DEVELOPING ECOTOURISM IN UZBEKISTAN: POSSIBILITIES, OBSTACLES, AND FUTURE POTENTIAL

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Abstract. *Uzbekistan, a region rich in history and cultural heritage, is being increasingly recognized for its untapped ecotourism potential. While the country is well-known for historic Silk Road cities, including as Samarkand and Bukhara, its various landscapes, distinct flora and fauna, and commitment to sustainable practices make it an attractive ecotourism destination. In addition to its abundant cultural heritage, Uzbekistan boasts distinct natural resources. This presents substantial potential for the advancement of ecotourism. This study focuses on the significance, available opportunities, challenges, and future possibilities for the growth of ecotourism in Uzbekistan. The paper examines the nature of ecotourism, its impact on Uzbekistan's economy, its role in enhancing the living standards of local communities, and its significance for environmental conservation.*

Keywords: *Ecotourism, Uzbekistan, development, opportunities, problems, prospects, nature, sustainability, resources.*

Introduction. One of the ways of harmonious human contact with the environment is ecological tourism or ecotourism. The development of ecotourism is due to the strong motivation of tourists, their craving for adventure and the acquisition of new knowledge and experience. This article introduces ecological tourism as a means of supporting natural areas, and also contributes to the social and economic development of the local population, the formation of systemic knowledge about the principles of developing a new type of tourism in our country.

First of all, this is a trip to nature promotes their preservation and development. Ecological tourism is inextricably linked with the cognitive and educational functions, tourists get acquainted with nature, local customs and culture, and they learn more about environmental problems and take an active part in solving them. Thus, ecological tourism not only gives the impression of rest in the most beautiful places, but also fosters in a person love and a sense of responsibility towards the environment.

1.1 Ecotourism's Benefits and Challenges for Sustainable Development

In recent years, tourism-based sustainable growth has been a hot subject of debate [6]. Tourism is a powerful catalyst for change [7]. Tourism creation affects culture and the community everywhere it happens. Development adds new value to local services while still putting more pressure on current infrastructure [8]. Tourism contributes significantly to resource use and climate change [9,10], despite contradictory indications that it is a net contributor to poverty reduction and alleviation. As a result, tourism growth must be pursued in order to reap benefits for the destination's population [11].

Ecotourism, a form of sustainable tourism, has played a significant role in the growth of developing destinations [12]. There are several different meanings and descriptions of the term ecotourism. In 1983, Mexican environmentalist Hector Ceballos Lascurain defined ecotourism as "traveling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specific goal of observing, admiring, and enjoying scenery, wild animals, and plants." [13]. Since then, ecotourism has been defined as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people, and includes interpretation and education." [14] Ecotourism aims to reduce negative environmental effect, raise cultural and environmental knowledge, provide pleasant guest experiences, and empower local communities, while also raising sensitivity to the environment. The host country's environmental and economic policies [15,16]. Sustainable tourism aims to meet tourists' economic, social, and aesthetic requirements while preserving the natural environment and cultural legacy [1]. While some scholars [12,18] contend that the precise definition and meanings of the word are not precisely articulated, ecotourism has been seen to conserve endangered habitats and improve local economies in remote regions [17]. Ecotourism focuses on direct engagement with nature and people from different cultures, as well as selecting tourism kinds that maximize earnings for underprivileged groups. Rather than huge international tourism firms; and finally, reducing overall travel environmental impacts [19]. Ecotourism has the potential to support the world by helping to preserve and conserve the environment. It is a means of raising environmental consciousness that can be used to fund the conservation of natural areas while still increasing their economic competence [2].

1.2 Ecotourism in Uzbekistan

The Aral Sea region contains numerous historical, archeological, and biological sites. The different character of the major river banks, as well as their flora and fauna, provide ample opportunities for ecotourism. The key functions of ecotourism—to conserve natural areas, provide competitive tourism experiences, and strengthen local economies through nature conservation, environmental education, and rural empowerment—may stimulate rapid growth in tourism and other sectors of the economy, as well as help to mitigate the Aral Sea region's ongoing environmental degradation and increase the socioeconomic well-being of the local population [4]. The ecotourism potential of the lower Amudarya state's biosphere reserve, the Aral Sea shore's ship cemetery in Muynak, ancient Khorezm fortresses (Ayazkala, Tuprakkala), and the Nukus Art Museum named after Savitsky [5] is not fully understood, both for tourists and tour operators.

Uzbekistan has taken a number of steps to encourage ecotourism, which will help to raise living standards, generate new opportunities, and boost foreign ties. The active introduction of ecotourism production in Uzbekistan demonstrates the importance of fully comprehending the scope and significance of this development as a component of the state's long-term sustainability. Uzbekistan offers a wide range of ecotourism possibilities, including the Ugham Chatkal State Natural Park, the riparian forests in the Amu Darya River delta, the Aral Sea area of environmental catastrophe, desert scenery and the Kyzyl Kum desert, and the mountains and lake Nuratin Aydarkul in the Farish district of the Jizzakh region [3].

Khamidov [20] created the tourism-recreation complex in the Uzbek economy and successfully managed it. He established an index of ecological tourism in protected natural areas and calculated ways to increase ecotourism revenue and contribute to the GDP. This article examines the current condition of ecotourism in the Khorezm region and proposes ways to expand it [21].

The Aral Sea Basin's protected natural resources, including the Lower Amudarya State Biosphere Reserve, Sultan Uvays Mountains, Ustyurt Plateau, Sudoche and Saigachia, and the Aral Sea ecotourism potential, have been exploited to build a model of ecotourism production [5]. Tourist itineraries have been created centered on the Lower Amudarya State Biosphere Reserve, Sultan Uvays Mountains, Ustyurt Plateau, and Sudoch. In addition to assessing Karakalpakstan's tourism potential, this study examines theoretical and methodological issues related to the development of ecotourism in the Republic of Karakalpakstan, including analyzing new ecotourism destinations [3]. Khalilova and Allaberganov [22] outlined methods for resolving the Aral Sea basin crisis, as well as current conditions and proposals for improving the region's ecological situation and creating tourist zones.

By addressing these challenges and adopting a sustainable approach, Uzbekistan can realize the enormous potential of its natural resources and establish itself as a leading ecotourism destination in Central Asia, thereby contributing to economic diversification, community development, and environmental conservation for future generations. The objective is to balance economic expansion with the preservation of Uzbekistan's natural and cultural legacy, ensuring that tourism benefits both the environment and the local communities that rely on it.

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