

CLIMATE-ADAPTIVE AGRI-TOURISM IN VIETNAM: A SUSTAINABILITY PERSPECTIVE FROM THE MEKONG DELTA

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ABSTRACT

Climate change significantly impacts socio-economic activities in Vietnam's Mekong Delta, especially agriculture and tourism. Agritourism offers a path for local economic development and climate adaptation. This study assesses agritourism development in the Mekong Delta and proposes climate adaptation solutions, based on surveys and expert interviews. Findings reveal the region's rich natural conditions and unique culture offer considerable agritourism potential. However, it faces challenges from climate change, including sea-level rise, saltwater intrusion, and drought. Proposed solutions involve sustainable agricultural models, green technologies, enhanced community awareness, and supportive policies. These aim to mitigate climate impacts, foster sustainable agritourism, and contribute to regional livelihoods and environmental protection.

Keywords: *Climate change, agri-tourism, Mekong Delta, sustainable development, adaptation solutions, policy...*

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism and agriculture are two key economic sectors that are increasingly prioritized for development to meet the diverse needs of people worldwide. The harmonious combination of these two industries generates significant socio-economic value and gives rise to a new form of tourism: agri-tourism. This type of tourism is becoming a firm global trend, attracting growing interest from tourists.

In the context of increasing urbanization and industrialization, many travelers seek natural, pristine spaces to enjoy fresh air, experience a simple lifestyle, and explore traditional cultural values that modernization has not yet influenced.

The development of agritourism offers dual benefits, simultaneously boosting the tourism sector while supporting agricultural growth in a mutually beneficial manner. Agriculture helps create unique tourism products that meet visitors' needs for sightseeing and experiences, thereby enhancing the quality and sustainability of the tourism industry. Meanwhile, tourism is crucial in promoting agricultural products, expanding markets, creating more jobs, and increasing farmers' incomes, thereby contributing to sustainable rural development.

With its diverse tropical agriculture that varies by region, Vietnam has numerous advantages for agritourism development. In particular, the Mekong Delta is known as the "rice bowl," "fruit bowl," and "shrimp and fish basket" of the nation, being the country's leading agricultural region. With its rich ecosystem, picturesque waterways, friendly and hospitable people, and unique cultural values,

the region possesses immense potential for agritourism development. According to the report, Vietnam's rice exports are expected to exceed 8 million tons in 2024, with the Mekong Delta accounting for approximately 7.6 million tons, equivalent to 95% of the total volume. This region plays a crucial role in Vietnam's agricultural sector, accounting for approximately 31% of the country's total GDP. It produces nearly 50% of the nation's rice, 95% of rice exports, 65% of farmed and wild-caught seafood, 60% of exported fish, and nearly 70% of various fruits (Minh, 2024).

However, agritourism in the Mekong Delta remains fragmented and largely spontaneous. Tourism products are still monotonous and lack diversity, primarily following the "homegrown" model with relatively low quality. Additionally, the connection between agritourism operators and travel agencies remains weak, failing to attract a steady flow of tourists effectively. Notably, many farmers lack proper training in tourism-related skills, which limits their ability to enhance service quality.

This situation underscores the pressing need for targeted solutions to effectively capitalize on the agritourism potential of the Mekong Delta, thereby contributing to a positive economic restructuring. At the same time, agri-tourism development must align with the new rural development movement, creating a ripple effect that enables both the tourism and agricultural sectors to grow sustainably and in an environmentally friendly.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Agri-tourism is a rapidly growing sector worldwide, attracting the interest of many researchers.

Agri-tourism is a growing field that encompasses various aspects of tourism related to agriculture. Williams discusses the evolving character of wine tourism destination imagery projected by wine producers and independent writers, highlighting the importance of destination development in the wine tourism industry (Williams, 2001). Daugstad et. al delve into the concept of authenticity and the pseudo-backstage of agri-tourism, shedding light on the importance of genuine experiences in this sector (Daugstad & Kirchengast, 2013). The Author, Vafadari, analyzes the tourism potential of agricultural heritage systems, focusing on the case study of the Kunisaki Peninsula in Japan and emphasizing the significance of cultural heritage in agri-heritage tourism (Vafadari, 2013). Giaccio et. al investigate the income sources of Italian farm tourism businesses, highlighting the impact of economic, social, and environmental variables on farm income. Culinary tourism experiences in agri-tourism destinations (Giaccio et al., 2018) and sustainable consumption are explored by Testa et. al., who find that social and environmental sustainability plays a crucial role in influencing Italian tourists' frequency of experiencing local food and beverages in these destinations (Testa et al., 2019).

In a study on the circular economy in agricultural tourism, Joshi et. al. identify key Circular Economy dimensions in the agri-tourism industry and assess their performance using the AHP-TOPSIS method, emphasizing the importance of sustainability in agri-tourism clusters (Joshi et al., 2020). Barbieri and Mshenga stated that agri-tourism is a commercial enterprise conducted at a working farm, ranch, or agricultural plant for the enjoyment and education of visitors, generating supplemental income for the owner (Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008). Accordingly, agritourism is a commercial activity conducted on operational farms. Phillip, Hunter, and Blackstock expanded the concept of agritourism by defining it as tourists visiting working farms or any agricultural, horticultural, or agribusiness operation for enjoyment, education, or active involvement in the farm's or operation's activities (Phillip et al., 2010). The authors emphasized the importance of tourists' direct experience and active participation in agricultural activities. In addition, Tew & Barbieri and Che, Veeck & Veeck also agreed that agritourism encompasses any activity conducted on a farm to attract visitors (Tew & Barbieri, 2012)

Author Claudia Gil Arroyo and colleagues, in a study, pointed out that agritourism refers to "farming-related activities carried out on a working farm or other agricultural settings for entertainment or education purposes (Gil Arroyo et al., 2013). Claudia Schmidt and other authors, in

a study, describe agritourism as follows: "agri-tourism services, along with direct-to-consumer sales, have experienced significant growth." For farmers, these two supplemental income sources may contribute to farm profitability and... farm survival odds (Schmidt et al., 2023). The authors Soumi Chatterjee and M. V. Durga Prasad describe agri-tourism as a model that combines farming with tourism experiences, helping farmers increase their income, preserve cultural heritage, and attract visitors to rural areas (Chatterjee & Prasad, 2019)

At the Proceedings Third International Conference Held in Quezon City, Metro Manila, Philippines, under the theme "Developing Sustainable and Resilient Rural Communities amid Climate Change: A Challenge to Disaster Preparedness and Mitigation Strategies," Miguela M. Mena emphasized the essential role of sustainable agri-tourism in the context of climate change. From a long-term perspective, the conference proceedings highlighted that sustainable agri-tourism not only helps increase short-term income for farming households but also serves as an effective strategy for climate adaptation. It contributes to the conservation of natural resources and ensures sustainable livelihoods for rural communities heavily affected by climate change (*Developing Sustainable and Resilient Rural Communities in the*, n.d.).

Regarding the sustainability aspect of agritourism, Anamai Damnet and colleagues argue that sustainable agritourism combines farming with tourism experiences, contributing to rural development (Damnet et al., 2024). Ramaano's research, "Indigenous communities and tourism-integrated climate change outcomes on subsistence within the hinterlands: a development management perspective", identifies agro-tourism as a beneficial tool in climate change mitigation and adaptation. He argues that it alleviates strain on natural resources, fosters environmental consciousness within communities, encourages the implementation of sustainable ecological development models, and provides a viable strategy for adapting to the effects of climate change (Ramaano, 2024).

3. DATA SET AND METHODS

Research data encompasses information gathered from various sources, including legal documents, Vietnamese government policies, research studies, summary reports, planning projects, and other relevant materials, such as maps, images, and videos. These data sources are systematized and analyzed to serve the resolution of the research problem.

The primary research method applied in this study is SWOT analysis, which aims to evaluate the factors influencing the development of sustainable agri-tourism in the context of climate change in the Mekong Delta. Specifically, the study focuses on four key factors: (i) Strengths, including rich natural resources, a distinctive agricultural culture, and a diverse river system. (ii) Weaknesses: Limitations in tourism infrastructure, lack of awareness among local communities regarding sustainable tourism, and challenges in sustainably exploiting resources. (iii) Opportunities: The rising trend of eco-tourism development, government support policies, and the increasing demand for green tourism experiences. (iv) Threats: The negative impacts of climate change, saline intrusion, land subsidence, and pressures from urbanization. The application of SWOT analysis provides a scientific foundation for proposing feasible solutions to promote sustainable agri-tourism in the Mekong Delta. In addition, the study integrates several complementary research methods, including comparison, synthesis, correlation analysis, mapping, and field surveys, to ensure objectivity and comprehensiveness in the assessment.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 The concept and characteristics of agri-tourism

The concept of agri-tourism

Around the world, agri-tourism experienced strong growth during the 1980s and 1990s. In different countries, this form of tourism linked to agricultural development and traditional cuisine has various names. Specifically, in the UK, it is referred to as rural tourism; in the US, as homestead tourism or farm tourism; in Japan, as agricultural tourism and green tourism; and in France, it is known as tourism with nature or plant-based tourism, among others.

Agri-tourism has existed for a long time and is understood as a type of tourism that serves visitors based on agricultural production activities with the aim of entertainment or education. Agri-tourists can experience activities such as visiting farms, harvesting agrarian products, learning about plants and animals, or participating in agricultural production processes. There are various perspectives on agri-tourism. According to author R. Lobo, agri-tourism is any business activity carried out by a farmer to entertain or educate the public, promote farm products, and generate additional income for the farm (Lobo et al., 1999).

McGehee and Kim stated that agritourism is the practice of attracting visitors to an area primarily used for agriculture. This definition is brief yet somewhat vague and lacking in specifics. It could be improved by clarifying whether the term "area" refers to an individual farm, a rural locality, or a larger agricultural region (McGehee & Kim, 2004). Additionally, it does not explain the reasons behind the visitors' interest or the types of activities they typically take part in. Specifying the purposes of these visits, like education, leisure, or hands-on participation, would enhance the clarity and usefulness of the definition.

Ngô Thị Phương Lan and Colleagues, agritourism is understood as a form of tourist participation in spaces associated with agricultural production activities, aiming to satisfy the needs for sightseeing, learning, and experiencing natural and cultural values, while also contributing to the socio-economic benefits of the destination's owners (Lan et al., 2021). Author Đào Ngọc Cảnh believes that Agri-tourism is a type of tourism that utilizes the values of agriculture and related elements to create tourism products. These elements include production tools, agricultural workers, production processes and techniques, farming customs, agricultural products, as well as natural factors associated with the farm ecosystem such as weather, climate, soil, and water resources (Đào Ngọc Cảnh, n.d.). Author Nguyen Duy Chinh and Phan Thi Ngan state that agritourism is a form of tourism in which visitors come to explore and experience the lifestyle and production activities on farms (Nguyen & Phan, 2021)

Currently, Vietnam lacks an official definition for this type of tourism. However, in recent times, the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism has organized several seminars related to agricultural tourism. Generally, agricultural tourism can be understood as follows: (i) It is a combination of tourism and agriculture activities designed to attract visitors to areas associated with agriculture; (ii) Its primary goal is to increase farmers' income by creating a new livelihood through tourism, while still maintaining their traditional agricultural practices; (iii) It offers tourists opportunities for recreation, physical and mental engagement in a nature-friendly environment, allowing them to experience the life and work of farmers; (iv) It integrates natural and traditional cultural values in rural areas, thereby contributing to the preservation of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, as well as traditional crafts.

Agri-tourism can be briefly understood as a type of tourism that combines agriculture and travel, aiming to attract visitors to rural areas to experience the daily life and work of farmers. It contributes to increasing local incomes, preserving traditional craft villages, and protecting the natural environment.

Key Characteristics of Agri-tourism in the Mekong Delta

The Mekong Delta plays a vital role in Vietnam's agricultural production. Comprising one centrally governed city and twelve provinces, the region contributes 18% of the national GDP and leads the country in agricultural exports. Specifically, it accounts for approximately 90% of Vietnam's rice exports, 60% of its aquatic products, and 70% of its fruit exports (Minh -, 2024b). These figures highlight the Mekong Delta as the nation's largest hub for rice, aquaculture, and fruit production (**Figure 1**).

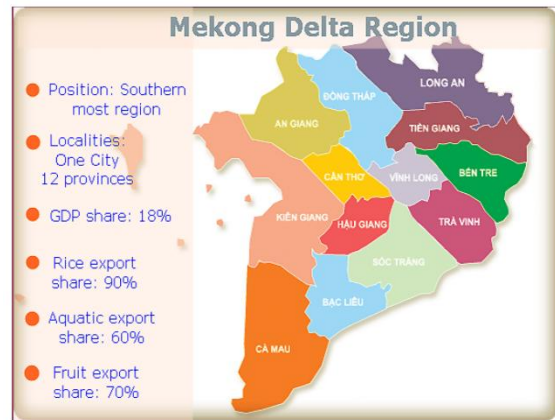


Figure 1: Mekong Delta Region - 2024

Source: Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (Vietnam)

Agri-tourism in Vietnam's Mekong Delta exhibits a set of distinctive characteristics shaped by the region's unique ecological, cultural, and agricultural conditions. First and foremost, the integration of agriculture and tourism is a defining feature. Local households combine traditional farming practices such as rice planting, fish catching, and fruit harvesting with interactive tourism experiences. These activities transform farms into both production spaces and educational environments for visitors, particularly those from urban areas seeking authentic rural experiences.

Secondly, agri-tourism in the region is predominantly community-based and small-scale in nature. Many initiatives are operated by individual farming households or through informal cooperatives. This localized model enables the preservation of cultural authenticity and provides direct economic benefits to rural communities. However, it also means that many operations lack formal training, standardized services, or access to broader tourism markets.

A third key characteristic lies in the diversity of agricultural products. The Mekong Delta is known as the "rice bowl" of Vietnam and is also rich in tropical fruits and aquatic resources. Seasonal variations present unique opportunities for tourism, such as fruit festivals, flower seasons, or fishing seasons. This diversity enables a wide range of agri-tourism packages, creating a dynamic tourist experience throughout the year.

The fourth defining feature is the region's water-based and ecological landscape. The Delta's dense network of rivers and canals gives rise to iconic attractions, including floating markets, boat tours through fruit-laden orchards, and visits to mangrove forests. These features facilitate a seamless integration between agri-tourism and eco-tourism, offering both recreational and educational value to visitors (**Figure 2**).



Figure 2: Floating markets in the Mekong Delta. Source: Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (Vietnam)

Fifth, agri-tourism in the Mekong Delta is enriched by its cultural and culinary heritage. Traditional folk music performances (Southern amateur music - *Đờn ca tài tử*), local festivals, and regional cuisine, such as the Vietnamese sizzling pancake (*Bánh xèo*), Vietnamese rice noodle soup (*Hủ tiếu*), and Charcoal-Grilled snakehead fish (*cá lóc nướng trui*), are integral parts of the visitor experience. These elements foster an emotional and cultural connection between tourists and the local community, adding layers of meaning that extend beyond purely agricultural interactions.

Despite its richness, agri-tourism in the Mekong Delta still operates with informal and low-tech infrastructure. Facilities are often essential, relying on traditional tools and manual labor. Digital transformation and marketing outreach remain limited, although recent years have seen increasing interest from younger entrepreneurs and local authorities in upgrading services and reaching wider audiences through online platforms.

Lastly, a critical characteristic and challenge is the vulnerability of agri-tourism to climate change. The Mekong Delta is one of the regions most affected by sea-level rise, saltwater intrusion, and erratic weather patterns. These changes threaten both the agricultural base and the overall tourism experience (*Mekong Delta Faces Increased Saltwater Intrusion in 2024-25 Dry Season*, n.d.). (Figure 3).

In summary, agri-tourism in the Mekong Delta is characterized by a potent blend of agriculture, culture, and natural elements. It holds immense potential for sustainable development but also faces significant challenges, especially in the context of climate change and limited institutional support.

4.2 Climate Change Implications for Agri-tourism in the Mekong Delta

The Mekong Delta is facing significant challenges across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Moreover, these challenges interact and reinforce one another, creating downward spirals that hinder both the overall economy and the sustainability of agriculture in the region. Without comprehensive transformation solutions, achieving sustainable development in the Mekong Delta will be a significant challenge (Figure 4).

Economically, the focus on fulfilling the mission of food security and prioritizing agricultural production in terms of quantity over quality has resulted in a low value of farming forestry, and fishery products, leading to low economic growth.

Socially, the lack of quality employment opportunities resulting from low economic growth has led many young workers in the Mekong Delta to migrate, primarily to the Southeastern region.

Environmentally, climate change, and fluctuations in the transboundary Mekong River's water resources, as well as internal issues such as natural resource exploitation, overuse of pesticides, soil, water, and air pollution, and excessive sand and groundwater extraction, etc., have significantly impacted the ecosystem, lives, and livelihoods of millions of people in the Mekong Delta. In a study, A. Smajgl and Colleagues highlighted that the Mekong Delta is confronting persistent challenges, including declining upstream water flow, sea-level rise, saltwater intrusion, and erosion. These factors collectively pose significant difficulties in ensuring adequate water supply for domestic use and agricultural production (Smajgl et al., 2015).

Climate change has significantly impacted agri-tourism in the Mekong Delta through various direct and indirect pathways. Rising temperatures, erratic rainfall patterns, and increasingly frequent



Figure 3: Drought and salt intrusion destroy Mekong Delta paddy fields.
Source: VCCI - Fulbright

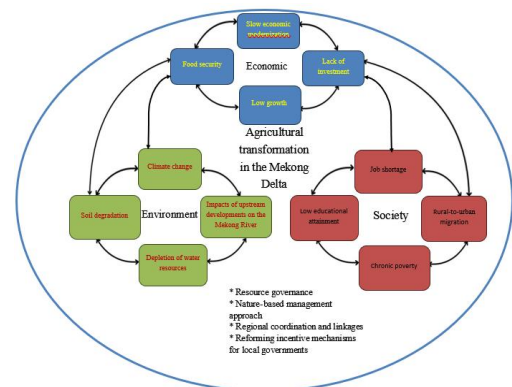


Figure 4: Agricultural Transformation in the Mekong Delta
Source: Author's compilation

extreme weather events, such as floods, droughts, and salinity intrusion, have disrupted agricultural production—the very foundation of agri-tourism experiences in the region. These impacts reduce the attractiveness of rural landscapes, limit seasonal tourism activities, and pose risks to infrastructure and visitor safety.

Climate change is significantly impacting agriculture in general and agri-tourism in particular through various mechanisms, resulting in several noticeable consequences: (i) Rising sea levels and saltwater intrusion have led to the loss of arable land and reduced productivity of rice, fruit, and other local specialties, diminishing the appeal of agri-tourism. These conditions also compel farmers to modify or abandon traditional farming practices, thereby affecting the authenticity and diversity of tourism services. As livelihoods become more vulnerable, the local community's ability to invest in and sustain tourism activities also declines. Climate change exacerbates tidal surges, floods, droughts, and other natural disasters, posing significant challenges to socio-economic development, particularly in the agri-tourism sector. (ii) Extreme weather changes, including unusual droughts and floods, disrupt agricultural activities and degrade the distinctive riverine landscapes, thereby affecting tourists' experiences. (iii) Biodiversity loss, including the gradual disappearance of ecosystems and endemic species, weakens the appeal of both eco-tourism and agri-tourism tours. (iv) Local communities are also heavily affected as climate change reduces the income of farmers and tourism workers, making it difficult for them to invest in improving the quality of tourism products and services.

Overall, climate change poses a significant challenge to the sustainability of agri-tourism in the Mekong Delta, underscoring the need for adaptive strategies that integrate climate resilience into both agricultural and tourism planning.

In addition to the impacts of climate change, agricultural production in general and agri-tourism in particular in the Mekong Delta are now facing a tangible threat from Cambodia's construction of the Funan Techo Canal (**Figure 5**).

The proposed Funan Techo Canal, a \$1.7 billion infrastructure project in Cambodia, aims to connect the Mekong River to the Gulf of Thailand, bypassing Vietnamese territory. While intended to boost Cambodia's inland water transport and reduce reliance on Vietnamese ports, the project has raised significant concerns in Vietnam, particularly for the Mekong Delta (*Mekong River Commission*, n.d.).

Experts warn that the canal may alter water flow patterns, potentially reducing freshwater availability in Vietnam's delta during the dry season, and worsening salinity intrusion. Furthermore, the ecological balance of the lower Mekong could be disrupted, threatening agriculture, fisheries, and the livelihoods that depend on the river.

This project may exacerbate freshwater shortages and intensify saltwater intrusion in the region, which has already been severely affected by climate change and upstream water storage from hydropower dams along the Mekong River (*Troubled Waters*, 2024).

4.3 Some solutions for the Sustainable Development of Agri-tourism in the Context of Climate Change



Figure 5: Funan Techo Canal
Source: Cambodia submission to the Mekong River Commission

As previously discussed in the section on the concept of agri-tourism, and based on the specific characteristics of this tourism model in the Mekong Delta region, it is evident that the development of sustainable agri-tourism in the context of climate change cannot be separated from the region's comprehensive agricultural transformation agenda. In particular, the proposed solutions to address climate change, as well as other external challenges such as resource degradation, saltwater intrusion, declining water availability, and labor migration, must be grounded in the four foundational pillars of agricultural transformation in the Mekong Delta (Figure 6).

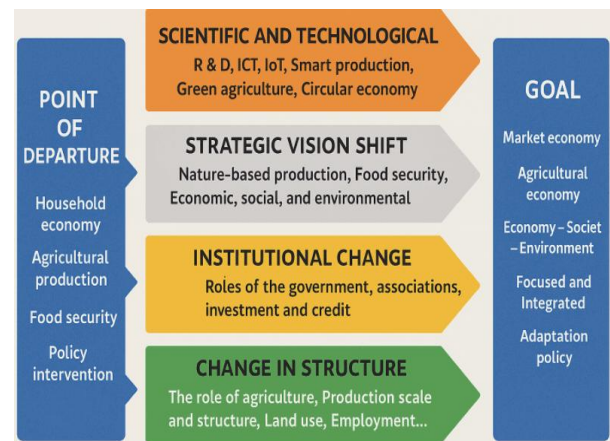


Figure 6: The four pillars of agricultural transformation in the Mekong Delta
Source: Author's own compilation

To develop sustainable agri-tourism in the context of climate change, the Mekong Delta must initiate a transformation in its strategic vision. This new vision not only clearly defines the region's development goals in alignment with modern and sustainable agricultural trends but also helps to remove longstanding barriers that have previously hindered the growth of the agri-tourism sector. The importance of digital transformation in agriculture in the context of climate change is emphasized by authors Mehmet Ali Dayioğlu and Ufuk Türker, digital transformation creates a smart agricultural ecosystem in which real-time data connectivity and analysis systems not only enhance productivity and product quality, but also contribute to sustainable development and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions throughout the agricultural value chain (Dayioğlu & Türker, 2021).

The prerequisite for realizing this vision is the implementation of comprehensive and systematic institutional reforms. These include restructuring land ownership and land use regimes, redefining the roles of the State, businesses, and socio-professional organizations, enhancing regional governance effectiveness, and promoting the development of industry clusters and value chains that integrate agriculture and tourism. The role of the State plays a crucial part in coordinating agritourism activities, as acknowledged by Xiaowen Jin and colleagues, the overall strategy of the state government serves as the guide, and a strong driver of Michigan's agritourism development in the above four stages, which industry associations and universities alone could not accomplish (Jin et al., 2021).

One key solution for sustainable agritourism development is enhancing cooperative and benefit-sharing models. Establishing community-based cooperatives enables local people to co-own, manage, and share the profits fairly and equitably. This model fosters accountability, transparency, and social cohesion. It is also vital to collaborate with local authorities, businesses, and researchers for technical and communication support.

Sharing the benefits of agro-tourism is a crucial element to ensure the sustainability of this model. In a study, R.m.m.h.k. Rambodagedara and Colleagues highlighted that agro-tourism not only provides farmers with an additional source of income by integrating agricultural production with tourism activities, but also creates various employment opportunities for local people, including family members and the broader community. Locals can engage directly in tourism services or produce goods for visitors, such as traditional food and handicrafts. Furthermore, farmers can sell agricultural produce and value-added products directly, or organize interactive experiences such as "pick-your-own" activities to enhance value and attract tourists (Rambodagedara et al., 2015).

In addition, the application of science and technology plays a crucial supporting role, particularly in promoting mechanization, digital transformation, innovative production, green agricultural practices, and the adoption of circular economy models. These elements will enhance the region's capacity to adapt to climate change while generating sustainable added value for both agriculture and tourism.

The outcome of this transformation is a modern agri-tourism structure that enhances the quality and value of agricultural products, while closely integrating agrarian production with processing industries and eco-tourism services. Land use becomes more efficient and rational, while the employment, income, and living standards of rural communities improve, contributing to the establishment of a sustainable agri-tourism economy in the Mekong Delta amid the challenges of climate change.

5. CONCLUSION

Agri-tourism in Vietnam's Mekong Delta presents both promising opportunities and formidable challenges in the face of climate change. With rich natural resources, diverse agricultural products, and a deeply rooted cultural heritage, the region holds immense potential to develop sustainable agri-tourism that benefits both the economy and the environment. However, the sector remains informal, underdeveloped, and highly vulnerable to climate-related threats, such as saltwater intrusion, land degradation, and extreme weather events. To ensure long-term sustainability, agri-tourism must be integrated into a broader agricultural transformation strategy that encompasses innovation, institutional reform, digitalization, and environmentally friendly practices. Community-based models that emphasize benefit-sharing, capacity building, and policy support are critical for empowering local farmers and enhancing service quality. Furthermore, investments in infrastructure, marketing, and environmental resilience will be vital to maintain the authenticity and appeal of agri-tourism experiences. Ultimately, agri-tourism can serve as a dual-purpose solution, revitalizing rural livelihoods while building climate resilience if approached with a strategic, inclusive, and forward-looking vision.

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