

Mountain Tourism: Sustainable Development, Economic Impacts, and Ecological Challenges

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Abstract

Globalization finds expression in each sphere of economic activity, including tourism, which unites the production, trade, and services sectors, and more generally in the sphere of services, particularly international tourism. Ecotourism can be seen as a form of responsible tourism conducted in natural areas with the aim of preserving ecosystems, biodiversity, and the quality of life of local populations. The key features of ecotourism include environmental sustainability, social responsibility, and economic efficiency. In addition to guaranteeing effective utilization of natural resources, this kind of tourism supports the preservation of the environment. In theory, both agritourism and ecotourism play a significant role in the formation of the post-industrial economy. The growth of the service sector, urbanization, and environmental consciousness are regarded as the main drivers of the development of agritourism and ecotourism. Modern studies indicate that agritourism and ecotourism not only generate economic profits but also promote the development of social capital and environmental sustainability. Mountain tourism is one of the most rapidly growing branches of the global tourism industry. The mountain area has become the attraction of 9-16 percent of the international tourist flow. In addition, the tourism sector plays a significant role in generating jobs, providing incomes, and developing infrastructure in mountain areas. Nevertheless, issues such as ecosystem degradation, climate change, and resource overutilization may lead to the unsustainability of mountain tourism development. This article studies the economic, social, and environmental consequences of mountain tourism, sustainable development concepts, and management approaches. The findings demonstrate that with proper strategies, approaches, and management, sustainable mountain tourism development is achievable.

Keywords: Mountain tourism, Sustainable development, Ecotourism, Regional economy, Climate change

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, tourism is one of the spheres with significant development tendencies, which are connected with employment, financial turnover, and commodity circulation, as well as with other spheres of the economy. It should be noted that tourism is among the fastest developing sectors of the multifunctional world economy, where all three sectors of the economy (industry, services, and commerce) are involved, and mountain tourism can be regarded as a part (WTO, 2022). Globalization is expressed in all sectors of the economy, such as tourism, and, moreover, in the sphere of services, which includes production, trade, and services, particularly in international tourism.

2. The Conceptual Framework of Ecotourism

Ecotourism is a type of tourism that is conducted responsibly and in natural territories to conserve the environment, preserve biodiversity, and improve the quality of life of residents. Environmental sustainability, social responsibility, and economic effectiveness are the main tenets of ecotourism. Such a type of tourism not only provides for rational resource management but also contributes to environmental protection.

From the theoretical point of view, agritourism and ecotourism are directly associated with the emergence of a postindustrial economy. The expansion of the service sector, accelerated urbanization, and increased environmental awareness are considered to be the main factors stimulating the development of these forms of tourism. Modern research shows that agritourism and ecotourism not only create economic benefits but also serve to form social capital and ensure ecological sustainability (Qafarov, 2019).

Tourism is one of the most dynamic sectors of the modern global economy, and mountain tourism is considered an important component of this system. Mountain areas are attractive destinations for tourists due to their natural landscape, biodiversity, clean air, and cultural heritage. Globally, mountain tourism accounts for approximately 9-16% of international tourist flows and attracts hundreds of millions of tourists. In recent decades, scientific research on mountain tourism has increased rapidly, and tourism development, sustainable management, and mountain destination models have emerged as key directions in this field.

Mountain tourism is an important tool for regional development, rural revitalization, and socio-economic transformation. However, unsustainable tourism management can lead to problems such as land use change, pollution, and damage to ecosystems. The aim of this article is to systematically analyze the economic, social, and environmental impacts of mountain tourism and identify key models for sustainable development. One of the types of tourism that mountain tourism is closely related to is ecological tourism.

Ecotourism is one of the fastest-growing sectors of the tourism industry. Its annual growth is estimated at 10-20% to 30%, and its income from international tourism reaches 10-15%. Ecotourism is the tourism niche that attracts the most interest from tourists. Ecotourism is travel to explore and enjoy natural and cultural tourist attractions that help conserve nature. Additionally, ecotourism ensures the active socio-economic participation of the local population and the benefit of the environment from this activity.

The following principles of ecotourism exist:

1. Ecotourism provides purposeful trips to wildlife to get in touch with nature.
2. Ecotourism is sometimes called "soft tourism" because it has minimal, if any, negative impact on the natural environment.
3. Ecotourism activities encourage tour operators and tourists to protect the natural environment and promote the socio-economic development of areas.
4. The development of ecotourism should be beneficial to the local population and should not conflict with their interests and socio-economic development.
5. Ecotourism, as an integral part of the tourism industry, plays a key role in protecting the natural environment and improving the living standards of the local population as a tourist activity in nature that produces and sells tourism products and makes a profit from them.
6. The main goals of ecotourism are environmental education, improving human relations with nature and culture, developing ethical standards of behavior in the natural environment, cultivating a sense of personal responsibility for the fate of nature and individual elements, as well as restoring a person's spiritual and physical strength, creating a natural environment that provides proper rest, etc (Rüstəmovə et al., 2020).

Ecological tourism is considered one of the most relevant areas today. Today, the expansion of global problems related to natural resources in the world, the failure to effectively use the resources in the world's land and water areas, and, on the contrary, the pollution of water bodies and the disruption of the ecological balance as a result of erosion and depreciation in recreational areas related to the development of tourism have created serious problems

in the world economy and ecology in general. Implementing measures to develop environmental efficiency in the tourism sector, taking into account depreciation costs in tourism zones, and especially expanding the scale of ecotourism, are of particular priority.

In the 21st century, the global tourism industry has entered a phase of structural transformation, and the transition from traditional mass tourism models to sustainable, ecological, and community-based forms of tourism has accelerated. In this transformation process, agrotourism and ecotourism have emerged as the most dynamically developing areas of tourism (ADTA, 2020). In modern scientific literature, these types of tourism are evaluated not only as recreational activities but also as a means of regional economic development, social inclusion, and preservation of ecological balance (Əlirzayev, 2010).

Azerbaijan is one of the very few countries in the world that has managed to preserve its natural resources to this day. One of the main tasks facing the country today is to understand and assess the value of these resources and to adopt a literate approach to their use, which will serve to restore, increase, improve, and pass them on to future generations (OECD, 2022). The experience of countries around the world that carry out tourism activities related to the use of natural resources in any form shows that improper organization of the exploitation of these resources for recreational purposes leads to their erosion and destruction. Restoring those reserves requires a large amount of financial resources (Əsgərov, 2011).

3. The Essence of Mountain Tourism

Mountain tourism is a set of tourism activities carried out in specific geographical locations, such as mountainous and hilly areas. This type of tourism encompasses leisure, sports, health, and adventure tourism and is considered a form of nature-based tourism. From a theoretical perspective, agritourism and ecotourism are closely linked to the formation of a post-industrial economy. The expansion of the service sector, accelerated urbanization, and increased environmental awareness are considered to be the main factors stimulating the development of these forms of tourism. Modern research shows that agritourism and ecotourism not only create economic benefits but also serve to form social capital and ensure ecological sustainability (Lane et al., 2018).

3.1. Key Characteristics of Mountain Tourism

Mountain tourism is distinguished by the following characteristics:

- High ecological sensitivity;
- Seasonality (especially winter tourism);
- Difficult geographical conditions;
- High role of local communities;
- Commitment to nature and cultural heritage.

These characteristics distinguish mountain tourism from other types of tourism and require a special approach in management.

Mountain tourism is one of the important factors of regional economic development. Tourism infrastructure, the service sector, and investments increase economic activity in mountain regions.

- According to research, mountain tourism:
- Increases local employment;
- Leads to the creation of new businesses;
- Increases tourism revenues;
- Stimulates regional development.

Mountain tourism helps economic diversification and contributes to poverty reduction, especially in rural and remote areas. At the same time, tourism services (hotels, transportation, guides, gastronomy, etc.) create an economic multiplier effect and increase the social well-being of regions.

3.2. Social and Cultural Influences

Mountain tourism acts as a tool for social transformation for local communities. It contributes to the preservation of local culture, creates more jobs for residents, and hastens the construction of social amenities. Nevertheless, the swift expansion of the tourism industry may cause difficulties, including cultural conformity, modification of lifestyle patterns, and social conflicts.

4. Environmental Impacts and Risks

Mountain ecosystems are very fragile, and unsustainable tourism development leads to the following problems:

- Soil erosion
- Deforestation
- Water and soil pollution
- Increased waste
- Decreased biodiversity

Climate change is also a major risk for mountain tourism. Declining snow cover, melting glaciers, and extreme weather events are negatively impacting tourism seasons and economic stability. The sustainable mountain tourism model refers to the increase in the population living in urban areas as a result of urbanization and, as a result, the need for recreational travel by the urban population, at least on weekends, especially due to the high enthusiasm of people who previously lived in rural areas for nostalgia and ethno-tourism, which leads to various picnics, mountain climbing, communication with people living in mountainous areas, organization of trips in these areas, the healing, sports, entertainment, and cognitive functions of mountainous areas, cultural-historical research, modern expansion of the scale and types of travel under the influence of ethno, nostalgia, and other factors, and the beneficial use of these areas for tourism by future generations.

Sustainable mountain tourism aims to create a balance between economic development, environmental protection, and social well-being. Modern research highlights sustainability as a major research direction in mountain tourism.

Sustainability Principles:

- Efficient use of resources
- Protection of ecosystems
- Ensuring the participation of local communities
- Management of tourist flows
- Environmental education

Sustainable management mechanisms include:

- Ecotourism strategies
- Protected areas management
- Green infrastructure
- Sustainable tourism policies include

Studies show that mountain tourism creates long-term economic benefits when ecological and social balance is maintained.

5. Prospects of Mountain Tourism in Azerbaijan

The foundations for the development prospects of tourism in Azerbaijan were laid with the signing of the 1994 international contract, the “Contract of the Century”. Thus, this international agreement laid the foundation for successful business cooperation in our country and became the main means of its recognition in the world. After that period, the number of travelers to our country for business investment purposes and later for recreational

purposes began to increase rapidly every year. Our country's geographical location, favorable natural conditions for the tourism sector, biodiversity, and its proximity to the Greater Caucasus and Lesser Caucasus mountain ranges can be considered its main tourism resources. As we know, every traveler is interested in three main factors: Time, finance, and safety. It is precisely in our country that political stability, multicultural values, traditions of hospitality formed since ancient times, internal stability, the resolute will of the President of Azerbaijan in 2020, the "Iron Fist" of our army, the power of our martyrs and veterans, the magnificent victory of the state-people-army unity, which glorifies the valor of our martyrs and veterans, and the liberation of our native Karabakh from the enemy's clutches accelerated the solution of the main security-related problems, and then the successful anti-terrorist operations against separatists-terrorists in our native Khankendi ensured the restoration of the sovereignty of our country. Thus, the availability of tourist destinations for different tourist segments in terms of financial resources, the geographical location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, which is easily accessible by plane in terms of time, and the above-mentioned issues in terms of security increase the attractiveness of our country for foreign tourists.

During the pandemic, the development of the economy, especially the service sector, has come to a complete halt almost all over the world, and some sectors have gone into decline. During this period, in our country, which has a socially oriented market economic system, the state implemented financial regulations to support the service sector, including tourism, and supported entrepreneurial activity to prevent layoffs. All these processes have led to positive changes in indicators in the tourism sector in the post-pandemic period. Azerbaijan's normal neighborly relations with neighboring countries, traditions of hospitality, geographical location, rich history in line with statehood traditions, a society with cultural and multicultural values, political stability, and flexible modern and bureaucratic organization of state administration, especially the implementation of the ASAN service model, are among the factors that make both inbound and outbound tourism favorable.

Table 1. Tourism Sector Indicators in Azerbaijan (2020-2024).

Indicators	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Travel Agencies & Tour Operators	300	150	240	300	381
Number of Received & Dispatched Tourists (Persons)	8,205	16,324	31,801	50,345	100,777
Gross Number of Employees (Persons)	1,464	962	1,268	1,698	2,132
Gross Income of Travel Agencies & Total Tour Operators	16,147.3	22,614.8	53,350.3	78,772.7	166,392.3

As can be seen from Table 1, as a result of the successful economic policy pursued by the Azerbaijani state, positive progress has been observed with specific indicators towards the self-recovery and development of the tourism sector in the post-pandemic period (ASTA). Thus, since 2022, the amount of income earned by tour operator companies, their personnel, and companies has been expressed in positive figures. During this period, an increase in the number of tourists arriving has also been observed. It is practically obvious that these indicators have increased under the influence of both socio-economic and political factors. Thus, the establishment of administrative concessions and direct financial allocations by the state to prevent layoffs and eliminate bankruptcy in the private sector during the pandemic prevented the closure of businesses, especially in the service sector, including tourism, and led to their development over time in the post-pandemic period. The tourism sector is among the fastest-growing sectors in the world, as it also encompasses extensive networks such as transportation, catering companies, and the hospitality industry.

6. Regional Development and Mountain Tourism

Mountain tourism plays an important role in regional planning. The development of infrastructure, the creation of tourist routes, and the expansion of protected areas increase the tourism potential. For example, in some countries, the development of mountain tourism is supported by the rehabilitation of roads, the marking of hiking trails, and the management of national parks. Mountain tourism creates a broader economic impact by integrating with rural tourism, agrotourism, and ecotourism.

The main purpose of tourism is recreation. In this regard, our country has broad prospects for mountain tourism. Both the Greater Caucasus and the Lesser Caucasus Mountains, the Talysh Mountains in the south, and the numerous cultural and historical sites and caves located in the mountains indicate the potential resources of this type of tourism in Azerbaijan (Əsgərov et al., 2011).

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7. Key Destinations and Regional Highlights

One of our areas that attracts the attention of both domestic and foreign tourists for recreation and ethnotourism is Khinalı, the highest rural settlement in Europe. There are many recreational places in Guba in terms of travel time and distance. One of the famous places in Guba is the village of Khinalig (Figures 1, a & b). Khinalig is an interesting settlement located at an altitude of 2,350 meters above sea level and is considered one of the most suitable for ethnotourism. This tourist destination has a 5,000-year history. Geographically, it is 57 km southwest of Guba, and 14 km from the village is the Shah Plateau. There are caves in the area that are a suitable resource for speleotourism. Khinalig attracts the attention of both local and foreign tourists, especially in the spring and summer months.



Figure 1. Khinalig village.

Qachrash village (Figure 2) is located 12 km from the district center in Guba and is considered one of the large villages with extensive travel opportunities and rich in elements of nature tourism. Qachrash is an interesting tourist zone, attracting the attention of domestic and foreign tourists with its mysterious landscapes and recreation centers. It is an area mainly surrounded by mysterious forest areas and rich in natural springs. Here, in the forest area, there are walnut, hazelnut, cranberry, hawthorn, rosehip, apple, pear, and sycamore trees, and Gudyalchay, which adds special beauty to this area and gives special pleasure to local and foreign tourists. Waterfalls further expand recreational opportunities in this area. This village offers recreational areas serving tourists, offering natural food and the famous samovar tea, as well as places for picnics. This is especially attractive to young people,

young families, and middle-aged people who come for recreation or want to stop along the way and continue their journey later. In terms of segmentation, it can be said that most segments of tourism market participants (in terms of age, gender, and financial status) can be seen here, especially in the spring and summer months, and sometimes in the fall and winter as well.



Figure 2. Qachrash, Guba.

The village of Tengealti is one of the recreational areas of Guba and means "place between the mountains." Located 33 km from the district center, this village boasts mysterious and beautiful landscapes. The Velvelachai River flows between two mountains, through magnificent cliffs and greenery, creating a fascinating landscape on the northern slope of the Greater Caucasus Mountains.

One of the examples of mountaineering culture in these areas is Afurca Waterfall, 42 km from the district center, 60 meters high, located on the slope of the Afurca Waterfall (Figure 3), a canyon-like valley formed by the Yan ridge of the Velvale River, and registered as a geological natural monument.



Figure 3. Afurca waterfall.

Lake Chanlibel, located approximately 14 km from the district center and reminiscent of the famous "Goygol" is an ideal area for recreation and photo and video shooting around the village of Nugedi, full of beautiful views. There are numerous tour flights for travelers who want to relax and enjoy the beauties of nature and travel away from the heavy traffic jams of the city on busy work weekends. There are public catering establishments around the lake, which allow visitors to combine gastronomic pleasure with the mysterious views of the lake. The Guba Khan Palace, also known as the "Shah Abbas Palace," is a historical and cultural architectural monument of the city and one of the city's most beautiful tourist attractions. The palace, which has attracted the interest of both local

and foreign tourists and has gained wide popularity with its three-century history since the 18th century, has become an indispensable tourist destination.

Azerbaijan, a multicultural and modern country, has been famous throughout the world for its traditions of hospitality since ancient times. The regions of our country, which have vast opportunities for gastronomic tourism, are rich in various customs and traditions, elements of hospitality, and delicious regional foods and drinks. The richness of Azerbaijani cuisine provides ample opportunities for tourists traveling to both the capital, Baku, and the regions to effectively utilize the potential opportunities of the gastronomic type of tourism. Thus, the Guba and Sheki regions are very famous for their sweets; the Zagatala-Balakan region for its dishes called "surhullu"; the western region for its pastry dishes, especially in the fall and winter months, with its delicious pilaf made from khangali, dovgasi, and rice; and our southern regions for their indispensable levangi and our Nakhchivan region for its govorma.

8. Conclusion

Studies show that interest in mountain tourism is growing day by day. Travel in this direction in Europe and America has become even more relevant since the beginning of the 20th century. In our country, the Caucasus and Lesser Caucasus Mountains are "encircled" by mountains in the south. The demographic situation is that there are more large cities in the entire market. This, combined with the bustling city life typical of all megacities, encourages the population to engage in recreational travel and nature tourism, especially to mountainous areas. On weekends and especially during holidays, the city population begins to flow into the regions. A large part of the mountainous areas located in Azerbaijan is rich in historical and cultural sites, ancient settlements, and caves that attract the attention of tourists. Speleotourism, i.e., cave tours, which are very popular in the European region today, can also be implemented in our country. There is a need to expand marketing research in this direction so that both domestic and foreign tourists can get to know these areas.

Thus, from the economic perspective of tourism, the potential opportunities are broad, with natural resources being the three main resource groups. In terms of the second main capital resource, although tourism companies spend money in this direction and earn income, attracting foreign investors or creating joint ventures can motivate further growth in income in this direction. To transform third-generation human resources into human capital in this direction, tourism specialties are taught in Azerbaijan at both bachelor's and master's degrees, and young doctoral students are also conducting scientific research at the doctoral level. Thus, taking into account the demands of the labor market, the Azerbaijani state supports students, both in state higher education institutions and in private higher education institutions (with high scores), where students are provided with education based on state orders.

We believe that, taking into account the reality that the modern urban lifestyle, where innovative technologies are being applied day by day, will increase the scale of urban residents' trips to rural areas, especially mountainous areas, and the expansion of our country's relations with countries around the world, especially friendly and allied countries of Azerbaijan, the mountainous areas, which are geographically located on the border of the Western and Eastern territories, rich in biodiversity and with 9 climate types, and which are eye-catching with their mysterious beauty, can be considered promising opportunities for the development of mountain tourism in mountainous areas where historical, ethnographic, and cultural tourism intersect, as well as nature tourism.

The Karabakh economic region is considered one of the promising development areas of Azerbaijan with its rich natural resources, favorable geographical location, and diverse landscape structure. The economic structure of the region allows for the formation of diversified types of activities. Tourism, which includes health, mountain, and recreational tourism, agriculture, industry, and the construction sector, as well as the mining industry, should be noted among the priority areas in this context. This will allow diversifying and ensuring the sustainable development of the regional economy (MERA).

The region of Karabakh is located in the southwestern part of the Lesser Caucasus mountainous zone and is characterized by great natural diversity. The forest resources of this territory are quite numerous, and their general

size is estimated at about 247 thousand hectares. Part of them belong to economically valuable tree and plant species that provide good potential for the development of the forestry sector, woodworking, and ecotourism.

Among the protected territories, one needs to highlight those created for the protection of natural diversity and ecosystems before the occupation. Of interest in this aspect is the Basitchay State Nature Reserve (Figure 4). The nature reserve is located on both banks of the river of the same name, in the region of Zangilan, with the aim of protecting rare plane trees (*Platanus orientalis*). Moreover, some of these trees are hundreds and even thousands of years old.



Figure 4. The Basitchay state nature reserve.

The reserve is situated on both banks of the Basitchay River in the territory of the Zangilan region with the objective of protecting rare Oriental plane trees (*Platanus orientalis*). Some of them are aged several hundreds or thousands of years and are regarded as an important part of the biodiversity of the country. The fertile soil, together with its flora and fauna elements, has been heavily damaged due to intentional fires and illegal deforestation. The damage to centuries-old Eastern plane trees is considered one of the greatest losses from the perspective of ecology and culture.

It is important to note that the economic revival of Karabakh should not be confined merely to the reconstruction of the country's infrastructure. The contemporary development paradigm should be compatible with ecological recovery and the implementation of the principles of the "green economy." The peculiar mountain landscape and presence of mineral springs facilitate the development of health and mountain tourism. On the other hand, the availability of rich soil resources makes it possible to develop agricultural, including horticultural, winemaking, and cattle raising sectors. Furthermore, the presence of mineral deposits may help to establish a strong industrial sector. Thus, the main principle of the development of Karabakh is the use of natural resources in a rational way, preservation of ecological balance, and socio-economic integration.

Several institutional actions are taken to create management procedures and perform a preliminary inventory of resources in the territories that were released from occupation. The monitoring involved such regions as Zangilan, Jabrayil, Gubadli, Khojavand, and Fuzuli. The primary aim of the mentioned activity is to estimate the present situation with regard to the available natural resources, identify the extent of environmental damage, and create relevant protection mechanisms and effective exploitation plans. It has been proven that the damage to not only natural ecosystems but also tangible and intangible cultural heritage elements, such as cemeteries, historical buildings, and other landmarks, has been made.

Author Contributions

The author was responsible for all aspects of the study, including conceptualization, methodology, data collection and analysis, and manuscript preparation.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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