Dash, 2024; Obradović et al., 2024).

Although previous studies have examined tourism and conservation at individual wetlands and Ramsar sites, nationwide comparative assessments using a common framework and multiple stakeholder perspectives remain limited. To address this gap, this study applies the GSTC Destination Criteria to assess and compare sustainable tourism development across all nine Ramsar sites in Vietnam from the perspectives of tourists, local communities, experts/managers, and tourism businesses. The study aims to identify differences across the four sustainability pillars and key challenges, thereby providing a comparative basis for site-specific sustainable tourism management and wetland conservation.

II. Theoretical and conceptual framework

Sustainable tourism development in Ramsar sites requires a balance between wetland conservation, tourism development, community benefits, and destination governance. Accordingly, this study adopts the GSTC Destination Criteria (2019) as the empirical assessment framework because its four pillars, namely sustainable management, socio-economic sustainability, cultural sustainability, and environmental sustainability, provide a comprehensive structure for assessing destination sustainability.

The conceptual framework integrates complementary theoretical perspectives. Sustainable tourism theory provides the overarching principle of balancing development and conservation (UNDESA,

2015; UNEP & UNWTO, 2005), while the Ramsar Wise Use principle and the Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) framework emphasize maintaining wetland ecological integrity and controlling tourism impacts (Blasco, 2001; Stankey et al., 1985). The Social-Ecological Systems and co-governance perspective highlights interactions among ecosystems, communities, tourism activities, and management institutions (Ostrom, 2009; Plummer & Armitage, 2007), while Stakeholder Theory provides the basis for incorporating and comparing the perspectives of tourists, local communities, experts/managers, and tourism businesses (Freeman, 2010). Together, these perspectives provide the conceptual basis for applying the four GSTC pillars to assess management, socio-economic, cultural, and environmental sustainability, while incorporating the perceptions of multiple stakeholder groups at Ramsar sites.

III. Research methodology

The study employed purposive convenience sampling, with face-to-face surveys conducted at nine Ramsar sites from June to October 2025. A total of 778 valid responses were collected, including 473 tourists, 250 local community members, 35 experts/managers, and 20 business representatives. The questionnaire was translated into English for surveying international tourists. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and provided voluntary informed consent to participate.

The measurement instrument was developed based on the GSTC Destination Criteria (2019), comprising four pillars: management, socio-economic development, culture, and environment. The indicators were measured using a five-point Likert scale. Data were processed in SPSS using descriptive statistics, mean analysis, and

comparisons across destinations. The reliability of the measurement scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for each pillar. The results showed Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.766 for management, 0.795 for socio-economic development, 0.776 for culture, and 0.787 for environment, all exceeding 0.70, indicating satisfactory reliability and internal consistency.

For the overall assessment, the score for each GSTC pillar at each Ramsar site was calculated as the arithmetic mean of tourist and local community assessments. The overall mean was calculated as the average of the four pillar scores, and the balance gap was defined as the difference between the highest and lowest pillar scores; a smaller gap indicates a more balanced sustainability profile. Equal weighting was applied to the four GSTC pillars. For Lang Sen, where community data were unavailable, the assessment was based solely on tourist responses. The overall assessment considered the overall mean, balance gap, stakeholder consistency, and site-specific conservation and tourism development conditions, rather than the overall mean alone.

IV. Research findings and discussion

4.1. Current status of sustainable tourism development in Ramsar sites in Vietnam

4.1.1. Sustainable management of Ramsar sites in Vietnam

Sustainable management at Ramsar sites was rated positively, with

mean scores ranging from 3.64/5 to 4.13/5. Key strengths include effective control of environmental impacts, visitor management to avoid overcrowding (tourists: 3.84/5), and effective destination promotion (experts: 4.03/5). However, adaptive capacity to climate change and natural disaster risks remains limited, as reflected in the relatively low assessment by businesses (3.50/5), indicating a lack of proactive, long-term response scenarios.

A comparison of sustainable management across the nine Ramsar sites, based on assessments by tourists and local communities, reveals clear differences in management effectiveness among destinations (Table 1). The Ramsar sites assessed as having good and relatively consistent management performance include Tram Chim, Ba Be, Con Dao, and Bau Sau. Con Dao stands out with a particularly high assessment from the local community (4.40/5), indicating effective coordination between management activities and the local community. In contrast, Lang Sen received the lowest assessment (3.37/5 from tourists), mainly due to weaknesses in the reception process and service organization. U Minh Thuong showed a substantial discrepancy between the assessments of the local community (4.57/5) and tourists (3.55/5), suggesting that although internal management is effective, insufficient attention has been given to visitor experiences and tourism services.

Table 1. Comparison of sustainable management levels across the 09 Ramsar sites

No.	Ramsar site Name	Tourists	Community
1	Tram Chim National Park	4.04	4.03
2	Con Dao National Park	4.03	4.40
3	Ba Be Lake	4.03	4.03
4	Bau Sau Wetland Area	3.99	4.06
5	Van Long Wetland Nature Reserve	3.90	3.97
6	Mui Ca Mau National Park	3.74	3.81

No.	Ramsar site Name	Tourists	Community
7	Xuan Thuy National Park	3.65	3.94
8	U Minh Thuong National Park	3.55	4.57
9	Lang Sen Wetland Reserve	3.37	N/A
	Average	3.83	4.13

Note: N/A indicates that no responses were collected from the local community at Lang Sen Wetland Reserve.

(Source: Survey and analysis results by the research team, 2025)

4.1.2. Socio-economic sustainability in tourism development at Ramsar sites in Vietnam

The socio-economic pillar received the lowest overall assessment scores (Local community: 4.01; Experts: 3.75; Tourists: 3.68; Businesses: 3.66).

Although tourism has created livelihoods and improved incomes in buffer-zone areas, a major bottleneck remains the weak integration of local supply chains. Businesses gave relatively low ratings to the prioritization of local labor (3.60/5) and local suppliers (3.55/5). Investment in infrastructure remains limited (experts: 3.66/5), while tourists gave a relatively low rating to the value for money in terms of price and quality (3.64/5).

There are clear differences in socio-economic performance among the Ramsar sites. The high-performing group includes Mui Ca Mau (strong potential for river-based ecotourism), Con Dao (successful transition of livelihoods from fisheries to tourism), Ba Be (effective homestay model), and Van Long (a self-managed boat-rowing cooperative model). The lower-performing group includes Bau Sau and Lang Sen, where priority is given to core-zone conservation, resulting in restrictions on tourism activities. U Minh Thuong shows a substantial discrepancy between assessments by the local community (4.54) and tourists (3.41), as strict peat-swamp forest conservation limits opportunities for visitor experiences.

Table 2. Comparison of socio-economic sustainability across the 09 Ramsar sites

No.	Ramsar site Name	Tourists	Community
1	Mui Ca Mau National Park	4.02	3.93
2	Tram Chim National Park	4.01	3.75
3	Con Dao National Park	3.98	4.57
4	Ba Be Lake	3.88	4.16
5	Van Long Wetland Nature Reserve	3.84	3.92
6	Xuan Thuy National Park	3.73	3.80
7	U Minh Thuong National Park	3.41	4.54
8	Lang Sen Wetland Reserve	3.20	N/A
9	Bau Sau Wetland Area	3.10	3.24
	Average	3.68	4.01

(Source: Survey and analysis results by the research team, 2025)

4.1.3. Cultural sustainability in tourism development at Ramsar sites in Vietnam

The cultural pillar received the highest overall assessment scores (Community: 4.29/5; Tourists: 4.09/5;

Experts: 3.93/5; Businesses: 3.89/5). In particular, the control of cultural exploitation and the protection of cultural heritage were assessed very positively (scores ranging from 4.00 to 4.31). The

expression of cultural identity and the clarity of information systems were also positively recognized by tourists (4.10/5 and 4.11/5, respectively). Nevertheless, experts warned of the risk of commercialization affecting local people's access to cultural and religious spaces (Experts: 3.71/5; Businesses: 3.75/5).

A comparison among the Ramsar sites (Table 3) shows that Ba Be and Con Dao received the highest assessments due to the effective integration of Tay and Nung cultural values and historical and spiritual

heritage. Van Long, Tram Chim, and Mui Ca Mau have effectively preserved water-based cultural traditions associated with local livelihoods. Xuan Thuy and Bau Sau received lower scores due to the lack of complementary cultural tourism products. U Minh Thuong showed a substantial discrepancy between community and tourist assessments (Community: 4.65; Tourists: 3.77), as its cultural values primarily serve the local community's daily life and have not yet been transformed into experiential products for tourists.

Table 3. Comparison of cultural sustainability at 09 Ramsar sites

No.	Ramsar site Name	Tourists	Community
1	Ba Be Lake	4.54	4.54
2	Con Dao National Park	4.53	4.61
3	Tram Chim National Park	4.09	4.05
4	Van Long Wetland Nature Reserve	4.04	4.31
5	Mui Ca Mau National Park	4.01	4.05
6	Lang Sen Wetland Reserve	4.00	N/A
7	Bau Sau Wetland Area	3.93	3.89
8	Xuan Thuy National Park	3.88	4.01
9	U Minh Thuong National Park	3.77	4.65
	Average	4.09	4.29

(Source: Survey and analysis results by the research team, 2025)

4.1.4. Environmental sustainability in tourism development at Ramsar sites in Vietnam

Environmental sustainability received generally positive assessment scores, reflecting a clear improvement in social awareness and the initial effectiveness of environmental management at Ramsar sites. In particular, waste management and noise control were found to be effective, while environmental education through tourism activities and businesses' social responsibility in conservation were highly rated. However, despite these achievements, several potential issues remain. The zoning and protection of ecologically sensitive

areas have not yet been fully effective, receiving only 3.60/5 according to expert assessments. Tourism carrying capacity management scored 3.77/5, which remains insufficient to maintain a balance between tourism exploitation and conservation. In addition, the control of illegal exploitation of biodiversity resources remains relatively weak, indicating persistent gaps in environmental monitoring and management enforcement in practice.

The assessment results (Table 4) also indicate that Bau Sau, Tram Chim, and U Minh Thuong ranked highest due to their strict control of core zones. Con Dao showed a large discrepancy between community and tourist assessments

(Community: 4.63/5; Tourists: 3.88/5), attributed to pressures from waste and noise during peak tourist seasons. Mui Ca Mau received the lowest score, mainly

due to floating plastic waste in rivers and the impacts of watercraft used for transporting tourists.

Table 4. Comparison of environmental sustainability at 09 Ramsar sites

No.	Ramsar site Name	Tourists	Community
1	Bau Sau Wetland Area	4.56	4.59
2	Tram Chim National Park	4.51	4.52
3	U Minh Thuong National Park	4.21	4.65
4	Xuan Thuy National Park	4.05	4.49
5	Lang Sen Wetland Reserve	4.00	N/A
6	Van Long Wetland Nature Reserve	3.91	4.09
7	Con Dao National Park	3.98	4.63
8	Ba Be Lake	3.88	3.91
9	Mui Ca Mau National Park	3.81	3.81
Average		4.09	4.35

(Source: Survey and analysis results by the research team, 2025)

4.1.5. Overall assessment of sustainable tourism development at Ramsar sites in Vietnam

Based on the four GSTC sustainability pillars, the nine Ramsar sites were comparatively assessed for overall sustainability performance, balance across sustainability dimensions, and consistency between tourist and local

community assessments. The results were interpreted in conjunction with the specific conservation and tourism development conditions at each site, enabling an integrated assessment rather than one based solely on the overall mean. Accordingly, the nine Ramsar sites were classified into three relative groups: high sustainability, moderate sustainability, and low sustainability (Table 5).

Table 5. Overall Assessment of Sustainable Tourism Development at the Nine Ramsar Sites

No.	Ramsar site	Overall mean	Balance gap	Overall Assessment	Basis for Overall Assessment
1	Con Dao National Park	4.34	0.36	High sustainable, highly developed and relatively balanced	Highest overall sustainability performance; all four pillars achieved high scores. Particularly strong in cultural sustainability (4.57), while management (4.22), socio-economic (4.28), and environmental sustainability (4.31) were also consistently high.
2	Ba Be Lake	4.12	0.65	High sustainability, strong cultural performance and relatively balanced development	High overall performance across the four pillars, with cultural sustainability as a major strength (4.54). Management (4.03) and socio-economic sustainability (4.02) were stable, while environmental sustainability (3.90) was relatively positive. Notably, stakeholder assessments were highly consistent across the four pillars, supporting a relatively coherent sustainability profile.

No.	Ramsar site	Overall mean	Balance gap	Overall Assessment	Basis for Overall Assessment
3	Tram Chim National Park	4.13	0.64	High sustainability, strong environmental and management performance	High overall sustainability performance, particularly in environmental sustainability (4.52). Management (4.04) and cultural sustainability (4.07) were also strong. Socio-economic sustainability (3.88) was comparatively lower, indicating room for improving local economic benefits.
4	Van Long Wetland Nature Reserve	4.00	0.30	Moderate sustainability, highly balanced performance	Moderate and highly balanced performance across all four pillars. The small balance gap (0.30) indicates that no sustainability dimension substantially underperformed, reflecting harmonious integration of conservation, tourism development, culture, and community benefits.
5	Mui Ca Mau National Park	3.90	0.26	Fairly developed, balanced but with moderate overall performance	The smallest balance gap (0.26) indicates highly even performance across the four pillars. Socio-economic (3.98) and cultural sustainability (4.03) were relatively strong, while management (3.78) and environmental sustainability (3.81) remained comparatively lower.
6	Xuan Thuy National Park	3.94	0.51	Fairly developed, with strong conservation performance	Environmental sustainability was the main strength (4.27), supported by relatively positive cultural sustainability performance (3.95). Management (3.80) and socio-economic sustainability (3.77) were lower, indicating limited translation of conservation advantages into tourism and local economic benefits.
7	Bau Sau Wetland Area	3.92	1.41	Low sustainability, conservation-oriented but highly imbalanced	Environmental sustainability was exceptionally high (4.58), but socio-economic sustainability was substantially lower (3.17). The largest balance gap (1.41) among the nine sites indicates a strong imbalance between conservation performance and tourism-related socio-economic benefits.
8	U Minh Thuong National Park	4.17	0.46	Low sustainability, high overall score, but substantial stakeholder discrepancy	Although the numerical overall mean was high, assessments differed substantially between tourists and the local community. Community assessments were consistently much higher, while tourists rated management, socio-economic, and cultural dimensions considerably lower, indicating that conservation achievements and locally perceived benefits have not been fully translated into visitor experiences and tourism services.

No.	Ramsar site	Overall mean	Balance gap	Overall Assessment	Basis for Overall Assessment
9	Lang Sen Wetland Reserve	3.64	0.80	Low sustainability, limited and poorly integrated tourism development	Lowest overall performance, based on tourist assessments only. Cultural and environmental sustainability were relatively positive (4.00 each), but management (3.37) and socio-economic sustainability (3.20) remained low, indicating limited tourism infrastructure, services, and organization.

(Source: Research analysis and assessment results, 2025)

The overall assessment shows that the Ramsar sites in Vietnam have generally achieved positive outcomes in environmental conservation and cultural preservation; however, notable differences remain in overall performance, the balance among sustainability dimensions, and the consistency of stakeholder assessments. While some sites demonstrate relatively balanced development across the four GSTC pillars, others show substantial gaps between conservation achievements and socio-economic benefits, tourism development, or visitor experiences. These findings highlight the need for differentiated, site-specific solutions tailored to the sustainability profiles of each group of Ramsar sites to improve overall sustainability and strengthen tourism's contribution to wetland conservation and local community development.

4.2. Issues and challenges for sustainable development at Ramsar sites in Vietnam

Disruptions in the supply chain and inequality in benefit distribution: Economic and social sustainability was the lowest-rated pillar, reflecting limitations in value-chain linkages and benefit distribution at Ramsar sites. Businesses often rely on external labor and suppliers to optimize costs rather than utilizing local resources. Although 75.9% of households in buffer zones participate in tourism activities, they are mainly engaged in low-value services (such as boat rowing and small-scale

food services). In contrast, higher-value activities (such as tour organization and tour guiding) are controlled by businesses and management authorities. This reduces the community's incentives to participate in conservation.

Challenges in conserving cultural values and strengthening community participation: The difference in perceptions between local residents, who perceive access to cultural resources as relatively normal, and experts, who warn of the risk of heritage commercialization, highlights the need to establish a "cultural carrying capacity threshold" while ensuring authenticity and strengthening the community's role as the primary custodian of its cultural heritage.

Limitations in carrying-capacity management and climate change adaptation: The lack of long-term preventive and adaptive measures may increase risks to ecosystems under the combined pressures of tourism and climate change. In Tram Chim National Park, for example, maintaining year-round water levels for fire prevention and firefighting has affected the habitats of spikerush and the Sarus Crane. This demonstrates the need for flexible management approaches tailored to the ecological characteristics of each Ramsar Site.

Institutional bottlenecks and governance mechanisms: Conservation activities are subject to overlapping

provisions across the Law on Forestry, the Law on Biodiversity, the Law on Environmental Protection, and the Land Law. Inconsistencies in guidelines concerning the leasing of forest environmental services and infrastructure development hinder socialized investment. A predominantly administrative management model also limits the meaningful participation of relevant stakeholders.

4.3. Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. First, the assessment relies primarily on stakeholder perceptions, with unequal sample sizes across stakeholder groups and missing community data at Lang Sen. Second, the cross-sectional design captures sustainability conditions at a specific period and does not reflect changes over time. Third, the study has limited integration of quantitative ecological indicators and long-term monitoring data, particularly for assessing tourism carrying capacity and climate-change adaptation. Future research should therefore combine stakeholder-based assessments with ecological indicators, longitudinal monitoring, and appropriate inferential statistical methods to provide a more comprehensive assessment of sustainable tourism development at Ramsar sites.

V. Conclusion

Vietnam's Ramsar Site system has significant potential to establish an international ecotourism brand; however, its development is currently constrained by institutional bottlenecks, fragmented value chains, and limited ecological adaptive capacity. To promote sustainable development, the study proposes three strategic recommendations:

- *Transition toward a co-governance model*: Establish intersectoral coordination mechanisms that ensure meaningful participation of local communities, businesses, scientists, and management authorities in destination planning and decision-making.

- *Strengthen local value chains and equitable benefit sharing*: Promote green tourism certification/labeling schemes and strengthen business linkages with local communities. A transparent benefit-sharing mechanism should be established whereby an appropriate proportion of tourism-related revenues is reinvested in conservation and livelihood improvement in buffer zones, with the proportion determined according to site-specific conditions. International experience from protected areas demonstrates the potential of tourism revenue-sharing mechanisms to support both conservation and community development (World Bank, 2021)

- *Strengthen risk and carrying-capacity management*: Apply the LAC approach to identify acceptable thresholds of ecological change and gradually develop technology-supported environmental monitoring systems, particularly at Ramsar sites experiencing high visitor pressure. Cultural carrying capacity should also be considered to protect community access to cultural heritage spaces.

The coordinated implementation of these orientations will help ensure a balance among tourism development, wetland conservation, and improvements in community livelihoods, thereby providing a foundation for the sustainable development of Ramsar sites in Vietnam.

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PHÁT TRIỂN DU LỊCH BỀN VỮNG TẠI CÁC KHU RAMSAR Ở VIỆT NAM: THỰC TRẠNG VÀ NHỮNG VẤN ĐỀ ĐẶT RA

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Tóm tắt: Phát triển du lịch bền vững tại các khu Ramsar là một định hướng quan trọng nhằm hài hòa giữa việc bảo tồn vùng đất ngập nước và phát triển kinh tế - xã hội. Nghiên cứu này đánh giá thực trạng phát triển du lịch bền vững tại chín khu Ramsar ở Việt Nam dựa trên Bộ tiêu chí điểm đến của Hội đồng Du lịch Bền vững Toàn cầu (GSTC). Nghiên cứu sử dụng 778 phiếu trả lời hợp lệ, gồm 473 khách du lịch, 250 người dân, 35 chuyên gia/cán bộ quản lý và 20 doanh nghiệp du lịch. Kết quả cho thấy tính bền vững về văn hóa được cộng đồng địa phương (4,29/5) và khách du lịch (4,09/5) đánh giá cao, trong khi các doanh nghiệp đánh giá tương đối thấp hơn đối với việc sử dụng các nhà cung cấp địa phương (3,55/5) và lao động địa phương (3,60/5). Tuy nhiên, vẫn tồn tại những khoảng trống đáng kể trong việc tăng cường liên kết kinh tế địa phương, quản lý sức chứa du lịch, bảo vệ các giá trị văn hóa và nâng cao năng lực quản lý rủi ro sinh thái. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy sự khác biệt về mức độ phát triển du lịch bền vững giữa chín khu Ramsar, đồng thời cho thấy sự cần thiết của các cách tiếp cận quản lý phù hợp với đặc điểm của từng khu vực. Nghiên cứu cung cấp cơ sở so sánh cho việc tăng cường quản trị điểm đến, tích hợp chuỗi giá trị địa phương, phân bổ lợi ích công bằng và quản lý rủi ro cũng như sức chứa du lịch tại các khu Ramsar của Việt Nam.

Từ khóa: du lịch bền vững, đất ngập nước, Ramsar, nhận thức của các bên liên quan, tính bền vững của điểm đến

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