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Green in Name or in Practice? Environmental Practices at Agritourism Sites around Vientiane, Lao PDR

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Abstract

Agritourism is promoted as a low-impact and green type of tourism in the Lao PDR, but little is known about the environmental practices of agritourism sites. This study compares the words and actions of operators in nine operating and prospective agritourism sites in Vientiane Capital (n=4) and Vientiane Province (n=5). Data was collected through a structured interview between February and May 2026 and a nine-item checklist for field observation on waste, agrochemicals, energy, water, environmental education and habitat. Responses were analyzed by content analysis and an unweighted green-practice index (0-9). None of the operators mentioned the government's promotion of green tourism when talking about their plans, and only one mentioned conservation. All nine said their waste was well managed, but none separated waste, and none had any measures to cut back on single-use plastics. Seven sites were using chemical fertilizers or pesticides, including one that called its vegetables organic. Operators most often associated environmental sustainability with low chemical use, landscaping or income for neighboring farmers. Index scores ranged from 1 to 6. Operating sites scored higher than prospective sites (mean 4.0 vs 1.8), but the gap narrowed to 2.4 vs 1.5 when visitor-facing measures such as bins and interpretation were excluded; these differences are descriptive and were not tested statistically. Support priorities were mainly finance, training and markets, with only one operator including an environmental need. On the practices assessed, the results indicate that the agritourism sites studied around Vientiane are green in setting, but not in management. Connecting credit, training, and promotion to straightforward practice standards (such as waste separation, plastic reduction, and safer input use) would help reconcile the disparity between the green image of agritourism and its actual implementation.

Keywords: agritourism, green tourism, environmental practices, Lao PDR

1. Introduction

Farmers are seeking to supplement their income and urban dwellers are seeking rural experiences which leads to an increase in agritourism visits to working farms for recreation, learning, food or the purchase of produce (Phillip et al., 2010; Gil Arroyo et al., 2013). It is often promoted as a sustainable form of rural tourism because it relies on existing farmland, local produce and landscapes rather than large built infrastructure (Lane, 1994). Agritourism activity providers report that their activities help to keep land in farming, conserve rural landscapes and educate visitors about food and nature (Tew & Barbieri, 2012). Agritourism farms in the United States have been found to perform better on a number of sustainability indicators than other farm ventures (Barbieri, 2013).

Evidence for the environmental claim is thin. A systematic review of agritourism and sustainability shows that environmental outcomes are far less addressed than economic and social ones (Ammirato et al., 2020). Similarly, research on small tourism and hospitality firms has found that positive environmental attitudes do not necessarily lead to environmental practices (Tilley, 1999; Carlsen et al., 2001). Companies may overstate their environmental performance (Delmas & Burbano, 2011), or not disclose practices that they actually engage in (Font et al., 2019). Hence self-reported claims are a weak basis to judge a site's greenness. A simple solution consists of comparing what operators say with what is visible on site but this is rarely applied in the case of agritourism.

Agritourism in the Lao PDR is at the intersection of two national priorities. Agriculture and forestry and information, culture and tourism are two of the seven focus sectors of the National Green Growth Strategy till 2030 (Government of the Lao PDR, 2018). One avenue to inclusive growth post COVID-19 is to strengthen the links between agriculture and tourism (Asian Development Bank, 2021). Agritourism can therefore be expected to feature in efforts to make tourism greener. But Lao agriculture does have real environmental threats. There

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have been detections of pesticide residues above the World Health Organization drinking-water guidelines near commercial banana plantations in the north of the country (Wentworth et al., 2021) and ongoing regional study on farmers' knowledge and handling of pesticides (Hughes et al., 2021). Tourism itself is also adding to environmental pressure in the Lao destinations. For example, land use around the tourism economy has changed in Luang Prabang, with urban ponds lost or polluted (Chanmany et al., 2025). If agritourism sites do follow these practices, their green image could be deceiving for visitors and policy makers.

Vientiane, the capital, and the neighboring province of Vientiane offer a useful context for exploring this question. The capital is the country's largest urban center and its growth, partly driven by foreign direct investment (Thidakone, 2026), has created an expanding urban market within reach of surrounding farms. Farms in the outer districts of the capital, and in Vientiane Province along the road and rail corridor to Vang Vieng, a well-established center of nature-based and adventure tourism (Souliyasack et al., 2021), are well placed to receive day and weekend visitors. Some already are open as agritourism sites; others are preparing to open. To the best of the authors' knowledge, there are no published studies that have explored these sites' environmental practices and there is a dearth of evidence from the Lao PDR in the international agritourism literature.

This study, therefore, attempts to find out whether the agritourism sites around Vientiane are really green or just in name. The four research questions answered are: (1) How do agritourism operators link their development plans to the government's green tourism agenda? (2) What environmental practices are reported by operators and how do they understand environmental sustainability? (3) Which environmental practices can be observed on site, and how do they compare with what operators report? (4) What support do operators seek, and does it include environmental needs?

In keeping with the evidence of an attitude-behavior gap for small tourism firms (Tilley, 1999; Carlsen et al., 2001), the study expected the operators' environmental claims to exceed the practices observed on site. The results provide baseline evidence on the environmental performance of agritourism in the Lao PDR and identify practical entry points for green tourism policy.

2. Methods

2.1. Study area and sites

The study was conducted in two adjacent areas of the Lao PDR: Vientiane Capital, the country's largest urban center, and the neighboring Vientiane Province (Figure 1). The study sites were located in four districts: Sangthong and Xaythany on the outer edge of Vientiane Capital, and Vangvieng and Thoulakhom in Vientiane Province, along the road and rail corridor north of the capital.

Figure 1. Study area: (a) location of the study districts in the Lao PDR; (b) the four study districts in Vientiane Capital and Vientiane Province. The scale is approximate. Base map adapted from "Laos, administrative divisions (districts) - Nmbrs - monochrome" by NordNordWest/Wikipedia, Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Laos,_administrative_divisions_(districts)-_Nmbrs_-_monochrome.svg), licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 DE (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/de/legalcode); converted to greyscale, district numbers removed, and shading, labels and symbols added by the authors.

2.2. Population and sample group

The study population comprised the operating and prospective agritourism sites on the site list of a research project on agritourism of the Institute for Enterprise Development Research (IEDR), which was approved and funded by the Lao Academy of Social and Economic Sciences (LASES). The list was compiled from sites recommended by district tourism and agriculture offices and from sites identified through online sources. All ten sites on the list for Vientiane Capital and Vientiane Province were visited, and none declined to take part. One of them, a nature-based community-based tourism site in Vangvieng with no farm activity, was excluded from the analysis, leaving a sample of nine sites: four in Vientiane Capital and five in Vientiane Province. These nine sites cover the four organizational forms of agritourism on the list (private farms, a cooperative, a producer group and a community-based tourism village) and both stages of development: five sites were already welcoming visitors and four were preparing to do so. The sample is purposive and was not designed to be statistically representative of all agritourism businesses in the study area, so the findings are interpreted as evidence from these sites. The term site is used instead of farm because the sample includes private farms plus a village, a cooperative and a producer group. At each site, one key informant (an owner, a manager, a village head or a group representative) provided the information. The sites are profiled in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of the study sites

Site	District, province	Organization	Tourism status (start)	Main farming activity	Visitor services	Entry fee
10.01	Sangthong, VC	Private	Operating (2018)	Crops, integrated farming	Learning, food, farm stay	No
10.02	Sangthong, VC	Private	Operating (2024)	Livestock (horses), rice	Viewpoints, learning (horse riding), food, farm stay	Yes
10.03	Xaythany, VC	Private	Operating (2022)	Flowers and crops	Viewpoints, food, direct sales	Yes

10.04	Xaythany, VC	Private	Operating (2025)	Crops; deer, emu, fish	Viewpoints, food, animal feeding	No
30.02	Vangvieng, VP	Cooperative	Prospective	Vegetables	None yet	No
30.03	Vangvieng, VP	Producer group	Prospective	Vegetables	None yet	No
30.04	Vangvieng, VP	Village (CBT)	Operating (2010)	Crops, livestock, rice	Viewpoints, learning, food, homestay, CBT, weaving, trekking	Yes
30.05	Thoulakhom, VP	Private	Prospective	Durian orchard	Direct sales	No
30.06	Thoulakhom, VP	Private	Prospective	Melon	Direct sales	No

VC: Vientiane Capital; VP: Vientiane Province; CBT: community-based tourism. Private sites ranged from 1 to 50 ha.

2.3. Instruments

Two instruments were used. The first was a structured questionnaire in Lao with five parts: (1) site profile and services; (2) self-rated strengths and weaknesses on six items (1 = poor, 5 = very good); (3) open questions on distinctive features, plans to use the government's green tourism promotion, and waste and environmental management; (4) support needs, ranked 1-3, and views on economic, socio-cultural and environmental sustainability; and (5) recommendations. The second was a nine-item checklist for recording observed environmental practices: waste separation, visitor bins, composting, use of chemical fertilizers or pesticides, solar energy, rainwater harvesting or water saving, plastic reduction measures, environmental interpretation for visitors, and retention of trees, forest or natural water bodies. Before fieldwork, the research team met at IEDR to go through both instruments together and agree on how each question should be asked and each answer recorded. The questionnaire was then pre-tested in Luang Prabang Province. Interviews were audio-recorded and photographs were taken as supporting evidence.

2.4. Data collection

Fieldwork was conducted from February to May 2026, with interview permits obtained from local authorities. At each site, members of the research team jointly interviewed the key informant using the questionnaire. Each interview lasted about 30-60 minutes and was followed by a walk around the site, during which the team observed and recorded environmental practices. The team members took turns asking questions and taking notes. The questionnaire form was filled out during the interview, interviews were recorded in audio with the permission of the informant, and photographs were taken as evidence. The self-ratings were recorded as reported by the informant on the same scale and form at each site.

The team also documented field notes on the visible environmental practices at each visit. After fieldwork, these notes and photographs were coded into the nine-item observation checklist. The use of chemicals was recorded if observed on site and/or reported by the informant.

To keep the records accurate and consistent, the team met at the end of every fieldwork day to review the completed forms, compare notes on what had been observed during the site walk, and agree on the accuracy of what had been recorded. The interviews were not fully transcribed. The open-ended responses were summarized from the written notes and recordings, and these summaries were checked by the team during the daily meetings.

2.5. Data analysis

The site was the unit of analysis. Open answers were analyzed by means of directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), which combines categories set in advance with categories that emerge from the data. Categories for environmental practices (waste, inputs, energy, water, habitat, education) were set in advance from the questionnaire and the observation checklist. Categories for the meaning operators gave to environmental sustainability (low chemical use or organic production, local income, attractiveness of the site, and education) were not set in advance; they emerged from the responses during coding. All members of the research team coded the responses together in team meetings, and any differences in interpretation were discussed until the team reached agreement. The research team then translated the coded statements from Lao into English. The observed practices were combined into an unweighted index of green practices between 0 and 9, where each practice present received one point and the absence of chemical inputs received one point. Because two items, bins for visitors and environmental interpretation, can only be present where visitors are received, a core index of the remaining seven farm-management items (0-7) was also calculated, so that operating and prospective sites could be compared on a level playing field. Each environmental claim was then evaluated against the observation record and assigned a category of consistent, partly consistent, contradicted or not independently verifiable. Because no records of fertilizer or pesticide application and no quantitative data on chemical use were collected, claims about chemical use were classed as not independently verifiable unless the observation record directly contradicted them. The self-ratings and index scores were summarized using the mean and standard deviation (SD). Because there were nine sites, no inferential tests were used.

2.6. Ethical considerations

IEDR does not have a research ethics committee. The study was conducted as part of a research project

approved by LASES and with interview permits from local authorities. Participation was voluntary. Prior to each interview, the team explained the study's purpose and obtained verbal consent from the informant and audio-recorded the interviews only with permission. Sites are reported by code, not by individual name.

3. Results

3.1. Engagement with the green tourism agenda

None of the operators mentioned a link between the government's green tourism promotion and their plans in response to what they would do with the promotion. Four outlined plans to open learning centers on horse riding (10.02), flower growing (10.03) and vegetable growing (30.02, 30.03). Others planned to open the site as a free community recreation area (10.04) or to expand it for visitors and produce sales (30.05, 30.06). One operator did not reply (10.01). Only the community-based tourism village 30.04 incorporated its plans with conservation to improve villagers' awareness of waste management. Green tourism was therefore seen, if at all, as a general development opportunity rather than a set of environmental requirements.

3.2. Reported practices and the meaning of environmental sustainability

All nine operators described their waste as adequately handled. The four sites in Vientiane Capital relied on municipal waste collection. Well managed waste was reported in three sites in Vientiane Province and little waste was reported in two sites. None of the operators mentioned sorting, recycling or reducing waste.

Operators were asked what factors make their businesses environmentally sustainable and they gave four types of answer. All five sites in Vientiane Province mentioned organic production or low chemical use (30.02-30.06). Two cited outgrower arrangements in which neighbors grow grass or flowers to sell to the farm (10.02, 10.03), which are economic rather than environmental benefits. One mentioned planting trees and grass for landscaping to make the site attractive (10.04) and one mentioned teaching children how to propagate trees (10.01). Environmental sustainability was therefore primarily understood as low input use, local income or attractiveness.

3.3. Observed practices

The observed practices clustered around waste disposal and composting with no waste reduction (Table 2). Seven sites composted organic matter and six had bins for visitors. None separated waste and none had any measure to reduce single-use plastics. Seven of the nine sites used either chemical fertilizer or pesticides.

Table 2. Environmental practices recorded at the nine sites

Practice	Sites (n of 9)	Site codes
Composting	7	10.01, 10.03, 10.04, 30.02, 30.03, 30.05, 30.06
Bins for visitors (visitor-facing)	6	10.01, 10.02, 10.03, 10.04, 30.04, 30.05
Trees, forest or natural water retained	4	10.01, 10.03, 10.04, 30.04
Environmental interpretation for visitors (visitor-facing)	3	10.01, 10.02, 30.04
Rainwater harvesting or water saving	3	10.02, 10.04, 30.05
No chemical fertilizers or pesticides	2	10.04, 30.03
Solar energy	2	10.02, 10.04
Waste separation	0	-
Plastic-reduction measures	0	-

Source: field notes, February-May 2026.

Scores of the full index varied from 1 to 6 out of 9 (Figure 2). Sites already receiving visitors scored higher (mean 4.0, SD 1.2) than prospective sites (mean 1.8, SD 1.0). The main difference was the two visitor-facing items. Apart from these, the gap on the core index was reduced to 2.4 (SD 1.5) compared with 1.5 (SD 0.6), and the two groups were almost identical if the single highest-scoring site (10.04) was excluded. These differences are descriptive and were not tested statistically, given the small number of sites. Composting was more common at prospective sites (4 of 4) than at operating sites (3 of 5). All four Capital sites were operational, so differences between the two provinces cannot be separated from tourism status and are not interpreted.

Green-practice index by site and tourism status (0 = none of the nine practices in Table 2; 9 = all). Solid bars show the seven core farm-management practices; hatched bars show the two visitor-facing practices.

3.4. What operators say versus what they do

Analysis of claims against observations revealed that many of the environmental claims were too broad to be verified or were only partially supported (Table 3). Most evident was the contradiction with agrochemicals: cooperative 30.02 labeled its vegetables as organic but used chemical inputs. The producer group 30.03, which made the same claim, was not seen to use chemical inputs, but without application records or certification this claim could not be independently verified. The three sites claiming low chemical use did use chemicals. Because the quantities applied were not recorded, their claims of low use could not be independently verified either.

Table 3. Operators' environmental claims compared with field observations

Claim	Sites	Observation	Assessment
Waste removed by municipal collection	10.01, 10.02, 10.03, 10.04	Visitor bins at all four; no separation	Partly consistent: disposal only
Waste "well managed"	30.04, 30.05, 30.06	No separation at any; visitor bins at 30.04 and 30.05	Partly consistent (30.04, 30.05); not independently verifiable (30.06)
"Little waste"	30.02, 30.03	Composting at both; no bins or separation	Not independently verifiable
Organic vegetables, low chemical use	30.02, 30.03	Chemical inputs at 30.02; none observed or reported at 30.03	Contradicted (30.02); not independently verifiable (30.03)
Low chemical use	30.04, 30.05, 30.06	Chemical inputs at all three; quantities not recorded	Not independently verifiable
Tree planting and landscaping	10.04	Trees, forest or water retained	Consistent
Environmental learning for children	10.01	Interpretation for visitors present	Consistent

3.5. Self-assessment and support needs

The most important strengths of the operators were natural resources and local distinctiveness (mean 4.2, SD 0.8) and product quality (4.2, SD 0.7), while the least was the financial capacity (3.0, SD 1.4). Staff skills (3.7, SD 1.0), management (3.6, SD 1.0) and social-media use (3.4, SD 0.9) fell between. All nine expected their business to last ten years or more.

Support priorities were almost universally non-environmental. Finance was among the top three needs of five sites, technical or service training of four sites, and promotion or market access of three sites. One site (30.04) suggested there was an environmental need for awareness of conservation and waste management and one (10.03) requested soil-improvement techniques. Recommendations to government focused on infrastructure, less paperwork, promotion and markets; only site 30.04 recommended regulations to make tourism sustainable.

4. Discussion

On the nine practices assessed, the sites studied around Vientiane are green in setting rather than in management. Operators' main asset is the natural surroundings. Each operator thinks its waste is under control. But the practices that make a site green in management, separating and reducing waste, avoiding agrochemicals, saving energy and water were rare or absent. The study's expectation was thus partly confirmed: claims did go beyond practice but mostly because they were too vague to be confirmed, rather than untrue. This pattern is consistent with the attitude-behavior gap long documented in small tourism firms (Tilley, 1999; Carlsen et al., 2001). It also qualifies the view that agritourism is inherently more sustainable than other farm ventures (Barbieri, 2013): in this sample the landscape was the environmental advantage, not what operators did with it.

The gap here does not appear to be strategic greenwashing in the sense described by Delmas and Burbano (2011) and in later reviews (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020). Only one claim (30.02) was a clear exaggeration of practice. Operators are more likely not to have a working definition of what green tourism is. Low input use, local income or attractiveness were linked to environmental sustainability but none of them related the national green growth agenda (Government of the Lao PDR, 2018) to anything they could do on site. The term "green" is vague, so operators can make a good faith claim and do very little.

Receiving visitors adds visitor-facing practices such as bins and interpretation, but does not change the way the farm itself is managed. The core index was comparable between operating and prospective sites, although with nine sites this comparison is descriptive and was not tested statistically. This is significant because the primary environmental risk in Lao farming is agrochemical use (Wentworth et al., 2021) and chemical inputs still are used at seven of the nine sites. These practices have a direct impact on the buyers of farm produce and consumers. The incentive for operators to label their produce as organic is the demand for organic produce in the urban areas of the Lao PDR (Lounbandith et al., 2020). Claims such as this without verification are likely to damage trust in agritourism as a whole.

The support that operators request points to a practical lever. Their needs were primarily finance, training and promotion, and environmental support was rarely requested. If these services could be linked to simple environmental conditions, then practices could be improved without additional burden. Training that operators already request on services and techniques could include waste separation, composting and safer pesticide use. Credit or promotion schemes could favor sites that fulfill basic standards, drawing on regional references such as the ASEAN Community Based Tourism Standard (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016). Community-based sites such as 30.04 are already connecting tourism and conservation awareness and could be demonstration sites, as community

participation has supported forest restoration elsewhere in the country (Phetlumphun, 2026).

The study has limitations. Nine sites were purposively selected and do not represent all agritourism in the Lao PDR; because the site list relied on recommendations from district offices and online sources, less visible sites may have been missed. Open answers were entered in summarized form by the research team, which may have reduced detail, and identical summaries for some sites make it hard to infer individual views. The questionnaire asked about operators' intention to use the green tourism promotion rather than their awareness of it, so policy awareness was not measured directly. Observation was only made on one visit, so seasonal practices may have been missed, and claims about chemical use could not be checked against application records. Finally, the study assessed the presence or absence of nine practices only. It did not measure environmental outcomes such as soil or water quality, biodiversity or emissions, so it should not be read as an environmental impact assessment. The green-practice index is unweighted: solar power is equivalent to a waste bin. It is a comparative summary of practices, not a measure of environmental impact.

5. Conclusion

On the practices assessed, the agritourism sites studied around Vientiane are green in appearance but not yet in terms of management. Operators like their natural setting and feel their environmental management is good, but no one sorts waste or reduces plastics and most still use farm chemicals. Most of the environmental claims made were not specific enough to be verified and one concerning organic production was not consistent with on-site observation. Receiving visitors adds visible measures such as bins and signs but does little to change the way the farm itself is run. Operators link green tourism with learning centers, income and nice landscapes but not with concrete practices and they rarely ask for environmental support.

The main policy implication is that green tourism has to be defined in a clear and simple way at site level. The tourism and agriculture authorities could compile a short list of basic practices (separating waste, reducing plastic, composting and safe, recorded use of farm chemicals) and attach it to the training, credit and promotion operators already want. Organic or chemical-free claims on produce should be supported by recognized certification. Community-based sites with conservation goals could serve as models for others.

The results are based on a small purposive sample and on the presence or absence of selected practices, so they should be taken as indicative rather than as a full assessment of environmental performance. Further work could involve longitudinal studies of the same sites, measure environmental outcomes directly, incorporate visitor perspectives and test whether support for basic standards influences operators' practices.

6. Conflict of Interest

We certify that there is no conflict of interest with any financial organization regarding the material discussed in the manuscript.

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Declaration of generative AI use: During the preparation of this work, the authors used a generative AI tool only to polish and check the English language. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication. No generative AI was used to create or alter figures.

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