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The Competitiveness of Soc Trang Ecotourism Associated with Khmer Culture*

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Abstract

Tourism is considered one of the key economic sectors in Vietnam as it helps to promote the economic development, increase foreign exchange earnings, create jobs, and improve the living standards of local people. So, this study aims to identify factors affecting the competitiveness of Soc Trang ecotourism associated with Khmer culture based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Qualitative research was conducted through focus group discussions with experts, and quantitative research was conducted through direct interviews with visitors at ecotourism sites in Soc Trang province. The study involves questionnaire surveys and multivariate data analysis methods (Cronbach's Alpha test, EFA, CFA, SEM). Research results from 350 respondents demonstrate that all factors have a positive impact on the competitiveness of ecotourism associated with Khmer culture in Soc Trang province. It shows that the competitiveness of ecotourism associated with Khmer culture is influenced by five factors, including: (1) religious ritual customs of the Khmer people; (2) ecotourism infrastructure; (3) traditional festival activities of Khmer people; (4) culinary culture of Khmer people; and (5) folk ritual customs of the Khmer people. From these findings, the study offers some managerial implications to improve the competitiveness of Soc Trang ecotourism associated with Khmer culture.

Keywords: Khmer Culture, Competitiveness, Ecotourism

JEL Classification Code: M21, M31, Z32

1. Introduction

Tourism is considered one of the key economic sectors in Vietnam as it helps to promote the development of other economic sectors, increase foreign exchange earnings, create jobs, improve living standards of local people as well as significantly contribute to the innovation process and international integration. According to Lee and Syah (2018), tourism growth and agriculture land growth are positively related to an increase of total output in the short-run. Along

with the development of the tourism industry, ecotourism has become a strong global trend and also has become the core of tourism development strategies in many countries. Literally, ecotourism is a form of responsible tourism, nature-based tourism, supporting the goals of nature conservation and community development. This type of tourism has many practical contributions to sustainable development, natural protection, and economic benefits for the locality. For example, ecotourism helps people to access to pristine nature and fresh environment, learn many unique indigenous cultures, meet the needs of discovery, and human health.

Soc Trang province is one of 13 provinces in the Mekong Delta. Located in the South of Hau River, 231 km from Ho Chi Minh City, and 60 km from Can Tho, it has a favorable geographical position for its trade and socio-economic development. Its North and Northwest borders Hau Giang province, its Southwest borders Bac Lieu, its Northeast borders Tra Vinh, while its East and Southeast borders the East Sea. In addition, Soc Trang is located on National Highway 1A connecting Can Tho, Hau Giang, Bac Lieu and Ca Mau provinces; Highway 60 connects Soc Trang with Tra Vinh, Soc Trang, and Tien Giang provinces. With

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a 72km-long coastline, three large estuaries are flowing into the East Sea, which is very convenient for the waterway, road transport, tourism, and economic development. Moreover, Soc Trang has over 50km of the Hau River and the green islets in the middle of the Hau River. This is a great potential for Soc Trang to develop its ecotourism, organize ecotourism activities, especially community tourism, and the combination of river and sea tourism.

Currently, Soc Trang has eight tourist sites classified as national monuments and 36 rated provincial-level tourist attractions. Besides recognized places, it has many attractions to develop its ecotourism, such as My Phuoc dunes, Nga Nam floating market, Tan Long stork garden, Mo O beach, Cu Lao Dung mangrove forest, among others. In general, Soc Trang ecotourism is not much different from that of other provinces in Mekong Delta, such as Tien Giang, Tra Vinh, Dong Thap, and An Giang. However, Soc Trang ecotourism has its special characteristics with Khmer culture for their successful differentiation because 31.1% of Khmer people in Mekong Delta are now living in Soc Trang. The Khmer people live mainly on agriculture with an average living standard. However, their cultural and spiritual life is diverse and rich with various types of theater arts such as Robam dance, Du Ke, or Cham Rieng Cha Pay performances. Moreover, because of the long-developed written language, the Soc Trang Khmer is also the owner of folk arts with many fairy tales, myths, fables, jokes, folk songs, proverbs, wordplay, and puzzles. This is considered as a special advantage for the development of Soc Trang ecotourism.

Nonetheless, Soc Trang tourism faces fierce competition from other provinces in Mekong Delta such as Tien Giang, Tra Vinh, and An Giang because they also have similar natural conditions for their ecotourism. In such a competitive marketplace, attracting more tourists to Soc Trang is critical for the survival and growth of its tourism industry. According to Bordas (1994), tourism destinations must compete fiercely with each other in terms of markets, products, and technology in tourism, i.e., destinations need to improve their tourism attractiveness, infrastructure, equipment, tourism products, and related services as well as their efficient organization. Consequently, this paper examines the role of Khmer culture in the competitiveness of Soc Trang ecotourism for its sustainable development. Soc Trang ecotourism is associated with Khmer culture.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Destination Competitiveness

According to D’Hauteserre (2000), competitiveness is the ability of a tourist destination to maintain its market position and improve it over time. Hassan (2000) defines

competitiveness as the ability of a destination to create and integrate value-added products to maintain its resources and maintain its position in the market compared to competitors. Dwyer et al. (2000) asserted that competitiveness in tourism is a common concept, including the difference in prices along with exchange rate fluctuations, the productivity of different sectors in the tourism industry, and the factors that make the attraction of a tourist destination. According to Dwyer and Kim (2003), the competitiveness of a destination is the ability to provide goods and services better than that of others based on tourist experiences.

According to Crouch and Ritchie (2003), the factors that create competitiveness are the ability to increase investment in spending more than the services provided, experience activities, health safety, nature protection. Hence, more tourists will be attracted by a sense of satisfaction and destination-friendliness. Specifically, Crouch and Ritchie (1999) pointed out that important factors affecting the destination competitiveness in attracting tourists include infrastructure, culture and history, market relationships, activities, and events. They developed the conceptual model of destination competitiveness with four aspects, including standard destinations, its management ability, core resources, and support resources. From a resource-based viewpoint by Barney (1991) and Grant (1991), destination competitiveness depends on tangible and intangible resources. There is an interaction between the destination competitiveness and the businesses located in that area. As such, hotels, restaurants, and other service businesses are considered supporters of the tourism industry (Porter, 1980; Crouch & Ritchie, 1999).

2.2. Ecotourism

According to Vietnam’s tourism law issued in 2017, “Ecotourism is a type of nature-based tourism, in association with local cultural identity and the participation of the local community for sustainable development.”

According to Ba (2005), ecotourism is a type of tourism that takes specific, natural ecosystems as objects to serve tourists who love nature, travel, enjoy landscapes, or research on ecosystems. It is also a close and harmonious combination of tourism, economic development, and the introduction of national beauty as well as propaganda, education, sustainable development, and protected environment and natural resources. In ecotourism activities, historical monuments, local architectural works, folklore, festivals, products associated with terrain, climate, hydrology, wildlife, and plants are important factors that make a destination different. Demir and Cevirgen (2006) argued that the main factors that form the structure for ecotourism depend on local policies, including the development of the tourism industry, local and national management, local communities, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations. Among these

factors, the local community is considered as the most critical one.

According to Than et al. (2020) community attachment has a direct effect on both perceived benefits and destination sustainability. Moreover, the government needs to support ecotourism development by investing in the development of infrastructures such as transport systems, information systems, health care, security, food safety, and others without harms towards the environment. In addition, the competitiveness of a destination is also affected by its brand which is an essential factor to attract tourists, the strategic factors for a destination's brand include (1) geographical location; (2) people; (3) history and heritage; (4) attractive points; (5) potentials and opportunities; and (6) management capability (Anholt, 2003).

2.3. Factors Affecting Destination Competitiveness

Tsai et al. (2009) pointed that the competitiveness of tourism destinations is affected by (1) technology and infrastructure innovation; (2) Human resources; (3) Price; (4) Environment; (5) Public; (6) Social development; (7) Tourism staff; (8) Government; (9) History and culture; (10) Macroeconomy; (11) Microenvironment; (12) Destination management (marketing); (13) Factors of circumstances/situations; (14) Demand conditions; (15) Customer satisfaction; and (16) Psychological and social factors. Mechinda et al. (2010) applied the framework developed by Dwyer and Kim (2003) to conduct an empirical analysis of the Koh Chang destination in Thailand. By using regression analysis techniques, they found that the competitiveness of Koh Chang in Thailand is influenced by 12 factors, including (1) Destination environmental management; (2) Service quality; (3) Cultural monuments and local hotels; (4) Infrastructure; (5) Shopping and nightlife; (6) Natural resources; (7) Activities; (8) Competitive price; (9) Food; (10) Hygiene; (11) Safety; and (12) Location, which are consistent with those presented by Dwyer and Kim (2003). These studies showed that there are two different types of infrastructure: public and tourism infrastructure. Tourism infrastructure is an artificial resource, while public infrastructure is secondary elements. Moreover, the results from factor analysis suggested that local hotels were similar to heritage and culture.

Craigwell (2007) studied the competitiveness of destinations as small tourist islands, thereby determining the factors affecting the competitiveness of 45 small islands (in 2004). The study provided a comprehensive view of the tourism activities on the islands. Factors affecting the competitiveness include (1) Price; (2) Human resources; (3) Infrastructure; (4) Environment; (5) Technology; (6) Openness; and (7) Social aspects. Price is found as the most important determinant of competitiveness. Meanwhile, Zhu

et al. (2014) proposed a model to evaluate and analyze the factors affecting the competitiveness of the Delta in China, including the achievements of the tourism industry, the responsiveness of the destination, a professionally trained workforce for the tourism industry, a diversity of attractions, natural environmental protection factors, economically environmental protection factors, socially environmental protection factors. Kayar and Kozak (2010) introduced 13 factors affecting the competitiveness of destinations in EU and Turkey, including national policy mechanisms and regulations, environmental regulations, safety and security, hygiene and health, priority for tourism routes and tourism industry, aviation infrastructure, road transport infrastructure, tourism infrastructure, information and telecommunication infrastructure, price competitiveness, human resources, national tourism vision, culture, and natural resources.

In the case of rural tourism in An Giang province, Long and Nguyen (2018) identified factors affecting the satisfaction and return intention of tourists at the tourist destination in An Giang province based on the combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. They found that (1) the visitor satisfaction is influenced by seven factors including tourism infrastructure, natural environment, cuisine, security and order - safety in tourism, human, service prices, spirituality; and (2) the visitor's return intention is influenced by six factors including cuisine, security and order - safety in tourism, human, service prices, spirituality, and satisfaction. From this result, the study provided some managerial implications to enhance the tourist's satisfaction and return intention to the tourism destinations in An Giang province.

2.4. Proposed Research Model

Based on the theoretical approach from the above-mentioned studies, this research aims at investigating possible factors affecting the competitiveness of Soc Trang ecotourism associated with Khmer culture. Specifically, the following factors are investigated.

2.4.1. Ecotourism Infrastructure

Tourism infrastructure is described as all material and technical facilities created by the tourism organizations and the government to exploit the tourism potential. They include the system of hotels and restaurants, entertainment and recreation areas, transport mean, architectural works, historical and cultural monuments. These are typical elements of a technical infrastructure system of the tourism industry (Khuong & Nguyen, 2017). According to Cracolici et al. (2008), tourism infrastructure includes: (1) stops and tourist services; (2) transport and telecommunications infrastructure; (3) factors serving the community such as

health, education, and aesthetics; (4) entertainment spots such as sports complexes, fairs, cinemas; and (5) Information Technology infrastructure to improve service quality and information transparency (Purnomo et al., 2020). Tourism infrastructure is one of the critical factors influencing tourist's satisfaction and attract them to a country or a tourist destination (Le & Le, 2020). Good tourism infrastructure will create favorable conditions for a destination to attract more tourists (Grytsiuk et al., 2017). Thus, this study will examine the following hypothesis:

H₁: Ecotourism infrastructure positively affects the competitiveness of Soc Trang ecotourism.

2.4.2. Culinary Culture of Khmer People in Soc Trang Province

Culinary is an increasingly important factor for the tourism industry because it has always been recognized as one of the essential leading factors to attract tourists. There are core intangible cultural values of the destination hidden inside the culinary, and through enjoying them, tourists can explore and feel the orthodox cultural identity of the local people (Lee & King, 2009; Molina-Azorin et al., 2010). For the food vendors in the destination, it is necessary to expand the knowledge of the culinary culture of tourists, such as eating habits, tastes, and customs to make the cuisine suitable for their habits (Quan & Wang, 2004). In Soc Trang province, the culinary culture of the Khmer is diverse and plentiful. From the dishes in daily life to the dishes on special occasions such as Tet holidays (Lunar New Year holidays) or the death anniversary of Khmer people, they all show the human behavior towards the natural environment. They choose foods that come from nature, then process and make many different dishes. Up to now, Khmer people have had a long list of typical dishes, such as beef sauce, som lo soup, noodle soup, green rice flakes, palm sugar cake, palm water, which are very attractive to tourists. Thus, the following hypothesis:

H₂: Culinary culture of Khmer people positively affects the competitiveness of Soc Trang ecotourism.

2.4.3. Folk Ritual Customs of Khmer People

Folk ritual customs of Khmer people in Soc Trang province in particular and in the Southern region, in general, have unique values among the diverse and rich spiritual culture. According to Son (2017), the folk ritual customs of Khmer people in Soc Trang province include Pithi ching chot Pro lung (Soul Rite), Pithi Bon Chhak Bang skol (Requiem ceremony), Chhak Mo ha Bang skol (Great

Requiem ceremony), Pithi Bon Phnum pone (Feast of the Mountains), Bon Kom som Srok (Peace Praying), Pithi Long Arak (Ceremony to Arak), Pithi sene Neak Ta (Ceremony of worshipping Ta), Pithi Bon som Tuk phlieng (Rain Praying), Bon sene len (Ceremony of worshipping rice field), among others. With the socio-economic development of Soc Trang, the physical and spiritual life of Khmer people has been increasingly improved. Due to the cultural exchange with the Kinh and Chinese people, there is a significant change in the perception and awareness of the Khmer's folk beliefs. However, Khmer people still retain their diversity and plentiful of spiritual culture values. Hence, this study will investigate the following hypothesis:

H₃: The folk ritual customs of Khmer people positively affects the competitiveness of Soc Trang Soc Trang ecotourism associated with Khmer culture.

2.4.4. Religious Ritual Customs of Khmer People in Soc Trang Province

According to Son (2017), religious ritual customs of Khmer people are associated with temples which are sacred places for worshipping Buddha, sending beliefs through current actions, wishing for the realms of nirvana in the future. Temple is attached to every Khmer people for most of their life, from birth to death. The rituals always occupy an important position in the spiritual, cultural life of the Khmer. Typical ceremonies can be mentioned as Bon Mekh bo chea (Ceremony of promulgating the doctrine); Bon Pi Sak bo chea (Vesak); Bon A soth bô chea (Ceremony of descending on earth); Bon Puth the Phi sek (Ceremony of setting Buddha statue); Bon Chol Vosa (Ceremony of entering summer); Bon ching Vosa (Ceremony of ending summer); Bon Ka Than-na tean (Kathina robe-offering ceremony); Bon Phka (Flower offering Ceremony); Bon banh-chos Say ma (Ceremony of new main hall). Hence, the following hypothesis:

H₄: The religious ritual customs of Khmer people in Soc Trang province positively affect the competitiveness of Soc Trang ecotourism.

2.4.5. Traditional Festival Activities of Khmer People in Soc Trang Province

Soc Trang Province has many unique festivals due to the Khmer culture. Basically, the origins, names, and methods of organizing festivals by the Khmer people are the same across the provinces in Mekong Delta. However, the annual traditional Ngo boat racing and the Sene Don Ta ceremony (ceremony of worshipping grandparents) is the uniqueness of the Khmer in Soc Trang. According to Son (2017), the

customs and festivals of the Khmer in Soc Trang play an important role in the material, spiritual life, and there are even the customs and rituals which have become the customary law in sex education for society such as “Chbap Pros - Chbap sray” (Educating men and women). Other popular traditional festivals include Pithi Bon Chol Chhnam Thmay (Festival on the New Year); Pi thi Dak Ban or Kanh Ban (Ceremony for placing rice balls); Pithi Bon Sene Don Ta (Ceremony of worshipping grandparents); Pithi Bon Om tuk (Ngo boat racing festival); Pithi Ok Om bok - Thvai Pres Kher (Ceremony of green rice flakes - moon worshipping); Pithi loi Protip (water lantern festival). Thus, this study will investigate the following hypothesis:

H₅: Traditional festival activities of Khmer people in Soc Trang province positively affect the competitiveness of Soc Trang. Soc Trang ecotourism associated with Khmer culture.

3. Research Methodology

This study is performed in three stages:

Stage 1: This stage was conducted with expert interviews and group discussions to improve the scale and design of the survey questionnaire.

Stage 2: This stage is conducted to test the reliability of scale with Cronbach's Alpha coefficient and exploratory factor analysis. According to Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), items whose corrected item-total correlation is greater than 0.3 and whose Cronbach's alpha coefficient is greater than 0.6 ensure the reliability of scale. This method is based on the eigenvalue, exploratory factor analysis is suitable and the items in each group correlate with extraction sums of squared loadings must be greater than 50%, KMO ranges from 0.5 to 1, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity must be less than 0.05, the factor loading of all items must be greater than 0.5 and the bias of weights ($\lambda_{iA} - \lambda_{iB}$) must be greater than 0.3.

Stage 3: There are two elements in this stage: (1) confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and (2) testing the research model with structural equation modeling (SEM). The purpose of CFA is to clarify: (1) the unidimensionality; (2) the reliability of scale; (3) the convergent validity; and (4) the discriminant validity. The purpose of SEM is to test research models and research hypotheses. In accordance with Hair et al. (1998), Steenkamp and Van Trijp (1991) a research model is considered suitable with market data if testing valuable Chi-square P-value > 5%; Cmin/df ≤ 2; GFI, TLI, CFI ≥ 0.9. However, according to recent perceptions, GFI can be acceptable when it is larger than 0.8 Hair et al. (1998); RMSEA ≤ 0.08. In addition to the above criteria, testing results must also ensure the synthetic reliability > 0.6; variance extracted must be greater than 0.5 (Hair et

al., 1998). Data were input and screened with SPSS 20.0 software.

4. Research Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

There were a total of 350 hard copies of the questionnaire and only 195 copies were collected. Among the 195 responses received, 36 were rejected due to many blank cells. Consequently, 159 valid responses were used (45.43%) in the study. Among the 159 valid responses, there were 82 females (51.57%) and 77 males (48.43%). Regarding the age of the respondents, five persons were under 18 (3.14%), 73 were 18-35 (45.6%), 52 were 36-50 (32.5%), and 29 were over 50 (18.76%).

4.2. Scale Reliability Tests

The Cronbach's Alpha coefficients of the scales are all higher than 0.7; the corrected item-total correlation coefficients are greater than 0.3. Therefore, all scales are accepted and included in the EFA.

4.3. Exploratory Factor Analysis

In Part 1, the analysis of factors affecting the competitiveness of ecotourism associated with Khmer culture includes 26 observed variables. As shown in Table 2, the variables are classified into five groups, with the cumulative of variance (or the total variance explained) by 63.96% > 50%; KMO = 0.848 within $0.5 \leq KMO \leq 1$; hence, the EFA is considered appropriate. Bartlett's Test with Sig. = .000, shows a high level of significance. All factor loadings of observed variables are greater than 0.5; the weight differences between $\lambda_{iA} - \lambda_{iB}$ are greater than 0.3; it is, therefore, acceptable.

In Part 2, the factor analysis of the competitiveness of Soc Trang ecotourism associated with Khmer culture includes three observation variables. The results show that the total variance explained = 69.69% > 50%, the scale is accepted. Since the KMO = 0.7704 within the range of 0.5 to 1, so factor analysis is considered appropriate. The Bartlett's Test with Sig. = 0.000, indicates a high level of significance. The factor loadings of all observation variables (NLCT₁ = 0.841, NLCT₂ = 0.837, NLCT₃ = 0.826) in this group are greater than 0.5 and are accepted.

4.4. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

Composite reliability and extracted variance of the concept factors and the competitiveness of Soc Trang ecotourism show that their reliability parameters satisfy the required conditions presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

Concept	Component	Number of observed variables	Reliability		Extracted variance
			Cronbach's alpha	Composite	
The factors affecting the competitiveness	Ecotourism infrastructure (VCKT)	8	0.891	0.893	0.513
	Culinary culture of Khmer people (VHAT)	7	0.888	0.888	0.533
	The folk ritual customs of the Khmer people (PTNL)	3	0.736	0.740	0.489
	The religious ritual customs of Khmer people (NLTN)	4	0.811	0.818	0.534
	Traditional festival activities of Khmer people (LHTT)	4	0.896	0.899	0.694
The competitiveness of Soc Trang ecotourism associated with Khmer culture (NLCT)		3	0.780	0.783	0.546

Figure 1: The CFA Results of The Final Model

As shown in Figure 1, the CFA results of the final model show that the model fits the data: Chi-square = 439.541; df = 362, p-value = 0.003; CMIN/df = 1.214 < 2. The measurement criteria, GFI = 0.844; TLI = 0.962; CFI = 0.966, are greater than 0.8; RMSEA = 0.037 < 0.08.

In sum, the CFA results of the final model indicate that all factors in the model achieve: (1) unidimensionality; (2) reliability of scale; (3) convergent validity; and (4) discriminant validity. The research model fits with the data.

4.5. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

4.5.1. Testing the Research Model and the Hypotheses

The estimated results (standardized) of the research model in Figure 2 show that the model fits with the data (as detailed in Figure 2): Chi-square = 514.118; df = 372,

p-value = 0.00; CMIN/df = 1.382 < 3, The measurement criteria, GFI = 0.828; TLI = 0.931; CFI = 0.937, are greater than 0.8; RMSEA = 0.049 < 0.08.

4.5.2. Estimated Test for the Research Model by the Bootstrap Procedure

With the bootstrapping technique 500 times, the obtained results showed that there is an insignificant bias. Thus, the estimations in the model can be accepted.

4.5.3. Test for Research Hypotheses by SEM

The estimated results of the research model and the bootstrap procedure in SEM analysis shown in Table 2 indicate that the independent factors positively affect the competitiveness of Soc Trang ecotourism, i.e., all of the proposed hypotheses are statistically accepted.

Figure 2: SEM Results of The Standardized Model

Table 2: Table of Official Research Model's Regression Coefficient

Relations			Coefficient	Standardized coefficient	S.E.	C.R.	p	Note
NLCT.	<---	VHAT.	.278	.401	.055	5.064	***	Accept H2
NLCT.	<---	PTNL.	.273	.337	.068	4.012	***	Accept H3
NLCT.	<---	NLTN.	.369	.515	.065	5.686	***	Accept H4
NLCT.	<---	LHTT.	.258	.419	.047	5.433	***	Accept H5
NLCT.	<---	VCKT.	.293	.448	.055	5.353	***	Accept H1

5. Discussion and Managerial Implications

5.1. Discussion

The competitiveness of Soc Trang Soc Trang ecotourism associated with Khmer culture is found to be affected by five factors whose importance levels are ranked in descending order: (1) religious ritual customs of the Khmer people ($\beta = 0.515$); (2) ecotourism infrastructure ($\beta = 0.448$); (3) traditional festive activities of Khmer people ($\beta = 0.419$); (4) culinary culture of Khmer people ($\beta = 0.401$); and (5) folk ritual customs ($\beta = 0.337$). That the religious ritual customs of the Khmer people have the strongest impact on the competitiveness of Soc Trang Soc Trang ecotourism associated with Khmer culture agrees with Zhu et al. (2014), and Long and Nguyen, (2018).

5.2. Managerial Implications

5.2.1. Combining Ecotourism Tours with Participating and Learning Religious Ritual Customs of The Khmer People

As the religious ritual customs of the Khmer people take place at different times of the year and they are the most important factors affecting the competitiveness of Soc Trang ecotourism associated with Khmer culture, thus, to facilitate the development of Soc Trang ecotourism, the following issues are proposed.

(1) Making a list of religious ritual customs of the Khmer people with more details in terms of their history, characteristics, and meanings; time and location of each ceremony, photos and how to perform the ceremonies to make promotional materials.

(2) Encouraging Khmer people to let visitors learn and participate in their religious ritual customs at home or temples where the religious rituals take place.

(3) Developing a training plan for Khmer people about knowledge and skills on how to provide services, guide tourists, and introduce their religious rituals, the meaning,

and operating procedures of the religious rituals, ritual preparation, and offering materials.

(4) Tourism businesses coordinate with the local temples to build resorts and ceremony halls for tourists wishing to stay overnight at the temples or homestay at Khmer people's houses.

5.2.2. Implications for Ecotourism Infrastructure

Ecotourism infrastructure is found as the second influential factor affecting the competitiveness of Soc Trang ecotourism associated with Khmer culture. Thus, the following proposals should be considered.

(1) For tourist accommodations: using provincial and local policies to call for investors in accommodations and standard food services. Current accommodation providers should further renovate and invest in modern equipment to better serve their customers and satisfy certain standards.

(2) For businesses and travel agencies: Soc Trang should have relevant policies and programs to call for investors and tourism agencies outside the province to invest and open their branches in the province. They should also encourage and create favorable conditions for existing travel agencies to participate in international tours, linking travel agencies inside and outside the province.

(3) For tourism workforce: local colleges should provide some training programs in tourism to training tourism agencies, tourist destinations, and households, especially Khmer households. Soc Trang should also reinforce the professional certificates or permissions for qualified tour guides.

(4) For qualified points of sales serving tourists: the province needs to have policies and programs in land allocation to call for investors inside and outside the province to invest in operating qualified points of sales serving tourists.

(5) Building roads, medical services, and the internet at tourist sites, especially the famous Khmer temples. Operating recreation areas and entertainment to serve tourists.

5.2.3. Combining Ecotourism Tours with Participating and Learning Traditional Festival Activities of Khmer People

The traditional festival activities of Khmer people activities take place at different times of the year and they are found as the third important determinant of the competitiveness of Soc Trang ecotourism associated with Khmer culture. Consequently,

(1) Making a list of traditional festival activities of the Khmer people with clear details such as their history, characteristics, and meaning; time and location of the activity, photos and how to organize the activity to make promotional materials. Some typical traditional festival activities of the Khmer people in Soc Trang province are illustrated in Table 3.

(2) Tourism management departments should coordinate with tourism agencies and Khmer households to set up Khmer performance teams (in association with Khmer ethnic culture) at tourist spots to perform music with musical instruments and unique dances of the Khmer people in Soc Trang province in traditional festivals. It is necessary to clarify the typical characteristics of the Khmer people in Soc Trang province, the harmonious combination between the three ethnic groups, including the Kinh, the Khmer, and the Chinese.

(3) Tourism management departments should advise the province to execute procedures for recognizing traditional festival activities of Khmer people in Soc Trang province as a national and provincial heritage.

5.2.4. Combining Culinary Culture of Khmer People with Ecotourism Tours

The culinary culture of the Khmer people is the fourth factor affecting the competitiveness of Soc Trang ecotourism associated with Khmer culture. The Khmer have diverse and

unique ways of cooking and using cuisine. The Soc Trang Khmer people often use two sources of food, animals, and plants, for processing to promote tourism. Therefore, this study proposes some feasible implications as the following:

(1) Making a list of unique cuisines of Khmer people, such as (1) Pro hoc (a sauce) and Pro hoc op (a sauce with the whole fish); (2) Ordinary pro hoc (a type of sauce that the Khmer people often use to season in soups); (3) Tep chao with the other name - small shrimp sauce; and (4) Soups; with the specific contents (e.g., origin, food processing, how to enjoy) to make promotional materials. Especially, it is highly recommended to emphasize the uniqueness of “Bun nuoc leo” (a kind of vermicelli noodle soup) compared to other places as “Bun nuoc leo of Khmer people in Soc Trang has some differences from the ones in Tra Vinh, An Giang as well as the noodle soup of Khmer people in Cambodia. Particularly, the Soc Trang broth contains less Pro Hoc flavor but richer fingerroot flavor compared to the ones in Tra Vinh; the meat and fish in the Soc Trang noodle soup are not smashed like in the An Giang noodle soup. More interestingly; and the Soc Trang noodle soup does not have turmeric like the ones in Cambodia”.

(2) Establishing Khmer culinary village (or area): tourism management department needs to coordinate with tourism agencies and Khmer households to set up areas selling typical cuisine of Khmer people at the ecotourism sites, spiritual tourism sites, especially in the Khmer cultural village in Soc Trang City and ecotourism sites such as Tan Long Stork Garden.

(3) The tourism management department should coordinate with tourism agencies and Khmer households to set up homestays in areas where many Khmer people live with different organizing models, such as living with Khmer families, participating in food processing, and dining with the Khmer people.

Table 3: Some Typical Traditional Festival Activities of The Khmer People in Soc Trang

No.	Traditional festival activities of the Khmer people	Time	Proposals and recommendations of the research team
1	Pithi Bon Chôi Chhnăm Thmây	13th-15th April (Solar calendar)	Need to simulate this activity in the Khmer cultural and tourism village at all times, to develop scenarios for tourists to participate in games, dances, self-processing authentic food.
2	Pithi Bon Om tuk	14th-15th October (Lunar calendar)	Even though it is already added, but need to advertise more. Need to exploit and use for visitors to experience (participate in the trial race) when coming to Soc Trang in the non-festive seasons.
3	Pithi Ok Om bok – Thvai Pres Kher	15th night October (Lunar calendar)	Need to simulate this activity in the Khmer cultural and tourism village at all times, to build a scenario for tourists to participate in the activities of making green rice flakes.
4	Pithi lôi Protip	15th night October (Lunar calendar)	Need to simulate this activity in the Khmer cultural and tourism village at all times, to build a scenario for tourists to participate in the activity.

Table 4: Some Typical Folk Ritual Customs of Khmer People in Soc Trang Tours

No.	The folk ritual customs of the Khmer people	Time	Proposals and recommendations of the research team
1	Pithi Bon Chhak Bang skol (Requiem ceremony) or Chhak Mo ha Bang skol (Great Requiem ceremony)	This ceremony is usually held by the Soc Trang Khmer people at the temple on the occasion of Chol Chhnam Thmay festival or held at home to preserve the traditional culture of their people.	Need to simulate this ceremony in the Khmer cultural tourism village.
2	Bon Kom som Srok (Peace Praying)	The ceremony usually takes place after the harvest day from January to March (Lunar calendar).	Need to simulate this ceremony in the Khmer cultural tourism village.
3	Pithi sene Neak Ta (Ceremony of worshipping Ta)	The ceremony takes place from mid-April to May (Solar calendar).	Need to simulate this ceremony in the Khmer cultural tourism village.
4	Pithi Bon som Tuk phlieng (Rain Praying)	The ceremony takes place from June to July (Lunar calendar) in one morning, sometimes up to the afternoon.	Need to simulate this ceremony in the Khmer cultural tourism village.
5	Bon sene len (Ceremony of worshipping rice field)	The ceremony is usually held around December and January (Lunar calendar) for the early rice harvest areas, April, or May (Lunar calendar) for the usual rice harvest areas.	Need to simulate this ceremony in the Khmer cultural tourism village.

(4) Organizing training classes for tourist guides and members of Khmer families on culinary knowledge, and precise food processing methods in order to introduce, advertise, and guide the tourists on how to enjoy and process the food. Moreover, they need to carry out procedures for food licensing and food safety certification for these dishes.

5.2.5. Combining Ecotourism Tours with Participating and Learning Folk Ritual Customs of Khmer People

The folk ritual customs is the fifth influencing factor on the competitiveness of Soc Trang ecotourism associated with Khmer culture. It plays an essential role in social life and often associates with agriculture and rural areas, which can be combined to promote Soc Trang ecotourism. Thus, this study proposes the following:

(1) Listing the folk ritual customs of the Khmer people with clear details such as their history, characteristics, and meaning; time and location of the ceremony, photos and how to perform the ceremony to make promotional materials. Some typical folk ritual customs of the Khmer people in Soc Trang province are illustrated in Table 4.

(2) Encouraging Khmer people to let visitors learn and participate in their folk ritual customs at home or temples where the folk rituals take place.

(3) The tourism management department should coordinate with tourism agencies and Khmer households to simulate these folk rituals at the tourism sites, tourism areas, especially Khmer cultural tourism villages.

5.2.6. Other Implications to Promote Soc Trang Ecotourism Associated with the Khmer Culture

(1) Establishing a Khmer cultural-tourism village that fully illustrates the cultural and spiritual life of Khmer people in Soc Trang, such as traditional folk festivals, religious rituals, culinary culture, costumes, and music. In the Khmer cultural tourism village, visitors can experience and understand several religious rituals, traditional folk festivals, traditional music and dances, and enjoy typical food, games, festivals of Khmer people. There are also souvenirs associated with Khmer culture for visitors to buy as gifts.

(2) Developing strategies and plans to use Ngo boats after the festival in ecotourism: It is necessary to exploit and use Ngo boats for tourists to experience (participate in trial racing) when coming to Soc Trang in non-festive seasons and consider the Ngo boat racing (Pithi Bon Om tuk) as a specific product of Soc Trang associated with Khmer culture.

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