

THE IMPACT OF GREEN TOURISM ON THE ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract. The article reflects the actions of the international community, in particular the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), in promoting the development of sustainable tourism. It analyzes the impact of COVID-19 on tourism activities, the importance of COP-29 in environmental protection and combating climate change and the interest of rural residents and local authorities in attracting tourists while preserving natural, anthropogenic and ethnographic resources and diversifying the range of services offered. The article examines the influence of green tourism on a sustainable economy as well as the implementation of entrepreneurship development programs, including rural tourism initiatives. Implementation of state programs for the development of entrepreneurship in rural areas, the interest of local authorities in environmental balance.

Keywords: *Climate change, rural green tourism, sustainable development, social development.*

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1. Introduction

Sustainable development of a country implies the continuous growth of economic indicators. However, the development of heavy industry, the increase in coal extraction and its subsequent use as a primary fuel source have a destructive impact on the environment. The rise in greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere leads to climate change. Economic growth contributes to improved public welfare, which in turn encourages mass travel - now not only to large metropolitan areas, but increasingly to natural environments. Forests, shorelines and mountain landscapes are becoming recreation and entertainment destinations. As a result, there are fewer places left "untouched by human activity". Given the scale of climate change and in order to prevent its escalation, annual United Nations Climate Change Conferences are held.

2. UNWTO and climate change

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a rethinking of the catastrophic state of the environment. Critical situations increase global attention to ecosystem issues. The COP-29 Conference was held in Baku, where a decision was adopted to mobilize at least 300 billion USD annually by developed countries until 2035 to support developing nations. The outcomes of COP-29 serve as a reminder of the importance of solidarity and collective efforts in shaping a sustainable and secure future for the planet. At COP-29, the strategic document known as the Baku Declaration was adopted, defining key directions for international cooperation in combating climate change.

The Organization of Turkic States signed a joint Action Plan on environment and sustainable development. A declaration by the Caspian littoral states aimed at preventing environmental threats related to fluctuations in the Caspian Sea level was also adopted. These initiatives highlighted the importance of regional cooperation. As is evident, countries outside the European Union have also remained engaged in addressing climate challenges. The conference adopted a Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism, integrating the tourism sector into climate policy. More than 50 countries joined the initiative.

For the first time in the history of the UN Climate Conferences, a Tourism Day was held within COP-29 and the first ministerial meeting was devoted to shaping tourism policies in support of national climate objectives, as reported by UN Tourism. At the Baku Conference, leaders from both the public and private sectors acknowledged the significant impact of climate change on tourism and its contribution to greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time, they emphasized the sector's potential to actively support climate adaptation and resilience strategies.

UNWTO adopted “The Glasgow Declaration: A Commitment to a Decade of Climate Action in Tourism”. This declaration sets a clear, coherent, sector-wide message and approach to climate action over the coming decade. More than 900 organizations have signed the Glasgow Declaration with the aim of accelerating climate-action measures in tourism (UNWTO, 2025).

UNWTO (2022) is also implementing the “Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism” program and presents the results of its work across countries on different continents. With the support of the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO), UNWTO developed the Tourism for SDGs (T4SDG) platform. In 2015, governments worldwide adopted the 2030 Agenda, including 17 Sustainable Development Goals aimed at eradicating poverty, protecting the planet and ensuring prosperity for all by 2030 (UNWTO, 2015).

3. Tourism and the green economy

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, air and rail passenger transportation resumed, land borders reopened in most countries and by 2024 the number of international tourists approached pre-pandemic 2019 levels. Under such circumstances, green tourism risks being pushed out of professional focus. Tourism activities account for approximately 8.8% of climate impacts, which requires proactive tourism policies and recovery measures to stimulate the transition toward green business models and value chains, while improving environmental outcomes for destinations and benefiting local economies and communities (Faisal, 2024).

One of the crucial challenges in regional management is ensuring sustainable socio-economic development and active tourism activities can significantly contribute to this goal. Given increasing political pressure to improve environmental performance through effective environmental management strategies, the concept of green tourism becomes highly attractive for travel agencies and tour operators (Faisal, 2024).

Promotion of international environmental awards can play a decisive role in enhancing tourism competitiveness. For example, the “Blue Flag” awarded to beaches for cleanliness and safety is assessed against 30 criteria by independent experts from the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE), headquartered in Denmark. Holders of

this certification must confirm their status annually and such recognition increases tourism inflows.

In 2024, Copenhagen introduced the innovative pilot program CopenPay, aimed at transforming tourist visits into acts of sustainability. Through this initiative, the Danish capital seeks not only to reduce environmental pressures caused by tourists but also to foster a culture of sustainability that reshapes visitor experiences. During specific periods, tourists engaging in eco-friendly activities - such as cycling, using public transport or participating in canal and park clean-ups - may exchange their contributions for rewards such as free meals, museum visits or kayak rentals (Noriega, 2024).

4. Green tourism as a key element of regional sustainable development

The concept of “sustainable development” is closely associated with “sustained economic growth”. This approach implies assessing national sustainable development at macro- and meso-levels in interaction with environmental, political, economic and social factors (Mironova *et al.*, 2016).

Every country has agricultural regions that lag economically behind others, thus requiring economic diversification. In this regard, tourism and recreational potential should be utilized, particularly through rural or green tourism. Both forms are similar, as they involve leisure in natural rural environments. Rural (green) tourism refers to the provision of tourism services in rural areas based on natural-recreational, historical-cultural, social, household, ethnographic and other traditional resources. Tourism development may be achieved by prioritizing the use of regional natural and climatic resources while considering the attractiveness of anthropogenic objects for tourists (Alirzayev & Yusupov, 2019). Rural residents provide hospitality services in their homes, while tourists may voluntarily participate in various rural activities (crop production, harvesting, livestock care).

Although technological progress has partially reduced resource dependency, it does not guarantee full environmental sustainability. This is because technology reduces human-generated waste only at high entropy levels and manufactured capital cannot fully substitute natural capital (Gasimli *et al.*, 2022).

The primary objective of green tourism is to ensure the preservation and integrity of the maximum number of natural resources and cultural values, which allows green tourism to be justifiably associated with sustainable development (Lagodiienko *et al.*, 2022). Simply being in nature does not make tourism sustainable; sustainability arises from the proactive efforts of rural hosts who simultaneously provide tourism services and improve the environment. Engaging tourists in voluntary clean-up activities, tree-planting, water supply installation and similar initiatives is an essential component of sustainable tourism.

The recreational tourism system also has cross-sectoral impacts, with one of its key positive outcomes being the creation of a favorable ecological balance. The absence of heavy industry in the southern region of Azerbaijan creates favorable conditions for sports, ecological and health tourism. The region is known for its health and wellness facilities and has strong development potential. Rural tourism is actively evolving in this area (Alirzayev & Yusupov, 2019).

Rural green tourism contributes to livelihoods and regional attractiveness as follows:

- **for rural residents:** an additional source of income, enhanced social status, increased employment;
- **for tourists:** clean air, connection with nature, social enrichment, authentic non-hotel cuisine, adrenaline experiences, exposure to local traditions and rural life.

Residents engaged in tourism are naturally interested in maintaining a green and sustainable economy. To ensure a continuous tourist inflow, they prioritize environmental cleanliness, safety, preservation of greenery and service diversification. Tourists may participate in local culinary events, traditional celebrations or rural sports activities (Ahipasaoglu *et al.*, 2006). Reducing car use and switching to alternative transport can significantly decrease CO₂ emissions. Local municipalities are also deeply invested in environmental protection and public safety, organizing community efforts to preserve the environment and improve infrastructure for the benefit of future generations. Sustainable tourism broadens rural residents' horizons, improves quality of life and preserves cultural identity and traditions. It is a key component of regional sustainable economic development. Increasing tourist flows stimulate development of transportation networks, communications, water and energy supply systems and other infrastructure.

One of the key positive effects of green tourism is the preservation of natural ecosystems. By managing tourist flows, implementing environmental standards and implementing conservation measures, it is possible to reduce soil degradation, deforestation, water pollution and the destruction of biological landscapes. Global experience shows that the implementation of green tourism practices contributes to the conservation of biodiversity, increases the value of protected areas and reduces the carbon footprint of the tourism industry (Scott *et al.*, 2012).

5. Conclusions

Climate change is one of the primary challenges facing the global economy. Preventing and reducing harmful atmospheric emissions has become a key focus of international discourse. The tourism sector is no exception: UNWTO actively promotes initiatives aimed at reducing environmental impacts. Sustainable regional development is closely linked to tourism activities, with rural green tourism playing a particularly important role. Green tourism is gaining popularity amid rapidly changing environmental conditions. A sustainable green economy ensures safety, preservation of natural and cultural assets and increased tourist interest in environmentally responsible tourism.

Tour operators organizing tours to forested areas and mountain villages positively impacts the relationship between the city and the countryside. Tourists visiting mountain villages remote from main roads revitalizes the local population and contributes to the restoration and preservation of ethnocultural traditions.

Overall, green tourism has a predominantly positive impact on the environment, contributing to the conservation of natural resources, strengthening environmental stability and fostering a culture of sustainable development. However, it requires particular adherence to the principles of rational use of natural resources and effective management of tourism activities.

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