

Towards sustainable tourism through circular economy: The case of the Mekong Delta, Vietnam

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Abstract: The research on the circular economy in tourism in the Mekong Delta focuses on developing a circular economy model within the tourism industry in this region. The goal of the study is to assess the potential, challenges, and propose solutions for developing the circular economy in Mekong Delta tourism. The research uses a qualitative approach, analyzing documents, legal frameworks, and relevant previous studies. The findings indicate that despite the Mekong Delta's significant advantages in natural resources and cultural heritage, the development of circular tourism remains limited due to weak transportation infrastructure, inconsistent legal frameworks, and low awareness of the circular economy. The proposed solutions include complete the legal framework for the circular economy, develop infrastructure and apply green technology, raising awareness and educating communities on the circular economy, developing sustainable tourism linked to the circular economy, preserving and promoting ecological and cultural values, enhancing international cooperation and regional linkages in tourism development.

Keywords: Circular economy, Mekong delta, Sustainable development.

1. Introduction

The circular economy is increasingly gaining attention across various sectors, including tourism. The circular economy, with its goal of optimizing resource use and minimizing waste, has become a global trend in sustainable development [1]. In the tourism industry, the issue of waste is becoming more severe, with tourism generating significantly more waste compared to other production sectors, causing adverse environmental impacts. According to the United Nations Development Program UNDP [2] the tourism industry contributes approximately 5% of global waste, equivalent to 330 million tons per year. Managing waste at tourist sites is challenging due to difficulties in controlling tourist behavior and unsustainable resource use. The circular economy plays a crucial role in promoting sustainable tourism by optimizing resource use, reducing emissions, and alleviating environmental pressure [3, 4]. Furthermore, the circular economy addresses challenges in the tourism industry, generating sustainable economic value [5]. Studies show that the circular economy positively impacts sustainable tourism development, particularly in achieving environmental, economic, and social goals [6]. Applying circular economy to tourism not only reduces environmental impact but also creates new economic and social values by reusing resources, minimizing waste, and protecting natural environments [7].

Several countries have successfully integrated the circular economy into tourism, bringing substantial economic and environmental benefits. In Vietnam, national policies and strategies have clearly outlined goals to promote the development of a circular economy. The National Strategy on Green Growth for the period 2021-2030, with a vision to 2050 Decision No [8], sets one of its goals to “green” the economy, including the tourism sector, to achieve sustainable development and strengthen resilience to external shocks. Decision No. 687/QĐ-TTg Decision No [9], approving the Circular

Economy Development Plan in Vietnam, also affirms that the circular economy is a strategic and overarching policy to help recover the economy and meet sustainable development goals. The Mekong Delta has many advantages for tourism development, thanks to its rich and diverse ecosystems shaped by natural conditions such as rivers, mountains, and coastal areas. Additionally, the region's unique culture, with the blend of four main ethnic groups (Kinh, Khmer, Hoa, and Cham), creates its distinct identity, reflected in customs, beliefs, festivals, and traditional folk arts. However, in the context of climate change and environmental challenges, the application of the circular economy in production and tourism is becoming more critical than ever. In this context, research on applying the circular economy model to sustainable tourism development in the Mekong Delta is essential to address existing issues and create long-term development for the region [10]. This approach not only helps protect the environment but also ensures the sustainable development of the region's tourism economy. Based on the research, specific solutions must be proposed to develop a sustainable tourism economy in the Mekong Delta while realizing the nation's broader sustainable socio-economic development goals.

2. Theoretical Background and Research Methods

2.1. Theoretical Background

Circular Economy: A circular economy is an economic system where resources, materials, and products are optimally used over multiple life cycles, being recycled and reused many times before they become waste [10]. Unlike the linear economy (produce-consume-dispose), the circular economy focuses on regenerating resources and minimizing waste through recycling and reusing [11]. According to the World Trade Organization (WTO), the circular economy is a model in which the value of goods and resources is maintained for as long as possible, generating new value while reducing the risk of resource depletion and price volatility. This helps prevent waste generation and promotes the sustainable use of renewable resources. The United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) also emphasizes that the circular economy is a closed production cycle in which waste is reused as raw materials, helping to reduce negative impacts on the environment and human health. The circular economy is based on recycling, maintenance, and repair to extend product life, minimizing resource wastage [12]. Although there are various definitions, the circular economy can generally be understood as a closed-loop economic model that focuses on saving, recycling, and reusing resources to maximize their value and reduce negative impacts on the environment, economy, and society in the long term.

Circular Economy Model: The development of a circular economy is influenced by both objective and subjective factors. First, awareness of the circular economy plays a key role. It not only affects the economic sector but also has far-reaching impacts on political and social aspects. Understanding the importance of the circular economy is the foundation for nations and businesses to build appropriate transition strategies. This not only fosters economic development but also contributes to the comprehensive growth of the nation and the global community. Second, the circular economy model needs to be adapted to each country. Since each nation has different economic conditions and development goals, the circular economy model must be based on the specific development status of each region. This ensures that circular economy strategies are not only feasible but also have the highest effectiveness. Third, the legal framework is crucial in promoting the circular economy. There should be specific incentive policies and resources from the state to encourage stakeholders to participate in the transition process. These policies should focus on environmental management, waste treatment, and financial management while encouraging innovation in production and consumption. Lastly, financial resources are key to the success of the circular economy. Mobilizing finance from the public and private sectors, as well as non-profit organizations, is essential to achieving sustainable goals. Green finance and environmentally friendly investments are becoming mainstream, creating opportunities for circular economy projects to thrive. In conclusion, the circular economy is a model based on optimizing and extending the lifecycle of resources, minimizing negative environmental impacts. This model aims to achieve three main goals: addressing the depletion of input resources,

reducing environmental pollution during production, and balancing economic development with environmental protection, leading to long-term sustainability.

Sustainable Tourism: According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), sustainable tourism is a concept of tourism development that meets the needs of present tourists and local communities without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The main principles of sustainable tourism include efficient resource management, environmental protection, and respect for local culture [13].

Sustainable Development: According to the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), sustainable development is the development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs [14]. In Vietnam, the circular economy is built in alignment with sustainable development goals. Thus, the development of tourism through the circular economy is linked to sustainable development objectives.

Tourism Development Through the Circular Economy: Tourism development through the circular economy is a sustainable approach in which all stakeholders, such as tourism businesses, destination management organizations [15]. Service providers, hotels, restaurants, and local communities, apply environmentally friendly measures [16]. This model focuses on economic growth and ensures a balance between people and the environment, aiming for comprehensive and sustainable development. While traditional tourism economies generate significant waste and use resources unsustainably, circular tourism encourages the reuse and recycling of resources throughout the tourism value chain. Products and services that become worn out or discarded are repaired or recycled for tourism activities, reducing waste and energy consumption. This helps tourism foster economic growth and protect the environment, creating sustainable value for communities and stakeholders. Developing tourism through the circular economy is an appropriate solution in the current context, where the need to reduce emissions and waste and optimize inputs is becoming increasingly urgent. This model generates economic benefits and redistributes value to local residents, promoting balanced and sustainable economic growth. The tourism activities in a circular economy model include service provision, organization, and tourism experiences within a closed system that optimizes resource lifecycles and progresses toward green, eco-friendly tourism. This development direction receives solid social support due to its sustainability and harmony with the living environment. During the development of circular economy-based tourism, the government plays a crucial role in formulating supportive policies and strategies; businesses are the driving force behind this economic model, and citizens are critical actors in implementing and benefiting from the circular economy [17].

2.2. Experience In Developing the Circular Economy in Tourism

To implement the circular economy, the European Union (EU) calls for the participation of all stakeholders, from governments and businesses to consumers. The EU has made significant progress in transitioning from the traditional economic model to the circular economy. The circular economy is estimated to generate approximately 600 billion Euros per year, create 580,000 new jobs, and help reduce greenhouse gas emissions [18]. The framework directive 2008/98/EC (adopted in 2008) is a legal document requiring member states to issue regulations governing waste management in production and consumption. In 2015, the EU adopted an action plan and legal documents to regulate the development of the circular economy. The revised waste management framework (effective from July 2018) sets targets for waste reduction. It establishes a long-term roadmap for waste management and recycling: 65% of municipal waste will be recycled by 2035, and 70% of packaging waste will be recycled by 2030. Additionally, recycling targets for packaging materials include paper and cardboard (85%), non-ferrous metals (80%), aluminum (60%), glass (75%), plastic (55%), and wood (30%). The goal is to reduce landfill usage to a maximum of 10% of municipal waste by 2035 [19]. By 2030, EU member states must eliminate waste disposal sites and promote the creation of a recycled materials market [20].

Thailand has introduced the “Bio-Circular-Green Economy” (BCG) model for a sustainable future in its development plan. Thailand has implemented several effective measures, such as closing specific

tourist destinations during high-risk periods in the monsoon season, ensuring safety while allowing nature to recover. Additionally, they have adjusted tourism seasons and used weather forecasts to plan activities like culinary tours, health and wellness tourism, and cultural events. Agricultural tourism has been promoted as a key attraction. Farmers are shifting toward organic farming, reducing pesticide use to limit chemical exposure in rural communities and consumers [21]. These examples show that developing tourism through the circular economy is a suitable approach, contributing to overall economic growth and ensuring sustainable development by leveraging the advantages of the circular economy model.

2.3. Research Methodology

The study was conducted using a qualitative research method. The primary approach in this paper is document synthesis and literature review. Information was collected from various sources, including articles by scientists and journalists related to the topic and government documents concerning the development of the circular economy and sustainable tourism. The research team employed an analytical and synthesis method to review these materials and address the research problem, ultimately proposing several appropriate solutions.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Potential for Developing a Circular Economy in Tourism for the Mekong Delta

The Party and the Government of Vietnam have always formulated policies to guide the economy toward sustainable development. Elements of the circular economy have been integrated into several legal documents, notably Resolution No. 55-NQ/TW, dated February 11, 2020, by Politburo, which outlines the national energy development strategy 2030 with a vision for 2045. This resolution emphasizes the importance of renewable energy sources and encourages the development of waste-to-energy plants to protect the environment while promoting the transition to a circular economy. This highlights the priority the Party and the State gave to transitioning from a traditional economy to a circular economy.

Various aspects of the circular economy, such as resource conservation, renewable energy, sustainable production and consumption, green supply chains, and green consumption, have been addressed in legal documents. The Mekong Delta Regional Plan for 2021-2030, with a vision to 2050, is the first integrated regional plan in the country, reflecting the Government's strong focus on sustainable development and the circular economy.

Globally, many countries such as Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark, Canada, Japan, China, and Singapore have integrated the circular economy into their economic models, demonstrating the importance of this model in building a sustainable economy.

With its vast area and diverse ecosystems, the Mekong Delta is one of the world's three largest deltas. This region has great potential for developing ecological, community-based, and sustainable tourism thanks to its rich river network, mountain ranges, caves, and islands such as Phu Quoc, Hon Khoai, and the Pirate Archipelago. The area also boasts extensive mangrove forests, such as U Minh Thuong, U Minh Ha, and the Ca Mau mangrove, offering favorable conditions for the development of green tourism.

Additionally, the Mekong Delta has abundant natural resources, including fertile agricultural land for rice and fruit cultivation, particularly along the Tien and Hau rivers. This creates an advantage for integrating agriculture with sustainable tourism, improving local economic livelihoods.

The Mekong Delta's culture, with its unique blend of the Kinh, Hoa, Khmer, and Cham ethnic groups, along with traditional folk festivals and arts like Don Ca Tai Tu, is another highlight in the development of cultural tourism. This rich cultural heritage enhances visitors' experiences and plays a vital role in preserving and promoting national cultural values. The combination of natural resources and regional culture positions the Mekong Delta as a critical area for developing sustainable tourism,

which aligns with environmental protection and local economic growth. The region has successfully attracted a large number of tourists for sightseeing and exploration:

Table 1.

Total number of visitors and revenue of the Mekong Delta Region [22]

Criteria	Year 2020	Year 2021	Year 2022	Year 2023	Year 2024
Total number of visitors	28,950,445	23,487,886	37,504,427	42,550,000	52,117,637
Number of international visitors	2,250,115	1,480,100	526,100	2,112,134	2,809,748
Revenue (billion VND)	22,100	9,500	32,000	45,700	62,239

3.2. Challenges in developing the circular economy in tourism for the Mekong Delta

The legal framework for developing the circular economy in Vietnam still needs to be completed and needs consistency. Circular economy models have yet to be fully implemented, primarily due to unclear information about policy systems. Vietnam still needs to establish specific criteria to identify, evaluate, and classify the development levels of the circular economy. The existing institutional framework and regulations mainly focus on corporate environmental responsibility but need comprehensive regulations governing the circular economy process. This has resulted in limited awareness of the circular economy within the business community, particularly in the tourism sector.

Consuming plastic bags and single-use plastic products remains prevalent in society, contributing to a large amount of waste at tourist sites that need more effective solutions for waste management. Despite efforts from the authorities, a lack of coordination between different management levels and the public has hindered the implementation of the circular economy. The Mekong Delta's economic growth has stalled, heavily impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, declining from 7.14% in 2019 to (-0.43%) in 2021, while the country maintained positive growth.

Circular tourism activities in the Mekong Delta remain small-scale and unsustainable, mainly due to the local population's self-driven transition from agriculture, forestry, and fisheries to community-based eco-tourism. However, a lack of coordination and appropriate government policy support has limited the region's potential.

The transportation infrastructure in the Mekong Delta needs to be developed, particularly in remote areas, hindering tourism development. With the country's lowest ratio of national highways and expressways, the Mekong Delta cannot fully leverage its tourism potential. At the same time, the region faces severe environmental challenges such as erosion, saltwater intrusion, and declining water resources due to upstream hydropower activities, which have made agriculture and local livelihoods increasingly precarious. Climate change exacerbates these issues, with predictions that many areas of the Mekong Delta will experience flooding and extreme weather by 2030-2040. These impacts directly threaten agricultural productivity and the livelihoods of residents [23].

The Mekong Delta is facing significant economic, social, and environmental challenges. Moreover, these challenges are interconnected, creating a downward spiral in all three areas, making it easier to achieve sustainable development with comprehensive transformation [24].

3.3. Solutions For Developing the Circular Economy in Sustainable Tourism in the Mekong Delta

Given the potential and limitations of the Mekong Delta region, the following coordinated solutions are necessary to promote sustainable tourism development shortly:

Complete the legal framework for the circular economy: The government should establish clear and specific criteria to assess and categorize the level of circular economy development in tourism. These criteria will provide a solid foundation for businesses and regulatory agencies to monitor the progress and effectiveness of circular economy projects. This also helps evaluate the suitability of circular tourism models in each locality, enabling improvement proposals. The legal framework must be comprehensive and synchronized, ensuring that processes from production and consumption to waste management

adhere to circular economy principles. The goal is to ensure all stakeholders understand and actively participate in developing the circular economy model. Additionally, the government should offer tax incentives and financial support to encourage tourism businesses to transition to a circular economy model. This may include tax reductions for companies that adopt green technologies, recycling, energy-saving measures, and preferential loans for investing in green and sustainable infrastructure [15].

Develop infrastructure and apply green technology: Emphasizing technological innovation is a key factor in the successful application of the circular economy model in the region, linking the circular economy in tourism with technological development, the digital economy, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Furthermore, investments in information and communication technology infrastructure are needed to enhance the tourism experience in the context of digital technology. Tourism businesses should adopt energy-saving technologies such as solar power systems, wastewater management, and resource recycling to minimize emissions and environmental impact. This will create a sustainable tourism operation model. The development of a green supply chain, focusing on using sustainable local products will reduce transportation costs and increase the sustainability of the tourism ecosystem [25].

Raising awareness and educating communities on the circular economy: The government should coordinate media campaigns on the benefits of the circular economy in tourism, helping residents and tourists better understand the importance of environmental protection and applying the circular economy model in everyday tourism activities. Encouraging tourists and local communities to engage in responsible tourism activities and use renewable energy sources will help reduce environmental impacts. Additionally, training programs should be established to teach residents the skills needed for circular tourism, assisting them in transitioning from agriculture to eco-tourism services. These training programs should focus on resource management, recycling, and sustainable tourism marketing skills.

Developing sustainable tourism linked to the circular economy: Developing sustainable tourism products and services based on circular economy principles is practical. Fully utilizing the Mekong Delta's abundant natural resources, such as mangrove forests, river ecosystems, and the region's unique folk culture, can foster the growth of eco-tourism, community-based tourism, and agricultural tourism. These efforts help protect natural resources and provide long-term economic benefits for local communities. Localities should conduct surveys and reassess their potential and advantages for tourism development, building high-quality, regionally distinct tourism products to create a unique footprint in the tourism industry. Strengthening green tourism services, where tourists participate in nature conservation activities such as tree planting, beach clean-ups, and waste recycling, is essential.

Preserving and promoting ecological and cultural values: Developing tourism programs that introduce the culture, occupations, and lives of the Mekong Delta locals will create income opportunities for communities and contribute to cultural heritage preservation. Establishing nature reserves combined with eco-tourism development will help protect the unique ecosystems of the Mekong Delta, such as mangrove forests, rivers, and national parks. This will not only maintain biodiversity but also create opportunities for sustainable tourism. Encouraging the development of tourism products based on the cultural and historical values of the Mekong Delta, such as Don Ca Tai Tu music, folk festivals, and floating markets, will allow the combination of cultural tourism with the circular economy model, aiding in the preservation and sustainable development of local traditions.

Enhancing international cooperation and regional linkages in tourism development: Applying the circular economy in sustainable tourism development can promote cooperation among local communities, tourism businesses, environmental protection organizations, and the government. Therefore, local communities should contribute ideas and resources to develop unique tourism products. Regional supply chains must also be developed to reduce transportation costs and carbon emissions. Learning from successful circular economy models in countries like Sweden, the Netherlands, Japan, and China while enhancing cooperation with international organizations will enable access to green financing and technology. These international experiences will help Vietnam adopt a more practical approach to developing the circular economy in tourism.

4. Conclusions

The development of tourism based on the circular economy will promote sustainable tourism activities, achieving a balanced growth between the economy, culture, and environment of the Mekong Delta in particular and Vietnam in general. Developing a circular economy in sustainable tourism in the Mekong Delta requires a comprehensive strategy from policy to implementation and the active participation of the community, businesses, and international organizations. A coordinated approach is essential to effectively implement the circular economy in sustainable tourism development in the Mekong Delta. This includes complete the legal framework for the circular economy, develop infrastructure and apply green technology, raising awareness and educating communities on the circular economy, developing sustainable tourism linked to the circular economy, preserving and promoting ecological and cultural values, enhancing international cooperation and regional linkages in tourism development.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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