

Developing Sustainable Tourism in the Mekong Subregion

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ABSTRACT: The Mekong sub-region is a land known for its diverse ecosystems, which are valuable resources for tourism development. This area has been promoting its existing potential for tourism development, and has achieved significant results, but there are still many difficulties in the current context. In this article, the author focuses on analyzing the conditions for tourism development in the Mekong sub-region, the achievements that have been achieved, and the limitations still encountered, thereby proposing solutions for tourism development. sustainable calendar of the region.

KEYWORDS: Tourism, sustainable development, Mekong Subregion.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, the tourism industry not only plays an important role in promoting economic development but is also a powerful tool to protect and develop the environment and cultural heritage. In particular, in the Mekong sub-region - one of the areas with natural beauty and rich cultural heritage - sustainable tourism development not only brings short-term benefits but also makes an important contribution to sustainable development of the region.

The role of sustainable tourism is an important tool to preserve and protect the environment and cultural heritage of the region. Through creating sustainable tourism programs, we can help visitors better understand the value of the local environment and culture and motivate them to take responsible travel actions. Activities such as exploring nature, practical ecological journeys and participating in environmental conservation projects not only help create awareness about environmental protection but also generate profits to support environmental conservation projects. conservation activities. In addition, sustainable tourism can also contribute to the economic and community development of the Mekong region. By creating employment and income opportunities for local communities through the development of tourism services, we can enhance economic development in rural and mountainous areas, and at the same time Reduce pressure on natural resources by transitioning from unsustainable mining practices to sustainable tourism.

However, sustainable tourism development also poses some challenges. That is, tourism development ensures that this development does not cause negative impacts on the local environment and culture; Strict management and monitoring is necessary for tourism activities to be carried out in a sustainable manner that is beneficial to both local communities and tourists.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

To understand the issue of sustainable tourism development in the Mekong sub-region, it is first necessary to clearly understand the concept of tourism and sustainable tourism, and then to understand the research space. Based on those general factors, the author will delve deeper into sustainable tourism activities in the identified geographical space; Collect facts, information and geographical data to analyze the situation of sustainable tourism development here. Through the actual situation, the author proposes some solutions to better implement sustainable tourism activities in this place.

III. RESEARCH CONTENT

1. Concept of sustainable tourism development

According to the definition of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO): "Tourism includes all activities of people who travel, temporarily stay, for the purpose of sightseeing, exploring and learning, experiencing or for the purpose of destination for rest, entertainment, relaxation; as well as for professional and other purposes, for a continuous period of time but not exceeding one year, outside the settled living environment; but excludes trips whose main purpose is to make money. Tourism is also a form of active rest in a living environment completely different from the place of settlement.

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In Vietnam, according to the Law on Tourism (2017): "Tourism includes activities related to trips of people outside their regular place of residence for a period of not more than 01 consecutive year to meet the needs of sightseeing, recreation, entertainment, learning, exploring tourism resources or combining with other legal purposes.

Travel is an indispensable human need in an increasingly materially improved life. Travel is a spiritual gift for people to rest and entertain after tiring working hours, regain health, spirit for work and higher productivity. Travel is also an opportunity for people to discover more about nature, culture, origins, etc. to improve their understanding of the world around them. According to UNWTO statistics, in 2019, there were about 1.4 billion people traveling around the world (accounting for nearly 20% of the population). Therefore, tourism is also one of the most important economic sectors in countries around the world (Dalia Streimikiene & al., 2021). According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (2020), in 2018, the Travel and Tourism industry achieved a growth rate of 3.9% (exceeding the growth rate of the global economy, which was 3.2 %). In addition to the benefits that tourism brings to people and the economy, it is also related to issues such as the impact on the quality of life of local people, energy consumption, and increased negative impacts on the environment, natural resources (in 2018, tourism contributed to the world's carbon dioxide emissions by 8% (Lenzen et al., 2018)), ... Tourism development will impacts tourism resources, causing them to change. Therefore, to develop long-term tourism, it is necessary to pay attention to sustainable tourism development.

Sustainable Tourism In English it is called Sustainable Tourism. This concept was first mentioned in 1992, at the United Nations conference on environment and development in Rio de Janeiro. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO): "Sustainable tourism is the development of tourism activities that meet the current needs of tourists and indigenous people while still paying attention to conservation. and restore resources for the development of tourism activities in the future. In Vietnam, according to the Law on Tourism (2017): "Sustainable tourism development is tourism development that simultaneously meets socio-economic and environmental requirements, ensuring harmony in the interests of entities participating in tourism activities, without compromising their ability to meet future tourism demand".

Thus, sustainable tourism development is tourism activity that meets current human needs, but always pays attention to preserving, conserving and enhancing tourism resources, aiming for development. persist in the future. Tourism resources that need to be preserved are cultural heritage and the natural environment. Related to this is concern for the carrying capacity of the natural and cultural environment, as well as the well-being of local communities. WTO (1993) stated that: sustainable tourism development requires three basic principles, which are ecological sustainability, cultural and social sustainability, and economic sustainability, for both the present and the future.

+ In the environmental and ecological aspects: Make optimal use of environmental resources, maintain essential ecological processes and help preserve natural heritage and biodiversity.

+ In the cultural and social aspects: Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of the host community, preserve cultural heritage and traditional values.

+ In the economic aspect: Ensuring viable, long-term economic activities that bring socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders, including jobs, opportunities to earn stable income, as well as social services for the host community, contributing to hunger eradication and poverty reduction.

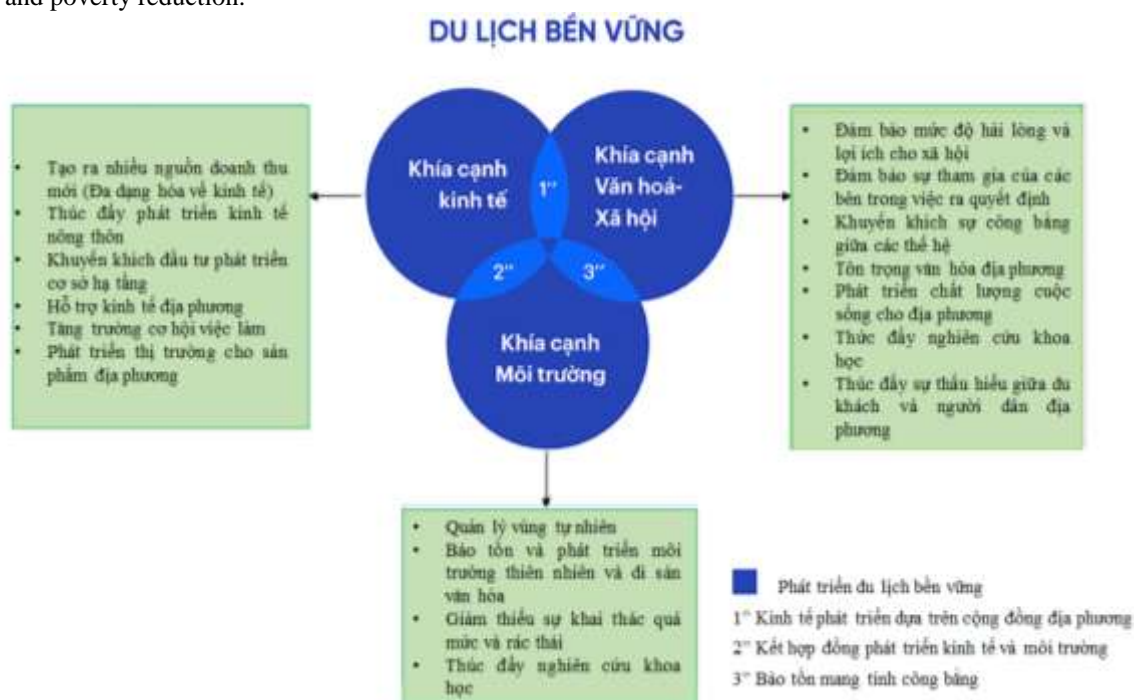


Figure 1. Three basic principles of sustainable tourism development

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Source: FPTDigital

2. Tourism resources of the Mekong sub-region

The Mekong sub-region's English name is Greater Mekong Subregion, abbreviated as GMS. This is a small sub-region, with about 2.3 million square kilometers and a population of about 350 million people (2022). The sub-region includes 5 countries: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and the two provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi of China. This is the area of countries where the Mekong River runs through. This river is like a red thread, connecting the countries in the region.



Figure 2. Map of the Mekong Subregion



Figure 3. Mekong River

The Mekong River originates from the mountains of Tibet (China), weaving through different terrains of 6 countries, with a total length of 4,350 km, basin area about 795,000 km². This is the longest river in Southeast Asia, 12th longest in the world, 7th longest in Asia (Wikipedia), and is known as the "five-color" river as it flows through many different beautiful terrains. This natural terrain element has created a majestic and attractive Mekong for tourism development. In the upstream part of the river running in the mountainous terrain of Tibet in China, creating rapids and rushing waterfalls; As it flows through Laos, the Mekong is characterized by deep gorges, fast-flowing streams and shallow pools of water; In the downstream part, when flowing to Vietnam, due to the relatively flat terrain, the river flows relatively calmly.



Figure 4. The majesty of Khone Falls - a waterfall on the Mekong River (in Laos): 15km long, 18m high.

As a large river, the Mekong has abundant resources with water reserves and biodiversity. The flora and fauna of the Mekong River basin are second only to the Amazon River of South America - a source of food, a biosphere reserve, and a valuable resource for tourism development. Abundant fresh water resources, Annual traffic reaches about 475 billion m³, average flow is 13,200 m³/s, during flood season it can be up to 30,000 m³/s. This is a source of fresh water for irrigation, saltwater rinsing, hydropower development, trade and river transportation. These are also the main economic sectors of the countries in the basin. Besides, the vast forests in the Mekong basin are habitats for thousands of different species of animals and plants. The forest ecosystem is extremely rich: evergreen forests, mountain forests, deciduous and semi-deciduous forests, shrub forests, mangrove forests, etc. This diverse ecosystem is an extremely valuable resource for tourism development.

The ecotourism resources of the Mekong sub-region not only consist of the diversity and wealth brought by the Mekong River, but also forests, seas, mountains, ... creating a rich treasure of resources. tourism resource for the region.



Figure 5. Ao Phang Nga Bay, Thailand



Figure 6. Ha Long Bay (Vietnam) - Top 25 most beautiful destinations in the world



Figure 7. Tra Su cajuput forest -



Figure 8. Fansipan Peak – Vietnam

In addition to the rich natural resources bestowed by nature, the Mekong sub-region is also an area with a long history of development, creating a treasure trove of cultural tourism resources, with historical - cultural relics, revolutionary relics, archeology, architecture; traditional cultural values, festivals, folk arts and other cultural values; human creative labor.

For example: When talking about Laos, we are talking about Buddhist culture (90% of the population is Buddhist) and festivals, such as: Bunpimay Tet and H'Mong Tet, Bun Pha Vet (incarnation of Buddha), Bun VisakhaPuya (Buddha's Birthday), Bun Khao PhanSa (Lent season), Bun Khao Padapdin (remembering the deceased) and Bun Suanghai (boat racing festival), ... With Cambodia is famous again with historical relics such as Angkor Wat, Angkor Thom, ... In Thai culture, there are indispensable festivals, such as: Songkran water festival, Khao Phansa Buddhist festival, Loy Krathong festival and Phi Ta Khon ghost festival, ... In Vietnam, Society is associated with rivers, especially the Mekong River. Not to mention floating market culture, amateur singing, garden tourism with hundreds of unique and delicious fruits, ... According to statistics from the national tourism agencies of Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, culture is the tourism product that tourists are most interested in and interested in, attracting the most tourists (Nguyen Van Dung and Nguyen Tien Luc, on the website of the Scientific Union for Sustainable Tourism Development).

Thus, the Mekong sub-region is an area rich in tourism resources, both natural tourism resources and cultural tourism. Exploiting this tourism potential will bring a huge advantage to the tourism industry of Mekong sub-region countries.



Figure 10. Apsara dance of Cambodia



Figure 9. Songkran water festival - Thailand

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3. Sustainable tourism development in the Mekong sub-region

Tourism is identified as a key economic sector of many countries around the world, including countries in the Mekong subregion. Based on the advantage of natural resource diversity, richness and uniqueness in culture, Mekong sub-region countries have exploited that strength to develop tourism, and have obtained some achievements. .

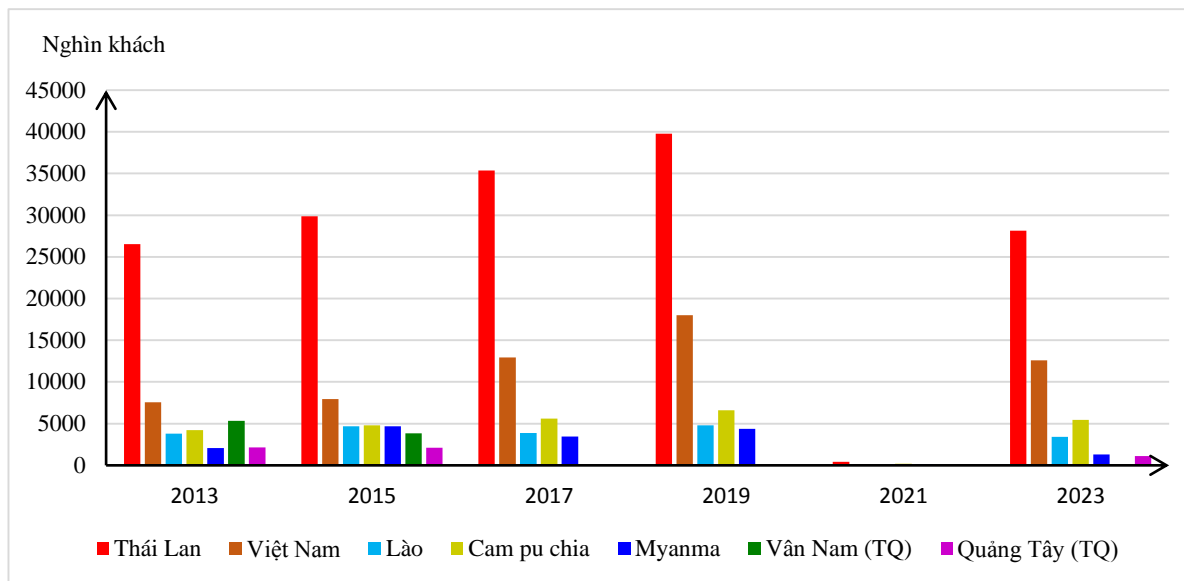


Figure 11: Chart of international tourist arrivals to the Mekong sub-region

Source: Data processing from Mekong tourism coordinating office

The number of international tourists coming to the Mekong sub-region is quite large, increasing from 2013 to 2019. But in 2019, after the Covid 19 pandemic broke out, international tourists decreased significantly. (In 2021 there will only be 977,220 visitors; even Laos still has its tourism sector closed). In 2023, tourism activities have restarted, but have not yet attracted many tourists, especially international tourism. After the Covid 19 pandemic, to regain the excitement in the tourism industry, countries in the Mekong sub-region have had many activities to promote tourism activities in this region. For example, the forum "Rebuilding the tourism industry, resiliently recovering tourism", was organized by Vietnam on October 12, 2022, in Quang Nam province; or in 2023 the forum with the theme "Rethinking to adapt and digitalize" will be held from April 24-28, 2023 in the coastal province of Preah Sihanouk of the Kingdom of Cambodia, finding the best solutions for development. tourism, marketing research and tourism promotion in the GMS region.

In tourism development activities of the Mekong sub-region, the country with impressive tourism activities is Thailand, always leading in the region in attracting tourists. Tourists come to the area mainly by air.

Table 1. How tourists travel to the Mekong sub-region Unit: %

Vehicle	two thousand and thirteen	2015	2017	2019
Air	56.86	50.16	56.22	74.57
Road	41.74	48.76	42.60	19.44
Sea route	1.4	1.08	1.96	5.95

Source: Mekong tourism coordinating office

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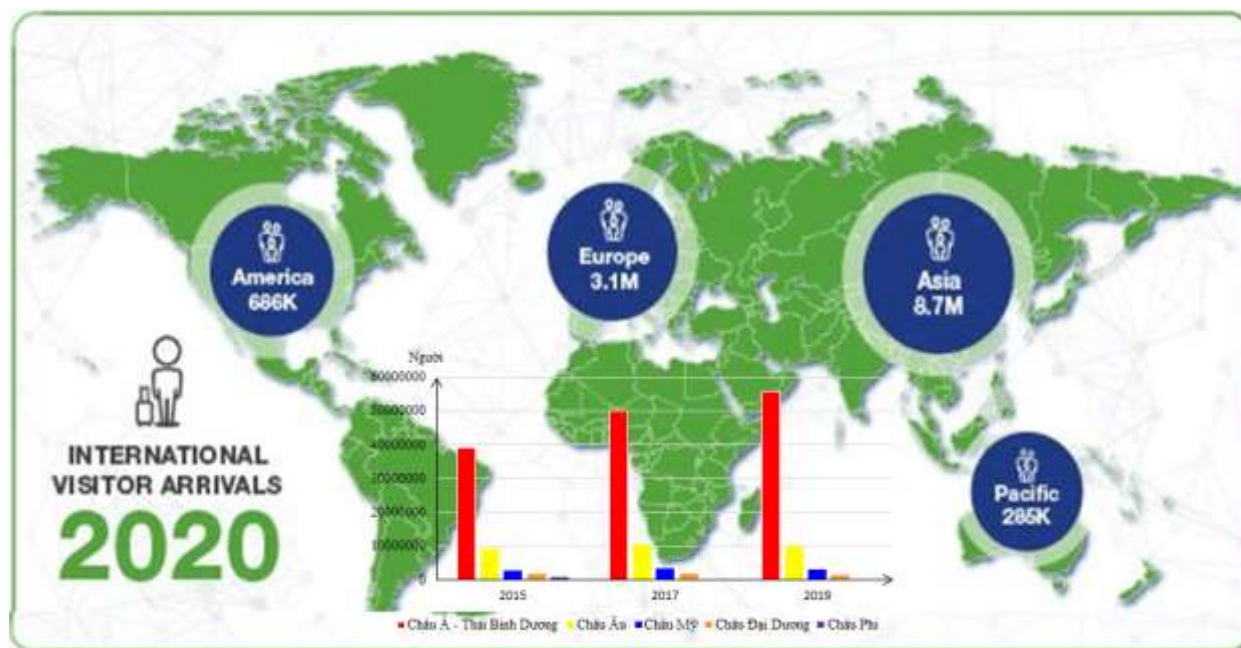


Figure 12. Tourist market map to the Mekong sub-region

Source: Mekong tourism coordinating office

For many years, the most tourists coming to the Mekong sub-region have been the Asia-Pacific region, and in descending order to Europe, the Americas, Oceania and finally Africa. This reflects that the attractiveness in tourism development of the Mekong sub-region has not created a strong emphasis for further development. This is because the countries have quite similar natural characteristics and even wet rice culture, so the tourism development of Mekong sub-region countries also has many similarities, with few differences. In particular, many products are similar and have not yet created a strong global brand; Between countries and regions, travel companies still operate individually, not creating a connection or a common voice in tourism activities (Dung and Luc, 2022).

Table 2. Tourism revenue and direct contribution to GDP

Water	2015		2017		2019	
	Tourism revenue (million dollars)	Direct contribution to GDP (%)	Tourism revenue (million USD)	Direct contribution to GDP (%)	Tourism revenue (million USD)	Direct contribution to GDP (%)
Thailand	40,113.04	9.66	55,760.58	9.4	59,715.36	19.7
Vietnam	15,364.00	4.6	23,000.00	7.5	33,000.00	9.2
Cambodia	3,012.00	14.6	3,638.00	12.3	4,920.00	12.1
Myanmar	2,122.00		1,968.86	3.5	2,818.75	4.6
Laos	725.36	5.0	648.06	4.2	934.71	9.1
Total	63,757.05	16.6	85,015.50	7.38	101,388.82	15

Source: Mekong tourism coordinating office

The tourism industry of Mekong sub-region countries had increasing tourism revenue in the pre-covid 19 period, showing that tourism has brought encouraging economic efficiency (contribution to GDP ratio is 16, 6; 7.38 and 15% for the years 2013, 2015, 2017 respectively). What is more important is that tourism has created a lot of jobs for workers. In 2015, direct contributions to employment were 4,862,234, but by 2017 it had increased to 8,767,106 (nearly doubled), and increased to 18,006,400 (3.7 times more than in 2015). Within 4 years, on average, 2,628,833 jobs were contributed each year. This trend of increasing contributions is to ensure the principle of sustainable development.

Table 3. Number of jobs provided by tourism

Water	2015	2017	2019
Thailand	2,215,500	4,317,106	8,054,600
Vietnam	2,034,000	2,467,500	4,951,300
Cambodia	1,045,000	600,000	630,000
Myanmar	505,000	808,500	1,073,500

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Laos	150,000	114,000	3,297,000
Guangxi, Yunnan (China)	944,700	460,000	

Source: Mekong tourism coordinating office

To develop sustainable tourism, countries in the Mekong sub-region have paid attention to the issue of protecting the environment, ecosystem, and protecting local cultures rich in national identity. However, environmental problems are still polluted and ecological imbalance still occurs: Mekong River water decreased by 157 billion m³ from 2011 to 2020, along with the amount of sediment decreasing by 14 million tons in the same period (Le and Nga, 2020). From 1973 to 2009, countries in the region lost nearly a third of their natural forest area, and it is predicted that by 2030, only 14% of the remaining natural forest area will be able to sustain wild species populations. wild. Faced with this situation, promoting the green growth model is the future choice to protect the environment and people's livelihoods, which is also a way to maintain sustainable development of the tourism industry.



Figure 13. Environmental pollution on the Mekong

In addition to the environmental and ecological issues being threatened, the socio-cultural tourism resources of the Mekong sub-region countries are also changing, and some national cultural features are being eroded. , and the appearance of foreign cultures, etc. For example, in Vietnam, many ethnic groups abandoned the custom of ancestor worship, or there were transformations in religious activities; The mother tongue is gradually being lost (the Bo Y people in Lao Cai no longer remember their mother tongue, have switched to speaking Quan Hoa, the Southern Chinese language, the Red Co Lao people in Ha Giang can no longer speak it). mother tongue; the Thuy ethnic group was assimilated into the Pa Then ethnic group); Festivals and music are also being lost and transformed; Traditional festivals and beautiful customs sometimes only remain in the memory of village elders and village chiefs... This greatly affects the sustainable development of tourism.

Thus, although tourism development has brought some economic achievements in the Mekong region, issues related to environmental protection and cultural preservation still remain many challenges. To solve this problem, it is necessary to apply specific and comprehensive solutions, to ensure that tourism is sustainable and balanced.

4. Some solutions for sustainable tourism development in the Mekong sub-region

To ensure sustainable tourism development in the Mekong region, it is necessary to apply a series of rigorous and effective solutions. To do that, it is necessary to implement many solutions simultaneously to ensure that tourism not only brings economic benefits but also protects and develops the environment and cultural heritage of the region.

- Environmental protection and cultural heritage: This is a key factor in developing sustainable tourism in the Mekong region. Establishing environmental protection regulations and standards is necessary to ensure that tourism activities do not cause negative impacts on local ecosystems. In addition, preserving and restoring cultural heritage not only helps tourism become more attractive but also preserves and develops the region's unique cultural values. In this way, tourism is not only a source of income but also a tool to preserve and develop cultural heritage and the natural environment.

- Local community development: The active participation of the local community is an important factor to help ensure the sustainability of tourism. By encouraging their participation in tourism decisions and activities, we create opportunities for them to share local knowledge and participate in the conservation and management of resources and the environment. Furthermore, building the capacity and skills of communities helps them be autonomous in managing tourism and taking advantage of related business opportunities. This not only helps create new sources of income for the community but also creates a friendly and consensual tourism environment.

- Developing a sustainable tourism industry: Investing in sustainable tourism projects not only brings economic benefits but also helps protect the environment and cultural heritage. By encouraging the use of innovative and environmentally friendly technology, we can minimize the negative impact of tourism on the environment. Furthermore, building sustainable tourism infrastructure such

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as public transportation also helps reduce pressure on the environment and contributes to creating a comfortable and safe travel experience for visitors.

- Strengthen international cooperation: International cooperation is an indispensable factor in sustainable tourism development. By sharing experiences and resources with countries and international organizations, we can learn and apply the most effective environmental protection and management methods. Furthermore, promoting educational and training cooperation programs helps create a tourism workforce that is highly qualified and aware of environmental and cultural protection, thereby ensuring sustainable development. sustainability of the tourism industry.

- Education and propaganda: Increasing education and propaganda not only helps tourists better understand the local environment and culture but also helps them promote responsible travel behavior. By organizing educational tours and creating informational programs, we can help visitors understand their impact on the local environment and culture, thereby motivating them to take action. Responsible and respectful travel practices. This is important to ensure the sustainable development of the tourism industry in the future.

IV. CONCLUDE

Thus, although tourism in the Mekong sub-region has brought certain successes, positively contributing to economic development and creating job opportunities for the community, many significant problems still exist. Environmental pollution is one of the major challenges, threatening not only the health of local residents but also affecting the attraction of tourist destinations. Preserving and promoting national cultural values is also facing difficulties, as traditional cultural features are gradually disappearing under the pressure of commercialization and modernization. The sustainability of the tourism industry in the Mekong subregion is seriously threatened due to the above issues. To solve this situation, there needs to be close cooperation between the government, tourism businesses and local communities. It is necessary to apply effective environmental management measures and promote sustainable tourism activities to preserve and develop national cultural values. Only through the cooperation and joint efforts of all stakeholders can sustainable and safe development of tourism in the Mekong region be ensured in the future.

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