VIETNAMESE ECOTOURISTS
Ecotourists from an unconventional market

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Introduction
Ecotourism is one niche segment of the larger tourism sector. As such it conforms to all core characteristics of tourism that Goeldner and Richie (2003, p. 5) define “as the processes, activities, and outcomes arising from the relationships and the interactions among tourists, tourism suppliers, host communities, and surroundings environments that are involved in the attracting and hosting of visitors”. Therefore, ecotourists travel some threshold distance to destinations in order to find multiple psychological and physical experiences, employ tourism services, and seek satisfaction. However, this particular tourist segment involves the complex circumstances of relatively fragile environments and needs to be considered differently from the popular commercial tourism destinations such as theme parks and casinos.

In 1987, Laarman and Durst coined the concept of the hard-soft dimension of ecotourism by differentiating between dedicated or casual interest respectively and the physical rigor of the experience (Laarman & Durst, 1987). By examining national park visitors’ behaviours, Weaver and Lawton employed a typology technique to prove and expand this theory. They found three groups of harder, softer, and structured ecotourists, in which a newly found structured ecotourists combine characteristics of both harder and softer ecotourists in the same trips (Weaver & Lawton, 2002).

Understanding about behaviours of ecotourists from conventional markets, particularly harder and softer ecotourists is well developed. In terms of ecotourism sites, for harder ecotourists, the destinations are wilderness or otherwise relatively undisturbed settings (Acott, La Trobe, & Howard, 1998; Valentine, 1993) as well as the efforts exerted to access those remote areas. In contrast, softer ecotourists prefer more infrastructure and services to make their trip more comfortable and less risky. Softer ecotourists (or ‘occasional ecotourists’) sometimes combine their ecotourism trip with other leisure purposes (Laarman & Durst, 1987; Wallace, 1993; Weiler & Richins, 1995). In addition, preference for big city attractions was used as a segmentation variable as it can differentiate between ecotourists and non-ecotourists (Eagles, 1992).

In addition, research on learning and education purposes displays consistent findings about harder ecotourists (Weaver, 2002b). Learning new things about nature and wildlife occurs on-site or before the trip through prepared documents and reading (Lindberg, 1991).
However, with softer ecotourists, learning activities are more passive as expressed by greater reliance on interpretation services (Meric & Hunt, 1998), the presence of interpretation facilities (Blamey & Hatch, 1998), and seeing wildlife (Lindberg, 1991; Ryan, Hughes, & Chirgwin, 2000).

The third ecotourism criterion comprised efforts to minimise negative impacts (or ‘footprints’) in the destination and improve conservation outcomes. Harder ecotourists require only basic accommodation and services (Laarman & Durst, 1987) and are also more likely to want to leave the destination in a better condition than when they arrive (Acott et al., 1998; Diamantis, 1999). Harder ecotourists make efforts to influence other people to not have a negative impact on the site. They are also more concerned with being ethical visitors (Wight, 1993). The softer negative impacts of ecotourists are well described in the literature (Duff, 1993; McClung, Seddon, Massaro, & Setiawan, 2004; Müllner, Eduard, & Wikelski, 2004; Orams, 2002). Approaching wildlife is one aspect in this dimension.

This discussion of the hard-to-soft ecotourism spectrum is important because of its variable implications for impacts, settings, and behaviour. If for example one adheres to a hard perspective, then ecotourism constitutes perhaps 0.1% or less of global tourism activity and as such is essentially negligible despite the wider spatial diffusion, and higher per capita income and expenditure of participants. Conversely, the generous parameters of soft ecotourism, with its masses of short-term, marginally engaged protected area visitors, potentially implicate 15% or even 20% of global tourism, representing a major segment of the industry and a powerful economic force. The previous discussion reflects a Eurocentric construct of ecotourism that associates with demand in Western countries—popularly known as conventional ecotourist market, and only marginally engages emergent unconventional ecotourist market share in that appear to emulate this Western model. Given the size of the Asian population and its expected dominance of future tourism growth, any discourse on ecotourism identities and trends is grossly incomplete without a more systematic consideration of emerging Eastern ‘ecotourist’ markets.

**Ecotourists from unconventional markets**

Ecotourists are mostly categorised by region, sub-region, and country. The nineties of the last century saw the popularisation of ecotourism among conventional markets such as Australia, North America (United States of America, Canada), and Europe (United Kingdom, Germany, Scandinavia) (Hall & Weiler, 1992; Wearing & Neil, 1999).

Notwithstanding the continuing dominance of Western sources, there is increasing evidence of ecotourist-type markets appearing in non-conventional source regions such as East Asia and Latin America, as indicated previously. Cochrane (2006) reported an emerging market from East Asia that includes Japan, Korea, Taiwan, China, and Hong Kong while Weaver (2002a) defined the emerging market of Asia as including East Asia and South East Asian countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Research in a Thai national park shows a 91:9 ratio of Thai residents to foreign visitors (Hvenegaard & Dearden, 1998) and supported patterns observed in Indonesian protected areas (Cochrane, 2006). Eagles and Higgins (1998) insisted that Japan is a rapidly developing market and may become a dominant player in the near future. It should be noted that each year, there are over 300 million visitors to Japan’s national parks system (Suntherland & Britton, 1980) compared with the approximately 60 million annual visitors to the United States’ much vaunted nature-based national parks system (National Park Service, 2000–2009). Since the number of inbound visitors to Japan was less than five million in 2000, it is presumed that the vast majority of these national park visitors are domestic and
probably soft ecotourists or an East Asian variant of same. This is in part because the Japanese national park system accommodates landscapes that are much more modified by human activity than their U.S. counterparts, as per Categories IV to VI of the IUCN typology (Weaver, 2002a) and the Korean research of Lee, Lawton, and Weaver (2013).

Statistics found in other Asian countries also support the emerging trends of domestic ecotourism in Asia, such as the 20 million visitors to Korean national parks in 1999 (Kim, Lee, & Klenosky, 2003) and the 11.5 million visitors to Thailand’s national parks in 1994 (Hvenegaard & Dearden, 1998). Huge flows of domestic park visitation in Asia are argued to indicate ‘mass ecotourism’ if identified against the core criteria (Weaver, 2002a). It is also possible for this large-scale ecotourism to contribute even more positively to the sustainable development in protected areas in Asia if appropriate visitor education and stricter environmental codes of conduct are implemented (Luck, 2002). Presumably, ecotourists, or at least a type of tourist that incorporates ecotourism-related characteristics, appear in other parts of the world but are not yet adequately captured in the English literature.

In the East, the concept of ecotourism was introduced in China in the mid- to late-1990s (Wen & Ximing, 2008). From their surveys of visitors to national parks, bio-reserve areas, and ecologically scenic spots, two prevalent types of ecotourists have been described. They are ‘elite’ and ‘mass’ in which the former includes a small number of international hard ecotourists and local highly educated elites, and the latter contains a much larger number of general and mostly domestic tourists interested in nature (Wen & Ximing, 2008). The respective similarities with hard and soft ecotourists are clear, notwithstanding the inclusion of a Western visitor component. Many of the Chinese elite have absorbed Western precepts of environmental education and roughly emulate the Western consciousness of ecotourism. Among them, students from Yunnan University, China exemplify these criteria of ‘quasi-hard’ ecotourists (Wen & Ximing, 2008) citing (Xue, 2005). The majority of domestic ecotourists (over 90%), however, are positioned as mass or soft ecotourists, according to evidence from Mount Taibai National Forest Park, Shanxi, China (Zhang & Zhao, 2005; cited in Wen & Ximing, 2008). There is no empirical evidence in this literature of structured ecotourists or their equivalent.

Evidence from other Asian countries is almost non-existent in the English language literature, and therefore not accessible to the researcher. So it is a question of whether the Chinese model of soft-hard ecotourists is applicable to other Asian countries because of the common influence of Confucianism or not applicable because of variations among Asian cultures and economic backgrounds. Responding to this shortage, Lee et al. (2013) showed that ecotourism in Korea can be superficially considered as soft ecotourism after taking into consideration the three core criteria. Through a review of 206 articles about ecotourism and field trips to four protected areas in Korea, the research also gave evidence as to how culture and human beings together constitute ‘nature’. Accordingly, it is highly acceptable for ‘nature-based’ protected areas to accommodate monuments, gardens, and other highly visible manifestations of material human culture. Since there is no study about Vietnamese ecotourists undertaken to date, this chapter will examine the portrait of Vietnamese domestic ecotourists in Cat Tien National Park according to the core ecotourism criteria.

**Cat Tien National Park**

Cat Tien, a RAMSAR recognised national park, was selected as a site for this study. CTNP has an undeniable advantage as an accessible ecotourism destination compared with other national parks in Viet Nam due to its desirable location. The park is 150 kilometres by
highway from Ho Chi Minh City (three hours driving) that is the economic and foreign trade capital of Viet Nam and home to about 9 million residents. The city airport, Tan Son Nhat airport, is the largest international flight hub in Viet Nam and makes the park easily accessible to international visitors (see Figure 20.1). However, the park is remote enough from Ho Chi Minh City that it does not function merely as a weekend sightseeing site for mass tourists from that city that has a serious shortage of leisure parks and green spaces. Located in the East of the Mekong Delta, CTNP is also on the Highway to Da Lat, a famous tourist town in the Highlands (four hours from the park), and is connected to Mui Ne’s beach resorts (three hours). Thanks primarily to CTNP’s location in the ecotone between two major geophysical regions, the fauna and flora of wet tropical forests and wetlands are both represented, giving rise to a high level of biodiversity.
Flora—There are 1610 species, 724 genera, 162 families, and 75 vegetation orders in CTNP. Thirty-eight species from 13 families are listed in the Viet Nam Red Book that lists rare and endangered species of fauna and flora native to Viet Nam that need to be protected, recovered, and developed. These include red wood (Afzelia xylocarpa), rose wood (Dalbergia bariensis), narra padauk (Pterocarpus macrocarpus), and sindoer sepertir (Sindora siamensis). In addition, 22 species from 12 families are endemic local plants such as Telectadium dongnaiensis, Telectadium edule, and species from the Asclepiadaceae, Orchidaceae, Moraceae, and Anacardiaceae families (Vietnam Forest Creatures, 2012).

Fauna – CTNP is one of the most important sites in Viet Nam for the conservation of large mammals. Many species are not only found in the Viet Nam Red Book, but also in the IUCN Red List of threatened species. Among the confirmed large mammal species are the Asian elephant (Elephas maximus), Indochinese tiger (Panthera tigris corbetti), Sun bear (Ursus malayanus), Eurasian wild pig (Sus scrofa), Sambar deer (Cervus unicolor), and Gaur (Bos gaurus). The latter three species reportedly occur at high densities relative to other areas in Viet Nam (Cat Tien National Park, 2010). The park was well known for its Javan rhino (Rhinoceros sondaicus an-namiticus, also known as the lesser one-horned rhinoceros), which sadly became extinct in 2012.

Market segmentation study

The quantitative study surveyed visitors to Cat Tien National Park (CTNP) in order to extract ecotourists from nature-based tourists by motivations, preferred activities, behaviours, environmental, and socio-economic attitude. Twenty-two behaviour, 11 attitudinal, and 20 motivation scale items from the ecotourism literature resulted from the thorough review of literature about Western and Asian ecotourists upon which this selection was made examined the three core criteria of ecotourism, the distinction between harder and softer ecotourists.

Using random stratified sampling method, before implementing check-out procedure, the CNTP receptionists asked every second visitor whether they were willing to participate in the survey and then collected completed questionnaires from the visitors. A total of 1532 paper based questionnaires were distributed to all visitors who satisfied the participant criteria when they checked out of the park during the six-month dry season in 2010–2011. Of these, 1267 visitors returned the questionnaires, resulting in a response rate of 82.7%. After the treatment of missing data, 1082 questionnaires remained (46.2% Vietnamese, 53.8% Western). Ward’s hierarchical clustering method and one-way ANOVA were utilised to cluster visitors into distinctive groups and t-test helped to compare the differences between Vietnamese and Western visitors in each group (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010).

The cluster analysis identified six groups of visitors: Classic Western ecotourists (n = 171), Service shunners (n = 89), Service seekers (n = 92), Typical CTNP visitors (n = 283), Sociable wildlife engagers (n = 208), and Unenthusiastic visitors (n = 239). The proportion of Vietnamese and Western visitors in each cluster was calculated in which three clusters tend to have a majority of Western visitors, i.e., ‘Classic Western ecotourists’ (91%), ‘Service seekers’ (90%), and ‘Service shunners’ (90%). On the other hand, Vietnamese visitors accounted for a large proportion in two clusters ‘Unenthusiastic visitors’ (64%) and ‘Sociable wildlife engagers’ (84%). Among them, ‘Typical visitors’ had a relatively balanced proportion of visitors with 49% Vietnamese and 50% Westerners.

All six visitor groups conform to the core expectations of the ideal ecotourism type as articulated by Blamey (1997, 2001), i.e., preference of being close to wild nature, commitment to a certain level of learning about nature, awareness of environmental protection, and striving to be responsible travellers in tandem at least with the neutral option of status quo sustainability.
Crucially, the commitment level to each criterion varies across and within the six groups, thereby corroborating the theoretical and empirical literature. In order to understand how rigorous the domestic ecotourism is, the three groups that comprise majority of Vietnamese visitors in the sample (93.4%) are examined according to the soft-hard dimension.

**Unenthusiastic visitors = ‘Softer ecotourists’**

The ‘unenthusiastic visitors’ group that resembles ‘soft ecotourists’ in all aspects is suggestive of a soft ecotourism experience. It is noteworthy that even when visiting a national park, they only marginally view national parks as wilderness settings (M = 3.66). This is because their experiences are limited to the headquarters area and do not involve deeper forest environments. Although visiting a national park, they have had little contact with ‘relatively undisturbed natural areas’ (Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1996). In terms of sustainability, their visits adhere to the steady-state position by being responsible visitors (M = 3.80) and being ambivalent about eating wild animal meat (M = 2.97) at the same time. Moreover, these visitors have a correspondingly moderate level of pro-environmental awareness.

**Typical visitors and sociable wildlife engagers = ‘Structured ecotourists’**

The group known as ‘typical visitors’ is a balanced mix of the Vietnamese and the Western visitors who tend to rate relatively lower on the scale in the category of anthropocentrism. For example, they travelled in medium-sized groups of 10 people on average. To some extent, this group might be regarded as ‘structured’ as per Weaver and Lawton (2002) that is, they are as likely as harder ecotourists to be physically active in order to see unique wildlife (M = 3.97). However, failure to see wildlife is not a problem for them (M = 3.29). Striving for sustainability is observed in this group through their lower desire for the park to have comfortable facilities and services (M = 2.76), and their intention to leave the destination in a better condition than when they arrive (M = 3.96). However, they resemble softer ecotourists in their motivation to learn about nature through the interpretation materials (M = 4.01) and tour guides (M = 4.10). It is noteworthy that their enhancing of sustainability corresponds with a moderate level of environmental awareness, rather than with the expected high awareness. Perhaps the sustainable behaviours that they practise on-site are contextual and as a consequence of the on-site environmental education program.

Almost all the Vietnamese visitors from the group ‘sociable wildlife engagers’ show an extremely high motivation to learn about nature (M = 4.35) that is similar to the harder ecotourists, though with a concomitantly high preference for learning through interpretation (M = 4.20). In terms of concerns about sustainability, these visitors (M = 3.68) expect facilities and services at approximately the same level as the ‘service seekers’ (M = 3.85) and the ‘classic Western ecotourists’ (M = 3.62). As with the ‘typical CTNP visitors’, they have a strong awareness for the need for environmental protection and tend to try to enhance sustainability through their visits (M = 4.44). To some extent, aspects of their visits comply with “non-damaging, non-degrading, ecologically sustainable” motivations (Valentine, 1993, p. 108).

Perhaps the main characteristic of this group is their especially high anthropocentric tendency. They prefer to be in a large group, a preference that is in alignment with previous studies showing that this choice may originate from the ecotourist’s alleged need for socialising (Ballantyne, Packer, & Sutherland, 2011), entertaining (Singh, Slotkin, & Vamosi, 2007), and
coping with the uncertainty of being in a wilderness setting. Even though they are in large groups, they manage to keep a certain distance from other group members inside the trekking trails in order to enjoy and learn about the environment. Their high interest in touching beautiful plants/flowers (M = 4.08) and cute wild animals (M = 3.85) is different from findings from Kerstetter, Hou, and Lin (2004) about ‘touching the fauna or flora in order to have fun’ by Taiwanese ecotourists (M = 2.96).


**Qualitative study**

The qualitative study comprises two stages of total 24 in-depth face-to-face interviews. Stage one (I) comprises 14 interviews in a field trip to the CTNP in early June 2010. Fourteen Vietnamese informants were selected by the researcher for their representation of harder as well as softer ecotourism proclivities, agreed to participate in in-depth interviews. The respondents were simultaneously and invited along the trekking trails or in the night wildlife watching tour. They were questioned about their motivations, behaviours, attitude, and experiences during their trips in CTNP and their overall view towards nature and conservation. Three visitors were interviewed just after their trip in the park and the other 11 were approached in Ho Chi Minh City not later than one month after the trip.

From the quantitative study, Principal Component Analysis also revealed the factor ‘anthropocentrism’ (α = .714) which entails preferences for touching wild animals and beautiful flowers and plants; to be in a larger group of four persons or more; avoiding wilderness areas because of safety concerns; and big city attractions over national parks. Among six visitors groups, three groups comprising majority of Vietnamese visitors in the sample (93.4%), one group resembles ‘soft ecotourists’ and two groups as ‘structured ecotourists’. The other three majority Western visitor groups pertain to harder, structure, and softer ecotourists. It is noteworthy that the three majority Vietnamese groups have higher ‘anthropocentrism’ than other three groups. The qualitative interview component of the research was designed to not only explain the new concept of ‘anthropocentrism’ among Vietnamese ecotourists but also explore their distinctive characteristics in relation to the three core ecotourism criteria.

In stage two (II), qualitative data consists of nine face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews and one telephone interview, was collected during a one-month period in early 2012. The informants were selected to represent each of the six groups revealed by the cluster analysis. Data collection occurred in Ho Chi Minh City after one week or maximum one month after their trips to CTNP. Most encounters took place in quiet coffee shops, except for one participant who invited the researcher to her home. Each interview took approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Ten interviews with Vietnamese informants were audio recorded and then transcribed. In addition, the participants were encouraged to provide explanatory materials, such as photos, objects, and other personal things relating to their behaviour in Cat Tien National Park. Structured according to the three ecotourism core criteria, the following sections report the relationship between nature and human in which concept of ‘anthropocentrism’ is explained, then introduced the nature of learning and sustainability from Vietnamese ecotourist perspective.
Nature and human

The Vietnamese people share a similar worldview with other East Asian people in embracing the unity between humans and nature (Sofield & Li, 2007; Wen & Ximing, 2008), and in regarding humans as an integral part of nature, as per the ancient influence of Confucianism and Taoism (Weller, 2006). As evidenced in the data, wildlife, landscapes, and humans harmonise as a complete entity. Inseparability is one of the most popular themes raised by almost all Vietnamese participants. This finding corresponds to Lee et al. (2013), who describe the reciprocal relationship between humans and the physical environment in Korean culture.

The existence of both unity and tension between nature and culture corresponds with the negative yin and positive yang of Taoism in which two opposite things exist reciprocally and paradoxically (Brunn & Kalland, 1995; Saso, 1972). Therefore, it was not surprising that besides unity between nature and humans, nature was also perceived as being distant from people so that luxurious nature appeared only in cyber space. “The nature I know is only from Discovery or Geographic channels” (C6V65f). In addition, C2V68f similarly described her perception of the distance between humans and nature that she has experienced:

I mean nowadays, people gather in cities too much. It means that they compete to live here, even myself, competitive to find a job. They completely don’t have time to go there (forest) and visit like we, students, do now. The majority of employees work from Monday to Saturday. I know a girl who just wants to sleep on Sunday. Asking her to go shopping, or walking, she never goes because working is too tiring, 8 hours a day. There are people who work in offices. There are people who work extra time. They even work on Sunday. The opportunities for them to visit and connect [with nature] are rare. I think nowadays, they [human and nature] are separated.

Touching nature

Touching, therefore, enabled people to have contact with and brought participants closer to nature: “I felt like I was close to them, I saw them, I touched them” (PilotG, female). The desire to touch also resulted from a desire to feel that nature still persists:

I have a feeling that nature is close. It’s close. It appears very completely. It’s not a state that it is being destroyed. It’s still untouched, wild. It’s not faded. I think so. Once touching, I feel that it still exists…I respect it. I’m afraid that I don’t have a chance to touch. Actually last time, I couldn’t see any (C1V156m).

In addition, the cultural proclivity for touching is also evident in the Dong Ho folk woodcut paintings that were very popular in almost every household during the seventeenth to twentieth centuries (Dao, 2013). The focus of these paintings was on domestic animals such as pigs, chickens, cats, buffalo, and fish (that is tamed nature), as well as rural life, agriculture, and other cultural activities (that is human landscapes). Close relationships between humans and tamed nature were embodied and clearly represented in these paintings through images of humans holding and touching animals (Figure 20.2).
Data distillation exposes three cultural constraints that demotivate visitors from being alone in the forest. Mystery is defined by Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary as something that is difficult to understand or to explain, “In general, forest is a place of mystery. It has inside something that we don’t know” (C1V232m). However, people still believe and have a fear of myths, for example sacred forests in Cam Đin Chìn that curse and punish intruders (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2012). This animistic tendency is also found in Japan and India where curses associated with specific places or specific types of wildlife prevent people from approaching (Gadgil & Vartak, 1976; Sasaki, Sasaki, & Fox, 2010). As a result, Pilot N, male was “scared of being alone”.

Ghosts are another issue, discouraging people from being alone in the darkness of the night. “But at night, I am afraid of ghost … not really … walking alone in the forest at night, I have a feeling of someone following me … and I hate that feeling”, C6V65f. This fear is not confined to females. One male respondent who travels extensively to Cat Tien has also experienced the same feeling. Belief in ghosts is a reflection of local beliefs mixed with Taoist and Buddhist cultural characteristics (Peng, 2007). In the case of C4V198m, such spiritual aspects originated from Buddhism and prevent a harder ecotourist from walking in the night time when the ‘yin’ (dead people) are thought to appear; “I am a true follower of Buddhism, and there are yin people and yang people”. Although the existence of ghosts is not scientifically proven, its impact as a temporal barrier hold true in Cat Tien and has also been reported in the case of tsunami-hit destinations in Thailand (Rittichainuwat, 2011).

The preference to be a part of larger groups

The fear of animistic spirits and ghosts aside, sociable interaction is an important consideration for Vietnamese people in protected area trips. Without accompanying people, the experience in the park would cause much distress for many Vietnamese visitors, with one respondent (Pilot N, male) equating solitude with an act of suicide: “Going to such a wild place needs friends. If I go alone, I might jump into Crocodile Lake”. Less dramatically, C1V232m expressed the fundamental need for having others to communicate and enjoy leisure with: “Along the road, we have people to talk with, and make fun with”.

Figure 20.2 Dong Ho folk woodcut paintings (seventeenth–twentieth century), Lao Dong Publishing House, 2012

The alien concept of walking alone in the wilderness

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When travelling with partners, visitors feel safer because they help and support each other as a way to cope with various constraints, such as being lost, a lack of knowledge, a lack of travelling experience, and a lack of survival skills. In addition, socialising is also a way to mobilise the collective expertise of the group: “If we meet dangerous animals, more heads can find out solutions” (C1V232m). This finding supports the high collectivism and low individualism of Vietnamese culture as measured by Hofstede’s 2001 cultural survey, wherein Viet Nam ranks equally with the sister East Asian cultures of China, Thailand, and South Korea (score IDV 20/100). The individualism score is much lower than in Western cultures such as Australia (90), UK (89), France (71), and Germany (67). Besides the direct impact on group size, Vietnamese collectivism is also argued to be associated with the alien concept of being alone in the wilderness, in sharp contrast to Western culture where many protected area visitors cherish solitude in wild or semi-wild settings.

**Big cities as safer than national parks**

Some constraints that may affect domestic visitors travelling to protected areas are presented in this section. In addition to the above dimensions of mystery and the supernatural, forests have also traditionally been regarded as unfavourable and risky destinations to visit. Dangerous animals are the most prevalent risk mentioned by both harder and softer ecotourists. People are usually warned about dangerous animals such as snakes and tigers when travelling into forests, and can easily mention anecdotes about unpleasant encounters from friends, family, or other acquaintances. PilotL, female, shared her story; “I don’t know which animals are inside the forest. They might harm me, don’t they? People told me that there must have many dangerous animals, because it’s the forest!”. Visitors are also afraid of poisonous plants that are rumoured to be easily found in the forests (Thien Nhien, 2013). Protected areas, moreover, not only house hostile wildlife and plants but pose the risk of encountering illegal intruders. Illegal loggers, illegal traders, and wildlife poachers are all perceived to be security risks for the visitor, especially if they are by themselves. “While walking in the forest, people said that illegal loggers might attack … so I’ve already prepared some self-protection tools” (PilotG, female).

In order to better understand this issue, the social context of Vietnam’s increasingly urban population, which dominates the domestic portion of the sample, should be examined. Urbanisation in Viet Nam is a recent phenomenon affiliated with the doi moi policy of economic liberalisation, though city dwellers still accounted for only 30% of the population in 2010, or 26.3 million individuals. This situation contrasts with the figure of 85% in Australia, and 80.7% in the United States (Berg, 2012; Stevenson, 2003; World Bank, 2011), but indicates a major increase from the 11.8 million in 1986. At least one-half of current Vietnamese urban citizens, therefore, constitute people with deep rural roots who had to quickly adapt to new urban lives. Having experienced all features of early-, late-, and post-modernity within a single generation (Zukin, 1998), this new ‘bourgeois’ expects improved amenities, luxury brands, shopping arcades, easily accessible entertainment, golf courses, and of course travel to ‘dream destinations’. National parks perhaps are the alternative destinations that satisfy a desire for novelty, but cosmopolitan and iconic tourist destinations are still preferred for general domestic tourists.

**Learning**

A desire to learn is indicated by the specific types of plants and animals that visitors wish to encounter. Question 6 in the survey questionnaires (Stage 1) asked respondents to list the names
of wild animals and/or plants that they wanted to see in Cat Tien. Among the 374 Vietnamese
visitors who responded to this inquiry, the coding shows that megafauna are most frequently
listed. These include mammals such as rhino (82), deer (72), gaur (72), elephant (54), boar (16),
and fox (9). Cited carnivores include bear (72), tiger (62), panther (35), weasel (8), cat (2), and
civet (1). Primates comprise monkey (44) and gibbon (28). Listed amphibians are crocodile (62)
and lizard (3) while reptiles are represented by snakes (14). Bird species include birds in general
(73) and more specifically peacock (19) and pheasant (10). Other small species, such as leech (6),
insect (3), and butterfly (3), are poorly represented. In terms of plants, giant trees (60) and wild
flowers (39), in particular orchids (22), are of interest to visitors. It should be noted that 67
visitors, accounting for 18% of respondents to this question, were able to list specific types of
species under families or scientific names. The highest number of fauna and flora listed by any
single visitor was eight. Such high levels of familiarity, pending further testing, are likely associated
with the preponderance of university students and others with university qualifications who may
further reflect on the erosion of traditional taboos against ‘dangerous’ wild animals. Figure 20.3

Figure 20.3 Visitor activies in CTNP (a) Top left: Company colleagues boating in Crocodile Lake (Photo
courtesy: Duong Truong Son, 2011). (b) Top right: University students visiting Bear Rescue
Centre (author’s photo). (c) Bottom left: Group tour listening to tour guide interpretation
(author’s photo). (d) Bottom right: Group tour planting trees in a volunteer reforestation
program where their names will be given to that tree (Photo courtesy: Cao Tuan Dung, 2014)
This salient Vietnamese preference for seeing megafauna is very much different from other studies alleging an East Asian (China, Japan, South Korea) focus on charismatic micro-flora and micro-fauna (Lee et al., 2013). The author’s field observations confirm that the East Asian “blossom and waterfall” prototype (Weaver & Lawton, 2002) is not applicable in Viet Nam ecotourism. As can be seen from the aforementioned Dong Ho folk paintings, Vietnamese imagery is different from East Asian paintings that focus on panoramic views of landscapes (context-oriented) as well as small details. Dong Ho paintings simply present “human scale” images of subjects that share a certain similarity with the Western attention to major objects, and completely omit the background (that is, they are object-oriented) (Masuda, Gonzalez, Kwan, & Nisbett, 2008; Petersen, 1995).

The different style of learning that characterises Vietnamese culture is also pertinent. All three majority Vietnamese clusters adhere to passive learning, unlike Western cultures, and therefore express support for interpretation, tour guides, and other forms of attraction mediation. However, there is also awareness of how individual touching and other physical contact can facilitate the learning process. Through touching, people can gain some knowledge about the subjects, as emphasised by one informant: “I think that by touching trees, leaves, animals, they inspire us to love and understand nature” (C1V232m). What transpires in this exchange is that wildlife receives respect, empathy, and tenderness from humans, who in turn are inspired to love and respect nature.

Sustainability

Given the aforementioned context about forests as an unfamiliar and hostile environment for the majority of Vietnamese people, it is not surprising that the historical and contemporary human artefacts that are commonly encountered in the protected areas of China, Japan, and South Korea (Lee et al., 2013) are almost unknown in Viet Nam. Tombs are sometimes encountered, but these belong to indigenous people (Thanh, 2012). An important consideration here is how the agricultural culture still defines the relationship between nature and humans in the mindset of the many people with ongoing rural connections (Thomas, 2002). As a result, the Vietnamese proclivity was to protect forests only if they perceived them to be a direct benefit for themselves (Anh, 2013). One participant alluded to this proclivity in advocating more tourism for protected areas: “I saw another value … if we put our efforts to protect it, and employ it for tourism, we will have much benefit from it” (PilotG, female).

Recent developments, however, indicate some change in these attitudes. As this research neared its completion in late 2013, it appeared for the first time that a civil environmental movement protecting CTNP from the threat of two hydro-electric power plants had gained momentum. The Save Cat Tien group was established and sent a letter to the Chairman of the State Council. The information was disseminated online and obtained over 4700 signatures on an online petition, according to savingcattiennationalpark.blogspot.com.au. It is the first time that the Vietnamese people lobbied to protect a forest not for their direct benefit but for the earth and for future generations.

This study finds that the biggest contribution of ecotourism experiences to sustainability is changing visitor awareness and traditional perceptions about wildlife protection and the role of conservation in improving the quality of life for an increasingly urban population. There is considerable evidence of an adherence to a ‘steady-state’ sustainability awareness that respects the environment by ‘leaving no trace’. However, there is also evidence of a vanguard that evinces awareness of ‘enhance/sustainability’ in which human actions deliberately try to improve the condition of the environment. These “agents of change” remind other people to
behave correctly and respect nature by clearing existing rubbish, inspiring other people, and being environmental models in their own behaviour. These environmental models, notably, often publicise their trip experiences through social media, calling for others to join the trips “to help people to obtain a right view of nature” (C4V198m). The degree to which this ‘right view’ assimilates Western environmental sensibilities is as yet unclear, since the transition is still early and the advocates still too few.

Last but not least is the awareness of eating wild meat. In a metaphor for a changing Viet Nam, one participant confessed that he is struggling with himself about whether or not to eat wild meat. Like many other respondents, he selected the Neutral option for his answer to this question in the survey. In terms of the reasons why most participants insist that they don’t like to eat wild meat, some admit that they would like to eat the meat of wild animals at least once. Curiosity is the reason most often given: “If the meat is special, I am open to trying it – trying it once just to know” (PilotN, male). This curiosity may be related to perceptions that wild meat has good flavour and texture. The harder ecotourist (C4V198m) is aware of both sides of this issue and finds himself struggling with it:

Desire for new things is a basis for being human. We all eat pork which is contaminated by chemicals so we want to try wild animal meat to see how it is by comparison. It’s just the “like”, but eating them is illegal, so we shouldn’t do that. I hesitate, struggling with myself.

Confounding this issue is the observation that eating wild animals is not contradictory to a world view that sees animals and humans as part of the same unity of nature, though the logic of 90 million Vietnamese all participating in this activity is not conducive to harmony and balance because it dictates against the long term survival of wild animals. Socialising is another factor associated with eating wild meat. People just find it hard to resist eating it when they were invited to an event where wild meat was being served. They may feel bad about it, but they need to be diplomatic and keep a harmonious relationship with the hosts and other guests. This mismatch between attitude and behaviours is also observed in the hunting and consumption of wild meat on the Caribbean island of Trinidad (Waylen, McGowan, & Milner-Gulland, 2009). Often marketed as a local specialty, in many places the wild meat is in high demand as a souvenir that people take back to families and friends.

Yet, most of the surveyed Vietnamese visitors expressed no intention to eat wild meat during the trip to CTNP. Besides feelings of disgust and cruelty, they cited ethical consideration, conservation issues and legal constraints. The belief in the unity of humans/nature, is also paradoxically, invoked in sentiments against such consumption. Emphasising the equality of all organisms in the world, one informant stated that: “In terms of spiritual aspect, I feel that a creature has its right to live” (C5V504f). This awareness very much related to a dimension from Buddhist ideology that called for restraint in the killing of animals. In sum, the experiences of Vietnamese visitors in protected areas informed by traditional ideologies that disproportionately affected urban residents, as well as by more recent Western influences through education and elsewhere and tend to comply with ethical perspectives that also pervade and typify Western perceptions of ecotourism (Fennell, 2001).

The idiosyncracies of Vietnamese culture curtail the degree to which the anthropocentric tendencies of its emerging ecotourist market can be extrapolated to other East Asian and Southeast Asian societies that share similar religious and philosophical traditions. It is also useful to note that culture is not fixed but evolves (Runciman, 2005), and that Vietnamese culture has been changing rapidly over the past few decades. The anthropocentrism revealed in this study is
therefore likely to change even more as Vietnamese culture is integrated more broadly and deeply into the global community.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The results indicate that the domestic visitors to a protected area of Viet Nam that provided the sample for this study are indeed ‘ecotourists’ as defined in the Western sense through the three core criteria of nature-based attractions, learning, and sustainability (Blamey, 1997). Nevertheless, they do display different behaviour due to the idiosyncratic cultural and social context. In particular, a salient anthropocentrism dimension has been identified for the first time in the literature as the factor that most clearly differentiates the Vietnamese and Western ecotourist segments. This newly identified anthropocentrism, in conjunction with the harder-to-softer spectrum, has been critical for explaining the phenomenon of the domestic Vietnamese ecotourist. It can be seen that anthropocentrism contains many cultural implications, and consequently operationalises earlier discussions of cultural contexts that shape distinctive patterns of Asian ecotourism. For example, human manipulation of the environment that other authors (Lee et al., 2013; Sofield & Li, 2007; Weaver, 2002a) pointed out from observations in Asian national parks is arguably not solely for aesthetic appeal but also a response to the fear of emptiness and danger in wilderness areas. For this and other reasons, anthropocentrism also entails an embedded collectivism that underpins high crowding thresholds among Vietnamese ecotourists (Cochrane, 2006; Weaver, 2002a).

Moreover, despite such conformities to the broader East Asian cultural context, idiosyncracies have been identified in Vietnamese domestic ecotourism that are not consistent with the otherwise ubiquitous ‘blossom and waterfall’ ecotourism model of the Buddhist/Confucianist cultural realm identified by Weaver and Lawton (2002). This includes a paucity of introduced cultural artefacts, such as temples, cemeteries and gardens, in Vietnamese protected areas, and a preference for interacting with charismatic megafauna rather than with micro-fauna or micro-flora. The extent to which the Vietnamese model can be extrapolated to other East Asian contexts, therefore, is a matter for further investigation.

In terms of practical implication, a new regime of learning facilitation for domestic visitors should take into account the broader regional impulses of collectivism (i.e., cooperative group learning) as well as the proclivities to touch and otherwise interact closely with desirable flora and fauna. The complex learning context of Vietnamese visitors, moreover, should accommodate opportunities, perhaps through sensory botanical gardens and wildlife rehabilitation facilities, to satisfy those who seek sensory impressions (Ballantyne et al., 2011). This could foster a model of what might be described as ‘complementary’ or ‘green’ anthropocentrism that seeks deliberately and simultaneously to satisfy and enrich visitors without compromising parallel mandates to protect and restore the environment. It is perhaps even possible that interactions that attract feelings of awe and delight may further stimulate the sensitivities that are apparent in some of the Vietnamese visitors through ‘enhancement sustainability’, and inspire their participation in different kinds of site enhancement activities. In the longer term, the same effect may pertain to non-ecotourist nature-based domestic visitor segments exposed to the same opportunities (Coghlan, Buckley, & Weaver, 2012; Weaver, 2013). It may be suggested further that Western visitors are also exposed to these opportunities in order to achieve a better understanding of the Vietnamese culture and to meet Vietnamese people, thereby potentially enhancing the visitor experience for both groups. These managerial implications suggest for the question about how Vietnamese strictly protected areas be managed to best accommodate both domestic and Western ecotourists whilst achieving optimal benefits for the natural environment.
Notes

1 C6 shows the number of cluster. V65 means this visitor was Vietnamese and her survey questionnaire was coded number 65. f means female.

2 Pilot means this informant was selected from the Stage I interviews.

References


Ecotourists from an Unconventional Market


