

OVERTOURISM: AN EMERGING ISSUE IN HA LONG BAY, QUANG NINH

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Abstract

Overtourism has emerged as a critical issue in Ha Long Bay, Quang Ninh, as rapid tourism growth strains natural resources, infrastructure, and local communities. This study explores the causes, current state, and impacts of overtourism, highlighting environmental harm, socio-cultural shifts, and reduced visitor satisfaction. Contributing factors include the area's limited carrying capacity, localized overload and poor public awareness in tourism participation. Key solutions involve managing visitor numbers, diversifying tourism products, promoting eco-tourism, strengthening governance, enforcing environmental regulations, and raising awareness about responsible tourism. A coordinated approach will help Ha Long balance tourism development with preserving its World Heritage status for sustainable, long-term appeal.

Keywords: Overtourism, Sustainable tourism, Ha Long Bay, Vietnam.

Quá tải du lịch: Một vấn đề nổi lên ở vịnh Hạ Long, Quảng Ninh

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Tóm tắt

Quá tải du lịch đang trở thành vấn đề đáng quan tâm tại Vịnh Hạ Long, Quảng Ninh, khi sự phát triển du lịch nhanh chóng gây áp lực lên tài nguyên thiên nhiên, cơ sở hạ tầng và cộng đồng địa phương. Nghiên cứu tìm hiểu nguyên nhân, thực trạng, đặc biệt là các tác động tiêu cực về môi trường, văn hóa - xã hội và giảm sự hài lòng của du khách do nạn quá tải du lịch gây ra. Các yếu tố góp phần dẫn đến quá tải du lịch bao gồm: sức chứa hạn chế của khu vực, tình trạng quá tải cục bộ và nhận thức bảo vệ môi trường chưa cao của cộng đồng. Những giải pháp như: quản lý số lượng du khách, đa dạng hóa sản phẩm du lịch, thúc đẩy du lịch sinh thái, tăng cường quản lý, thực thi các quy định bảo vệ môi trường và nâng cao nhận thức về du lịch có trách nhiệm sẽ giúp Hạ Long cân bằng giữa phát triển du lịch và bảo tồn di sản di sản một cách bền vững.

Từ khóa: Quá tải du lịch, du lịch bền vững, Vịnh Hạ Long, Việt Nam.

1. Introduction

Vietnam's tourism industry is booming, attracting nearly 11.4 million international visitors in the first eight months of 2024 – an increase of 45.8%

compared to 2023. Major destinations like Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Quang Ninh, and Da Nang draw tourists with their robust infrastructure and vibrant events. Quang Ninh, home to UNESCO

World Heritage site of Ha Long Bay, also boasts attractions like Yen Tu, Bai Chay, and Van Don. In 2023, it hosted 15.6 million tourists, including 2.2 million internationals. In the first half of 2024, the province welcomed 10.4 million visitors, generating VND 22.2 trillion, making it the fourth-ranking province nationwide. This rapid development has been driven by the diversity of tourism types, including cultural tourism,

ecotourism, and island tourism, with Ha Long Bay—a UNESCO World Natural Heritage site—being the highlight. However, alongside this success, Ha Long Bay faces challenges similar to other major tourist hubs in Vietnam, including overtourism that pressures on infrastructure, sustainable management of natural resources, cultural heritage preservation, and enhancing the tourist experience.

Table 1. Number of Tourists of Quang Ninh Tourism from 2016 to 2024 (million)

| Year | Total number of visitors | Domestic visitors | Inbound visitors |
|---------------|--------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| 2016 | 8.3 | 4.9 | 3.5 |
| 2017 | 9.9 | 5.6 | 4.3 |
| 2018 | 12.2 | 7.0 | 5.2 |
| 2019 | 14.0 | 8.3 | 5.7 |
| 2020 | 8.8 | 8.2 | 0.5 |
| 2021 | 4.38 | 4.38 | - |
| 2022 | 11.6 | 11.3 | 0.3 |
| 2023 | 15.6 | 13.4 | 2.2 |
| November 2024 | 19 | 15.5 | 3.5 |

Source: Quang Ninh Department of Tourism (2024)

It is noticed that there was a noticeable drop in the number of visitors in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with inbound tourism being particularly affected. From 2022 onwards, there has been a strong recovery in tourism numbers, with 2023 and 2024 seeing a significant increase, almost back to pre-pandemic levels for domestic tourism.

The Concept of Overtourism

Overtourism refers to the phenomenon where a tourist destination attracts a number of visitors that exceeds the capacity of its infrastructure, services, and environment to accommodate them. In other words, overtourism happens when a destination receives an overwhelming number of visitors. It can be described as the effect of tourism on a destination, or certain areas of it, that significantly diminishes the quality of life for residents and/or the experience of tourists in a negative manner. An excessive

number of visitors concentrated in one location may lead to a poor experience for them. Additionally, the local lifestyle will likely be disrupted and impacted to some extent (Wong, 2024).

This phenomenon leads to various negative consequences, such as:

Pressure on heritage sites: When the number of tourists exceeds expectations, the infrastructure system—such as transportation, restaurants, hotels, and public services like electricity, water, and waste management—becomes insufficient to meet demand. This results in traffic jams, congestion at attractions. In addition, the constriction of heritage spaces due to the overwhelming number of visitors at any given time will be a significant issue.

Negative environmental impacts: Overtourism exerts significant pressure on natural resources, particularly at sensitive natural tourist sites such as forests,

beaches, and unique ecosystems. The large volume of waste generated from tourism activities and daily life contributes to the degradation of the natural environment, leading to the deterioration of ecosystems.

Social and cultural changes: When an excessive number of tourists concentrate in a destination, local communities may experience negative transformations. Rising property values and increased living costs place pressure on residents. Additionally, tourist overcrowding can erode the authenticity of cultural sites, as historical monuments, traditional festivals, and daily life may become commercialized, altering the local cultural identity.

Diminished travel experience: For tourists, overtourism can significantly reduce the quality of their experience. Crowding, lack of space, and deteriorating facilities create discomfort, often preventing visitors from fully enjoying the scenery and culture. Increased competition for access to services, rising prices, and long waiting times at attractions also contribute to a decline in tourist satisfaction.

Prominent tourist destinations in Vietnam, like Sam Son, Hoi An, Da Lat, and Sa Pa, are experiencing overtourism, leading to environmental, societal, and cultural issues. In Ha Long, the issue of overtourism is becoming increasingly pressing, contributing to rising environmental pollution, altering socio-economic conditions, and diminishing tourist experiences. This situation necessitates more effective management solutions to balance economic tourism development with heritage conservation.

2. Overtourism in Ha Long Bay, Quang Ninh

Quang Ninh has consistently centered Ha Long Bay in its development strategies. The 2021-2030 Provincial Planning envisions Ha Long City as a modern service and tourism hub, balancing heritage preservation with sustainable development. Resolution No. 17-NQ/TU (October 30, 2023) further highlights the promotion of Quang Ninh's cultural values

as resources for sustainable growth, aiming for Ha Long to join UNESCO's network of creative cities and host major events. Ha Long Bay remains a key focus in Quang Ninh's green growth strategy. Ha Long has consistently served as the heart of tourism in Quang Ninh. Currently, Ha Long Bay attracts millions of visitors each year. Specifically, in 2016, it welcomed over 3.1 million tourists; in 2017, this number increased to more than 3.9 million; and both 2018 and 2019 saw visitor numbers exceeding 4 million. The majority of international visitors to Quang Ninh are drawn to Ha Long Bay, accounting for approximately two-thirds of the total tourist arrivals. After the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism in Ha Long, as well as in Quang Ninh in general, has experienced a robust recovery.

In particular, the trend of revenge tourism has accelerated the pace of overtourism following the pandemic. This increase is primarily driven by domestic tourism, with approximately 80% of visitors to Ha Long being Vietnamese nationals. Continuing the growth momentum and focusing on market expansion, Quang Ninh's tourism aims to attract 19 million visitors in 2024, including 3.5 million international tourists. The recent arrival of 5,000 Indian tourists visiting Ha Long Bay in August 2024 has reaffirmed the significant appeal of this UNESCO World Heritage site to both domestic and international travelers.

Currently, tourists have exhibited significant changes in their fundamental travel behaviors before embarking on their trips. These changes include a greater reliance on the internet for travel information, increased usage of online booking services, a focus on seeking promotional offers, a preference for short trips during off-peak seasons, and a tendency to travel with family and friends. (Thúy, 2022)

However, a simple search on the internet reveals numerous contrasting opinions from visitors after touring Ha

Long Bay. Many reviews and comments from tourists indicate that overtourism has become a significant issue for this natural heritage site in recent years. Foreign tourists are disappointed after visiting UNESCO heritage site Ha Long Bay, saying it is now overcrowded and full of plastic waste.

“Although it is an amazing place I honestly think it is not worth visiting in it’s current state. There seems to be no restriction on the amount of visitors and when we were there on a 2 day, 1 night cruise there were at least 200 boats. They all do the same activities, visiting the caves, Ti Top Mountain, kayaking etc. and it is so overcrowded. The water surprisingly was clear of most rubbish, but it was incredibly polluted with fuel and wastewater from the boats. This was the only part of our 4 months of travel that we regretted doing and are surprised that UNESCO have not put more of a limit on the number of visitors allowed at one time like they have in many other sites around the world”. (A review from Tripadvisor, 2019)

Ana Mich, a Lithuanian visiting Ha Long Bay on a five-star cruise ship on November 2, said the landscape was “impressive” but the countless plastic bags and bottles floating around the water were “alarming.” “I’m really sad when I see the garbage in Ha Long Bay. The landscape and people of Vietnam are wonderful, but their awareness of environmental protection is quite poor.” (Tu, 2023)

Alva White of Sweden also saw overcrowding in the Sung Sot cave area, and said she had to wait nearly 30 minutes to reach the steps and inched her way up into the cave. “I think there must be thousands of people at this attraction. Everyone stops to take pictures, so they move very slowly, leaving many people stuck in crowds.” (Tu, 2023)

The situation has worsened as the American travel magazine Fodor’s Travel included Ha Long Bay in its “No list”, recommending that travelers reconsider their plans to visit. The “2024 No List”

focuses on three main areas of tourist impact—overtourism, trash production, and water quality and sufficiency—which not only harm the destinations themselves, but the local communities who rely on them. Ha Long Bay in Vietnam is particularly highlighted for issues related to overtourism and waste generation. (Fodor’s Travel, 2023)

The issue of overtourism has become serious, greatly impacting the heritage, environment, society, and tourist experiences. Overtourism in Ha Long Bay is not a year-round issue but tends to intensify during peak tourist periods, particularly in the summer and on holidays. Nonetheless, specific areas or moments may still experience localized overtourism even in the off-season.

Local Overload at Heritage

In 2022, Ha Long assessed its carrying capacity, concluding that tourist numbers were still below capacity. However, visitors tend to concentrate at peak times and in a few locations, such as Sung Sot and Thien Cung caves, causing occasional overloads. A study by the Institute of Geological Science and Mineral Resources found poor air quality in these caves, with oxygen levels 21% lower than natural levels and elevated carbon dioxide, mainly due to high visitor numbers and poor ventilation.

The disparity in investment has led to two opposing trends: urban expansion into the sea and modern infrastructure and services on land, which increase the capacity for Ha Long City. Conversely, the shrinking buffer zones imply a reduction in the tourism carrying capacity of Ha Long Bay. Tourists traveling by boat to explore Ha Long Bay often express dissatisfaction as they encounter floating debris on the waters of this natural heritage site.

Negative Impact on the Environment

Overtourism in Ha Long has caused severe environmental issues, mainly from plastic and domestic waste. Pollution sources include wastewater, solid waste, and industrial discharges, with hundreds of tourist boats contributing to the problem.

Despite regulations against dumping in the bay, compliance is low, as many boats illegally dispose of waste to cut costs. Ha Long also lacks adequate funding for waste collection systems and has limited environmental management staff, making nighttime enforcement challenging (Lập & et al., 2013).

In addition, several studies have indicated that Ha Long is showing signs of dust pollution. The main sources of air emissions in Ha Long City, particularly in areas like Tuan Chau and Bai Chay, contribute significantly to this issue. During peak seasons, the high volume of transportation vehicles increases dust dispersion and emissions into the environment. Furthermore, in the pre-COVID-19 period, construction vehicles transporting materials for various hotel projects in the Bai Chay area significantly raised the concentration of suspended dust in the air (Trang & Tuấn., 2022).

Social and Cultural Impact

The issue of overtourism has also resulted in changes in the social and cultural structure of the local community. Many residents of Ha Long have shifted to tourism-related businesses, leading to the commercialization of traditional cultural activities. The increase in tourists has also prompted a race among service providers, resulting in a decline in the quality of the products and services they offer.

Research on the social carrying capacity of Ha Long Bay, based on the perceptions of locals and tourists regarding overcrowding, estimates the maximum number of visitors that can be accommodated. The findings reveal that tourism activities in Ha Long Bay have led to numerous social impacts. There has been an increase in the number of migrants from other regions seeking employment, coupled with rapid urbanization. This surge in tourism has also created potential conflicts between locals and tourists, driven up land prices, and contributed to public urination and littering. Additionally, the region is experiencing a loss of order,

safety, and social security, along with rising crime rates and a proliferation of social issues. Health risks have increased, as well as tensions stemming from wealth disparity. Overuse of clean water and waste treatment facilities has become evident, causing inconveniences due to overcrowding in public spaces. These factors have collectively resulted in significant congestion in parks and public facilities, as well as traffic jams throughout the area (Hoàng & et al., 2022).

Travel Experience Reduction

Overtourism has significantly impacted the tourist experience in Ha Long Bay, with many visitors facing long wait times and overcrowded attractions, especially during weekends and holidays. Popular sites and recreational areas in Bai Chay are often packed, detracting from the enjoyment of the bay's beauty. According to a 2020 survey, 44.5% of complaints focused on high costs for transportation, accommodation, and goods, while 24.7% cited littering as a major issue. These factors have contributed to a decline in overall visitor satisfaction (Cục thống kê Quảng Ninh, 2020). Alongside small groups and families, Ha Long also welcomes a significant number of corporate and business travelers during the summer. However, the sudden increase in visitors places considerable pressure on Ha Long's tourism services and often leads to situations where tourists feel they are being overcharged. Many reviews on travel forums suggest that Ha Long should improve service quality and provide better support for its visitors.

"I find Ha Long very beautiful and attractive. However, the prices are too high. The cost of living in Ha Long is high, but that cannot justify the many shops that engage in unscrupulous practices and charge excessive prices." A reviewer expressed his opinion on the internet (Quang, 2022).

Clearly, this is a problem that the Ha Long tourism industry needs to address immediately if it does not want to fall into

the same pitfalls as Sam Son in the past or Phu Quoc in recent times.

The issue of overtourism is posing many significant challenges to the sustainable development of Ha Long tourism. The management board of Ha Long Bay in particular, and the leaders of Quang Ninh province in general, need to promptly implement measures to mitigate the negative consequences of overtourism, ensuring that Ha Long maintains its attractiveness and natural beauty in the future.

3. Solutions to Overtourism in Ha Long, Quang Ninh

The overtourism situation in Ha Long is not only an issue of the number of tourists exceeding infrastructure capacity, but also reflects the imbalance between tourism growth and the ability to sustainably maintain natural and social resources. To address the root of the problem, solutions must focus on adjusting the nature of tourism management and development, ensuring long-term benefits for tourists, residents, and the environment.

First, Rational Management and Distribution of Tourists

The essence of overtourism in Ha Long lies in the concentration of a large number of tourists in a few prominent locations over a short period, putting pressure on resources and infrastructure. Therefore, it is essential to distribute tourists in both space and time. This can be achieved through the following strategies:

(1) Limit the number of visitors at popular tourist spots by establishing a daily or hourly visitor cap through an online registration and ticketing system.

(2) Redirect tourist flows to lesser-known sites within the Quang Ninh region, such as Bai Tu Long, Yen Tu, or Van Don. This will alleviate pressure on Ha Long while simultaneously expanding experiences for visitors. We agree that developing satellite destinations can help prevent future tourism overload. (Tuan, 2023).

(3) Enhancing promotional programs and incentives during the off-peak season will

help balance the flow of tourists throughout different times of the year, preventing excessive concentration during peak seasons. The development of year-round tourism should continue to be promoted, particularly with wellness tourism products such as the Onsen Quang Hanh mineral hot spring resort and the internationally-classed Yen Tu Legacy resort. These initiatives will diversify Quang Ninh's tourism offerings and complement Ha Long's existing natural tourism products.

Second, Strengthening Environmental and Natural Resource Protection

Ha Long Bay is not only a UNESCO World Heritage site but also a non-renewable resource. Therefore, protecting the environment and resources is one of the core factors. Proposed measures include:

(1) Controlling environmental pollution from tourist vessels: Ha Long is facing pollution issues due to the large number of operating boats. It is essential to monitor water quality and establish clear regulations regarding emissions and waste from these vessels. Additionally, the authorities should encourage the use of boats equipped with wastewater treatment technology to minimize the environmental impact on the bay.

(2) Tight Monitoring of Tourism Activities in the Bay: An integrated environmental monitoring system is necessary, such as cameras and water quality sensors, to promptly detect and address actions that harm the environment.

(3) Promoting Ecotourism: Transitioning from mass tourism to forms of ecotourism will help minimize environmental impact. Ecotourism also raises visitors' awareness of the responsibility to protect nature. Avoid activities that contribute to pollution or damage natural habitats. Instead, incorporate sustainable practices into entertainment activities, such as using renewable energy sources, recycling, or promoting ecotourism activities (Anh, 2023).

Third, Adjusting the Economic and Tourism Development Structure

One of the fundamental causes of overtourism is the excessive reliance on mass tourism to drive the local economy. Therefore, to address this issue, Ha Long needs to diversify its economic development model, specifically:

(1) **Developing High-Quality Tourism Models:** Focus on attracting high-income tourists who are willing to spend more and prioritize experiences over quantity. This includes developing luxury resorts, cultural tours, and personalized services, thereby reducing dependence on mass tourism.

(2) **Encouraging Community-Based Economy:** Developing tourism linked to local communities, such as cultural, historical tours, or experiences in traditional villages, will not only help distribute tourist flows but also provide direct benefits to the local population.

Fourth, Strengthening the Role of Government and State Management

Local authorities need to take the lead in establishing clear regulations and closely monitoring the tourism development process. Management measures include:

(1) **Sustainable Tourism Planning:** Develop and implement long-term plans for tourism development that integrate the protection of natural and cultural resources. This planning should be based on scientific research regarding the carrying capacity of Ha Long Bay and surrounding areas.

(2) **Strengthening Monitoring and Enforcement of Visitor Regulations:**

Authorities need to implement stricter measures for managing overcrowded tourist sites, such as limiting photography and video recording in certain popular locations to reduce congestion.

Restricting tourism may negatively impact local livelihoods in the short term due to limited income alternatives, but failing to protect the key attractions can lead to long-term consequences. Ha Long needs to be protected and deserves to be the leading tourist destination of Vietnam on the world tourism map.

4. Concluding Remarks

Overtourism in Ha Long, Quang Ninh, is a long-term challenge for sustainable development. To address it, solutions must focus on scientific management, environmental protection, and balanced socio-economic growth. This includes adjusting planning, managing tourist numbers, diversifying products, and promoting awareness to change visitor behavior. Leveraging technology will help optimize the experience while protecting Ha Long Bay's natural heritage. Post-COVID-19, Quang Ninh must adopt sustainable tourism models to preserve its ecosystem. Cooperation among government, communities, and businesses is crucial to ensuring Ha Long's development without compromising its natural and cultural values.

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