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# Ecotourism, gender and development in northern Vietnam

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## ABSTRACT

Community-based Ecotourism is increasingly recognized as a form of sustainable development designed to promote local livelihood, environmental conservation and culture. However, like all development projects, participation and benefits accrued are complicated by contextual factors and social structures, including gender. Using gender analysis tools commonly employed in Gender and Development research, this study investigates women's participation in a community-based ecotourism project in northern Vietnam. Applying Longwe's empowerment framework reveals a more equitable division of labor, increased income, self-confidence and community involvement, and new leadership roles for women. However, inequities of social class, childcare, and violence against women remained outstanding. The study concludes with recommendations for research and practice in community-based ecotourism from a gender perspective.

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## Introduction

Over the last several decades, community-based ecotourism (CBET) has come to be seen as a variant of sustainable community development (Björk, 2007; Scheyvens, 2002; Stronza & Gordillo, 2008). Done properly, CBET should contribute to the environmental conservation of wildlife and wilderness, allow local communities to generate new sources of livelihood predicated on this conservation, and reinforce or revive traditional culture and lifeways (Butler & Hinch, 2007; Honey, 2008; Zeppel, 2006). However, CBET is no stranger to the social, psychological and political complexities of development initiatives. Factors such as external partnerships, internal cooperation, capacity-building, funding, dependency, leadership, local institutions, development approaches, land rights, and

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relations of class, gender and cultural identity can all contribute to the success or failure of CBET projects (Farrelly, 2011; Jones, 2005; Lacher & Nepal, 2010).

With several notable exceptions (Dilly, 2003; Pleno, 2006; Reimer & Walter, 2013; Schellhorn, 2010; Scheyvens, 2007; Stronza, 2005; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012), research in the field of ecotourism has been mostly “gender blind.” In a recent review of research in ecotourism, Weaver and Lawton (2007, p. 1168), for example, examine over 75,000 abstracts related to ecotourism in 6,000 periodicals, noting that ecotourism is now firmly established as an academic field of inquiry. And yet among the vast corpus of research in the field, the authors identify only two studies peripherally related to gender. To help address this gap in research, the present study undertakes a gender analysis of a community-based ecotourism project in northern Vietnam, with reference to wider scholarship in gender and tourism studies, and to the extant literature on gender in community-based ecotourism.

The literature on gender and tourism has provided increasingly complex analyses of gender identities, roles and relationships in tourism development policy and practice (Aitchison, 2005; Ferguson, 2011; Gentry, 2007; Hall, Swain, & Kinnaired, 2003; Kinnaired & Hall, 1994; Swain, 1995). In recent years, the “cultural turn” of post-structuralism in tourism studies has been increasingly present, encompassing issues such as hegemonic tourism discourses, cultural practices and power inequities, gender identity construction, host and tourist subjectivities, embodiment, sexuality and symbolic representation (Aitchison, 2005; Cabezas, 2006; Pritchard & Morgan, 2000; Tucker, 2007).

In an early edited collection in the field, *Tourism: A Gender Analysis* (Kinnaired & Hall, 1994), Kinnaired, Kothari, and Hall (1994, p. 24) proposed a “gender-aware framework” with three basic premises: “(1) tourism development processes and tourism-related activities are constructed out of gendered societies; (2) gender relations both inform, and are informed by, the practices of all societies; and (3) power relations surrounding tourism development processes represent an extension of the politics of gender relations.” The empirical case studies which followed showed how these premises played out in the gendered practices and ideologies of tourism. In some cases, social relations in tourism development acted to reproduce patriarchal norms of larger societies (e.g. England, Ireland and the Caribbean). Women who worked in marginal, low wage tourism jobs experienced an amplification of traditional reproductive labor in cleaning, cooking and serving tourists. In other case studies, where societies had more equitable gender norms (such as Western Samoa), women were able to capitalize on tourism opportunities (Fairbairn-Dunlop, 1994), highlighting the importance of local context in understanding gender roles and relations.

A second major collection of articles on gender and tourism, published in the *Annals of Tourism Research* (Swain, 1995), combined analyses of the material conditions of gendered labor, power relations and ideology, with post-structural case studies focusing on cultural constructions of gender and sexuality among hosts and guests. Gender was taken here as a “system of culturally constructed identities, expressed in ideologies of masculinity and femininity, interacting with socially structured relationships in divisions of labor and leisure, sexuality, and power between women and men” (Swain, 1995, pp. 258–259). This hybrid of structural analysis and post-structural approaches to gender and tourism research has since been more widely adopted in the field (Aitchison, 2005). Tucker’s (2007) research on gender and tourism development in Turkey, for example, demonstrated how Muslim women, whose mobility was limited by patriarchal traditions to the private sphere of the home, adopted new gender roles in paid tourism employment in the public sphere, in the process promoting new gender identities and relations. By contrast, a recent case study by Ishii (2012) on Akha women’s involvement in tourism in Thailand found that when new income generated by women disrupted men’s patriarchal gender roles (as household heads), the resulting stigma sometimes led to alcohol and narcotics use by men, “gender antagonism,” and community dissolution.

The complex structural and post-structural themes found in gender and tourism studies are also reflected in research on gender and ecotourism in particular (Dilly, 2003; Pleno, 2006; Schellhorn, 2010; Scheyvens, 2000; Stronza, 2005; Swain & Swain, 2004; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012; Walter, 2011). Findings of a comparative study of Bakiga people involved in community-based ecotourism in southwestern Uganda, for example, showed that women’s traditional gender roles changed with their participation in tourism, allowing them new income and autonomy (Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012). Women’s new roles – in housekeeping, gardening and tour guiding – were marginal and low paid, and their workload was intensified. However, increased income was spent on family needs,

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