

## **Community-Based Tourism Activities in Con Son Island (Mekong Delta- Vietnam) with the Issue of Preserving Cultural and Natural Values Before Changes**

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### **Abstract**

*The strong impacts of urbanization and industrialization have profoundly changed the livelihoods, spiritual cultural values, natural landscapes, and lifestyles of people in Can Tho in general and Con Son Island, Binh Thuy District in particular. There are many different assessments of the impact, transformation, adaptation, or permanent abandonment of the previous living values of Con Son residents, where there are major changes in building a community tourism model. In this article, the authors use a mixed content analysis method (qualitative and quantitative research) to survey to collect information on the livelihood status, the impacts of community tourism activities on Con Son Island, Binh Thuy District, Can Tho City on the issue of preserving community cultural and natural values before the impact of social changes to record the status quo, analyze and evaluate local resources, existing values, the level of sustainability - vulnerability and the desires of the community. The research results show that community agricultural tourism activities in Con Son, Can Tho City have brought high economic value, helping people have a good income, their material life is increasingly developing and the cultural features of symbiosis and solidarity are maintained for households participating in the Community Agricultural Tourism Cooperative here. Besides, the natural landscape is also preserved and adapted to current climate change. This article contributes to providing information on the positive impact of community agricultural tourism, specifically on Con Son Island, Can Tho City (Mekong Delta- VietNam) and contributes to building a sustainable community agricultural tourism model in ensuring livelihoods for people, preserving culture, and landscape, and adapting to climate change.*

**Keywords:** *Community tourism, Agritourism, Con Son island, Can Tho city, Mekong Delta.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Con Son is an island located in the Hau River, Binh Thuy District, Can Tho City, in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. It is about 7 km from the city center and is surrounded by lush green orchards in the middle of the Hau River, offering the peaceful and pristine beauty of the Mekong Delta countryside. This is a rural area with a strong rural character, even though it is only about 600 meters from the mainland (urban area). Con Son Island was cultivated for agriculture from the middle of the 20th century. The settlers from Tan Quoi, Tan Luoc in Binh Minh, Vinh Long, O Mon (Can Tho), and Hau Giang... came here to live together, support each other, share, and live in harmony.

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From a place with no electricity, no roads, no schools, and no medical stations, the people of Con Son realized the difference from the surrounding areas and took advantage of this to develop tourism. They did not follow the trend of turning this place into a luxury resort but focused on preserving the natural values, environment, customs, and rituals, and promoting the spirit of mutual support in the community to improve their livelihoods and rise above themselves to become a friendly and close destination.

Instead of opening garden restaurants, the people of Con Son have made a memorable impression on visitors from the mainland to the island, including foreign tourists, including a program for Francophone students in Asia-Pacific (8-2017).

**Primary data collection and analysis:** We conducted a direct survey using several methods: questionnaires with 10 households of people in Con Son, Can Tho City who do community tourism using a questionnaire related to livelihood activities and conservation of cultural and natural values. We processed the data from the questionnaire using statistical and descriptive methods, using SPSS 16.0 software. **SWOT and PEST analysis methods:** We applied the method of collecting and analyzing secondary data: Books, newspapers, and the system of legal documents that have been issued and are related to Con Son, Can Tho City.

**Research objectives and scope:** The main objective of this study is to investigate the impacts of community-based tourism activities on livelihoods and the preservation of cultural and natural values in Con Son Island, Can Tho City. Specifically, the study aims to: Analyze the livelihood status of the households participating in community-based tourism in Con Son Island.

Assess the impacts of community-based tourism activities on the preservation of cultural and natural values in Con Son Island. Identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of community-based tourism development in Con Son Island. Propose solutions for sustainable development of community-based tourism in Con Son Island, ensuring the livelihoods of the local people and preserving cultural and natural values. The study focuses on community-based tourism activities in Con Son Island, Binh Thuy District, Can Tho City. The study period is from 2017 to 2023.

**Research Significance:** The study is expected to provide valuable information for the local authorities and stakeholders in developing a sustainable community-based tourism model in Con Son Island. The research results can also be used as a reference for other localities in the Mekong Delta region that are developing community-based tourism.

## 2. CONTENT

### 2.1 Current status of livelihood activities (community tourism), culture and natural environment

Previously, the livelihood activities of Con Son people mainly depended on agriculture: gardening, livestock raising, seasonal work (carpentry, masonry, fishing...). Therefore, the income was not high, and the economy of many households still faced many difficulties at low and medium levels (40%).

The previous livelihood activities of the Con Son people: were Rice cultivation and Gardening: This was the main livelihood activity. People grow a variety of fruits and vegetables, such as coconuts, rambutan, and bananas... Livestock raising: People raised pigs, chickens, and ducks for meat and eggs. Seasonal work: Some people worked as carpenters, masons, or fishermen to supplement their income. The low income and economic difficulties faced by many households can be attributed to several factors: Limited access to markets: Con Son Island is located in a remote area, which makes it difficult for farmers to get their products to market. Low prices for agricultural products: The prices of agricultural products are often low, which makes it difficult for farmers to

make a profit. Lack of capital and technology: Many farmers lack the capital and technology to invest in their farms, which limits their productivity. Despite these challenges, the people of Con Son are resilient and hardworking. They are working to improve their livelihoods by developing new sources of income, such as community tourism.

Truoc kia, gia dinh song bang nghe

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Rice cultivation	2	20,0	20,0	20,0
Gardening and Livestock raising	7	70,0	70,0	90,0
Seasonal work	1	10,0	10,0	100,0
Total	10	100,0	100,0	

Source: A field survey in December 2023

Monthly income per household member

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Under 700 thousand VND	1	10,0	10,0	10,0
Between 700 thousand and 1 million VND	1	10,0	10,0	20,0
Tu 1-1,5 million VND	2	20,0	20,0	40,0
Tu 2-5 million VND	4	40,0	40,0	80,0
Other	2	20,0	20,0	100,0
Total	10	100,0	100,0	

Source: A field survey in December 2023

Improvement of Livelihoods through Community Ecotourism on Con Son Island. To improve the livelihoods of the local community, a community ecotourism model was established on Con Son Island in 2015. Initially, 14 households participated in the model. The number increased to 18 households in 2016, 30 households in 2019, and 43 households in 2023. These households have now formed a legally recognized agricultural tourism cooperative with a management board. The cooperative has brought about many positive outcomes, including increased income for the local people.

A survey of the households involved in the ecotourism model revealed that 80% of them reported an improved standard of living (excluding reinvestment). According to statistics

from the Can Tho Department of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, the number of tourists visiting Con Son Island has steadily increased, reaching 80,000<sup>3</sup> in 2022.

Does tourism improve people's lives?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	9	90,0	90,0	90,0
	No	1	10,0	10,0	10,0
	Total	10	100,0	100,0	

Source: A field survey in December 2023

Difficulties and challenges faced by the community tourism households in Con Son Island:

Complicated administrative procedures (50%), Low professional and technical level, untrained staff...

Favorable conditions: Solidarity and mutual support (60%); Local authorities create favorable conditions (20%); High income is a favorable condition (30%)

Monthly income of each family member after working in tourism

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	700 thousand VND - under 1 million VND	0	00,0	00,0	00,0
	1-1,5 million VND	0	00,0	00,0	00,0
	Tu 2-5 million VND	1	10,0	10,0	10,0
	Over 10 million VND	9	90,0	90,0	900,0
	Total	10	100,0	100,0	

Source: Field survey in December 2023

The cultural and natural environment of Con Son Island

Con Son Island, located in the Mekong River Delta, boasts the captivating beauty of a typical riverine countryside. Exploited and cultivated since the mid-20th century, the island preserves many unique cultural imprints of the Mekong Delta people.

Religion and spiritual life: Hoa Hao Buddhism: The dominant religion on the island, deeply intertwined with the locals' spiritual life. Belief in deities and ancestors: Practiced by many households, reflecting the cultural heritage of the pioneers who cultivated the land. Sincere and peaceful lifestyle: Influenced by religious teachings, yet not fanatic, maintaining a clear and open mind.

Local cultural characteristics: In-depth knowledge of nature: Locals rely on tides, moon, and stars to predict weather and crop seasons. Traditional fish sauce-making technique: Using only fish and salt, creating distinctive flavors typical of the Mekong Delta. Culinary expertise: Producing nearly 100 types of traditional cakes with diverse colors

<sup>3</sup> <https://baocantho.com.vn/con-son-don-80-000-luot-khach-trong-nam-2022-a155429.html>

and flavors, reflecting the unique water culture. Community spirit: Strong sense of solidarity, mutual support, and assistance in times of difficulty.

Attractive agricultural tourism products: Flying snakehead fish, Frog circus, visiting floating fish farms on the Hau River: Observing local fish farming practices. Seasonal fruit orchards: Enjoying fresh and delicious fruits straight from the trees. Spiritual culture: Worship of deities and ancestors: Preserved and cherished by the locals."Ban Thien" or "Thong Thien" altar: Found in every household, symbolizing the harmonious balance of Yin and Yang. Daily prayers and offerings: Seeking blessings for health, peace, and prosperity for the family. Special rituals on lunar 1st and 15th days: Offering prayers for good fortune, protection, and a peaceful life.

Environmental protection awareness: Efforts to maintain a clean and fresh environment: Encouraging visitors to refrain from using plastic bags and bottles. Limited wastewater treatment system: A challenge that needs to be addressed.

Overall, Con Son Island offers a unique blend of natural beauty, cultural heritage, and sincere hospitality, making it a compelling destination for those seeking an authentic Mekong Delta experience.

#### S (Strengths)

- 1) Community: Shared goals, and mutual support attract tourists.
- 2) Natural environment: Pristine and refreshing.
- 3) Fertile, abundant water resources. Favorable for growing safe and organic vegetables and fruits.
- 4) Variety of fruit trees: Diverse tropical fruits.
- 5) Local people: Kind, friendly, and sincere.
- 6) Preserving and processing traditional delicacies. Stories: About the pioneering period, delicious food, Mekong River...
- 7) Cultural life: Healthy, open, friendly, and generous. Harmonious customs and beliefs.

#### W (Weaknesses)

- 1) Small land plots
- 2) Labor: Lack of specialized training and education.
- 3) Management skills: Family-based, autonomous, can easily lose control when the number of tourists increases.
- 4) Infrastructure: Lack of wastewater treatment system.
- 5) Low financial capacity and investment.
- 6) Capital mobilization capacity: Limited within the community.
- 7) Self-analysis and evaluation capacity. Limited in terms of challenges, opportunities, and cost-benefit calculation.

#### 2.2. Development orientation of community tourism model associated with the preservation of cultural values and natural landscapes

Continue to implement and develop the ecological community tourism model, each house with one product:

- Households need to take advantage of the existing strengths in terms of culture, fruits, and natural landscapes.
- Combine to gradually consolidate and professionalize customer service activities. Increase the scale and mobilize all remaining households on the island to participate voluntarily.
- Organize a variety of services to encourage spending by tourists.
- Build a souvenir system: With unique characteristics of the people on the island. Reflecting the philosophy of living in harmony with nature in the riverine area.

Using available products: Combo of traditional cakes that can be stored for 7-10 days and transported long distances.

Protect the ecological environment: To maintain and develop the community tourism model. Do not invest in concrete resorts.

Survey results: 100% of households live near canals, ponds, and have trees surrounding their homes. Demonstrating the people's spirit of harmony with nature.

Strategy

	Content	Expected outcome
Step 1: Mobilize support from local authorities	Promote community consensus, increase the scale and number of participating households to promote their strengths and differences; re-plan the production space for safe vegetables and fruits, and implement the motto "Delicious meals with the flavor of Earth - Sky in Con Son".	Analyze the differences in values at each destination, promote the unique dishes on the menu, synthesize internal and external linking resources, and build a method for integrating information, coordinating traffic flow, and developing the supply chain (page/website...).
Step 2	"Convergence between the rivers" is the name for the plan based on the local landscape, resources, traditional villages, skills, and family traditions to develop the service type of each destination, promote planting flowers, trees, and landscaping, and adjust the garden space and communication space towards promoting local values.	Learn management, operation, and event scheduling skills that attract tourists linked to customs, villages, beliefs, and traditional culture and know how to promote the brand through stories and creative forms.
Step 3	Build a "Common House" to preserve artifacts and images of the family from the pioneering period, and unique events, and share local cultural knowledge, practice on the spot, keep memories for visitors to bring back, and create a sustainable livelihood for the community.	Immerse myself in local culture through hands-on experiences: Sharing local cultural knowledge engagingly, and inviting tourists to participate in interactive sessions and discussions. Offer opportunities for practical activities that allow tourists to learn by doing, creating lasting memories to take home. Encourage voluntary promotion on social networks by providing engaging content and hashtags, empowering tourists to become advocates for your community.
Step 4	"Chatting" with the people of Con Son: Approach and identify the neighborhood life in the miniature community between the Hau River - a tributary of the Mekong:	Expanding the production of clean vegetables and fruits: Increase resources through meals, and destinations. Provide diverse and reliable vegetables and fruits for

		tourists to take home.
		Organize cultural exchange activities:
		Introduce the local cultural beauty.
		Create opportunities for tourists to interact and chat with the locals.
		Allow tourists to participate in the production and living activities of the locals.
		Create a sense of closeness and familiarity for tourists.
Bước 5	Develop a product development plan:	Develop an ordering mechanism: Receive orders from mainland residents and tourists. Create attraction for other resources to Con Son.
	Create exclusive logos and brands for local products:	
	Register for protection with the State.	
	Enrich the local value of products such as traditional cakes, fish sauce, safe vegetables, and fruits...	Provide regional delicacies and souvenirs.
	Develop characteristic tourism products:	
	Based on the needs of tourists:	
	Want to relax and be peaceful?	
	Want to eat delicious vegetables and fruits?	
	Want to chat like family?	
	Want to feel the simple life of the river?	
	Want to sow vegetable beds themselves?	
	Want to organize birthday parties with traditional dishes...	

Opinions of Con Son people when there is an investment unit in high-rise buildings and resorts on Con Son island

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Accept	1	10,0	10,0	10,0
disagree	9	90,0	90,0	100,0
Total	10	100,0	100,0	

Source: Field survey in December 2023

### 3. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 3.1 Conclusion

The business operation capacity of the Con Son community tourism households is developing but still weak, fragile, and vulnerable. However, the Con Son people are very united and supportive of each other. Community tourism activities in Con Son are currently showing many positive changes and have improved the income of people participating in tourism compared to before. The number of visitors to Con Son is increasing. People have taken advantage of their free time to participate in providing tourism services. In addition, people are more aware of protecting the environment for "green" tourism, and are increasingly active in preserving and restoring local cultural values such as making traditional cakes, making fish sauce, utilizing local products, and supporting each other.

However, besides the achievements, Con Son community tourism is currently facing many difficulties and challenges. The risk of neighborhood relationships being broken down by a few individuals "interfering" in the tourism activities of the people, complicated administrative procedures, and the authorities making it difficult and interfering too deeply in the economic activities of the people. There is a conflict in the way some households receive many guests while others have few guests. There is a risk of losing solidarity in the pursuit of the false values of money.

Do not invest in types of transportation that pollute and risk disrupting the natural landscape, but need to improve and build walkways for tourists to walk or paddle boats and canoes on the island. The management and operation capacity is still not flexible and loose.

#### O (Opportunities)

- 1) Wide recognition: With the support of the Tourism Association, local party and government leaders, and a large number of people both domestically and internationally.
  - 2) Clear goals and community consensus: Attracting experts, academics, artists, and journalists to participate in consulting and sharing activities.
  - 3) Increased income: Linking and matching resources, recalculating value chains and supply chains.
  - 4) Potential to become a destination for natural and cultural conservation: Preserving local culture and traditions.
- Membership expansion: Attracting new members to join the club.
- 5) Traditional craft revival: Restoring and promoting traditional crafts.
  - 6) New ideas and meaningful events: Organizing events that celebrate and promote traditional values.

#### T (Challenges)

- 1) Increasing tourist demands: In terms of quantity, service types, scenery, products, souvenirs, and professionalism.
- 2) Supply-demand mismatch: The small scale of the club members compared to the increasing demand for safe and organic products.
- 3) Environmental changes: River flow changes, erosion, and water source changes.
- 4) Limited capacity: Limited management, operation, customer care, and foreign language skills of the locals.
- 5) Competition: Competition from other homestay businesses, garden restaurants, and tourist destinations in Phong Dien, Cai Rang, and other provinces. Conflict of interest: Potential conflicts of interest between different stakeholders.
- 6) Limited communication strategy: Relying on word-of-mouth and traditional communication methods instead of utilizing low-cost, highly effective multi-channel communication



advantages.

Analysis of PEST factors influencing Community-Based Agritourism Tourism Cón Son island, Mekong delta

P (Political)

The city government has a policy of developing Binh Thuy into a center for services, trade, industry, and urban agriculture. Priority is given to developing tourism in Con Son...

Despite the attention of the Binh Thuy district government, only the Department of Culture and Information supports people in tourism.

The and a complex legal environment for households doing tourism in Con Son in the process of linking.

The management agency understands the role of linkage in community tourism activities.

S (Social)

The people are simple, honest, and live with affection. The local culture is reflected in the way of life.

The young labor force is leaving the rural areas more and more, making it increasingly difficult to organize production, serve tourists, and develop organic agriculture.

Management capacity is still very weak and untrained.

Images and brands have not been registered and built separately, but each household.

E (Economic)

The agricultural economy is linked to key products identified according to available advantages.

The trend of finding "picky" standard markets has been formed and developed among a few households.

The policy bank only provides support loans which is not enough to invest in changes and development.

The tendency for people to do their own thing.

The community tourism business is linked to organic agricultural activities associated with key products identified according to available advantages.

Agricultural products and tourism activities face many obstacles due to erratic weather, climate, pests, and diseases, but people still maintain the production of "old" products.

T (Technological)

Science and technology have not been applied and accessed in tourism and organic agriculture activities.

High-tech agriculture attracts highly skilled workers but lacks investment capital and most are only good at production, weak in bringing products to market to conquer consumers.

There are policies to support the application of technology, but they depend on the dynamism and flexibility of the functional agencies of the Department of Science and Technology and the Department of Agriculture.

Positioning of valuable products and building intellectual property assets is still very weak.

### 3.2 Recommendations

Development Orientation: Avoid building villas and high-rise buildings: The island has weak soil and complex erosion conditions. Instead, prioritize developing ecotourism and clean agriculture. Become a center for organic agriculture and biodiversity conservation: Preserve the unique characteristics of the island and empower local communities.

Community-based Tourism: Local ownership: Residents should be the main actors in tourism development, with investors acting as partners. Respect for natural values and local opinions: Ensure that development respects the island's environment and culture and

that residents have a say in decision-making. Diversified services: Each household should offer unique services and products, reflecting their identity. Branding and Capacity Building: Create a logo and branding system: Establish a strong identity for the Cồn Sơn Community Agricultural Tourism Cooperative.

Develop internal regulations: Promote transparency, accountability, and cooperation among members. Invest in training: Provide training opportunities for members in various areas such as hospitality, language, and agriculture. Establish a sustainable supply chain: Ensure consistent pricing and avoid supply-demand imbalances. Nurture the next generation: Build a team of successors with expertise in tourism and business.

Expand agricultural production: Collaborate with farms to increase the supply of clean vegetables and fruits. Establish a community center: Promote cultural preservation and community exchange. Replicate the model: Share the success of Cồn Sơn's "smokeless" tourism model with other communities worldwide.

Conclusion:

The Con Son model of tourism integrated with natural habitats and sustainable production has brought numerous benefits to the community and the locality. It has improved livelihoods, enhanced cultural values, fostered community cohesion, and raised environmental awareness. The model demonstrates the effective combination of economic development and environmental conservation and deserves to be replicated globally.

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