FACTORS OF POSSIBILITY TO ATTRACT TOURISTS IN THANH PHU DISTRICT, BEN TRE PROVINCE

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Abstract

Being a coastal district in Ben Tre province, Thanh Phu occupies natural assets to develop rural tourism with sand dunes and mangrove forests, a network of rivers, channels, seashores, and a plentiful source of seafood. However, tourism sector in the district is not likely to develop respect with its potential as not many tourist companies consider Thanh Phu an interesting tourism destination toward their customers. Whist, understanding factors of local capacity to attract tourists is meaningful and important for provincial authorities to implement appropriate solutions in developing tourism activities in the district. Applying the five-factor model suggested by Hu and Ritchie (1993) with 205 interviewed tourists who had visited Thanh Phu, this research analyzes the factors that influence the possibility to attract visitors in Thanh Phu district, Ben Tre province to identify destination attractiveness of its tourism attributes. Research findings help to figure out suggestions and policy implications for the development of tourist attractions in the district.

Keywords: tourism, destination attractiveness, Thanh Phu – Ben Tre destination, rural tourism

1. Introduction

Thanh Phu is one of three coastal districts in Ben Tre province, occupies flat fields interspersed with sand dunes and mangrove forests. The total natural area of the district is 41,180 ha, mostly influenced by the tides from the East Sea and soil salinity. Although affected by brackish water, rivers of Ham Luong and Co Chien allow local people to diversify their livelihoods with rice fields and fruit trees plantation. In the direction towards the sea, the area of rice fields is gradually narrowed and replaced by loads of shrimp farms. A network of river distributaries and sea surfaces supply a plentiful source of seafood, annually providing Thanh Phu with thousands of tons of shrimp, crab, fish, clams, etc. However, tourism activities are still poor as tourism products are not diverse and really simple. The promotion of the tourism sector is limited, could not reach foreign tourists who prefer to explore natural and cultural characteristics in their travel destinations. With the natural resources and local culture and historical features, it is necessary to have various research to find out and activate tourism potentials in the district. The local authority of Ben Tre province and Thanh Phu

districts also determined to create convenient conditions for tourism development to diversify and develop economic activities in this area. The purpose of the study is to identify factors affecting the capacity of Thanh Phu destination to attract tourists to give some policy implications to develop tourism in the district.

2. Theoretical basis and research methods

2.1. Definition and attractiveness of tourist destination and attraction

The United Unions' World Tourism Organization (UN-WTO) has conceived the concept of tourism destination as *"Tourism destination is the geographical area where tourists are able to stay at least one night, including tourism products, provided services, tourist resources in order to attract visitors, having administrative boundaries for management and image recognition to determine competitiveness in the market"*. Rubies (2001) defined: "*A destination is a geographic area that contains a group of tourism resources and factors of attraction, infrastructure, equipment, service providers, other support areas and management organizations that they interact with and coordinate activities together to provide visitors with the experiences they expect their chosen destination will be"*. Similarly, Page and Conel (2006) assumed that *"Destination is a mixture of prepackaged service products, accessibility, attraction, facility, activities and support services"*.

Therefore, tourist destinations contain various factors affecting tourism demand and attract tourists. These factors are basically varied and diverse, but the most

important thing is to catch the attention of both domestic and foreign tourists. For this reason, the creation and management of a tourism destination must be based on the correct perception about destination image and the core value that the destination could bring to visitors. According to Hu and Ritchie (1993), the attractiveness of a destination "*reflects the feelings, beliefs, and opinions that each individual possesses through the ability to meet customer's demand at their destination in related to their own trip"*. It might be said that the more a destination can meet the needs of visitors, the more likely it would be selected for their travel. This is also suitable with the opinions of Mayo and Jarvis (1981) that the attraction of the destination is "*the ability of the destination to deliver benefits for tourists*". These capabilities depend on the attributes of the destination and also be the factors motivating visitors to the destination (Vengesayi, 2003; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). Thus, the attractiveness of a destination can be acknowledged by visitors whenever they have access to the destination information without indeed having a real experience at the destination.

2.2. The proposed research model

Many domestic and foreign studies have developed models to evaluate the attractiveness of a tourist attraction. These models include multi-dimensional attributes, combined to define the attractiveness of the destination for an individual when they choose to travel. According to Lew (1987), these characteristics are "historical sites, amusement parks, landscapes, services and facilities that serve the daily needs of visitors". Then those properties were listed

and classified into the below five major groups: natural factors, social factors, historical factors, recreational and shopping facilities, and infrastructure, food, and accommodation (Gearing et al., 1974). Similarly, Hu and Ritchie (1993) also proposed a model consisting of five groups of similar factors impacting on visitor attraction, including 16 attributes to assess the attractiveness ability: natural landscape, climate, historical attractions, cultural attractions, accommodation facilities, cuisine, local lives, accessibility, festivals, sports activities, shopping, recreational activities, hospitalities, transportation, language barriers, and expense. Meanwhile, Aziz (2002) recommended a model comprising five groups of principal factors: (1) geographic factors: the geographical location of the destination, accessibility of the destination whether easy or not, weather, climate, dominance of destination relative to others; (2) cultural - social factors: local custom, hospitality, expense at local area; (3) supplementary features: infrastructure, accommodation services (hotels, motels, resorts, ...) and dining/ cuisine, transportation; (4) natural features: the scenery, unique and majestic landscape, outdoor activities; (5) Physical characteristics: amusement park, shopping malls, architecture, entertainment facilities. According to Vengesayi (2003), the fundamental resource elements of destination and mixed activities are the basic criteria with a view to create unique attractiveness. That is the reason why visitors make a choice and choose this destination more than others. Especially, there are five elements: culture, nature, events, tourism activities, and entertainment activities at the destination. The main resource elements of the destination and the mixed activities can provide visitors with more options, keep them staying longer at destinations, and that is the "pull visitors" strategy.

In Vietnam, the study tourism attractiveness in Hue province by Bui Thi Tam and Mai Le Quyen (2012) is based on the model of Hu and Ritchie (1993), and property added is the "Safety of destination". A similar project evaluating the attraction of the Hue Imperial Citadel relic is by Le Thi Ngoc Anh and Tran Thi Khuyen (2014). This model applies the attributes of tourism attractiveness proposed by Aziz (2002) in accordance with the scale and characteristics of the destination studied is the Citadel relic. From that, six factors affecting the attractiveness of the Citadel - Hue are identified as landscape and tourism environment, the value of Dai Noi relic, accessibility, staff, souvenirs, supporting mixed services/activities. Nguyen Thi Minh Nghia et al. (2017) also recommend five factors that represent Hoi An's ability to attract domestic visitors. However, the analytical results demonstrate that only elements "Nature and climate" and "Culinary and accommodation" have a significant effect on attracting tourists.

In general, these relevant research models illustrate the basic attributes of tourist destinations within five groups of main factors: natural factors, cultural - social factors, historical factors, entertainment and shopping facilities (physical conditions), infrastructure including food and accommodation. This study continues using these five key factors

to evaluate the attractiveness of the Thanh Phu destination.

2.3. Research methods

The research was conducted with combined two methods of qualification and quantification. The qualification method is with theoretical review and experts' interviews to set up a survey questionnaire revised by a pretest phase. The questionnaire with 31 criteria was then utilized in a survey with 284 respondents conveniently selected. With the statistical software of SPSS version 18.0 and in a multivariate analysis, explanatory factor analysis (EFA) method was used to identify the underlying relationships between measured variables, grouped by the above 31 criteria.

3. Research results and discussion

3.1. Sample description

The study was conducted by interviews with 284 respondents. After eliminating the questionnaires with shortcomings, the number of valid questionnaires which are verified is 205, the information of research samples is given below (Table 1)

Table 1. Sample description

Feature	No.	Ratio
Gender		
Men	105	51.2
Women	100	48.8
Age		
< 20	114	55.6
20 – 35	52	25.4
36 – 50	21	10.2
>60	14	6.8
Tourism forms		
Group Tour	84	41.0
Backpacking	101	49.3
Others	20	9.8
Time for traveling		
1 night	145	70.7
2 nights	28	13.7
3 nights	17	8.3
> 4 nights	15	7.3
Purpose of traveling		
Sightseeing	157	76.6
Relaxing	11	5.4
Visiting relatives	6	2.9
Business	16	7.8
Others	15	7.3

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3.2. Exploratory Factor Analysis method (EFA)

The proposed research model consists of 5 components that are measured by 31 observed variables. After testing Cronbach's alpha reliability, Variables with Corrected Item-total Correlation < 0.3 will be filtered, the standard for selecting scale when it has Cronbach's alpha reliability of 0.6 or higher (Nunnually & Bernstein, 1994) and are taken in exploratory factor analysis to assess the degree of convergence of observed variables according to components. KMO = 0.864, meeting the condition of 0.5 <KMO <1, therefore, the Exploratory Factor Analysis is suitable for survey data. The analytical results illustrate that there are 3 factors extracted from EFA analysis: (1) "Natural factors, social factors, cultural-historical factors", (2) "Support characteristics", (3) "Entertainment and shopping facilities"

Table 2. Reliability and appropriate level of variables

Observed variables	Scale means if Item deleted	Scale Variance if Item deleted	Corrected Item-total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item deleted
Natural, historical, cultural – social factors				
Alpha = 0.914				
C1	41.33	45.448	0.679	00.905
C2	41.35	45.375	0.696	0.904
C3	41.39	45.111	0.659	0.906
C4	41.20	47.301	0.552	0.911
C5	41.34	45.842	0.650	0.907
C6	41.40	45.643	0.699	0.904
C7	41.36	45.193	0.652	0.907
C8	41.30	45.181	0.732	0.903
C9	41.40	45.270	0.662	0.906
C10	41.40	45.015	0.675	0.905
C11	41.33	44.947	0.684	0.905
Support Characteristics (Infrastructure, cuisine and support services)				
Alpha = 0.893				
C13	19.67	14.762	0.689	0.878
C15	19.73	15.413	0.732	0.872
C16	19.93	14.240	0.807	0.859
C17	19.85	14.325	0.751	0.868
C18	19.72	14.770	0.696	0.877
C19	19.88	15.363	0.616	0.889

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Entertainment and shopping facilities

Alpha = 0.893

C14	20.92	13.067	0.682	0.878
C20	21.03	12.759	0.685	0.878
C21	21.01	12.965	0.724	0.872
C22	21.04	12.528	0.752	0.867
C23	21.05	12.694	0.737	0.870
C27	21.12	13.074	0.696	0.876

3.3. Regression analysis

The study uses a regression model to define factors affecting the ability to attract visitors of Thanh Phu district in Ben Tre province. With the three group variables identified from the above EFA results, a regression model was proposed as following:

$$KNTT = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + error$$

$KNTT$ is "the attractiveness of destination"

X_1- Natural, historical, cultural and social factors

X_2- Additional characteristics

(Infrastructure, cuisine and support services)

X_3- Shopping and entertainment facilities.

The results also showed that the P-value of three components was extremely small (P<0.05), indicated these three groups give statistically significant effects on the attractiveness of destination and all of them have a crucial influence on the ability to attract visitors of Thanh Phu district, in Ben Tre province. The order of importance of individual factors depends on the absolute value of coefficient β. The greater coefficient β of factor is with the higher level of influence on attracting tourists in Thanh Phu district, Ben Tre province. Results of the above equation indicate that the attractiveness of the destination (of Thanh Phu district) with tourists is most affected by the X_3 factor (Shopping & entertainment facilities) corresponding to $\beta_3 = 0.579$, and then X_2 factor (Mechanical infrastructure, cuisine and support services) with $\beta_2 = 0.270$, finally, factor X_1 (Natural, historical, cultural - social factors) with $\beta 1 = 0.116$.

Table 3. Coefficients of the regression equation

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t-value	P-value
	B	**s.e**	**β**		
constant	0.119	0.169		0.700	0.485
X_1	0.116	0.060	0.106	1.927	0.005
X_2	0.270	0.051	0.282	5.264	0.000
X_3	0.579	0.059	0.558	9.792	0.000

Form of regression equation:

$Y = 0,119 + 0.116X_1 + 0.270X_2 + 0.579X_3$

From the above equation, some solutions could be proposed to push up tourist attraction of Thanh Phu destination in Ben Tre province by improving these 3 following factors: shopping and entertainment facilities, supporting activities in infrastructure, cuisine and support services, and explore more attraction from natural, social, historical and cultural resources of the district.

3.4 Discussion and some management implications

Management implication is suggested to develop entertainment and shopping facilities; improve complementary characteristics (infrastructure, cuisine and support services); preserve and promote natural, historical, cultural and social factors at Thanh Phu destination, Ben Tre province in order to attract tons of domestic and foreign tourists to this place. Moreover, promoting and exploiting the advantages of natural strengths about tourism products, natural resources, and human resources of Thanh Phu is encouraged.

Shopping and entertainment facilities play an important role in attracting visitors to Thanh Phu destination. Stunning sightseeing areas are necessary for tourists to snap pictures; developing marine tourism, spiritual tourism; developing a safe and friendly tourism environment for visitors with a comfortable atmosphere when relaxing and entertaining during their traveling. Improving the quantity and quality of goods and souvenirs which are various and unique to meet the demand of visitors. Souvenir shops, neighborhoods, markets need upgrading for tourists to visit. Products from local agricultural products such as mango, coconut fruits, or hand-made products produced from the local agricultural products such as palm-leaf conical hats, crude brooms need some places to expose to tourists for their convenience to purchase as souvenirs of their travel to Thanh Phu destination.

Supporting services include accommodation, transport infrastructure, and public utilities are the most important elements to be improved to attract more visitors to Thanh Phu, Ben Tre province. This implication is consistent with the point of view of Ritchie and Crouch (2000) in which tourism attractiveness could be enhanced by the ability to provide services and facilities that visitors can use when they are in their destination. The tourists who were not satisfied with supporting services in Thanh Phu, Ben Tre province answered

that accommodation facilities do not meet expectations. Local cuisine is very delicious but there is still a limited number of restaurants, coffee shops with sanitary, and food security standards. Especially the absence of public services like restrooms, public parks for group picnics also were considered limitations for tourism development at the district.

The natural factor is the basic attribute to attract and charm most, which could lead to the word-of-mouth effect in visitors, especially for the destination of Thanh Phu, being famous for fresh fruit trees, clam beds, and natural mangrove forests. If nature is a captivating factor for visitors coming to Thanh Phu, Ben Tre province, the factors related to the lives, customs and lifestyle of the local community, etc are the things that make tourists satisfied and return. Activities of visiting craft villages, listening to southern folk songs, living with amateur people give visitors many opportunities to explore and relax after a series of hard-working days. Besides, the shrine of two whales whose skeleton has been conserved by local people is promoted to be a psychical destination for tourists from eastern countries and the ones who care about natural lives.

Nowadays, climate change is seriously affecting the livelihoods of local residents and economic development in Thanh Phu district, Ben Tre province. Many typical phenomenons of climate change such as sea-level rise, saline intrusion, drought, landslides, etc increasingly impact agriculture and transportation development. Solutions should be taken to mitigate the impact of climate change and promote existing strengths of destination in Thanh

Phu, Ben Tre province, especially, with the natural and cultural-social factors. This region can develop tourism that combines with unique models like rural resort tourism on the river (taking advantage of abundant water resources that nature offers to build resorts with rivers and streams, attracting visitors with high spending and friendly blending into the natural environment). Tourism model explores the nature at climate change areas (guests could jogging, enjoying and exploring the land, plants, creatures that are typical of the region, helping them to approach the locals to learn about climate change, conveying messages to encourage people to protect nature and reduce the effects of climate change). What is more, adventure and entertainment with games such as balloon, admiring the green view from the high position, discover the land of Thanh Phu Ben Tre province, etc.

4. Conclusion

The results of research on the attractiveness of Thanh Phu destination, Ben Tre province have shown the entertainment and shopping facilities, improved supporting characteristics such as infrastructure, cuisine and support services, conserved natural, historical, cultural and social resources play a crucial role in the process of attracting tourist. With the strength of natural and cultural diversity and peaceful social and cultural characteristics, the region has a great potential to develop tourism and attract many more tourists when transportation, accommodation, and other supporting services were upgraded properly. Local authorities and tourism corporates should work together to set up detailed plans, develop tourism infrastructures such as

modern restaurants with local cuisine and rest stops with shops of hand-made and on-site products to meet the various needs of visitors, create a sense of satisfaction and enhance revisits to Thanh Phu destination.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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