



BETWEEN LIVELIHOOD AND HERITAGE: THE FUTURE OF FLOATING MARKETS IN THE MEKONG DELTA

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Abstract:

Floating markets in the Mekong Delta represent a unique socio-economic and cultural form rooted in aquatic livelihoods and long-standing community traditions. However, these spaces are increasingly challenged by shifting economic structures, environmental degradation, and the expansion of tourism. This study explores the contemporary transformation of five key floating markets between 2018 and 2024, focusing on the tensions between preserving cultural heritage and sustaining local livelihoods. Drawing on interdisciplinary frameworks and combining qualitative research with descriptive quantitative data, the article examines how floating markets are reconfiguring as part of broader socio-ecological changes. It identifies significant challenges, such as the erosion of trade functions, climate-related impacts, and fragmented governance. In response, the paper proposes six strategic pathways for conservation and sustainable development, positioning floating markets not only as symbolic heritage sites but as dynamic community systems central to the future of the Mekong Delta.

Keywords: floating markets, Mekong Delta, intangible heritage, socio-ecological systems, sustainable livelihoods, cultural tourism

1. Introduction

Floating markets are a distinctive institution that integrates both economic and cultural functions. They originated and evolved from the Mekong Delta's unique environmental and hydrological conditions. In this region, the dense network of rivers and canals historically made water transport the primary mode of mobility. As a result, floating

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markets became an essential part of community life, where commercial activities are deeply intertwined with cultural practices. These markets facilitate the exchange of goods and serve as symbolic spaces that embody local customs, traditional knowledge, and regional identity.

In recent decades, the vitality of floating markets has declined noticeably in scale and function. Multiple factors have contributed to this trend, including the rapid development of road-based transportation systems, the expansion of supermarkets and land-based retail centers, and the escalating effects of climate change. Phenomena such as saltwater intrusion, riverbank erosion, and rising sea levels have increasingly disrupted the ecological and socio-economic foundations that support floating markets. Many localities have reported a sharp drop in trading boats, a shrinking volume of commercial transactions, and a growing tendency to transform markets into tourist destinations. This process has gradually displaced the markets' original economic role and created tensions in how these spaces are managed, preserved, and adapted to current demands.

A critical question, therefore, emerges: Should floating markets be protected as living cultural spaces rooted in local livelihoods or reconstructed as commodified tourist attractions? The absence of recent and integrated studies that address the interplay between environmental, social, and cultural factors has limited the effectiveness of current policy frameworks. Additionally, the role of local communities, the principal actors maintaining these markets, remains underrepresented in most conservation initiatives.

In response to these challenges, this study investigates the current condition and transformation of five prominent floating markets in the Mekong Delta. These include Cai Rang, Cai Be, Nga Nam, Nga Bay, and Phong Dien, with a research period spanning from 2018 to 2024. The research adopts an interdisciplinary perspective, combining qualitative methods with descriptive data analysis. It aims to identify the drivers of change, analyze emerging tensions in the preservation process, and propose strategies for the sustainable conservation and revitalization of floating markets as integral components of the cultural and social fabric of the Mekong Delta.

2. Literature Review

This section provides an overview of academic studies related to floating markets in the Mekong Delta and identifies key research gaps that inform the direction and objectives of this article.

2.1. Theoretical Framework and Key Concepts

The Mekong Delta, characterized by low terrain and an intricate network of rivers and canals, has given rise to a unique economic and cultural landscape shaped by aquatic livelihoods. In this context, floating markets function as trade centers and reflections of the close interaction between human activity and hydrological conditions. From a social sciences perspective, this study draws on three key theoretical approaches.

First, the concept of cultural space explains the role of floating markets as historically and socially constructed environments. These markets serve as spaces that preserve traditional customs, collective memory, and intergenerational interactions. They are embedded in daily life and are associated with rituals, customs, and community relations.

Second, intangible cultural heritage allows floating markets to be viewed as dynamic cultural systems capable of evolving. This includes professional knowledge such as navigating and bargaining skills, community-based values rooted in riverine life, and distinctive communicative forms such as vocal calls and visual signs.

Third, the social-ecological systems approach is employed to understand the complex interactions between human systems, economic production, and natural ecosystems. From this perspective, floating markets are part of broader socio-environmental systems in which hydrological changes, urban development, and shifts in consumer behavior affect their resilience and adaptability.

By combining these frameworks, the study moves beyond interpreting floating markets solely as cultural artifacts. Instead, they are conceptualized as adaptive systems at the intersection of changing environmental and social structures. This interdisciplinary lens provides a foundation for a more comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities surrounding floating markets in the current era.

2.2. Review of Existing Research

Floating markets in the Mekong Delta have attracted attention from scholars in fields such as geography, anthropology, cultural studies, agricultural economics, and sustainable tourism. While this body of work is valuable, it remains fragmented regarding scope, methodology, and theoretical alignment.

A representative example is Nguyen (2018), who approached floating markets from a human geography perspective, analyzing their spatial evolution of riverine networks and traditional trade patterns. This study highlighted the importance of waterways in shaping residential and economic configurations and documented the ongoing decline of markets in the face of urbanization and transportation changes.

Other sources, including Ca Mau Newspaper (2024) and Vietnam Economic News (2024), provide updated information on the decline of floating markets. These reports emphasize the influence of environmental changes such as saltwater intrusion, sea level rise, riverbank erosion, and changes in consumption habits. They also note efforts such as festivals and ecotourism initiatives, though these measures are often short-term and disconnected from community livelihoods.

Studies in folklore and tourism argue that floating markets could serve as heritage tourism destinations if integrated adequately with cultural preservation and local economic development. Le and Tran (2019) and Nguyen (2020) advocate for community-based and experiential tourism models highlighting daily riverine life. However, these proposals often lack updated field data and do not sufficiently address the role of local communities in shaping the future of floating markets.

While existing literature affirms floating markets' cultural and historical value, it remains primarily descriptive. There is a clear need for integrative studies that combine environmental, social, and cultural dimensions within a unified analytical approach.

Three main research gaps emerge. First, the lack of updated data is a critical limitation. Most studies rely on information collected before 2020, whereas the region has experienced rapid changes due to climate variability, urban expansion, and socio-economic transformation. Without recent data on boat numbers, trade frequency, goods distribution, and consumer behavior, analyses risk becoming outdated.

Second, interdisciplinary research remains limited. Existing work tends to isolate cultural, environmental, or economic dimensions, resulting in partial and fragmented insights into the floating market phenomenon.

Third, there is insufficient attention to community perspectives. Most studies rely on secondary data and overlook the lived experiences, expectations, and strategies of riverine residents who sustain these market spaces.

Addressing these gaps requires a renewed research agenda that integrates current field data, adopts interdisciplinary methodologies, and centers the voices of local communities. Such an approach would enhance the scholarly relevance and practical impact of research on floating markets while supporting evidence-based policy for the sustainable conservation of this cultural landscape.

3. Data and Research Methods

3.1. Scope and Study Subjects

This research examines the current conditions and challenges facing five representative floating markets in the Mekong Delta. These include Cai Rang and Phong Dien in Can Tho, Cai Be in Tien Giang, Nga Nam in Soc Trang, and Nga Bay in Hau Giang. The selected sites represent geographic diversity, historical significance, commercial function, and distinct cultural values. They also hold strong potential for tourism development and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

The study covers the period from 2018 to 2024 to provide up-to-date observations and reflect the influence of climate change, transport infrastructure shifts, and urbanization on these markets.

3.2. Research Methods

The study is grounded primarily in qualitative methodology, supplemented by descriptive quantitative elements to deepen the analysis and enhance the reliability of the findings. Specific methods employed include the following:

- **Secondary document analysis:** This involves collecting and synthesizing data from academic publications, provincial-level cultural and tourism reports, specialized articles, and tourism statistics from 2018 to 2024. Key sources include Nguyen (2018), Vietnam Economic News (2024), Ca Mau Newspaper (2024), and official documents from relevant Departments of Culture, Sports and Tourism.

- **Field observation and spatial simulation:** Satellite imagery from Google Earth, GIS data, on-site photographs, and media videos are used to assess changes in boat density, market scale, and spatial organization over time.
- **Content analysis:** The study analyzes written materials, news reports, and media coverage that document the lives of river-based residents. This helps identify dominant themes, conflicting viewpoints, and development trends in public discourse about floating markets.
- **In-depth interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten vendors and thirty long-term residents across the selected markets. The interviews explored their perspectives on market transformation, the impact of tourism, climate change, and their expectations for the future of their living environment.

3.3. Analytical Tools and Evaluation Criteria

Evaluation criteria include the number of active boats, transaction frequency, types of goods, participant profiles, modes of operation, and the degree to which markets have transitioned from traditional trade to tourism-oriented functions.

Analytical tools used in the study include Microsoft Excel, Word, SPSS for basic statistical descriptions, and Google Maps for spatial representation. Charts and tables are also employed to present findings in a clear and accessible format.

This multi-dimensional approach integrates physical space, economic activity, and socio-cultural elements. It is designed to accurately reflect the current realities of floating markets while uncovering underlying tensions and informing conservation strategies aligned with sustainable development goals.

4. Findings and Discussion

The research findings are presented through analyses of each selected floating market. This is followed by synthesizing overarching trends and key issues that characterize floating markets in the Mekong Delta.

4.1. Analysis of Selected Floating Markets

4.1.1. Cai Rang Floating Market (Can Tho)

Cai Rang is one of the Mekong Delta's largest and most iconic floating markets. Over the past decade, it has experienced a significant decline in operational scale. The number of active boats dropped from approximately 500 to 600 in 2010 to around 200 to 250 in 2023, representing a more than 50 percent reduction. The primary causes of this decline include the expansion of road-based transportation, changing consumer behavior, and the effects of urbanization. The trade volume has decreased despite a sharp increase in tourist arrivals—exceeding one million visits in the first half of 2024. This trend highlights the growing shift toward tourism and transforming the market's function from a site of commerce to one of cultural performance (Vietnam Economic News, 2024).

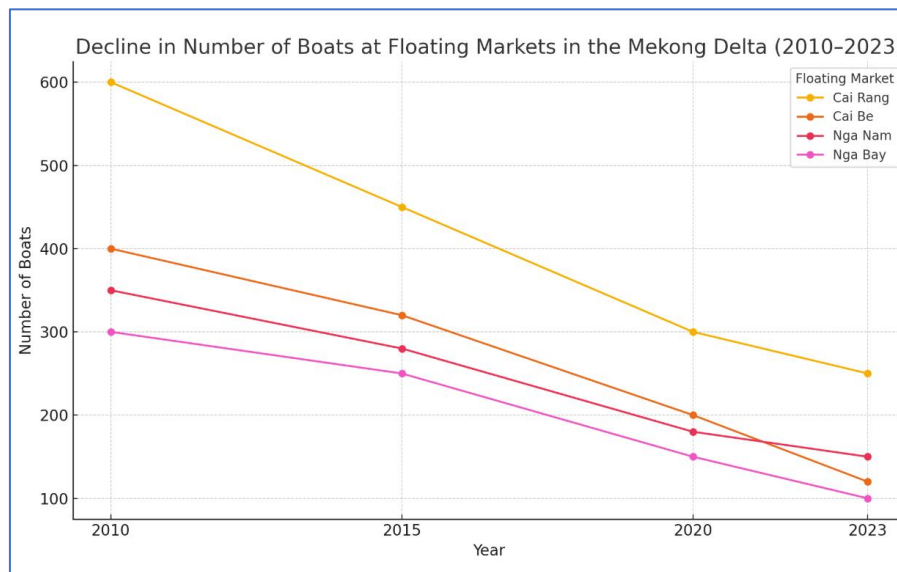


Figure 1: Trends in the Decline of Boat Numbers at Major Floating Markets in the Mekong Delta (2010 - 2023)

4.1.2. Cai Be Floating Market (Tien Giang)

Once a significant hub for collecting and distributing agricultural products along the Tien River, the Cai Be floating market has rapidly declined. The expansion of onshore market infrastructure and changes in consumer preferences and transport methods have significantly reduced the number of operating boats. Despite this, local authorities continue to organize festivals and tourism events to revitalize the market's commercial role and integrate it with the development of local tourism services.

4.1.3. Nga Nam Floating Market (Soc Trang)

Located at the intersection of five significant waterways, Nga Nam held strategic importance in regional trade. Although its scale has diminished recently, the local government has implemented a tourism development initiative from 2021 to 2025. This plan aims to integrate market preservation with promoting distinctive local tourism products. Initial signs indicate some success in terms of engagement and visitor interest.

4.1.4. Nga Bay Floating Market (Hau Giang)

Closely associated with folk culture and traditional southern opera, Nga Bay was once one of the region's key wholesale markets. Today, its commercial activities have contracted substantially. However, events such as the Tourism Festival held in June 2024 demonstrate ongoing efforts to reconstruct the cultural environment of the market as part of a broader strategy to leverage its historical value and promote tourism-led development.

4.1.5. Phong Dien Floating Market (Can Tho)

Although it no longer functions as a central hub for agricultural trade, the Phong Dien floating market remains a popular tourist destination. In the first half of 2024, it welcomed over one million visitors and generated revenues exceeding 315 billion VND.

These figures reflect the market's substantial potential for growing river-based tourism and promoting local cultural experiences.

4.2. Discussion: Emerging trends and key tensions

4.2.1. Tourism-Oriented Transformation and the Erosion of Trade Functions

A notable trend is that many floating markets today persist primarily due to tourism rather than their original commercial functions. The process of transformation into a tourist attraction may provide short-term gains in terms of visibility and revenue. However, this shift often leads to the distortion of the cultural space, as market activities become staged and disconnected from authentic local practices. Consequently, many residents have gradually withdrawn from traditional water-based trade due to the diminishing viability of these markets as sources of livelihood.

4.2.2. Impacts of Climate Change and Urbanization

Environmental factors such as saltwater intrusion, altered water flows, riverbank erosion, and water pollution directly affect the operation of floating markets. In addition, the expansion of road infrastructure and urban development has significantly reduced the role of waterway transport, which was once the foundation of these traditional markets.

4.2.3. Limitations in Conservation and Governance

Current conservation efforts are primarily event-based and lack a long-term strategic vision. There is insufficient coordination among stakeholders, and no comprehensive policy framework has been established. Furthermore, the absence of community-based management models and limited participation by residents in planning and implementation have reduced the effectiveness of these efforts.

4.3. General Assessment

The above analysis indicates that floating markets in the Mekong Delta are undergoing a severe decline, not only in terms of physical scale, such as boat numbers and trading activity, but also in their socio-cultural significance tied to local livelihoods. Without timely and well-structured interventions grounded in community realities, the complete disappearance of this distinctive market form is a likely scenario in the near future.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings and analysis, this study proposes six strategic solution groups to preserve and sustainably develop floating markets in the Mekong Delta. These recommendations focus on planning, infrastructure, cultural preservation, tourism innovation, community empowerment, and interdisciplinary governance.

5.1. Strengthening Planning and Management

There is a need to develop general and detailed plans for each floating market that integrate economic, cultural, and tourism functions. Planning should promote regional

connectivity and align with inland waterway development and urbanization strategies. Establishing dedicated floating market management boards, with the participation of local communities, government officials, and researchers, would ensure effective, transparent, and context-sensitive governance.

5.2. Developing Infrastructure and Support Services

Priority should be given to investments in essential infrastructure, including safe docking areas, sanitation facilities, fuel stations, waste collection points, and riverbank service zones. Adopting digital technologies in management and monitoring, such as digital mapping and tourism data platforms, would improve operational coordination and enhance visitor experiences.

5.3. Preserving and Promoting Riverine Cultural Heritage

Cultural preservation efforts should be grounded in the lived experiences of local communities. Events such as festivals, re-enactments of riverine trading practices, and folk music performances, including "Don Ca Tai Tu," should be integrated with each location's historical and cultural context. The formal recognition of floating markets as national or regional intangible cultural heritage is also essential to securing legal and financial support for conservation.

5.4. Promoting Experience-Based Tourism

Rather than relying on staged performances, floating markets should adopt community-based tourism models that allow visitors to engage directly in everyday activities such as trading, food preparation, and social interaction with residents. This approach enhances the experience's authenticity while preserving the cultural space's living character.

5.5. Enhancing Community Awareness and Capacity

Educational and communication programs should be implemented to raise public awareness about the value of floating markets in sustainable development. In addition, training programs in tourism guidance, service management, environmental protection, and digital communication should be offered to local vendors and residents to build their capacity and adaptability to new market models.

5.6. Promoting Interdisciplinary Cooperation and Resource Mobilization

Collaboration among governmental agencies, social organizations, research institutions, businesses, and local communities should be encouraged in planning, conservation, and development activities. The mobilization of diverse financial resources, combining public and private investment with technical assistance from interdisciplinary programs, will help establish a sustainable governance ecosystem for floating markets.

6. Conclusion

Floating markets in the Mekong Delta are not merely traditional trading venues but deeply embedded cultural institutions that reflect the intricate relationship between riverine communities and their natural and historical environment. In the contemporary context, however, these spaces are transforming, raising concerns over the erosion of their economic and cultural foundations.

Through a multi-dimensional analysis of five representative markets, this study identifies three significant trends: the dominance of tourism over traditional commerce, the adverse effects of environmental and infrastructural shifts on communal life, and ongoing shortcomings in the governance and conservation of these heritage spaces. It also highlights significant research gaps, including the lack of updated field data, limited interdisciplinary integration, and insufficient engagement with the lived realities of residents.

Against mounting tensions between heritage preservation and livelihood sustainability, this article proposes six strategic solution groups to shape a viable future for floating markets. These strategies encompass integrated planning, infrastructural enhancement, tourism innovation, and community empowerment. The study argues that floating markets must not be treated solely as static cultural artifacts but as dynamic socio-ecological systems. Their sustainable conservation requires long-term, context-sensitive approaches rooted in community participation and the reintegration of economic relevance into their everyday function.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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