

Marine Tourism Development in Vietnam's South Central Coast From 2011 To 2021

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ABSTRACT

The South Central Coast of Vietnam has distinctive cultural traditions and abundant natural landscapes. In recent years, localities in the region have exploited these resources to develop marine tourism. This paper presents the marine tourism potential and the development of marine tourism in the South Central Coast during the study period, and proposes several solutions to promote marine tourism development in the region in the coming period.

Keywords: Promotion; development; marine tourism; South Central Coast region.

INTRODUCTION

Marine tourism is a form of tourism organized in coastal territories and adjacent marine areas, including nearshore islands; therefore, its development depends greatly on the natural characteristics and tourism potential of coastal geographical spaces (Pham Trung Luong, 2012). Vietnam's South Central Coast comprises eight provinces and centrally administered cities: Da Nang, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, Khanh Hoa, Ninh Thuan, and Binh Thuan. The region has a coastline of more than 1,000 km, creating favorable conditions for marine economic activities, particularly marine and island tourism.

The region is closely connected with the sea and possesses abundant marine and island resources, including the Hoang Sa and Truong Sa archipelagos. Marine and island tourism has been identified as an important characteristic and development orientation in Vietnam's tourism strategy. At the regional level, the 2014 master plan also identified marine and island tourism as an important tourism orientation, while emphasizing quality improvement, professionalism, environmental protection, and stronger linkages among provinces.

Despite its advantages, marine tourism in the South Central Coast has not yet fully realized its potential. Similarity in products among localities, uneven service quality, limitations in human resources and infrastructure, weak regional coordination, and increasing environmental pressures continue to constrain sustainable development. In this context, the paper examines the potential and development process of marine tourism in the region during 2011–2021 and proposes policy directions to strengthen sustainability and competitiveness and promote marine tourism development.

Contributions and originality of the study

Compared with previous studies that have mainly focused on resource potential, tourism development, or individual solutions in selected localities, this study approaches marine tourism in the South Central Coast from a regional-linkage perspective, simultaneously examining four groups of factors: tourism resources, supply capacity, tourism performance, and sustainability and competitiveness. Placing the eight provinces and cities within a common analytical framework helps identify similarities, differences, and interprovincial constraints in marine tourism development during 2011–2021.

The study makes three main contributions. First, it places the eight provinces and cities within a common analytical framework and develops a data matrix by locality and time, thereby clarifying intra-regional differentiation rather than merely describing overall trends. Second, it links tourist volume, supply capacity, and revenue with issues of products, services, human resources, regional linkages, and the environment, while analyzing changes before and during COVID-19. Third, it translates the identified constraints into a proposed set of quantitative indicators for monitoring sustainable marine tourism development in future studies. Because environmental and social data have not yet been standardized across the eight localities, the study does not construct a composite index but focuses on empirical comparisons based on verifiable secondary data.

Theoretical Basis and Research Methods

Theoretical basis of marine tourism development

Marine tourism development can be understood as an interaction among tourism resources, infrastructure and technical facilities, tourist markets, tourism products, human resources, business performance, environmental conditions, and state governance. Natural and cultural resources provide the foundation for product formation; transport infrastructure and accommodation facilities determine accessibility and service capacity; while human resources, technology, business capabilities, and governance determine professionalism, value creation, and long-term competitiveness.

From a sustainable development perspective, marine tourism needs to balance economic benefits, social welfare, cultural conservation, environmental protection, and the rational use of marine and coastal resources. For the South Central Coast, this approach is particularly important because the region simultaneously contains major tourism centers, sensitive marine ecosystems, coastal communities, and marine spaces of strategic significance.

Research methods

The study primarily uses secondary data to analyze marine tourism development in the eight provinces and cities of the South Central Coast during 2011–2021. Data were compiled from studies, reports, and statistical information cited in the references, focusing on: (i) domestic and international tourist arrivals at key marine tourism localities and selected representative local tourism indicators; (ii) accommodation establishments and rooms; (iii) tourism revenue; (iv) length of stay; and (v) indicators reflecting tourism resources, infrastructure, and environmental conditions.

The indicators were selected according to three criteria: (i) direct relevance to marine tourism development; (ii) comparability across localities; and (iii) data accessibility. When sources did not provide indicators specific to marine tourism, the study used representative indicators for coastal localities and explicitly stated the interpretive limitations. Statistical and comparative methods were used to identify development trends and differences among localities.

Because the study mainly uses secondary data published at different times and from different sources, the completeness and consistency of data across the eight localities remain limited. Therefore, the study focuses on trend analysis and comparisons appropriate to the available data rather than developing an econometric model or a composite index of competitiveness.

Historical–logical methods were used to examine changes in marine tourism development during 2011–2021. Statistical and comparative methods were used to assess tourist arrivals, accommodation capacity, tourism revenue, and related development trends. In addition, analytical, synthesis, comparative, generalization, and interdisciplinary approaches were applied to clarify the relationships among resource potential, tourism supply capacity, market outcomes, and sustainability. The study primarily relies on secondary information contained in the original studies and cited sources. Quantitative tables were standardized according to units and comparable periods; where a homogeneous time series for all eight localities was unavailable, no interpolation or conversion was performed in order to avoid generating assumed data.

Analytical framework

The analytical framework is structured around four main groups: (1) marine tourism resources, including beaches, bays, islands, ecosystems, seafood resources, and coastal cultural heritage; (2) tourism supply capacity, including transport, accommodation, entertainment, food and beverage services, and human resources; (3) tourism performance, reflected in tourist arrivals, length of stay, tourism products, and revenue; and (4) regional sustainability and competitiveness, reflected in environmental protection, resource conservation, community participation, product differentiation, service quality, and interprovincial linkages.

On this basis, the study examines the relationship between resource potential, supply capacity, and market outcomes, while analyzing factors that constrain sustainable development and the competitiveness of marine tourism across the region. The contribution of the study lies in combining a regional perspective with a distinction between direct marine tourism data and representative indicators for coastal localities, thereby avoiding the assumption that all tourism activities of a province are marine tourism.

Research Results

Marine tourism potential of the South Central Coast

Marine and seafood resources

The South Central Coast has abundant and diverse marine biological resources. The original study reports approximately 600 fish species, of which only about 30–40 have high economic value. The offshore waters of the region account for a large share of Vietnam's potential for marine fisheries, with valuable species such as flying fish, tuna, mackerel, Indian mackerel, sardines, and lobsters. The northern part of the region, from Da Nang to Binh Dinh, has dispersed offshore resources, whereas the Khanh Hoa–Ninh Thuan area has relatively high resource density and a more concentrated fishing season. These resources can support tourism experiences linked to coastal livelihoods, seafood culture, fishing communities, and marine cuisine.

Beaches and coastal landscapes

The region has approximately 1,172 km of coastline and numerous beaches, coastal landscapes, and island spaces suitable for integrated tourism development. Beaches are generally relatively flat, with fairly clear water and moderate waves, creating favorable conditions for swimming and leisure tourism. Da Nang and Nha Trang are well-known destinations, while the coastal landscape from Son Tra Peninsula to Non Nuoc and My Khe provides a strong foundation for resort and recreational tourism. The combination of beaches, mountains, bays, and islands also allows the development of sightseeing, ecotourism, adventure tourism, and specialized tourism products.

Marine and coastal mineral resources

The South Central Coast also has marine and coastal mineral resources, including oil and gas potential, glass-making sand, titanium oxide, clay, kaolin, limestone, and certain gemstones. Although many of these resources have limited direct relevance to tourism products, coastal geological landscapes and dune systems retain tourism value. The region contains multiple generations of coastal dunes, including red, yellow, white, and gray-yellow sand formations, particularly in Ninh Thuan and northern Binh Thuan.

Bays, islands, and marine ecosystems

Along the coastline there are many bays, gulfs, and deep, sheltered sea inlets, including Quy Nhon, Xuan Dai, Nha Trang, and Van Phong. These spaces combine seascapes with coastal cultural life and provide favorable conditions for boating, diving, fishing, coral reef observation, and marine recreation. Nearshore islands such as Son Tra Peninsula, Cu Lao Cham, Ly Son, Hon Tre, Hon Tam, and Phu Quy continue to retain important landscape and biodiversity values and can support resort, ecotourism, exploration, and specialized tourism.

Marine and coastal ecosystems are highly diverse, including wetlands, coral reefs, mangroves, seagrass beds, estuaries, island ecosystems, and coastal sandy habitats. Nha Trang Bay, for example, has rich diversity of marine species and coral communities. These ecosystems not only create tourism attractions but also perform ecological functions such as providing habitats and breeding grounds, protecting natural coastlines, and regulating environmental conditions. Therefore, conserving these ecosystems is essential to maintaining the long-term competitiveness of marine tourism destinations.

Coastal cultural values

The region's marine tourism potential is reinforced by distinctive cultural resources. Sa Huynh culture, Cham culture, coastal community traditions, the ancient town of Hoi An, the My Son Sanctuary, Cham towers in Phan Rang, traditional craft villages, and festivals such as the Thap Ba Ponagar Festival, Nghinh Ong Festival, whale-worshipping festivals, and the Kate Festival create a rich layer of cultural values around coastal destinations. The combination of natural landscapes and coastal cultural values gives the South Central Coast a comparative advantage in developing marine tourism combined with cultural and ecological experiences.

Marine tourism development from 2011 to 2021

Tourism infrastructure and technical facilities

Localities in the region have expanded investment in integrated entertainment complexes, golf courses, casinos, adventure activities, water sports, hotels, and resorts. Investment has been concentrated particularly in Quang Nam, Da Nang, Khanh Hoa, and Binh Thuan. The region also benefits from transport connectivity through international and domestic airports, National Highway 1A, and seaports. Accommodation capacity increased rapidly, with high-quality facilities concentrated in major coastal cities. During 2011–2018, the average annual growth rate of tourism accommodation establishments reached 13.93%, while the number of rooms increased by 16.53% per year (Nguyen Thi Lan Huong & Nguyen Hoang Mai, 2021).

The relatively high share of high-end accommodation facilities indicates the region's capacity to serve higher-spending market segments. However, the original study also notes that professionalism and the level of utilization of entertainment and recreational facilities remain uneven among localities.

Domestic and international tourists

To ensure the specificity of the topic, the tourist tables in this section prioritize statistics that directly identify key marine tourism localities. Because the statistical coverage does not uniformly encompass all eight localities and there is no continuous series for the entire 2011–2021 period, the study uses only localities and years that can be cross-checked and does not interpolate missing years.

Tables 1 and 2 below use data for localities that official sources identify as key marine tourism destinations. The two tables do not cover Quang Ngai and Phu Yen because the statistical source used does not include these two localities within the same table scope; this is a limitation of data coverage, not an exclusion of the two localities from the study.

Table 1. International tourist arrivals in selected key marine tourism localities, 2016–2020

Unit: thousand arrivals.

Locality	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Da Nang	1,677	2,332	2,875	3,523	880
Quang Nam	2,250	2,768	3,800	4,666	766
Binh Dinh	256	264	327	484	145

Khanh Hoa	1,170	2,022	2,793	3,560	438
Ninh Thuan	55	61	80	100	17
Binh Thuan	521	591	676	774	171

Table 2. Domestic tourist arrivals in selected key marine tourism localities, 2016–2020

Unit: thousand arrivals.

Locality	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Da Nang	3,868	4,302	4,788	5,169	1,842
Quang Nam	2,110	2,582	2,720	3,124	712
Binh Dinh	2,944	3,436	3,765	4,345	2,070
Khanh Hoa	3,366	3,403	4,228	4,080	810
Ninh Thuan	1,645	1,839	2,110	2,250	1,160
Binh Thuan	3,994	4,541	5,076	5,630	3,124

Source: Compiled from local statistical yearbooks, according to the Environmental Assessment Report for the North Central and Central Coastal Regions.

The two tables show that during 2016–2019, both international and domestic tourist arrivals in key marine tourism localities increased, but at different rates and scales. Quang Nam, Da Nang, and Khanh Hoa stood out in international arrivals, while Da Nang and Quang Nam had large domestic markets. In 2020, both groups of tourists declined sharply because of COVID-19. Because direct statistics on marine tourism do not uniformly cover all eight localities, the tables reflect only key localities for which comparable data are available. In Table 1 specifically, international arrivals at key marine tourism localities increased strongly during 2016–2019, particularly in Quang Nam, Khanh Hoa, and Da Nang. In 2020, international arrivals fell sharply in all localities due to COVID-19 and travel restrictions.

In addition, investment in high-end hotels and resorts in these localities contributed to attracting international visitors with relatively high spending capacity, including visitors from Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and part of the Chinese market. In Khanh Hoa, the total number of guest-days at accommodation establishments during 2016–2020 reached 24.9 million, of which approximately 10 million were international guest-days; in 2019, tourism contributed approximately 12.29% of the province’s GRDP (Xuan Thoa – VPTU, 2021).

Marine and island tourism products

Marine and island resorts, beach tourism, island and bay sightseeing, diving, coral observation, and water sports are identified as characteristic products. Localities have also developed market-oriented products such as honeymoon tourism, destination weddings, and experiences associated with iconic coastal landmarks. These products expand the tourism portfolio and can connect leisure tourism with cultural identity, awareness of national maritime and island sovereignty, and green-growth orientations.

Seafood cuisine and local specialties are another important component of the tourism experience. However, high-quality restaurants and food services are concentrated mainly in coastal urban areas and major tourism centers, while many small-scale establishments remain dispersed and lack professionalism, limiting the ability to increase value from local culinary resources.

Tourism revenue and impacts of COVID-19

According to the consistent statistical series on travel-agency tourism revenue, revenue in the region's localities increased clearly before COVID-19 but declined sharply from 2020. This indicator is used because it allows consistent comparison across the eight localities over a long period; it should not be interpreted as total revenue from all tourism activities.

Table 3. Travel-agency tourism revenue of the eight South Central Coast provinces/cities, 2011–2020

Unit: billion Vietnamese dong.

Locality	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Da Nang	813.8	621.4	686.7	987.1	1,166.4	1,461.6	1,597.2	1,905.6	2,113.3	563.8
Quang Nam	64.4	106.7	140.8	201.1	289.6	364.9	414.0	439.0	476.3	93.0
Quang Ngai	2.5	4.4	5.0	5.2	6.1	7.9	8.7	9.3	10.9	4.4
Binh Dinh	14.9	24.8	26.1	30.4	32.4	37.3	45.2	50.9	59.2	36.5
Phu Yen	1.5	1.5	1.3	1.6	2.0	3.3	3.7	4.2	4.3	2.1
Khanh Hoa	124.4	136.9	154.7	164.5	197.4	290.2	372.8	477.5	544.5	245.1
Ninh Thuan	2.2	2.9	1.7	2.2	1.9	2.0	2.3	2.5	2.9	1.4
Binh Thuan	45.9	56.2	61.8	43.8	46.4	49.7	56.6	61.4	67.4	40.0

Source: General Statistics Office of Vietnam (2023), Economic and Social Conditions of Coastal Localities, 2011–2022, Statistical Publishing House, Hanoi, p. 27. Note: travel-agency tourism revenue is a representative indicator and is not equivalent to revenue generated specifically by marine tourism.

Table 3 shows clear differences in tourism revenue among localities. This indicator is used as a representative measure to compare the scale and economic capacity of tourism activities in coastal localities; it is not equivalent to revenue generated specifically by marine tourism. However, because localities in the region possess prominent advantages in marine resources and marine tourism activities, coastal and marine tourism plays an important role in the tourism product structure of many localities. Therefore, revenue from marine tourism activities and products can be regarded as a significant component of total tourism revenue in these localities. Accordingly, the general tourism revenue indicator still has relatively high reference value for assessing the market scale and economic capacity of marine tourism, although the exact share of marine tourism revenue cannot be determined from the available dataset.

During 2011–2019, tourism revenue generally increased, with Da Nang and Khanh Hoa standing out in scale. By 2020, revenue fell sharply under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the results in Table 3 are used as supplementary evidence for assessing the marine tourism development capacity of localities and, to some extent, the economic role of marine tourism within the tourism structure of the South Central Coast.

DISCUSSION

Major limitations

First, the region has not established a sufficiently strong coordination mechanism to formulate distinctive regional-level marine tourism orientations and products. Similar geographical conditions and resources lead

many localities to focus on similar products such as beach tourism, resorts, and bay and island sightseeing, reducing the potential for destination differentiation.

Second, product development remains oriented toward exploiting existing resources, while systematic market-demand research and product innovation have not yet been fully implemented. This limits the ability to extend visitors' length of stay and increase their spending.

Third, service quality and professionalism are uneven among localities. Some tourism activities remain spontaneous and lack common standards for information, safety, amenities, and service organization.

Fourth, the competitiveness and branding capacity of tourism enterprises remain limited. Entertainment, recreation, and supporting services are not sufficiently diverse, while the capacity for product linkages among localities remains weak.

Fifth, marine tourism human resources remain insufficient in both quantity and quality, particularly personnel with professional skills, foreign-language competence, technological skills, and the ability to provide services according to international standards.

Sixth, pressure on the marine environment and resources is increasing. Tourism waste, inappropriate resource exploitation, and spontaneous tourism activities may reduce environmental quality and destination attractiveness if not effectively controlled.

These limitations show that regional competitiveness depends not only on the scale of resources and tourist volume but also on product differentiation, service quality, resource conservation, community participation, and effective coordination among localities.

Key issues for sustainable development

Marine tourism development needs to be linked to improving local livelihoods, particularly those of coastal and island communities. Tourism and other marine economic activities also need to be integrated with national defense and security requirements in strategically important coastal spaces.

Table 4. Proposed quantitative indicators for monitoring sustainable marine tourism development

Group	Indicator	Unit measurement	Analytical meaning
Economic	Tourist growth	%/year	Measures market expansion trends
Economic	Tourism revenue per tourist	thousand VND/tourist	Reflects the quality and economic value of tourist flows
Economic	Average length of stay	days/tourist	Reflects the ability to retain visitors and diversify products
Environment	Share of accommodation establishments/tourist destinations with compliant waste treatment	%	Assesses environmental pressure and control capacity
Resources	Area of conserved marine ecosystems	ha or km ²	Monitors resource conservation

Social	Share of local labor in tourism	%	Assesses the distribution of benefits to communities
Community	Share of households/communities participating in tourism activities	%	Assesses community participation and benefits
Pressure	Tourists per unit of sensitive area	tourists/km ² or tourists/ha	Monitors tourism pressure on resources

Source: Authors' proposal based on the synthesis of analytical content on sustainable marine tourism development and evaluation criteria used in the study.

Communication and community education should raise awareness of marine and island strategies and build social consensus on the sustainable use of resources. At the same time, policies should reflect the specific characteristics of each locality while supporting investment, coastal livelihoods, and stable incomes for fishing and aquaculture communities.

Coastal and island planning needs to ensure scientific, objective, comprehensive, and cross-boundary coordination. Marine spatial planning should consider geographical and economic linkages among localities while establishing intersectoral and interprovincial coordination mechanisms.

DIRECTIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings, the paper proposes six policy directions to strengthen marine tourism development in the South Central Coast.

Develop a distinctive and sustainable regional tourism strategy

Provincial and municipal authorities should develop a common strategy for the entire region while conserving and promoting the comparative advantages of individual destinations. Planning should balance rapid growth and sustainability and integrate tourism development into the broader sustainable-development strategy of Vietnam's marine economy.

Strengthen tourism human resources

Local authorities and enterprises should improve the forecasting of tourism labor demand and align training programs with occupational requirements. Training quality should be linked to employment and wage policies, while recruitment should emphasize practical competence, creativity, communication skills, and service professionalism. Workers should receive regular training and capacity building; managers and experts should study successful marine tourism models in Vietnam and other destinations in the region.

Apply science, technology, and digital solutions

Investment in science and technology should support destination management, tourism information, marketing, resource monitoring, product development, and service efficiency. Localities should link technological development with market-oriented business activities and strengthen local technological capacity.

Strengthen regional and product linkages

Interprovincial coordination mechanisms should be institutionalized through a mechanism for monitoring and evaluating marine tourism development. Tourism routes should connect marine and cultural attractions, ecological destinations, lagoons, and inland heritage sites. For example, routes linking Hue–Da Nang–Quang Nam could be developed, together with broader itineraries across the South Central Coast. International

linkages should also be expanded through cruise tourism and multinational tourism routes connecting Vietnam with Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Singapore, Japan, South Korea, Russia, and other markets.

Protect the marine environment and strengthen sustainability

Environmental standards should be integrated into tourism planning, investment approval, and destination operations. Priority actions include waste reduction and treatment, protection of coral reefs and coastal ecosystems, control of spontaneous tourism activities, environmental education for residents and visitors, and promotion of responsible tourism practices. Environmental quality should be regarded as a core tourism asset rather than merely a secondary management issue.

Improve the business environment and international integration

Local authorities should continue administrative reform, improve transparency, and create a fair and predictable business environment. Tourism enterprises should be supported in branding and international promotion, including participation in international fairs and exhibitions. The use of international partnerships and linked tours should be strengthened to position the South Central Coast as a competitive marine tourism destination in the region.

Implications Beyond The Study Period

The directions proposed in the paper remain relevant after 2021 but need to be updated in line with the new planning context. The Regional Plan for the North Central and Central Coastal Region, approved in 2024, continues to emphasize the development of regional- and international-scale marine tourism and ecotourism centers, while requiring the development of the marine economy to be linked with environmental protection and sustainable resource use. This reinforces the relevance of the recommendations on regional linkages, product diversification, ecosystem protection, and service-quality improvement proposed in the study.

CONCLUSION

The South Central Coast possesses outstanding advantages in marine resources, coastal landscapes, ecosystems, and cultural values, creating a favorable foundation for marine tourism development. During 2011–2019, the region recorded strong growth in tourist arrivals, accommodation capacity, tourism products, and tourism revenue. These results, together with resource advantages and the development of marine and island products, indicate that marine tourism has increasingly played an important role in the region's tourism development structure. However, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the sector's vulnerability to external shocks and revealed a relatively high dependence on several markets and tourism centers.

The analysis shows that the major constraints on regional marine tourism include product similarity, uneven service quality, limitations in human resources, ineffective regional linkages, weak enterprise competitiveness, and increasing pressure on the marine environment. Therefore, future marine tourism development needs to shift from a model primarily based on resource exploitation and scale expansion toward one emphasizing product differentiation, quality improvement, resource conservation, and resilience.

On this basis, the study proposes six directions: developing a distinctive and sustainable regional tourism strategy; developing human resources; applying science, technology, and digital solutions; strengthening regional and product linkages; protecting the marine environment; and improving the business environment and international integration. These directions should be implemented simultaneously at local and regional levels, with clear coordination mechanisms and performance monitoring.

Because the study mainly uses secondary data and data are not completely homogeneous across localities, it has not constructed a composite quantitative index of sustainability or competitiveness for marine tourism. In the post-2021 context, the proposed directions remain relevant as reference points but need to be continuously updated according to recovery developments and new requirements in each locality. Therefore,

future research should develop standardized economic, environmental, and social indicators, update data series after 2021, and conduct deeper quantitative analyses across the region.

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