

ECOTOURISM IN UZBEKISTAN: THEORY, CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Shokhrukh Shakhriyorov

Master's student at Silk Road International University
of Tourism and Cultural Heritage.

shohrux.shaxriyorovbk@ru

ABSTRACT

As tourists increasingly seek destinations aligning with their interests, niche market tourism has emerged as a strategic approach. Niche tourism represents diversity and individuality in an increasingly uniform world. It targets a limited consumer base compared to mass tourism but remains a consistent market. Niche tourism focuses more on the activities rather than the volume of visitors at a specific location.

Among various niche tourism markets, ecotourism stands out as the fastest-growing sector, accounting for approximately 20% of the global tourism industry (Bunghez, 2021) [1]. Ecotourism's significance lies in its potential to challenge traditional industry practices by promoting environmentally friendly, community-oriented, and educational experiences. Its purpose is to utilize nature in a sustainable way, ensuring ecological integrity and long-term well-being for current and future generations. Uzbekistan has great potential for ecotourism due to its unique climate and natural features. To boost the future of nature-based tourism in the country, we need to address current issues. This paper will explore the ecotourism possibilities in Uzbekistan and identify the obstacles hindering its growth.

Keywords: *Ecotourism, Uzbekistan, ecotourism routes, environmental challenges, sustainable tourism, niche tourism.*

Introduction

Tourism is a global industry with far-reaching economic implications, affecting multiple sectors. Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie (2006) [2] note that over the past 50 years, tourism has grown at an annual rate of 6.6%, with international travel soaring from 25 million in 1950 to over 700 million in 2002. Particularly pertinent to our exploration of ecotourism, the top five vacation destinations in Europe and the Americas accounted for 71% of the market in 1950, but just 35% in 2002, reflecting a growing interest in exploring new regions, especially in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Pacific.

The changing tourism scene highlights the growth of niche tourism, a customized strategy for people with unique interests. Niche tourism stands out as a symbol of diversity and individuality in a world that's becoming more similar. It caters to a specific group of people, avoiding mass tourism in favor of a more specialized and consistent approach. Within the array of niche tourism markets, ecotourism emerges as a prominent star, boasting the fastest-growing sector, accounting for approximately 20% of the global tourism industry (Bunghez, 2021) [1].

Ecotourism is more than just about its market share; it's set to transform the industry by emphasizing eco-friendliness, involving local communities, and providing education. Its main goal is to make the most of nature for tourism while making sure the environment remains healthy and prosperous for both present and future generations.

Ecotourism has expanded the tourism industry's reach and capabilities, despite some claims to the contrary. Its significance lies in its ability to offer new approaches to how the industry operates. These "alternative" methods enhance our understanding of the industry, both in terms of its breadth and depth (Wearing and Neil, 1999) [3]. Ecotourism, much like any other form of tourism, should prioritize environmental friendliness, while still delivering an enjoyable experience for visitors and economic benefits for local communities. Its main goal is to use nature for tourism in a

responsible way, ensuring the long-term ecological health and development for both current and future generations.

Uzbekistan, with its diverse climate, including warm winters, hot summers, vibrant springs, and brisk autumns, stands as a promising destination for ecotourism. The country has the potential to create a unique and sustainable network of ecotourism routes, enhancing its presence in the global tourism market by catering to a wide range of tourists. Today, Uzbekistan is gaining recognition as one of the most sought-after eco-tourism spots in Central Asia.

Methods

In this paper, we seek to explore the perspectives and insights of local governments in various ecotourism destinations across Uzbekistan regarding the challenges they face in achieving successful ecotourism initiatives. Our data primarily derives from published sources and books. While a qualitative approach would have yielded more precise and accurate statistics on the subject, conducting interviews with individuals in the tourism sector proved unfeasible. Therefore, our research materials are largely drawn from books, articles, and online resources.

Results and discussion

Ecotourism and nature-based tourism are often located in remote and protected areas that boast abundant natural beauty, ecological significance, and cultural value. These areas serve a vital role in preserving biodiversity and preventing widespread destruction of natural ecosystems. According to Wearing and Neil, (1999) [3] currently, there are approximately 8,500 protected areas worldwide, covering about 5.17% of the Earth's total land area. The number of these protected areas has grown significantly over the past two decades.

Tourists with special interests are drawn to activities that allow them to connect with nature, appreciate the beauty of untouched natural environments, experience the joy of observing wildlife in its native habitat, relish the excitement of exploration, discovery, and learning, and find fulfillment in overcoming challenges. They take pleasure in acquiring skills like map reading, navigating rivers, and learning climbing

techniques. Activities such as diving, horseback riding, canoeing, cattle herding, and carrying their own gear are all part of their adventure. For these tourists, the physical effort is a small price to pay for the reward of witnessing a majestic mountain, camping beside a crystal-clear lake, or watching an eagle glide through the sky (Kruja and Gjyrezi, 2011) [4].

According to Fennell (2008) [5] Ecotourism may be effective as a tool to emphasize the human, service qualities that are important to the development of sound recreational programming because it is a form of tourism that is presumably ethical, responsible, small scale, and community based.

According to Wearing and Neil, (1999) [3] Protected areas, on the other hand, are increasingly under threat from a variety of sources:

- demands for “multiple use” parks that allow extractive industries;
- lobby group demands for access to a variety of recreational activities such as four-wheeling, horseback riding, hunting, and fishing;
- indigenous groups’ aspirations for park title and management.

Uzbekistan has actively taken steps to promote ecotourism, recognizing its potential to improve the quality of life, generate employment, and enhance international relations. The successful growth of ecotourism in Uzbekistan underscores the importance of fully grasping the scope and value of this innovation as a factor in the country’s long-term sustainability. Uzbekistan offers a diverse range of ecotourism opportunities, including places like the Ugham Chatkal State Natural Park, the lush forests along the Amu Darya River delta, the Aral Sea region with its environmental challenges, the desert landscapes of the Kyzyl Kum desert, and the mountains and Lake Nuratin in the Farish district of the Jizzakh region (Saidmamatov, et al., 2020) [6].

According to Saidov and Qudratov, (2022) [7] In Uzbekistan, over 800 tour operators, 600 hotels, more than 30 protected areas (nature reserves, national parks, unique natural monuments, etc.), and 60 foresteries are currently operational. In addition, Uzbekistan has around 400 distinct natural monuments.

Ergashev and Khamidova, (2021) [8] claim that ecotourism's growth in Uzbekistan has the following socioeconomic implications:

- creation of extra jobs for the local community in other collaborative industries, such as tourism;
- a boost in the local economy's earning sectors (hotels, catering, transportation complexes, souvenir production, national economy, and so on);
- stimulating currency exchange;
- agriculture and the food industry will develop as a result of increased investment and demand for manufactured goods;
- living conditions, utilities, and transportation services are all being improved;
- investment in the rational use of tourist resources (attractions) and in protected areas;
- intensive agriculture as a result of a requirement for land conservation;
- development of global communication;
- because of the tourist community's ongoing attention, incentives targeted at protecting the local natural and cultural treasures;
- the construction of recreational complexes, which, in turn, creates a plethora of opportunities for local residents to have fun.

Today, there is a growing global concern about the ecological crisis. The weakening ability of nature to renew itself, the exhaustion of its resources, and the contamination and poisoning of our environment are the main causes of the increasing environmental problems worldwide. It is vital to cultivate an ecological awareness among the population, encouraging people to care for the environment and preserve its treasures for future generations. Environmental education is essential for maintaining a balance in nature and fostering a harmonious relationship between society and the environment. Building ecological awareness in people is a necessary step for the development of ecotourism in the country, as evidenced by past experiences (Ergashev and Khamidova, 2021) [8].

According to Papathanassis (2011) [9], when we consider the content and qualities of the tourism experience, ecotourism can indirectly compete with two other forms of tourism: cultural tourism and adventure tourism. These three, including ecotourism, are part of the broader category known as alternative tourism.

In Uzbekistan, there are various micro-niche markets associated with ecotourism, such as extreme (adventure) tourism and wildlife tourism. Worldwide, wildlife tourism makes up around 7% of all tourism, as estimated by the United Nations. This figure does not even include animals in captivity, so the actual number is likely even higher. Travelers have numerous ways to observe and interact with wildlife, from safaris in Tanzania to diving on the Great Barrier Reef.

In addition to wildlife tourism, there are various activities related to it, including safaris, bird watching, and opportunities for interaction with animals like lions.

Uzbekistan's diverse natural landscape allows for a unique combination of ecotourism and dark tourism. For instance, during a trip to the Aral Sea, tourists can visit the Moynaq Ship Graveyard in the desert, often referred to as a "ghost town" in the middle of nowhere. This location used to be a bustling fishing port, but with the Aral Sea drying up, all that remains are a few abandoned ships. Businesses shuttered their doors, fishing boats were abandoned in the sand that was previously the bottom, and residents were forced to relocate in order to find work. Now it is being used as a dark tourism destination.

According to Toyirova (2022) [10], Uzbekistan encounters several challenges in the realm of ecotourism. First and foremost, there is a scarcity of national parks. Leading ecotourism destinations worldwide prioritize their national parks, emphasizing self-sustainability. However, in Uzbekistan, 50% of these parks are privately owned, with the remaining 50% under state management. The financing model for developing ecotourism in park reserves differs somewhat. Instead of government support, it relies on state assistance, a model more commonly found in developed nations. Even among these state-owned national parks, the offerings tend to be quite similar, with differences primarily limited to the specific attractions on display.

Many of these parks are situated in remote locations, which can lead to dissatisfaction among tourists who have traveled long distances in the hopes of experiencing a unique tour but find a degree of sameness. Additionally, the challenging weather conditions, particularly the intense heat during Uzbekistan's peak tourist season in the summer, can deter travelers from venturing to more distant, natural sites, prompting a preference for closer destinations.

Furthermore, there is a notable deficiency in the management of ecotourism in Uzbekistan. Long-distance tour packages that combine various attractions are notably lacking. Families visiting often struggle to find recreational activities suitable for all members, and alternative options are also quite limited. The management of the country's transport infrastructure presents another challenge. The quality of transportation services frequently falls short of the expectations of tourists, and many roads are in need of substantial improvement.

An emerging concern in the parlance of Uzbekistan's travel industry is the concept of an "off-season". This term is no longer limited to just the winter months; it's increasingly observed during the summer season as well. While Europe traditionally experiences a surge in tourism during the summer, Uzbekistan often witnesses a significant drop in hotel occupancy. In the midst of summer vacations, the number of tourists in Uzbekistan can sometimes be as low as a few dozen, primarily due to unfavorable climatic conditions.

Recommendations

To address the challenges effectively, the following strategies should be implemented:

- a) Conduct an in-depth study of the experiences and advanced technologies employed in ecotourism by developed countries. It is crucial for any nation aspiring to develop ecotourism to adopt systematic approaches and sophisticated solutions from developed countries. International recommendations are essential for making informed decisions. The wealth of experience from these countries can significantly benefit any developing nation aiming for a promising ecotourism sector.

- b) Improve infrastructure, including transportation (transport services and road conditions), railway networks, and airports. Accessibility to tourism destinations is paramount, and this necessitates ongoing improvements in transportation and road conditions.
- c) Foster partnerships with local communities. Local residents possess a deeper understanding of the ecological conditions in their area and may offer valuable insights and ideas.
- d) Invest in the training and education of specialists in the ecotourism field. Equipping employees with the necessary qualifications is vital, and businesses should allocate resources for employee training and development.
- e) Create recreational amenities in ecotourism areas, such as bike trails, roller skating paths, and walking routes.
- f) Attract investments from both local and foreign sources. To bolster ecotourism, increased investment is necessary, particularly for projects aimed at enhancing sustainability. Establishing partnerships is vital to manage the development initiatives associated with ecotourism effectively.

Conclusion

Uzbekistan is at a pivotal juncture in its pursuit of ecotourism development. As the nation faces certain challenges, it simultaneously enjoys numerous opportunities for growth and transformation in the ecotourism sector.

While challenges such as the shortage of national parks, transportation infrastructure issues, and uniformity in offerings need to be addressed, the strategies outlined, including learning from developed nations, attracting investment, and engaging local communities, provide a clear path forward. These strategies can help Uzbekistan tap into its vast potential for ecotourism, ensuring that its natural beauty and ecological treasures are preserved, while also creating economic opportunities and enhancing the overall tourism experience. By implementing these strategies effectively, Uzbekistan can position itself as a compelling ecotourism destination on the global stage.

This journey not only promises the preservation of its natural beauty and ecological treasures but also offers economic opportunities and an enriched tourism experience for visitors. Through strategic planning and concerted efforts, Uzbekistan has the potential to become a leading ecotourism destination in the years to come.

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