

Criteria for Agricultural Tourism Development for Farms in Thanh Hoa, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT: The study focuses on developing a set of criteria for developing agricultural tourism for farms in Thanh Hoa - a locality with great potential for agricultural resources and indigenous culture. Based on theoretical analysis and summarizing international (Japan, Korea, Europe) and domestic (Lam Dong, An Giang, Hanoi, Ninh Binh) experiences, the study has pointed out the important role of agricultural tourism in transforming the rural economic structure, increasing farmers' income, preserving culture and promoting sustainable development. From the current status of pilot models in Thanh Hoa such as Pu Luong or Hai Tien, the authors propose a set of criteria consisting of five groups: (i) basic conditions; (ii) organization and management; (iii) products and services; (iv) community culture; (v) sustainable development. The set of criteria is highly compatible with international (GSTC), regional (ASEAN Homestay, CBT Standard) and national (OCOP) standards, and reflects local characteristics. The study concludes that the application of the set of criteria will help standardize, improve the quality and competitiveness of Thanh Hoa agricultural tourism, contributing to creating a foundation for sustainable rural development in the context of integration.

KEYWORDS: Agricultural tourism; Criteria; Sustainable development; Thanh Hoa; Community culture; Farmstay.

I. INTRODUCTION

Thanh Hoa is among the largest and most populous provinces in Vietnam's North Central region and possesses abundant agricultural resources. With a diverse agricultural ecosystem, many types of crops and livestock, along with a long history of culture and attractive natural landscapes, Thanh Hoa has great potential for developing agricultural tourism. In the context of green economy and sustainable tourism becoming a global trend, exploiting this potential not only brings economic benefits but also contributes to preserving the environment and local cultural values. However, agricultural tourism activities in Thanh Hoa are currently limited to a number of pilot models or are spontaneous, lacking strategic direction and synchronization. In particular, the province does not have a specific set of scientific and practical criteria to evaluate, recognize and orient the development of farms, leading to difficulties in state management, limiting the ability of enterprises and cooperatives to connect and creating sustainable trust for tourists. In this situation, the research and development of a set of criteria for developing agricultural tourism for farms in Thanh Hoa is necessary and urgent.

This study aims at two basic objectives: Proposing a set of criteria for agricultural tourism development suitable to natural conditions, socio-economic conditions and local cultural identity; The set of criteria needs to have a feasible assessment framework to support state management, while providing a basis for enterprises, cooperatives and farmers to implement agricultural tourism activities in a sustainable direction. The research subjects are farms, ranches, and agricultural cooperatives that are participating in or have the potential to develop tourism; the scope of the research focuses on some typical districts and towns of the province such as Nhu Thanh, Ngoc Lac, Tho Xuan, Ba Thuoc, Hoang Hoa, areas with strengths in agriculture and tourism, from which to draw suggestions that can be widely applied throughout the province.

II. THEORETICAL

From a theoretical perspective, agritourism is understood as tourism experiences that take place on farms or within active agricultural spaces, where visitors can observe, interact with, and consume products directly related to farming activities. This

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distinguishes agritourism from other forms of rural tourism because of its close connection to agricultural production and its experiential orientation (Phillip et al., 2010). The experience economy framework explains how farm households stage the four dimensions of education, entertainment, aesthetics, and escapism to transform agricultural products and services into experiential value (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

At the same time, the multifunctional agriculture and place-based rural development approach shows that agritourism carries both economic functions (such as income diversification) and socio-environmental functions (such as preserving landscapes, safeguarding farming heritage, and strengthening community ties), and requires sustainable small-scale destination management (OECD, 2020; Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). At the household and enterprise level, the performance of agritourism depends on characteristics of the farm and its owner, such as gender, education, and market orientation; at the territorial level, agritourism contributes to job creation, population retention, and the strengthening of agri-food and tourism value chains (Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008; Schilling et al., 2012).

According to Christine Tew (2010), agritourism is a term used to describe visits to farms or agricultural production processes and agribusinesses for purposes of awareness, interest, education, or recreation. It embraces agricultural resources, natural resources, and human resources.

Similarly, David Preece (2015) defines agritourism as the activity of farming enterprises and rural communities in presenting visitors with agricultural production processes and rural agricultural heritage. From a comprehensive perspective, agritourism products can be divided into four categories: (1) Attractions associated with production such as fields, workshops, farming tools, and production processes; (2) Special events such as exhibitions, fairs, conferences, and seminars; (3) Recreational activities such as hiking, cycling, animal riding, and picnicking; and (4) Services such as accommodation, camping, retailing of goods, and handicrafts.

In summary, agritourism can be regarded as a form of tourism closely tied to agricultural production, in which the entire space, resources, processes, and agricultural values are “transformed” into tourism products.

III. PROPOSAL OF CRITERIA FOR AGRICULTURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Based on theoretical foundations, domestic and foreign experiences, as well as the current situation in Thanh Hoa, this study proposes a set of criteria for agricultural tourism development applicable to farms, ranches and cooperatives. The set of criteria not only acts as an assessment tool but also as a development orientation to ensure sustainability, efficiency and connection with local characteristics.

A. Criteria group on foundation conditions

First of all, foundation factors are central in determining the ability to form and develop agricultural tourism. Favorable geographical location, easy traffic connection and synchronous infrastructure system (roads, electricity, water, telecommunications) are prerequisites for tourists to access the destination. In addition, the abundance of agricultural resources, including seasonal products (such as oranges, grapefruit, longan, tea, specialty rice), will create competitive advantages and unique appeal. Natural landscape factors and a clean ecological environment are also necessary conditions to create attractive resort and experience spaces, contributing to enhancing the attraction for tourists.

B. Group of criteria on organization and management

The success of the agricultural tourism model depends largely on the organizational and management capacity of the farm owner. Operators need capabilities in operations, financial management, customer service, and product innovation. In addition, the level of connection between the farm and cooperatives, travel businesses and local authorities also determines the development efficiency. This connection helps optimize the value chain from production to consumption, while ensuring product promotion and distribution. In addition, compliance with regulations on food safety, hygiene and environmental protection is a mandatory requirement to maintain reputation and sustainable development.

C. Criteria for tourism products and services

Products and services are the soul of agricultural tourism. First of all, experiential activities must be attractive and diverse, from participating in planting, harvesting, processing agricultural products to visiting farms and learning agricultural skills. Accommodation systems such as farmstays and homestays built in a friendly style, in harmony with the landscape will help prolong the length of stay and increase tourists' spending. In addition, typical cuisine based on local ingredients is a factor that creates a distinctive mark. In addition, the development of OCOP products and tourist gifts from agricultural products contributes to increasing economic value, promoting local brands and expanding consumption channels.

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D. Community culture criteria

A sustainable agricultural tourism model cannot be separated from cultural and community factors. Exploiting and preserving local cultural identity from language, cuisine, festivals, craft villages to farming practices will increase the value of the experience for tourists. The level of participation of the farming community is considered a decisive factor for the long-term success of the model, because the community is both the creator and the direct beneficiary of tourism. At the same time, the educational value that agricultural tourism brings, such as raising awareness of clean production, environmental protection and cultural preservation, also contributes to affirming the social role of this type.

E. Sustainable Development Criteria

Finally, sustainable development is the core principle to ensure the long-term stability of agricultural tourism. Environmental protection—through waste reduction, renewable energy adoption, and clean agricultural technologies—is essential. Using resources efficiently, economically and plannedly, while limiting overexploitation, will contribute to maintaining resources for future generations. Moreover, agricultural tourism must truly contribute to local socio-economic development, not only in terms of increasing income but also creating jobs, improving the quality of life and strengthening community solidarity.

F. Synthesis of proposed criteria for agricultural tourism development

To systematize the research results and ensure visibility, the study synthesizes the proposed criteria groups into a reference framework table. This table fully covers five core aspects including: basic conditions, organization and management, tourism products and services, community culture, and sustainable development. Each group of criteria is concretized into component indicators and suggested indicators to create a basis for practical assessment at farms. The construction of the synthesis table not only helps to clearly define the priority criteria, but also creates a convenient tool for management agencies, travel businesses and farmers in implementing, monitoring and improving the quality of agricultural tourism activities in a sustainable direction and suitable to the conditions of Thanh Hoa province.

Table 1.1: Proposed set of criteria for agricultural tourism development

Criteria group	Component criteria	Suggested indicators
Basic conditions	Geographical location, traffic, infrastructure	Distance, infrastructure, connection
	Agricultural resources	Specific products, seasons
	Ecological environment, landscape	Level of attractiveness, ecological safety
Organization and management	Management capacity of farm owners	Level and management skill
	Linking with cooperatives, travel businesses	Level of cooperation and promotion
	Safety and environmental protection	Compliance with regulations and protection measures
Service products	Experiential activities	Diverse and attractive
	Accommodation system	Farmstay, homestay, amenities
	Cuisine and OCOP products	Typical cuisine, gift products
Community culture	Preserving and exploiting cultural identity	Customs, craft villages, festivals
	Community participation	Labor rate, benefit level
	Educational value and experience	Environmental education, satisfaction
Sustainable development	Sustainable Environment	Waste Management, Clean Energy
		Recycle, save water
	Sustainable economy	Creating jobs, income, and community welfare
	Sustainable society	Stable employment; average income; participation of women and youth; community engagement; cultural preservation

(Source: Proposed by the author group)

IV. DISCUSSION

Are integrated into the “service products” and “management organization” groups of the proposed criteria set. This synchronization helps farms link tourism with OCOP Comparison with national and international criteria. The proposed set of

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criteria is highly compatible with existing international sustainability standards. At the global level, the core themes of GSTC (destination management; socio-economic benefits for the community; cultural heritage; environment) coincide with the five criteria groups in the study (platform; management organization; service products; community culture; sustainable development). This makes it easier to calibrate into measurement indicators (e.g. risk management, benefit sharing, waste management) when implementing assessment or certification later.

At the regional level, the ASEAN Homestay Standard and ASEAN Community-Based Tourism (CBT) Standard focus on safety and hygiene, cultural authenticity, host capacity, benefit-sharing mechanisms, and linkages with authorities/partners, which have been localized into the criteria of “management organization”, “community culture” and “service products” of the study. Referencing these two sets of standards is particularly relevant to the context of farmstay/homestay and community-based tourism in Thanh Hoa.

At the national level, the OCOP Program applies a system of ranking criteria based on product quality, market capacity and community strength; indicators on specific products, value chains and commercialization (gifts, processing experiences), while taking advantage of existing policy promotion channels.

Advantages, limitations and feasibility of using the criteria set in Thanh Hoa. The main benefit of the criteria set is its multidimensional but compact structure, covering everything from background conditions to governance, products, culture and sustainability, creating a “road map” for farms to self-assess their capacity and prioritize investments. Comparing with GSTC/ASEAN/OCOP helps reduce the cost of standard conversion and improve the ability to “connect to the market” (transportation tours, certification, promotion).

The main limitations lie in implementation capacity: inter-district infrastructure gaps; limited digital and foreign-language skills among operators; agricultural seasonality; and weak inter-sectoral coordination. Some sustainability indicators (waste management, renewable energy, social-impact monitoring) require upfront investment and tools that not all farms can immediately meet. In terms of feasibility, Thanh Hoa has the advantage of diverse resources (mountainous coastal plains), the presence of core models (Pu Luong, Hai Tien), and benefits from Vietnam's tourism strategy framework until 2030, creating policy “leverage” to gradually apply the criteria according to a 2-3 year roadmap.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has systematized the theoretical basis and practical experience at home and abroad, and analyzed the current status of agricultural tourism development in Thanh Hoa to propose a set of criteria suitable to local conditions. The set of criteria includes five main groups: (i) basic conditions; (ii) organization and management; (iii) tourism products and services; (iv) community culture; (v) sustainable development, in which sustainable development is emphasized in all three aspects: environment, economy and society. This is an important scientific basis for orienting, evaluating and improving the quality of agricultural tourism activities, helping farms promote their advantages, overcome limitations and move towards a sustainable development model.

The research results show that the proposed criteria are highly compatible with international (GSTC), regional (ASEAN Homestay and CBT Standard) and national (OCOP Program) standards, and can therefore be implemented without creating gaps in the current legal and management framework. However, some challenges still exist, such as limitations in infrastructure, governance capacity, digital and foreign language skills, seasonality of agricultural products, as well as financial resources and enforcement monitoring. This requires close coordination and strong support from many stakeholders.

From the research results, the authors make a number of recommendations:

For state management agencies: it is necessary to issue documents guiding the application of the set of criteria, integrating them into the agricultural tourism development plan and the province's OCOP program; at the same time, support the construction of essential infrastructure in potential areas.

For farms and cooperatives: proactively improve management capacity, improve service quality, diversify products, and link tourism activities with local cultural identity as well as green consumption trends. For the community and people: increase participation in agricultural tourism models, both as creative subjects and beneficiaries, to create long-term spread and sustainability.

For travel businesses: need to expand links with farms, build specialized tour products and promote Thanh Hoa agricultural tourism to domestic and international markets.

Regarding support policies: encourage green financial incentives (credit, tax) for environmental protection activities, renewable energy; implement skills training programs for farmers, especially management skills, foreign languages and digital marketing; at the same time, establish a periodic monitoring and evaluation mechanism to ensure transparency and efficiency.

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In conclusions, the development and application of a set of criteria for agricultural tourism development in Thanh Hoa not only contributes to promoting local economic growth, but also creates a foundation for transforming the sustainable rural development model, linking agriculture - tourism - culture, thereby enhancing the position and competitiveness of Thanh Hoa tourism in the context of integration.

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