

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN VIET NAM

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ABSTRACT—Vietnam tourism has greatly flourished, generating economic benefits to the national economy. However, rapid tourism growth also leads to environmental degradation and cultural erosion. Sustainable tourism plays a role in preserving environmental and natural resources, conserving cultural identities and ensuring economic benefits for all stakeholders. The purpose of this research is to examine the main potentials of sustainable tourism, identify several major challenges and suggest possible solutions for developing sustainable tourism. In this study, a secondary data collection method within a qualitative research framework is employed to analyze the opportunities and the challenges of sustainable tourism development. The findings show that Viet Nam possesses significant potentials for sustainable tourism development, thanks to its stunning beaches with diverse ecosystems, abundant natural and cultural resources, rich traditions, supportive government policies, and the commitment of tourism businesses to embracing sustainable practices. Nonetheless, there are some challenges that hinder sustainable tourism development, including low tourist awareness resulting in inappropriate behavior, inadequate infrastructure for sustainable operations, ineffective management of tourism organizations' sustainability efforts, and a lack of skilled staff. The recommendations include educating and managing tourist behaviors, and implementing better guidelines, legal framework and economic incentives for tourism organizations. The government should also invest in sustainable infrastructures and develop workforce in both quantity and quality to meet the demands of sustainable tourism requirements.

Keywords—Sustainable tourism, Sustainable tourism development, Vietnam tourism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a key service industry which plays an important role in economic development in many countries in the world including Viet Nam. It provides numerous economic, cultural and social benefits to the nation. Vietnam tourism has rapidly grown, contributing to the nation's economic advancement and employment opportunities. It has become one of the world's most tourist attractive destinations due to its rich history, marvelous natural landscapes and vibrant culture [1]. The number of international tourists coming to Viet Nam is significantly increasing. Vietnam National Authority of Tourism asserts that Viet Nam welcomed 12.7 international visitors in the first nine months of 2024, about 43% more than the same period of 2023 [2]. This indicates that Vietnam has considerable potentials for tourism growth, and it is essential to focus on sustainable development to guarantee lasting success. Nevertheless, the fast growth of tourism has raised concerns about its sustainability such as environmental conservation, cultural heritage preservation and equitable distribution of benefits to local communities [3]. Pham and Khin noted that Vietnam has mainly focused on developing tourism for economic benefits but has paid insufficient attention to safeguarding the environment and natural resources for future generation tourism development [4]. Indeed, the growing influx of tourists has put pressure on natural resources, resulting in pollution, deforestation and habitat destruction. Moreover, rapid tourism expansion also raises concerns about cultural degradation and the diminishing of authenticity. Study suggests that without proper management tourism activities can have detrimental impacts on both the environment and society [5].

Sustainable tourism has emerged as a key aspect of global travel, as it aims to strike a balance between economic growth and the conservation of the environment and cultural heritage. As stated in the Sustainable Travel Report 2023, 33,000 tourists from 35 countries worldwide emphasized the importance of sustainability [6]. Dang Xuan Son, chairman of the Vietnam Responsible Tourism Club, emphasized the pressing need for Vietnam to prioritize sustainable tourism because it can boost the number of visitors coming to Vietnam both in the present and in the future [6]. It is very crucial for Vietnam to adopt sustainable practices to guarantee long-term tourism development for both current and future generations. Embracing sustainable tourism can not only help to differentiate Vietnam from other countries but also attract a large number of environmentally-conscious travelers who care for environmental protection and cultural preservation.

II. DEFINITION OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Sustainable tourism is defined as a type of tourism that brings economic, cultural and environmental benefits to the local community while delivering excellent visitor experience [7]. It aims to reduce negative impacts on the environment and indigenous culture while providing job opportunities for local people and preserving local ecosystems [8]. According to Creaco & et al [9], "sustainable development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Current and future economic, social and

environmental effects need to be effectively considered to fulfill the demands of tourists, the tourism industry, the environment and host communities [10]. To ensure long-term sustainability for present and future tourism development, these three dimensions need to be properly balanced. In simple terms, sustainable tourism can be regarded as the development and provision of tourism activities that respond to the needs of visitors and local people while ensuring that natural resources are preserved for future tourism development. It is vital to maintain intact cultural, biological and ecological values while meeting the aesthetic, economic, and social requirements of people [11]. The purpose of sustainable tourism is to maximize the benefits for local people, respect the culture, conserve the natural beauty and educate travelers and local inhabitants.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

A qualitative method is used with secondary data to assess the potential for sustainable tourism development, identify the challenges of sustainable tourism and propose some possible solutions for its implementation. From the point of view of Vartanian [12], secondary research refers to "data that has been previously gathered and is under consideration to be reused for new questions, for which the data gathered was not originally intended". The analyzed data is mainly derived from secondary sources such as academic articles, journals, government reports, industry data, case studies on sustainable tourism in Vietnam as well as trustworthy newspapers and magazines from the country.

IV. POTENTIALS FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN VIET NAM

Việt Nam has five great potentials to develop sustainable tourism. Firstly, the nation is renowned for its breathtaking natural beauty with a pristine coastline expanding approximately 3000 kilometers. This extensive coastline offers numerous beautiful and distinctive beaches, making it a prime location for tourism growth [13]. Hạ Long Bay, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is well-known for its stunning natural beauty, featuring more than 1,600 limestone islands and diverse ecosystems [14]. It is also recognized as one of the twelve countries with the most magnificent bays globally [13]. Additionally, Lang Co Bay is another popular tourist destination in Việt Nam that was voted as the most attractive bay in 2009 by the World Bays Club [15]. Furthermore, Nha Trang Bay is considered one of the rare natural models of the bay system worldwide. The bay has diversified ecosystems and is home to many rare and valuable animal species. Nha Trang Bay is recognized as 29th member of the club of the most beautiful bay in the world in June 2003 [16]. Last but not least, Côn Đảo has been recognized as one of the world's 25 most beautiful bay by U.S. Magazine Travel+Leisure. The beach is famous for "distinct golden sand, soft swells and shady groves of bamboo and evergreen trees." [17].

In addition, Viet Nam offers plenty of historical and cultural relics and stunning landscapes that attract both domestic and international visitors. More than 40,000 relics and landscapes including five relics were recognized by UNESCO and 3,000 others were classified as national relics [18] and 9,857 provincial relics [11]. Besides, 9 UNESCO World Heritage sites are located in Việt Nam including 5 cultural sites, 3 natural sites, and 1 complex heritage site. These sites are Complex of Huế Monument, Hạ Long Bay, Mỹ Sơn Sanctuary, Hội An Ancient Town, Phong Nha Kẻ Bàng National Park, Imperial Citadel of Thăng Long, Citadel of Hồ Dynasty, Tràng An Landscape Complex and Hạ Long Bay-Cát Bà Archipelago [19]. Moreover, The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism showed that Việt Nam has 188 museums, including over 4 million historical and cultural artifacts. These museums have attracted tourists and become cultural and tourist attractions [20].

Furthermore, Viet Nam is rich in tradition and culture. The country is home to 54 distinct ethnic groups each of which has its own unique cultures, customs and lifestyles [21]. UNESCO recognizes numerous famous intangible cultural heritages, including Vietnamese court music, Quan Họ Bắc Ninh folk songs, Ca Trù singing, the worship of Hùng Kings in Phú Thọ, and the art of Đờn Ca Tài Tử music and song from southern Vietnam [22]. Actually, these cultural values help to create many cultural tourism products which are highlighted in the Vietnam Tourism Development Strategy to 2030 as well as the Strategy for Developing Vietnam Tourism Products to 2025, orientation to- 2030 [23]. Indeed, these cultural assets have successfully drawn tourists from around the globe.

Next, the Vietnamese government has introduced national policies to support and develop sustainable tourism. As part of environmental protection efforts, the government approved the Vietnam Green Growth Strategy for the 2011-2020 period [24]. The main goal is to use natural resources effectively, reduce greenhouse gas emissions through research and application of modern technologies, develop infrastructure and drive economic development in sustainable ways. The government made a great effort to synthesize green action plans for major sectors including the tourism industry [24].

Furthermore, the Strategy for Việt Nam's tourism development until 2020, with a vision to 2030, approved by Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng in the Decision 2473/QĐ-TTg on December 30, 2011, emphasizes the importance of enhancing infrastructure and technical facilities for tourism. This includes transportation, tourism

services, and entertainment options for tourists, while also ensuring environmental sustainability, training and nurturing human resources for the tourism industry [25]. Many solutions are highlighted in the strategy like using advanced digital technologies in tourism organizations, and minimize pollution resulting from tourism activities [3]. Additionally, the government has launched the Green Tourism Action Plan Program for the period of 2023-2025 aiming at developing green tourism linked to civilized, clean and beautiful environmental protection [26].

Last but not least, developing sustainable tourism has become a mainstream trend for more and more tourism businesses in Vietnam. This smokeless industry has been encouraged by the Vietnam Tourism Association to develop sustainably and effectively such as making green tourism products, and green services to decrease the negative impacts on the environment [27]. Hội An has proactively taken action to minimize pollution by urging businesses and tourists to cut down on the amount of single-use plastic waste. Approximately, 100 organizations in Hội An are committed to reduce 30 percent single-use plastic items and recycle 50% of organic material [28]. Moreover, many five-star resorts and hotels in Viet Nam have received international green certificates from EarthCheck (the world's leading scientific benchmarking, certification and advisory group for sustainable travel and tourism) and Green Growth 2050 including Banyan Tree Lăng Cô resort, Caravelle Saigon Hotel; Angsana Lăng Cô (EarthCheck Gold Certification); Avani Quy Nhơn Resort, Anantara Muối Nê Resort and Spa, Harbor View Hotel Hải Phòng, Anantara Hội An Resort (Gold certification of Green Growth 2050)[29]. Next, in November 2022 around 5,093 lodging establishments have got the Sustainable Tourism Badge issued by the Booking.com platform. Viet Nam ranks fifth in the Asia Pacific region for earning the Sustainable Tourism badge. This shows that the increasing number of accommodation businesses in the country are recognizing the environmental impacts on the local community. To ensure long-term success, these businesses understand the need to adopt more responsible operational practices [30].

V. CHALLENGES OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN VIET NAM

Although Viet Nam has made great efforts to achieve sustainable tourism, many obstacles still exist. First, tourists' awareness of eco-friendly tourism is quite modest. The survey found 41% of Vietnamese travelers fail to take priority for sustainability in choosing their tourism products and 47% thought this has little impact on the environment [31]. This survey also showed that tourist's behavior is a barrier to responsible tourism. Regarding the environment, pollution caused by tourists in Vietnam is one of the serious issues that can hinder the development of sustainable tourism. Annually, millions of travelers generate a large amount of plastic waste, causing harm to the environment and the country's ecosystem [32]. Nguyen Thi Ngoc Anh from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment indicated that almost 10 plastic bags, and four plastic bottles are dumped by each tourist every day. Plastic garbage accounts for 10 -12 percent of daily solid waste in tourism cities [32]. The United Nations in Vietnam claimed that Viet Nam is one of the five countries producing the estimated 13 million tons of plastics discarded into the sea each year. This consequence is caused by poor waste management [33]. Furthermore, inappropriate tourists' behaviors to heritage sites are another issue for sustainable tourism. Touching, sitting, climbing, walking on ancient floors, and graffiti on heritage sites by tourists result in rock decay and faster failure at scenes [34]. Inside the caves of Hạ Long Bay, many stones have been carved, sprayed or painted in Vietnamese, Chinese and English words [35]. Hoi An is famous for the yellow ancient houses lining along the streets of the town that attract many local and foreign tourists every year. However, graffiti on the walls caused by tourists takes away its unique charms and beauty [36]. In addition, a study on sustainable tourist behaviors of Vietnamese tourists conducted by Tung, Thu, Sang and Ngoc shows that 90 people (37.5%) admitted that they often leave the electricity on when leaving their hotel due to forgetfulness. Some individuals strongly believe that having unlimited access to water and electricity is a benefit included in their service package [37]. These findings indicate that many tourists prioritize personal convenience over energy conservation, leading to irresponsible consumption.

Second, tourism businesses fail to do sustainable tourism in a proper way. Many tourist agencies consider responsible tourism as a product to exploit [11]. Hạ Long Bay, a World Heritage site recognized by UNESCO, deals with water pollution. Hundreds of boats in the bay are taking tourists to enjoy the beauty of the bay every day. According to a report from the United States Agency for International Development, approximately 500 boats are running in the bay including 300-day tour boats and 200 overnight boats [38]. Tour operators are reluctant to care about the environment. Their boats leave oil on the surface of the water, which causes water pollution. The operation of the boat disturbs the living environment of marine species especially endangered coral reefs or seagrass beds, which can lead to the damage of ecosystem [39]. Only some tourist boats have proper water and sewage treatment resulting in dirty water and floating garbage around the bay. Patricia, a traveler from Australia mentioned that Ha Long Bay is like a "sea of trash", and Ged Kelly, a tourist from Britain, noticed a large number of plastic cans, bottles, gloves and an office chair floating on the bay [40]. The International Union for Conservation of Nature reported that approximately 20 large, modern boats are equipped with onboard wastewater treatment systems, while the remaining boats discharge an estimated 500m³ of untreated water into

the bay each day [41]. Hội An, a UNESCO Cultural Heritage site, is also dealing with the same problem as Hạ Long Bay. Hội An wastewater treatment and disposal system are in poor condition. So, wastewater and solid waste from hotels, restaurants, and laundry services discharge directly to rivers and other waterways [42]. This damages the natural beauty of Ancient Town and has a negative impact on visitor's experiences.

Third, tourism infrastructure in Viet Nam is still limited, especially eco-friendly ones. The quality and efficiency of the transportation system are still at average levels [43]. The infrastructure is unable to satisfy the demand for sustainable tourism in the peak tourist season. Approximately 20% of expressway routes and 10% of railway routes are expected to meet international standards [3]. Additionally, Viet Nam has only two main international airports: Tân Sơn Nhất and Nội Bài. During the tourist season, airports become overcrowded leading to long delays, and impacting tourists' experience [43]. The need for air travel will be increasing in the future. By 2037, the International Air Transport Association anticipates that the demand for aviation transportation will double to 8.2 billion [44]. However, the air transport infrastructure and the rapid growth of travel demand are mismatched, which could reduce Vietnam's tourism competitiveness and affect sustainable tourism. Next, the increasing number of tourists requires sufficient high-quality accommodations. Vietnam National Authority of Tourism stated that Vietnam currently has 38,000 accommodations with 780,000 rooms, including 247 five- star hotels and 368 four-star ones [45]. Most accommodations are small and medium-sized [6], so the quality of these establishments should be improved to meet the increasing needs of travelers. Sustainable tourism development requires synchronous development of infrastructure. Besides, the types of tourism infrastructure significantly affect the environment. Data from World Bank indicated Vietnam was ranked as the 17 largest emitter of greenhouse gas emissions worldwide, releasing around 344 million tons of CO₂ per year in 2022 [46]. Plane and car transportation in the tourism industry plays a role in emitting carbon dioxide. Hotels and restaurants use much energy to provide services for guests such as air-conditioning, lights, washing laundry and dishes, and entertainment activities which emit large amount of carbon footprint.

The last challenge is a severe shortage of high-quality human resources. Vietnam lacks human resources both in number and quality. According to Vietnam Tourism Association, by 2025 the need for staff working in accommodation establishments is expected to reach more than 800,000 people, surpassing more than one million by 2030 [47]. Nevertheless, currently the number of students graduating from universities and vocational schools is around 15,000 per year. In HCM City, around 50 colleges and universities offer training courses on tourism and hospitality. But only 60 per cent of employment demand is met [48]. Many accommodation establishments staffing shortages have been the most significant during tourist seasons like holidays, and Lunar New Year [49]. Moreover, the staff turnover rate is high in the hospitality industry due to unattractive benefits, wages, and remuneration policies [50]. The lack of human resources forces many tourism enterprises such as hotels, and restaurants to depend on untrained laborers to serve tourists, which undoubtedly impacts tourists' experience. Besides, tourism employees are unqualified to fulfill the industry requirements. Dao Manh Hung, chairman of the Vietnam Tourism Training Association, said that a severe lack of skilled human resources is a big problem in the sector. Many new graduates are unable to have good technological skills and foreign language skills to work in the tourism industry [51]. Staff with good language proficiency account for 60%, in which the number of staff using English is 42% of the total workforce. Other languages such as Chinese, French and others take up 5%, 4% and 9% respectively [52]. A survey on human resources in Vietnam's tourism sector reveals that approximately 60-70% of recent graduates require additional training due to the significant gap between the theoretical knowledge they gain in school and the practical skills needed in the workplace [53]. Tourism and hospitality training institutions in Viet Nam invest inadequate time and effort to make close connections with businesses to develop a practical curriculum which can train graduates with the practical skills needed by hospitality and tourism businesses. The unpractical and ineffective curriculum of most training institutions results in unwell-trained staff who lack both the skills and knowledge required to work, especially green labor skills, and environmental expertise to develop sustainable tourism.

VI. RECOMMENDATION

Firstly, tourists should be properly educated and managed to ensure sustainable tourism development. Education is the key to raising tourist awareness, engaging them and guiding them toward responsible tourism practices. Interpretation is an effective tool in tourism management that helps reduce the negative impacts of tourism on the environment and tourist sites conservation. It serves as both public environmental education and a means of communication with visitors, incorporating the principles and practices of effective strategies [54]. Different methods of communication should be taken such as educational signage, brochures, hi-tech interpretive media, maps, leaflets or guidelines. The goal is to help visitors respect and appreciate the significance of the sites they visit and take more responsible actions. Installing information boards at heritage sites explaining local ecosystems, waste management and responsible tourist behavior is also a good way to educate tourists about protecting the environment for future generations. The use of environmental reminder messages in the hotel

rooms is another effective strategy. Small actions like reusing towels, and skipping housekeeping can have a profound effect when practiced by many guests. For group tours, tour guides are a valuable source of information and advice concerning conditions affecting the environment as well as the visitor experience. Well-trained tour guides can help tourists have better choices, respect cultural traditions, reduce waste and conserve wildlife.

Secondly, the government should have clear guidelines, a robust legal framework and economic incentives to help businesses adhere to environmentally responsible practices. More effective guidelines should be set on sustainable activities such as carbon emissions, tourism infrastructure development with much fewer effects on the environment and nature, solid and wastewater management and tourists' appropriate behavior towards heritage and natural sites. Next, implementing better monitoring and enforcement mechanisms for tourism enterprises is also crucial to avoid unsustainable practices. Stricter regulations on littering, waste management, water usage and cultural preservation need to be imposed on tourism organizations, especially in ecologically sensitive areas like Ha Long Bay and Hoi An. Moreover, financial incentives are effective methods to encourage tourism businesses to carry out sustainable tourism practices. Tax benefits, subsidies or grants should be offered to tourism organizations adopting green technologies, friendly environmental practices and cultural conservation activities.

Thirdly, investing in high-quality infrastructure is crucial for supporting sustainable tourism and enhancing the overall experience for travelers. Improving transportation systems like roads, railways, aviation, and seaports can reduce travel time in transit and the environmental impact of long-distance travel. Faster and more comfortable travel might bring pleasant feelings to tourists and encourage them to explore more destinations. Upgrading and expanding accommodation infrastructure is necessary to satisfy the increasing demands of both national and international travelers. Offering a wide range of options-ranging from affordable homestays and motels to more luxurious resorts and hotels- ensures that people with different types of budgets can enjoy their stay. Additionally, the government should create policies that promote and support the development of green transportation infrastructure to lower carbon dioxide emissions and conserve natural resources. Tourism operators using electric buses or offering electric bike rentals could benefit from these policies, which would encourage the adoption of sustainable practices. Moreover, for accommodations, it is important to promote the use of energy-efficient technologies like solar panels, wind turbines, and rainwater harvesting systems.

Lastly, the development of a workforce with the right blend of knowledge, skills and behaviors is essential for ensuring that products and services are sustainable, innovative and competitive. To improve recruitment and retention, tourism organizations need to consider creating more attractive and competitive policies such as salary packages, benefits, and career advancement opportunities. In addition, developing a strong connection between tourism businesses and training institutions is crucial for creating a more effective curriculum. The curriculum should strike a balance between theoretical knowledge and practical experience. Nguyen Huu Tho, Chairman of the Vietnam Association of Tourism, stated that the education and training of skilled human resources in tourism and hospitality should include 50-70 percent practical training and the remaining 30-50 percent theoretical learning [55]. The collaboration between hospitality and tourism businesses and educational institutions is key to ensuring that the curriculum is continuously updated with the latest skills, knowledge, and professional standards. This close relationship ensures that employees are well-prepared to meet the dynamic demands of the industry, which is especially crucial for sustainable tourism development.

VII. CONCLUSION

Vietnam requires a long-term strategy to make sure that tourism can be significantly developed without causing environmental harm or cultural erosion. The pursuit of sustainable tourism will ensure a stable economic future for local communities. Vietnam possesses significant potentials for sustainable tourism development including many stunning beaches with diverse ecosystems, rich natural and cultural resources, and vibrant tradition and culture. In addition, the government's supportive policies promote sustainable tourism, along with the willingness of tourism enterprises to adopt eco-friendly practices. However, Vietnam faces several challenges to hinder sustainable tourism development including a lack of awareness among tourists about sustainable practices, which results in inappropriate behavior, inadequate infrastructure for sustainable operations, inefficient management of tourism organizations' sustainability efforts, and a shortage of skilled human resources. To address these challenges, the government should have strategic policies to manage tourists and regulate tourism, establish clearer guidelines, create a legal framework and provide economic incentives to ensure tourism businesses to practice sustainably. Investing in sustainable infrastructures such as eco-friendly accommodation and transportation is also an important factor for the development of sustainable tourism. Besides, the workforce needs to be developed in sufficient numbers and trained with necessary new skills, knowledge and behaviors that are in line with sustainable industry standards. Vietnam is actively working to foster the growth of sustainable tourism.

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PHÁT TRIỂN DU LỊCH BỀN VỮNG Ở VIỆT NAM

Kiều Thủy Tiên

TÓM TẮT—Du lịch Việt Nam đã phát triển mạnh mẽ, mang lại lợi ích kinh tế cho nền kinh tế quốc gia. Tuy nhiên, tăng trưởng du lịch nhanh chóng cũng dẫn đến suy thoái môi trường và suy thoái văn hóa. Du lịch bền vững đóng vai trò bảo tồn tài nguyên thiên nhiên và môi trường, bảo tồn bản sắc văn hóa và đảm bảo lợi ích kinh tế cho tất cả các bên liên quan. Mục đích của nghiên cứu này là xem xét các tiềm năng chính của du lịch bền vững, xác định một số thách thức lớn và đề xuất các giải pháp khả thi để phát triển du lịch bền vững. Trong nghiên cứu này, phương pháp thu thập dữ liệu thứ cấp trong nghiên cứu định tính được sử dụng để phân tích các cơ hội và thách thức của phát triển du lịch bền vững. Các phát hiện cho thấy Việt Nam có tiềm năng đáng kể để phát triển du lịch bền vững, nhờ vào những bãi biển tuyệt đẹp với hệ sinh thái đa dạng, tài nguyên thiên nhiên và văn hóa phong phú, truyền thống phong phú, chính sách hỗ trợ của chính phủ và cam kết của các doanh nghiệp du lịch trong việc áp dụng các hoạt động bền vững. Tuy nhiên, vẫn có một số thách thức cản trở phát triển du lịch bền vững, bao gồm nhận thức thấp của khách du lịch dẫn đến hành vi không phù hợp, cơ sở hạ tầng không đầy đủ cho các hoạt động bền vững, quản lý không hiệu quả các nỗ lực phát triển bền vững của các tổ chức du lịch và thiếu nhân viên có tay nghề. Các khuyến nghị bao gồm giáo dục và quản lý hành vi của khách du lịch và thực hiện các hướng dẫn, khuôn khổ pháp lý và ưu đãi kinh tế tốt hơn cho các tổ chức du lịch. Chính phủ cũng nên đầu tư vào cơ sở hạ tầng bền vững và phát triển lực lượng lao động cả về số lượng và chất lượng để đáp ứng nhu cầu du lịch bền vững.

Từ khóa –Du lịch bền vững, Phát triển du lịch bền vững, Du lịch Việt Nam.



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