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# Green and Social beyond a Postcard Scene? Sustainable Tourism in Costa Rica and Vietnam

Víctor Milla\*, Alonso Villalobos\*\*, Linda Wallbott\*\*\*, Markus Lederer\*\*\*\*

**Abstract:** *The paper analyses ask why and promoted by which actors Costa Rica and Vietnam have started to develop domestic sustainable tourism strategies, and which opportunities and challenges arise locally in the context of practicing sustainable tourism. Thereby, we contribute to both the research agenda on green transformations as well as on sustainable tourism. Empirically, and based on desk research and expert interviews with stakeholders at different political levels in both countries in 2018, we present two case studies, namely the province of Puntarenas (Costa Rica) and the province of Lao Cai (Vietnam). To do so, we first a short conceptualization of ‘green transformations’ and how sustainable tourism might contribute to its realization. Then we describe the profile of the tourism sector for both countries, followed by a review and analysis of the situation in the Puntarenas and Lao Cai provinces arguing that whereas Costa Rica has made substantive progress regarding eco-tourism, Vietnam is at the beginning of a long journey but has started to take first and highly relevant steps.*

**Keywords:** *Sustainable tourism, green transformation, Vietnam, Cost Rica.*

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## 1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, the service branch has undergone significant growth as part of the global economy (Vellas and Bécherel, 1995). Tourism, which is oftentimes considered as a means to achieve economic progress, was initially conceived of as a service industry concentrated in the Northern Hemisphere but it became more dynamic and expanded in

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the 1990s also in developing countries located in the Global South (Vignati and Hawkins, 2016). Today this includes different types of touristic activities in those destinations, often labeled as sun and surf tourism, entertainment and recreation tourism, cultural tourism, or risk and adventure tourism (Cohen, 2004; Cooper, and Hall, 2008; Honey, 2008; Raj et al., 2013; Mazanec and Wöber, 2010). Additionally, so-called eco-tourism (or sustainable tourism) has been on the rise, which has been defined as *“tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities”* (UNEP/UNWTO, 2005:11-12). Therewith, the implementation of the fundamental idea behind sustainable tourism has the theoretical potential to contribute to achieving green transformations across different sectors and scales (Lederer, 2018) in destination countries.

The proliferation of the sustainable tourism approach has been promoted by the World Tourism Organization which, in early 2000s, begun to initiate policies and programs to improve the competitiveness standards and create tourism management and administration guidelines in destination countries using the slogan of being “friendlier to and in harmony with the environment” (UNWTO, 2004; UNWTO, 2015). This has been floated, not only as a requirement for the longevity of the tourist industry and environmental sustainability, but also as a strategy for attracting international tourists and raising the visitor volume at foreign and domestic tourist centers. Complementarily, international tourism strategies such as “green is better” or “small is beautiful” and corporate codes of conduct formally foster environmental and social commitment through tourism-related social responsibility programs and activities with communities and populations (UNWTO, 2012). However, there has also been wide-spread criticism of tourism’s role in development, specifically so called pro-poor tourism, e.g. regarding exploitation of labor force, degradation of the environment due to unregulated construction, or the disruption and commodification of local cultures (Brown and Hall, 2008; Monshausen, 2015).

Two countries that have over the past years engaged in the design of programs and activities related to sustainable tourism, including the development of standards and certifications to evaluate the sustainability of their tourist enterprises and to reward sustainable business practices, are Costa Rica and Vietnam. It has been recognized that this might be part of a country brand setting to attract visitors, and also for possible investors inside and outside the tourism services branch (Rojas, 2010). However, there is still little knowledge concerning the driving forces and interactions (cf. Liu, 2003), e.g. between state and non-state actors, that actually contribute to the formulation of such national sustainable tourism strategies. Additionally, limited empirical evidence exists concerning the role of sustainability certification and standardization in the tourism sector in enhancing social, environmental and economic aspects at sub-national levels.

Hence, in this paper, we aim to contribute to these two research avenues, tackling the questions, why and promoted by which actors Costa Rica and Vietnam have started to develop domestic sustainable tourism strategies, and which opportunities and challenges arise locally in the context of practicing sustainable tourism. Thereby, we contribute to both the research agenda on green transformations as well as on sustainable tourism. Empirically, and based on desk research and expert interviews with stakeholders at different political levels in both countries in 2018, we present two case studies, namely the province of Puntarenas (Costa Rica) and the province of Lao Cai (Vietnam).

The paper is organized as follows: In the next section, we provide a short conceptualization of 'green transformations' and how sustainable tourism might contribute to its realization. In section 3, we describe the profile of the tourism sector for both countries, followed by a review and analysis of the situation in the Puntarenas and Lao Cai provinces. The concluding section summarizes our findings and outlines avenues for further research.

## **2. Green transformations and sustainable tourism**

Given the unprecedented destructive impact of human (anthropogenic) activities on our planet, it has become widely accepted that substantial changes regarding utilization of resources are required. Accordingly, green transformations can be defined as the restructuring of political, social, and economic systems to fit within the planetary boundaries (Scoones, 2015). In contrast to the concept of 'transition', it can be argued that a 'transformation' requires far-reaching changes in structures, processes, and actor constellations, thereby potentially challenging the polities (institutions), policies (content), and also politics (processes) within and between the social, economic and ecological dimensions of a specific system across scale (Urban et al, 2018). Notably, detrimental effects - trade-offs - within and between the different dimensions of sustainability should be minimized.

In this, and for its part, restructuring the economy takes place through a change in behavior patterns for producers and consumers alike. Ideally, this should facilitate a symbiosis to secure growth and the socio-economic development of diverse populations all the while improving human wellbeing, providing decent jobs, reducing inequalities and poverty, and respecting planetary boundaries (Schmitz and Becker, 2013; Scoones, 2015; Smith and Ely, 2015).

Sustainable tourism can be assumed to play an important role in establishing green change (oftentimes discussed in relation to a Green Economy approach (e.g. Law, 2017; Lederer et al, 2018), presumably and in particular in developing countries through leapfrogging (for a critical perspective on the assumed linkage between tourism and development see Monshausen, 2015). Herein, both local actors in destination areas (as providers) and

tourists (as consumers) can be considered responsible agents along the value chain (different travel services and activities) of the tourism industry. It can be argued that public communication, e.g. via the internet, is important to channel knowledge about sustainable tourism performance between those different groups of actors.

### **3. The tourism sector in Costa Rica and Vietnam: policies, standardization and certification**

Tourism represents a promising venue for both Vietnam and Costa Rica. In 2017, almost three million (2,959,869) tourists arrived in Costa Rica, most of them from the United States (51%), Central America (25%) and Europe (16%). In that year, tourism accounted for 35% of total export value and generated close to USD 3,873.1 million, approximately 6.7% of the GDP (ICT, 2018).

Vietnam, for its part, has been experiencing a tremendous growth of its tourism sector over the past years. According to the WTTC (WTTC, 2018), the direct contribution of the tourism activity to GDP in 2017 was USD 12,965.5 million, 5.9% of total GDP, and is forecast to rise to 6.2% of total GDP in 2028. Additionally, for 2017, the total contribution of tourism to GDP was USD 20,605.6 million, which equals 9.4% of GDP, and is forecast to rise to 9.8% in 2028.

Hence, we find that tourism in both countries is of high and even increasing relevance, with a strong potential for continuing to contribute to the countries' economic growth. Therefore, it seems useful to shed light on the more specific policies and standards that have been issued by political authorities to guide the development of this sector, and to possibly even contribute to realizing the countries' sustainability agendas.

#### ***3.1. Costa Rica: policies and players in sustainable tourism***

Costa Rica, a small Central American country with borders to Nicaragua in the North and Panama in the South, is recognized internationally for its longstanding tradition of peace and democracy and its efforts to conserve and sustainably manage its natural resources (Morera, 1998; Wallbott and Rosendal, 2018). It is one of the 20 countries worldwide with the highest share of biodiversity (a lot of it endemic) and different kinds of rainforest throughout the country. This has made Costa Rica a relatively safe tourist destination with a reputation for wealth of natural beauty, where visitors can enjoy a wide variety of attractions, microclimates and ecosystems, including in a high number of national parks and protected areas (Morera, 1998; Quesada, 2014).

Since 2012, the country has had data on the main reasons for tourist visits based on an ongoing survey, conducted by the Costa Rican Tourism Institute (ICT) in conjunction

with migration authorities, of nonresident visitors arriving and departing from international airports. Thus, for the 2012-2017 period, 72-77% of tourists said the reason they visited was for vacationing and partaking in recreational and leisure activities<sup>1</sup>. For the same period, when visitors were asked upon departure if they had visited any national parks, biological reserves or protected areas during their stay, 60-70% stated that they had. Likewise, the survey data for 2017 at the country's two main airports, based on a multiple-response question, showed that the main vocational and recreational activities of visitors were: sun and beach (72%), ecotourism (68%) and adventure tourism (61%) (ICT, 2017a; ICT, 2017b).

These results indicate that the preservation of natural resources is highly important if Costa Rica wants to maintain the rate of incoming tourists. However, in geographical terms, there is an imbalance within the country: 62% of tourists had visited the Pacific coast, where also the Puntarenas province is located, while only 12% had visited both coasts (Pacific and Caribbean).

In terms of the tourism policies, the "National Plan for Costa Rican Tourism Development" for the period 2017-2021 is crucial. It establishes a set of policies, strategic objectives and actions for ensuring that the future evolution of tourism adheres to the positioning of the country's "tourism brand". The plan sets a tourism target of 3.94 million arriving visitors by 2021 by means of an average annual growth of 6%, starting in 2016 (the base year) (ICT, 2017d). It also seeks to position the country's tourism brand named "*Essential Costa Rica: My Choice Naturally*", which has been promoted since 2013. This was a deliberate strategy to continue supporting public policies through tourism certifications, programs and instruments (Vasconcelos, 2011; Zueras, 2017). More specifically, the main differentiation programs in the National Plan include the Certification for Sustainable Tourism, the Ecological Blue Flag (Bandera Azul), destination competition, coastal planning, micro and small tourism enterprise support programs, and programs for improving destination management (ICT, 2017c).

This National Plan and branding have been the result of an alliance and joint work program between the ICT and the Costa Rican Investment Promotion Agency (CINDE). The ICT was created in 1955 by Law 1817 as a public institution that has representatives of private enterprises, civil society and the central government on its board. It has the aim to strengthen the sustainable Costa Rican tourism development model by defining public policies, partnerships, programs and projects (ICT, 2017c). Thus, its CEO has the rank of a minister and is in charge of promoting tourism, the country as a tourist destination and protecting the country's tourism heritage under the principle of sustainability (ICT, 2009). One of ICT's promotional programs is the voluntary Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST). It aims at classifying and differentiating tourism enterprises according to their degree of sustainability, in terms of natural, cultural and social resource management.

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<sup>1</sup> The sampling used in these surveys is random and disproportionate, with minimum quotas set for the main tourism markets in Costa Rica.

### **3.2. Costa Rica's Certification for Sustainable Tourism**

The ICT's Department of Certifications and Tourism Social Responsibility is in charge of planning, implementing and monitoring the CST, the Ecological Blue Flag (beach category), and the climate change and institutional environmental management programs (ICT, 2008; ICT, 2017c). Moreover, it conducts sensitization and awareness-raising workshops on sustainable tourism and environmental topics and leads in the interfacing of tourism and climate change with corporate social responsibility programs.

The idea of the CST program is to classify and certify tourism enterprises according to how well they approach a model of sustainability, for which four fundamental components are assessed: physio-biological environment, service plant, service management, and customers (Gobierno de Costa Rica, 2010). The first of these is the most relevant for our purposes, since it concerns the interaction between the company and its surrounding natural environment, looking at the company's implementation of actions and programs for sustainability, environmental protection, reduction of environmental degradation and containment of the environmental footprint (ICT, 2016).

For the purpose of classifying and certifying the participants in the CST, a questionnaire is applied by the ICT, with specific questions to evaluate how well a company meets the four fundamental components through its corporate services and activities. Participants can be lodging companies, tour operators, vehicle rental firms, theme parks, food and beverage companies, and coastal marine tour operators.

Each of the questions addresses a sustainability factor that the company must meet to classify at one of the predetermined levels. The CST has a scale of zero to five to measure and place these levels. Each number indicates the company's relative position in terms of sustainability. Level 1 means the company has taken the first step on the path or process of sustainability, while each of the following levels represents an increasingly advanced stage in the specific process being evaluated, ending in level five, when a company would be considered a prime example in terms of sustainability.

By implementing this program, ICT data states that the number of CST-awarded enterprises in 2017 was 384 (see table 1), showing an important increment compared to 2012, when only 71 companies were awarded. Also, data show that 40% of the "Lodging Companies" are at levels four and five, and 61% of "Tour Operators" have also reached these levels.

Table 1. Number of Certified Companies by CST Level and Type of Company, and Levels Achieved in the Certification Process, 2017<sup>2</sup>

Type of company / level	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Lodging companies	23	57	67	44	56	247
Tour operators	8	9	16	26	26	85
Sustainable theme parks	2	2	8	5	2	19
Vehicle rental firms	0	0	3	3	3	9
Sustainable food and beverage companies	0	0	4	0	5	9
Coastal marine tour operators	2	5	2	5	1	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>384</b>

*Source: Database of the Department of Certifications and Tourism Social Responsibility, ICT.*

The agreement between ICT and participating companies prohibits disclosing the disaggregated levels of the aforementioned components unless the company itself wishes to make them public, so it is difficult to estimate the percentage of companies that have been certified out of all active companies in the country. As an example, in 2017, ICT had 3,687 active lodging companies on record, leading us to think that only 6.7% of them have tourism certification. The estimate should probably be higher, though, since the lodging companies' figures do not distinguish between those geared to businesses or overnight lodging for travelers and those intended especially for tourism.

In terms of the geographic distribution of tourist activities, we observe a bias in favor of the Pacific region - complementing the bias of touristic visits mentioned above. In 2017, there were 65 certified lodging companies in the province of Puntarenas (Central, Mid- and Southern Pacific), 41 in the province of Guanacaste (Northern Pacific), and only nine in the province of Limón (Caribbean region). The rest are located in the Central Valley. In addition, data from the directory of ICT's Department of Certifications and Tourism Social Responsibility, shows that from the 65 certified lodging companies located in Puntarenas, 41 are sun and beach establishments, 17 are exclusively mountain establishments and only seven are sun, beach and mountain establishments.

### **3.3. Vietnam: policies and players in sustainable tourism**

Vietnam is located on the Eastern side of the Indochina Peninsula, bordering China to the North, Laos and Cambodia to the West, and Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia to the South-West, South-East, and East, respectively. The country has a long coastline of 3,444km and a land area of 331,123km<sup>2</sup>. While North Vietnam is characterized by mountains, hills, and the Red River Delta, South Vietnam features coastal lowlands, the Mekong River Delta and tropical forests, making it one of the countries with the greatest touristic potential in the region.

<sup>2</sup> Companies certified at the close of 2017, including companies in the process of revalidating their certification.

In Vietnam, government involvement has a significant impact on tourism development, similar to former and transitioning state socialist countries in South-East Asia (Hall, 1994). The tourism sector is coordinated by the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (VNAT), under the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, and given the economic significance of tourism, the government has enacted a number of policies to promote tourism development (Dao, 2013).

From 2005 to present, tourism has remained an economic spearhead while also being perceived as a contributor to poverty alleviation (Dao, 2015). During this period, the government prepared the Master Plan for Tourism Development to 2020, Vision 2030 (Institute for Tourism Development Research, 2018), with the overall goal to turn Vietnam into a country with a developed tourism industry and an attractive destination in Asia by 2030. This is proposed by the development of seven tourist zones (Northern Midlands and Mountain Areas, Red River Delta and North-Eastern Coastal Areas, North Central, South Central Coastal Areas, Central Highlands, South-East, and South-West), 46 national tourist areas and 41 national tourist spots (Institute for Tourism Development Research, 2018).

In terms of promoting tourism activities, the VNAT has been actively involved in expanding what the country has to offer. As an example, in 2005 VNAT spent a budget of USD 5.3 million for promotional activities in several strategies and forums (Dao and Le, 2016). As a result, three promotion campaigns have since been implemented to attract foreign tourists: Welcome to Vietnam (2004-2005), Vietnam - the Hidden Charm (2006-2011), and Vietnam - the Timeless Charm (2012-present).

Positioning this last campaign (Vietnam - the Timeless Charm) is basically done by the state, but it includes cooperation mechanisms with local and regional tourism operators, fundamentally from the Asia-Pacific area (VNAT, 2018a). Also, public materials (e.g. brochures, tourism reports) are produced in different languages, addressing potential visitors from China, Japan, North and South Korea, and the English-speaking world. In addition, the VNAT has collaborated with Vietnam Airlines, Vietnamese embassies overseas, and international media corporations (e.g. BBC, CNN, NHK). It has also participated in international tourism promotion events such as ATF (ASEAN Tourism Forum), Top Resa (France), ITB (Germany), JATA (Japan) and WTM (UK) (Dao and Le, 2016). Furthermore, the government has signed visa exemption agreements with approximately 80 countries worldwide (Dao, 2014).

As a result, in 2017, international visitors to Vietnam reached 12,922,151 arrivals, meaning an increase of 29.1% as compared to 2016. 76% of the total international visitors came from Asia, 15% from Europe, 6% from America, 3% from Oceania and 0.3% from Africa. From the total of 9,762,661 Asian visitors, 41% were Chinese, illustrating also the impact of China on the Vietnamese economy (VNAT, 2016; VNAT, 2018c).

In terms of employment, the tourism sector generated 2,467,500 jobs directly in 2017 (4.6% of total employment). By 2028, a total of 2,917,000 jobs is expected, an increase of 1.5% per annum over the next ten years. This includes employment by hotels, travel agents, airlines and other passenger transportation services, and the activities of the restaurant and leisure industries directly supported by tourists (excluding commuter services) (WTTC, 2018).

As for the different tourism components, leisure travel spending (inbound and domestic) generated 90.3% of direct tourism GDP in 2017, compared with 9.7% for business travel spending. Also, domestic travel spending generated 49.3% of direct tourism GDP in 2017 compared with 50.7% for visitor exports (i.e. foreign visitor spending or international tourism receipts).

The push in tourist activities is also reflected in the increase of specific establishments like hotels. Table 2 shows the growth rate in the number of establishments, rooms, and the average room occupancy for the period 2000-2015.

Table 2. Growth of tourist accommodation establishments in Vietnam for the period 2000-2015

Year	No. of acc.	Growth rate of acc. (%)	No. of rooms	Growth rate of rooms (%)	Average room occupancy rate (%)
2000	3,267		72,200		
2002	4,390	34.37	92,500	28.12	
2005	5,847	33.19	125,400	35.57	49.9
2006	7,039	20.39	160,500	27.99	60.0
2007	9,080	29.00	178,348	11.12	60.7
2008	10,406	14.60	202,776	13.70	59.9
2009	11,467	10.20	216,675	6.85	56.9
2010	12,352	7.72	237,111	9.43	58.3
2011	13,756	11.37	256,739	8.28	59.7
2012	15,381	11.81	277,661	8.15	58.8
2014	16,000	-	332,000	-	-
2015	18,800	-	355,000	-	-

Source: VNAT, 2018c.

The growth of tourism in the country came after thirty years of implementing major economic reforms, known as *Đổi Mới*, in 1986. Ever since, the country has transitioned from a centrally-planned economy, characterized by low levels of income and widespread poverty, to a middle-income country with a globally integrated, socialist-orientated market economy (Barker and Üngör, 2018). As mentioned, government involvement has played an important role in the development of tourism, particularly in its initial stages when the private sector

was non-existent and when the government was more concerned about national security than the benefits of tourism (Truong and Le, 2016).

#### **4. Sustainable tourism in Puntarenas and Lao Cai: challenges and opportunities revised**

In order to illustrate the situation of the tourism sector in Costa Rica and Vietnam, the relevance of sustainability concerns therein, and its links with a green transformation, we selected the province of Puntarenas in Costa Rica, and the province of Lao Cai in Vietnam, as two regions that historically (and even more over the last decade) have been frontrunners in positioning tourism as a development factor, each with its particularities, impacts and future challenges.

##### **4.1. Sustainable tourism certification in Puntarenas, Costa Rica**

Puntarenas covers an area of 11,266 km<sup>2</sup> and is the largest province of Costa Rica. It stretches out fairly narrowly but occupies practically two-thirds of the Pacific coastline in the Western part of the country. Because of this, the province shows tremendous geographical variety with ever-changing landscapes (Vargas, 2012), including rainforests, cloud forests, dry forests, swampland, biological reserves on some of the islands in the Gulf of Nicoya, and many varied beaches. It thus has innumerable tourist attractions, like Carara National Park, the Doña Ana beaches, the Gulf islands, Jaco Beach, Manuel Antonio National Park, Cabo Blanco Nature Reserve, Caño Island Biological Reserve, the Guayabo, Negritos and Pájaros Island Biological Reserves, and the Corcovado National Park (Meza, 2001).

In 2017, the Yellow Pages Directory showed that more than 400 tourism accommodations were operating in the province. At the same time, a significant number of informal hotels and cabins (rental homes) exist that are not listed in the directory.

In order to analyze the sustainability actions of those companies, we conducted an internet search in November and December 2018, seeking and analyzing official information from the companies. We were able to identify 65 CST-certified lodging companies in the province, whose sustainability actions regarding the physio-biological environment component of the CST guidelines we compiled<sup>3</sup>. The actions cover environmental awareness-raising, recognition of the value of conservation, recognition of the impacts of tourism and generation of several basic changes such as reducing the use of electricity and water and implementing recycling. Out of the 65 companies, 39 companies (60%) had their own official website, and from these, 28 had an additional Facebook page, whereas the remaining 11 had only their official website. 22 companies (34%) were found with only a Facebook page. Four companies (6%) neither possessed an official website nor a Facebook page.

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<sup>3</sup> In the CST guidelines, sustainability actions are compiled under "What is Expected of the Lodging Company?".

Table 3 gives an overview of those companies and the CST-relevant actions (physio-biological environment component) they reported online (both official websites and Facebook pages).

Table 3. Sustainability actions and reporting of CST-recognized lodging companies

Operational areas of the physio-biological environment component in the CST <sup>4</sup>	Number of internet reporting (own official website - Facebook page mentions)	Own Websites	Facebook Fan Pages
<b>1. Environment and Conservation</b> - The company values the environment in which it is immersed.	23 (29,9%)	20	3
<b>2. Green Areas</b> - The company lets the green areas serve as points of attraction for native animal species and migratory birds.	54 (70,1%)	32	22
<b>3. Natural Areas</b> - The company recognizes that environmental conservation generates benefits with adequate responsible tourism management.	63 (81,8%)	37	26
- The company promotes the appropriate use of these natural areas as tourist destinations.	63 (81,8%)	35	28
<b>4. Protection of Flora and Fauna</b> - The company avoids changes in the environment that have repercussions on the site's flora and fauna.	20 (26,0%)	10	10
<b>5. Protection of the Archeological, Architectural and Cultural Heritage</b> - The company knows that the natural and cultural heritage and its protection is, on the whole, an attraction.	2 (2,6%)	2	0
<b>6. Climate Change</b> -The company is developing climate change strategies focused on reducing its energy use and including new, low-carbon energies and materials in its value chain in order to reduce its carbon footprint.	24 (31,2%)	18	6

<sup>4</sup> Area number three (Golf Course) has been excluded since only three of the province's companies with CST have an area of this type.

<b>7. Water Use</b>			
- The company knows the amount of water it uses in its operation and takes actions to reduce the level of use.	32 (41,6%)	27	5
- The company installs devices to save water in conventional equipment (faucets, showers and toilets).	32 (41,6%)	25	7
<b>8. Energy Use</b>			
- The company knows the amount of energy it uses in its operation and takes actions to reduce the level of use.	41 (53,2%)	33	8
- The company changes to one of the following types of devices: automatic shut-off, motion sensor switches, circuit deactivation, sensors, and photocells.	41 (53,2%)	29	12
<b>9. Organic and Inorganic Waste Management</b>			
- The company participates in recycling programs.	32 (41,6%)	31	1
<b>10. Wastewater</b>			
- The company has a wastewater treatment system in operation to prevent raw discharge into national waters, minimizing adverse environmental impacts.	11 (14,3%)	11	0

*Source: Authors' compilation.*

We find that companies communicate more on their situatedness within a green setting and their suitability for green touristic activities (categories two and three) as compared to own corporate preservative activities (e.g. categories five to ten). Hence it seems that the CST-certificate does not encourage more sustainability per se, but could be regarded more as an advertising token for tourism. In economic terms, the certificate can thus be seen as a marketing tool but also as a communication or public relations instrument.

### ***Tourism in Lao Cai***

Lao Cai is a province of the mountainous North-West region of Vietnam bordering the province of Yunnan in China and covering 6,383.9 km<sup>2</sup>. It is home to the district of Sa Pa in the Hoang Lien Son mountain range near the Chinese border. Sa Pa district has 17 communes and one town - which is also the district capital - of the same name. Sa Pa is famous for its rice terraces, lush vegetation, and Fansipan (3,143 m), the highest peak in the Indochinese Peninsula (comprising Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), hence its nickname "the

Roof of Indochina". It is also home to a great diversity of ethnic minority groups, including H'mong, Dao, Tay, Giay, Muong, Thai, Hoa and Xa Pho.

Tourism is a highly relevant and accelerating economic sector in the province. In 2015, Lao Cai received 2,042,670 tourists, 36% more than in 2011. From the total of tourists, 33% were international and 67% domestic. Also, by 2015 there were 9,100 people employed in tourism related activities - a relevant increase, compared to 3,500 people employed in 2011. Moreover, in 2015 the total accommodation establishments were 550, which increased by 14% from 2011 (VNAT, 2016). Thus, in 2015, Lao Cai province exceeded the targets established by VNAT in 2011 as follows: tourists exceeded the set target by 36%; tourism receipts reached 34% surpluses compared to 2011; labor exceeded the set target by 7%; per capita expenditure level exceeded the 2011 target by 15%; tourism infrastructure (e.g. hotels) reached 15%; and tourist guides and explanations members exceeded the set targets by 111% (VNAT, 2018b).

Tourist development in the province depends heavily on the provincial government, and the public policies that it approves. On July 2015, Decision No.: 2284/QĐ-UBND was signed by the Lao Cai Provincial People's Committee, including important elements for achieving tourism goals in the Master Plan of socio-economic development of the Sa Pa district for the year 2020, and oriented to the year 2030. This document should carry the achievements of the 2011-2015 comparison even further. The purpose of this policy was thus to fully exploit potentials and advantages of the natural conditions of the region, and to develop tourism as a key economic sector. For this, several important considerations were approved (VNAT, 2018b):

- Upgrade, expand and develop Sa Pa town to come up with the standard of urban type three in 2020, expanding the area for sustainable tourism to 1,188 ha and including four tourism zones, five residential areas two urban areas.
- Develop synchronous and modern infrastructure system, and diverse tourism products, e.g. sightseeing tours or sport tourism.
- Attract national and foreign investment to develop luxury resorts (e.g. four-star and five-star hotels) and shopping-entertainment centers
- Develop training plans and establish training centers for those employed in tourism at all provincial and district levels in order to enhance knowledge and capacity of sustainable tourism. This should encompass 15 staff members from state institutions at the district level, 400 staff members from tourism enterprises, 250 tour guides and 450 language translators, both from ethnic minorities.
- Boost community tourism by enhancing tourism agencies and encouraging and supporting local people to build new tourism accommodations.

- Increase the promotion of tourism activities in Sa Pa, with the active participation of the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism.

By implementing the Master Plan and its related activities, Sa Pa district institutions intended to increase the visitation and revenues from tourism. Thus, it is planned to raise the number of visits by 20.2% per year during the period 2016-2020, and revenues by 26.2% per year. Also, more than 5,500 rooms should be available for tourists in 2020, and 10,000 new jobs should have been created. Whereas those developments are not concluded at the time of writing, it is fair to say that major challenges still persist in terms of boosting the tourism sector generally, and in terms of establishing sustainable tourism specifically, as personal communication has revealed. Those challenges include “limited funding for developing more tourism options, limited transportation infrastructure, and deficiencies in encouraging community tourism” (VNAT, 2018a). Also, so far it remains unclear how different types of infrastructure development, including transportation and high-quality accommodation will interact in terms of protection of the environment and implementation of labor standards. Additionally, the potential import of mass tourism into traditional communities may pose a challenge in terms of safeguarding local values and fair cooperation.

Against the background of those considerations, it could be an asset to mobilize the private sector and possibly to investigate the potential of sustainability certification comparable to the Costa Rica case elaborated above, as a condition for the development of sustainable tourism on a large scale. Relatedly, capacity building seems to be the key, when creating awareness across levels on the importance of developing sustainable tourism to enhance community livelihoods.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have analyzed the development of sustainable tourism, and particularly the proliferation of sustainable tourism certification and public policy making, as part of a route towards green transformations in Costa Rica and Vietnam.

We have found mixed results: On the one hand, sustainable tourism - respectively the image of sustainable tourism - has become an important issue and reference point to develop tourist destinations and activities in both countries. In Costa Rica, this development builds on a long tradition, whereas in Vietnam it is rather a new trend but one that has gained a lot of momentum over the last years. In both countries, sustainable tourism can be regarded as part of an attempt to position the country as a frontrunner in sustainable development policies. But this development has been, in line with the general character of the political systems in both countries, the result of different policy approaches. In Costa Rica, the role of corporate certification for private actors from the tourism sector is an im-

portant instrument. Voluntary reporting, however, leaves important questions unanswered, like “What are the key challenges in terms of implementing the single items that are covered in the CST?”, “How does a CST certificate attract more tourists to the companies?” and “What are the conditions for implementing sustainability standards and working towards a green transformation on the ground?”. In contrast, Vietnam does not rely on this type of corporate reporting to foster and promote sustainable tourism. Instead - and in line with the country’s tradition - it is primarily the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism that guides new activities through hierarchical policy-making.

On the other hand, sustainable tourism in Costa Rica and Vietnam is not yet a defining element of a green transformation for the following reasons. First, in both countries, tourism is an important part of domestic economic performance, and it is planned to sustain or even expand its relevance in the future. But both countries rely heavily on international visitors who usually fly to their destinations, and the transport and accommodation of tourists in the destination area is resource-intensive (e.g. in terms of land use, water and energy consumption). The enhancement of tourism, in absolute terms but also as share of GDP, is per se thus not a very ecofriendly activity. Second, inter-sectoral aspects are not systematically taken into account yet, as attempts to green tourism seem not to have any positive side-effects on traffic, agriculture etc. Finally, even those tourist or hotel operators who jump the green bandwagon seem to do so for branding. It thus seems fair to say that much of what is called sustainable tourism is primarily a form of “green-washing” and not (yet) a central element of a substantial and sustainable transformation of the tourism sector. Future research may thus wish to explore whether and under which conditions more serious and transformative policies will emerge.

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