

ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN UZBEKISTAN: OPPORTUNITIES, BENEFITS, AND CHALLENGES

Haydarova Maftuna
Student, Department of Tourism and Hospitality, group TH-426
“Silk Road” International University of Tourism and Cultural Heritage
E-mail: maftunahaydarova@gmail.com

Annotatsiya: O‘zbekiston madaniy merosi va tarixi bilan mashhur, biroq shu bilan birga ekoturizm uchun katta imkoniyatlarga ega mamlakatlardan biridir. Ekoturizm — bu o‘zlashtirilmagan tabiiy hududlarga borish, bokira tabiat hamda mahalliy aholining madaniyati bilan tanishishdir. Ushbu maqolada ilmiy manbalar, rasmiy hujjatlar va boshqa e’lon qilingan ma’lumotlar tahlili asosida mamlakatdagi ekoturizm holati o‘rganiladi. Tahlil shuni ko‘rsatdiki, ekoturizm qishloq joylarda ish o‘rinlari yaratishi va mahalliy iqtisodiyot o‘sishini rag‘batlantirishi mumkin. Shunga qaramay, O‘zbekistonda uning rivojlanishiga infratuzilmaning yetishmasligi, bilim darajasining pastligi, tashkilotlar o‘rtasidagi hamkorlikning zaifligi hamda mahalliy kichik korxonalarni qo‘llab-quvvatlash uchun moliyaviy resurslarning yetishmasligi kabi muammolar to‘sqinlik qilmoqda. Maqolada, shuningdek, O‘zbekistondagi ekoturizm haqidagi beshta noto‘g‘ri tasavvur ochib beriladi va uning rivojlanishi bo‘yicha umumiy xulosa keltiriladi.
Kalit so‘zlar: ekoturizm; O‘zbekiston; barqaror rivojlanish; muhofaza etiladigan hududlar; mahalliy hamjamiyatlar; barqaror turizm; jamoaviy turizm; biologik xilma-xillik; qishloqdagi bandlik; turizm infratuzilmasi
Abstract: Uzbekistan is famous for its cultural heritage and history, but it is also among the countries with significant ecotourism potential. Ecotourism means visiting undeveloped natural areas and experiencing virgin nature as well as the indigenous culture of local people. This paper examines the state of ecotourism in the country through an analysis of scientific sources, official documents and other published information. The analysis shows that ecotourism has clear advantages: it can create jobs in rural areas and stimulate the growth of the local economy. Despite this, its development in Uzbekistan is held back by a range of problems, such as a lack of infrastructure, a low level of knowledge about the subject, weak collaboration between organizations and a lack of financial resources to support local small businesses. The paper also reveals five misconceptions about ecotourism in Uzbekistan and presents an overall conclusion on its development.
Keywords: ecotourism; Uzbekistan; sustainable development; protected territories; local communities; sustainable tourism; community-based tourism; biodiversity; rural employment; tourism infrastructure
Абстрактный: Узбекистан известен своим культурным наследием и историей, однако страна обладает и значительным потенциалом для развития экотуризма. Экотуризм — это посещение неосвоенных природных территорий, знакомство с первозданной природой и культурой коренного населения. В данной работе рассматривается состояние экотуризма в стране на основе анализа научных источников, официальных документов и другой опубликованной информации. Анализ показал, что экотуризм имеет ряд преимуществ: он может создавать рабочие места в сельской местности и стимулировать развитие местной экономики. Вместе с тем развитие экотуризма в Узбекистане сдерживается рядом проблем: недостаточной инфраструктурой, низким уровнем осведомлённости, слабым сотрудничеством между организациями и нехваткой финансовых ресурсов для поддержки местных малых предприятий. В работе также раскрываются пять заблуждений об экотуризме в Узбекистане и формулируется общий вывод о его развитии.
Ключевые слова: экотуризм; Узбекистан; устойчивое развитие; охраняемые территории; местные сообщества; устойчивый туризм; общинный туризм; биоразнообразие; сельская занятость; туристская инфраструктура

Introduction (Kirish/Введение).

Ecotourism is the practice of travelling to less-developed natural regions. Mass tourism, however, can be detrimental: large crowds create pollution, degrade pathways and affect animals negatively. For this reason, several nations are now concentrating on forms of tourism that present less risk for the environment, and ecotourism is one of them.

The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as responsible travel to natural environments in a way that preserves the environment, improves the lives of local people and includes an educational component [1]. The international community recognized ecotourism in 2002, when the United Nations proclaimed that year the International Year of Ecotourism. Ecotourism is regarded as a segment of sustainable tourism.

In Uzbekistan, tourism has always been associated with cities such as Bukhara, Samarkand and Khiva. Yet the country’s natural beauty includes the Nurata and Chatkal mountains, Lake Aydar, the Kyzylkum desert and the Aral Sea region, which is why scholars believe that Uzbekistan possesses enormous natural potential [2]. At the same time, existing studies usually address economic aspects, infrastructure or conservation separately, and very few follow the same location over time.

This study therefore has three objectives: (1) to describe the main natural resources and ecotourism areas of Uzbekistan; (2) to examine the opportunities and benefits that ecotourism provides; and (3) to identify the main challenges standing in its way and to offer practical recommendations. The paper begins with a literature review and the research question, and then describes the methodology, the data analysis and the results, followed by a discussion, practical implications, limitations and conclusions.

Literature review (Mavzuga oid adabiyotlar tahlili/Обзор литературы).

Overview of ecotourism

The idea of ecotourism emerged as a reaction to the harmful impact of mass tourism on nature. According to the International Ecotourism Society, it is responsible travel to natural areas that helps preserve their surroundings and makes a positive contribution to the life of local people [1]. Ecotourism thus consists of three components: conservation, benefits to the local population and education. A trip to a mountain or a lake cannot be called ecotourism merely because it takes place in a protected area; it becomes ecotourism only if it conserves the area, helps the residents and teaches visitors something.

This strict definition creates challenges for research. Researchers must take ecological, social and educational conditions into account rather than only the number of visitors and the revenue a destination receives. Studies that report only income or visitor numbers therefore give an incomplete picture of ecotourism.

Ecotourism and sustainable tourism

Sustainable tourism takes into account the economic, social and environmental effects of tourism in the present and the future [4, 5]. It applies to every kind of tourism: mass, urban, business and nature tourism. Ecotourism is only one element of this wider concept, limited to natural destinations, nature conservation and nature education. In other words, sustainable tourism can be applied to a beach resort as well as to a national park, while ecotourism is restricted to a specific type of destination.

Many authors note that ecotourism has no widely accepted definition, which allows some companies to use the word “eco” merely as a marketing term. This ambiguity prevents travellers from distinguishing truly responsible tours from ordinary tours with eco-slogans, and it undermines the credibility of the whole sector. For a country where ecotourism is still in its infancy, standards are therefore not a technical issue but a precondition for credibility.

Previous studies on Uzbekistan

Karimova and co-authors analysed 15 ecotourism companies in Bukhara region for the period from 2018 to 2024 and complemented the financial analysis with interviews with 12 experts [6]. The total income of these companies rose from US$565,000 in 2018 to US$1.35 million in 2024, an increase of 139%. The authors stress, however, that this growth does not show that spending on sustainable development caused it. The study’s contribution is that financial data are supported by expert opinions; its limitation is a small sample drawn from one region only.

Yuldasheva examined sustainable tourism and biodiversity protection in Uzbekistan and concluded that the number of tourists should be limited, local people should be involved, and tourism revenues should be managed carefully so that they serve the preservation of the environment [7].

Overall, the existing evidence is limited. Few studies have measured the same location over a period of time, so it is hard to judge whether the changes are lasting. This paper therefore combines several approaches and discusses the benefits and the drawbacks reported in the available literature.

Research question

The study is guided by one main research question: What are the main opportunities, benefits and challenges for developing ecotourism in Uzbekistan? Because the study is qualitative and descriptive, no statistical hypotheses were tested. Instead, the main question was divided into three sub-questions:

1. RQ1. What natural resources and areas does Uzbekistan have for ecotourism?
2. RQ2. What economic, social, cultural and environmental benefits does ecotourism offer?
3. RQ3. What challenges limit the development of ecotourism, and how can they be addressed?

Methods (Tadqiqotni amalga oshirishda foydalanilgan usullar/ Методы).

This paper is qualitative and descriptive. The results are based on secondary data: no surveys, observations or interviews were conducted, and the paper analyses information already published by researchers and organizations. The aim is to gather information on ecotourism in Uzbekistan and to check the dependability of the findings.

The sources were collected through an internet search in October 2026 using key phrases such as “ecotourism Uzbekistan” and “ecotourism challenges”. Sources that offered only statistics, or data without information about where the data came from, were disregarded. The selected sources include scientific articles, official documents of state bodies and materials of international organizations (see References).

Data analysis

Every source was examined in terms of three aspects: how it defines ecotourism, which benefits it describes, and which difficulties it mentions in relation to Uzbekistan. The examined sources were then compared and grouped according to shared ideas, and these groups became the themes of the Analysis section: natural resources and tourist spots, economic growth and job creation, social, cultural and environmental benefits, government support, challenges and misconceptions. No statistical tests were applied. The only quantitative data, the income figures for Bukhara region [6], are reported as published; the 139% growth rate is consistent with the two reported totals ($565,000 and $1.35 million). Wherever the evidence was weak, cautious wording was used.

Analysis and rezults (Tahlil va natijalarlar /Анализ и результаты).

Ecotourism as a part of sustainable tourism

The literature regards ecotourism as part of a bigger concept. Sustainable tourism should lie at the base of every hotel, airline and travel agency, while ecotourism is a form of travel that involves nature and its protected territories. The distinction matters in practice, because without one single definition of “eco” the term can be abused (Table 1).

Table 1.

Comparative analysis of sustainable tourism and ecotourism

Criterion	Sustainable tourism	Ecotourism
Area of investigation	All kinds of tourism	One kind of tourism
Main zones	Cities, resorts, villages, nature	Natural and protected areas
Main idea	A balance among money, people and nature	To protect nature, to educate tourists and to assist local inhabitants
Who can follow it	Every hotel, airline and tourism company	Eco-lodges, guides and managers of parks

Natural resources and tourist spots

Uzbekistan has very diverse landscapes within one country: high mountains, forests, rivers, lakes and deserts. Tourists can therefore climb mountains, walk through the desert, or stay on a farm or with a family in a village. The main zones described in the literature are shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

Main ecotourism areas of Uzbekistan named in the sources

Zone	Main natural features	Possible activities
Ugam-Chatkal National Park	Mountains, forests, rivers	Hiking and trekking
Nurata Nature Reserve and Lake Aydarkul	Mountains, desert, lake	Homestays and bird observation
Kyzylkum desert	Desert landscapes	Desert tours and camping
Aral Sea region	A fragile area after an ecological crisis	Educational and research tourism
Zaamin National Park	Mountain forests	Walking, relaxing in nature
Kitab State Geological Reserve	Distinctive geological sites	Study and nature visits

Economic growth and job creation

Ecotourism enterprises in Bukhara region showed income growth of 139% from 2018 to 2024 [6]. These numbers come from a small sample, however, and they cannot show that sustainable investment caused the growth. Ecotourism can also create jobs in rural areas, which supports the local economy.

Social, cultural and environmental benefits

Ecotourism helps to reduce poverty in villages and creates jobs for women and young people. In some regions the traditional village way of life is presented to guests in a respectful manner, which helps keep local culture intact. Part of the income from tourists is used to maintain protected natural areas, and ecotourism teaches both residents and tourists to respect nature and to value it [2].

Government support and international attention

The State Committee for Nature Protection has developed a concept for the development of ecotourism that covers organizational, legislative, educational and social elements [14]. The literature on protected areas indicates that government programmes and cooperation among different parties create suitable conditions for development, and it points to the importance of community-based ecotourism, green infrastructure and new technology in the future [2]. The topic also receives international attention: in August 2026 Tashkent hosted an international summit on ecotourism and sustainable tourism [3].

Challenges

The sources describe several groups of problems that slow down ecotourism development (Table 3).

Table 3.

Main challenges for ecotourism development in Uzbekistan

Challenge	What the sources indicate
Infrastructure	Roads, facilities and accommodation near protected sites are insufficient; local actors in the Aral Sea region named infrastructure among the most crucial problems
Knowledge	A low level of knowledge about ecotourism among tourists, the population and tourism companies
Cooperation	Weak collaboration between ministries, park authorities, travel companies and local communities
Financial resources	Access to micro-credit is limited, although small loans are vital for villagers to start a homestay or a small business
Regulation and labelling	Unclear regulations and vague limits for visitors lead to litter and overcrowding at popular places; some companies use the word “eco” only for marketing
Climate impact	Long trips to natural sights add to climate problems and can make the trip harmful

Five misconceptions about ecotourism in Uzbekistan

1. Uzbekistan only has historic cities. In fact, it also has mountains, lakes and deserts that have not been fully utilized.

2. Any trip to nature with an eco-sign is ecotourism. In fact, a trip counts as ecotourism only if it conserves nature, helps local people and educates visitors.

3. An increase in income proves that sustainability spending is worthwhile. The authors from Bukhara emphasize that their positive results should not be read as evidence of cause and effect.

4. Ecotourism is always safe. If the number of tourists is not restricted, well-known attractions can be destroyed, and long travel distances increase tourism’s carbon footprint.

5. Natural wealth automatically brings tourists. If infrastructure, readiness to cooperate and knowledge are weak, even the richest location will not attract visitors.

Discussion

The analysis shows that Uzbekistan has both the natural resources and the first policy steps needed for ecotourism, which answers RQ1 and RQ2. At the same time, the findings call for caution in several respects.

First, the growth of 139% in Bukhara region is encouraging, but it comes from 15 companies in one region, and its authors do not claim that sustainability spending caused it [6]. Income alone is also a weak indicator, because, according to the strict definition, a trip is ecotourism only if conservation, local benefits and education are all present [1]. Second, the lack of a commonly accepted definition makes the “eco” label unreliable, so certification and clear rules are a precondition for the credibility of the sector rather than an optional extra [5]. Third, natural wealth is not enough: weak infrastructure, limited cooperation and low awareness can keep even the most attractive places from developing (misconception 5). Finally, ecotourism contains a paradox: travelling long distances to nature adds to the climate impact that conservation is meant to reduce [10], which is why limiting visitor numbers and promoting shorter regional trips matter.

Practical implications

Based on the findings, four groups of recommendations can be made for the state, tourism companies and local communities (RQ3).

Community engagement. Encourage community-based ecotourism such as local lodging and guiding, and give villagers training and access to small loans so that more of the money stays in their own villages.

Infrastructure development. Improve roads, facilities and eco-friendly accommodation near protected sites, and promote local and regional trips that are shorter and leave a smaller ecological footprint.

Regulation. Set clear limits and rules for tourists, and establish certification systems so that “eco” does not become a simple product label.

Education and cooperation. Carry out education campaigns on nature preservation for tourists, the population and tourism companies, and develop cooperation among ministries, park authorities, travel companies and local communities.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. Since only published materials were used, the current position of tourists and local villages cannot be determined with certainty, and the paper reflects the views of specialists rather than the feelings of tourists and local people. Some sources are short or contain inadequate data, and some information about Uzbekistan is limited or outdated. Several statistics show correlation but not causation, and some were obtained through secondary sources, so each figure should be double-checked against the original source. Future research could interview families in Chatkal, Nurata or the Aral Sea area, survey tourists and local inhabitants, and compare the protected natural areas of Uzbekistan in terms of their environmental and socioeconomic results over time.

Conclusion and Recommendations (Xulosa va takliflar/Выводы и предложения).

This paper examined the opportunities, benefits and challenges of ecotourism development in Uzbekistan and reached three main conclusions. First, Uzbekistan is rich in mountains, lakes, deserts and national parks, and the literature suggests that ecotourism can contribute to nature protection, create jobs and raise awareness among local people. Second, the development of ecotourism is limited by poor infrastructure, lack of knowledge, uncoordinated cooperation and limited financing for local companies. Third, the government has started to work on a legal framework for ecotourism development. Realizing the country’s potential will depend on community engagement, clear regulation and certification, and cooperation between all stakeholders.

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