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## Developing Sustainable Tourism: Critical Perspective from Bac Kan Province, Vietnam

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### **Abstract:**

*Currently, many countries appreciated the role of sustainable tourism development because tourism plays an important role in socio - economic development and the process of international economic integration. This paper focuses on assessing the sustainability of tourism development in Bac Kan province, uses both of secondary data and primary data; and the statistical, systematic, synthesized method. The study shows that local authorities focused on planning and investing in tourism facilities, so tourism is increasingly developing with the total revenue from tourism also increasing rapidly in the period 2017-2019; creates many jobs. However, tourism development also makes indigenous culture much changed and has negative effects on the environment. On basis of the research results, the study gives some recommendations aim to contribute in the sustainable development of Bac Kan's tourism.*

**Keywords:** *Tourism, sustainable development, Vietnam, environment, economy, society*

### **1. Introduction**

Sustainable tourism development has become a topic attracting the attention of both domestic and foreign researchers and business, especially research related to tourism planning and development (Byrd, 2007). Sustainable tourism development should pay attention to the factors and principles of sustainable development based on three aspects: economic, social and environmental.

Bac Kan is a mountainous province located in the inland center of the Northeastern region. Although the province has high mountainous terrain, deep inland, it can connect with most of the provinces in the region. Bac Kan is a province with a diversified natural and cultural tourism resource with festive customs and traditions of the Tay, Nung, Mong and Dao ethnic groups as well as historical relics bearing imprints in the resistance war against colonialism and imperialist invasion. Therefore, the province has a great potential for tourism development with the highlight is Ba Be National Park, the center of which is Ba Be Lake. The majority of the province's tourism resources are relatively well-preserved and accessible, which is a strong point in their tourism resource exploitation organization. However, tourism activities in the province have not developed synchronously and sustainably, not commensurate with the potential of the province. Therefore, finding solutions for sustainable tourism development is very necessary.

### **2. Literature Review**

There have been a number of research projects related to sustainable tourism development in both Vietnam and many other countries that can be mentioned as follows:

Rob Harris, Peter Williams, Tony Griffin (2012) have researched about 'Sustainable tourism: A global Perspective'. The book presents views and issues associated with the concept of sustainable tourism development; Sustainable tourism case studies in several destinations from Africa, Australia, North America, Southeast Asia and the Caribbean. The work also analyzes the barriers, challenges and responses of governments to the development of sustainable tourism in different parts of the world.

Manuel R. Herrera et al (2018) have researched on 'Quality and Sustainability of tourism development in Copper Canyon, Mexico: Perceptions of community stakeholders and visitors'. The study assessed perceptions of perceived quality and sustainability of tourism development at Copper Canyon Park in relation to local residents and tourists. Thereby, it shows that the model of tourism development lacks of sustainable and effective planning. Using this approach allows authors to determine the convergence of community perceptions, visitor experiences, and site features.

Nguyen Quyet Thang and Nguyen Van Hoa (2012) have a research about 'The situation of ecotourism development based on community - Lessons for the North Central tourist area'. By synthesizing, documentary research and statistical methods, the article summarizes some experiences in ecotourism development based on community in the

world, analyzes ecotourism activities of the North Central tourism area and proposes solutions to develop ecotourism based on community, helps ecotourism activities of the North Central tourism area more sustainable.

Pham Thi Phuong and Ngo Thuy Lan (2017) studied 'Solutions for sustainable ecotourism development in Tram Chim National Park in the industrial revolution 4.0'. Research showed the benefits of ecotourism development as well as the negative impacts on the environment, ecosystems and flora and fauna, which had a significant impact on biodiversity conservation in Tram Chim National Park. Environmental education for tourists and local people has been carried out, but there are still many problems needed to be overcome in order to form the attitudes and responsibilities of tourists and local residents towards tourism resources and environment.

La Thi Bich Quang (2018) has researched on 'Sustainability in tourism development in Sa Pa'. The paper assesses the sustainability of tourism development in Sa Pa (Lao Cai) on three aspects: economic, social and environmental to point out the differences in each party's thinking and actions, as well as the difficulties in achieving sustainability. The author has proposed synchronous solutions to develop sustainable tourism in Sa Pa, including: perfecting the legal system, implementing the overall tourism development planning, ensuring scientific and comprehensive; stabilizing people's lives; preserving indigenous culture and natural environment; to attach importance to the conservation and development of human resources.

The above related studies show that the issue of sustainable tourism development is approached and studied through many aspects: barriers, challenges and responses of governments to the development of sustainable tourism; the relationship between local people and tourists, the government's response to sustainable tourism development, the impact of tourism on the environment and ecosystems. However, to tourism in Bac Kan province, there has not been any research focusing on the sustainability of tourism development in the province, specifically analyzing the impacts of tourism on the local economy, culture, society and environment. This is the knowledge gap that this research needs focus on solving.

### 3. Research Methods

- Data collection methods: The research collected secondary data from reports, planning, statistics of agencies in Bac Kan province such as Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism; Department of Statistics; Report on socio-economic situation of the province in the period 2017-2019. In order to collect primary documents, the research conducted a survey in Ba Be national park – the most famous tourist sites in Bac Kan province. Information collected from documents and in-depth interviews was used to illustrate the results of statistical analysis.
- Methods of data processing: The research used statistical, systematic, generalized and synthesized methods based on criteria to assess the sustainability of tourism development in Bac Kan such as: planning for tourism; results of tourism business activities; the development of technical and material foundations in service of tourism; human resource training for sustainable tourism development.

### 4. Results and Discussions

#### 4.1. The Overview of the Tourism Potential in BAC Kan Province

Bac Kan has a diversified and rich tourism resource with great potential for tourism development, including:

##### 4.1.1. The Potential for Ecotourism

Bac Kan is favored by nature with many landscapes, caves and waterfalls, which highlight is Ba Be National Park, a key tourist area of the province with many unique tourist attractions and the most important tourist resources of Bac Kan for example Ao Tien, Ba Gao Island, An Ma Temple, Puong Cave, Dau Dang Waterfall, Tat Ma Waterfall, Nang River; Hua Ma cave, Na Pho cave (the first base of Voice of Vietnam), Tham Kit cave, Tham Phai cave. The lakesides tilt houses with the model of Homestay tourism have preserved the long-standing traditional ethnic culture with many diversified types of tourism such as sightseeing tourism, relaxation; cultural and historical tourism; sports tourism, adventure climbing, boating... attract domestic and foreign tourists. In addition, Bac Kan has Fairy Cave, Kim Hy Nature Reserve (Na Ri); ornamental creatures Xuan Lac, Phya Khao Peak (Cho Don); Ban Chang Lake, Na Khoang Waterfall (Ngan Son); Silver waterfall, Room waterfall (Bac Kan city).

##### 4.1.2. The Potential for Cultural Tourism

Besides natural tourism resources, Bac Kan province also has diverse cultural tourism resources such as customs, cultural festivals, delicious and unique cuisines of ethnic groups of Tay, Nung, Mong, Dao...; stilts villages on mountain, riverside and lake sides; them, shi, luon melodies... imbued with cultural identity of the ethnic people in Bac Kan, creating attraction to tourists, especially international tourists. Some typical festivals, attracting a large number of tourists and people to participate include:

- Long Tong festival in Ha Vi commune, Phu Thong festival (Bach Thong district); Bang Van festival (Ngan Son district); The Mu La Festival, Co Linh Commune (Pac Nam District).
- Ba Be Spring Festival (Nam Mau commune, Ba Be district); Bac Kan City Spring Festival and Na Ri Xuan Duong Traditional Culture Fair (meeting once a year on March 25 of lunar calendar).
- About folk songs, dance and music: The Tay people have LuonCoi, PhongSlur, the Quan Lang singing (wedding singing), Then singing, Put singing, the bowl dance, the fan dance, the lute dance; Nung people sang Sli, Luon,

Then, Xieng dances; Dao people sing Pao Dung, dance bell, dance to catch Ba Xing, blow Khèn Pi Lè, have Appointment Ceremony; Mong people have Khen dance, playing cat flute, Gau Tao festival...

In addition, ethnic minorities in Bac Kan also have rich, unique and diverse customs, traditional practices, rituals, voices, scripts, folklore, costumes, house architecture, craft villages. handicraft, culinary culture....

#### 4.1.3. The Potential for Historical Tourism

Typical revolutionary historical relics include: Cho Don ATK, Na Tu relic, Don Phu Thong relic, Pass Giang victory relic... are historical relics imprinting revolutionary activities of President Ho Chi Minh, senior leaders of the Party, the State, the army and people of Bac Kan. In addition, Bac Kan has a number of typical temples and pagodas (Tham Temple, Thach Long pagoda in Cho Moi district); Mau Temple, Co Temple, Gieng Waterfall Temple in Bac Kan City; An Ma temple, Pho Old pagoda in Ba Be district ...) with beautiful architecture, natural landscape, are cultural and spiritual tourist spots that can be exploited to attract tourists.

#### 4.2. The Situation of Tourism Development in Bac Kan Province

In the period 2017-2019, the tourism industry in Bac Kan province has focused on developing with the participation of economic sectors and communities, thereby achieving many remarkable results:

Indicators	2017	2018	2019	2018/2017		2019/2018	
				±	%	±	%
Total number of tourists	450.100	484.500	528.241	34.400	7,6	43.741	9,0
- International visitors (arrivals)	13.778	15.500	18.957	1.722	12,5	3.457	22,3
- Domestic visitors (arrivals)	436.322	469.000	509.284	32.678	7,5	40.284	8,6

Table 1: The Number of Tourists in BAC Kan Period 2017-2019

Source: BAC Kan Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2020

The total tourist arrivals to Bac Kan tends to increase over the years in the period 2017-2019, which is still mainly domestic tourists, international visitors account for a very low rate. Specific results are shown in the table 1.

In 2017, the total number of tourists was 450,000. In which, international visitors are 13,778 arrivals, accounting for 3.1%; domestic tourists are 436,322 arrivals, accounting for 96.9%. In 2018, the total number of tourists was 484,500. In which, international visitors are 15,500 arrivals, accounting for 3.2%; Domestic tourists are 469,000 arrivals, accounting for 96.8%. Total tourist arrivals in 2018 increased by 34,400 arrivals, corresponding to an increase of 7.6% compared to 2017. In 2019, the total number of tourists was 528,241 arrivals. In which, international visitors are 18,957 arrivals, accounting for 3.6%; Domestic tourists are 509,284 arrivals, accounting for 96.4%. Total tourist arrivals in 2019 increased by 43,741 arrivals, equivalent to an increase of 9.0% compared to 2018. Thus, tourists coming to Bac Kan are mainly domestic tourists, accounting for an average of about 96.7%; International tourist arrivals account for only 3.3% on average.

Domestic tourists to Bac Kan often go in groups organized by travel agencies, trade unions of agencies and enterprises, or organize themselves in groups. Although day average stay of domestic tourists to Bac Kan is higher than international visitors, generally remains low, only 1.5 to 1.7 days on average. International tourists to Bac Kan mainly travel by road along National Route 3, Hanoi - Thai Nguyen - Bac Kan highway, Red River Delta provinces and Northern Vietnam provinces, or Route 279, 3B from the northeast coastal provinces, Northwest. The market of international tourists to Bac Kan in recent years is mainly French, German, British, Italian and Australian.

The purpose of most international tourists coming to Bac Kan is to visit, research ecological, and learn local culture; some of them have public service, conferences and seminars purposes. The reason mainly is the poor tourism product of the province, there are no specific tourism products, more outstanding than neighboring provinces; Technical tourist facilities is weak, whole province has only 2 hotels with 3-star standards, lack of entertainment services.

#### 4.3. Assessment of Sustainability in Tourism Development in Bac Kan Province

##### 4.3.1. Tourism Development Planning

Bac Kan province has determined that tourism development becomes an important economic sector in the economic structure, creating a premise for tourism to become a spearhead industry in the future, actively contributing to the transition process. Economic structure, preservation of local cultural values is important while developing tourism as a driving force to promote other economic sectors. The province also has a right viewpoint about sustainable tourism development, effective management and exploitation of natural tourism resources associated with environmental protection, biodiversity, conservation and promotion of heritage values of ethnic cultures.

In the Decision approving Project to develop typical tourism products in Bac Kan province to 2025, vision to 2030 issued on August 10, 2020, Bac Kan People's Committee has set a target to strive to 2030, synchronously develop and complete services at Ba Be tourist area to form an ecotourism product associated with traditional cultural experiences as a typical product of the province.

The planning has oriented the development of tourism products; invest; tourism exploitation associated with agro-forestry economy development, natural ecological diversity, zoning planning for spatial development, land use,

arrangement of structure, architecture, landscape... with the goal is to develop Ba Be tourism towards becoming a typical ecotourism area in Vietnam.

#### 4.3.2. The Contributions of Tourism on Economic Growth and Government Budget

By focusing on planning, investing in infrastructure construction, embellishing historical and cultural relics; forming tours, tourist routes within the province, inter-region, focusing on exploiting eco-tourism advantages, historical tourism, cultural identity; tourism has brought many economic benefits to Bac Kan province with diversification of sustainable income generating activities for local communities.

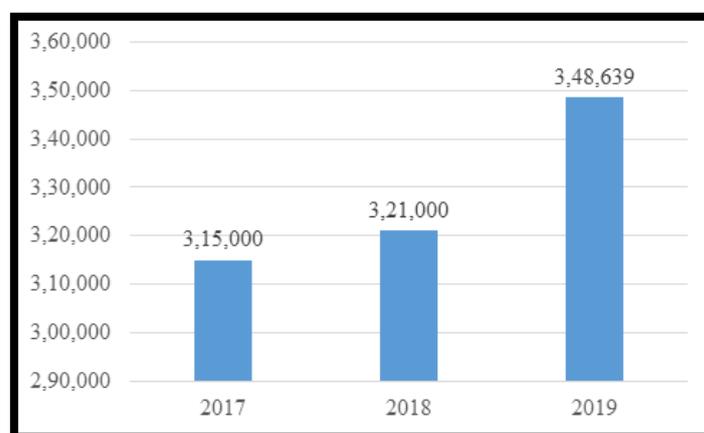


Figure 1: Total Revenue from Tourists  
Unit: Million VND

Source: Bac Kan Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2020

Total revenue from tourists in Bac Kan tends to increase over the years in the 2017-2019 period. In 2017, total revenue from tourists was 315,100 million VND. In 2018, total revenue from tourists reached 321,000 million VND, equivalent to an increase of 5,900 million VND (1.9%) compared to 2017. In 2019, total revenue from tourists reached 348,639 million VND, an increase of 27,639 million VND corresponding to an increase of 8.6% compared to 2018. In the coming years with the current trend, along with the increase in the number of tourists, it is certain that total revenue from tourists in Bac Kan will increase, contributing to poles on the local socio-economic development. However, due to the low average spending of visitors and a downward trend, the total revenue from tourists is generally limited. In order to increase the total revenue from tourists in the coming time, Bac Kan tourism needs solutions to attract high-spending tourists and increase additional services, entertainment services, create a unique and outstanding tourism product to extend the length of tourists' stay and increase their spending power.

#### 4.3.3. Tourism Development: Impacts on the Cultural – Social Perspectives

The development of tourism sector has solved the major problem about employment in Bac Kan province. As of December 31, 2019, there were about 1,100 employees working in tourism business, mainly small and medium enterprises, individual business households in Bac Kan province. The workforce mainly works in accommodation and dining facilities (reception, cabins, tables, bars, kitchens), entertainment areas and other additional service facilities.

Indicator	Quantity (people)	Proportion (%)
1. Laborstructure by sex	1.100	100
- Male	396	36,0
- Female	704	64,0
2. Laborstructure by age	1.100	100
- Under 24 years old	80	7,3
- From 24-40 years old	741	67,4
- From 41-55 years old	248	22,5
- Above 55 years old	31	2,8
3. Labor structure by training level	1.100	100
- Trained	315	28,6
- Untrained	785	71,4
4. Labor structure by profession	1.100	100
- Accommodation and dining sector	981	89,2
- Travel sector	76	6,9
- Transport sector	43	3,9

Table 2: Human Resources of Tourism in BAC Kan Province, as of December 31, 2019

Source: BAC Kan Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2020

- Labor structure by sex: The proportion of female workers always accounts for a higher rate than male workers because the unique character of tourism is a fairly meticulous industry, requiring skillful hands of women in work cabins, desks, bars, guides. Out of 1,100 employees, there are 396 male workers, accounting for 36%; 704 female workers, accounting for 64%.
- Labor structure by age: The labor structure of the tourism industry in Bac Kan province tends to be rejuvenated, the group of workers aged 24-40 years old accounts for the largest proportion with 67.4%; the group of workers from 41 to 55 years old accounts for 22.5%; the group of workers under the age of 24 accounts for only 7.3%; The lowest is the group of workers over 55 years old with 2.8%. Thus, it can be said that the above labor structure is suitable, meeting the requirements and business characteristics of the tourism industry, contributing to successfully rejuvenate and dynamic the tourism industry of Bac Kan in particular and Vietnam in general.
- Labor structure by training level: One of the remarkable things about Bac Kan tourism in recent years is that the number of unskilled (untrained) labor force still accounts for a high proportion, focusing mainly in villages with the development of community, private guesthouses and restaurants based on tourism. Out of 1,100 employees working in the tourism industry, there are 785 untrained workers, accounting for 71.4%; 315 trained workers, accounting for 28.6% (20.2% has been trained tertiary and postgraduate; 8.4% has been trained at colleges, intermediate and primary).
- Labor structure by profession: In the structure of employees by occupation, sector staying and eating the highest percentage with 89.2%; The number of workers working in travel accounts for 6.9% and the transportation sector for 3.9%.

Training to improve professional skills for employees is an important issue to continuously improve service quality. Over the past years, with local funding, the support of the Mekong Subregion Sustainable Tourism Development Project, the Pro-Poor Partnership in Agriculture and Forestry Development Project in Bac Kan Province, The Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism has coordinated with Hanoi Tourism College and other units to organize dozens of refresher courses to improve skills of management, desks, bars, kitchens, guidance lecturers, lecturers, canoe drivers... for hundreds of managers in organizations, businesses, owners of hotels, restaurants, boat owners and workers in tourist sites. However, it can be seen through the above analysis that, despite being training and retraining, the number of untrained workers in Bac Kan tourism industry still accounts for a high proportion.

Tourism has contributed to awaken and preserve the traditional handicrafts with national identity. Tourism not only advertises the local traditions abroad through tourists but also promotes the image of the country, people and culture of Bac Kan to other provinces in the territory of Vietnam and internationally.

Many traditional festivals and customs have been maintained, recreated and developed such as the Tong Tong Festival, Water Procession Festival, Nang Hai Festival of the Tay; Phat Lang Ceremony of the Red Dao people; Pu Hung ceremony of the Dao Que Lam made cultural activities more dynamic and flexible in the market mechanism. However, in recent years, due to the influence of Western culture and plains, indigenous culture has been changed a lot. The festivals are no longer kept original and attract people to participate as before. With the goal of maintaining and preserving the traditional festival, BAC Kan province must support funds and encourage communes to organize into clusters. In addition, people's traditional costumes have also changed a lot, not often worn in normal daily activities.

#### 4.3.4. The Improvement of Tourism Infrastructure

To exploit the potentials and advantages of the locality, from 2015 to now, Bac Kan has renovated and repaired provincial road 258 from the beginning point of Ba Be tourist area at Km 42 - Buoc Lom canoe to the center of Ba Be National Park at Km 48 + 200.

Bac Kan province has also focused on the restoration and embellishment of historical and cultural. The restoration and embellished relics include: Gianggorge relic, Na Tu relic, Phu Thong station relic (Bach Thong); Coong Tat relic (Ngan Son); Khuoi Linh relics, Ban Ca relics (Cho Don); embellishment of famous relics of Nang Tien cave (Na Ri); Bac Kan ATK relic ... However, due to the limited resources of the province, the restoration and embellished relics mainly belonged to the investment capital of the National Target Program, only a few is the capital of the province and the source of socialization.

Bac Kan also actively supports and facilitates businesses and investors in applying for investment certificates and implementing investment projects for tourism development and has attracted some projects such as: Saigon - Ba Be eco-tourism project of Saigon - Ba Be Joint Stock Company; Son Nu hotel and restaurant project (Huong Rung) of Thai Son - Bac Kan Company Limited; Ba Be Ecogolde eco-tourism resort project of Le Hung One Member Company Limited; Nature & Fresh eco-tourism project of GREENCANAL Vietnam Tourism and Trade Co., Ltd, located in Ba Be district; Commercial Center and Shophouse Complex Project of Vincom Retail Joint Stock Company in Bac Kan city... The operation of the projects promises to attract many tourists to Bac Kan.

#### 4.3.5. The Impacts of Tourism Development on the Local Environment

Determining the protection of landscape and ecological environment is an important task to develop tourism sustainably, Provincial People's Committee has directed the Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, the authorities, businesses, organizations, and tourist sites to protect natural resources and preserve environmental sanitation; organize cleaning operations, garbage collection, tree planting... in tourist sites. Culture, Sports and Tourism Sector has frequently coordinated with the branches of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs; Natural Resources and Environment; Medical; Transportation; The police and local authorities to organize propagating and disseminating the law, inspecting the

environmental sanitation, ensuring traffic safety, maintaining security and order in tourist sites and in accommodation establishments.

To strengthen the management and protection of natural tourism, environment resources; create favorable conditions for organizations and individuals to participate in tourism development, Bac Kan province has signed the coordination regulations in areas bordering Cao Bang, Tuyen Quang, Lang Son and Thai Nguyen provinces in management and protection of unexploited minerals, environmental landscape.

Building and conserving the tourism resource system: including high biodiversity resources such as Ba Be National Park, Kim Hy natural reserve, Nam Xuan Lac species and habitat conservation; the relics have been ranked; landscape area with tourism potential... that are susceptible to tourism and other economic development activities. Bac Kan province has organized regular monitoring of changes to have promptly solutions to overcome problems such as the degradation natural resources and tourism environment; strictly management of tourism and other socio-economic activities that have the risk of affecting the tourism environmental resources system.

Raising public awareness and socializing environmental protection. Currently, the viewpoints and guidelines are not close to the specific situation of environmental and natural resources protection activities. Therefore, environmental protection activities of the community are unsustainable and ineffective. Facing that situation, Bac Kan province has strengthened education, training to develop human resources for investigation, research and management of natural resources and tourism environment. Education and training on environmental protection for the community in order to increase the community's understanding of the symbiotic relationship between the environment, tourism and people. In addition, education and training on environment also helps the community to understand, sustainably use, exploit properly resources and protect the tourism environment, thereby contributing to sustainable development.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The tourism industry of Bac Kan province has been focused by the People's Committee and the Party in recent years and has created more jobs, increased income and state budget revenues, poverty alleviation. However, investment for tourism development is still limited, especially investment in infrastructure, waste treatment system and preserving traditional culture. Tourism management is ineffective, agencies and unions have not regularly checked and monitored the quality of tourism services; lack of tourism management regulations. In addition, the linkage of tourism community members is too loose to help each other. Professional level is not high, marketing, access activities and take care of travelers are left open. Therefore, sustainable tourism development is an inevitable trend for Bac Kan province in the coming time. To develop sustainable tourism, Bac Kan province needs to pay attention to implementing the following solutions:

- In terms of planning: there should be close cooperation between tourism planning experts and experts in relevant areas, the management of tourist sites, and the government and local communities in the planning process. The government should strictly manage investment projects in tourism development, ensuring sustainability.
- In terms of economics: tourism products in the province are undiversified, so they have not attracted a large number of domestic and foreign tourists. Therefore, in the coming time, the tourist sites need to build new tourism products in both space and time, with a unique nuance of Bac Kan province - Vietnam. Strengthen promotional activities and attract investment in order to efficiently exploit tourism resources and facilities that have been invested and built.
- In terms of socio-cultural: Bac Kan province is located in a mountainous area with many communes with extremely difficult conditions, slow economic development, and low awareness about sustainable tourism. Therefore, the locality needs to attach importance to pay attention to increase the community awareness through mass media, assigning specialized staff for the education program and encouraging local communities to actively participate in tourism activities, making efforts to protect and develop sustainable tourism resources.
- In terms of infrastructure: The government needs to create mechanisms and policies to support investment in infrastructure, promote the socialization of construction of tourism infrastructure to attract tourists to visit.
- In terms of environment: tourism projects need to have an environmental impact assessment report of a specialized agency; they must comply with the State's regulations on construction of infrastructure in tourist resorts when building; periodic monitoring, identifying sources of environmental impacts to promptly prevent.

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