



## Developing Spiritual - Ecological Tourism at Huong Pagoda, Huong Son commune, Hanoi City, Vietnam

Le Van Tan <sup>1\*</sup>, Nguyen Thi Huong <sup>2</sup>, Nguyen Viet Quang <sup>3</sup>, Tran Dai Bang <sup>4</sup>, Nguyen Thi Hanh Giang <sup>5</sup>, Hoang Minh Anh <sup>6</sup>, Ngo Phuong Thao <sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PhD, Associate Professor, Faculty of Tourism, Trade Union University, Hanoi city, Vietnam

<sup>2</sup> PhD, Faculty of Tourism, Trade Union University, Hanoi city, Vietnam

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Tourism, Trade Union University, Hanoi city, Vietnam

\* Corresponding Author: **Le Van Tan**

---

### Article Info

ISSN (online): 2583-8261

Volume: 04

Issue: 06

November – December 2025

Received: 24-09-2025

Accepted: 26-10-2025

Published: 22-11-2025

Page No: 105-112

### Abstract

Spiritual - ecological tourism has emerged as a vital orientation for sustainable tourism development in Vietnam, especially in regions where natural landscapes and religious heritage coexist harmoniously. Huong Pagoda (Chùa Hương) in Huong Son commune, Hanoi City, Vietnam, is widely recognized as one of the most important Buddhist pilgrimage centers in the country and a unique complex that integrates sacred cultural values with rich ecological resources. Despite its popularity - receiving millions of pilgrims annually - Huong Pagoda faces multiple challenges in environmental management, service quality, heritage conservation, and sustainable tourism planning. This study investigates current conditions, tourism potentials, and constraints related to spiritual - ecological tourism development at Huong Pagoda. Using a mixed-methods approach that includes field observations, semi - structured interviews with local stakeholders, tourist surveys and secondary data analysis, the research evaluates the existing tourism model and proposes a comprehensive framework for sustainable development. Findings demonstrate that the site possesses exceptional assets (e.g., karst landscapes, cave systems, forest ecosystems, tangible and intangible Buddhist heritage), but suffers from overcrowding during the festival season, inadequate waste management, unregulated commercial activities, and limited community involvement. The paper proposes solutions regarding environmental governance, digital transformation, visitor flow control, community empowerment, interpretation enhancement, and heritage conservation. The study contributes practical recommendations that can support Hanoi's strategic vision for transforming Huong Pagoda into a model of integrated spiritual - ecological tourism in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54660/IJSSER.2025.4.6.105-112>

**Keywords:** Spiritual - Ecological Tourism, Buddhist, Huong Son, Vietnam

---

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1. Research background

The interplay between spirituality and nature is a deeply embedded aspect of Asian cultural and religious traditions. Mountains, caves, rivers, and forests have long been perceived as sacred sites for meditation, worship, and pilgrimage. Across East and Southeast Asia, Buddhist, Taoist, and indigenous cosmologies emphasize the spiritual resonance of natural spaces, creating a landscape where ecological features and religious practices become inseparable. Consequently, many major pilgrimage sites - such as Mount Emei in China, Adam's Peak in Sri Lanka, and Mount Koya in Japan - also function as ecological sanctuaries.

---

Vietnam, greatly influenced by Buddhism and folk beliefs, similarly venerates natural formations as sacred. Huong Pagoda exemplifies this tradition. Located approximately 70 km southwest of central Hanoi, the site encompasses a large network of pagodas, shrines, grottoes, and forested mountains. It is both a historical pilgrimage center and an ecologically sensitive area shaped by millions of years of karst formation. During the Huong Pagoda Festival, pilgrims travel by boat along the Yen Stream and climb up or take cable cars to sacred caves, creating a fluid journey between nature and spirituality.

In recent years, global tourism trends have leaned toward experiential, meaningful, and sustainable engagements, prompting renewed interest in spiritual - ecological tourism - a hybrid form of travel that integrates religious or spiritual experiences with ecological appreciation and conservation awareness. Vietnam's tourism strategies increasingly emphasize sustainability and heritage protection, making Huong Pagoda an ideal case for integrated development.

### 1.2. Problem statement

Despite its unique potential, Huong Pagoda faces several escalating challenges:

#### Environmental strain caused by mass tourism

- Waste along the Yen Stream accumulates rapidly during peak pilgrimage months.
- Path erosion, vegetation damage, and water pollution threaten the ecological balance.
- The carrying capacity of caves, trails, and boat routes is frequently exceeded.

#### Commercialization and erosion of the sacred atmosphere

- Stalls and vendors encroach upon temple paths, creating noise pollution and obstructing worshippers.
- The rapid expansion of cable car and transport services disturbs natural habitats.

#### Management fragmentation and institutional complexity

Overlapping responsibilities between religious authorities, district government, private tourism operators, and local villagers lead to inefficiencies and conflicting interests.

#### Lack of systematic environmental education and responsible tourism initiatives

Visitors often lack awareness of ecological sensitivity, contributing to littering and ritual practices that harm the environment (e.g., burning excessive votive papers).

#### Economic dependency and social inequality

Local communities rely heavily on short-term seasonal income from boat services and vending, while lacking access to diversified or stable employment opportunities.

These issues collectively threaten both the sustainability of tourism and the spiritual-ecological harmony of the site.

### 1.3. Research objectives

This study aims to:

- Assess the natural, cultural, and spiritual values of Huong Pagoda comprehensively.
- Identify current tourism management practices and

evaluate their effectiveness.

- Analyze visitor motivations, satisfaction levels, and environmental perceptions.
- Examine stakeholder perspectives across community members, businesses, authorities, and religious leaders.
- Explore how spiritual and ecological dimensions intersect in shaping the site's tourism identity.
- Propose feasible, sustainable, long-term strategies for developing spiritual - ecological tourism.

### 1.4. Research questions

How do the natural and spiritual landscapes of Huong Pagoda intertwine to form a unique tourism experience?

- What are the key drivers behind rapid tourism growth, and what are the consequences?
- How do different stakeholders perceive benefits and challenges relating to tourism?
- What governance model is best suited to managing a large religious - ecological complex?
- How can tourism be balanced with environmental protection and cultural authenticity?

What strategic interventions can improve sustainability over the next 10 - 20 years?

### 1.5. Significance of the study

This research provides several contributions:

- Academic contribution: Enhances understanding of spiritual-ecological tourism, an under-researched yet increasingly relevant field.
- Practical contribution: Offers actionable recommendations to policymakers in Hanoi.
- Cultural contribution: Supports efforts to conserve one of Vietnam's most important Buddhist heritage sites.
- Environmental contribution: Addresses urgent ecological issues affecting karst landscapes.
- Socioeconomic contribution: Helps design more inclusive community-based tourism models.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Spiritual tourism: definitions, motivations, and global trends

Spiritual tourism encompasses religious pilgrimage, ritual travel, meditation retreats, temple stays, and journeys focused on meaning, healing, and personal transformation.

Motivations vary widely:

- Seeking emotional or spiritual renewal
- Fulfilling religious obligations
- Connecting with sacred spaces
- Exploring traditional culture
- Escaping urban stress

In modern contexts, spiritual tourism often merges with wellness tourism and nature tourism, reflecting a global shift toward holistic well-being. This trend affects both demand and supply, as destinations adapt by providing ethno-spiritual experiences, guided meditation tours, and environmentally friendly pilgrimage routes.

Major global destinations such as Mecca, Varanasi, Shikoku, and Machu Picchu demonstrate how spiritual sites play crucial roles in national tourism economies. Like Huong

Pagoda, many face sustainability challenges due to overcrowding and environmental pressures.

## 2.2. Ecotourism and the principles of sustainable development

Ecotourism promotes:

- Conservation of natural environments
- Low-impact travel
- Community empowerment
- Environmental education

Successful ecotourism depends on maintaining ecological integrity, enforcing carrying capacity limits, and ensuring that local residents benefit economically. Case studies from Costa Rica, Nepal, and Thailand illustrate that ecotourism can protect biodiversity while generating sustainable income, provided that governance is strong.

## 2.3. Theoretical Integration: Spiritual - Ecological Tourism

The hybrid concept of spiritual - ecological tourism focuses on:

- Experiencing spiritual meaning through nature
- Engaging in meditation or rituals in natural settings
- Learning about sacred ecological narratives
- Participating in environment-friendly pilgrimage practices

Studies suggest that sacred landscapes inherently possess conservation value because their spiritual significance encourages respectful behavior. However, commercialization and modern tourism pressures may erode this effect unless supported by effective management.

## 2.4. Huong Pagoda in historical and religious context

Huong Pagoda has been a pilgrimage destination for centuries. Historical documents indicate that:

- Worship at Huong Tich Cave began as early as the 15th century.
- The legends of Avalokitesvara (Quan Âm) link the site to spiritual enlightenment.
- Kings and scholars visited the area, contributing to its cultural legacy.
- The annual pilgrimage tradition became widespread during the Le and Nguyen dynasties.

The sacred landscape includes:

- Huong Tich Cave (“Nam thiên đệ nhất động”)
- Thien Tru Pagoda
- Giai Oan Pagoda
- Long Van Cave, Hinh Bong Cave, and other grottoes
- Yen Stream, considered a spiritual waterway

The area is recognized for both tangible heritage (architecture, stone inscriptions) and intangible heritage (rituals, chants, folk songs, legends).

## 3. Research methodology

### 3.1. Research design

To capture the complexity of spiritual - ecological tourism at Huong Pagoda, this study uses a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative, qualitative, and spatial-

environmental analysis. The rationale for adopting mixed methods is threefold:

- **Triangulation:** Combining multiple sources ensures more reliable findings.
- **Complementarity:** Quantitative data illustrate broad patterns, while qualitative data uncover deeper meanings and stakeholder dynamics.
- **Holistic Understanding:** Spiritual - ecological tourism involves cultural, ecological, social, economic, and governance elements that require diverse methods for proper analysis.

The research follows a sequential design:

**Phase 1:** Exploratory qualitative research

Preliminary field visits, informal discussions, and document analysis to identify themes.

**Phase 2:** Quantitative surveys

To measure visitor motivations, satisfaction, perceptions of environmental quality, and behavioral intentions.

**Phase 3:** In-depth qualitative interviews

To understand stakeholder perspectives, institutional structures, and community experiences.

**Phase 4:** Environmental & spatial analysis

Using GPS mapping and GIS to identify environmental hotspots and patterns of human impact.

## 3.2. Data collection methods

### 3.2.1. Field observations

Field observations were conducted in two main periods:

**Peak season:** February - March (Huong Pagoda Festival)

Focus: visitor density, ritual practices, waste accumulation, service congestion, commercial activities.

**Off-peak season:** July and October

Focus: daily tourism patterns, ecological restoration, local livelihoods, maintenance activities.

Observations followed structured forms including:

- Environmental indicators (water clarity, erosion points, pollution sources)
- Behavioral indicators (visitor flow, overcrowding patterns, ritual practices)
- Management indicators (signage, staff presence, rule compliance)

Photographs, GPS coordinates, and detailed field notes were used to support analysis.

### 3.2.2. Tourist Surveys

A structured questionnaire survey was administered to 420 visitors, using systematic sampling at three main points:

- Yen Stream boat dock
- Thien Tru Pagoda courtyard
- Cable car entrance

The sample demographics:

- 52% female, 48% male
- Age groups: 18-29 (34%), 30-45 (41%), 46-60 (20%),

60+ (5%)

- 82% domestic visitors, 18% international visitors

Survey sections included:

- Visitor motivations
- Evaluation of spiritual and ecological experiences
- Satisfaction with services (boats, food, guidance, sanitation)
- Environmental awareness and behavior
- Opinions on management policies
- Willingness to pay for conservation

All data were processed using SPSS software.

### 3.2.3. Semi-structured interviews

A total of 58 in-depth interviews were conducted:

- 25 local residents
- 15 tourism businesses (boat owners, vendors, restaurant operators, cable car company)
- 10 government officials (My Duc District PC, Huong Son relic management board)
- 8 monks and religious caretakers

**Main interview themes:**

- Perceptions of tourism benefits and challenges
- Conflicts among stakeholders
- Environmental issues and conservation opinions
- Views on commercialization vs. spirituality
- Ideas for sustainable development

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using NVivo software.

### 3.2.4. Secondary data analysis

Secondary data came from:

- Hanoi tourism statistics
- Government planning documents
- Academic studies on Huong Pagoda
- Environmental impact assessments
- Satellite imagery and land-use maps

These documents provide historical context, quantitative background, and policy frameworks.

### 3.2.5. GIS Environmental Mapping

Using ArcGIS software, the study mapped:

- Waste accumulation points
- Erosion-prone trails
- Boat traffic patterns on the Yen Stream
- Commercial activity clusters
- Zones of high ecological sensitivity

This allowed spatial visualization of environmental pressures and helped formulate zoning recommendations.

## 4. Results (extended)

### 4.1. Overview of tourism potential

Huong Pagoda is an integrated spiritual ecological landscape with exceptional resources.

### 4.1.1. Natural landscape value (expanded)

The Huong Son Mountains are part of a karst limestone system aged roughly 200 million years. Key ecological features include:

- Limestone mountains rising sharply from the landscape
- Dense forests with tropical flora
- A cave system of more than thirty significant grottoes
- The Yen Stream, central to pilgrimage rituals
- Biodiversity, including medicinal plants used in traditional healing

These characteristics create a rare combination of:

- Scenic beauty
- Geological uniqueness
- Biodiversity
- Spiritual symbolism

The natural environment not only supports tourism but reinforces the sacred significance of the landscape.

### 4.1.2. Cultural and spiritual value

Huong Pagoda holds:

- Rich Buddhist heritage
- Ritual traditions dating back centuries
- Tangible heritage such as temples, pagodas, inscriptions
- Intangible heritage including folk chants, incense rituals, vegetarian cooking traditions, and oral legends

The annual Huong Pagoda Festival is one of Vietnam's largest, lasting from the 6th day of the first lunar month to the end of the third month. Pilgrims participate in:

- Prayers for peace and prosperity
- Offerings to Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara
- Chanting ceremonies
- Traditional boat journeys
- Mountain ascents to sacred caves

These activities create a unique blend of spirituality, culture, and nature.

### 4.1.3. Socioeconomic value

Tourism contributes significantly to local income:

- Over 4,000 households benefit directly or indirectly from tourism.
- Seasonal employment includes boat rowing, food services, lodging, and vending.
- Sales of local products (honey, medicinal herbs, souvenirs) provide additional income.

However, the seasonal nature of tourism leads to unstable livelihoods and economic inequality.

## 4.2. Challenges identified

### 4.2.1. Environmental degradation

The most serious environmental issues include:

#### Waste accumulation

- Plastic bottles, food packaging, and ritual waste appear along the Yen Stream and temple paths.
- During peak days, waste volume can exceed local disposal capacity by 2–3 times.

**Water pollution**

- Restaurant wastewater flows into the stream.
- Decomposing organic waste reduces oxygen levels.

**Soil Erosion**

- Popular trails to Huong Tich Cave show deep grooves and exposed tree roots.
- Heavy foot traffic accelerates degradation.

**Habitat Disturbance**

- Noise from vendors and boats disrupts wildlife.
- Construction of the cable car altered forest structure and wildlife movement.

**4.2.2. Overcrowding and carrying capacity issues**

Peak crowd levels reach:

- 30,000-40,000 visitors per day during special ritual dates
- Boat congestion on the Yen Stream
- Long queues at cable cars, causing stress and safety risks
- Overload in cave capacity affecting air quality inside Huong Tich Cave

These exceed the ecological carrying capacity in many zones.

**4.2.3. Commercialization of sacred spaces**

Commercialization manifests in:

- Vendors cluttering temple entrances
- Loud sales pitches disrupting rituals
- Souvenir stalls blocking pathways
- Inappropriate products (plastic toys, non-religious items) being sold in sacred zones

This undermines the spiritual atmosphere and reduces visitor satisfaction.

**4.2.4. Fragmented institutional management**

Governance involves multiple actors:

- My Duc District People's Committee
- Huong Son Relic and Landscape Management Board
- Religious authorities
- Private operators (cable car company, boat cooperatives)
- Local households

Conflicts arise over:

- Revenue distribution
- Environmental responsibility
- Decision-making authority

Lack of unified management slows down improvements.

**4.2.5. Limited community involvement**

Interviews reveal that:

- Local residents feel decisions are top-down.
- Income opportunities are unevenly distributed.
- Young people lack training in tourism management.
- Residents desire more participation in planning and conservation.

**4.2.6. Visitor experience problems**

Survey data show:

- 68% complain about litter and pollution.
- 59% dislike overcrowding.
- 48% rate service quality as low or average.
- 42% consider commercial activities intrusive.

These issues reduce destination competitiveness.

**4.3. Visitor perceptions (expanded analysis)****4.3.1. Motivations**

Main reasons for visiting:

- Performing religious rituals (72%)
- Enjoying natural scenery (65%)
- Seeking peace and relaxation (41%)
- Exploring cultural heritage (38%)
- Family bonding (32%)

This confirms Huong Pagoda as both a spiritual and ecological attraction.

**4.3.2. Satisfaction levels**

- Highly satisfied with natural landscape (87%)
- Highly satisfied with spiritual atmosphere (76%)
- Moderately satisfied with services (54%)
- Low satisfaction with sanitation (38%)
- Low satisfaction with crowd management (35%)

**4.3.3. Environmental awareness**

- 62% believe they should reduce waste.
- 79% support stricter environmental regulations.
- 67% would pay an additional environmental fee (10,000 - 20,000 VND).

**4.3.4. Perceptions of spiritual authenticity**

Visitors express concerns that:

- Commercial noise reduces sacredness.
- Rituals become rushed due to overcrowding.
- Stalls surrounding pagodas create a "marketplace atmosphere."

**5. Discussion****5.1. Interconnection between spirituality and ecology at Huong Pagoda**

The relationship between spirituality and nature at Huong Pagoda is deeply rooted in Vietnamese culture and Buddhist philosophy. The sacredness of the site derives not only from its temples and rituals but also from the serene and majestic natural environment. Visitors frequently describe their experience as "harmonious," "peaceful," and "sacred," reflecting an implicit understanding that spiritual meaning emerges from the ecological setting itself.

The research findings confirm that:

- The Yen Stream is not merely a waterway but a symbolic spiritual passage, where the boat ride represents a meditative transition from ordinary life to sacred space.

- Caves such as Huong Tich symbolically connect the earthly world with the spiritual realm, embodying both geological and religious significance.
- Forested mountains enhance the contemplative atmosphere, contributing to the “silent sanctity” valued in Buddhist practice.

However, environmental degradation undermines this connection. When visitors encounter litter, foul odors, or noise pollution, the spiritual ambiance is diminished. This suggests that ecological preservation is a prerequisite for maintaining the authenticity and integrity of the pilgrimage experience.

## 5.2. Contradictions in current tourism development

The study reveals several contradictions:

### Sacredness vs. Commercialization

- The spiritual ambiance is disrupted by excessive vending and noisy business activities.
- Commercial forces compete with religious values, causing tension between economic gain and cultural preservation.

### Mass tourism vs. carrying capacity

- The festival season brings millions of visitors, overwhelming environmental systems and management capacity.
- The site was never designed for such volume, and infrastructure cannot keep pace.

### Economic benefits vs. community inequality

- Income opportunities are uneven; many households depend on short-term seasonal jobs.
- Profit is concentrated among larger businesses (e.g., cable car operators), while smaller vendors face instability.

### Management fragmentation vs. coordination needs

- Overlapping responsibilities prevent effective environmental protection.
- Conflicting interests between government and religious groups slow policy implementation.

## 5.3. International comparisons and lessons

Case studies from similar spiritual - ecological tourism sites demonstrate potential pathways for Huong Pagoda:

- Mount Koya (Japan) emphasizes quietness and spiritual immersion through strict control of commercial signage and visitor numbers.
- Bodh Gaya (India) combines pilgrimage and heritage preservation by involving monks and international organizations in conservation.
- Taktsang (Bhutan) limits daily visitor numbers and integrates environmental fees for conservation.
- Sacred mountains in South Korea use zoning to separate sacred areas, buffer zones, and tourist service zones.

### Key lessons:

- Limiting commercial intrusion into sacred zones is essential.
- Clear zoning protects ecological and spiritual areas.

- Unified management ensures balanced decision-making.
- Environmental fees can fund conservation effectively.
- Community participation must be institutionalized, not optional.

## 5.4. Towards a sustainable framework for Huong Pagoda

Based on data and global comparisons, the study proposes that sustainable development should follow five pillars:

### Ecological conservation

Protecting forests, streams, caves, and wildlife with strict zoning and restoration programs.

### Cultural - spiritual integrity

Preserving the contemplative atmosphere and ritual traditions by reducing noise and inappropriate commercial activities.

### Visitor flow management

Using digital tools, online reservations, and daily caps to reduce overcrowding.

### Community empowerment

Ensuring local participation in decision-making, training, and revenue-sharing.

### Governance reform

Establishing a unified tourism and heritage management board with clear responsibilities.

## 6. Recommendations

### 6.1. Environmental management solutions

#### 6.1.1. Smart waste management systems

To address waste overload:

- Install IoT - based smart bins with fill-level sensors to optimize collection.
- Implement waste separation stations (organic, recyclable, ritual waste).
- Introduce a “carry-in, carry - out” campaign encouraging visitors to take back their trash.
- Increase the number of waste management staff during festival months.

Educational signs should explain how waste affects the sacred environment.

#### 6.1.2. Protection of water resources in the Yen Stream

Measures include:

- Monitoring water quality using digital sensors.
- Prohibiting wastewater discharge from restaurants into the stream.
- Upgrading sewage systems in villages around the site.
- Strict penalties for illegal dumping.
- Promoting eco - friendly boat engines or electric boats.

#### 6.1.3. Restoration of trails and forest ecosystems

- Use natural stone and erosion-resistant materials to fortify trails.
- Replant native vegetation in degraded forest areas.
- Control access to highly sensitive ecological hotspots.
- Create designated viewing platforms to reduce off-trail trampling.

## 6.2. Visitor low control and infrastructure improvement

### 6.2.1. Online ticketing and daily visitor caps

Implement a digital system that:

- Limits daily visitor numbers based on carrying capacity analyses.
- Distributes visitors across time slots to avoid peak congestion.
- Provides real-time updates about crowd levels.

International examples show that digital capping improves both experience and environmental sustainability.

### 6.2.2. Transportation improvements

- Expand electric vehicle routes while reducing internal combustion vehicles.
- Improve boat dock designs to streamline flow and reduce boat collisions.
- Offer multiple walking routes to Huong Tich Cave to disperse visitor flow.

### 6.2.3. Infrastructure for accessibility and safety

- Build resting platforms along steep trails.
- Install better lighting and signage in caves.
- Ensure all facilities meet safety standards for mass gatherings.

## 6.3. Enhancing spiritual - cultural experiences

### 6.3.1. Improved interpretive systems

- Install multilingual interpretive panels explaining historical, spiritual, and ecological narratives.
- Use QR codes linking to audio guides and virtual tours.
- Provide digital maps highlighting ecological features, sacred symbols, and meditation paths.

### 6.3.2. Development of spiritual retreat programs

Implement guided programs such as:

- Nature-based meditation sessions
- Buddhist philosophy workshops
- Weekend spiritual retreats
- Ecological mindfulness walks led by monks or trained guides

These programs help shift tourism from mass consumption toward meaningful experience.

### 6.3.3. Preservation of ritual practices and sacred atmosphere

- Design buffer zones around temples and grottoes to reduce commercial noise.
- Restrict vendors from operating within 200 meters of sacred zones.
- Promote traditional rituals (chanting, offering lotus flowers) instead of environmentally harmful practices (burning large votive bundles).
- Provide educational materials about Buddhist principles of non-harm (ahimsa) and living in harmony with nature.

### 6.3.4. Digitization of cultural heritage

Digital transformation can enrich visitor experience:

- Create 3D models of caves and pagodas for virtual exploration.
- Produce documentary videos displayed at visitor centers.

- Develop a multilingual mobile app providing meditation guides, historical explanations, ecological information, and route recommendations.
- Use augmented reality (AR) at key sites to visualize ancient rituals and legends.

These tools make cultural interpretation more engaging, especially for young visitors

## 6.4. Strengthening community participation

A sustainable tourism strategy must include local communities at the core.

### 6.4.1. Community - based tourism (CBT) models

Communities should be empowered to manage tourism through:

- Homestay networks preserving local architecture
- Community-owned boat cooperatives with environmentally friendly standards
- Local-guided tours showcasing traditional farming, herbal medicine, and folklore

These initiatives diversify income and reduce dependency on stalls and low-margin tourism activities.

### 6.4.2. Capacity building and skills training

Training programs should focus on:

- Hospitality and customer service
- Interpretation and guiding skills
- Environmental management and waste reduction
- Digital literacy for online tourism promotion
- English and other foreign language skills

Training will help residents participate effectively in higher-value tourism activities.

### 6.4.3. Inclusive benefit - sharing mechanisms

To avoid inequality:

- Implement a transparent revenue-sharing policy among businesses, temples, and local communities.
- Require large operators (e.g., cable car companies) to contribute a fixed percentage to a local conservation fund.
- Provide microcredit loans for households to upgrade tourism-related services.

### 6.4.4. Supporting women and youth

Women and youth are major contributors to local tourism but often lack formal recognition.

- Create women - led craft cooperatives producing eco-friendly souvenirs.
- Encourage youth participation through volunteer conservation programs, digital tourism initiatives, and entrepreneurship contests.

## 6.5. Institutional reforms and Governance Improvements

### 6.5.1. Establishment of a unified management board

A major barrier to sustainability is fragmented management. The study proposes establishing a Huong Pagoda Spiritual - Ecological Tourism Authority, with clear roles:

- Heritage preservation
- Environmental monitoring

- Business licensing
- Tourist service management
- Visitor education
- Coordination with religious institutions

The board should include representatives from government, religious leaders, community groups, and tourism experts.

### 6.5.2. Clear zoning and regulatory frameworks

Introduce a zoning plan with three functional zones:

- Core Sacred Zone - highest protection, limited access, no commercial activities.
- Ecological Buffer Zone - regulated tourism, strict conservation rules.
- Service and Commercial Zone - designated areas for food, markets, accommodations.

This model aligns with UNESCO guidelines for managing cultural–natural heritage sites.

### 6.5.3. Monitoring and evaluation systems

A digital monitoring platform should track:

- Visitor numbers
- Waste volume
- Water quality
- Trail erosion
- Biodiversity indicators

Annual sustainability reports should be publicly released, enhancing transparency and accountability.

## 7. Conclusion

Huong Pagoda is one of Vietnam's most significant spiritual–ecological destinations, embodying a rare fusion of natural beauty, cultural depth, and devotional tradition. The findings of this extended research highlight both the extraordinary value and the profound challenges of developing sustainable tourism at the site. Spirituality and ecology are intricately interwoven at Huong Pagoda; its sacredness derives from the natural environment, while religious narratives enhance the ecological landscape. However, rapid commercialization, overcrowding, environmental degradation, and fragmented governance threaten the essence of the site. Without timely interventions, both the ecological and spiritual integrity of Huong Pagoda may face irreversible decline.

The study recommends a multidimensional strategy grounded in conservation, cultural preservation, community empowerment, digital transformation, and institutional reform. Implementing smart waste systems, ecological restoration, daily visitor caps, improved interpretation, community-based tourism models, and unified management can transform Huong Pagoda into a model of spiritual - ecological tourism not only for Vietnam but for Southeast Asia.

Ultimately, sustainable development requires collective responsibility - among authorities, religious leaders, local residents, businesses, and visitors. The future of Huong Pagoda depends on recognizing that ecological protection is a spiritual obligation, and spiritual heritage thrives only when nature is respected. Through balanced and evidence-based planning, Huong Pagoda can continue to serve as a place of pilgrimage, reflection, ecological harmony, and cultural pride

for generations to come.

## 7. References

1. ASEAN Tourism Secretariat. Ecotourism development in Southeast Asia. Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat; 2021.
2. Do HT. Spiritual tourism in Vietnam: potentials and challenges. *J Tour Stud.* 2019;18(2):45-62.
3. Hanoi Department of Tourism. Annual tourism statistics report 2023. Hanoi: Hanoi Department of Tourism; 2023.
4. Jamal T, Sharpley R. Tourism and sustainability: development, globalisation, and new tourism in the Third World. 4th ed. London: Routledge; 2019.
5. Nguyen PQ. Cultural heritage management in Huong Pagoda. *Vietnam Cult Herit Rev.* 2019;11(4):22-9.
6. Pham TA. Pilgrimage practices in Vietnam: historical continuity and transformation. *Asian Anthropol.* 2022;21(1):101-25.
7. United Nations World Tourism Organization. Sustainable tourism framework. Madrid: UNWTO; 2020.
8. Vu LT, Tran NH. Ecological pressures in karst tourism destinations. *Environ Geogr Rev.* 2021;30(1):77-98.
9. World Bank. Community-based tourism models in emerging economies. Washington, DC: World Bank; 2020.

### How to Cite This Article

Tan LV, Huong NT, Quang NV, Bang TD, Giang NTH, Anh HM, et al. Developing spiritual-ecological tourism at Huong Pagoda, Huong Son commune, Hanoi City, Vietnam. *Int J Soc Sci Except Res.* 2025;4(6):105-12. doi:10.54660/IJSSER.2025.4.6.105-112.

### Creative Commons (CC) License

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work non-commercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.