Assessing dynamics of ecotourism using multi-methods analysis

Abstract

Purpose: Ecotourism promotes sustainable and responsible travel and tours. It preserves nature and sustains and promotes the environment. The study focused on assessing the dynamics of ecotourism and its impacts on socio-economic development. Methodology: The study is based on a multi-method approach to exploring trends, themes, and influential contributions in ecotourism through a multi-method analysis. First, it applied a systematic literature review (SRL) based on predefined criteria. SRL helped to explore the themes and trends from the Literature, which were later verified through structured interview findings. The interviews were conducted with professionals following the snowball sampling technique to further explore the phenomenon of interest. Findings: The study found that community involvement, environmental conservation, and training and education in ecotourism discourse significantly impact social and economic development in the context of ecotourism. Furthermore, the study explored the critical challenges of ecotourism and proposed a model based on SLR and interview findings for ecotourism development. Originality: The findings provide valuable insights for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers seeking to understand and promote sustainable tourism practices. The contextual and theoretical synthesis contributed to the body of knowledge and practices and demanded collaboration, cooperation, and coordination to enhance ecotourism.

1. Introduction

Ecotourism has gained the interest of researchers and practitioners. It emphasizes more nature-based experiences, responsible travel, and tours. It prioritizes environmental sustainability, conservation, and regeneration through active community engagement, train- ing, and awareness (Arif et al., 2022; Baloch et al., 2023). Globally, governments, organizations, groups, and individuals are investing in ecotourism for multiple reasons, which include but are not limited to promoting biodiversity and economic growth, environmental protection, climate change, and reducing the degradation of the natural environment or habitats (Zhou et al., 2021; Zielinski et al., 2020b).

Unlike traditional forms of tourism, which often result in environmental degradation and cultural modification, ecotourism seeks balance among these elements. It provides alternative livelihood resources for the communities for social and economic development (Hunt et al., 2015). It reduces dependence on environmentally harmful resources like logging and mining. Moreover, ecotourism carries an appreciation of nature and cultural diversity and leads to increased conservation awareness and support for the protected areas (Weaver, 2002). It creates new employment opportunities for the local community, which brings social, emotional, psychological, and economic benefits to the communities (Hussain, 2022; Lasso & Dahles, 2023).

The increasing interest in ecotourism is driven by biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, and climate change. Bellato et al. (2023) and Hafezi et al. (2023) claim that traditional tourism negatively affects natural resources and ecosystems. Moreover, traditional tourism causes cultural erosion and leads to a loss of authenticity in local practices and traditions (Fons, Fierro, & Patiño, 2011; Paul & Roy, 2023). In the same

way, due to more dependency on the tour industry, equitable access to resources and their associated social and economic benefits in traditional tourism may lead to social and economic disparities (Sethy & Senapati, 2023).

Besides these, from a social perspective, there is a need to engage and empower the community to promote equitable benefit distribution besides bringing balanced economic growth with environmental protection (Insani et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). Additionally, researchers and practitioners propose strategic planning for destination development with government and local support for transparency and accountability. This may help develop a harmonious relationship between humans and the natural environment (Jaya et al., 2024; Sethy & Senapati, 2023). In the same way, Baloch et al. (2023), Das and Chatterjee (2023), and many other researchers recommend ecotourism, explore its underlying themes and patterns of ecotourism, and gain insights into its impacts on society. Additionally, traditional tourism is creating differences that are leading to unequal distribution of benefits, causing social, emotional, and psychological disparities among local communities (Bellato et al., 2023; Dolezal & Novelli, 2022; Zhang et al., 2024; Zielinski et al., 2020a, 2020b).

Based on these gaps and recommendations, the study identifies and addresses strategies and provides potential solutions through providing a regulatory framework and community empowerment. Likewise, previous studies have identified a need for comprehensive review studies to integrate socioeconomic benefits, environmental conservation, and cultural authenticity in ecotourism to balance development and conservation in eco- tourism practices. Therefore, the study focuses on exploring the dynamics of ecotourism and its impacts on promoting equal socio-economic development and preserving cultural authenticity and heritage besides the environment. Thus, the main query of the research is 'What are the potential impacts on socio-economic development?'. Accordingly, the focus of the study was to investigate the different aspects of ecotourism and its impact on socio-economic development.

The paper is structured as follows: The first part provides an introduction, research question, and methodology. Based on the study's objective, it was qualitative and multi-methods. The first part contains a comprehensive literature review through SLR followed by structured interviews. The last section provides synthesis, discussion, and recommendations for future studies.

2. Literature Review

Ecotourism is responsible tourism in natural regions. It aims to protect, conserve, preserve, maintain, sustain, and promote environmental well-being through local communities (Arif et al., 2022; Dolezal & Novelli, 2022). Its central premise is the mitigation of the adverse effects of traditional tourism on the environment. Similarly, it seeks to foster destination and cultural aspects besides enriching community and visitors' experiences (Chrastina et al., 2020; Zielinski et al., 2020a, 2020b). Additionally, it aims to enhance economic gains, creation of alternative livelihood opportunities, empowerment of the local community, create awareness and sensitivity regarding environmental sustainability, preservation, and conservation, and reduce biodiversity losses through active involvement of locals in planning, management, decision-making processes (Dedeke, 2017; Wang et al., 2021).

Ecotourism has its roots in ecological sciences, which talk about cultural sensitivity, sustainability, biodiversity conservation and sustainment, regenerative processes, naturalism, futurism, and environmentalism (Arif et al., 2022; Björk, 2000; Dolezal & Novelli, 2022). It aims to provide visitors with a responsible tour of nature, and the visitors should

contribute to both social and economic development besides recreation. Moreover, ecotourism encompasses social activism and engagement to promote natural resources and beauty through local communities (Fennell, 2001; Wardle et al., 2021). Moreover, public well-being is another primary concern of ecotourism. Thus, it seeks to minimize wastage and maximize the well-being of local communities (Dragomir & Mazilu, 2021; Huang et al., 2023). Additionally, it emphasizes wildlife conservation, nature walks, and cultural exchange. All these elements are integrated into ecotourism in a manner that respects the interest of the culture and indigenous individuals and systems (Lindsey et al., 2005; Tisdell & Wilson, 2001).

2.1. Historical evolution of ecotourism: concepts and definitions

This section provides a transformative ecotourism journey from nature-based travel to the sustainable tourism industry. Ecotourism emerged in response to traditional tourism. Traditional tourism harms nature and human lives (Che, 2006; Khanra et al., 2021; Sahahiri et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2023). It causes environmental, cultural, social, and economic disruption. Similarly, loss of cultural authenticity and infrastructural strains remain high. In certain seasons, it causes overcrowding and unemployment as the season ends. Subsequently, environmental and cultural sustainability and maintain- ability were at risk (Diamantis, 1999; Donohoe & Needham, 2006; Khanra et al., 2021). Due to these facts, ecotourism emerged as a way out, focusing on minimizing the nega- tive impacts of ecological footprints and increasing environmental awareness. Further- more, ecotourism believes in the active social engagement of the community to protect biodiversity and sustain nurture (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017; Sparks et al., 2022)

Due to these practices, the definition becomes broader. Ecotourism adopts active social engagement, respects social and cultural values and norms, and distributes equi- table economic benefits (Koure et al., 2023; Wardle et al., 2021). Ecotourism emphasizes naturalism and environmentalism and balances sociocultural integrity, economic prosperity, and environmental conservation (Che, 2006; Huang et al., 2023; Khanra et al., 2021; Samal & Dash, 2023).

Currently, ecotourism has become a multitude of constructs. The increasing concern over biodiversity losses and environmental degradation has pushed the need for ecotour- ism practices to maintain and sustain environmental resources and social integrity besides holistic economic development (Bellato et al., 2023; Wezel & Jauneau, 2011). This diversification of the construct and perspective calls for ongoing dialogue among practitioners, researchers, and business professionals to assess opportunities and chal- lenges and collaboratively develop a plan to comprehend and implement them (Harish- naika et al., 2023; Western, 1993).

In the same way, the rise of the environmental movement and advocacy for environ- mental awareness has also increased awareness regarding responsible travel behaviors and introduced ethical tourism practices (Hsu et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2023). Further- more, changing consumer's preferences for meaningful and authentic travel experiences fueled the demand for ecotourism. It prioritizes immersion in natural environments, cul- tural exchange, and meaningful engagement with local communities (Koure et al., 2023; Machnik, 2021). This relationship among sociocultural, economic, and environmental factors has boosted ecotourism from niche markets to reshaping and introducing con- temporary ecotourism practices worldwide (Paul & Roy, 2023).

2.2. Key themes and trends in ecotourism research

As mentioned in the historical evaluation and definition section, ecotourism has become a composite construct. It carries different themes and perspectives. Biodiversity conservation is the central theme of ecotourism to protect, conserve, and preserve natural systems and wildlife habitats (Junaid et al., 2021; Sethy & Senapati, 2023). It also calls for avoiding human-nature conflicts and, in the same way, mitigating human-wildlife conflict. This led to wellness-focused ecotourism practices and experiences, which emphasize relaxation, rejuvenation, mindfulness, accommodation, and connection with nature activities (Huang et al., 2023; Loy & Spence, 2020). Moreover, community-based tourism has emerged as a prominent theme of ecotourism. It engages the local community in ecotourism and ensures equitable sharing of shared economic resources (Neger, 2022; Paul & Roy, 2023). Moreover, integrating and implementing technology is another emerging trend in ecotourism. Technology is used for geospatial mapping and virtual tours through different software packages. It enhances visitor experiences, facilitates environmental monitoring, and promotes education and awareness about ecotourism destinations (Li et al., 2024; Mileti et al., 2022; Zhang & Deng, 2024).

Furthermore, environmental stewardship, sociocultural integrity, and economic prosperity are the emerging themes of Ecotourism (Groulx et al., 2019; Hajkowicz & Collins, 2009). Research explores that implementing ecotourism can bring eco-certification schemes and green infrastructure development and lead to responsible visitor behaviors (Font, 2002; Weaver, 2002). Similarly, social engagement and empowerment elevate social equity, improve cultural preservation, and reduce poverty. These practices promote volunteer tourism and ecovillages and promote potential sustainability potential and community resilience (Hsu et al., 2020; Wardle et al., 2021).

2.3. Critical issues and challenges in ecotourism

Despite the potential benefits of Ecotourism, Ecotourism is confronted with specific challenges, issues, and shortcomings. Therefore, careful consideration and a proactive approach toward its management are needed (Coria & Calfucura, 2012; Wondirad, 2020). Among others, one concern is overdevelopment, which may badly affect the natural habitats in ecosystems. The increased visitor influx and rapid infrastructure development pressure fragile ecosystems (Fennell, 2001; Wondirad, 2020). It may cause habitat fragmentation and losses, disturbance to wildlife, pollution, and threats to biodiversity conservation efforts.

In the same way, over-tourism is causing overcrowding and degradation of natural and cultural resources, bringing serious concerns to ecotourism management and evaluation (Farinha et al., 2021; Chen & Teng, 2016; Streimikiene et al., 2021). Therefore, strategic efforts are needed for effective zoning and regulation, as well as robust visitor management strategies to bring balance to ecosystem protection. These strategies will also enhance visitor experiences and inculcate sustainable behaviors (Arif et al., 2022; Han, 2021; Sharpley, 2020).

Similarly, cultural and ecosystem erosion and modification of the traditional norms can be another issue that needs to be addressed. Cultural homogenization may occur due to an increased influx of visitors (Dragomir & Mazilu, 2021). This may disempower the local community, perpetuate stereotypes and misconceptions about Indigenous people, and may affect cultural authenticity (Jaya et al., 2024). Likewise, unequal social and economic benefits distribution may bring social, psychological, emotional, and dismay among community members. These all require a holistic approach to prioritize community engagement, empower the locals, and preserve cultural sensitivity (Junaid et al., 2021).

One more current issue is that after COVID-19, travel patterns and behaviors have changed. It disrupted travels, threatened visitors' confidence, and threatened the livelihood of the ecotourism-dependent communities (Dolezal & Novelli, 2022; Hosseini et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2023). Health and safety issues, travel restrictions, and economic uncertainty led to the cancellation and postponement of the trips, which is causing significant financial losses to both local communities and the tourism industry. High vulnerabilities of the ecotourism destination have reduced its capacity for external shocks (Han, 2021). Hence, innovative and proactive approaches are needed to ensure its resilience and community well-being to face global challenges (Fennell, 2001; Harishnaika et al., 2023).

The SLR links the fundamental and equivalent key concepts of ecotourism, like sustainable tourism, responsible tourism, and community-based tourism. These all holistically emphasize environmental sustainability, community engagement, and cultural preservation – similarly, natural resource preservation, cultural authenticity, and preservation and how they promote environmental sustainability. Likewise, the study provides strategic approaches and directions for attaining the ecotourism goals and objectives through participatory planning, stakeholder collaboration, and sustainable infrastructure development.

2.4. Theoretical perspectives of the study

2.4.1. Sustainable tourism theory (STT)

Many theories can be fitted in the context of ecotourism, and they contribute significantly. However, in this section, more arching theories are discussed in detail, as well as their synthesis with application. Among them, the STT works as a normative frame- work. It calls for a balance between economic growth and the protection of the environ- ment and demands the sociocultural integration of ecotourism development (Hafezi et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2021). This theory recommends adopting all practices that promote naturalism, futurism, and environmentalism regarding tourism development. It advocates for the local community's active social engagement to protect and promote Ecotourism (Björk, 2000; Cater, 1993; Lee et al., 2021).

Moreover, the theory recognizes the interconnectedness of social, economic, and ecological aspects in the planning and development of ecotourism. STT focuses on the triple-bottom-line achievement of Ecotourism to mitigate adverse environmental impacts by incorporating equity, responsibility, and conservation principles, bolster sociocultural sensitivity and authenticity, and promote economic prosperity among tourism destinations (Dolezal & Novelli, 2022; Hasana et al., 2022; Horng et al., 2015; Ocampo et al., 2018). According to research, destinations with sustainable tourism principles exhibit better environmental resilience, develop stronger communities, and bring cohesion among them. At the same time, sustainable ecotourism promotes visitor satisfaction, which leads to sustainable development and strategic success in the tourism industry (Grilli et al., 2021; Wezel & Jauneau, 2011).

Moreover, SST calls for partnership and collaboration among all stakeholders, which can be individuals, travel and tour agents, groups, organizations, government, local communities, and visitors, to address the complex sustainability challenges more feasibly (Dedeke, 2017; Hafezi et al., 2023). This participation in tourism planning and management empowers stakeholders and sustains cultural diversity with equitable distribution of benefits (Wang et al., 2021). Moreover, dialogue, cooperation, and coordination are developed through active engagement in decision-making processes, strengthening governance structures, enhancing accountability, and developing social capital in tourism

destinations (Batabyal, 2016; Tseng et al., 2018). Furthermore, SST highlights creating awareness regarding sustainable environmental practices, which develops capacity and fosters a culture of sustainability among stakeholders. Through environmental literacy, positive behaviors regarding ethical consumption, responsible behaviors, and collective responsibility and stewardship can be inculcated, promoting cultural heritage and advancing sustainable development goals globally (Han, 2021; Tauro et al., 2021).

2.4.2. *Community-based tourism (CBT)*

CBT provides a cornerstone in ecotourism. It advocates for the active participation of the local community in ecotourism planning, development, and management processes (Cáceres-Feria et al., 2021; Dolezal & Novelli, 2022). CBT empowers the community financially, economically, socially, psychologically, and culturally, besides advocating for sustainable ecotourism practices and minimizing its negative impacts (Koure et al., 2023; Zielinski et al., 2020a, 2020b). It onboards local communities not only for processes but also for their roles and opinions in decision-making processes. CBT aims to equally distribute all kinds of benefits from tourism sources to enhance the well-being and livelihood of the communities (Hafezi et al., 2023; Lonn et al., 2018). Previous research proclaims that CBT initiatives have often increased community pride and ownership in planning and developing tourism destinations. Similarly, CBT believes in promoting cultural authenticity and developing technical labor by promoting and developing Indigenous (Tacit) knowledge (Fiorello & Bo, 2012; Kibria et al., 2021).

Moreover, from a sustainability perspective, CBT advocates for socio-economic development and environmental conservation and balances them for their optimum benefits. Through local engagement, environmental and cultural degradation can be overcome. Furthermore, CBT calls for diversifying income sources and livelihood (Phelan et al., 2020; Sakata & Prideaux, 2013). This leads to a reduction in dependencies on sole economic drivers, leading to social and economic development. Studies on ecotourism indicate that ecotourism benefits can be achieved in the destination, where locals are motivated to protect their natural, cultural, and environmental rights (Batabyal, 2016; Cáceres-Feria et al., 2021). In a nutshell, CBT offers a holistic and participatory approach to tourism development, which leads to social stability, environmental sustainability, and sociocultural preservation.

2.4.3. *Destination management theories (DMT)*

DMT is a blend of theories. These theories strategically focus on tourism destinations. It considers market demands, stakeholder collaboration, infrastructure development, and destination branding. It postulates that effective destination planning, management, and development catches and attracts visitors and maximizes tourism benefits (Cox et al., 2014; Haid et al., 2021). Through a systematic and coordinated approach to destination planning and development, DMT enhances competitiveness and attractiveness besides maintaining environmental and cultural norms and values (Ávila-Robinson & Wakabayashi, 2018; Kim et al., 2017). Moreover, DMT postulates that well-management destination strategies, well-defined organizational and management structures, and integrated planning processes capitalize on ecotourism opportunities and address its challenges and other risks in the most viable way (Bellato et al., 2023; Coban & Yildiz, 2019).

Moreover, DMT recognizes community involvement and empowerment in destination design, planning, and development. Critical stakeholder engagement fosters a

sense of ownership, belonging, and aspirations (Adeyinka-Ojo et al., 2014). Moreover, DMT believes in creating tourism experiences that benefit both the host community and the visitors. This collaboration enhances sustainability and contributes to destinations' socio-economic development and cultural preservation (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017; Coban & Yildiz, 2019). Moreover, DTM attempts to balance the well-being of the destination residents and tourism development, which leads to inclusive and resilient tourism development (Dolezal & Novelli, 2022; Streimikiene et al., 2021).

Another aspect of the DMT is destination governance. It provides a governance framework that prioritizes stakeholder participation, collaboration, mutual compatibility, and decision-making (Chen & Phou, 2013; Chon, 1992; Trauer & Ryan, 2005). In the same way, destination competitiveness theory differentiation and competitiveness of the ecotourism destinations (Hankinson, 2007; Pike, 2005). Likewise, destination image and brand theory seek nature-based experiences, sustainability, biodiversity preservation, and responsive tour and travel experiences (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017).

Moreover, image theory advocates for cultural authenticity, environmental quality, and sustainability (Hartman, 2023; Marzano & Scott, 2009; Pechlaner et al., 2012). The synthesis of the theories is given in Table 1.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a multi-methods approach to comprehensively comprehend the composite construct of ecotourism. In the first stage, the study adopted SLR to explore and assess the different aspects of ecotourism. SRL is considered a method to synthesize the existing research on a particular issue. It provides a comprehensive and up-to-date overview of the specific issue. SLR is applied when a study needs to systematically analyze trends, patterns, and approaches in certain subjects and contribute to the body of knowledge through the identification of trends and patterns (Mengist et al., 2020; Visentin et al., 2020). For this, the study used the Scopus database. The keywords used were 'ecotourism', 'sustainability', and 'ecotourism and sustainability'. Moreover, the study defined specific criteria for the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the study, which are listed below.

3.1. Inclusion criteria

1. The study included relevant information and studies based on the research objectives and questions.
2. The study included peer-reviewed journal articles, proceedings, conference material, published books, thesis, and dissertations.
3. The publication language was considered only English.
4. The date was kept open to include all potential studies.
5. Both qualitative and quantitative studies were considered for inclusion.

Table 1. Thematic synthesis of the theories.

Theory	Key Points	References
Sustainable Tourism Theory (STT)	• Balancing Economic Growth, Environmental Protection, and Sociocultural Integrity • Advocacy for a Triple Bottom Line of Sustainability • Stakeholder Collaboration and Engagement • Education and Awareness • Positive Outcomes of Sustainable Tourism Initiatives	Tsaur et al. (2006), Walker and Pages (2014), Wang et al. (2021), Hafezi et al. (2023), Lee et al. (2021), Cater (1993), Björk (2000), Horng et al. (2015), Dolezal and Novelli (2022), Ocampo et al. (2018), Hasana et al. (2022), Grilli et al. (2021), Wezel and Jauneau (2011), Tseng et al. (2018), Batabyal (2016), Tauro et al. (2021), Han (2021).
Community-based Tourism (CBT)	• Active Community Involvement in Tourism Planning • Empowerment of Local Communities • Collaborative Decision-Making and Resource Management • Promotion of Cultural Authenticity and Sociocultural Sustainability • Enhanced Sustainability through CBT Principles	Cáceres-Feria et al. (2021), Dolezal and Novelli (2022), Koure et al. (2023), Zielinski (2020a), (2020b), Fiorello and Bo (2012), Kibria et al. (2021), Phelan et al. (2020), Sakata and Prideaux (2013), Batabyal (2016), Cáceres-Feria et al. (2021).
Destination Management Theory (DMT)	• Crucial Role of Effective Destination Management • Integrated Planning Processes for Destination Competitiveness • Facilitation of Sustainable Tourism Development	Haid et al. (2021), Cox et al. (2014), Kim et al. (2017), Ávila-Robinson and Wakabayashi (2018), Coban and Yildiz (2019), Bellato et al. (2023), Adeyinka-Ojo et al. (2014), Coban and Yildiz (2019), Streimikiene et al. (2021), Dolezal and Novelli (2022).

3.2. Exclusion criteria

1. Studies that needed relevant data and information and were not aligned with the search scope and objectives were excluded from the study.
2. Documents with no proper peer-reviewed process were also excluded from the study.
3. Studies not in the English language were also excluded from the study.
4. Duplicated and redundant studies were also excluded.
5. Non-published data and material were also excluded from the study.

The rest of the processes are listed in the PRISMA flow diagram given in Figure 1.
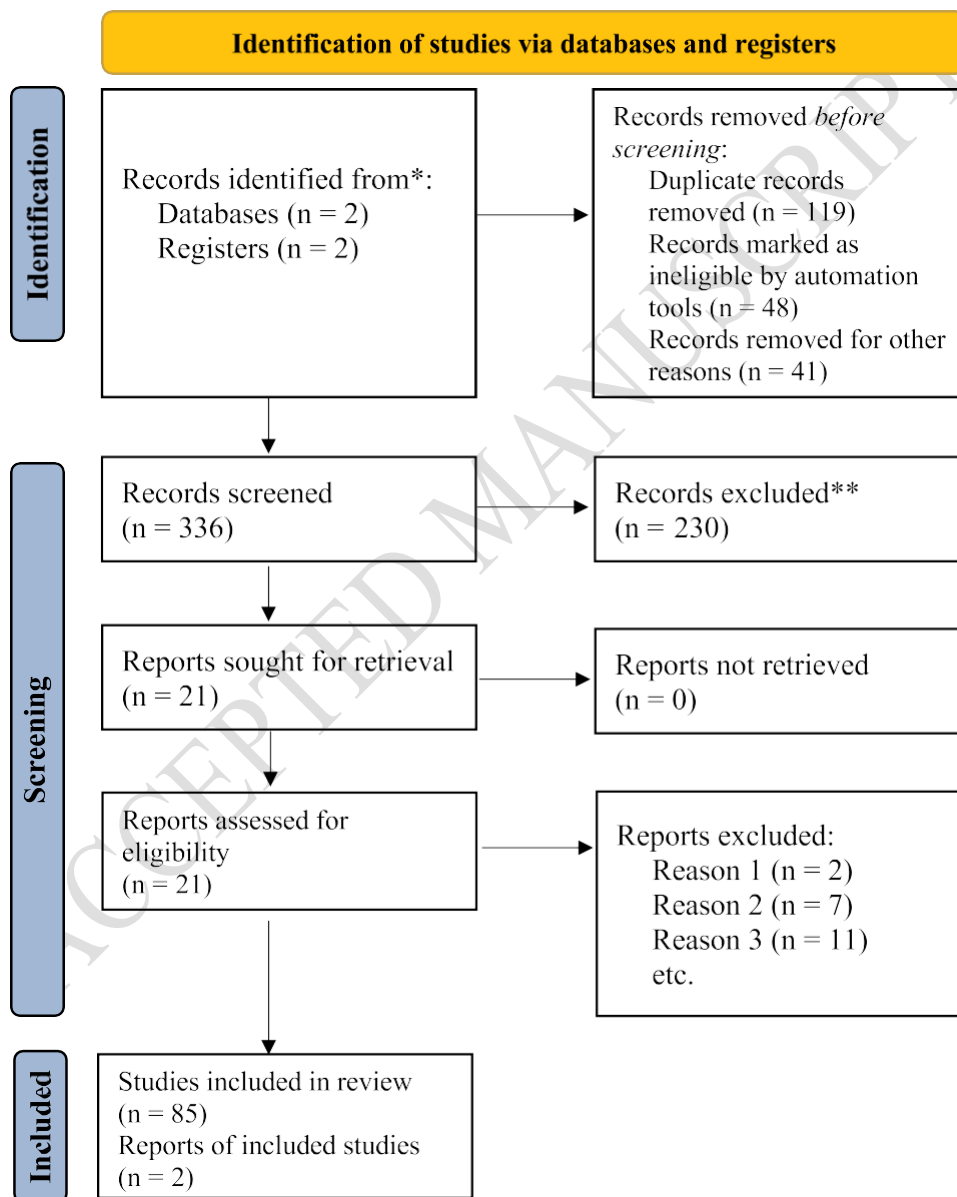

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram for the study.

SRL findings were used in qualitative analysis. First, the study applied thematic analysis to identify the themes and meanings in the Literature. In the second stage, based on the gaps and recommendations identified in the Literature, the study conducted structured interviews with professionals working in the tourism industry.

For the interview, professionals were contacted and selected using snowball sampling techniques so that only experienced and domain experts' professionals' thoughts could be collected. They were approached through emails, social media, and professional and personal contacts. The interviewees' selection was based on clearly defined criteria and research objectives. A total of almost sixty (60) respondents were approached. However, some of them were excused due to personal and professional reasons. The objectives of the study were shared in advance with them. All ethical and professional protocols were adhered to during the interview. The study got informed consent from all the participants by explaining their rights and ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents. The study was conducted in English.

Before the interview, the study developed an interview guide outlining topics and questions to be asked. The questions and guidelines were also practised in the pilot phase to avoid redundancies during the interview. Additionally, the interview was conducted at a location convenient for participants. The environment was conducive to open and honest communication. The interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the respondents. All the interviews were conducted in person by the authors with the respondents.

In the first round, their responses were transcribed and later shared with them for confirmation. In the second round, compiled responses were generated and shared with the interviewees for their final approval. Each interview was conducted in person and took almost 40–45 min.

The study also avoids all the leading or confusing questions. The interview was closed with positive notes, thanking interviewees with respect and thanks, and their contributions were appreciated. After closing the interview, the interview was transcribed and shared with the respondents for confirmation. In the third round, the aggregative responses were generated, which were again shared with the respondents for confirmation and validation. The study also conducted its thematic analysis. In the final round of the study, findings from both (SLR and interviews) were compared and presented for possible policy recommendation and implementation. Ultimately, the study also used NVIVO-11 to extract ecotourism and its related constructs from the literature. The findings have been presented in the word cloud mapping and frequency chart.

4. Findings of the study

4.1. Interview findings

4.1.1. Demographics of the interview

Table 2 presents the details of the respondents. The statistics show that the respondents have potential experiences and qualifications.

4.1.2. Interviews transcription

The interviews were transcribed and compiled in a very professional way. All the respondents were given space, time, and opportunity to share their concerns openly. Regarding

maintaining and bringing balance between economic growth and environmental protection, out of 43, 27 respondents acclaimed that: Ecotourism can effectively balance economic growth and environmental protection. It pro- motes low-impact activities and conservation efforts. Additionally, it creates alternative livelihoods, which helps reduce pressure on ecosystems and fosters employment and environmental stewardship among local communities and visitors. It ensures conservation initiatives and sustainability while compromising environmental integrity.

Similarly, almost all the respondents agreed on the effectiveness of the local community's engagement in decision-making processes and practices, and they proclaimed that:

> Engaging local communities in decision-making processes and co-creating tourism experiences is very important. This engagement empowers them and develops their ownership. Besides skill, it brings fair compensation and a transparent local revenue-sharing mechanism. Similarly, a capacity-building program needs to be initiated to bring awareness and skills. Moreover, it encourages community participation and commitment to ecotourism.

Likewise, regarding the promotion and distribution of equitable benefits among stake- holders, 19 respondents out of 43 admitted that.

Ecotourism promotes equitable benefit distribution following community-based models and other inclusive policies. Regular impact assessment and transparency in revenue reduce disparities. It encourages dialogue and promotes negotiation, cooperation, and shared responsibility regarding ecotourism.

In the same way, about the key consideration in planning and development in sustainable ecotourism, 28 respondents out of 43 proposed that:

Table 2. Demographics of the respondents.

Items	Characteristics	Percentage (%)
Age Group	15–25 years	14.2
	26–35 years	41.4
	36–45 years	25.6
	Above 45 years	18.8
Qualification	High/Higher School	33.5
	Undergraduate	43.7
	Graduate	14.7
	Ph.D.	8.1
Designation	Customer relationship manager	11.9
	Ecotourism Development Worker	7.8
	Tourism Consultant	9.1
	Community Engagement Coordinator	10.1
	Cultural Heritage Department Worker	7.4
	Ministry Worker	8.6
	Private Company Manager	4.5
	Local Community Representative	7.5
	Tourism Economist	13.6
	Ecotourism Sustainability Advisor	6.7
	Human Resources Manager	9.3
	Community Development Officer	3.5
Country	Saudi Arabia	47.3
	Pakistan	23.7
	United Kingdome	29.0
Years of experience in the ecotourism industry	1–10	52.8

	11–20	37.2
	Above 20	10.0

Table 3. Themes of the Interview.

So. No	Themes	References
1	The balance between Economic Growth and Environmental Protection	Almeyda-Ibáñez and George (2017), Zielinski et al. (2020a), (2020b), Trauer and Ryan (2005)
2	Effective Engagement of Local Communities (2020b), Cáceres-Feria	Cox et al. (2014), Zielinski et al. (2020a), et al. (2021), Fiorello and Bo (2012)
3	Equitable Benefit Distribution Dolezal and	Zhou et al. (2021), Streimikiene et al. (2021), Novelli (2022)
4	Considerations in Destination Planning and Development	Haid et al. (2021), Marzano and Scott (2009), Neger (2022), Lee et al. (2021)
5	Role of Stakeholder Engagement, Governance, and Destination Branding	Horng et al. (2015), Hankinson (2007), Huang et al. (2023), Tseng et al. (2018)

Policymakers and planners should initiate strategic planning and development regarding ecotourism. Zoning and capacity measures can protect ecotourism and the ecosystem. Similarly, sustainable infrastructure development, promotion of community-based ecosystem conservation, and sustainment policies support long-term sustainability. Through community-based initiatives, sustainable planning can be done for ecotourism development.

In the last, concerning the role of the stakeholders and local community's engagement in sustainable ecotourism development, governance, and destination branding, all the respondents agreed that:

Active engagement of the stakeholders in ecotourism processes fosters trust and accountability. It also encourages effective decision-making for better governance and destination branding. Moreover, it ensures transparency, collaboration, destination branding, and cultural authenticity. Education, training, and awareness programs better help in sustainable management practices, continuous planning, and implementation of ecotourism practices. Furthermore, themes were extracted from the interviews as presented in Table 3, and these themes were also supported in the relevant literature.

In the end, a word cloud was generated from the interviewees' responses, given in Figure 2. The figure indicates that more respondents agree that ecotourism brings sustainability and community overall development, generates employment, preserves the authenticity of the culture, and promotes benefit-equity distribution.

Based on the literature review, theoretical synthesis, and interpretation of the interviews, the study proposed the following model, which is given in Figure 3.

5. Discussion

The focus of the study was to investigate different aspects of ecotourism. The study explored both theoretical aspects of ecotourism and discovered themes in the field of ecotourism. The theoretical aspect recognizes a need for holistic framework development for Ecotourism (Alexakis & Rice, 2016; Mahravan, 2012; Salman et al., 2020). Different contextual, cultural, and environmental factors must be explored to promote sustainable ecotourism. Moreover, the theoretical aspect also revealed that ecotourism is a multi-disciplinary construct; therefore, it must be explored from different perspectives. It ranges from biodiversity conservation, community engagement, and environmental sustainability.

Moreover, these trends also reflect that more research and practices are needed to address contemporary sustainability challenges. It may enhance the resilience of ecotourism destinations and balance the rapid changes in the environment and the

Figure 2. Words' cloud from Literature.

socio-economic disruptions (Baloch et al., 2023; Dolezal & Novelli, 2022). Through active collaboration and knowledge sharing, practitioners, policymakers, and researchers must develop long-term environmental protection strategies, sustainability, and development. These will also help to achieve sustainable development, including biodiversity conservation, poverty alleviation, and cultural heritage preservation (Hafezi et al., 2023; Haid et al., 2021; Hasana et al., 2022).
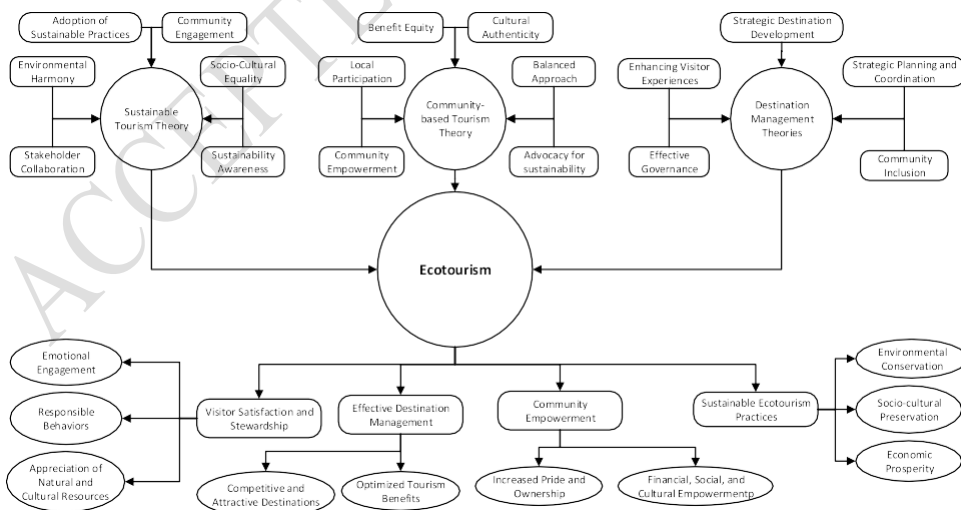

Figure 3. Conceptual Model of the Study.

Furthermore, the interviewees' responses proclaim that ecotourism can help balance economic growth and environmental sustainability. The interviewees admitted that ecotourism could generate alternative livelihoods, promote employment and reduce pressure on existing economic activities (Baloch et al., 2023). By fostering ecotourism, low-impact activities can be promoted, positively impacting environmental conservation activities. Moreover, the respondents added that these activities will ensure environ- mental stewardship and empower, encourage, and engage local communities, visitors, and stakeholders in environmental promotion and protection activities (Dedeke, 2017; Huang et al., 2023).

Likewise, these practices will lead to the active engagement of the local community in the decision-making process, which will not only promote a sense of ownership and fair compensation but will also lead to the co-creation of ecotourism activities (Dragomir & Mazilu, 2021; Koure et al., 2023). Additionally, it will add to the equitable benefits distri- bution among communities, following community-based models. The locals will be able to develop tacit knowledge-based plans and policies, which will be adhered to by the locals positively (Jaya et al., 2024). The study also recommends strategic planning, zoning, and coordination for long-term ecotourism policies and plans and a comprehen- sive operational governance framework (Arif et al., 2022).

In addition to these, the theories offer a comprehensive framework for ecotourism. STT advocates for sustaining natural resources and aligning them with conservation goals inherent in Ecotourism (Baloch et al., 2023; Dedeke, 2017). Similarly, CBT empha- sizes the relationship between human societies and their possible associations with natural resources, indigenous knowledge, and local traditions. Moreover, it asks for the active social engagement of the locals to stop or reduce social and environmental erosion (Cáceres-Feria et al., 2021; Lonn et al., 2018). Furthermore, it discusses the col- laboration of all the stakeholders, including individuals, groups, organizations, and the government. Moreover, the destination theory promotes destination branding, facilitat- ing the co-creation of a well-designed and sustainable tourism destination (Baloch et al., 2023; Horng et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2023).

6. Study Contributions

The study contributed to both practices and the body of knowledge. It extended the eco- tourism concept by presenting a comprehensive framework to promote low-impact activities, create alternative livelihoods, and conserve efforts. Similarly, the study explored the role of community engagement in decision-making processes to co-create tourism experiences and ensure equitable benefit distribution. Likewise, the study explored destination branding and its impact on long-term ecotourism and sustainabil- ity. The study also developed a holistic conceptual framework regarding ecotourism and its potential impacts.

The study developed a framework based on theoretical support and their contribution to the body of knowledge and practices. It added to sustainability theory by incorporating responsible practices like waste reduction and its management, energy efficiency and conservation, and habitat management. Likewise, the study extended CBT by integrating local tradition and culture into ecotourism experiences, which enriches visitor experi- ences and satisfaction and empowers local communities. In the same way, it added to

the destinations theory by providing strategic planning and development procedures for ecotourism. Moreover, the current study explored that these theories not only talk about the financial aspects of ecotourism, but also develop psychological, social, emotional, moral, and ethical support to the local communities and appreciate their active participation in ecotourism development.

Additionally, the study extended the STT theory by developing a framework for inclusive decision-making processes, encouraging collaboration among stakeholders to address social, economic, and environmental concerns and ensure the sustainability of ecotourism initiatives. Destination management theory provides frameworks for effective planning, marketing, and management of ecotourism destinations, optimizing visitor satisfaction while minimizing negative impacts on natural and cultural resources. Together, these theories contribute to the evolution of ecotourism practices and knowledge, driving the sector towards greater sustainability, authenticity, and inclusivity.

7. Limitations and Recommendations

The study provides valuable insights into ecotourism research and practices. However, at the same time, it carries certain limitations. The study can be extended to quantitative empiricism in the future using primary or secondary data, or the study can be replicated using panel data. A mixed-method approach based on more extensive data can cover these biases and shortcomings. The research also admitted that ecotourism is a composite variable. Therefore, in-depth multi-disciplinary research is needed to explore and exploit this phenomenon. One promising aspect is that if locals are actively involved in such research projects, it will give new directions and philosophies to ecotourism research. Another promising aspect in the era of technology, ecotourism, can be enhanced with the integration and implementation of intelligent technology. This is one of the promising areas for future research to assess its impact and significance.

From practitioners' perspectives, close coordination and collaboration are needed to plan, implement, and promote ecotourism. Governments, organizations, groups, and agents should initiate awareness and training regarding ecotourism and its long-lasting impact. Locals and professionals must be trained in sustainability practices and operations, which will inculcate ecotourism and sustainability practices at the unit level.

8. Conclusion

The study focused on the construction of ecotourism. Its focus was to explore the concept from different aspects and respects. Therefore, the study adopted a multi-methods approach to better comprehend the phenomenon of interest in more detail. The study evaluated the concept from historical and contextual perspectives. The study also examined trends, patterns, and themes of the study. The study offers valuable findings from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives. It highlights the multi-disciplinary nature of ecotourism. The study demands a sustainable, responsible, collaborative response for the sustainment and development of ecotourism processes and practices. The research recommends intradisciplinary research with inclusive methodologies and participatory approaches. These processes and practices can contribute to realizing sustainable development goals and make the world more natural, conserved, and sustained.

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Appendix

Questionnaire for the study

1. Can you explain how ecotourism can manage and balance economic growth and environ- mental protection?
2. Do you consider it essential to engage local communities in decision-making processes regard- ing ecotourism?
3. In your opinion, how does ecotourism promote equitable benefit distribution among stake- holders in the community?
4. In your opinion, what are the key considerations in planning and managing sustainable eco- tourism in the community?
5. What is the possible role of the stakeholder in sustainable ecotourism development, governance and branding?