

## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this research is to identify barriers to the successful involvement of local government in ecotourism development in the Ha Long Bay area, Vietnam. To achieve this aim, the study was guided by five objectives: to examine the understanding of local tourism officers about ecotourism; to examine their perceived importance of ecotourism for sustainable development in Ha Long Bay; to investigate the current situation of ecotourism development in this area; to examine local government's roles and responsibilities in involving in ecotourism development; and to identify the obstacles to local government's involvement in ecotourism development in this area.

Qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews demonstrate that local tourism officers have an insufficient understanding of ecotourism as they mainly associate ecotourism with nature-based tourism, with little impact by humans on the natural environment. However, they are not particularly aware of other core components of ecotourism such as it supports environmental education, sustainable management and benefits the local community. Although most of local tourism officers acknowledge the importance of ecotourism for sustainable tourism development in the Ha Long Bay area, they only appreciate the conservation aspect of ecotourism, but are not fully aware of other benefits of ecotourism.

The findings of this study show that the region has great potential to develop ecotourism, but this type of tourism is just in its infancy. The existing ecotourism

services and activities in this area are small-scale, poorly executed and unattractive; and tourism entrepreneurs and the local communities' have only a minor involvement in ecotourism.

The findings of this study indicate that although local authorities have recognized the necessity to focus on ecotourism development for sustainable tourism in the Ha Long Bay area, and have just designated several potential areas for ecotourism development in the region, they have not yet introduced any guidance or appropriate strategies and policies to implement it.

With regard to the barriers to local government's involvement in ecotourism development in the Ha Long Bay area, this study points out six main issues, including (1) the limited understanding about ecotourism, lack of professional skills and competence among local tourism officers, (2) the limited awareness of ecotourism among local community and tourism operators, (3) the lack of commitment to ecotourism implementation by local authorities, (4) the lack of communication, cooperation and coordination between local authorities and other stakeholder groups, (5) the lack of stakeholder involvement in ecotourism, and (6) the lack of resources for ecotourism development