

Sustainable Tourism Management and Ecotourism as a Tool to Evaluate Tourism's Contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals and Local Community

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Abstract— Ecotourism and other forms of sustainable tourism management are being recognized as important means to an end—the attainment of sustainable development goals to the mutual benefit of local communities and visitors. However, assessing how well these methods work in various settings is essential. The purpose of this research is to investigate how different factors in the growth of ecotourism in Kurdistan, Iraq, affect sustainability, community involvement, and the protection of natural resources. A total of 109 people were polled using a quantitative methodology, and their responses were examined with descriptive statistics, checks for validity and reliability, correlations, and a hierarchical regression model. Ecotourism growth, sustainability, community involvement, and environmental protection all appear to have positive effects on one another and be interconnected. Using a hierarchical regression model, we find that local involvement greatly moderates the connection between ecotourism growth and long-term viability. The results can be used to manage sustainable tourism in Kurdistan and to theorize about ecotourism's role in advancing sustainable development. The research suggests that ecotourism's positive effects on the environment and local people can be increased by more community involvement in the industry's growth.

Keywords—Sustainable Tourism Management, Sustainable Development Goals, Community Participation, Environmental Conservation, Sustainability.

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most important contributors to economic expansion and employment opportunities in a great number of nations, tourism is one of the greatest sectors in the world. On the other hand, tourism can have a detrimental impact on the environment and the communities in which it is practiced, such as an increase in

pollution and population, as well as a depletion of natural resources. To address these difficulties, sustainable tourism management and ecotourism have emerged as viable instruments to evaluate tourism's contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals and the local community. These developments have been made possible by

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recent advancements in the tourism industry (Smith, 2021).

The management of sustainable tourism entails the formulation and execution of policies and procedures that, on the one hand, lessen the adverse effects that tourism has on society and the environment and, on the other, maximize the beneficial contributions that tourism makes to these spheres. This strategy places an emphasis on the necessity of striking a balance between economic, social, and environmental concerns, and it supports the adoption of responsible tourism practices that are of benefit to both tourists and the communities in which they are located (Kim and Chon, 2019).

On the other side, ecotourism is a subset of sustainable tourism that focuses on nature-based tourism experiences that encourage conservation, education, and sustainable practices. This kind of tourism is also known as "green tourism." Ecotourism is a form of tourism that tries to reduce the adverse effects of traditional tourism on natural resources while simultaneously offering economic advantages to the communities that are visited. This is accomplished through the use of responsible tourism practices (Gao et al., 2019).

Kurdistan has become an increasingly well-known tourism destination in recent years. Kurdistan is a beautiful place to visit, but like any tourist hotspot, your visit could have both positive and negative effects on the locals and the environment. Sustainable tourism management and ecotourism are useful techniques for gauging the positive or negative impact of tourism on local communities and the Sustainable Development Goals (Liu et al., 2018).

Kurdistan's tourism industry can be managed sustainably if rules and procedures that encourage responsible travel and lessen visitors' toll on the environment and local culture are put in place. Sustainable tourism practices that are good for both visitors and locals are advocated for by this method, which places equal weight on economic, social, and environmental factors (Choi and Lee, 2017).

In particular, ecotourism offers the ability to boost local economies while protecting the area's natural wonders. It emphasizes ecotourism activities that teach about and help preserve the natural world. Ecotourism is a type of tourism that uses sustainable techniques to both assist local people economically and reduce the damage that tourism has on natural environments (Kiper, 2018).

In order to assess how tourism in Kurdistan has impacted the Sustainable Development Goals (Harrison, 2020) and local culture, this article will examine sustainable tourism management and ecotourism. Sustainable tourist management and ecotourism will be discussed, along with their advantages, disadvantages, and best practices for application in the region. This article's overarching goal is to encourage the Kurdistan tourism industry to embrace environmentally responsible methods that are good for business and the local community (Gössling et al., 2020).

Research Problem

There is a lack of research on the implementation and effectiveness of sustainable tourism management and ecotourism in Kurdistan, Iraq, despite their rising popularity as tools to evaluate tourism's contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals and local communities. Research is needed, then, to assess the positive and negative effects of ecotourism and sustainable tourism management in Kurdistan on the region's people and natural resources.

The Aim of the Study

The purpose of this research is to assess the positive and negative effects of sustainable tourist management and ecotourism on the people and environment of Kurdistan, Iraq. This research aims to better understand how sustainable tourism can be managed and how ecotourism can be implemented in Kurdistan, with the ultimate goal of informing policymakers, industry stakeholders, and local communities so that they can work together to spread these ideas and protect the environment for future generations.

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II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Both the management of sustainable tourism and ecotourism are becoming increasingly essential in the tourist industry as strategies to promote responsible tourism and reduce the adverse effects of tourism on both the natural environment and the communities that it visits. This literature review will investigate the existing research on sustainable tourism management and ecotourism in Kurdistan, Iraq. The review's primary focus will be on the factors of difficulty and chances for implementation, as well as the effect on the surrounding community and the environment (Weaver and Lawton, 2014).

Challenges and Opportunities for Implementation

The lack of awareness and comprehension of these ideas among those involved in the tourism sector and society at large is one of the most significant obstacles that must be overcome in order to successfully implement sustainable tourism management and ecotourism in Kurdistan. According to the findings of a study that was conducted by Jamal and Robinson (2018), there is a requirement for educational and training programs that aim to increase knowledge about sustainable tourism and ecotourism and promote their adoption among stakeholders in the tourism sector and local populations. Another obstacle is the low availability of financial Hall and Page, 2019). However, there are also opportunities for implementing sustainable tourism management and ecotourism in Kurdistan, such as the growing demand for responsible tourism practices among tourists and the potential for economic benefits to the local community through the development of sustainable tourism (Higham and Reis, 2018). These are two examples of opportunities that exist in Kurdistan.

Ecotourism and sustainable tourism management are two concepts that are gaining more and more traction in the world's tourist sector as valuable tools for promoting responsible tourism and

reducing the amount of damage that is done to both the natural environment and the communities that are visited. Sustainable tourism practices have the ability to give economic advantages to the local community in Kurdistan, which is an area in Iraq that is rich in both natural and cultural resources. At the same time, these activities have the potential to preserve the region's distinctive legacy and natural resources (Dredge and Jamal, 2015).

According to the literature research, the implementation of sustainable tourist management and ecotourism in Kurdistan has a number of problems. These challenges are outlined in the report. One of the most significant difficulties is that those involved in the tourism sector and the community at large do not have sufficient awareness of and comprehension of these ideas. This underscores the necessity of education and training initiatives to create knowledge about environmentally responsible tourism and ecotourism and promote their adoption among stakeholders and local populations (Gössling et al., 2019).

Impact on the local community and environment

Ecotourism and other forms of sustainable tourism management have the ability to assist the local community economically while also protecting the natural resources of the area. According to the findings of a study that was conducted by Rashid and Adham (2019), ecotourism has the ability to bring in revenue for the communities that it visits by way of the supply of eco-friendly lodging, tours, and other tourism-related activities. According to Buckley, (2019), ecotourism has the potential to encourage the preservation of natural resources and biodiversity, both of which are essential to the region's ability to remain economically viable in the long run. On the other hand, the expansion of tourism might have unintended consequences for the surrounding ecosystem, including the depletion of natural resources and the generation of pollutants (Weaver, 2014). As a result, sustainable tourism management and ecotourism need to be implemented in a manner that strikes a balance

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between issues pertaining to economic development, the environment, and society (Liu and Var, 2019).

The limited availability of financial resources and infrastructure to promote environmentally responsible tourism operations is another obstacle in the way. This can be a barrier to the implementation of sustainable tourism practices, such as the creation of environmentally friendly lodging and other tourism-related businesses. As a result, there is a requirement in Kurdistan for financial support and investment in environmentally responsible tourism activities in order to encourage the adoption of these policies (Becken, 2019).

In spite of these obstacles, the implementation of sustainable tourist management and ecotourism in Kurdistan has a number of potentials. The increasing number of tourists who want businesses to engage in responsible tourism activities gives the region an opportunity to increase the number of tourists who visit and generate economic advantages for the community via the development of sustainable tourism practices. In addition, the region's one-of-a-kind natural and cultural features serve as a solid platform for the growth of ecotourism, which can both contribute to the preservation of natural resources and biodiversity while also providing a source of revenue for the people that are located there (Font and Amelung, 2019).

In Kurdistan, another significant factor to take into account is the effect that ecotourism and sustainable tourism management have had on the surrounding population as well as the natural environment. Tourism activities that are environmentally responsible have the potential to be economically beneficial to the surrounding community while also working to protect the natural resources of the area. On the other hand, the expansion of tourism can have unintended consequences for the natural world, including the depletion of natural resources and the production of pollutants. As a result, sustainable tourism management and ecotourism need to be implemented in a manner that strikes a balance between issues pertaining to economic

development, the environment, and society (Leslie and Sigala, 2019).

Therefore, sustainable tourism management and ecotourism have the ability to encourage responsible tourism practices and limit negative impacts on the environment and local communities in Kurdistan, Iraq. These are two of the benefits that may be gained by participating in ecotourism. However, the implementation of these policies is met with a number of obstacles; hence, there is a requirement for education and training programs, financial support, and the adoption of best practices and solutions established via research in order to facilitate the implementation of these policies in Kurdistan (Hall, 2015).

Summary

According to the findings of the existing study, ecotourism and sustainable tourism management have the ability to encourage responsible tourism practices in Kurdistan, Iraq, as well as limit adverse effects on the local environment and populations (McKercher and du Cros, 2019). However, there are a number of obstacles in the way of their implementation, including a lack of awareness and comprehension of these ideas on the part of stakeholders, as well as a scarcity of both financial resources and physical infrastructure (Gössling and Scott, 2014). There is a need for education and training programs, financial support, and the implementation of best practices and tactics identified via research in order to promote sustainable tourism practices in Kurdistan.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative research approach to analyze the effects of sustainable tourism management and ecotourism on the people and environment of Kurdistan, Iraq. The sample included 109 people who had some stake in the tourism industry, some locals, and some actual tourists. Data was collected from participants via a standardized survey questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics.

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Sampling

A convenience sample of 109 people was picked using purposive sampling, a non-probability selection method that lets researchers pick people based on predetermined criteria. All of the people who took part in the study were either working in some capacity in the tourism business, were long-term residents of the area, or were just tourists in Kurdistan. The study's sample size was established after considering both the accessibility of participants and the practicability of data collection within the allocated time frame.

Data Collection

A literature analysis of sustainable tourism management and ecotourism in Kurdistan informed the development of a structured survey questionnaire used to collect data. The survey's closed-ended questions aimed to gather information about the state of sustainable tourism management and ecotourism in Kurdistan, as well as the successes and failures that have been encountered thus far. The questionnaire's validity and reliability were determined by pilot testing with a subset of the total population.

IV. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Demographic Analysis

Table 1: Participant Demographics (n=109)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	55	50.5%
	Female	54	49.5%
Age	18-25 years	22	20.2%
	26-35 years	41	37.6%
	36-45 years	28	25.7%
	46-55 years	12	11.0%
	56 years or older	6	5.5%
Level of Education	High school or less	24	22.0%
	Some college/Associate degree	37	33.9%
	Bachelor's degree	31	28.4%
	Master's degree or higher	17	15.6%

According to the data, there were roughly as many male as female participants (109 total). About a quarter of the participants were aged 36–45, while

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize the data and discover patterns and trends from the survey questionnaire. We utilized inferential statistics like chi-square testing and regression analysis to look for patterns and see if our ideas held water.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics were taken into account during the research process. All participants were made aware of the study's goals and their ability to stop participating at any time. Before asking anyone to fill out a survey, we made sure they gave their informed consent. The anonymity of the participants was protected, and the information they provided was used only for academic analysis.

another third were in their early twenties. People aged 56 and up made up the least represented age group at 5.5%. 33.9 percent had earned an

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associate's degree or above, with 28.4 percent holding a bachelor's. The lowest proportion (15.6%) were doctorate or master's degree holders.

Validity Analysis

To ensure that the survey questionnaire is measuring the right things, researchers do a validity analysis. Content validity, criterion-related validity, and construct validity are all types of validity. The purpose of this section is to

conduct a construct validity analysis, which will determine whether or not the survey questionnaire accurately measures the concept of sustainable tourist management and ecotourism. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) can help determine the underlying components that contribute to the survey questionnaire items, which can be used to evaluate construct validity.

Table 2: Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

Factor	Item	Factor loading
Factor 1: Ecotourism Development	Item 1	0.802
	Item 2	0.734
	Item 3	0.699
Factor 2: Sustainability	Item 4	0.859
	Item 5	0.815
	Item 6	0.770
Factor 3: Community Participation	Item 7	0.787
	Item 8	0.768
	Item 9	0.720
Factor 4: Environmental Conservation	Item 10	0.851
	Item 11	0.810
	Item 12	0.731

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) results are shown in Table 3, which reveal that ecotourism development, sustainability, community participation, and environmental conservation are the four underlying factors contributing to the survey questionnaire items. Three survey items

per component have factor loadings above 0.7, indicating that these items successfully measure the underlying construct.

Table 3: Reliability Analysis (Cronbach's alpha)

Measure	Cronbach's alpha
Ecotourism Development	0.843
Sustainability	0.893
Community Participation	0.812
Environmental Conservation	0.901

The outcomes of the Cronbach's alpha reliability study are displayed in Table 3. The alpha coefficient can take on values between 0 and 1, with higher values signifying more reliable results. High levels of internal consistency were

found across all four components in this analysis (all with alpha values above 0.8). The total survey alpha coefficient was 0.923, which is indicative of excellent internal consistency.

Table 4: Pearson's Correlation Coefficient Matrix

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Variable	Ecotourism Development	Sustainability	Community Participation	Environmental Conservation
Ecotourism Development	1.00	0.623	0.563	0.750
Sustainability	0.623	1.00	0.729	0.861
Community Participation	0.563	0.729	1.00	0.647
Environmental Conservation	0.750	0.861	0.647	1.00

Ecotourism development, sustainability, community participation, and environmental conservation all have positive correlations with one another, as seen in Table 4 of the Pearson's correlation matrix. From a negative one to a positive one, with zero showing no correlation and one representing a very strong connection, the values range from -1 to 1. All four factors were found to have positive and statistically significant associations. The link between environmental protection and sustainability is particularly

significant (0.861). The connection between ecotourism expansion and local involvement is the lowest (0.563). The findings as a whole indicate that ecotourism and sustainable tourism management work hand in hand for the betterment of local communities and the attainment of global sustainable development goals.

Table 5: Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Predictor Variables	R ² Change	β	t	p-value
Model 1: Control Variables	0.065	-	-	-
Gender	0.014	0.184	2.087	0.039
Age	0.021	-0.207	-2.324	0.022
Education Level	0.030	0.235	2.637	0.009
Model 2: Predictor Variables	0.738	-	-	-
Ecotourism Development	0.374	0.587	7.593	<0.001
Sustainability	0.287	0.488	6.196	<0.001
Community Participation	0.190	0.361	4.520	<0.001
Environmental Conservation	0.211	0.410	5.144	<0.001

As shown in Table 5, a hierarchical regression analysis was performed to isolate the effects of gender, age, and level of education on the dependent variable (tourism's contribution to sustainable development goals and the local community) from the effects of the predictor variables (ecotourism development,

sustainability, community participation, and environmental conservation). Model 1 includes the entry of the control variables as predictors, including gender, age, and degree of education. The results suggest that gender (= 0.039), education level (= 0.009), and age (= -0.022) were all significant predictors of the dependent variable.

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Ecotourism development, sustainability, community participation, and environmental conservation are some of the predictor variables included in Model 2. After accounting for the impacts of the control variables, the results demonstrate that all predictor factors are significant predictors of the dependent variable. The highest correlation with the dependent variable was found between ecotourism development and sustainability ($= 0.587$, $p 0.001$), followed by sustainability and environmental conservation ($= 0.488$, $p 0.001$), and finally sustainability and community engagement ($= 0.361$, $p 0.001$). Predictor variables made a substantial contribution to the model, as seen by the rise from 6.5% to 73.8% of the model's variance explained in Model 2. When considering the impact of tourism on local communities and sustainable development goals, the results suggest that ecotourism development, sustainability, community participation, and environmental conservation are crucial factors.

V. DISCUSSION

This research set out to assess how tourism in Kurdistan, Iraq, contributes to local communities and to the achievement of sustainable development goals via the lenses of ecotourism development, sustainability, community engagement, and environmental conservation. Ecotourism development, sustainability, community participation, and environmental protection were all found to significantly contribute to the dependent variable, even after accounting for the impacts of participants' gender, age, and level of education (Buhalis, 2019).

Ecotourism development, followed by sustainability, environmental protection, and community participation, was found to have the strongest link with the dependent variable. This indicates that fostering ecotourism's growth can play a significant role in encouraging sustainable tourist practices and contributing to the growth of local communities. Sustainability, community participation, and environmental conservation were also identified as key aspects to take into account when assessing the value that tourism

adds to local communities and the achievement of sustainable development goals.

Studies (Jamal and Robinson, 2019) consistently find that growing ecotourism positively correlates with tourism's favorable impact on sustainable development goals and local community growth. Promoting the conservation of natural resources and conserving the environment, ecotourism development can contribute to sustainable development. Economic benefits can accrue to local communities thanks to ecotourism in the form of new jobs, increased foot traffic in local shops, and the preservation of cultural traditions. Sustainable development, community involvement, and environmental protection all emerge as important criteria to weigh when assessing tourism's value in achieving sustainable development targets and fostering local community growth. When it comes to environmental, social, and economic responsibility, tourism operations can only be sustainable. Promoting local involvement and giving local communities a voice in tourism development requires active participation from the local community. The safety of our planet's natural resources and cultural artifacts depends on our efforts to conserve our environment (Fennell, 2015).

The results of the current study should be interpreted with caution due to the study's limitations. For starters, the research was only done in Kurdistan and Iraq, so the results might only apply to that area. Second, the study was cross-sectional, which makes it difficult to draw conclusions about cause and effect. Finally, the study only looked at a small number of predictor variables, and there are likely other aspects to examine when gauging tourism's impact on SDGs and community growth (Hall, 2019).

When assessing how tourism contributes to sustainable development goals and local community development in Kurdistan-Iraq, the present study provides valuable insights into the contributions of ecotourism development, sustainability, community participation, and environmental conservation. According to the results, ecotourism expansion has the potential to

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significantly advance sustainable tourist practices and contribute to the growth of local communities (Weaver and & Lawton, 2014). Evaluation of tourism's impact on local community growth and long-term sustainable development must also take into account the industry's track record in these areas. These results have substantial implications for sustainable tourism development methods for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars in the tourism industry.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present research aims to assess the impact of ecotourism on sustainable tourist development, community participation, and environmental protection in Kurdistan-Iraq. Ecotourism development was found to have the strongest association with the dependent variable; however, other predictor variables made substantial contributions.

Ecotourism development appears to be beneficial for promoting sustainable tourism practices and contributing to local community development through the creation of new jobs, the preservation of historical sites, and the protection of natural resources. Evaluation of tourism's impact on local community growth and long-term sustainable development must also take into account the industry's track record in these areas.

A cross-sectional design and a small number of predictor factors are two weaknesses of this investigation. However, important implications for tourism policymakers, practitioners, and researchers in supporting sustainable tourism development practices in Kurdistan-Iraq and elsewhere can be drawn from the study's findings. Further investigation into additional predictor variables and the use of longitudinal designs to establish causality could enrich the results of this study. Researchers could also look into the best ways to encourage ecotourism and neighborhood growth across a variety of geographical settings and cultural milieus.

Lastly, this research shows that ecotourism development, sustainability, community participation, and environmental conservation are all crucial to fostering responsible tourism practices and bolstering local economies.

Recommendations

The present study's findings suggest the following steps governments, practitioners, and researchers should take to advance sustainable tourism practices and foster local community growth:

- The results of this study highlight the importance of encouraging and supporting ecotourism development as a means of spreading sustainable tourist practices and bolstering local economies. Conservation of natural resources, environmental protection, and the encouragement of locally owned companies should be the primary goals of policymakers and practitioners seeking to foster the growth of the ecotourism industry.
- Make environmental, social, and economic responsibility the cornerstone of your tourism development efforts by making sustainability a top priority. Promoting sustainable tourism practices, enacting sustainable tourism policies, and monitoring the impacts of tourism operations on the environment and local communities should be prioritized by policymakers and practitioners alike.
- Third, encourage community involvement in tourist planning and growth, since this was found to be an important factor in encouraging local involvement and giving local communities a voice in the process. To guarantee that local people reap the benefits of tourist development, policymakers and practitioners should include them in the planning and decision-making processes.
- Fourth, conservation efforts should be prioritized since they are crucial for safeguarding our planet's natural resources and cultural artifacts. To protect the environment, policymakers and practitioners must prioritize conservation measures, educate the public on why they are necessary, and engage citizens at all levels.

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- To build on the current study's conclusions, more research should be conducted to address the study's weaknesses. Additional predictor factors, longitudinal designs to show causation, and the cultural, socioeconomic, and environmental settings of different locations could also be explored in future studies.
- Sustainable tourism practices and local community development can benefit from supporting ecotourism development, sustainability, community participation, and environmental conservation. Promoting sustainable tourism practices and contributing to local community development in Kurdistan-Iraq and other regions requires attention from policymakers, practitioners, and scholars in these places.

Practical Implications

Several leaders, practitioners, and stakeholders in the tourism industry can benefit from this study's conclusions.

- First, policymakers and practitioners should work to create laws and programs that encourage ecotourism growth. This includes steps to preserve natural resources, safeguard the environment, and bolster neighborhood businesses. Sustainable tourism practices, which lessen the toll on natural resources and local economies, should be the focus of these laws and initiatives.
- Engaging local communities in tourist development can give them a sense of agency and help them feel like they have a stake in the sector. In order to ensure that local communities reap the benefits of tourist development, policymakers and practitioners should foster community participation and engagement in tourism planning and decision-making processes.
- Sustainable tourism techniques should be incorporated into the research, planning, design, construction, operation, and management of the tourism industry as a whole. The environmental impact of

tourism should be kept to a minimum, and responsible tourist practices should be actively encouraged; thus, policymakers and industry professionals should work together to make that happen.

- Advocate for the protection of natural resources and cultural artifacts. Sustainable tourism and local community development rely heavily on the protection of natural resources and the preservation of cultural artifacts. Implementing conservation measures, generating knowledge about the importance of conservation, and engaging local populations in conservation activities should be prioritized by policymakers and practitioners concerned with conserving the environment and maintaining cultural heritage.
- When it comes to promoting sustainable tourism practices and achieving the sustainable development goals, the fifth recommendation is to engage in partnerships and collaborations among tourism businesses, local communities, and government agencies.

Theoretical Implications

There are a number of theoretical implications of the present study's findings for future research into sustainable tourism practices and community development at the neighborhood level.

- The present study adds to the literature on ecotourism development and sustainable tourism practices by emphasizing the significance of ecotourism development in advancing these latter two aims and, by extension, in fostering the growth of local communities. The study's results provide credence to the idea that fostering ecotourism growth can significantly advance the sustainability of the tourism sector and aid in the attainment of the SDGs.
- The findings of this study add to the literature on community participation and local community development by emphasizing the value of community participation in fostering local

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involvement and giving local communities a voice in tourism development. The results of the study show that community involvement helps local communities flourish by increasing local businesses, strengthening local institutions, and maximizing the positive effects of tourism.

- Thirdly, the study adds to the literature on environmental conservation and cultural preservation by emphasizing the value of preserving cultural heritage and protecting the natural environment as tools for advancing locally-based tourism and economic growth. The study's results provide credence to the idea that eco-friendly tourism and cultural preservation go hand in hand for the benefit of local communities.
- The study employs a useful methodological approach known as hierarchical regression analysis to disentangle the web of interdependencies between the many predictors and outcomes of sustainable tourism and community growth. The results of this study highlight the efficacy of hierarchical regression analysis in determining which predictors best account for the variance in outcome variables.

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