

REIMAGINING COLONIAL LEGACIES IN BẠCH MÃ NATIONAL PARK, VIETNAM: SUSTAINABLE HERITAGE TOURISM AND INTERPRETIVE INNOVATION

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Abstract: This study examines Bạch Mã National Park (BMNP), Vietnam, as a case of sustainable heritage tourism and interpretive innovation in a postcolonial protected landscape. Originally developed as a French colonial hill station and later managed as a national park, BMNP combines ecological value, colonial architectural remains, wartime traces, and contemporary conservation priorities. Unlike highly commercialised mountain destinations such as Ba Na Hills or Fansipan Legend, BMNP suggests a slower, more reflective model of mountain tourism, in which heritage interpretation can support conservation education, historical understanding, and responsible visitor engagement. The study adopts a qualitative longitudinal case study design based on fieldwork conducted between 2011 and 2024. Data were collected through archival research in France and Vietnam, semi-participant observation, documentation of tangible and intangible heritage elements, historical witness testimonies, field-based exchanges with park and tourism actors, and park reports and tourism statistics. The findings indicate that BMNP should not be viewed only as a biodiversity site or a former colonial resort, but as a layered heritage landscape shaped by colonial planning, wartime disruption, postcolonial conservation, and current tourism development. Interpretive initiatives, including museographic displays, multilingual media, 3D reconstructions, interpretation centres, and the park’s seasonal “natural calendar”, show how ecological and historical narratives can be translated into visitor experiences that are educational, place-based, and attentive to conservation. The paper argues that sustainable heritage tourism in BMNP depends on the integration of ecological conservation, postcolonial reinterpretation, cultural mediation, and community participation. Its contribution lies in showing how an under-commercialised protected area can be repositioned through interpretation as a meaningful alternative to mass mountain tourism, while offering practical implications for park managers, tourism planners, heritage professionals, and policymakers in Southeast Asia.

Keyword: sustainable heritage tourism, heritage interpretation, interpretive innovation, postcolonial landscapes, protected areas, Bạch Mã national park

Introduction

In recent decades, tourism development has increasingly been discussed in relation to sustainability, cultural authenticity, and more responsible forms of visitor engagement. This shift is especially visible in heritage and nature-based destinations, where conventional mass tourism has often been criticised for placing pressure on fragile environments, simplifying cultural meanings, and generating uneven benefits for local communities. In response, greater attention has been given to tourism models that combine conservation, education, local participation, and responsible destination management. Within this context, heritage interpretation has become an important means of helping visitors understand not only what a place contains, but also why its historical, cultural, and ecological layers matter.

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This issue is particularly relevant in Southeast Asia, where colonial legacies are often embedded within landscapes reshaped by war, biodiversity conservation, local memory, and postcolonial development. Former colonial sites are not easy to interpret. Some are converted into nostalgic attractions, while others remain marginal within official tourism narratives because their histories are politically and culturally sensitive. In both cases, their potential for critical learning, cultural mediation, and more responsible tourism development remains unevenly realised. The research problem addressed in this study is therefore how a postcolonial protected landscape can be reinterpreted through sustainable heritage tourism without reducing either its historical complexity or its ecological value.

Bạch Mã National Park (BMNP) in central Vietnam offers a meaningful case through which to examine this problem. Originally developed as a French colonial hill station and later transformed into a national park, BMNP brings together colonial architectural remains, wartime traces, rich biodiversity, and contemporary conservation priorities. It differs from highly commercialised mountain destinations such as Ba Na Hills or Fansipan Legend, where tourism development is strongly associated with entertainment infrastructure and large-scale visitor consumption. Bạch Mã, by contrast, still retains the possibility of a slower, more educational, and conservation-oriented form of heritage tourism.

Yet existing discussions of BMNP have tended to emphasise its ecological value or general tourism potential, while giving less attention to its layered heritage character and to the role of interpretation in connecting colonial memory, biodiversity, local knowledge, and visitor experience. This gap is important because BMNP should not be understood only as a protected natural area or as a remnant of a former colonial resort. It is a layered heritage landscape shaped by colonial planning, wartime disruption, postcolonial conservation, and present-day tourism development. Interpretive innovation is therefore not simply an additional visitor-service tool; it is a way of making these historical and ecological layers legible. Museographic tools, multilingual media, 3D reconstructions, interpretation centres, and seasonal biodiversity-based programmes can help translate complex narratives into forms that visitors can understand and engage with.

This study therefore situates BMNP within the broader discussion of sustainable heritage tourism, postcolonial landscape reinterpretation, and tourism development innovation. It also considers the role of international cooperation, particularly the PRODETOUR Huế 1 initiative, in supporting the transfer of interpretive knowledge and museographic practices for destination development. By focusing on BMNP, the paper contributes to heritage tourism studies by examining how an under-commercialised protected area can be repositioned through interpretation without turning either nature or colonial memory into simple tourism imagery. It also offers practical insights for protected-area managers, tourism planners, heritage professionals, and policymakers in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

The study is guided by four objectives. First, it examines BMNP as a layered heritage landscape shaped by ecological, colonial, wartime, and postcolonial transitions. Second, it analyses how heritage interpretation and cultural mediation can support sustainable heritage tourism development in BMNP. Third, it explores the role of interpretive innovation in transforming historical and ecological resources into educational and engaging visitor experiences. Fourth, it identifies practical implications for sustainable destination planning in postcolonial protected areas.

Accordingly, the study addresses three research questions:

1. How can BMNP be interpreted as a layered heritage landscape rather than merely as a protected natural area?
2. How do heritage interpretation and cultural mediation contribute to sustainable heritage tourism development in BMNP?
3. What practical lessons can BMNP offer for interpretive innovation and protected-area destination management in Southeast Asia?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Sustainable heritage tourism and protected areas

Sustainable heritage tourism offers an analytical lens for examining destinations where cultural meaning, ecological conservation, visitor experience, and destination development overlap. In protected areas, tourism cannot be separated from conservation priorities, ecological sensitivity, and the long-term stewardship of local heritage resources. Foundational studies in sustainable tourism and protected-area management emphasise planning, conservation education, responsible visitor management, and institutional coordination as key conditions for nature-based destinations (Eagles et al., 2002; Weaver, 2006). Research on the sustainable integration of heritage and tourism also highlights the importance of conservation, authenticity, community participation, heritage management, and visitor experience (Loulanski & Loulanski, 2011; Zhang et al., 2023).

For BMNP, this connection is important because the park is not only a biodiversity site. It is also a former colonial hill station where ecological conservation intersects with historical memory, cultural interpretation, and tourism development. A sustainable heritage tourism approach therefore allows BMNP to be read as both a protected area and a historically layered destination, rather than only through the narrower lens of ecotourism.

2.2. Heritage interpretation and interpretive innovation

Heritage interpretation is central to transforming heritage resources into meaningful visitor experiences. Tilden (1957) frames interpretation not simply as the transmission of information, but as a process of revealing meanings and relationships that help visitors connect with a place. Uzzell (1998) extends this understanding by linking interpretation with environmental awareness, visitor learning, and critical reflection. This role is especially important in tourism settings, where visitors often encounter complex heritage landscapes through short visits, selected routes, and mediated narratives.

Recent studies show that interpretation can shape how visitors respond to sustainability messages. Huang et al. (2022) examine how content and media format influence visitor responses to sustainable tourism interpretation in World Natural Heritage Sites, while Abrahams and Nji Bama (2023) highlight the role of heritage interpretation in supporting sustainable ecotourism in protected areas. Cultural mediation and museographic practice also broaden interpretation beyond static signage or conventional exhibitions. Multilingual media, reconstructed images, 3D visualisation, participatory exhibitions, and place-based educational programmes can help visitors understand fragmented or dispersed heritage (Bordeaux & Caillet, 2013; Meissner, 2021; UNESCO & ICCROM, 2011). This perspective is directly relevant to BMNP, where colonial remains, biodiversity, trails, memories, and

conservation messages are dispersed across a mountainous forest landscape and are not immediately legible to visitors.

2.3. Postcolonial landscapes and colonial hill-station heritage

This study is also grounded in postcolonial heritage studies, which show that heritage is shaped by power, memory, identity, and selective forms of representation (Smith, 2006; Winter, 2007). This perspective is particularly important for colonial heritage, where buildings and landscapes may hold architectural or historical value while also carrying memories of inequality, exclusion, and domination. Colonial hill stations should therefore be interpreted not merely as mountain resorts or architectural remains, but as landscapes shaped by planning, mobility, labour, health discourse, leisure, and social hierarchy.

Classic studies show that hill stations were shaped by colonial concerns with climate, health, racial separation, leisure, administrative retreat, and imperial authority (Kenny, 1995; Kennedy, 1996). In the French Indochinese context, Jennings' work on Đà Lạt demonstrates that hill stations were contested spaces where colonial planning, labour, race, class, memory, war, and postcolonial reappropriation intersected (Jennings, 2011). Previous studies on colonial tourism and heritage landscapes in Vietnam and French Indochina have also provided important historical and regional context for understanding hill-station development and heritage transformation (Fife, 2009; Jennings, 2011; Demay, 2015; Nguyen, 2019).

More recent scholarship has shifted attention from the colonial formation of hill stations to their postcolonial trajectories. Peyvel et al. (2025) argue that South and Southeast Asian hill stations continue to evolve after independence through domestic tourism, local reappropriation, and mountain urbanisation. BMNP can be placed within this trajectory, although its transformation has followed a more conservation-oriented path. Its meaning has changed through colonial planning, wartime disruption, postcolonial conservation, and contemporary tourism development. A heritage tourism approach to BMNP therefore requires an interpretive framework capable of holding several narratives together, rather than reducing the site to ecological scenery or colonial nostalgia.

2.4. Research gap

The literature reviewed above provides strong foundations for analysing sustainable tourism, heritage interpretation, cultural mediation, postcolonial heritage, colonial hill stations, and protected-area management. However, three gaps remain. First, protected-area tourism studies often focus on biodiversity conservation, visitor management, or ecotourism potential, with less attention to how colonial and cultural histories are interpreted within protected landscapes. Second, research on colonial heritage in Southeast Asia has frequently examined urban architecture, museums, heritage cities, or major hill stations, rather than smaller mountain national parks where colonial remains are embedded within ecological landscapes. Third, discussions of BMNP have tended to emphasise its natural value or general tourism potential, while its role as a layered heritage landscape has not been sufficiently examined.

This study addresses these gaps by analysing BMNP as a postcolonial protected landscape where ecological conservation, colonial hill-station memory, cultural mediation, community engagement, and interpretive innovation intersect. It contributes a site-specific perspective on how an under-

commercialised protected area can be repositioned through interpretation-based sustainable heritage tourism without reducing its historical complexity or ecological value.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative longitudinal case study design to examine BMNP as a layered postcolonial heritage landscape and a potential model for sustainable heritage tourism. A case study approach is appropriate for analysing a context-specific phenomenon in relation to its historical, institutional, spatial, and social conditions (Yin, 2018). The study does not seek to measure visitor behaviour statistically, but to interpret the ways in which colonial hill-station heritage, ecological conservation, cultural mediation, and tourism development have evolved over time.

The empirical basis was developed and re-examined across three stages. The first stage took place within PRODETOUR Hué 1 between 2011 and 2013, when archival consultation, field observation, oral-history interviews, and interpretive documentation were undertaken for BMNP. The second stage involved the academic consolidation of these materials within the author's doctoral research on colonial tourism and heritage transformation in Annam, completed in 2019. The third stage consisted of updated field observation and documentary review in 2024, linking historical evidence with current tourism, interpretation, and conservation issues. This longitudinal design explains why the 2012–2013 testimonies remain analytically relevant rather than being treated as isolated project data.

3.2. Data sources and collection

The study draws on four main data sources: archival materials, oral-history testimonies, field observation, and institutional documents. First, archival research was conducted in France and Vietnam to trace the historical evolution of tourism, land use, and heritage governance at BMNP. In France, primary sources were consulted at the Archives nationales d'outre-mer (ANOM) in Aix-en-Provence and the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) in Paris. Key records from the Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine included Captain Debay's 1901 proposal for a sanatorium, a 1937 infrastructure petition, and a 1938 progress report related to the Résidence Supérieure de l'Annam (ANOM, GGI, 1901, 1937, 1938). In Vietnam, materials from the National Archives Centre No. 1 in Hanoi and the National Archives Centre No. 4 in Dalat were consulted, including selected files from the Résidence Supérieure de l'Annam and the Résidence Supérieure du Tonkin (VNA4, RSA, 1924; VNA1, RST, 1942). The 1939 *Règlement de police du centre-urbain de Bach-Ma* was also used to understand the regulatory framework of the emerging hill-station centre (Province de Thua Thien, 1939). These materials were reviewed mainly in French and organised thematically to interpret institutional priorities, planning practices, and historical continuities (Bowen, 2009).

Second, oral-history testimonies were used to reconstruct the social and experiential dimensions of Bạch Mã's hill-station past. Six historical witnesses were interviewed once each between June 2012 and August 2013 within the PRODETOUR Hué 1 fieldwork framework. Where permission was granted, the interviews were video-recorded, audio-recorded, and documented through field notes. Participants were selected purposively because of their direct or family-based connections with Bạch Mã. Where permission was granted, interviews were audio- and/or video-recorded and retained in the fieldwork archive. Oral history helps recover lived experience often absent from official archives (Ritchie, 2014).

Table 1. Oral-history witnesses included in the study

Code	Participant background	Relevance to BMNP heritage
W1	Local villager who spent several summers in Bạch Mã; elder brother worked as a residence guardian; worked in Bạch Mã during 1962–1965.	Everyday life, labour, residence maintenance, and postcolonial use of the hill-station landscape
W2	Local villager whose father worked in Bạch Mã	Family-based memory of work, mobility, and local connections
W3	Former scout leader in Bạch Mã	Youth activities, leisure practices, social organisation, and seasonal life
W4	Biologist and collector; son of a chalet owner; family owned four chalets; spent holidays in Bạch Mã from 1943	Vacation practices, chalet ownership, biodiversity knowledge, and historical documentation
W5	Former itinerant vendor in Bạch Mã	Informal services, local livelihoods, gendered labour, and visitor–seller interactions
W6	Former itinerant vendor in Bạch Mã	Everyday economic activities, local service practices, and social relations

Note. Participants are presented by codes to protect personal identity. The table reports only anonymised metadata and analytical summaries of the oral-history witnesses; no full transcript, image, audio, or video material is reproduced in this article. The original field archive includes audio-/video-recorded materials where permission was granted.

Source: Author’s oral-history fieldwork archive, collected within the PRODETOUR Huế 1 fieldwork framework, 2012–2013; see also Augeron (2014), Nguyen (2019), and PRODETOUR Huế 1 (2011).

The 2012–2013 testimonies were later incorporated into the author's doctoral research, compared with archival and documentary sources, and revisited in 2024 in relation to current tourism and interpretation practices at BMNP (Nguyen, 2019; BMNP, 2015–2024).

Third, semi-participant observation was conducted during multiple field visits between 2011 and 2024. Observation focused on colonial remains, visitor routes, interpretation facilities, signage, trails, tourism services, and the relationship between ecological and historical elements. The 2024 field update verified current tourism conditions, interpretive facilities, heritage communication practices, and conservation-related management issues.

Fourth, supplementary documentary data were drawn from project documentation, institutional park reports, biodiversity monitoring records, and relevant Vietnamese tourism and environmental policy documents (PRODETOUR Hué 1, 2011; Augeron, 2014; BMNP, 2015–2024, 2022). These sources were used as empirical rather than theoretical materials and were cross-checked with field observations to situate tourism development, conservation value, and interpretation potential. Field-based exchanges with park staff and tourism-related actors provided contextual background but were not treated as the core interview dataset.

3.3. Data analysis, validation, and ethics

Data were analysed through thematic qualitative analysis to identify patterns across archival materials, field notes, oral-history summaries, institutional reports, biodiversity records, tourism statistics, and 2024 field observations (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis was organised around three themes derived from the research questions: BMNP as a layered protected heritage landscape, modest and uneven tourism development, and interpretation and cultural mediation. Initial codes identified places, actors, routes, buildings, tourism facilities, conservation practices, and interpretation tools; interpretive codes focused on colonial hill-station memory, ecological conservation, postcolonial transition, local labour, visitor experience, community participation, stakeholder coordination, and tourism development constraints.

Triangulation strengthened credibility by comparing oral testimonies with archival documents, maps, photographic materials, field observations, institutional reports, biodiversity records, and policy documents (Denzin, 1978; Flick, 2018). Different data types were used for complementary purposes: archives reconstructed historical development; oral testimonies interpreted lived experience and memory; field observations assessed current heritage and visitor-service conditions; and institutional reports contextualised biodiversity, tourism trends, and management constraints. Interpretive initiatives, including museographic displays, multilingual media, 3D reconstructions, interpretation centres, and the seasonal “natural calendar”, were examined through field observation, project documentation, and institutional reports.

Ethical and positionality issues were also considered. Oral-history participants were informed about the academic purpose of the research, and their testimonies were used carefully to avoid misrepresentation or unnecessary personal identification. The author's involvement in Vietnam-based PRODETOUR coordination is acknowledged to clarify the provenance of the dataset, not as a source of analytical authority. To maintain critical distance, PRODETOUR materials were re-examined through doctoral research, cross-checked with other sources, and updated through 2024 fieldwork and documentary review.

4. Findings

The findings show how BMNP's heritage value, tourism constraints, and interpretive potential are connected through three analytical dimensions: a layered protected heritage landscape, modest and uneven tourism development, and interpretation and cultural mediation.

4.1. BMNP as a layered protected heritage landscape

BMNP should be understood not only as a biodiversity conservation area, but also as a layered heritage landscape shaped by ecological, colonial, wartime, and postcolonial transformations. Located within the nationally designated Cảnh Dương – Bạch Mã – Lăng Cô tourism corridor, BMNP covers 37,487 hectares, with an additional buffer zone of 58,676 hectares. Its zoning structure includes a strictly protected core zone, an ecological restoration zone, and a buffer zone where local and ethnic minority communities are present (BMNP, 2015–2024). This spatial structure places BMNP at the intersection of conservation management, historical interpretation, and sustainable destination development.

Archival sources show that Bạch Mã was historically framed through colonial concerns with climate, health, leisure, access, conservation, and territorial planning. Its touristic and environmental value was recognised before formal urban development, with early proposals in 1925 to designate the mountain area as a natural reserve. The transformation of Bạch Mã into a hill station accelerated after the 1933 visit of Desmarests, a public works engineer in Annam, and by 1935 tourists were permitted to access the summit. The “urban area of Bạch Mã” was officially established on 13 May 1939, marking the institutionalisation of the site as a planned mountain resort landscape (ANOM, GGI, 1901, 1937, 1938; Nguyen, 2019; Province de Thua Thien, 1939; VNA1, RST, 1942).

Bạch Mã's emergence was linked to the spatial limitations of Bà Nà, whose narrow ridges restricted further villa construction. In contrast, Bạch Mã offered broader topography for resort planning and a cool, comparatively dry summer climate. By late 1943, the hill station had expanded to 139 villas and chalets; by 1945, it included nearly 200 built structures, including hotels, a post office, tennis courts, a swimming pool, a hospital, a market, and youth-camp infrastructure. The Bạch Mã Tourist Board, established in 1938, also promoted the site as a seasonal resort destination (Nguyen, 2019).

The Grand Hôtel Morin de Bach Ma, constructed in 1942, linked the hill station to the wider Morin hospitality network in Central Annam and illustrates the interaction between private tourism enterprise and colonial infrastructure development (Nguyen, 2024). Bạch Mã also functioned as an Indochinese Scout training site, where Scout groups gathered for outdoor education, leadership training, and seasonal collective life (Nguyen, 2019). Fife's historical-archaeological study further confirms the significance of Bạch Mã's material remains, including building foundations, routes, terraces, and spatial traces of colonial and postcolonial occupation (Fife, 2009). Read together, these sources suggest that the former hill station was a structured seasonal settlement with social, educational, hospitality, and infrastructural functions.

The oral-history testimonies add social and experiential dimensions rarely visible in administrative records. They reveal memories of seasonal residence, Scout activities, chalet ownership, local labour, informal vending, family connections, and everyday interactions between visitors and local residents.

Witnesses described Bạch Mã as both a place of leisure and a working landscape involving guardians, vendors, seasonal residents, Scout groups, and local service providers. These accounts shift the analysis from colonial architecture alone to the social relations and everyday practices through which the hill station was produced and remembered.

Later wartime and postcolonial traces, including military remains and memories of changing park uses, further complicate the interpretation of BMNP as a single colonial or ecological site. These successive uses make BMNP a multi-layered landscape in which colonial leisure, youth education, wartime disruption, conservation management, and contemporary tourism coexist. The ecological dimension is equally significant. BMNP's distinctive microclimate supports 2,421 plant species and 1,728 animal species, including rare and endangered species such as Edwards' pheasant (BMNP, 2022). Taken together, the historical and ecological evidence shows that BMNP's heritage value lies in the interaction between conservation and interpretation, rather than in nature-based tourism or colonial heritage alone.

4.2. Modest and uneven tourism development

BMNP's tourism development remains modest and uneven despite its ecological, scenic, and historical significance. As shown in Figure 1, visitor numbers increased from 14,852 in 2015 to 29,250 in 2019, before declining during the COVID-19 pandemic and periods affected by landslides. By 2024, the park received 20,799 visitors, showing partial recovery but not a full return to the pre-pandemic level. Tourism revenue followed a similar pattern, peaking at 1,428 million VND in 2019 and recovering to 1,047 million VND in 2024 (BMNP, 2015–2024).

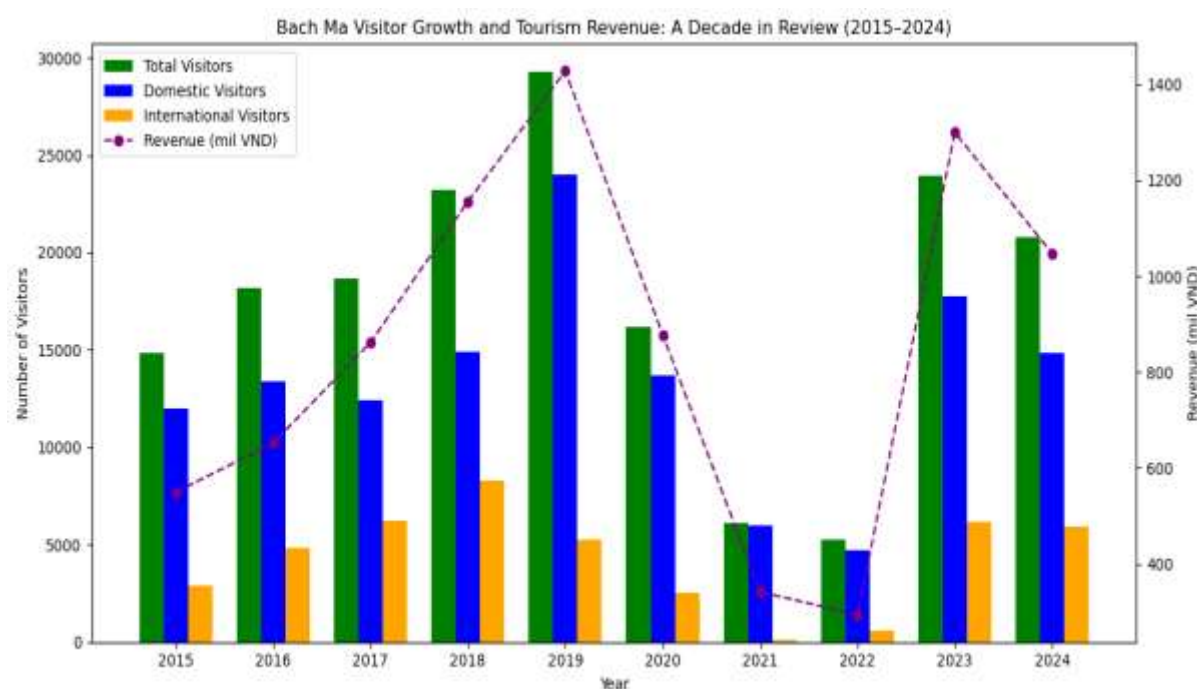


Figure 1. Bach Ma National Park Visitor Growth and Tourism Revenue: A Decade in Review, 2015–2024

Source: Bach Ma National Park Tourism Reports, 2015–2024.

These trends have three analytical implications. First, the pre-pandemic growth from 2015 to 2019 indicates rising tourism appeal, but at a scale that remained modest compared with more commercialised mountain destinations. Second, the decline during 2020–2022 reveals the vulnerability of a tourism system dependent on seasonal access, limited infrastructure, and external shocks such as COVID-19 and landslides. Third, the partial recovery in 2023–2024 suggests resilience, although it has not yet produced a diversified tourism economy. The low level of revenue recovery also suggests continued reliance on short-stay, low-spending visitation rather than higher-value interpretive, educational, or overnight tourism products.

Tourism remains small-scale, seasonal, and highly dependent on natural conditions. As of 2024, the park had only 26 rooms, and food and accommodation services were not consistently available throughout the year. Access also remains constrained by the single mountain road and limited internal transport options, which restrict visitor mobility and reduce the attractiveness of overnight stays.

The 2015–2024 tourism pattern points to a central tension. BMNP’s limited commercialisation reduces pressure for mass tourism and helps preserve its conservation-oriented character. At the same time, modest infrastructure, low overnight capacity, seasonal concentration, and limited service diversification restrict local economic benefits, visitor retention, and the development of higher-value tourism products. This suggests that BMNP has strong potential for sustainable heritage tourism, but that this potential remains underdeveloped because heritage interpretation, visitor services, ecological management, and destination coordination are not yet fully integrated.

4.3. Interpretation and cultural mediation

Interpretation is the main mechanism through which BMNP’s ecological, historical, and cultural values can be connected to visitor experience. Historically, interpretation infrastructure in the park was limited mainly to signage, leaflets, and static information panels. These tools provided basic orientation but were insufficient for communicating the complexity of a landscape that combines biodiversity, colonial remains, Morin-related hospitality heritage, Scout memory, wartime traces, local memories, and conservation priorities.

The PRODETOUR Huế 1 initiative introduced a more integrated approach to cultural mediation and heritage interpretation. Project documentation shows that interpretive planning for BMNP included museographic tools, multilingual materials, visual media, 3D reconstructions, and interpretation spaces linked to the park’s ecological and historical resources (PRODETOUR Huế 1, 2011; Augeron, 2014; Nguyen, 2019). Earlier initiatives also experimented with films, reconstructed images, and 3D visualisations of former villas, including the Ho Dac Di residence and the Richard chalet. These tools helped visitors imagine heritage elements that are now fragmented, ruined, or no longer physically intact, while translating colonial ruins, trails, biodiversity, oral-history materials, and memories of seasonal life into more accessible narratives.

A further finding concerns the park’s “natural calendar”, which maps seasonal patterns in climate, flowering, and wildlife activity. This tool supports seasonally responsive visitor programmes and helps align tourism activities with ecological rhythms. Rather than presenting biodiversity as static information, the natural calendar allows interpretation to reflect the changing temporal life of the

forest. It therefore links conservation education with visitor programming and place-based experience design. However, field observation and documentary review indicate that interpretive innovation remains uneven. Some interpretive materials and facilities require updating, maintenance, and stronger integration into visitor routes. Multilingual communication, staff training, digital media, and community-based interpretation are still limited. Field evidence also suggests that digital interpretation in BMNP must be adapted to the park's humid and high-rainfall environment, where maintenance, durability, and low-tech reliability are as important as technological novelty.

Overall, BMNP's sustainable tourism potential lies less in mass visitation than in an interpretation-led model connecting conservation education, colonial hill-station memory, Morin hospitality heritage, Scout-related youth education, local knowledge, and visitor engagement. Its effectiveness depends on stronger coordination between heritage interpretation, ecological management, visitor services, and community participation.

5. Discussion

5.1. Reinterpreting colonial legacies through sustainable heritage tourism

BMNP should not be understood only as a protected natural area or as a former colonial hill station. It is a layered postcolonial heritage landscape where ecological conservation, colonial infrastructure, wartime memory, local livelihoods, and contemporary tourism development intersect. Sustainable heritage tourism in BMNP therefore cannot be based only on preserving colonial remains or turning them into visual attractions. It requires a critical reinterpretation of colonial legacies through historical contextualisation, ecological education, and cultural mediation (Smith, 2006; Winter, 2007; UNESCO & ICCROM, 2011).

From this perspective, the former villas, Morin-related hospitality heritage, Scout memories, wartime remains, oral testimonies, and archaeological fabric of the hill station form a relational heritage landscape. They help explain how leisure, health, mobility, colonial planning, youth education, conflict, conservation, and postcolonial change shaped Bạch Mã over time (Fife, 2009; Nguyen, 2019). If these traces are presented only as picturesque or nostalgic remnants, interpretation may reproduce selective memory and obscure the unequal social and political conditions under which the hill station was created. A more critical interpretive approach should therefore make visible not only buildings and landscapes, but also local labour, exclusion, memory, disruption, and transformation (Smith, 2006; Winter, 2007).

5.2. Interpretation as cultural mediation and visitor engagement

Heritage interpretation in BMNP functions as a form of cultural mediation rather than simply as a technique for explaining heritage resources. In a protected postcolonial landscape, interpretation can connect natural and cultural narratives, link historical memory with present experience, and create space for park staff, former residents, local communities, and heritage actors to contribute to storytelling and co-curation (Tilden, 1957; Uzzell, 1998; Ham, 2013).

Based on the BMNP case, this study proposes an applied framework that links ecological and colonial heritage resources with interpretation, visitor engagement, community participation, and sustainable destination development. In this framework, interpretation mediates between fragmented heritage resources and visitor experience, while helping reposition BMNP as both a biodiversity site and a layered historical landscape (Augeron, 2014; Nguyen, 2019; PRODETOUR Hué 1, 2011). Its value

lies not simply in producing attractive stories, but in connecting conservation objectives, visitor learning, community memory, and long-term heritage governance.

5.3. Interpretive innovation, international cooperation, and knowledge transfer

PRODETOUR Hué 1 introduced museographic and interpretive methods that were not widely established in the park at the time. Initiatives such as museographic displays, multilingual media, 3D reconstructions, interpretation centres, and the seasonal “natural calendar” show how interpretive innovation can support an educational and reflective visitor experience (Augeron, 2014; Bordeaux & Caillet, 2013; PRODETOUR Hué 1, 2011).

The natural calendar is significant because it moves interpretation beyond static heritage presentation. By linking climate, flowering periods, bird migration, wildlife activity, and visitor programming, it allows tourism to follow ecological rhythms rather than impose a uniform tourism calendar on the park. This supports a conservation-oriented model in which visitor experience is shaped by biodiversity awareness and seasonal sensitivity (Bach Ma National Park, 2022; Eagles et al., 2002; Weaver, 2006).

Nevertheless, transnational knowledge transfer should not be understood as a one-way import of external models. In BMNP, international methods must be adapted to local climate, institutional capacity, staff skills, community knowledge, visitor behaviour, and maintenance resources. The park’s humid mountain environment shows that innovation should be assessed not only by technological novelty, but also by durability, feasibility, and long-term maintenance. In this context, low-tech reliability may be as important as digital sophistication (BMNP, 2015–2024; Ham, 2013; Uzzell, 1998).

5.4. Comparative insights from postcolonial mountain destinations

BMNP’s case becomes clearer when situated within the broader history of Asian hill stations and summer resorts. Spencer and Thomas’s classic geographical study showed that hill stations in the Orient were not merely leisure sites, but climate-based mountain settlements shaped by altitude, accessibility, health concerns, colonial mobility, and seasonal residence (Spencer & Thomas, 1948). Bạch Mã belongs to this regional tradition, but its contemporary significance lies in the fact that the inherited hill-station landscape is now located within a national park and can be reinterpreted through conservation-oriented heritage tourism.

BMNP also differs from more commercialised mountain destinations in Vietnam, especially Bà Nà Hills and Fansipan Legend. The Bà Nà case is relevant because it moved from a colonial hill station to a contemporary leisure park, illustrating how globalised leisure and tourism models can be locally reappropriated into highly commercialised mountain entertainment landscapes (Peyvel et al., 2024). These destinations have achieved strong market visibility through cable cars, themed landscapes, entertainment infrastructure, and large-scale visitor flows. BMNP represents a different trajectory: its smaller scale, limited commercialisation, and protected-area status create opportunities for slower, conservation-oriented, and interpretation-led tourism (Eagles et al., 2002; Weaver, 2006).

However, low commercialisation should not be idealised. It can also result in weak reinvestment, limited visitor services, poor maintenance of interpretive facilities, and modest benefits for local communities. BMNP shares broader challenges with other postcolonial hill-station landscapes in Asia,

such as Đà Lạt and Cameron Highlands, where colonial leisure heritage, climate-based tourism, local memory, and contemporary redevelopment intersect (Inagaki, 2023; Jennings, 2011; Spencer & Thomas, 1948; Weebers & Idris, 2016). Compared with these sites, BMNP remains less urbanised and more conservation-oriented, but its infrastructure, accommodation, transport, and commercial expansion are also more constrained.

This comparative perspective highlights BMNP's contribution. It offers a smaller-scale model of postcolonial heritage tourism where interpretation, rather than spectacle, can become the central development strategy. Yet this model is fragile and depends on long-term institutional commitment, inter-sectoral coordination, and careful balancing of conservation, heritage, tourism, and community interests (Dredge & Jamal, 2015; Timothy & Boyd, 2003).

5.5. Critical tensions: commodification, participation, and governance

Although BMNP has strong potential for sustainable heritage tourism, several tensions require critical attention. First, there is a risk of heritage commodification. Colonial villas, ruins, Morin hospitality heritage, Scout-related memory, and wartime remains may become attractive tourism images if they are presented without historical depth. In that case, complex colonial and postcolonial histories may be reduced to marketable scenery (Smith, 2006; Winter, 2007).

Second, community participation may remain superficial if local people are included only as guides, vendors, performers, or symbols of authenticity. Genuine participatory interpretation requires shared decision-making, fair benefit distribution, capacity building, and ethical representation of local voices. Otherwise, sustainable heritage tourism may reproduce unequal relationships between park authorities, tourism operators, external experts, and communities (Dredge & Jamal, 2015; Timothy & Boyd, 2003; UNESCO & ICCROM, 2011).

Third, stakeholder coordination remains a major governance challenge. Conservation goals may conflict with visitor access; heritage protection may compete with commercial expectations; community interests may differ from park regulations; and interpretive innovation may exceed available budgets or technical capacity. BMNP is better approached not as a ready-made model, but as an adaptive framework in which interpretation, conservation, community engagement, and destination management must be continuously negotiated (Dredge & Jamal, 2015; Eagles et al., 2002).

The value of BMNP lies in showing how a protected postcolonial landscape can be reimaged through sustainable heritage tourism while also revealing the limits of this process. For BMNP to become a genuinely sustainable heritage destination, interpretation must remain a tool for education, reflection, and inclusion, rather than merely a branding strategy for tourism promotion (Ham, 2013; Tilden, 1957; Uzzell, 1998).

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study examined BMNP as a layered postcolonial heritage landscape where ecological conservation, colonial hill-station heritage, wartime memory, local knowledge, and contemporary tourism development intersect. The findings show that BMNP offers an alternative to mass mountain tourism because its value lies less in visitor volume than in conservation education, historical reflection, cultural mediation, and interpretation-led visitor experience.

Heritage interpretation can support sustainable destination development when it connects ecological resources, colonial heritage, oral history, community knowledge, and visitor engagement. In BMNP, museographic tools, multilingual media, 3D reconstructions, interpretation centres, and the seasonal

natural calendar show how a protected area can become an educational and reflective tourism destination. At the same time, BMNP should not be treated as a ready-made model. Its development remains constrained by limited accommodation, seasonal visitation, modest services, uneven interpretive infrastructure, maintenance challenges, and stakeholder coordination.

Several policy implications follow. Interpretation should be institutionalised as a core function of park management through dedicated budgets, staff training, and regular content updates. Interpretive infrastructure should combine digital media with durable low-tech tools suited to BMNP's humid mountain environment. Community participation should move beyond symbolic inclusion toward co-curation, local guide training, benefit sharing, and ethical representation of local knowledge. International partnerships should also be sustained, but adapted to local capacity and long-term maintenance conditions.

Overall, BMNP contributes to sustainable heritage tourism debates by showing how a protected postcolonial landscape can be reimagined through interpretation, conservation-oriented planning, and culturally sensitive destination management. Future development should prioritise conservation learning, local participation, and interpretation quality rather than visitor volume alone.

This study has several limitations. First, it is based on a qualitative longitudinal case study of a single protected heritage landscape, so the findings should not be overgeneralised. Second, although the oral-history testimonies are historically valuable for reconstructing lived experiences, local labour, seasonal life, and memories that are not fully captured in archival records, the witness sample remains limited and should not be read as representative of all stakeholder groups involved in BMNP's tourism development. Third, the study relies on verified institutional visitor and revenue data up to 2024, but does not include a large-scale visitor perception survey or systematic measurement of local socio-economic impacts. Finally, researcher subjectivity is inherent in qualitative interpretation, although it was mitigated through triangulation of archival sources, oral-history materials, field observations, institutional reports, biodiversity data, and tourism statistics. Future research should examine visitor perceptions, the effectiveness of digital and low-tech interpretation tools, comparative postcolonial hill-station sites in Southeast Asia, and the long-term socio-economic impacts of interpretation-led tourism on local communities.

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