

# POTENTIAL OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPIRITUAL TOURISM AT THE MARINE REGION OF THANH HOA

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*Along with eco-tourism and community-based tourism, spiritual tourism has become a popular and attractive form of tourism in recent years. Thanh Hoa has more than 1,535 historical - cultural relics and beauty spots. Among them, many relics imbued with religions and beliefs of Vietnamese people contain spiritual values and play an important role in people's life. Every year, millions of tourists come to visit and enjoy those relics. The paper evaluated the potential and strengths of spiritual tourism at the marine region of Thanh Hoa so that Thanh Hoa tourism industry could diversify its marine tourism product system to meet the increasing needs of tourists.*

**Key words:** Spiritual tourism; marine region in Thanh Hoa; development.

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## 1. Introduction

Spiritual tourism is one of the types of cultural tourism that considers spiritual elements and values as the main driving force for exploitation. Spiritual tourism activities are increasingly developing "with depth" and become an indispensable need in the spiritual life of the majority of people. Spiritual tourism brings ethereal values and experiences, and

aspirations in life, which relieves worries, sorrows, hardships, worries and directs people to sacred and holy concepts, with the values of truth, goodness, and beauty. Spiritual tourism is not only an attractive form of tourism but also a promising tourism market with many advantages of localities. This type of tourism is not only the best condition to promote cultural heritage treasures, but also makes the tourism product system of each locality more diverse, overcoming seasonality in tourism.

Thanh Hoa is considered a province with a lot of potential to develop the tourism economy, especially the potential for sea-based tourism. With 102km of sea route, the marine region of Thanh Hoa has a large number of beautiful and famous beaches such as Sam Son, Hai Tien, Hai Hoa... In addition, Thanh Hoa beaches are also blessed with ideal natural conditions. Specifically, the sea is warm whatever season it is. In winter, the sea temperature rarely drops below 20°C while in summer it fluctuates at 25°C - 27°C. The average salinity of sea water is about 3.2%. The beach is relatively flat with far away seabed, and few deep trenches or

The seabed extends far away with relatively flat terrain, with few deep trenches or islands like Ha Long Bay. The sea is shallow compared to that of neighboring provinces such as Ninh Binh, Nam Dinh, Ha Nam in the North and Nghe An in the South. Sometimes, the depth of the seabed is only 1m in the distance of 1km from the coast, which creates white foam rushing to the shore even when the sea is “calm”. These characters are ideal conditions for marine tourism activities.

Moreover, compared to other marine regions of the country, Thanh Hoa sea area was exploited quite early as a result of the process of occupying the delta and coastal areas downstream of the Ma River by the ancient Vietnamese. On the basis of natural conditions and ecological environment, together with the open geo-cultural position, this region has possessed conditions for strong cultural exchange. It is a place to accumulate and condense the unique cultural values of the sea with a system of specific religions and beliefs associated with the spiritual life of the indigenous community. This is the potential strength of spiritual tourism in Thanh Hoa. The effective exploitation of the strength of spiritual tourism not only contributes to diversifying the system of tourism products, overcoming the seasonality in tourism for Thanh Hoa’s marine region, but also contributes to the conservation and promotion of marine cultural values of Thanh Hoa.

## **2. Research overview**

Spiritual tourism is a type of tourism that has been formed for a long time in the world, but it has only been really popular and considered as separate type of tourism since a few decades ago. Although being newly focused, this type of tourism is particularly interested by domestic and foreign researchers at various levels in terms of theory as well as practice. The theoretical research achievements on spiritual tourism are noted by the author such as Mu et al (2007) in the study of spiritual tourism and cultural pilgrimage in China defining Spiritual tourism as a special cultural activity, oriented by spiritual culture with the support of a

specific ecological environment, related to activities of worship, research, sightseeing performed by religious believers or normal visitors [3]. Spiritual tourism often involves visits to spiritual sites by pilgrims and ordinary visitors who are partly or purely spiritually motivated [4]. Tuan, Nguyen Van with the presentation "*Spiritual tourism in Vietnam: Situation and development orientation*" at the international conference on Spiritual tourism for sustainable development (Ninh Binh, 2013) claimed that Spiritual tourism is essentially a type of cultural tourism, taking spiritual and cultural elements as both a basis and as a goal to satisfy people's spiritual needs in spiritual life [6].

In addition to the studies on the concept of spiritual tourism, there are also studies on the conditions for spiritual tourism development, the ways to attract spiritual tourists, as well as the characteristics of different types of spiritual tourism model in Vietnam such as Lan, Nguyen Thuy with the article "*A study on the conditions for developing Zen tour in Vietnam*" in which the author focused on researching spiritual tourism under the exploitation of Buddhism, and detailed analysis of macro and micro environment of Zen tour [1]. Minh, Duong Duc with the article "*Spiritual tourism in Vietnam: theoretical and practical issues*" has outlined the theoretical basis of spiritual tourism. Besides, the author has given the characteristics of spiritual tourism in Vietnam as well as the current development practice. According to the author, in Vietnam, there are typical forms of spiritual tourism including visiting and learning about religious architectures; attending events related to festivals associated with the expression of beliefs and religions; pilgrimage tourism; Zen tourism, spiritual tourism commemorating national heroes [10]. Lam, Truong Sy (2014) with the topic "*Research on cultural and religious values in the West of Hanoi (former Ha Tay) to develop tourism*" has clarified the issues of culture, belief and religious culture tourism. In addition, the author also deeply assesses and analyzes the potential and current status of cultural and religious tourism activities in the western districts of Hanoi and proposes groups of solutions to strengthen the management and exploitation of religious culture tourism in the coming time.

There have not been any individual works researching on spiritual tourism in Thanh Hoa in general and Thanh Hoa's marine region in particular so far; however, many scholars have studied the system of historical and cultural relics including the spiritual value of the relic mentioned in the book "*Geography of Thanh Hoa*", Volume 2 providing readers with a comprehensive view of Thanh Hoa's culture and society [8]. The book series "*Monuments and Landscapes of Thanh Hoa Province (2000 - 2010)*" compiled by the Department of Historical Research and Compilation, the Provincial General Museum, and the Management Board of Thanh Hoa Monuments and Landscapes presents a number of researches on typical cultural relics of Thanh Hoa sea, and many detailed articles on the system of relics and spiritual activities related to relics in the marine region [9]. In addition, there are researches such as "*The custom of worshipping Doc Cuoc in Sam Son Mountain village*" (Tuong, Hoang Minh - 2005); "*Traditional customs and festivals of Thanh Hoa*" (Nhan, Hoang Anh); "*The belief in worshipping sea gods in Thanh Hoa province*" (Tuong, Hoang Minh - 2017)... These

works have given us an overview of the system of spiritual values in the marine region in particular and of Thanh Hoa province in general.

### **3. Research approach and methods**

In order to clarify the potential for developing spiritual tourism in Thanh Hoa's marine region, the authors have used different methods: (1) Analytical method - synthesize sources of documents on the system of historical and cultural relics associated with spiritual elements; religions and beliefs in Thanh Hoa's marine region; views and arguments on spiritual tourism...; (2) Field survey method - conduct a field survey in 6 coastal districts, focusing on districts where tourism activities are being exploited and developed to collect information and data of research subjects; (3) Historical-logical method - research, judge, deduce, and argue the historical and social bases that form religions, beliefs, roles and importance of spiritual activities for tourism development.

### **4. Research results**

#### ***4.1. The concept of spiritual tourism***

There have been different views on spiritual tourism. According to Tuan, Nguyen Van, "*Spiritual tourism is essentially a type of cultural tourism, taking spiritual and cultural factors as both a basis and as a goal to satisfy people's spiritual needs in spiritual life. In that view, spiritual tourism exploits spiritual cultural factors in the implementation of tourism activities, based on tangible and intangible cultural values associated with the history of forming people's perception of the world, the values of faith, religion, beliefs and other special spiritual values. Accordingly, spiritual tourism brings about spiritual emotions and experiences*" (Tuan, Nguyen Van, 2013). From the above point of view, it can be said that spiritual tourism is a form of expression of cultural tourism. Spiritual and cultural values are the core factor to form tourism activities and tourism products to serve tourists. Through experiencing cultural and spiritual values, visitors will form positive thoughts towards balance and spiritual development.

The above concept of the author Nguyen Van Tuan is also quite close to the assessment of spiritual tourism of the authors Nhan, Nguyen Trong – Khanh, Cao My. Specifically, the authors claim that "Developing spiritual cultural tourism not only brings economic - social - cultural benefits to the destination, but also helps visitors to raise their spirits in the search for values that are capable of enhancing the dignity themselves if tourism development goes in the right direction" (Nhan, Nguyen Trong – Khanh, Cao My, 2014, p.122). The author Alex Norman has briefly defined "*In spiritual tourism, tourists try to find spiritual benefits through the practice of religious rituals and beliefs.*" (Alex Norman, 2011, p.193).

Most recently, it is the concept of spiritual tourism proposed by the author Minh, Ho Ky: "Spiritual tourism is now expressed in different levels and forms. The first form is sightseeing activities at religious and belief establishments. This is the narrowest form, which has not yet shown the meaning of this tourism activity; however, it is the most popular

activity at the moment; The second form is more expanded with the understanding that visiting religious and belief establishments, besides sightseeing, is also to worship and pray. This form is more extensive, but it is only suitable for subjects who follow religion or belief; The third form has the main purpose of learning the philosophies and teachings that make people calm, relax their mind, improve their health and feel themselves” (Minh, Ho Ky, 2015, p.5). Through the concept of the author Minh, Ho Ky, it can be seen that forms of spiritual tourism are decentralized through the level of visitor participation. The foundation of forming and developing spiritual tourism is religious and belief establishments. In other words, the core value for building spiritual tourism activities is religious belief establishments. Visitors can perform activities that are graded from low to high at these religious establishments including sightseeing, performing religious rites, learning and applying religious philosophies and beliefs to improve your spiritual life and improve your physical health.

In general, spiritual tourism is an expression of cultural tourism. Cultural values, beliefs and religions are important foundations for the formation and development of spiritual tourism activities. The purpose of spiritual tourists can be divided into many different levels with the same starting point of having belief in a supernatural force associated with a specific religious cultural space. Their experiences in sacred spaces will potentially have significant implications for increasing their own awareness and understanding. Moreover, through spiritual tourism activities, tourists also expect to improve their mental and physical strength. Spiritual tourism is *“A type of cultural tourism that exploits religious objects and spiritual beliefs into tourism activities in order to satisfy the needs of belief, religion, sightseeing, research and raise awareness of visitors”*.

#### ***4.2. Overview of Thanh Hoa sea tourism***

The marine region of Thanh Hoa is located in the coastal area of the Gulf of Tonkin, coordinating 19<sup>0</sup>18' - 20<sup>0</sup>30' of North latitude and 105<sup>0</sup>30' - 107<sup>0</sup>30' of East longitude, with a coastline of over 102km. Thanh Hoa's sea is shallow with a depth of 20m, located 15-20km from the shore. There are 6 districts and towns running along the coast including Nga Son, Hau Loc, Hoang Hoa, Sam Son, Quang Xuong, Nghi Son. According to the book "Geography of Thanh Hoa" Volume 1, Thanh Hoa's coastline has a length of 102 km (from Cua Can, Nga Son to Ha Nam, Tinh Gia) with a territorial sea of 170,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Thanh Hoa can be classified as a province with a large sea area and coastline with different landforms on the coastline. The coastline is also cut by creeks such as Lach Sung, Lach Truong, Lach Hoi, Lach Ghep... The islands in Thanh Hoa sea are located not far from the shore, the largest of which are Hon Me (about 14km from shore), and other islands such as Hon Ne, Hon Vat, Hon Dot, Nghi Son. The diverse structure of the topography of the coastline and coastal islands, in addition to creating the complexity of the nature of Thanh Hoa's sea, also has positive uses. Coves and bays with deep creeks are very convenient for traveling and sheltering of fishing boats when there are big waves and storms. Areas of estuaries on shallow mudflats can develop aquaculture with high economic value. Besides, coastal islands

have the effect of breaking waves for the shore, and also create a belt that accelerates alluvial deposition, contributing to increasing the area of coastal delta areas. In addition, the diversity and complexity of topographical conditions have created an interesting and spectacular natural landscape, together with the historical sites available in the area that have increased the attractiveness of both local and foreign tourists.

The marine region of Thanh Hoa is a hot sea with an average air temperature of 23<sup>0</sup>C - 24<sup>0</sup>C with winter air temperature being about 17<sup>0</sup>C and summer air temperature being 28<sup>0</sup>C - 29<sup>0</sup>C. Thanh Hoa sea area has a diurnal tide regime with 18-20 days of diurnal tide every month and 10-12 days of semi-diurnal tides. The tide rises quickly (8-9 hours), slows down (15-16 hours) with tidal amplitude fluctuating in the range of 1.0 - 2.6m. Thanh Hoa beach in general has a moderate slope (under 15<sup>0</sup>), suitable sea salt concentration, moderate wave strength, clean sea water, and no mud; therefore, it is very attractive to tourists. Thanh Hoa coast is quite flat, lying deeper than the general topography of the South Central Coast. The north is the coastal area of Nga Son district with many muddy and alluvial soils while the south is sandy beaches, salt-making fields, and ecologically close to the morphology of the North Sea. Thanh Hoa coast rarely has bends to create coves and small bays. However, the split points of many rivers and the contiguity of mountains and sea, have created unique landscapes, estuaries, and ecological zones.

Compared with other marine regions of the country, Thanh Hoa's marine region was exploited early due to the process of moving to the plains and coastal areas of the ancient Vietnamese in the Ma river region. Furthermore, Thanh Hoa's sea plays an intermediary role, integrating many transitional elements between the North and South seas, which has many unique features not only on the natural aspects but also in the nuances of marine culture. Unlike the Red River Delta, there is a quite close relationship between the forest and the sea of Thanh Hoa. The system of cultural sites of the Neolithic and Bronze Ages along the Ma river axis, gradually running down the plain and approaching the sea such as Con Moong, Dong Khoi, Quy Chu, Con Chan Tien, Hoa Loc. .. Many gods and goddesses are worshiped along the coast and also in many midland and highland areas of Thanh Hoa located along the Ma River such as Doc Cuoc, Cao Son, To Hien Thanh... These things have created many unique cultural values in Thanh Hoa's sea, both tangible and intangible aspects. Specifically, there are still many cultural values with the unique features of the inhabitants of the sea.

Thanks to the available advantages, sea tourism has always been a strength in the tourism development of Thanh Hoa province and has always been identified as a key type of tourism in the province. Over the years, sea tourism has made positive changes with many important milestones in infrastructure development, promotion and diversification of tourism products, creating great attraction for domestic and international tourists. Currently, sea tourism accounts for about 70% of the tourism industry in Thanh Hoa.

Traditional resort tourism at the beaches of Sam Son, Hai Tien, Hai Hoa... has been much improved in terms of facilities, services and landscapes in recent years. In particular,

the type of beach resort at FLC Sam Son, with high-class services, fully integrated elements of a resort type is a product that can be sold in four seasons, which has contributed to dealing with the seasonality of sea tourism in Thanh Hoa in the past few years. Accordingly, in the 2016-2020 period, the tourism industry welcomed 42.58 million visitors, exceeding 0.7% of the plan (international visitors of 1.28 million, exceeding 1.6% of the plan); total revenue reached VND 59,946 billion, exceeding 0.2% of the plan. Notably, in 2019, Thanh Hoa province's tourism industry welcomed 9,655,000 visitors, an increase of 17.0% compared to 2018, reaching 101.6% of the plan in 2019. Total revenue of tourism reached VND 14,526 billion, up 37% compared to 2018. Since 2020, due to the impact of the Covid pandemic, the tourism industry has been seriously affected, accordingly, the number of visitors to Thanh Hoa in general and Thanh Hoa's sea in particular has decreased by nearly 60%. However, with its inherent potential and strengths, when the tourism industry recovers, sea tourism remains an attractive destination for tourists.

### ***4.3. Spiritual tourism potential associated with the marine region of Thanh Hoa***

Along with resort tourism, which is a traditional product of Thanh Hoa's sea, cultural tourism, including spiritual tourism, is also one of the strengths that Thanh Hoa's sea tourism has been exploiting to create diversity for marine tourism products in particular and the tourism product system of Thanh Hoa province in general. The fact that the sea was exploited early due to the moving down to the plains and coastal areas of the ancient Vietnamese in the Ma River region, the living process of the community here has created unique cultural values with a unique system of beliefs and religions. This is the basis and potential for developing spiritual tourism for the sea here.

#### ***4.3.1. Rituals, festivals, performances***

For ancient Vietnamese people, festivals were considered as the most popular community activity. The annual festival is an opportunity for villagers to mingle with the community. According to Prof. Tran Lam Bien "it would be difficult to balance life after a year full of hardships, to get on well with other people, and to keep cultural identities without festivals..."<sup>1</sup>

The rituals and festivals of Thanh land have existed since ancient times associated with gathering and organizing forces to fight and produce, expressing the need to balance spiritual life, create and enjoy cultural values of the community. The festivals of Thanh land bring the nuances of agricultural civilization, associated with folk beliefs of worshiping gods and people with meritorious services to the villagers and the country. Traditional festivals of Thanh land are very diverse and are means for long-term preservation of rich and unique customs, folk songs, performances, and folk games.

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<sup>1</sup> Tran Lam Bien, *Spring Festival, a few lines of reflection*, Journal of Scientific Information of Thanh Hoa College of Arts and Culture, p. 13

According to statistics from the Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Thanh Hoa, Thanh Hoa province currently has 160 traditional festivals related to historical sites and landscapes recognized by the state, 50 festivals related to religious beliefs. In particular, the marine region has 54 festivals itself and most of them are festivals related to religious beliefs. Through survey and collected data, 33 out of 47 communes of 6 coastal districts of Thanh Hoa province have festivals. Hau Loc district has 06 out of 54 festivals (accounting for 11.1%), Hoang Hoa has 03 out of 54 festivals (accounting for 5.5%), Nga Son has 05 out of 54 festivals (accounting for 9.2%), Quang Xuong has 10 out of 54 festivals (18.5%), Tinh Gia has 19 out of 54 festivals (accounting for 35.2%), Sam Son has 11 out of 54 festivals (accounting for 20.4%). These festivals attract thousands of visitors every year. In which, there are many festivals of great historical and cultural significance, having positive effects in educating patriotic traditions and restoring and developing the beauty in traditional cultural activities. Every year, communes in the coastal areas solemnly and solemnly organize typical festivals of each locality to partly meet the requirement of the people's spiritual and spiritual life, and to develop tourism as well. Festivals in the marine region are very rich and diverse, bearing many typical colors of each separate custom and routine such as Cau Ngu Festival in Nga Bach commune (Nga Son district), Ngu Loc commune (Hau Loc district), Hai Thanh and Hai Binh wards, Nghi Son island commune (Nghi Son town); Doc Cuoc Temple Festival, Ba Trieu Festival (Sam Son City); Diem Pho Village Festival (Hau Loc district); Quang Trung Festival (Nghi Son town); Ky Phuc Festival (Quang Xuong district)...

#### *4.3.2. Historical and cultural sites*

According to documents currently stored at the Heritage Conservation Center of Thanh Hoa Province, as of December 2020, Thanh Hoa province has more than 1,535 relics, of which 822 relics have been ranked (1 world heritage site, 3 special national monuments, 145 national monuments and 707 provincial monuments). Most of these relics are concentrated in the plains and midlands such as World Cultural Heritage of Ho Dynasty Citadel, Lam Kinh Special National Monument, Dong Son Archaeological Relic, Da But Cultural Archaeological Relic... The coastal area has fewer ranked historical and cultural relics compared to other areas, but it is conveniently located for the formation of tourist clusters as well as for the connection of different types of tourism. According to the statistics of the Heritage Conservation Center of Thanh Hoa province, there are more than 300 historical and cultural relics, including 01 special national relic, 39 national monuments and 261 provincial cultural relics in 6 coastal districts of Thanh Hoa. Among the relics and scenic spots of Thanh Hoa's sea, there are mainly relics associated with the belief of worshipping the gods of the coastal community of Thanh Hoa and the religions of the resident community here. Among them, there are many spiritual spots that annually attract millions of tourists to practice beliefs, religions and worship such as The cluster of relics of Diem Pho in Ngu Loc commune - Hau Loc district; Sam Son scenic area (Truong Le mountain, Doc Cuoc temple, Hon Trong Mai, To Hien Thanh temple, Co Tien temple); Phuc Temple Relics (Quang Nham commune - Quang Xuong district); Lach Bang relic cluster in Hai Thanh ward, Nghi Son town (Dot



Tien temple, Quang Trung temple, Cua Bang temple, Thanh Xuyen temple); Bien Son relic cluster - Nghi Son island commune - Nghi Son town... All of these are spiritual destinations that attract tourists and are the basis for developing spiritual tourism in the marine region of Thanh Hoa.

## **5. Discussion**

It can be seen that the marine region of Thanh Hoa is one of the regions with great spiritual tourism potential. Moreover, most of the spiritual sites are often associated with historical - cultural relics and scenic spots, located near the center of the districts, the main traffic routes (both by road and river) ... Therefore, it is convenient to link and build tours such as the cluster of national relics, especially historical sites and scenic spots in Sam Son located in the space of Sam Son beach tourism with spiritual sites of Doc Cuoc Temple, Co Tien Temple. In particular, The worshipping of Doc Cuoc in Doc Cuoc Temple is a belief in many rural areas of Thanh Hoa, especially places associated with the legend of the main God in Sam Son sea. The temple is located on the top of Sam Son mountain and called Co Giai Island - the easternmost tip of the Truong Le mountain range. On its West, there are famous landscapes such as Trong Mai Island and Co Tien Pagoda. These are all indispensable spiritual destinations in the journey of tourists when visiting Sam Son. Therefore, this place attracts thousands of visitors every year. Based on these spiritual sites, other attractive tours can be created to meet the needs of participating in spiritual tourism or combining different types of tourism in a trip such as the combination of the Sam Son - Tho Xuan route (with Lam Kinh special national relic site) - Cam Thuy (Holy Fish Stream, Cua Ha scenic spot) - Vinh Loc (World Cultural Heritage of Ho Dynasty Citadel, Giang pagoda, Tran Khat Chan Temple, Binh Khuong Lady Temple) - Yen Dinh (Dong Co Temple)... Besides, we can also connect spiritual points and other destinations in the marine region of Thanh Hoa to form a journey to explore the sea with attractive destinations such as Cua Than Phu, Tien pagoda, sedge mat craft village (Nga Son); Diem Pho relic cluster in Ngu Loc (Hau Loc) with Cau Ngu festival; To Hien Thanh temple, Hoi Long pagoda, Lach Truong spiritual cultural park tourist area (Hoang Hoa); Lach Bang relic cluster, Bien Son relic cluster (Nghi Son town)... With each spiritual tour, visitors will have an interesting experience. Products of spiritual tourism can be pilgrimages to temples, visits to religious facilities, historical and cultural routes related to tangible and intangible heritages such as festivals, music, theater, literature, culinary arts.

In addition, spiritual spots in Thanh Hoa marine region are often located in spatial and landscape positions in harmony with nature, which are ideal conditions for tourists who want a space to meditate, read books and do exercises to improve health...

On the other hand, spiritual tourism has a long history associated with pilgrimage rituals in world religions and is becoming increasingly popular. Besides other types of tourism such as community tourism, eco-tourism, adventure tourism... in the current tourism development trend, spiritual tourism is still increasingly popular. Mr. Zoltan Somogyu,

Deputy Secretary General of the World Tourism Organization claimed that "*In the development trend of world tourism, spiritual tourism continues to be emphasized.*" In addition, spiritual tourism activities are increasingly in-depth and become an indispensable need in the spiritual life of the majority of people. Spiritual tourism brings values and ethereal experiences to visitors, which relieves worries, troubles, and hardships in visitor's life; directs them to sacred and holy concepts, with values of truth, goodness, beauty; help them balance their moods and enjoy the serenity in their lives. Therefore, the development of spiritual tourism is one of the must-dos of sea tourism in particular and Thanh Hoa tourism in general.

## 6. Conclusion

Thanks to the available potentials and strengths, the marine region of Thanh Hoa is fully qualified to develop spiritual tourism. However, in order to make spiritual tourism become an attractive tourism product and meet the diverse needs of tourists, it is necessary to have synchronous solutions for both the marine region of Thanh Hoa in general and specific solutions for to each marine area in particular with the aim to exploiting its strengths as well as creating tourism products with specific characteristics and brands for each marine area. This will be a basis for attracting tourists and deal with the seasonality in tourism.

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