

Potential of Ecotourism in Uzbekistan: Regional Aspect

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Abstract. The article examines the problems and prospects for the development of ecotourism in the Republic of Uzbekistan, as well as its role in ensuring sustainable socio-economic growth and environmental protection. The study analyzes the potential of various regions of the country for the development of ecotourism taking into account the unique natural conditions, cultural and historical heritage and strategic geographical location. Particular attention is paid to practical measures and recommendations for the development of ecotourism, including issues of attracting investment, improving tourism infrastructure and training qualified personnel. The work emphasizes the importance of ecotourism as a means of reducing anthropogenic impact on nature and increasing the tourist attractiveness of the country. It is concluded that the successful development of ecotourism in Uzbekistan requires an integrated approach aimed at the rational use of natural resources and sustainable development of regions.

Key Words: Ecotourism; Sustainable development; Uzbekistan; Regional potential.

1 Introduction

It should be noted that in recent years, the population growth, the rapid development of agriculture and industry, and the increase in the number of motor vehicles in the Republic of Uzbekistan significantly and negatively impacted the environment. To reduce the consequences of this, it is necessary to implement systematic measures for the rational use of natural resources and their restoration. 20-25% of the factors that negatively affect human health are related to the environment [1, 3]. For example, pollution of atmospheric air and water bodies, soil degradation, quality of food products grown or produced in a polluted environment and other factors hurt human health. Therefore, it is desirable to reduce the anthropogenic impact on the environment as much as possible by adopting complex measures that ensure environmental safety.

One of the promising areas that contribute to reducing anthropogenic impact and preserving ecosystems is the development of ecotourism. Ecotourism, unlike traditional

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types of tourism, contributes not only to the conservation of natural resources, but also supports the socio-economic development of regions. The main goal of ecotourism is to harmonize the interaction of man and nature, as well as to ensure the sustainable use of natural resources. The local population is actively involved in organizing ecotourism activities, which helps to create conditions under which nature conservation becomes economically profitable. Uzbekistan, with its significant natural resources and unique landscapes, has great potential for the development of ecotourism, which opens up new prospects for ensuring the sustainable development of the country's regions.

The potential for tourism development in Uzbekistan, and ecotourism in particular, is significant due to the unique natural conditions, cultural and historical heritage and strategic geographical position of the country. In recent years, there has been an increase in the tourist flow, both domestic and foreign, which creates favorable conditions for the further development of the industry. According to data for 2023, 2.4% of the total number of people entering Uzbekistan (175.7 thousand people) were tourists, which reflects the initial stage of active tourism growth in the country. However, this figure does not exhaust the country's potential, especially in the field of ecotourism, which is becoming increasingly popular both domestically and internationally.

Therefore, the purpose of the study is to analyze the current state and prospects for the development of ecotourism in Uzbekistan, as well as to assess its role in ensuring sustainable socio-economic growth and environmental protection. Particular attention is paid to identifying opportunities for maximum use of the country's natural resources with minimal negative impact on ecosystems. The study also aims to identify practical measures and recommendations for the development of ecotourism in the country, which will not only increase the tourist attractiveness of Uzbekistan, but also make a significant contribution to environmental protection and sustainable development of the regions.

2 Literature Review

The development of ecotourism as an independent tourist destination coincided with the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. But currently, the generally recognized theory and practice of ecotourism is not sufficiently formed. For example, the first founder of the concept of ecotourism is the Mexican ecologist and economist G.Ts. Lasquerain. World scientists studying the economic aspects of ecotourism, as well as Russian scientists Birzhakov and Nikiforov emphasize that the most important thing for tourists in the tourism sector is convenient and systematic means of transport [2].

Buylenko [3] approached ecotourism from a psychological and pedagogical point of view and spoke about the positive effects of ecotourism on the human psyche. Ibn Sina also gave a number of recommendations in medicine that many diseases can be treated amid fresh air and beautiful nature.

Khrabovchenko [4] pointed out that the special devices leading to the mountain gorges in mountainous regions give good economic results. The implementation of these projects in the mountainous regions of our country plays an important role in ensuring the uniqueness of ecotourist routes.

Dmitruk [5] elaborated on the modern concepts of management and marketing in ecological tourism. In Uzbekistan, Khamidov's scientific views gave special importance to the problems and solutions of the management of ecotourism [8].

Kekushev, Sergeev, and Stepanitsky [6] developed unique sociological-psychological and management principles of ecological tourism and were able to put them into practice.

Pivovarov and Shevchuk [7] conducted studies in the direction of ecotourism and proved that, in their opinion, ecotourism should be economically studied and protected even in areas that do not have the status of ecosystem protection. The environment is having a

serious negative impact on the ecosystems without the knowledge of humanity, and in such a situation, when it is studied economically, it is the cause of serious debates by experts. But experts have proven that nature is such a miracle, that together with its self-protection, it can contribute to the development of the tourism industry by paying for itself. They proved that ecological tourism is an effective means of attracting capital to environmental protection.

According to Khamidov, the effect of double success (both environmental health and protection, and economic benefits and efficiency) is defined as a relatively low-cost tourism direction that provides significant environmental and economic benefits [8].

In our opinion, ecotourism is a type of tourism that has an economic opportunity to create several protected areas that do not have the status of ecotourism protection. At a time when mankind is unknowingly hurting the environment, the possibility of preserving their unique natural corners has led to a serious debate among experts. However, protecting the environment and nature can not only "pay for themselves", but also contribute to the development of the local economy through the development of the tourism industry. Experts in the field have proven that ecotourism is an effective means of attracting capital to environmental protection. Today, relatively small countries such as Kenya, Costa Rica, the Middle East and some Arab countries, and some countries on the European continent are generating significant income from ecological tourism. According to analytical data, today the income from ecotourism in the entire world tourism market is 10-14% [9].

3 Analysis and Results

3.1 Measures to support tourism

During the past period of independence, Uzbekistan joined more than 40 conventions and international agreements in this field, which define environmental policy. The strategy of ensuring environmental security of the Republic of Uzbekistan is aimed at protecting the vital interests of the individual, society, and the state in the field of ecology, as defined in the Constitution, namely: creation of the most necessary environmental conditions for the protection of public health; stabilization of the ecological situation, physical development of generations; formation of sustainable development and sustainable ecological situation, healthy lifestyle in the regions; is to ensure high-level scientific and technical development in the priority sectors of the economy.

It is worth noting the importance of state action programs adopted every five years in the country. These documents are aimed at introducing environmental principles of ecological stability and safety, rational use of natural resources, and sustainable development in economic sectors. Funding volumes for these purposes are being significantly increased. It should be noted that 640 million USD were appropriated for the implementation of the program for 2014-2018, and 2 billion USD were allocated for the implementation of the program for 2019-2023 [13].

Another important aspect of the development of ecotourism in the regions of Uzbekistan is that it does not require hotels to provide high-level services to tourists. In this type of tourism, traditional recreation and domestic amenities are secondary. It is enough to place tents and set up campsites in order to enjoy the unique scenery of nature without leaving waste to nature. However, from another point of view, the problem is that ecotourism requires a highly qualified specialist, that is, a special ecologist for each group, a (guide) guide - an employee who ensures the safety of tourists. In addition, it provides that all actions of companies offering ecological species are carried out based on legal requirements for nature protection.

The advantage of sustainable development of ecotourism in Uzbekistan is that trips can be organized almost all year round. Ecotourism can be successfully developed in our country's national parks, forestry farms, intensive eco-parks, as well as mountainous and hilly areas, in specialized institutions. In particular, the Republic of Karakalpakstan has favorable areas and opportunities for the development of ecological tourism.

Also, it is difficult to organize permanent tourist tours to the Aral Sea, but a certain part of the income from this tourism can be spent on raising the standard of living of a certain part of the population of the region, and installing drinking water purification devices for them. 8.4 trillion funds were spent on the development of the island region this year [10-12]. It should not be forgotten that Uzbekistan is located in the middle of Central Asia, at the intersection of transport routes with the possibility of developing ecotourism. However, in practice, due to insufficient attention being paid to the full use of these potentials and opportunities, based on statistical data, the arrival and departure of tourists in the republic is three times less than the capacity to receive tourists. However, in recent years, initial steps have been taken to develop ecological tourism, and trends in the formation of the infrastructure of this sector have begun to be observed. The goal of the work being carried out within the framework of this project is to turn our country into a region with the largest ecotourism areas in the CIS countries. In the region of Fergana Valley, the most promising areas are Yangiurgan, Chust, Kosonsoy and Torakurgan districts [15-21].

The analysis of hotel occupancy rates is an important aspect of assessing the state of the tourism industry and its development potential. According to the data for 2023 presented in Fig. 1, the hotel occupancy rate in different regions of Uzbekistan varies from 14.1% in the Khorezm region to 40% in the Syrdarya region. This indicates that in a number of regions, despite the presence of natural and cultural attractions, the tourism potential is not fully utilized. At the same time, regions with higher hotel occupancy rates, such as the Syrdarya, Jizzakh and Kashkadarya regions, demonstrate more efficient use of tourism resources. These differences highlight the need for further development of tourism infrastructure, especially in regions with low hotel occupancy rates. Particular attention should be paid to the development of ecotourism, which can become an important factor in increasing tourist flow and contributing to sustainable economic growth in less developed regions of the country.

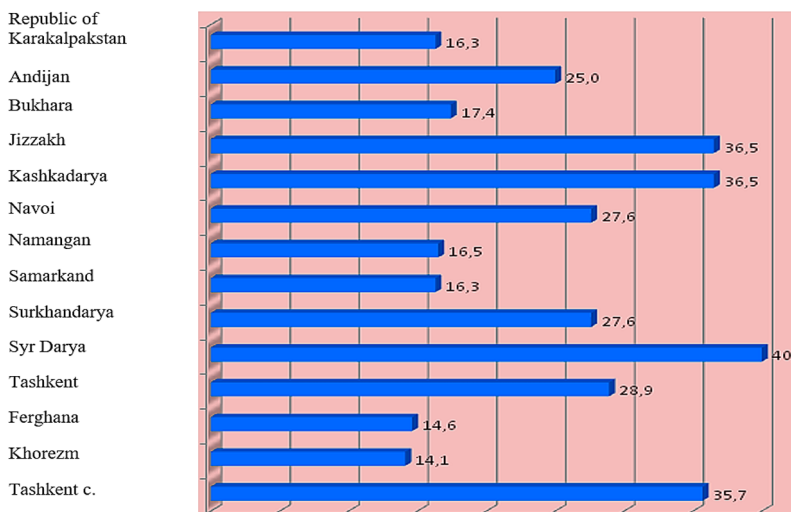


Fig. 1. Coefficient of use of space funds in hotels and similar accommodation facilities by region, in %.

Source: based on the data of the Statistical Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan [14].

3.2 Potential of the regions of Uzbekistan

Fergana Valley has enough opportunities for the development of tourism, especially ecotourism, and has many attractions. Forestry areas can be effectively used as ecotourism facilities. The share of forestry areas in the Fergana Valley region is distributed as follows:

If we consider 100% of the total forest areas in our republic, almost 10% of them correspond to the Fergana Valley region (Table 1).

Table 1. Forest areas of Fergana Valley.

Territory	Number	Share in the interest account	Land area, in hectares
Ferghana	3	8.9	12,297
Andijan	1	1.5	2,029
Namangan	4	89.6	124,006
<i>Total</i>	8	100	138,332

Source: based on the information of the Nature Protection Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan [8].

In particular, Chodak village of Pop district of Namangan region is a beautiful and prosperous place. But until now, domestic tourism has developed well in this place, and there have been some infrastructural problems and difficulties in bringing in foreign tourists. But at the same time, this problem has been solved, that is, the Angren-Pop electrified railway has been commissioned, and in the future, there is an opportunity to further develop the tourism industry in the region.

The railway project, which is the 1st in Central Asia and the 8th in the world, that is, trans-regional transport, was created at the expense of investment appropriation in the amount of 455 million USD.

This facility plays an important role in the socio-economic development of the Fergana Valley and is especially important in the development of tourism in Namangan.

The problem is that there are too many such attractions. Ensuring the continuity of distances to serve foreign tourists causes little inconvenience. We believe that further development of the railway infrastructure in our republic and the formation of a unified national railway system will solve these problems and difficulties in the future.

As for the ecotourism regions of Surkhandarya region, the existing potential is used wisely, and in particular, the creation of a vineyard on 77 hectares of land and an intensive garden on 400 hectares of land in the region in 2023 will serve as an important basis for the development of ecotourism in the region. In particular, in Termiz, Angor, Boysun, and Oltinsoy districts of the region, opportunities and facilities have been created to invite tourists to such remarkable scenic spots, which determines the prospects for the development of ecotourism and horticultural tourism. Also, it will give a good result in expanding the size of agriculture in the regions of our Republic and tourist excursions.

In conclusion, it can be said that the establishment of nature reserves in the Ferghana Valley in terms of the development of ecotourism remains a pending issue. The main reasons for this are the relatively small area of the valley, the high population density, the proximity of industry and transport networks, and the fact that almost the entire area of the valley has been developed. However, in the valley, there are opportunities to create resources of interest to tourists, such as nature reserves, ecological and national parks, and "nature museums". For example, it is possible to create reserves in the mountain-forest area of Pop district, the sandy desert in Central Fergana, in the hilly region, in the foothill plains. In these areas, it is possible not only to protect but also to increase the number of plant species that are decreasing. It should be noted that the Fergana Valley is located among the mountains of Central Asia. There are sanatoriums, rest houses, and tourist bases in picturesque places on several river banks and mountain slopes of the valley.

4 Discussion

To develop ecological tourism in Uzbekistan, develop legislation aimed at the formation of the ecotourism industry, carry out a comprehensive assessment of ecotourism objects and their cadaster, create a complete ecotourism map of the territory of Uzbekistan, reflect the content of rational use of nature and nature protection in ecotourism routes, and train experts in ecotourism and establishing retraining, expanding the ownership forms of ecotourism services and establishing privileges for individuals and legal entities engaged in this activity, supporting them in all aspects in developing projects and business plans, strengthening the material and technical base, creating an information-analytical, fast service base -support, raising the ecological consciousness and culture of the population through ecotourism is appropriate.

If the above-existing potentials and sources are fully used and put into practice, opportunities will arise to create new jobs and collect additional funds in Uzbekistan by establishing services for residents such as recreation, tourist excursions, and the opportunity to further increase the share of the service sector in the country's regional product production. In this context, ecotourism is considered as a tool that contributes to improving not only the environmental situation, but also the economic and social aspects in the regions of its development. Fig. 2 demonstrates that ecotourism has a multifaceted positive impact on society, combining economic, social and environmental benefits.

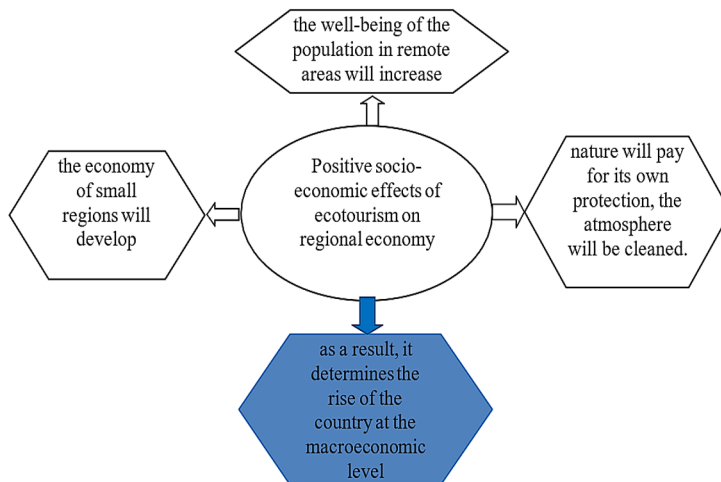


Fig. 2. Socio-economic positive effects of ecotourism on society.

Source: compiled by the authors.

We believe that in the future, state programs for the further development of this industry will be developed, and issues related to the tourism industry can be solved on a large scale. In the rapid development of ecotourism in the country, some problems are waiting to be solved, which can include the following:

- lack of professionals with high environmental literacy working in the tourism business,
- lack of mature and qualified personnel in the field.
- lack of formation of ecotourism development objects on the republican scale;

Organization of high-quality service to tourists is the main task of the system of large tourist companies and travel agencies located in almost all cities of the world. To further develop the tourism sector in the future, improve the tourism infrastructure, and thus

increase the flow of tourists in our country, we make the following proposals to increase the effectiveness of investments in this sector:

- attraction of foreign investments along with local investments to improve tourism services and develop tourism infrastructure
- extensive use of regionally appropriate foreign experiences in tourism development;
- to provide these facilities to entrepreneurs in a preferential way for the establishment of camping, boarding houses, and hostels serving tourists at the level of modern requirements;
- improvement of tourist facilities aimed at attracting foreign investments, setting criteria for attracting investments to these facilities;
- scientific justification of foreign investment efficiency indicators;
- to improve the qualifications of tourism workers, to send them to countries with developed tourism to acquire practical skills and to help them apply them in practice;
- a further increase of domestic and foreign investments attracted to the field of tourism.

5 Conclusion

In the context of rapid growth of tourism and its impact on the environment, the development of ecotourism in Uzbekistan is of particular importance. The study showed that ecotourism not only contributes to the conservation of natural resources, but also plays an important role in the socio-economic development of the country's regions. Uzbekistan has significant potential for the development of ecotourism due to its unique natural conditions and cultural and historical heritage.

However, to successfully implement this potential, a number of problems must be addressed, including insufficient training of personnel, weak infrastructure and insufficient attention to the creation of ecotourism facilities at the national level. An important step towards the development of this sector is to attract investment, both domestic and foreign, as well as to intensify government support through special programs and incentives.

Thus, ecotourism can become not only an instrument for environmental protection, but also an important factor in sustainable socio-economic growth in Uzbekistan. Its development will contribute to an increase in tourist flows, the creation of new jobs and the strengthening of the country's material and technical base. The implementation of the measures proposed in the work will not only increase the tourist attractiveness of Uzbekistan, but also make a significant contribution to environmental protection and sustainable development of regions.

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