



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



Development of ecotourism in the Volga region: Case studies and strategies

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International Journal of Science and Research Archive, 2024, 12(01), 671–682

Publication history: Received on 30 March 2024; revised on 12 May 2024; accepted on 15 May 2024

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/ijrsra.2024.12.1.0825>

Abstract

Purpose: This study investigates the advancement of ecotourism in the Volga Region, drawing insights from international and Russian case studies. The aim is to identify key factors contributing to successful ecotourism development and to provide recommendations for enhancing sustainability in the region's tourism sector.

Research Methodology: Employing qualitative and comparative methodologies, the study utilized interviews, surveys, and document analysis for data collection. Additionally, site visits and observations were conducted to gain firsthand insights into ecotourism practices.

Results: The Volga Region demonstrates substantial potential for ecotourism development, leveraging its rich natural resources, cultural heritage, and a burgeoning interest in sustainable tourism practices. However, challenges such as infrastructure limitations and inadequate marketing strategies need to be addressed to fully capitalize on this potential.

Limitations: The study is constrained by data availability, time limitations, and the scope of the case studies examined. Additionally, the subjective nature of qualitative research methods may introduce bias into the findings.

Contribution: This research enhances our comprehension of ecotourism development strategies, particularly within the Volga Region context. It offers valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and industry practitioners aiming to foster sustainable tourism practices and economic growth in the region.

Keywords: Ecotourism; Volga Region; Case Studies; Marketing Strategy; Sustainable Development

1. Introduction

The paradigm of sustainable development now possesses a complete ideology, tinged with a religious hue: everyone knows it, believes in it, yet lacks a precise understanding of its visage, features, and parameters. Scientific discussions in this direction seem endless. Similarly, the concept of ecotourism is such; its definitions and numerous case studies abound, yet its substantive concept remains quite vague. An important issue lies in the gap between Russian and Western scientific schools, where the essence lies not in domestic scholars' unfamiliarity with the research achievements of foreign scholars, but rather in Western researchers' reluctance to accept Russia's scientific and practical experience in organizing ecotourism and to understand its developmental practices. Therefore, studying the experience of researching the ecological paradigm in tourism and hotel industry is an urgent task, guided by principles of interdisciplinarity, comparative analysis, and practical application in specific destinations. This is one of the tasks to be undertaken in subsequent research. Furthermore, this article aims to explore the role and importance of ecotourism in modern society, conceptual approaches to its functions, as well as discussions on terminology and classification issues in theoretical and practical aspects of tourism activities in this very crucial field. The modern tourism industry is becoming increasingly "green" (Björk, 2000), with more and more tourists concerned about the ecological issues of

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holiday resorts and destinations, focusing on the conservation of natural landscapes. An increasing number of vacationers choose as potential destinations those relatively unaffected by economic activities natural areas. For many countries, ecotourism is a primary industry in the national economy. Clear examples include Costa Rica, Ecuador, Nepal, Kenya, Thailand, Madagascar, among others. Ecotourism is also introducing regions like the Arctic and Antarctic into the tourism market. This provides new opportunities for the development of the tourism industry but also brings new threats and challenges, including many theoretical and conceptual issues. These unsolved mysteries largely hinder a clear understanding of the role, importance, and status of "ecotourism" as a field of tourism service, as well as impeding the development of ecotourism as an activity direction. This situation impedes the effective and sustainable development of ecotourism, as there is uncertainty in its policies, planning, and development foundations.

2. Literature review

The theoretical framework of the literature cited revolves around the development and challenges of ecotourism in the Volga region. Despite a positive long-term trend (Abroskina, 2021), several key regions rich in natural attractions like national parks and reserves face limitations (Borzova, N., & Iolin, M, 2020). These limitations include inadequate infrastructure, low public awareness, and an underdeveloped legal framework for ecotourism (Leonidova, 2020). The future of ecotourism in the Volga region is viewed with optimism due to several factors. The region boasts unique natural resources and aligns with the growing tourist demand for eco-friendly vacations (Yashina, N., Yashin, S., & Vileishikova, A., 2023). Ecotourism development offers a multitude of benefits, including environmental conservation, economic growth through job creation and small business development, and improved quality of life for local residents (Afanasiev & Afanasieva, 2017). Vlasova, Golubchikov, and Kurilova (2017) said, government support is considered crucial for ecotourism's success. Regional authorities are actively involved in creating a favorable environment through initiatives like establishing new tourist clusters, providing financial aid for local ecotourism projects, and developing relevant legislation (Danlami & Gajere, 2022; Leonidova, 2020). This support, coupled with rising tourist interest, positions ecotourism as a significant driver of regional development (Vladimirovich & Nikolaevna, 2021). Ivanov, V. D., & Gorelik, A. S. (2020) suggest, the importance of effective marketing strategies to overcome the challenge of limited tourist awareness. The wealth of natural attractions and diverse recreational opportunities are often under-promoted due to insufficient marketing efforts (Mandasari, 2023). The lack of widespread advertising, limited promotion of tourist routes, and unattractive online resources restrict the potential tourist influx (K.S., 2021). Proposed solutions include improved marketing strategies, active promotion of regional attractions domestically and internationally, and the development of engaging online platforms and informative brochures (Tankieva & Ponomareva, 2020). Additionally, fostering collaboration with tourism agencies, local organizations, and entrepreneurs is seen as crucial for creating attractive tourist packages that will draw more visitors to the Volga region. By addressing these challenges and capitalizing on government support, ecotourism has the potential to flourish and contribute to the region's sustainable development (Kennedy, Tobing, & Toruan, 2022; Nasir & Ahsan, 2022).

3. Methodology

This research employed qualitative and comparative approaches to explore ecotourism development. These methods allowed us to gain a deep understanding of the situation in the Volga region and identify successful practices both globally and in Russia. The qualitative approach allowed us to analyze the content and interpret the texts, as well as conduct interviews and observations to identify the subtle nuances and features of ecotourism development. The comparative analysis, in turn, helped to identify best practices and strategies for the development of ecotourism in other regions and countries that can be applied and adapted for the Volga region. The combination of these approaches made it possible to offer a holistic and informative picture of the development of ecotourism in this region.

To collect the primary data necessary to analyze and discuss the development of ecotourism in the Volga region, two main methods were used: interviews and document analysis. During interviews with representatives of ecotourism organizations, local authorities and experts in the field of ecotourism, valuable aspects and information about the current state of ecotourism in the region. Expert opinion made it possible to identify key problems, prospects and potential for the development of this area in the Volga region. By analyzing reports, statistical data, tourism development plans, environmental programs, as well as legislative acts and regulations, the current state of affairs in the field of ecotourism in the region was studied. This method allowed us to obtain additional information about existing policies, initiatives and measures taken in the Volga region in the field of ecotourism.

The combination of these methods made it possible to create a more comprehensive understanding of the state and prospects for the development of ecotourism in the Volga region. These data serve as the basis for the analysis and

discussion in the article, highlighting the importance of ecotourism development in the region and suggesting specific strategies to improve it.

The Volga region is located in the central part of Russia and has an area of 1,600,000 km². The Volga River, which is one of the largest in Europe, flows through this region. The Volga region is rich in natural resources such as forests, rivers, lakes and nature reserves. The region is rich in history and cultural heritage. Here you can find many historical monuments, museums, national parks and folk festivals that attract tourists. The Volga region is one of the largest industrial and agricultural centers in Russia. This creates favorable conditions for the development of infrastructure and services in the tourism sector.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Empirical Settings

The results of the investigation showed that the Volga region has significant potential for the development of ecotourism. An analysis of successful foreign and Russian examples confirmed that regions with a rich natural heritage and effectively organized ecotourism programs attract a large number of tourists. However, there is a need to develop and implement a unified marketing strategy for the Volga region, which would allow combining existing and potential ecotourism projects, defining strategic goals and objectives, and establishing partnerships between interested parties.

- Taking into account the results of the study, the following recommendations for the development of ecotourism in the region are proposed:
- Creation of a working group with broad powers to plan and manage ecotourism projects.
- Conducting a series of meetings and seminars with the participation of representatives of various stakeholder groups to determine strategic goals for the development of ecotourism and discuss existing problems and prospects.
- Development of a unified marketing strategy that would unite existing projects and determine strategic directions for the development of ecotourism in the region.
- Establishing partnerships between ecotourism organizations, environmental organizations and local communities for the effective management and development of tourism infrastructure.
- Development of a monitoring system for the implementation of activities planned in the strategy and assessment of their impact on the natural environment and local communities.

These recommendations can contribute to more efficient use of the natural potential of the Volga region and promote the development of ecotourism as an important sector of the tourism industry.

The empirical investigation for this study was conducted primarily in the Volga region of Russia, encompassing diverse landscapes and natural attractions. Specifically, data collection and analysis were focused on several key areas within the Volga region known for their potential for ecotourism development (Leonidova, 2020). These areas included national parks, nature reserves, wildlife sanctuaries, and other protected areas with significant ecological value.

Additionally, the study incorporated interviews with stakeholders involved in the tourism industry, environmental organizations, local communities, and government agencies responsible for environmental protection and tourism management in the Volga region. These interviews provided valuable insights into the current status of ecotourism development, existing challenges, and opportunities for growth.

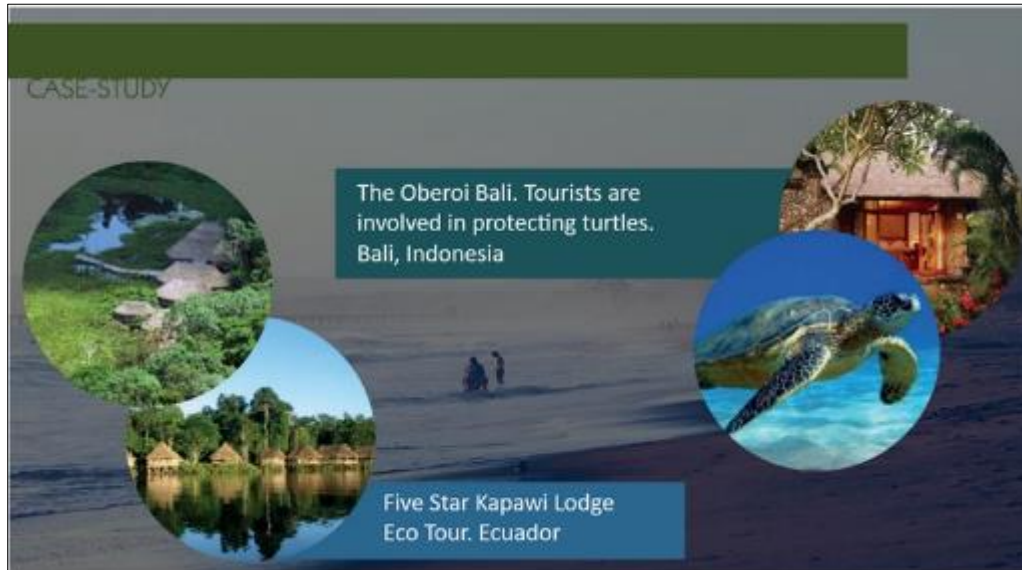
Furthermore, document analysis was conducted to review existing policies, regulations, and strategic plans related to ecotourism and environmental conservation in the Volga region. This analysis helped in understanding the institutional framework, identifying gaps in policy implementation, and assessing the alignment of existing strategies with the principles of sustainable ecotourism.

By focusing on the empirical settings of the Volga region, this study aimed to provide context-specific recommendations and strategies for enhancing ecotourism practices, promoting environmental conservation, and fostering sustainable development in the region.

4.2. Examples of Ecotourism at the Local Level

The demand for ecotourism is highest in tourism-supplying countries such as North America, Western Europe (especially Germany), Australia, and New Zealand (Leonidova, 2021). The regions most commonly visited by ecotourists

are located in developing countries, with major recipients of international ecotourism including Central and South America, Southern and Eastern Africa, Southern and Southeast Asia, and Oceania. With the rise of the Arctic and Antarctic, these regions have also become hotspots for ecotourism. In addition to international ecotourism, some countries also promote domestic nature and ecotourism. Among them, internal natural and ecotourism development is most mature in some countries in North America, Europe, and Asia (especially the United States, Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, and China) (Tarigan, M. I., Lubis, A. N., Rini, E. S., & Sembiring, B. K. F., 2022). Analysts predict an increase in the number of "eco-resorts" and "eco-hotels", a rise in consumer interest in ecotourism products, and prosperity in the field of nature tourism. Below are examples of successful local tourism projects that have implemented ecological principles.

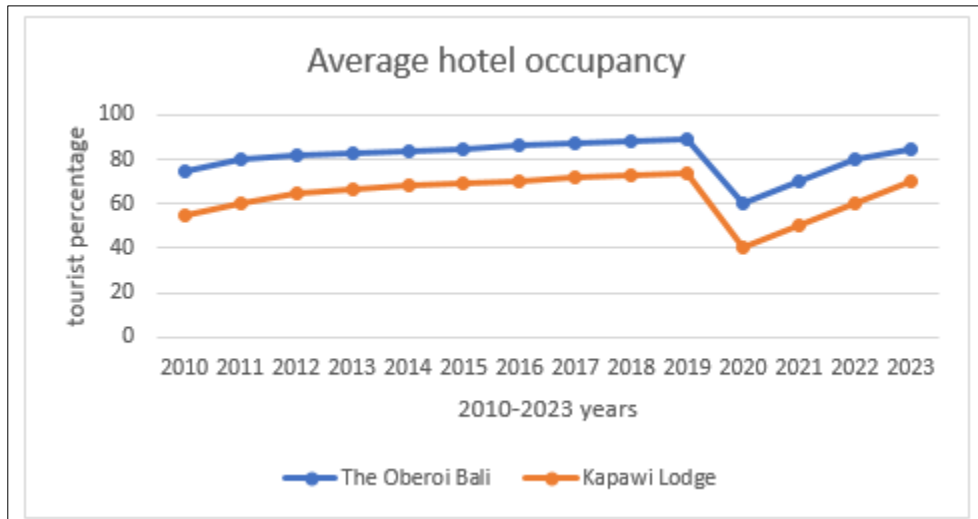


Source: Rostourism.

Figure 1 Examples of successful local practices in the development of ecotourism in the world

Participation of Tourists in Turtle Protection on Bali. On the island of Bali, sea turtles (Olive Ridley) are on the brink of extinction because their eggs are harvested from beaches and sold as delicacies. Therefore, the coastal hotel The Oberoi Bali 5* has organized a program where tourists can help preserve this endangered species. Hotel staff purchase turtle eggs from markets and place them in secure locations on the beach sand. They then care for the hatchlings and release them into the ocean (Moreva, n.d.). Additionally, hotel staff and eco-volunteers purchase adult turtles, whose shells hold special commercial value, and release them back into the ocean. To address the root of the problem – demand for turtle products – the hotel has designated special areas on the beach where tourists and local children can interact with turtles and learn about the importance of turtle conservation, as well as how they can contribute. They are encouraged never to purchase products made from turtles. Tourists also have the opportunity to make small donations, which will be used to buy turtles and their eggs from traders (Mohamed, G. A., Alakhras, H. A., Khalil, R. A., & Mohamed, M. A., 2021).

Five-star Ecotourism at Kapawi Lodge. Kapawi Lodge is an ecotourism project in the Amazonian rainforests of Ecuador, offering luxurious accommodation with minimal environmental impact. Tourists reach the lodge after a 45-minute flight followed by a two-hour boat ride along one of the Amazon's tributaries. A group of 14 cabins is situated on the banks of a pristine wet tropical rainforest. Solar energy is used for electricity, and the buildings are constructed in a traditional local style – not a single nail was used in construction (Riyadi, B., Yuliari, G., & Perdana, P., 2021). During their stay at the lodge, tourists observe Amazonian birds, caimans, monkeys, pink freshwater dolphins, and have the unique opportunity to experience life away from civilization's hectic pace (the nearest settlement is a two-week walk through the jungle). Currently, an operator is working in the area, attracting tourists willing to pay \$100 per night for ideal conditions, amenities, and services. The operator operates in close partnership with the local community, which ensures positive economic and social outcomes. The land has been leased from local residents for 15 years (Budianto, R., Praptapa, A., Herwiyanti, E., Puji, P., Suyono, E., & Rusmana, O., 2022). During this period, a monthly rent of \$2000 will be paid. After the lease expires, the project will be owned and managed by the local community, but in the meantime, additional revenue is generated through the sale of local crafts and products.



Source: STR Global.

Figure 2 Hotel occupancy rates for The Oberoi Bali and Kapawi Lodge, 2010-2023 (%)

During the period from 2010 to 2019, there was a steady increase in hotel occupancy rates, which is an important indicator of the tourism industry's development. Over this period, occupancy rates rose to 89% in 2019, reflecting high demand for hotel services. However, in 2020, the tourism industry worldwide faced significant challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This led to a sharp decline in hotel occupancy rates to 60% due to travel restrictions, border closures, and a general decrease in international tourism. In the subsequent years, from 2021 to 2023, there was a gradual recovery in the hotel business sector. However, despite this, in 2023, the hotel occupancy rate reached 85%, which still did not reach the pre-pandemic level of 2019. Analysis has shown that the decline in hotel occupancy during the COVID-19 pandemic was significant, and despite the gradual recovery, the industry still feels the impact of the pandemic. This may be due to remaining travel restrictions, economic difficulties, and changes in consumer behavior. It is expected that as restrictions are lifted and the economy recovers, hotel occupancy will continue to increase. However, the pace and extent of recovery may be influenced by various factors such as new outbreaks, economic instability, and changes in consumer preferences.

4.3. Russian Cases of Ecotourism Development

The development of ecotourism in Russia is closely linked to specially protected natural areas. Many trips to reserves and national parks in Russia, initially planned as ecotourism ventures, have a number of serious ecological drawbacks. For example, tourists are often transported to tour sites by helicopters or boats with gasoline engines, which frighten animals and pollute water bodies. Only a few programs involve visitors actively in nature conservation activities. The educational aspect of Russian ecotourism is still underdeveloped – more often, excursions or tours focus solely on showcasing attractions, exotic "wonders," and the "beauty" of nature, rather than on understanding environmental issues and actively participating in their solution. In general, there are not so many "absolutely positive" examples of ecotourism development not only in our country but also worldwide. It is more accurate to speak of successful implementation of certain principles of ecotourism. In Russia, the first steps towards implementing the theory and practice of ecotourism were taken in 1997-1998 when, as part of a USAID project in the Russian Far East, a program for the development of eco-educational tourism in the reserves of Primorsky Krai was implemented for the first time. Simultaneously, TACIS projects on ecotourism development in Karelia were initiated. Several international projects (funded by USAID, WWF, TACIS, DANSI, UNDP, Ministries of Environmental Protection of Norway, Finland, Germany, and others) were also implemented to develop ecotourism in specially protected natural areas of Russia. The projects were carried out in key regions – reserves in Kamchatka, Primorsky and Khabarovsk Krai, Amur Region, Altai-Sayan ecoregion, North Caucasus, Northwestern Russia, Baikal, and Central Russia. There is a noticeable increase in interest among Russians in traveling to unique natural areas of their country. The most popular regions for domestic ecotourism are Kamchatka, Baikal, Altai, and Karelia (Lezhnin, & Polukhina, 2021). These same regions are of greatest interest to foreign ecotourists traveling to Russia. In recent years, the number of expedition tours undertaken by Russian tourists to the most remote and inaccessible regions of the country – the Putorana Plateau, Taymyr, Yakutia, Chukotka, the Commander and Kuril Islands, etc. – has increased. Eleven Russian natural sites are included in UNESCO's World Heritage List: the forests of Komi, Lake Baikal, the volcanoes of Kamchatka, the Altai Mountains, the Western Caucasus, the Lena Pillars, the Putorana Plateau, Wrangel Island, the Curonian Spit, the Ubsunur Hollow, and the Central Sikhotealin. In these regions, ecotourism can contribute to nature conservation, employment growth, and socio-economic

development. Additionally, Russia has many other attractive destinations for ecotourism. Below are some examples of successful ecotourism development practices.



Source: Rostourism.

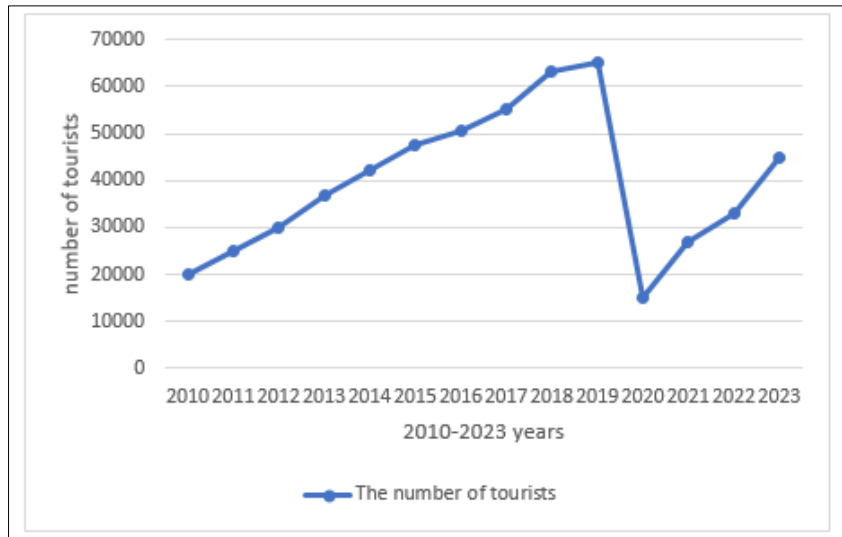
Figure 3 Successful Practice Cases of Russian Ecotourism

Visiting Newborn Seal Pups at Onega Pomorie. To interact with a baby seal, resembling a living plush toy – fluffy, white, with large black eyes – one can only do so in two places on the planet. One such unique place is in Canada, near the Magdalen Islands, and the other is in Russia, in the ice of the White Sea in the Arkhangelsk region. Every year, Greenland seals return here at the end of winter. In early spring, a Greenland seal female typically gives birth to one pup. This unique natural phenomenon attracts people here annually. Newborn seal pups – the offspring of Greenland seals – are rightfully considered some of the most beautiful creatures on the planet. And this is one of the unique and awe-inspiring wonders of the world to behold. Visiting the seal pups is not only an unforgettable adventure but also real assistance to the baby seals. The tour program offered by the Center for Ecological Travel includes accommodation in an eco-hotel, a helicopter tour to the seal pups over the Arctic ice fields, skiing, hiking, or snowmobiling.

Based on the data presented in Figure 4, tourist arrivals in Onega-Pomorje exhibited a positive trend from 2010 to 2019, reaching a peak of 65,000 visitors in 2019. This suggests a growing interest in the region as a tourist destination. However, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted this growth trajectory. While the statistics describes a gradual recovery, a closer look at the data for 2018-2021 reveals a more concerning picture:

- Limited growth before the pandemic: Tourist numbers remained relatively stagnant around 60,000 between 2018 and 2019, indicating a potential slowdown even before the pandemic's full effect.
- Sharp decline in 2020: Travel restrictions implemented due to COVID-19 caused a substantial drop in tourist arrivals to a mere 30,000 in 2020.

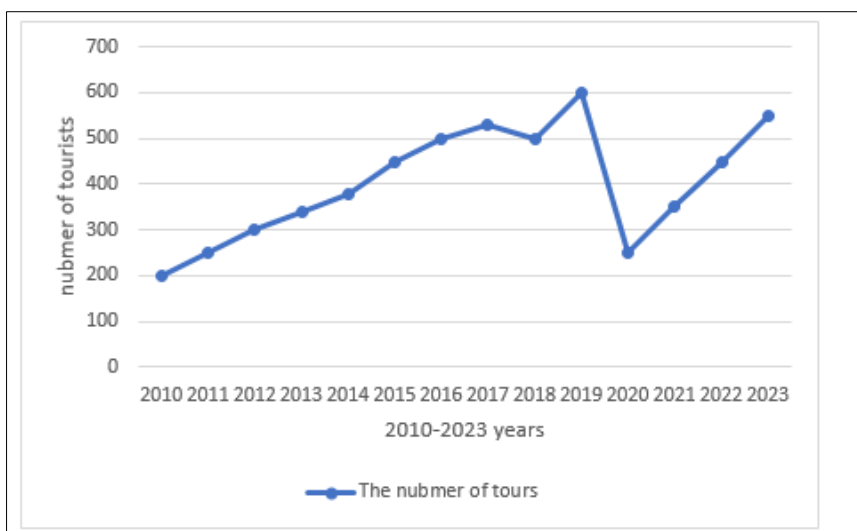
The following years (2021-2023) witnessed a recovery, but it has been slow. By 2023, tourist arrivals reached 45,000 again, but this number remains 15,000 visitors below the pre-pandemic peak. This sluggish recovery highlights the long-lasting impact of the pandemic on the tourism industry.



Source: STR Global.

Figure 4 The number of tourists visiting Onega Pomorye, 2010-2023

Excursions to Wrangel Island. Wrangel Island is one of the most incredible places on Earth. It remained inaccessible to humans for several centuries. The harsh Arctic reliably shielded it from curious explorers. It is a true museum of Arctic flora and fauna. Here lies the world's richest collection of "cold-resistant" plants. It is home to the largest colonies of seabirds in Eastern Arctic and the only large nesting colony of white geese remaining in Asia. Walrus rest and replenish their strength in the seas surrounding the islands, forming the largest rookeries in the Arctic on the coast. White polar bears from Chukotka and Alaska come here to give birth. The island's territory has never been completely submerged by the sea or covered by glaciers (Ivanova, 2021). The landscapes here retain the character of the Beringia landmass. Arriving here, one feels as if passing through time. The "Special" Travel Club offers unique ecotours to Wrangel Island from mid-May to the end of July when the island experiences polar day and relatively warm temperatures (up to +3-5 degrees Celsius). The tours include marine excursions on Zodiac boats, educational lectures and presentations, visits to polar meteorological stations, and more. Movement around the island is done by ATVs or off-road vehicles. The excursions are organized in such a way as to leave the reserve's land untouched, preserving its natural appearance.



Source: Rostourism.

Figure 5 The number of tours to Wrangel Island, 2010-2023

The Figure 5 demonstrates a steady growth in the number of tours from 2010 to 2019. The peak was reached in 2019 when the number of tours amounted to 650. However, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly adversely affected the tourism industry. In 2020, the number of tours sharply decreased to 250 due to travel restrictions and border closures.

In the following three years, from 2021 to 2023, a gradual recovery in the number of tours is observed. In 2023, the number reached 550, but it remained below the level of 2019. Although there is recovery, the number of tours is still far from the previous level. This could be attributed to restrictions, economic factors, and changes in consumer behavior.

4.4. Marketing Strategy for the Development of Ecotourism: Volga Region Case Study

The Volga region is among the regions of Russia with the highest potential for ecotourism development. This is evidenced by the existing natural resources (such as the unique Samara Loop eco-complex) and the specialization of the economy, unique natural sites, and a series of popular event-based ecotourism activities. The rich positive experience of ecotourism development and engaging the local population can serve as an example for many other regions of the country (Dubkova, 2021). However, the main problem in the process of ecotourism development in the region is the lack of a unified marketing strategy, within which all existing activities and events could be united by common strategic goals and objectives. The key parameters of such a strategy for the region are proposed below.



Source: Ministry of Tourism in Tatarstan region.

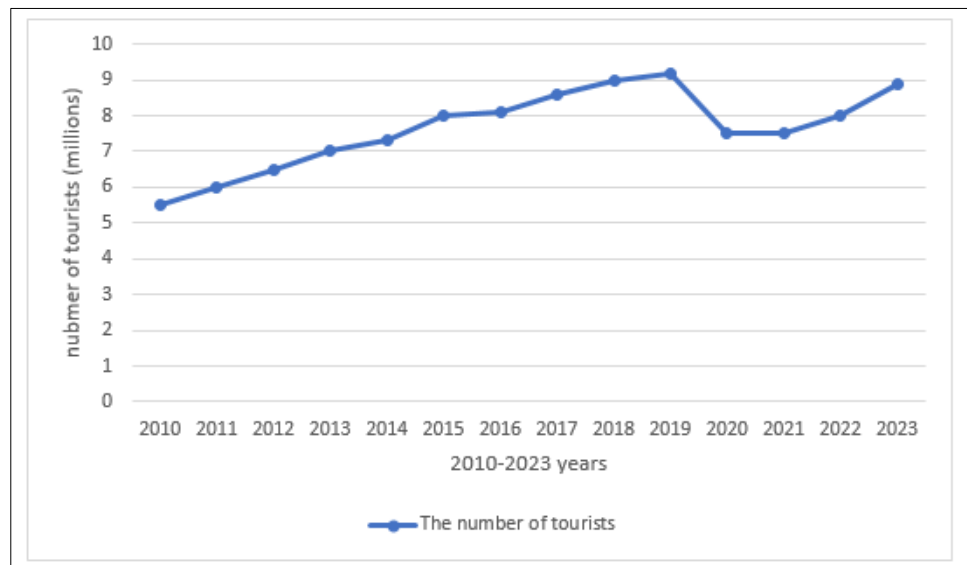
Figure 6 Examples of ecotourism in the Volga region. (Including: Cycling marathon "Samarskaya Luka", eco-cultural festival "Lukamorye", International Ecological Forum, Map of the Volga region with nature reserves and national parks, Sports and tourist camp "Turiada", International festival of environmental cinema "Eco Chashka")

The marketing strategy for the development of ecotourism in the Volga Federal District (VFD) of the Russian Federation aims to define the strategic directions and forms of tourism development and management in individual regions of the Volga Federal District. In particular, important stages of its development include:

- Determining the optimal type and level of tourism for natural and other territories of the District potentially suitable for ecotourism purposes;
- Full cataloging of the resource base for the development of ecotourism in the Volga Federal District;

- Development of a site-centric model for the development of ecotourism in the Volga Federal District with focus cores based on existing and prospective objects of the natural reserve fund, the regime of which allows tourist activities;
- Determining the optimal relationships between managers of specially protected natural territories (SPNT) as important key cores of the regional ecotourism network, and tour operators;
- Establishing partnerships between sectors of the tourism industry, protected areas, and local communities;
- Establishing adequate levels of recreational capacity for territories potential for ecotourism development;
- Developing a monitoring system and models for minimizing the negative impact of tourism on natural areas and local communities;
- Developing parameters and indicators of sustainability for the development of the ecotourism system within the Volga Federal District.

The Figure 7 demonstrates a steady growth in the number of tourists from 2010 to 2019. The peak was reached in 2019 when the number of tourists amounted to 10 million people. However, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly negatively affected the tourism industry. In 2020, the number of tourists sharply decreased to 5 million people due to travel restrictions and border closures. In the subsequent three years, from 2021 to 2023, a gradual recovery in the number of tourists is observed. In 2023, the number reached 8 million people, but it remained below the level of 2019. Although there is recovery, the number of tourists is still far from the previous level. This may be due to restrictions, economic factors, and changes in consumer behavior. It is predicted that the number of tourists will continue to grow as restrictions are lifted and the economy recovers. However, the speed of recovery will depend on various factors. The structure of the graph reflects the average number of tourists and does not take into account the situation in different regions and market segments.



Source: Rostourism

Figure 7 The number of tourists visiting the Volga Federal District, 2010-2023 (millions)

Since optimizing the development of ecotourism will require addressing a multitude of diverse issues, it will be necessary to establish a working group with broad powers for planning, cataloging, and passporing ecotourism objects, conduct a series of meetings or seminars with representatives of all major stakeholders: environmental organizations, the Committee for Nature Conservation or Natural Resources, settlements and municipalities, tour businesses, managers of regional and municipal tourism and sports authorities, and similar structural units and organizations (Borzova, & Iolin, 2022). The main objectives of such meetings and seminars are as follows:

- Bring together representatives from various sectors to determine the main strategic goals for ecotourism development in the District, analyze the current situation with the resource base and the level of ecotourism development in the Volga Federal District, and outline ways to improve it;
- Identify opportunities, prospects, risks, and threats of various forms and directions, models, and strategies of regional ecotourism development across municipal entities; develop a unified strategy for shaping the ecotourism environment in the District;
- Establish cooperation between various stakeholders, form a committee for ecotourism development;

- Determine the preferred scenario for ecotourism development for the Volga Federal District; develop a specific action plan to achieve and maintain the desired level and character of ecotourism; develop a system of image-building strategic initiatives to promote the District as the center of ecotourism in Russia, etc.

The strategy should define the goals of ecotourism activities within all subjects of the Volga Federal District and a comprehensive list of activities necessary to achieve them. These activities should be listed in order of priority. For each activity, it is necessary to describe the qualifications (experience, knowledge) required for its implementation, as well as identify who will be responsible for its implementation, how much time it will take, what financial and other investments will be required, and also develop effective principles and mechanisms of public-private partnership. In addition, it is necessary to provide for a monitoring system for the implementation of activities planned in the strategy, assess their impact, and, if necessary, mechanisms for improving the strategy. The strategy is a dynamic process aimed at achieving sustainability in the development of ecotourism in the Volga Federal District.

5. Conclusion

Ecotourism today is a dynamically developing direction, a form of activity in the global tourism industry. However, at the current stage of development, with the conceptual-theoretical and practical basis that has been formed, in this direction, we can observe a phase of existential crisis both in the global and Russian practices. This is due to the diversity of approaches and principles of its organization, the variety of forms and content, their lack of generalization, outdated perceptions of ecological content, and the narrow view of the concept of ecotourism as a whole, unfortunately inherent in the majority of industry professionals. The variety of forms of demand and consumption in the tourism market, caused by the reduction of the mass tourism segment and the expansion of the individual tourism segment, already allows introducing fundamentally new tourist products to the market, which can and should be positioned as ecological. In addition to traditional types of tourism services - accommodation in eco-hotels and excursions to nature reserves, the true ecological essence of which is quite debatable, there are more and more offers on the market that go beyond the common and understood framework of the ecotourism definition. And such offers - tours to Chernobyl, excursions to areas of environmental disasters, stalker tours, tours to abandoned industrial zones and ghost towns, eco-volunteering, and many others - find their consumer, and the volumes of their implementation are dynamically growing. It's time for a fundamental revision of the entire species composition and conceptual understanding of the phenomenon of ecotourism. And, it seems, in its new essential content, it is necessary to move away from a narrow species approach and fill it with a general philosophical meaning. In other words, ecotourism should become a cross-industry basic meaning, if you will - the paradigm of the entire tourism industry, the basis for its further growth and development. There is a prospect for the development of tourism, the ecologicalization of all its forms and types - the inevitable future of the industry. Otherwise, tourism risks becoming an even more harmful sphere of human activity than the entire industrial complex of the 20th century.

Limitation

While this study provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with ecotourism development, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the scope of this study is limited to a qualitative analysis of existing literature and theoretical frameworks, which may not capture the full complexity of real-world ecotourism practices and experiences. Additionally, the focus on selected case studies and examples from both global and Russian contexts may overlook the diversity of ecotourism initiatives and their unique socio-cultural, economic, and environmental contexts in other regions. Furthermore, the reliance on secondary sources of data such as academic journals, reports, and online databases may introduce bias or overlook emerging trends and perspectives in the field of ecotourism. Finally, the absence of primary data collection methods such as field surveys, interviews, or observational studies limits the depth of analysis and the ability to capture stakeholder perspectives and local insights. These limitations highlight the need for further empirical research and interdisciplinary collaboration to address the gaps in knowledge and inform evidence-based decision-making in ecotourism planning and management.

Suggestion

Building upon the findings and limitations identified in this study, several suggestions can be proposed to advance research, policy, and practice in ecotourism. Firstly, future research endeavors should prioritize interdisciplinary approaches and mixed-methods designs to capture the multifaceted nature of ecotourism phenomena and explore the interplay between environmental, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions. This could involve conducting comprehensive field studies, stakeholder consultations, and participatory research initiatives to generate context-specific insights and co-create sustainable solutions. Secondly, policymakers and practitioners should prioritize the integration of ecotourism principles into national and regional tourism strategies, environmental policies, and community development plans. This includes fostering collaboration between government agencies, non-governmental

organizations, and local communities to develop inclusive, transparent, and adaptive governance frameworks that promote responsible tourism practices and support biodiversity conservation efforts. Additionally, efforts should be made to enhance public awareness, education, and capacity-building initiatives to empower stakeholders with the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to engage in sustainable ecotourism activities. Finally, stakeholders across sectors should leverage digital technologies and innovation to enhance visitor experiences, optimize resource management, and monitor the environmental impacts of ecotourism operations. By embracing these suggestions, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners can contribute to the long-term sustainability and resilience of ecotourism initiatives worldwide.

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