

LOCAL COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN SUSTAINABLE ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT AT AN BINH ISLET

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Received: 10 April 2026; Revised: 28 April 2026; Accepted: 8 May 2026

ABSTRACT

This paper examines local community participation in sustainable ecotourism development at An Binh Islet, Vinh Long Province, Vietnam, from a qualitative and exploratory perspective. Rather than approaching participation as a purely measurable variable, the paper interprets it as a social process shaped by local meanings, everyday practices, and unequal levels of voice in tourism development. Drawing on the literature on ecotourism, community participation, and empowerment, the paper discusses how local residents at An Binh Islet contribute to tourism through homestay services, orchard-based experiences, food provision, transportation, and other local activities. At the same time, it argues that community participation at the islet appears stronger at the operational level than at the level of planning, management, and strategic decision-making. The paper also identifies several issues that may constrain deeper participation, including limited tourism knowledge and skills, insufficient access to information, weak institutional support, and uneven opportunities for local voice. The main argument of the paper is that sustainable ecotourism at An Binh Islet should move beyond service-based participation toward stakeholder-based participation, in which local residents are recognized not only as service providers but also as active actors in shaping tourism development. The paper contributes by offering a context-sensitive qualitative interpretation of participation in a rural ecotourism destination and by proposing an analytical distinction between visible involvement and meaningful participation in sustainable tourism development.

Keywords: Community participation, sustainable ecotourism, qualitative research, An Binh Islet, local residents.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of climate change, environmental degradation, and the growing demand for more responsible forms of travel, ecotourism has become an increasingly important orientation for sustainable tourism development. Ecotourism is no longer understood simply as tourism taking place in natural areas. Instead, it is commonly associated with a broader set of goals, including environmental conservation, local livelihood improvement, and socially responsible destination management. Methodologically, the paper's qualitative orientation is informed by discussions of thematic interpretation and trustworthiness in qualitative research [1], [2]. Ross and Wall [3] argued that ecotourism should be assessed not only by its economic outcomes but also by its environmental and social contributions, especially its relationship with host communities.

Within this perspective, local community participation is not a supplementary component of ecotourism but a central condition for sustainability. Local residents are closely connected to the land, water, culture, and everyday life of the destination. Their knowledge, perceptions, and willingness to engage directly influence how tourism develops in practice. Scheyvens [4] emphasized that ecotourism cannot be considered successful if local communities have little control over decision-making or receive only marginal benefits from tourism activities.

However, participation in tourism development is often more complex in reality than in theory. Tosun [5] showed that, particularly in developing-country contexts, community participation is frequently constrained by structural, operational, and cultural barriers. This means that local involvement may exist at a visible or formal level while remaining limited in terms of actual influence, access to information, or decision-making power.

For that reason, participation should be examined not only in terms of whether communities are involved, but also in terms of how they understand their role, how they experience tourism development, and what conditions shape or constrain their involvement. A qualitative perspective is especially useful here because participation is not merely a numerical indicator; it is a socially embedded process shaped by meanings, relationships, recognition, and everyday practice.

An Binh Islet in Vinh Long Province provides an appropriate setting for such a discussion. The islet is widely known for its orchards, waterways, homestays, and rural landscape, all of which create favorable conditions for ecotourism development. At the same time, the sustainability of ecotourism at An Binh Islet depends not only on these resources but also on the extent to which local residents are able to participate meaningfully in tourism development.

Therefore, this paper examines local community participation in sustainable ecotourism development at An Binh Islet from a qualitative and exploratory perspective. It seeks to discuss how local residents may be positioned in tourism development, how participation can be understood in practice, and what conditions may enable or constrain deeper involvement. By doing so, the paper aims to contribute to discussions of ecotourism sustainability by emphasizing the difference between service-based participation and stakeholder-based participation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Ecotourism and sustainability

Ecotourism has been widely discussed as a form of tourism associated with natural areas, environmental conservation, and community development. Rather than being understood simply as travel to nature-based destinations, ecotourism is more comprehensively defined as tourism that protects the environment while generating socio-economic benefits for local communities [3]. More recent reviews likewise emphasize that ecotourism outcomes depend on linking conservation objectives with local benefits and governance arrangements [6]. This broader understanding highlights that ecotourism must balance multiple objectives, including environmental preservation, economic viability, and social equity.

In this sense, sustainability in ecotourism cannot be reduced to the protection of natural resources alone. It must also involve the long-term social viability of the destination, including fair benefit distribution, local inclusion, and the recognition of communities as central actors in tourism development. A destination cannot be considered truly sustainable if local residents are present only as labor providers while strategic decisions remain concentrated elsewhere.

2.2. Community participation and empowerment

Among the dimensions of sustainability, the social dimension is particularly relevant to the present paper. Scheyvens [4] argued that ecotourism should be assessed in terms of empowerment, especially whether local people gain social, psychological, political, and economic benefits from tourism. This perspective shifts attention away from tourism growth alone and toward questions such as who holds influence, who benefits, and whether tourism strengthens or weakens community agency. Empirical research further shows that opportunity, knowledge, and other enabling conditions influence the depth of community participation [7], while community empowerment can strengthen support for sustainable tourism development [8].

This is especially useful for understanding local participation at rural destinations. Participation should not be interpreted merely as the presence of local labor in tourism activities. It should also be examined in terms of whether local people have a voice, whether they are heard in planning processes, whether they gain confidence from tourism, and whether they are able to shape the development of their destination.

2.3. Limits to participation

The literature on tourism participation also shows that local involvement is often constrained by broader institutional and structural conditions. Tosun [5] identified three broad categories of limitations to community participation: operational limits, such as lack of information, coordination, and skills; structural limits, such as centralized decision-making and unequal access to resources; and cultural limits, such as norms or attitudes that discourage open participation. Recent research in Vietnam reports comparable constraints, including limited tourism skills, knowledge, and participation in policy and planning processes [9]. Community-based ecotourism research in Quang Ngai likewise highlights participatory planning, stakeholder coordination, training, and equitable benefit sharing as important conditions for sustainability [10].

This framework remains highly relevant for many developing-country destinations because it helps explain why participation may appear present in policy discourse or visible service activities while remaining weak in actual influence and decision-making. In other words, participation can be broad in appearance but shallow in depth.

2.4. Participation as a qualitative issue

From a qualitative perspective, participation should not be treated merely as a variable to be measured. It should be understood as an experience to be interpreted. This means that researchers and analysts need to consider how local residents define participation, how they negotiate their place within tourism development, and how they perceive recognition, fairness, opportunity, and exclusion.

Braun and Clarke [1] described thematic analysis as a flexible method for interpreting patterns of meaning in qualitative materials. Although the present paper is exploratory rather than a fully developed empirical thematic study, the broader qualitative orientation remains useful because it focuses attention on meanings, social relationships, and the depth of participation rather than on numerical measurement alone. Nowell et al. [2] further emphasize that transparent, systematic, and traceable analytical procedures are important for the trustworthiness of qualitative analysis.

2.5. Analytical perspective of the paper

Based on this literature, the present paper approaches local participation at An Binh Islet not simply as visible involvement in tourism activities, but as a qualitative issue of voice, agency, and influence. In particular, the paper proposes an analytical distinction between:

- Service-based participation, in which local residents contribute labor, hospitality, food, transportation, and tourism services; and
- Stakeholder-based participation, in which local residents are able to contribute ideas, influence planning, and participate more meaningfully in tourism development.

This distinction provides the main analytical lens of the paper and helps clarify that the sustainability of ecotourism depends not only on whether communities are involved, but also on the quality and depth of that involvement.

3. QUALITATIVE ORIENTATION AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

This paper adopts a qualitative and exploratory analytical perspective to examine local community participation in sustainable ecotourism development at An Binh Islet. The purpose is not to produce a statistically generalizable account of participation, but to provide a context-sensitive interpretation of how participation may be understood in relation to local tourism development, community agency, and sustainability.

Instead of treating participation as a fixed variable, the paper approaches it as a socially embedded process. This perspective is appropriate because participation in tourism is shaped not only by economic opportunities but also by local meanings, institutional arrangements, communication, recognition, and the balance of power between stakeholders.

The paper is developed as an exploratory discussion grounded in relevant literature on ecotourism, empowerment, and community participation, together with the contextual characteristics of An Binh Islet as a rural tourism destination. In this sense, the paper does not claim to offer a fully documented empirical qualitative dataset with systematic participant profiles and coded interview evidence. Rather, it aims to provide an analytically informed and context-sensitive discussion of the forms, meanings, and possible limits of local participation in ecotourism development.

This orientation allows the paper to examine An Binh Islet not only as a site of tourism activity, but also as a social setting in which participation may be visible, uneven, negotiated, and constrained. From this perspective, the paper focuses on five analytical dimensions: local understandings of ecotourism, forms of participation, perceived benefits, barriers to deeper involvement, and the broader issue of voice and agency in tourism development.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Local understandings of ecotourism

At An Binh Islet, ecotourism can be understood as closely connected to the rural and river-based identity of the destination. The islet is associated with orchards, canals, local cuisine, homestays, and a peaceful countryside atmosphere. From a qualitative perspective, this means that ecotourism is not only a formal tourism category but also a locally meaningful way of presenting place, lifestyle, and hospitality.

In such a context, local residents are likely to understand ecotourism less through technical definitions and more through everyday experience. Ecotourism may be associated with welcoming visitors into orchards, offering food made from local ingredients, introducing guests to river life, and preserving the calm, familiar character of the countryside. This suggests that participation begins not at the level of formal tourism planning, but at the level of lived local knowledge.

At the same time, such understandings may remain uneven in depth. For some residents, tourism may primarily be viewed as an economic opportunity, while for others it may also

involve concerns about environmental preservation, local image, and cultural continuity. This variation is important because it shows that participation is shaped not only by economic interest, but also by how residents interpret the meaning and purpose of tourism development.

4.2. Forms of participation in tourism activities

One of the clearest features of tourism at An Binh Islet is the visible presence of local residents in practical tourism activities. Community participation is likely to occur through homestay services, orchard visits, food provision, boat transportation, local guiding, handicrafts, and the sale of local products. These forms of participation are important because they help create the visitor experience and sustain the destination's local character.

This type of participation can be described as service-based participation. It reflects the fact that local residents are already embedded in tourism operations and contribute directly to how tourism functions on the ground. Their labor, hospitality, and local knowledge are essential to the destination.

However, service-based participation does not necessarily mean that residents have equal influence over tourism strategies, destination branding, product design, or long-term planning. In many rural tourism settings, local people may be central to implementation while remaining peripheral to decision-making. For An Binh Islet, this suggests that visible involvement should not automatically be equated with deep participation.

4.3. Perceived benefits of participation

Participation in ecotourism may bring several benefits to local communities. The most visible is economic. Tourism can create supplementary income opportunities for households through accommodation, food, transportation, agricultural products, and other local services. In a rural setting, such opportunities may help diversify livelihoods and reduce exclusive dependence on traditional agricultural activities.

Beyond income, participation may also generate social and psychological value. When visitors appreciate local food, orchards, hospitality, and ways of life, residents may develop a stronger sense of pride in their community. Tourism may therefore reinforce local recognition and contribute to the symbolic value of place.

This is important because the meaning of participation in ecotourism is not only material. It also relates to whether people feel visible, valued, and connected to the development of their destination. From this perspective, participation can support empowerment when local residents are not treated merely as low-level service providers, but as contributors whose knowledge and cultural practices have value.

4.4. Barriers to deeper participation

Despite these potential benefits, deeper and more sustainable forms of participation may be constrained by several factors.

A first barrier concerns limited tourism knowledge and skills. While residents may have practical hospitality experience, they may not always have access to training in tourism management, communication, product development, foreign languages, or destination promotion. This can limit confidence, innovation, and the capacity to move beyond small-scale service roles.

A second barrier concerns access to information. If residents are not fully informed about tourism plans, support mechanisms, development priorities, or institutional opportunities, their participation may remain reactive rather than proactive. They may join tourism activities when opportunities emerge, but not necessarily feel that they are part of a broader development process.

A third barrier concerns institutional support and coordination. Sustainable tourism development requires communication among local authorities, tourism managers, business actors, and community members. When coordination is weak, local participation may become fragmented. In such cases, even motivated residents may struggle to expand their role.

A fourth barrier concerns infrastructure and destination management conditions. Rural tourism often depends on transportation, sanitation, signage, public services, and consistent promotion. If these conditions are underdeveloped, they may reduce both visitor satisfaction and local willingness to invest more deeply in tourism.

Taken together, these factors suggest that participation is shaped not only by residents' willingness to engage but also by the structural conditions that enable or constrain local action.

4.5. Participation as a matter of voice and agency

One of the most important interpretive issues in sustainable ecotourism is the difference between participating in tourism work and participating in tourism governance. At An Binh Islet, local residents may already be highly visible in tourism activities, but this does not automatically mean that they have a strong voice in deciding how tourism should be developed.

This is where the distinction between service-based participation and stakeholder-based participation becomes especially important. Stakeholder-based participation implies that local residents are not only providers of services but also legitimate actors in discussions about tourism planning, destination identity, benefit distribution, and development priorities.

From this perspective, participation should be assessed not only by counting how many households are involved in tourism activities, but also by asking whether local people are heard, whether their knowledge is recognized, and whether they can influence the direction of tourism development. The long-term sustainability of ecotourism depends on this deeper form of participation because environmental stewardship, local legitimacy, and social fairness are difficult to sustain when communities remain voiceless.

4.6. Discussion

The analysis reinforces the argument that local participation is central to sustainable ecotourism, but it also suggests that participation is layered rather than uniform. In the context of An Binh Islet, local residents appear to contribute strongly at the operational level through visible tourism services. However, participation seems more limited at the strategic level, where planning, policy influence, and decision-making take place.

This interpretation is consistent with Scheyvens' [4] emphasis on empowerment as a key criterion for evaluating ecotourism. It also supports Tosun's [5] argument that participation in developing-country destinations is often limited by wider structural and operational constraints. In this way, An Binh Islet can be understood as a case in which participation is present, but uneven in depth.

The paper's main theoretical contribution is therefore the distinction between service-based participation and stakeholder-based participation. This distinction helps explain why visible local involvement does not necessarily indicate meaningful influence. It also offers a more qualitative way of thinking about sustainability: ecotourism is not sustainable simply because local people are present in tourism activities; it is more sustainable when they are able to shape, evaluate, and influence tourism development as recognized stakeholders.

The discussion also suggests that the sustainability of ecotourism is not purely environmental or economic. It is also social, in the sense that it depends on recognition, communication, fairness, and local confidence. In rural destinations such as An Binh Islet, these dimensions are especially important because tourism is closely connected to everyday life, local culture, and small-scale community interaction.

Overall, An Binh Islet appears to have strong potential for sustainable ecotourism. Yet that potential can only be more fully realized if local participation becomes deeper, more informed, and more influential. A sustainable tourism model for the islet should therefore give greater attention to community capacity-building, inclusive planning, communication mechanisms, and the institutional recognition of local residents as central stakeholders.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper examined local community participation in sustainable ecotourism development at An Binh Islet from a qualitative and exploratory perspective. It argued that local residents are likely to play an important role in tourism through homestay services, orchard-based experiences, food provision, transportation, and other local activities that help shape the destination's rural character and visitor experience.

At the same time, the paper highlighted that participation should not be understood only as visible involvement in tourism labor. The more important issue is whether local residents are also able to influence tourism planning, decision-making, and destination development. In this sense, the analysis suggests that participation at An Binh Islet appears stronger at the operational level than at the strategic level.

The paper's main contribution lies in proposing a distinction between service-based participation and stakeholder-based participation. This distinction helps clarify that sustainable ecotourism requires more than local service provision. It requires recognition of local residents as legitimate actors whose voices, knowledge, and everyday experience matter in shaping tourism development.

From a practical perspective, strengthening community participation at An Binh Islet requires attention to tourism training, access to information, communication among stakeholders, supportive institutional arrangements, and more inclusive forms of local involvement in planning. Without these conditions, tourism may continue to rely on local labor and local resources without fully benefiting from local voice and community agency.

More broadly, the paper contributes to discussions of ecotourism sustainability by emphasizing that participation is a lived social process rather than a simple development indicator. By focusing on depth, meaning, and influence, the paper offers a context-sensitive framework for thinking about sustainable ecotourism in rural destinations.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This paper has several limitations. First, it is exploratory in nature and does not present a fully developed empirical qualitative dataset with systematic participant profiles, interview excerpts, or coded thematic materials. Second, the discussion is context-sensitive rather than statistically generalizable. Third, the paper focuses on local participation primarily from an analytical and conceptual perspective, rather than through multi-stakeholder comparative evidence.

Future research should build on this discussion through more systematically documented qualitative studies, including transparent participant profiles, interview-based evidence, and richer thematic analysis. Further studies may also combine qualitative and quantitative methods to compare participation across different stakeholder groups and ecotourism destinations. Such work would help clarify how local communities move from visible involvement in tourism activities toward deeper stakeholder participation in sustainable destination development.

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