



Article

The Transformative Power of Ecotourism: A Comprehensive Review of Its Economic, Social, and Environmental Impacts

Paulino Ricardo Cossengue¹, Jose Fraiz Brea¹  and Fernando Oliveira Tavares^{2,3,*} 

¹ Department of Business Organisation and Marketing, España, Facultad de Ciencias Empresariales y Turismo, Universidad de Vigo, Campus Universitario As Lagoas s/n, 32004 Ourense, Galicia, Spain; paulino.cossengue@ujes.ao (P.R.C.); jafraiz@uvigo.es (J.F.B.)

² REMIT-Research on Economics, Management and Information Technologies, Department of Economics and Management, Universidade Portucalense, 4200-027 Porto, Portugal

³ Instituto Superior Miguel Torga, Largo da Cruz de Celas n° 1, 3000-132 Coimbra, Portugal

* Correspondence: ftavares@upt.pt

Abstract

Based on a literature review, the present article aims to present ecotourism as a transformative factor in the economic, social, cultural, and environmental contexts, revealing key elements for the sustainable development of ecotourism. To ensure that this objective is met, the review combines the insights of classical authors and many recent authors who have best addressed the subject. The review carefully selected consensual and contradictory arguments, reflecting on the relevance of each group, particularly in aspects such as the influence of emotional experience on behaviour and satisfaction, strategy and competitive advantage, cooperation and sustainability, and the influence of resilience on ecotourism. The impact of each perspective was presented without ignoring the major constraints that ecotourism faces in its search for a position in the tourism industry. This led the study to accept the fact that the active participation of the community is indispensable in the formula for the success of ecotourism. Some statistical data were consulted and analysed, which enabled the study to determine the quantitative impact of ecotourism on economic, social, and environmental life. In terms of benefits to communities, the review clarifies the fact that ecotourism serves as an instrument that mobilizes not only the additional value of products and services traded in the process, but also the return on investments and job creation. The combination of visiting activities with the involvement of tour guides contributes to maximizing profits in the destinations, thus supporting solid economic, social, and environmental development for the benefit of both ecotourism promoters and local communities. However, the analysis makes it clear that the economic, social, and environmental benefit depends on the degree of involvement of the local population. In terms of usability, for other studies, this review can contribute to the understanding and positioning of ecotourism in the search for a balance between satisfying socioeconomic and environmental interests. Additionally, it can serve as an aid to policy makers in their decisions related to ecotourism.

Keywords: ecotourism; environment; sustainability; socioeconomic development



Academic Editor: Hossein Azadi

Received: 9 June 2025

Revised: 20 July 2025

Accepted: 21 July 2025

Published: 25 July 2025

Citation: Cossengue, P.R.; Brea, J.F.; Tavares, F.O. The Transformative Power of Ecotourism: A Comprehensive Review of Its Economic, Social, and Environmental Impacts. *Land* **2025**, *14*, 1531. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land14081531>

Copyright: © 2025 by the authors.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Tourism stands as one of the most significant economic sectors worldwide, exhibiting a consistent and high growth rate on a global scale. Within this context of rapid expansion and increasing uncertainty, ecotourism has emerged as a strategic alternative for the inclusive

and sustainable development of local communities, as it generates not only socioeconomic but also environmental benefits [1]. In the broader tourism industry, the consolidation of ecotourism is now regarded as a strategic priority, as it facilitates a balanced and mutually beneficial positioning of all stakeholders involved. Notably, this segment has demonstrated its capacity to foster win–win relationships between tourists and host communities, thereby reinforcing its value as a sustainable development tool [2].

In many countries, ecotourism has taken on the role of the main pillar within the tourism industry. This positioning seems to result from the fact that, amongst all the sectors of this industry, ecotourism is the one that presents characteristics for long-term sustainability. This perception is gaining more and more ground, as managers and entrepreneurs interested in development find in ecotourism the hope of perpetuating the existence of businesses, thus positioning themselves favourably in the eyes of the stakeholders [3].

In recent years, a growing number of studies have evidenced a significant correlation between the behavioural characteristics of tourist destinations and the quality of life of local communities [4]. These findings suggest that, although the attributes of a place are key determinants of its touristic or ecotouristic appeal, it is the interaction between tourists and residents that effectively impacts the quality of life within the destination.

Looking back in time, it can be seen that in the mid-19th century, with the emergence of international development, governments and humanitarian aid agencies began to promote tourism as a strategic factor for the advancement and growth of underdeveloped societies. In this perspective, the integration of markets through tourism aimed to catalyse a transition to new societies. Until then, economies were perceived as following the normal course of phases leading to modernization, for which tourism was the clearest indicator of national progress in any country [5].

Ref. [6] identifies three core dimensions through which place perception can be understood: the emotions elicited by one's experience of movement through the place, the beliefs that shape the identity of the place, and the behavioural commitment associated with the specific area. These dimensions are particularly relevant in the context of ecotourism, where perception plays a crucial role in shaping both tourist behaviour and destination development. As ref. [7] argue, the advancement of ecotourism relies on the capacity to foster an environment conducive to transformative tourism—an approach that prioritises innovation, sustainable growth, and long-term prosperity. Within this framework, the term “ecotourism” has often been employed not only as a broad reference to environmentally friendly practices, but also as a conceptual proxy for sustainability itself. Despite the variation in its usage, the various interpretations of ecotourism consistently converge around the notion of travel as a vehicle for achieving a more successful and sustainable tourism paradigm [2,8].

Ref. [9] argue that achieving sustainable development in ecotourism is contingent upon a comprehensive understanding of its conceptual framework, including the educational dimensions and the societal benefits this tourism segment can generate. In alignment with this perspective, ref. [10] propose a conceptual model that integrates environmental beliefs, attitudes towards ecotourism, behavioural intentions, and a willingness to balance materialistic values with tourism motivations. Their findings indicate that positive environmental attitudes and beliefs are significantly associated with an increased willingness to financially support ecotourism activities. However, materialistic orientations tend to exert a negative influence on ecotourism engagement, revealing a marked divergence in how environmental beliefs moderate individual behaviour. As such, ref. [3] suggest that the coherence and alignment of these attitudes are largely shaped by the underlying tourist motivations driving individual choices.

Ref. [5] understand that large-scale tourism, particularly with the emergence of large hotels, transportation networks conducted with great enthusiasm, and obsession without objections, was considered the only fuel for development. This trajectory made the concept of competitive advantage turn the nations of the islands and coastal areas of the world into paradises, promising sun, land, and beaches, as these destinations welcome foreigners and multilateral investors, benefiting from exemptions from various taxes and devaluation of local currencies. Clearly, this paradigm nullifies or at least greatly overshadows the original idea of ecotourism.

Ref. [11] notice that tourism consumption and production are interconnected. In turn, the tourism economy depends on the production and consumption of destination attractions. Therefore, tourism analysts have tried to understand the importance of the interconnection between consumption and production.

In response to the current growth of the tourism industry and what is considered to be sustainable, studies have investigated both the demand and supply sides of this phenomenon. In this case, the demand side seeks to examine ecotourism consumer preferences and motivations and psychological, behavioural, and demographic characteristics [10]. However, according to these authors, in the existing literature, these efforts remain fragmented and unbalanced, focusing on individual relationships rather than on a more integrated structure. Furthermore, there is little cohesion among existing research to explain the reason for tourists' involvement in ecotourism activities and the attitude towards rewarding these opportunities.

This study aims to explore ecotourism as a transformative mechanism for sustainable development across economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions. Its originality lies in integrating classical and contemporary perspectives to highlight the interdependence between tourist behaviour, local community engagement, and institutional governance. Unlike prior research, which often isolates demand- or supply-side factors, this review addresses the gap by presenting a multidimensional analysis of ecotourism. It contributes to the literature by linking individual motivations with systemic planning, resilience, and policy frameworks—offering a more cohesive understanding of ecotourism's strategic potential in advancing long-term sustainability.

2. Materials and Methods

Given the relevance of the topic, this paper aims to present a comprehensive analysis of the state of the art in ecotourism and its main determinants, through a systematic review of the literature. To this end, more than 50 scientific studies were analysed, duly referenced throughout the text.

In terms of methodology, the review used the analysis of different perspectives from different authors' points of view in a consensual and contradictory way, which allowed the identification of a common denominator between opinions. This led the study to accept the fact that the active participation of the community is indispensable in the formula for the success of ecotourism. Some statistical data were consulted and analysed, which enabled the study to determine the quantitative impact of ecotourism on economic, social, and environmental life.

The structure of the paper is organized as follows: after the introduction, Section 2 is dedicated to the presentation and deepening of the factors identified in the literature that explain the influence of the emotional experience on environmental behaviour and tourist satisfaction; the importance of the strategic path in obtaining a competitive advantage; cooperation as a central element for sustainable tourism; and, finally, the role of resilience in the impacts of ecotourism. Section 3 discusses the main contributions and implications of the studies analysed, establishing connections between the different theoretical and em-

pirical approaches. Finally, Section 4 presents the main conclusions arising from the review carried out, summarizing the advances in knowledge about ecotourism and proposing possible directions for future research.

2.1. Influence of Emotional Experience on Environmental Behaviour and Satisfaction

Ref. [12] consider factors like image, positive impressions, and different experiences as strategic factors that determine the capture, loyalty, and guarantee of word-of-mouth testimony regarding the destination. However, irresponsible tourist consumption behaviour can directly contribute to the destruction of the environmental system of destinations. In this sense, for the analysis of environmental protection to be complete, it would have to consider not only the condition of local residents, but also that of tourists [13]. Different factors, such as the influence of emotional experience on behaviour and satisfaction, strategy and competitive advantage, cooperation and sustainability, and the influence of resilience on ecotourism, were thoroughly analysed [1].

According to authors such as [14,15] visitors who have different and unique experiences are more likely to persuade their family, colleagues, and friends to try the same destinations. However, in the research, the authors recognise the fact that the sector still faces difficulties in combining the convincing factors.

From the perspective of [16] it is not possible to provide positive experiences without overcoming environmental concerns. This is not limited to issues of environmental preservation. It also includes economic, social, and safety aspects that ecotourists take into account in their decision-making process. There are many different indicators of value perception. However, three traditionally stand out, such as the economic, social, and emotional conditions [17], although it is believed that satisfaction and loyalty are the primary motivations. Economic, functional, social, and emotional perspectives are viewed as value factors which influence ecotourism. In this sense, it is noted that functional value proves to be a major predictor of ecotourist satisfaction, which in turn awakens intentions to return and pass on testimony through word of mouth. Meanwhile, social and emotional dimensions are forces motivating tourists to recommend destination areas [18].

In contrast, ref. [19] show that environmental knowledge has failed to influence the prediction not only of the purchasing attitude towards nature services, but also of the control of behavioural perception. This is reinforced by [1,4] when assessing the degree of perception and the intentions of public authorities regarding tourism in comparison with reality. In the region of Bihor, Romania, it was noticed that in a region represented by 100 administrative bodies, tourist perception stands out, followed by intention, and reality comes in last place (Table 1).

This observation, in the context of some European countries, is similar to the finding by [2], who argue that in some countries on the African continent, the ecotourism reserve areas presented in papers do not in reality exist. This finding is even greater in the Southern African Development Community region.

The term ecotourism is generally used in conjunction with terms such as protected area and nature-based tourism, and is considered to be the fastest growing segment in the tourism industry [20]. This understanding is in line with that [3,13], who believe that when tourists perceive environmentally friendly actions by residents, they experience the intrinsic state and identity of the destination as well as environmental concern, which consequently drives them to engage in environmentally friendly consumption, thus confirming the positive triangulation of stimulus, organism, and response.

Table 1. Tourism perception, intention, and reality in Bihor, Romania.

Factor	Description	Very Weak 0–25%	Weak 26–50%	Good 51–75%	Very Good 76–100%	Total Value
Perception	Tourism as a key element of economic development			75%		Good 75%
	Existence of tourist potential			75%		
Intention	Financial component provided (non-refundable)		44%			44%
Observed reality	Existence of areas for tourism development	30.66%				30.66%

Source: Adapted from [1].

The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) is a model that has been widely applied to assess intentions and current behaviours. It focuses primarily on cognitive factors but ignores the influence of emotional factors on behavioural intentions. This last element can become a weakness of the model, due to complexity in the decision-making process, which can involve a variety of factors, including emotional, social, and other psychological influences [21]. Ref. [13] suggest that the stimulus–organism–response framework can affect individuals’ cognitive and affective states, as an antecedent that leads to a series of behavioural reactions, positively or negatively affecting the degree of satisfaction resulting from lived experiences in the destination. Reflecting on this aspect, ref. [20] recognise that adopting wildlife value orientations in the context of ecotourism in protected areas helps decision-makers better understand how tourism communities relate and react to wildlife. From this perspective, understanding local residents’ orientation towards wildlife is important because if wildlife values are not aligned with wildlife conservation objectives, the whole process is doomed to failure.

In the same vein, ref. [22] understand that the perception of values positively affects tourist satisfaction and loyalty. In support of this argument, previous research has already revealed that the perception of values leads to favourable results in terms of satisfaction and behavioural intentions. This may mean that future consumer behaviour will be a product of the perception of the values of each tourist’s experience.

According to [10], attitudes appear to reveal cognitive and affective influences on final decision-making. The impacts of attitudes mediated by intentions presumably indicate that the opinion of potential tourists about the adverse impacts of human behaviour on the environment contributes to the formation of positive attitudes towards ecotourism. Therefore, the direct relationship between affective attitude and willingness to pay demonstrates the role of emotion in the process of satisfying ecotourism decision and desire.

In the context of ecotourism, ref. [23] provide further evidence, which reveals that tourists’ positive emotional experience during a trip is one of the determining factors of their satisfaction and future behaviour. However, according to [24] although tourists may have an interesting experience at the destination, they may not return because they prefer to discover new destinations instead. Nevertheless, they are likely to recommend it to friends or relatives.

Analogously, it is recognised that positive destination images are more likely to reach a high level of satisfaction, while negative images reach the highest level of dissatisfaction, which means that satisfied visitors will return to their favourite destinations [25,26].

The study carried out by [27] reveals that ecotourism holds great relevance in the empowerment of ecotourism participants as an instrument of economic and business development, in addition to the influence it exerts on cultural change, sustainability, and levels of involvement in tourism decision-making.

Given the increasing pressure on land and wildlife, there is a need for some additional rigor in the process of analysing ecotourism; the establishment of the concept of ecotourism as an expansion and refinement of links between tourism and conservation should be sought, built on the idea of using tourism for conservation, while deepening sustainability criteria [5]. Therefore, one may assume that ecotourism is designed to ensure positive feedback between tourism and conservation, leading to an understanding that both factors must strictly act together. It is clear to the present authors that once tourists are satisfied with travel service providers, they will share their unique and interesting experiences. Therefore, tourists may recommend destinations to family and friends and even post positive comments on the destination's website, which in turn stimulates the intentions of many to revisit.

2.2. Importance of the Strategic Path in Obtaining Competitive Advantage

Ref. [28] address three fundamental topics of ecotourism planning and management within the framework: the patterns of the importance of social relations for sustainable development; the values and discussions of different actors about sustainable development; and the policies and practices of ecotourism planning and management that are relevant for sustainability.

At this point, it is important to address the structural dimensions of social relations within local communities, and between outside actors, regarding ecotourism planning and management. It is also crucial to take into account what actors feel about these relations and their way of life. Considering all factors, it is valuable to examine the specific geographical context and community cases [28]. However, to do so, the study had to combine three fundamental aspects:

1. Discussion around the appropriate support of tourism;
2. Discussion regarding social and ecotourism resources;
3. Discussion around the decision-making process and management of ecotourism.

In recent years, there has been an increase in competition between ecotourism destinations. Each destination seeks to offer services that can best attract tourists [12]. However, the great challenge has been the combination of forces between attracting new customers and retaining the loyalty of old ones [29].

Ref. [30] argue that the competitiveness of tourist attractions is attributed to four main factors:

1. Support and resources, including the infrastructure of organizations and companies, promotional resources, and accessibility;
2. Key resources and attractions, including history and culture, topography, market relationships, and integrated activities;
3. Management of tourism offices, including resource management, organization, consultancy, marketing, and services;
4. Qualification criteria, including local environment and surroundings, costs, and safety.

It is clear that, regardless of the category, each factor presented is a resource and instrument of competitive advantage. Obviously, it may not be possible to bring together

all of these components, but if part of this set is available, the ecotourism development program will have a great chance of success [12].

The results of the study carried out by [31] around the competitive advantage of ecotourism destinations from the perspective of environmental management show that tourist attractions can be affected by environmental impacts, as well as by the quality of the environment itself, but that the competitiveness of the same attractions could be boosted by effective marketing activities.

According to [32] most governments are still operating without a strategic model capable of leading ecotourism towards sustainable development (Figure 1). However, nature itself offers potential that can be used as a scientific information source to develop strategic models for this sector.

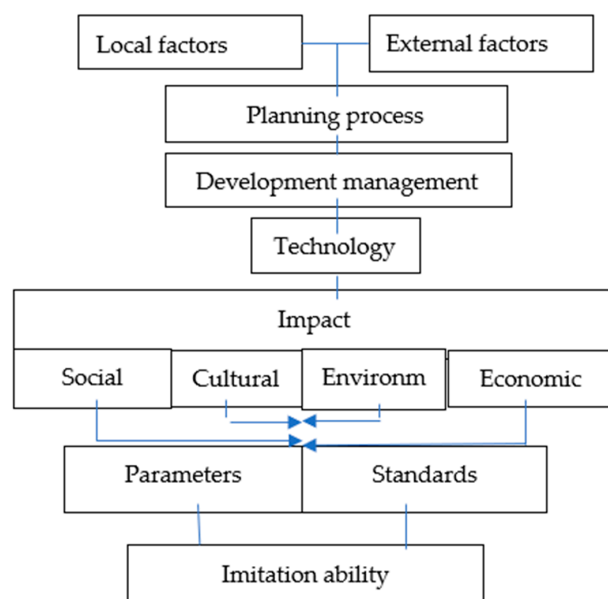


Figure 1. Strategic conduct capacity. Source: Adapted from [32].

Based on the understanding of these authors, it is possible to assume that the model of a strategic plan, detailing both the objective and the conceptual system, can be presented in the form of physical movements or images, or in the context of mathematical formulas.

Ref. [33] in his research, shows that marketing and the local population combined ensure the development of exemplary services, providing accommodation, food, transportation, public relations, and advertising. Therefore, it is clear that partnerships with social networks are crucial for ecotourism development.

Ref. [34] notices that, in Porter's model, involving logistics issues, the concern seems to lie in the way materials are managed. In the particular case of the ecotourism sector, materials may include the natural environment and the local culture. At this point, some studies understand local resources as being logistical elements [3]. Operations, in turn, are concerned with the transformation of raw materials into finished products. Here, in relation to ecotourism, in broader discussions, the final product would be nothing more than the service offered to ecotourism clients.

2.3. Cooperation Perspective as a Reference for Sustainable Ecotourism

Rivers as water sources play an important role in the economic and social life of both rural and urban communities [6]. However, the lack of studies on the cooperative relationship between rivers and residents' behavioural factors has created considerable gaps in the understanding of the interdependence between human beings and nature.

In this line of understanding, ref. [2] notice that there is a great variety in the use of the water flow of the Okavango Delta that runs between countries such as Angola, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Namibia, with greater use in some and less in others, resulting from the great disparity between perception, intention, and reality.

According to [6], the level of quality of life that can exist involving people and the environment is determined based on the quality of the habitat area. Therefore, with the understanding of the connection between these factors and the health of life, this relationship has received global attention in recent years.

Ref. [35] believe that reference centres focused on ecotourism studies open up the possibility of providing students from different areas of knowledge with the means to deepen and reflect on the universe of ecotourism. Strategically, this mechanism can reveal itself as a process of psychological and conceptual enthronement in the minds of societies, bringing to the debate issues related to the interest of markets in ecotourism products and services and highlighting the aspects of planning and management, which lead to economic, social, and environmental contexts as factors moving ecotourism forward.

The interpretation of the relationship between the three factors is highly complex. However, it is capable of bringing recognition to the importance of the attention that must be paid to respect for values, which is consensually the determining condition for transforming ecotourism into a safe alternative for improving the living conditions of disadvantaged communities [36]. Here, criticism is raised regarding the positioning of political power structures and non-governmental organizations, who often appear to be experts in managing ecotourism processes. In this particular case, according to [37] political values have been imposed in an authoritarian manner, leading to the failure of the inclusiveness process, particularly in the context of establishing leadership, empowering communities, setting objectives, organizational decentralization, and sharing results, thus breaking the principles of sustainability.

The phenomenon of tourism industrialization, both nationally and globally, is the result of a productive vision of tourism actions, which has led to a concentration in ecotourism areas, not only of suppliers, but also of investors corresponding to the demands of the development process [38]. According to [33], several studies linked to natural resource cooperative strategies have been carried out within the scope of ecotourism development. In the United States, for example, a relationship was established between natural resource cooperatives and organizations for the development of ecotourism, recognising that the participation of local populations, their organization, and the development of knowledge produce tourism development.

This understanding was reinforced by [39] when in their research, they came to understand tourism as an activity that, when supported by other economic aspects, contributes significantly to the development of many countries and has a special importance in the development process of rural areas.

In the strategic context, two important perspectives must be taken into consideration. First, a strong objective and the knowledge that local populations are available for active participation and acting on this notion are the solid foundation upon which sustainable development must be built [40]. Second, the concepts of various non-governmental organizations encourage discipline in conducting activities of various kinds despite some contradictory values. Additionally, experts can be called upon to conduct research activities on the environment and ecology. These combinations enable systems to determine the environmental and ecological capacity to develop ecotourism in these destinations, typically counting on traditional services [41].

Ref. [42] reveal some successful factors for the development of ecotourism in peripheral areas. These, in the authors' view, include the presence of a leader, partnerships,

identification and promotion of natural attractions, government support, marketing, research and education, local involvement, infrastructure, and financial support. As in all walks of life, it is clear that the establishment of partnerships is crucial for the success of ecotourism [43]. However, there are factors that must be ensured before seeking partnerships. Among several, the following can be highlighted: access routes, accommodation, communication, and transportation networks [44].

At the local level, government procedures (Figure 2), combined with reward factors for the development of ecotourism projects and the level of participation of local populations, are decisive for the sustainability of cooperation in this area [45]. However, the authors believe that, when it comes to national parks, the main construction actors are local governments. Therefore, in developing countries, the resource limitations associated with conflicts of interest make relations between the parties more complex. In attempt to mitigate such complexity, ref. [32] suggest that higher education institutions should be called upon to offer assistance by designing ecotourism training programs for local residents, while at the same time creating discussions with important community agents, with a view to drawing up development plans for the tourism industry, which in its portfolio could include pastoralism, fishing, and artisanal agriculture, with ecotourism as an important part of this industry.

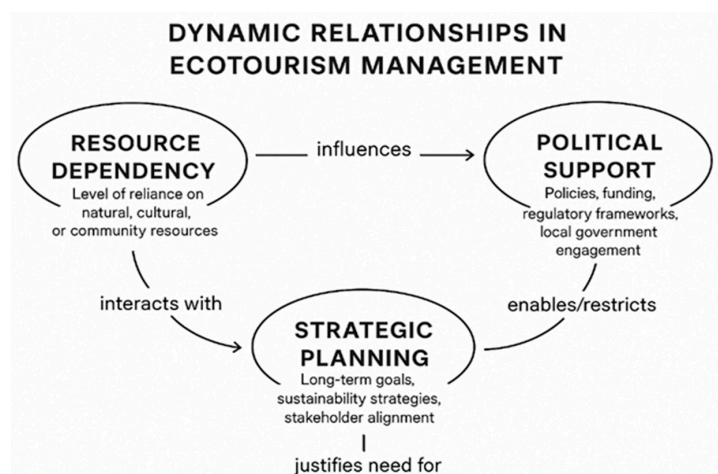


Figure 2. Interdependence. Source: Own elaboration.

Clearly, natural resources are key factors in ecotourism development. However, from the perspective of [46] the approach to this component must be based on a collaborative, community-oriented plan. This is the only way to convert ecotourism into an instrument of sustainable development, regardless of the country, region, or community.

Ref. [47] define rural ecotourism as a set of multidimensional activities that occur through the combination of natural tourism, adventure and sports, food tourism, wine tourism, and cultural tourism. This understanding indicates the importance of the involvement of other components of economic life, which can include governments, private agents, non-governmental organizations, and the general population.

Ref. [48] acknowledge that overdevelopment has negative effects on the natural environment, bringing serious environmental problems. In contrast, ecotourism is based on ecological and economic gains and the awareness that economic benefits cannot be achieved at the expense of the environment.

Ecotourism offers attractive opportunities to generate revenue without violating existing norms. Tourists can interact with the natural environment in a pleasant and sustainable way, while tourism operators ensure revenue generation. This role of ecotourism is also

educational, because it can shape people’s perceptions of the environment, thus reducing the rate of environmental destruction [49].

According to [50], local, regional, and national public authorities, in cooperation with non-governmental organizations, can promote cultural change and slow down day-to-day dynamics by introducing good practices in the implementation of sustainable rural tourism. Undoubtedly, as time goes by, ecotourism development programs are increasingly proving to be a solution capable of bringing about positive changes in the tourism industry as a whole [51]. Therefore, although there are several definitions surrounding sustainability and development, the greatest consensus lies in the one that highlights the satisfaction of current needs without compromising the ability to satisfy the same needs in the future [52].

Ref. [53] stress that despite the studies investigating this aspect, the conceptualization of rural tourism remains difficult, and this has implications for the planning and management of rural tourism itself.

The level of sustainability of a tourism destination depends on its operational practices and the quality of services offered (Figure 3). Indicators can help measure the results achieved compared to operational standards for destination managers, based on the certification system, and aid in controlling the impacts of ecotourism [54].

Ref. [55] when understanding this process, recognise that the collaboration system will be even more important for the education of new markets, because many new travellers have different expectations regarding the services that should be available to them. This, in the authors’ opinion, implies carrying out studies to determine what message should be conveyed to visitors and what their needs are. Here, tourism development should always be analysed from the perspective of networks, collaborative governance, and partnership.

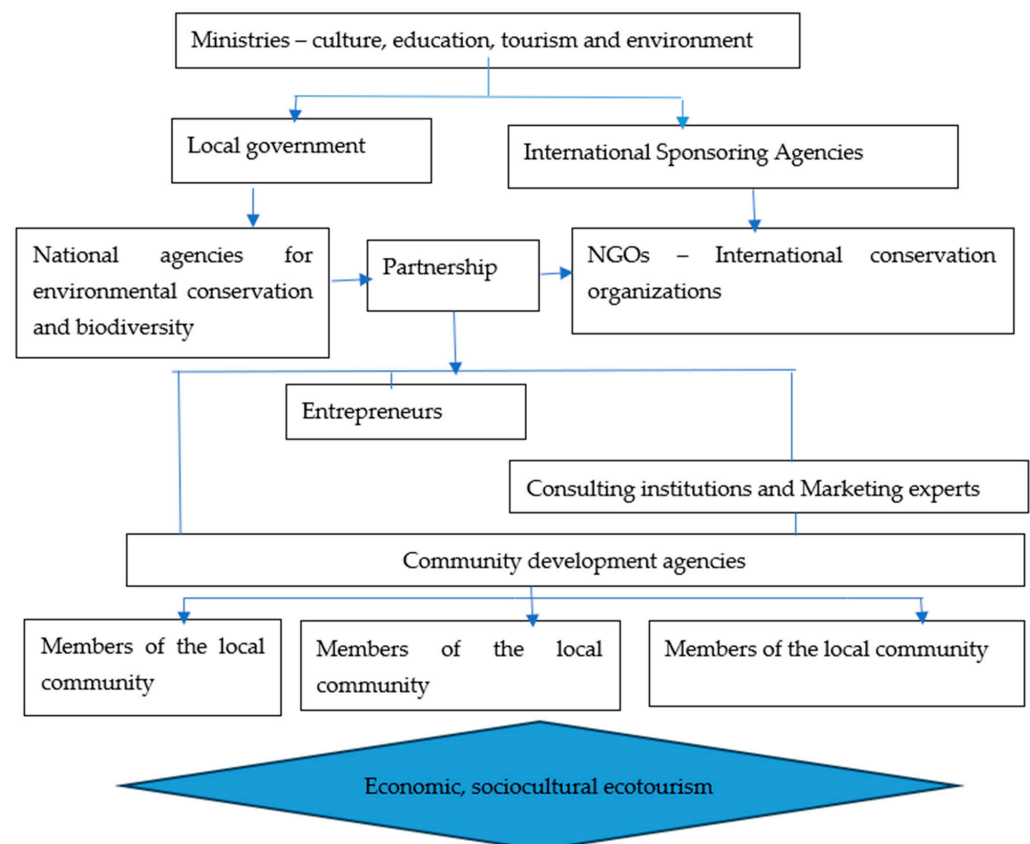


Figure 3. Suggested cooperation model. Source: Adapted from [56,57].

There are several stakeholders with different interests in the ecotourism development process. In the organizational context, these stakeholders may be distributed and

hierarchized according to the power of influence they exert on the process. In this sense, according to [56] the first group includes central and local governments and dependencies involving the tourism industry, various government departments, community organizations, non-governmental organizations, and independent individuals. The second group acts as a support group. In addition to ecotourists, this group includes academic scholars and sponsors. All of these stakeholders should be adequately represented in the design of the ecotourism development plan [58].

The determining factor for the success of any ecotourism development program lies in the creation of solid partnerships between stakeholders capable of contributing to the achievement of the most varied conservation objectives and the maintenance of common interests [57]. According to the author, the solidification of this relationship is crucial, although differences in objectives can create conflicts of interest. Ref. [58] argue that, considering the great difficulties of coexistence between these groups, communication is the indispensable factor to ensure sustainable collaboration between large volumes of stakeholders, creating a system for sharing resolutions that aim to satisfy collective needs. Local communities are among the key stakeholders that must inevitably be included in the ecotourism planning process [56]. However, defining the process regarding the involvement of communities is not enough to ensure success. Promoters must begin by understanding that local communities are not a collective of individuals sharing the same needs and desires. Even in numerically smaller communities, there will be a diversity of thoughts, with a variety of perspectives and experiences.

The model refers to governments. However, the selection of key stakeholders is not based solely on the fact that particular individuals are part of the government body. In a special way, they are those officials or individuals with leadership positions within the agencies of the state apparatus, who also demonstrate some concern with the planning of ecotourism development, and whose attention is focused on factors such as natural resources, education, protected areas, tourism, transport, and financial funds [57]. Here it is understood that the people to be involved in ecotourism development programs are those mobilized from the three levels, national, regional, and local, and they may be composed mainly of people from the local level.

Some people believe that the involvement of non-governmental organizations is unnecessary. However, they play a crucial role, because by using their experiences, they become elements of reconciliation in the negotiation process between the parties [59]. Local populations have the ability to create moments of face-to-face and peaceful discussions, thus reducing the possibility of conflicts, while establishing consensus mechanisms. Furthermore, the importance of these non-governmental institutions is not limited to creating stable negotiation environments. According to [60], these organizations also have the ability to advise, train, and establish partnerships with other community and tourism agents. As a whole, the tourism industry has a wide variety of groups of people, including travel agents, restaurant owners, tour guides and others, most of them in the guise of private sector entrepreneurs.

2.4. Influence of Resilience on the Impact of Ecotourism

Although in isolation, issues related to the lifestyles of communities and ensuring sustainability have been discussed in tourism research. Some studies take a more holistic view with regard to the integration of the standard of living and sustainable development of rural communities. At this point, due to limited access to basic factors, such as education services and employment opportunities, rural communities lag behind when compared to their counterparts in urban communities in any country, being subject to their own resilience capacity [61].

Evidence suggests that resilience against threats from climate change and social, economic, and governmental life allows for the development and solidification of proactive measures in the conservation of socio-ecological factors [62]. Ref. [63] notice that local communities play a crucial role in the implementation of tourism in reserved areas. The ideas of these communities contribute significantly to the establishment of management that best adapts to each context, thus making environmental protection a reality.

With these limitations, competition and globalization have become a challenge for ecotourism destinations, particularly in the efforts to quickly introduce products, services, and concepts to provide spaces for new demand, which requires a sustainable management response to innovations [64]. In this context, it may be understood that the future of innovation management revolves around how institutions can ensure the operational readiness of innovations to face future challenges.

Ref. [61] emphasizes that one of the most important sectors for development is ecotourism, with its investment being seen as a mechanism for empowering marginalized populations, falling under the heading of previously underprivileged individuals. However, the private sector, which often exhibits a lack of desire for investments in tourism businesses, raises some concerns regarding the advancement of tourism in rural areas. The author argues that the complexity and uncertainty regarding land appropriation, weak infrastructural support, the lack of a market for existing tourism, and the decisions of financial institutions not to take risks are factors that generate doubts.

Ref. [65] believe that tourism strategies should include large databases, capable of mapping the potential for tourism and strengthening tourism in its various aspects. These databases would consist of a vast data structure with the capacity to capture large-scale information and allow for longitudinal reflection in real time. In fact, in this regard, the great development of technology for analysing large databases has revolutionized tourism research. However, despite the advances, throughout the process, there have also been setbacks that must be taken into account. For example, the emergence of the Coronavirus disease and its results have profoundly changed the way nations, individually or collectively, manage plans and operations [66]. This change has obviously had a negative influence on global economic growth, to which tourism contributed significantly until recently. In this regard, the World Tourism Organization noted in 2020 that, apart from the travel industries, tourism has been the most affected.

In this sense, ref. [63] explain that the World Tourism Organization, concerned about this fact, has tried to encourage those activities that aim to achieve goals that are included in the global agenda for sustainable development. Sustainable ecotourism, as a development factor that demonstrates universal consensus, is promoted here as one of the fundamental routes for socioeconomic advancement. This particular sector has found its niche in the development models of several countries.

In the general context, tourism today promotes the standard of living of the population. The improvement in the quality of life of the populations in these areas is the result of the full-time operation of tourism. Therefore, due to the continuous development and progress of civilization, the standard of human living and the requirements for a quality life are gradually improving, and communities pay more attention to ecology and tourism. This perception has led to the rapid development of ecotourism, based on a better ecological environment, almost everywhere in the world [67].

This estimation has seemed to gain strength with the most recent advances in data technology and analysis, which have provided innovative mechanisms to the field of research, including unconventional data sources with a wide range of information, and have offered new opportunities for ecotourism research. At this point, the digital transformation that has taken place in the most recent era of the technological revolution has completely

changed the cycle of the tourism ecosystem, and has also been the cause of change in the cyber and visual cultures of tourists [68].

According to [67], farmers in communities surrounding reserves are among the main targets of biodiversity protection. However, the establishment of nature reserves has changed the traditional lifestyle of farmers and intensified the contradiction between ecological protection and the sustainable standard of living of the farming communities. Active participation and agreements with local communities in the management of sustainable ecotourism are crucial to the success of these programs. The participation of the population in the definition of indicators and the monitoring process is essential, because tourism has direct consequences on the lives of these communities. Therefore, they are undoubtedly in a position to better assess impacts and decide the level of activities that meet the expectations of local communities [54].

According to [69], this development that has been occurring in the reserves has improved the peasants' abilities to cope with the fragile economic environment and plays an important role in alleviating the contradiction between the traditional lifestyle and ecological protection in the reserves. This reflection leads to an understanding that the way in which the healthy development of tourism is promoted makes it possible to improve the standard of living of the residents, while reducing the level of interference of local residents in the animal habitat. It appears that this has proven to be one of the most important factors in balancing development and protection.

Ref. [54] argue that, throughout the process of developing tourism destinations with national parks, two major factors can be created:

1. Destination competitive performance;
2. The high quality of factors introducing ecotourism elements in national parks.

In this particular sense, the issue of the competitiveness of ecotourism destinations is becoming increasingly important, especially in countries and regions highly dependent on tourism, taking into account the fact that achieving expectations may not be enough to maintain customers. The quality of products and services must go beyond ecotourists' expectations.

Ref. [55] show that there is a process of discovering previously unseen places. The fact that Google Location can reveal some undervalued and not-yet-explored areas represents an opportunity, but also a challenge in terms of infrastructure and converting these same places into a source of sustainability for hosts' and visitors' relationships.

Ref. [35] emphasize that, although the scientific field presents a diverse set of concepts surrounding ecotourism, these, at the end of their contradictory observations, reach a common denominator that presents ecotourism as a way out for development, but one dependent on the existence of three fundamental pillars:

1. Ensuring environmental preservation;
2. The creation of conditions for environmental education;
3. Providing benefits to host communities.

This perception justifies the argument of [29], who suggest that excessive use can generate conflicts between users. Thus, conflicts between the use of ecotourism and the need for conservation arise when the nature-based industry becomes dependent on access to and the use of resources in protected areas.

Ecotourism involves a combination of conservation and tourism, with a view to benefiting communities, especially those focused on environmental sustainability [30]. Therefore, the operationalization of ecotourism, in its essence, minimizes negative impacts on the natural and sociocultural environment, contributing to the conservation of rural areas.

According to [70], the literature reveals two main mechanisms for serving ecotourism:

1. From the perspective of conservation organizations, ecotourism must be viewed as nature-based tourism activities that have links with sustainable development. Its implementation must fulfil the requirements for the conservation of nature and the environment, seeking results beyond environmental costs.
2. Another approach, supported by community development organizations, understands ecotourism as community-based tourism, which plays an important role in creating a positive influence on the local economy and quality of life for people living below the poverty line.

Based on these definitions, ecotourism can be treated as either nature tourism or responsible tourism. However, many tourism service marketing researchers endorse the definition that presents ecotourism as time spent purposefully in the natural environment to interact, learn, and experience other cultures and economically support local people working towards ecosystem conservation [71].

3. Discussion

3.1. Emotional Experience, Value, and Satisfaction

The interpretation of [12] vision suggests that the combination of the recorded image with the impression obtained is not enough to guarantee positive feedback from the ecotourists. It is necessary that these two factors be accompanied by lived experiences in the destination. However, in terms of sustainability, these three factors do not constitute the basis for the development of ecotourism, because, in the understanding of [16], experience is the ultimate goal of the process. This cannot be achieved in a positive way if environmental problems are not resolved.

Pondering over the thinking of [17,18] leads to an understanding that there are other factors that motivate the practice of ecotourism. These are linked to economic, social, and emotional satisfaction. However, although the emotional context stands out among ecotourism practitioners, the economic factor acts as a barometer in assessing the degree of sustainability of projects in this tourism segment. Therefore, it can be assumed that the economic component determines all other factors. This understanding finds support in the work of [19], who report that environmental perception, which is theoretically seen as a primary element of ecotourism, has neither been able to sufficiently influence customers' purchasing decisions, nor has it served as an instrument to control behavioural perception.

In contrast, wildlife has its values that must be respected when practicing ecotourism, especially in protected areas [20]. Although in the economic context societies generally agree that ecotourism has several positive benefits, they also recognise that such benefits are concentrated within only two groups, highlighting government elites and a few owners of leading private businesses [72,73]. It is believed that this lack of awareness of sharing resources that by nature belong to society is the result of three important factors: First, a low level of involvement of local populations in the operationalization of projects in the sector. Second, a lack of inclusive management programs, leaving local members out of the decision-making process. Third, an absence of policies designed specifically for ecotourism, which could act as guidelines in the development and management principles in the sector.

Apart from all these factors, it is crucial to understand that in tourism terms, perception is viewed as a subjective image that is created in the mind of the individual or within a given community. However, in this particular case it refers to the representative of the government bodies [1,74]. Thus, intention, in turn, is an important component in determining the development of tourism or ecotourism destinations, which results from perception. Finally, reality is the factual and evident condition of the tourist area, resulting from the combination of a set of factors, with nature as the main element [1,75]. However, despite the sequential understanding of the factors, the research in general shows that

there is no agreement between the decisions taken and the intentions demonstrated. This disparity, in turn, negatively affects the reality observed in territories.

Based on this argument, the absorption of these values would allow decision-makers not only to better understand, but also to establish the best relationships between local communities, tourists, and wildlife, thus producing a positive image. Here, although others assume that the economic factor is the key factor, there is also a significant consensus around the idea that the greater the degree of positivity of the image, the greater the possibility of the ecotourism destination achieving high levels of customer satisfaction [25,26]. Clearly, these observations lead to the conclusion that both the emotional experience and the process of creating value and satisfaction occupy places of capital importance in influencing the development of ecotourism. This is based on the fact that the ability to capture, retain, and build loyalty among ecotourism customers is a strategic process built on value and experience as a distinct foundation.

3.2. Strategic Path and Competitive Advantage

In the context of environmental relations, several factors, such as parks and rivers, rural and urban residences, science and mental health, and university movements, when connected with nature and rivers, are pointed out as strategic factors that determine rural and urban development, bringing better quality not only in the lives of residents but also to the maintenance of nature itself [6,72].

When analysing the vision of [27] it is possible to believe that the combination of all these components with the three factors presented in the description of strategic planning produces a holistic characteristic, making its structure solid for the establishment of an ecotourism destination. Furthermore, by contextualizing social standards, identifying values while attempting to best integrate ecotourism promoters, the possibility of bringing programs closer to local populations is opened, thus allowing the positioning and implementation of projects with a perspective of long-term sustainability.

According to [37] research on ecotourism in southern Africa shows that communities have benefited economically in several ways, although without meeting expectations. Here, local populations have access to resources such as grass for grazing, meat, firewood, and water, which in some ways contribute to mitigating economic problems.

The discussion of the most varied aspects, such as tourism sustainability, the allocation of resources for social and ecotourism projects, and the establishment of an inclusive decision-making process, enables these ecotourism programs to develop a competitive advantage over other sectors within the same industry. This perception is in line with the work of [30], who, in their analysis of competitiveness, present not only organizational infrastructures, but also resource support, environmental management and respect, and integration of local personnel as key factors for achieving competitive levels.

Many African countries such as Cameroon, Ghana, Angola, and others have been identified as having great potential for economic development resulting from ecotourism. However, over the years, this sector has been affected by several fluctuations caused by the typical conditions of underdevelopment [73]. Admittedly, these countries have ecotourism potential, with a strong spillover capacity to benefit other countries, because such potential has the ability to stimulate the continent's economic development. However, for this vision to be achieved, it is necessary to ensure that the efforts designed for local economic development in these countries are implemented. Clearly, it is important that appropriate support policies are put in place to ensure that all stakeholders concerned with maximizing benefits are involved in the process [73].

In relation to strategic conduct, it is becoming increasingly evident that although nature provides ecotourism potential, taking advantage of such potential will remain to be

seen if governments and managers are not able to make strategic models available. This is in line with the work of [76], in their approach suggest a combination of efforts from both parties in the implementation of ecotourism programs.

For example, a practical lesson in this regard can be drawn from Mesomagoro in Ghana. There, in order to address the ecotourism situation, specialists had to come up with a strategic idea that involved convincing municipal and communal administrations that the sustainable exploitation of natural tourism resources must start with a strategy designed at a higher level, so that strategic guidelines can be decentralized vertically, from top to bottom, and then horizontally absorbed and implemented by local communities, with the supervision of other, more specialized stakeholders [77]. According to [78] the Mesomagoro strategy has significantly reduced concerns about destructive tourism. This is not simply because attention has shifted, but because in practice, all activities that tend to produce more harm than good for nature are avoided and combated [79]. Today, despite concerns about the clarity of the concept of sustainability, in practice, ecotourism in Mesomagoro remains a popular development strategy.

3.3. Cooperation Perspective and References for Sustainable Tourism

The literature shows that, as in other areas of economic life, it is not possible to achieve sustainability in ecotourism without beginning from resolving cooperation problems. Based on the approaches observed, cooperation must start from the internal context and then extend to the external context. This thinking seems to be in line with [33], who in his research understands that the implementation mechanism of ecotourism must foresee the existence of a leader, partnerships, and the capacity to identify and promote natural attractions, with support from governments, marketing specialists, research and education, and the involvement of local communities, within a solid infrastructure with guaranteed financial support.

The degree of economic importance of ecotourism is incalculable, although the literature shows that this factor varies from country to country, depending on the context and the capacity to exploit each market [80]. In Angola (Table 2), for example, despite the great difficulties the country is facing, including a lack of concrete data on controlled ecotourism areas, the records that are publicly available reveal an acceptable level of employability in these areas [81].

Table 2. Employment in protected areas in Angola.

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Employees	157,954	173,478	202,766	219,349	221,847	223,965
Men			107,745		112,516	113,547
Women			95,021		109,331	110,418

Source: Adapted from [80].

The statistics, although lacking some information, as can be seen in the table above, show that 13% of the national territory is composed of protected areas, employing an average of 200,000 people. This means that by increasing investment and improving the control system, many other vulnerable communities will find jobs and business alternatives in the sector.

In the social sphere, there are opportunities for interaction between park management and employees, which in turn open up a series of opportunities such as jobs, good working relationships, and the establishment of team problem-solving mechanisms [82].

Among the various social benefits derived from ecotourism, the most notable are interactions with tourists, the sale of artisanal products, and the projection of cultural

activities. However, unfortunately, according to [83] the high levels of unemployment and poverty have served as a barrier to taking advantage of these opportunities. Therefore, a unified involvement of all stakeholders is required to overcome the challenges.

The absorption of this connection between various stakeholders is built on the basis of an education system oriented towards two important aspects: First, to educate local populations about the potential of nature and the benefits of ecotourism. Second, to educate the promoting and supporting institutions, enabling such promoters to adopt mechanisms for exploiting resources in a sustainable way, preserving the possibilities of meeting the needs of future generations. This perception is reinforced by several studies, such as those of [33,35], linked to strategies of natural resource cooperatives, which have been carried out within the scope of ecotourism development. In the United States, for example, a relationship was established between natural resource cooperatives and organizations for the development of ecotourism. Clearly, even though management with objectives is the key to success, when it comes to ecotourism, participative management in decision-making stands out.

Furthermore, the quality of life and its close relationship with other distinct socio-economic and environmental factors have been the subject of tourism studies in several European cities such as Budapest, Vienna, and Bratislava [6]. According to the author, these studies confirm differences between communities that are surrounded by nature and those that reside outside this environment, with some showing a greater interest in natural environments. This clearly shows that the tourist movement is increasingly moving towards coexistence with nature, which consequently will contribute to the socio-economic development of regions and countries, leading to ecotourism synergy between the two contexts.

Despite the great social contrasts in the practice of ecotourism, there are cases in Africa that can serve as good examples. Here, we can highlight the management process of the Pilanesberg National Park, which has a great deal of involvement from local residents. One of the requirements of this management is to consult all communities before integrating animals such as lions into the park. In addition, the power to make decisions related to the allocation and distribution of financial resources obtained from the park has been given to the communities [37]. This strategy clearly allows resources to be directed towards development actions of the communities themselves, including improving their management capacities. Through this mechanism, it has been possible to improve the water supply system and build more comfortable schools. The fact that several members of the community hold important positions in the park management allows for better sharing of resources. For example, 10% of the entrance fees go to the local population, and small entrepreneurs receive contracts for the construction and maintenance of roads to facilitate access to the park.

Richtersveld National Park in the Northern Cape is another commendable example (Table 3). This park was designed on the basis of contracts between the local community and the Parks Council (PCC). Interestingly, here, the local population have the right to reside within the park and act as assistant park managers [40]. Furthermore, a goods and services industry was created near the park, and part of its package is social responsibility, including technical training programs to increase the work and management capacity of these populations.

Table 3. Perception of the social impact of ecotourism.

Impacts of Ecotourism	Yes	No
Allows people to enjoy socializing with tourists	96.9%	3.1%
Promotes meetings and the establishment of relationships with different peoples	80.8%	19.2%
Generates employment opportunities in rural areas	90.0%	10.0%
Allows communities to share typical traditional values	71.5%	28.5%
Prostitution rate increases	0.8%	99.2%
Promotes negative feelings about one's own culture	16.9%	83.1%
Attracts the creation of casinos in destinations	0.8%	99.2%
Creates barriers to access to local natural resources	13.1%	86.9%

Source: Adapted from [72].

The statistical results suggest that the best alternative for the development of rural areas is surely the establishment of more ecotourism markets, supported by a good triangular relationships between management, residents, and tourists, which has proven to be a solid source not only of employment, but also of socialization and preservation of the environment for the benefit of the communities of the destinations and their surroundings. This perception is in line with the findings [46].

The information retrieved from the World Tourism Organization's guidelines on environmental impacts shows that there is a need to develop in-depth research into both the environmental costs and benefits of ecotourism [84]. However, such guidelines leave a gap, as these fail to discuss the impacts of travel and the abilities of ecotourism to provide long-term benefits, just as [85] suggested. This particular contradiction provides the present authors with an understanding that, until there is cooperative agreement between governments, international agencies, entrepreneurs, and local communities, management strategies will neither be able to mitigate environmental impacts nor produce a balance between costs and benefits. This is in line with the work of [86] who suggests the need for a deep relationship between tourism and biological invasion, as well as the development of effective strategies to prevent damage.

3.4. Environmental Context

Environmentally, mechanisms were created to expand programs aimed at environmental conservation. The seriousness in implementing these programs led to the design of a regular package of financial subsidies to motivate the local population to participate in the sustainable development process [36,87]. In this combination of economic, social, and environmental perspectives, perhaps the most striking example is the Somkhanda community in the remotest areas of northern KwaZulu-Natal. This community has found a crucial formula for prosperity by adopting ecotourism as a way of life. In this community, the average income per resident has increased from ZAR 450 to ZAR 1300 as a result of ecotourism [32]. This is a great example of how ecotourism can combine the economic development of disadvantaged rural communities with environmental conservation.

From the perspective of [32] ecotourism serves as an instrument that mobilizes not only the additional value of products and services, but also returns on investments and job creation (Table 4). An in-depth analysis of this understanding reveals that money spent by tourists generates employment in the destination. However, it is the same money that gradually brings factors that contribute to the appreciation of this same destination.

Table 4. Summary of the triple impact of ecotourism.

Context	Impact
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The main products of nature are made profitable, giving rise to the mechanisms of animal protection and cultural preservation projects. • Introduction of ecotourism policies with a notion of financial responsibility. • Implementation of business projects based on responsibility towards nature, with a focus on caring for the community, animals, and the environment. • Employability that prioritises the local population, particularly people from areas with higher poverty rates. • Improving the local economy through jobs, selling food to tourists, creating attractive and profitable activities, and transactions involving various artisanal products.
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourages residents to integrate their cultural exhibition activities into ecotourism programs. • Improvement of the educational mechanisms on environmental knowledge and nature conservation. • It instructs employees on the management of natural resources, especially wildlife and ecosystems. • Promotes cultural exchange and learning between tourists and residents. • It serves as an incentive for organizing voluntary and solidarity activities for the benefit of communities.
Environmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It imposes respect for codes of conduct with a view to avoiding destruction of the environment. • Sponsors environmental preservation, animal protection, and forest repopulation projects in areas where ecotourism takes place. • It requires the adoption of environmentally acceptable behaviours for tourists when dealing with different ecosystems. • It takes into account the ecological capacity of destinations, organizing travel programs without crowding participants.

Source: Adopted from [36].

4. Conclusions

In summary, this review underscores the growing relevance of ecotourism as a vital alternative source of income for rural populations, particularly in regions where economic and social development opportunities remain limited and where marginalized groups are disproportionately impacted. The expansion of tourist destinations and the availability of affordable travel options have increased accessibility for a wider range of tourists, thereby enhancing the sector's revenue-generating potential. Simultaneously, however, this growth has intensified urban mobility, environmental noise, and industrial pressures—factors

that, paradoxically, have strengthened demand for ecotourism as a more sustainable and balanced alternative. The review also highlights that the success of ecotourism development depends not only on the presence of natural attractions but also on the effective integration of human resources, including infrastructure, transportation, hospitality services, and strong environmental management. These elements are essential to ensuring the long-term viability and sustainability of ecotourism initiatives.

Beyond research-related considerations, strategic planning stands out as a fundamental pillar for the effective development of ecotourism. Competitiveness in this sector is contingent upon multiple interrelated factors, chief among them the capacity of governance structures to design and implement internal processes aligned with long-term objectives. The success of these processes is intrinsically linked to the adaptability of planning models to local socio-environmental and cultural contexts. Within this framework, technology emerges as a strategic enabler, serving as a catalyst for embedding ecotourism initiatives into the social fabric. Technological tools facilitate the dissemination of cultural values and sustainable practices, promote inclusion, and support intercultural exchange—ultimately empowering communities to replicate successful models and stimulate measurable economic development at local and regional levels. While creativity and innovation are frequently associated with individual entrepreneurs and business associations, it is the responsibility of centralized decision-making bodies—particularly ministries overseeing tourism, environment, education, and culture—to initiate structural reforms. These institutions must be staffed by qualified professionals capable of formulating clear, coherent strategies that are not only scalable but also adaptable for implementation at the community level.

This study further emphasizes the importance of central agencies establishing strategic partnerships with strong international institutions to secure funding and ensure the sustainability of institutional relationships. In this context, sustainability becomes central and refers to two interdependent dimensions vital to the long-term viability of ecotourism. The first dimension involves the continuous engagement of the academic and scientific community in producing applied knowledge through research focused on the economic feasibility of ecotourism. This scientific foundation is essential for maintaining credibility and long-term support from international stakeholders. The second dimension relates to the role of national agencies dedicated to environmental and biodiversity conservation, which must design and implement effective policies in coordination with non-governmental conservation organizations. Such institutional collaboration not only ensures ecosystem preservation but also promotes sustainable entrepreneurship, facilitating the identification of business opportunities that align with conservation goals while generating employment and income for local communities. This, in turn, contributes to improving the economic and social living standards of rural populations.

Based on this review, it can be concluded that the strategic trajectory outlined represents not only the most promising but also the most coherent pathway towards the development of socioculturally responsible and economically viable ecotourism. This conclusion is reinforced by a critical insight: although emotional experiences at destinations significantly enhance tourist loyalty and the diffusion of ecotourism practices, the long-term sustainability of ecotourism initiatives depends fundamentally on the alignment of stakeholder interests, which ultimately translates into sustained economic performance. In this context, the integration of sustainability principles, the strategic conservation-oriented use of natural resources, and inclusive decision-making processes position ecotourism as a competitively advantageous segment within the broader tourism sector. From a practical perspective, the findings of this review offer valuable tools for systems and managers to evaluate the environmental and ecological carrying capacities of destinations, while

accounting for the specificities of traditional services. This, in turn, facilitates more effective public policy formulation and sustainable investment planning. Crucially, the review emphasizes that the success and durability of ecotourism depend on a solid strategic foundation—anchored in academic engagement for the production of applied knowledge, and in government action for the creation of regulatory frameworks and the assurance of international cooperation.

The present facts enable people to assume that the problem of combining perception, intention, and reality cannot be seen as a cultural or regional issue. Instead, it should be considered on a global scale. Therefore, the absolute effectiveness of the decision-making process by the authorities strongly depends on the intentions intrinsic to the process, affecting the implementation in the practical context.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that governments develop clear, cross-sectoral strategies and public policies to support ecotourism, including the creation of appropriate regulatory frameworks and local capacity-building. International collaboration and financing are also identified as essential mechanisms for enabling long-term sustainable projects. Moreover, the active participation of local communities and stakeholders should be considered central to success, ensuring social ownership, environmental conservation, and the equitable distribution of economic benefits.

This article contributes to the understanding of ecotourism as a strategic tool for sustainable development by highlighting the need to integrate ecological, human, and institutional factors within a multiscale and participatory approach. The combination of territorial planning, effective public policies, and community engagement is presented as a determinant of the sector's viability. In the administrative context, this study can serve as a basis in the search for mechanisms that can mitigate the imbalance between the perception of tourism, with particular attention to ecotourism, and individual or collective aspirations to subsequently improve practice in the real world.

In the academic field, future research should draw attention to the fact that if the problems of perception, intention, and reality are somehow universal, combined studies in the global context can be conducted so that global solutions can be found, with respect to the differences between contexts.

In addition, future research should also focus on empirical analyses of ecotourism's impact on communities and explore collaborative governance models that promote equity, resilience, and continuity. Greater emphasis on outcome measurement and the dissemination of scientific knowledge could further reinforce the legitimacy of ecotourism as a catalyst for sustainable development.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, P.R.C., J.F.B. and F.O.T.; methodology, P.R.C., J.F.B. and F.O.T.; software, P.R.C.; validation, P.R.C., J.F.B. and F.O.T.; formal analysis, J.F.B. and F.O.T.; investigation, J.F.B. and F.O.T.; writing—original draft preparation, P.R.C.; writing—review and editing, P.R.C., J.F.B. and F.O.T.; visualization, P.R.C., J.F.B. and F.O.T.; supervision, J.F.B. and F.O.T. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors on request.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- Herman, G.V.; Banto, N.; Herman, L.M.; Ungureanu, M.; Kostilníková, K.; Josan, I. Perception, reality and intent in Bihorean tourism, Romania. *Folia Geogr.* **2022**, *64*, 86.
- Cossengue, P.R.; Fraiz Brea, J.A.; Tavares, F.O. Challenges of ecotourism in Africa: The state of the art. In *Regenerative Tourism for Social Development*; Sousa, B., Arantes, L., Bhartiya, S., Eds.; IGI Global Scientific Publishing: Hershey, PA, USA, 2025; pp. 65–92. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Cossengue, P.R.; Fraiz Brea, J.A.; Tavares, F.O. The ecotourism in the Central Plateau of Angola: An exploratory analysis of destinations potential. *Afr. J. Hosp. Tour. Leis.* **2025**, *14*, 237–249. Available online: https://www.ajhtl.com/uploads/7/1/6/3/7163688/article_25_14_1_237-249.pdf (accessed on 20 January 2024).
- Taleb, T.S.; Hashim, N.; Zakaria, N. Mediating effect of innovation capability between entrepreneurial resources and micro business performance. *Bottom Line* **2023**, *36*, 77–100. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Stronza, A.L.; Hunt, C.A.; Fitzgerald, L.A. Ecotourism for conservation? *Annu. Rev. Environ. Resour.* **2019**, *44*, 229–253. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Mousazadeh, H. Investigating the sense of place attitudes to quality of life of urban communities nearby the river. *Folia Geogr.* **2022**, *64*, 104.
- Vidickienė, D.; Gedminaite-Raudone, Z.; Vilke, R.; Chmielinski, P.; Zobena, A. Barriers to start and develop transformative ecotourism business. *Eur. Countrys.* **2021**, *13*, 734–749. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Sharpley, R. Ecotourism: A consumption perspective. *J. Ecotour.* **2006**, *5*, 7–22. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Salman, A.; Jaafar, M.; Mohamad, D. A comprehensive review of the role of ecotourism in sustainable tourism development. *E-Rev. Tour. Res.* **2020**, *18*, 215–233.
- Hultman, M.; Kazemina, A.; Ghasemi, V. Intention to visit and willingness to pay premium for ecotourism: The impact of attitude, materialism, and motivation. *J. Bus. Res.* **2015**, *68*, 1854–1861. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Kaushal, V.; Sharma, S.; Reddy, G.M. A structural analysis of destination brand equity in mountainous tourism destination in Northern India. *Tour. Hosp. Res.* **2019**, *19*, 452–464. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Quynh, N.; Hoai, N.T.; Loi, N.V. The role of emotional experience and destination image on ecotourism satisfaction. *Span. J. Mark.-ESIC* **2021**, *25*, 312–332. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Hu, J.; Xiong, L.; Lv, X.; Pu, B. Sustainable rural tourism: Linking residents' environmentally responsible behaviour to tourists' green consumption. *Asia Pac. J. Tour. Res.* **2021**, *26*, 879–893. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Tung, V.W.S.; Ritchie, J.B. Exploring the essence of memorable tourism experience. *Ann. Tour. Res.* **2011**, *38*, 1367–1386. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Walter, U.; Edvardsson, B.; Öström, Å. Drivers of customers' service experiences: A study in the restaurant industry. *Manag. Serv. Qual.* **2010**, *20*, 236–258. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Samdin, Z.; Abdullah, S.I.N.W.; Khaw, A.; Subramaniam, T. Travel risk in the ecotourism industry amid COVID-19 pandemic: Ecotourists' perceptions. *J. Ecotour.* **2021**, *21*, 266–294. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Carvache-Franco, M.; Perez-Orozco, A.; Carvache-Franco, O.; Viquez-Paniagua, A.G.; Carvache-Franco, W. The perceived value in ecotourism related to satisfaction and loyalty: A study from Costa Rica. *Geogr. Pannonica* **2020**, *24*, 221–228. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Carrascosa-López, C.; Carvache-Franco, M.; Carvache-Franco, W. Perceived value and its predictive relationship with satisfaction and loyalty in ecotourism: A study in the Posets-Maladeta Natural Park in Spain. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 7860. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Zhang, X.V.; Chan, S.H.G. Do knowledge and experience value affect green tourism activity participation and buying decision? A case study of natural dyeing experience in China. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 8579. [[CrossRef](#)]
- KC, B.; Min, J.; Serenari, C. Segmenting wildlife value orientations to mitigate human–wildlife conflict for ecotourism development in protected areas. *Tour. Plan. Dev.* **2021**, *19*, 1–18. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Zhang, Y.; Wong, I.A.; Duan, X.; Chen, Y.V. Craving better health? Influence of socio-political conformity and health consciousness on goal-directed rural-eco tourism. *J. Travel Tour. Mark.* **2021**, *38*, 511–526. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Brumatti, P.N.M.; Rozendo, C. Parques Nacionais, turismo e governança: Reflexões acerca das concessões dos serviços turísticos no Brasil. *Rev. Bras. Pesqui. Tur.* **2021**, *15*, e-2119. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Roseta, P.; Sousa, B.B.; Roseta, L. Determiners in the consumer's purchase decision process in ecotourism contexts: A Portuguese case study. *Geosciences* **2020**, *10*, 224. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Boo, S.; Busser, J.; Baloglu, S. A model of customer-brand based equity and its application to multiple destinations. *Tour. Manag.* **2009**, *30*, 219–231. [[CrossRef](#)]
- King, C.; Chen, N.; Funk, D.C. Exploring destination image decay: A study of sport tourists' destination image change after event participation. *J. Hosp. Tour. Res.* **2015**, *39*, 3–31. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Shafiee, M.M.; Tabaeerian, R.A.; Tavakoli, H. The effect of destination image on tourist satisfaction, intention to revisit and WOM. In *Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on e-Commerce in Developing Countries: With Focus on E-Tourism*, Singapore, 15–16 April 2016; pp. 1–8.
- Palmer, N.J.; Chuamuangphan, N. Governance and local participation in ecotourism: Community-level ecotourism stakeholders in Chiang Rai province, Thailand. *J. Ecotour.* **2018**, *17*, 320–337. [[CrossRef](#)]

28. Bornhorst, T.; Ritchie, J.B.; Sheehan, L. Determinants of tourism success for DMOs and destinations: An empirical examination of stakeholders' perspective. *Tour. Manag.* **2010**, *31*, 572–589. [[CrossRef](#)]
29. Yacob, M.R.; Radam, A.; Shuib, A.; Samarahan, K.; Sarawak, M. A contingent valuation study of marine parks ecotourism: The case of Pulau Payar and Pulau Redang in Malaysia. *J. Sustain. Dev.* **2009**, *2*, 95–105. [[CrossRef](#)]
30. Shiunn, M.; Han, Y.; Ru, Y. A study of the key success factors of the ecotourism industry in Taiwan. *Afr. J. Bus. Manag.* **2011**, *5*, 627–640.
31. Cater, E. Ecotourism as a western construct. *J. Ecotourism* **2006**, *5*, 23–39. [[CrossRef](#)]
32. Fitriasari, E.T.; Kistanto, N.; Yuwanto, Y.; Yuwono, T. Policy strategy beyond ecotourism development. *Econ. Dev. Anal. J.* **2019**, *8*, 264–278. [[CrossRef](#)]
33. Shemshad, M.; Malek Mohammadi, I. Analysis of factors affecting the ecotourism development. *Int. J. Archit. Urban Dev.* **2012**, *2*, 19–24.
34. Chi, N.T.K. Understanding the effects of eco-label, eco-brand, and social media on green consumption intention in ecotourism destinations. *J. Clean. Prod.* **2021**, *321*, 128995. [[CrossRef](#)]
35. Neiman, Z.; Saraceni, R.F.; Geerdink, S. Levantamento quali-quantitativo da produção científica sobre Ecoturismo no Brasil. *Rev. Bras. Ecotur.* **2010**, *3*, 528–555. [[CrossRef](#)]
36. Butarbutar, R.; Soemarno, S. Environmental effects of ecotourism in Indonesia. *J. Indones. Tour. Dev. Stud.* **2013**, *1*, 97. [[CrossRef](#)]
37. Wang, C.; Cater, C.I.; Low, T. Political Challenges in Community based Ecotourism. *J. Sustain. Tour.* **2016**, *24*, 1555–1568. [[CrossRef](#)]
38. Buzoianu, O.A.C.; Frâncu, L.G.; Vasilache, P.C.; Gombos, C.C. Perspective of rural tourism in the European tourism market. In *7th BASIQ International Conference on New Trends in Sustainable Business and Consumption*; Pamfilie, R., Dinu, V., Tachiciu, L., Plesea, D., Vasiliu, C., Eds.; ASE: Bucharest, Romania, 2021; pp. 66–72. [[CrossRef](#)]
39. Puška, A.; Pamucar, D.; Stojanović, I.; Cavallaro, F.; Kaklauskas, A.; Mardani, A. Examination of the sustainable rural tourism potential of the Brčko district of Bosnia and Herzegovina using a fuzzy approach. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 583. [[CrossRef](#)]
40. Nsukwini, S.; Bob, U. The socio-economic impacts of ecotourism in rural areas: A case study of Nompondo and the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park (HiP). *Afr. J. Hosp. Tour. Leis.* **2016**, *5*, 1–15.
41. Sangpikul, A. Ecotourism impacts on the economy, society and environment of Thailand. *J. Rev. Glob. Econ.* **2017**, *6*, 302–312. [[CrossRef](#)]
42. Da Costa Rodrigues, P.; de Andrade, M.R. Licenciamento ambiental: Uma análise entre desenvolvimento econômico e conservação. *Res. Soc. Dev.* **2023**, *12*, e14512943365. [[CrossRef](#)]
43. Maslovskaja, O.; Kopeva, A.; Petrova, E.; Ivanova, O.; Khrapko, O. Development of ecotourism infrastructure at protected areas of Primorsky Krai. *IOP Conf. Ser. Mater. Sci. Eng.* **2020**, *890*, 012002. [[CrossRef](#)]
44. Muhamad, M.; Ahmad, A.B.; Supriyadi, H. The influence of sustainable ecotourism infrastructure on local government policy in the national strategic tourism area of Yogyakarta. *J. Ilm. Ilmu Terapan Univ. Jambi* **2025**, *9*, 292–312. [[CrossRef](#)]
45. Meng, J.; Long, Y.; Lefeng, S. Stakeholders' evolutionary relationship analysis of China's national park ecotourism development. *J. Environ. Manag.* **2022**, *316*, 115188. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
46. Chan, R.; Bhatta, K.D. Ecotourism planning and sustainable community development: Theoretical perspectives for Nepal. *South Asian J. Tour. Herit.* **2013**. Available online: <https://hub.hku.hk/handle/10722/190525> (accessed on 20 January 2024).
47. An, W.; Alarcón, S. Rural tourism preferences in Spain: Best-worst choices. *Ann. Tour. Res.* **2021**, *89*, 103210. [[CrossRef](#)]
48. Ren, J.; Su, K.; Chang, Y.; Wen, Y. Formation of environmentally friendly tourist behaviors in ecotourism destinations in China. *Forests* **2021**, *12*, 424. [[CrossRef](#)]
49. De, U.K.; Chauhan, K. Degradation of forest and biodiversity in Sariska National Park, India and the responsible factors. *Int. J. Environ. Sustain. Dev.* **2015**, *14*, 398–426. [[CrossRef](#)]
50. Epuran, G.; Tescașiu, B.; Tecău, A.S.; Ivasciuc, I.S.; Candrea, A.N. Permaculture and downshifting—Sources of sustainable tourism development in rural areas. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 230. [[CrossRef](#)]
51. Zolfani, S.H.; Sedaghat, M.; Maknoon, R.; Zavadskas, E.K. Sustainable tourism: A comprehensive literature review on frameworks and applications. *Econ. Res.-Ekonom. Istraž.* **2015**, *28*, 1–30. [[CrossRef](#)]
52. Gavinolla, M.R.; Kaushal, V.; Livina, A.; Swain, S.K.; Kumar, H. Sustainable consumption and production of wildlife tourism in Indian tiger reserves: A critical analysis. *Worldw. Hosp. Tour. Themes* **2021**, *13*, 95–108. [[CrossRef](#)]
53. Rosalina, P.D.; Dupre, K.; Wang, Y. Rural tourism: A systematic literature review on definitions and challenges. *J. Hosp. Tour. Manag.* **2021**, *47*, 134–149. [[CrossRef](#)]
54. Eddyono, F.; Darusman, D.; Sumarwan, U.; Sunarminto, F. Optimization model: The innovation and future of e-ecotourism for sustainability. *J. Tour. Futures* **2021**, *11*, 96–113. [[CrossRef](#)]
55. Templeton, A.J.; Goonan, K.; Fyall, A. COVID-19 and its impact on visitation and management at US national parks. *Int. Hosp. Rev.* **2021**, *35*, 240–259. [[CrossRef](#)]
56. Kenawy, E. Collaborative Approach for Developing a More Effective Regional Planning Framework in Egypt: Ecotourism Development as Case Study. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK, 2015.

57. Romero-Brito, T.P.; Buckley, R.C.; Byrne, J. NGO partnerships in using ecotourism for conservation: Systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLoS ONE* **2016**, *11*, e0166919. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
58. Nugroho, I.; Pramukanto, F.H.; Negara, P.D.; Purnomowati, W.; Wulandari, W. Promoting the rural development through the ecotourism activities in Indonesia. *Am. J. Tour. Manag.* **2016**, *5*, 9–18. Available online: <http://article.sapub.org/10.5923.j.tourism.20160501.02.html> (accessed on 20 January 2024).
59. Susilo, P.; Diharto, A.K. The development of halal ecotourism destination: Context of business collaboration and mutual trust. *J. Environ. Manag. Tour.* **2018**, *9*, 325–333. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
60. Wondirad, A.; Tolkach, D.; King, B. Stakeholder collaboration as a major factor for sustainable ecotourism development in developing countries. *Tour. Manag.* **2020**, *78*, 104024. [CrossRef]
61. Ramaano, A.I. Potential of ecotourism as a mechanism to buoy community livelihoods: The case of Musina Municipality, Limpopo, South Africa. *J. Bus. Socioecon. Dev.* **2021**, *1*, 47–70. [CrossRef]
62. Jamaliah, M.M.; Powell, R.B. Ecotourism resilience to climate change in Dana Biosphere Reserve, Jordan. *J. Sustain. Tour.* **2018**, *26*, 519–536. [CrossRef]
63. Da Silva, G.K.M.S.; Lima, G.F.C.; Da Silva, E. Sítio Arqueológico Itacoatiaras do Ingá: Do turismo prático ao ecoturismo como alternativa de conservação. *Tur. Visão Ação* **2021**, *24*, 135–154. [CrossRef]
64. Fennell, D.A. Ecotourism and the myth of indigenous stewardship. *J. Sustain. Tour.* **2008**, *16*, 129–149. [CrossRef]
65. Ismail, F.; Imran, A.; Khan, N.; Qureshi, M.I. Past, present and future of ecotourism: A systematic literature review from last decade. *Stud. Appl. Econ.* **2021**, *39*, 1–13. [CrossRef]
66. Gabriel-Campos, E.; Werner-Masters, K.; Cordova-Buiza, F.; Paucar-Caceres, A. Community eco-tourism in rural Peru: Resilience and adaptive capacities to the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change. *J. Hosp. Tour. Manag.* **2021**, *48*, 416–427. [CrossRef]
67. Shi, H.; Zhang, L.; Song, B.; He, C. The impact of ecotourism on local rural households' livelihood around Wolong Nature Reserve. *For. Econ. Rev.* **2022**, *4*, 2–18. [CrossRef]
68. Mellon, V.; Bramwell, B. Protected area policies and sustainable tourism: Influences, relationships and co-evolution. *J. Sustain. Tour.* **2016**, *24*, 1369–1386. [CrossRef]
69. Mondal, S.; Samaddar, K. Responsible tourism towards sustainable development: Literature review and research agenda. *Asia Pac. Bus. Rev.* **2021**, *27*, 229–266. [CrossRef]
70. Scheyvens, R. International development and tourism geographies. *Tour. Geogr.* **2024**, 1–11. [CrossRef]
71. Rathnayake, R.M.W. Willingness to pay for a novel visitor experience: Ecotourism planning at Kawdulla National Park in Sri Lanka. *Tour. Plan. Dev.* **2016**, *13*, 37–51. [CrossRef]
72. Gottwald, S.; Brenner, J.; Janssen, R.; Albert, C. Using Geodesign as a boundary management process for planning nature-based solutions in river landscapes. *Ambio* **2021**, *50*, 1477–1496. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
73. Harilal, V.; Tichaawa, T.M. Community Perceptions of the Economic Impacts of Ecotourism in Cameroon. *Afr. J. Hosp. Tour. Leis.* **2020**, *9*, 959–978. [CrossRef]
74. Li, Y.; Sun, Q.; Bandara, Y.M.W.Y.; Sharma, K.; Hicks, J.; Basu, P.K. The Economic Impact of Ecotourism on Regional China: Further Evidence from Yunnan and Sichuan Provinces. *Glob. Bus. Rev.* **2018**, *19*, 533–542. [CrossRef]
75. Boulhila, S.; Alouat, M.; Rezzaz, M.A.; Schmitz, S. Towards a Development Model of Local Cultural Tourism Through the Involvement of Local Actors (Province of Constantine, Algeria). *Geoj. Tour. Geosites* **2022**, *40*, 9–19. Available online: <https://hdl.handle.net/2268/267071> (accessed on 20 January 2024). [CrossRef]
76. Johannes, J.; Edward, E. Using importance and performance analysis to direct emerging rural destination development. *Inov. J. Ekon. Keuang. Dan Manaj.* **2022**, *2*, 134–143.
77. Whittemore, R.; Knafl, K. The integrative review: Updated methodology. *J. Adv. Nurs.* **2005**, *52*, 546–553. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
78. Boakye, K.A.A. Towards creating sustainable ecotourism interventions: Practical lessons from Mesomagoro, Ghana. *Ghana J. Dev. Stud.* **2017**, *14*, 79–98. [CrossRef]
79. Eshun, G.; Tichaawa, T.M. Towards sustainable ecotourism development in Ghana: Contributions of the local communities. *Tourism* **2020**, *68*, 261–277. [CrossRef]
80. Nikolskaya, E.Y.; Uspenskaya, M.E.; Galkin, D.V.; Shelygov, A.V. Economic and legal aspects of developing ecotourism infrastructure. *Relações Int. No Mundo* **2022**, *4*, 37. Available online: <https://revista.unicuritiba.edu.br/index.php/RIMA/article/view/5928/371374014> (accessed on 20 January 2024).
81. Ezaquias, J.E. The Management of Ecotourism as a Way of Contributing to the Development of Protected Areas. In *Protected Area Management—Recent Advances*; IntechOpen: London, UK, 2022; p. 223.
82. Pinheiro, I.; Gabaake, G.; Heyns, P. Cooperation in the Okavango River Basin: The OKACOM perspective. In *Transboundary Rivers, Sovereignty and Development: Hydropolitical Drivers in the Okavango River Basin*; Nakayama, M., Ed.; United Nations University Press: Tokyo, Japan, 2003; Volume 6, pp. 105–118.
83. Che, D. Developing ecotourism in First World, resource-dependent areas. *Geoforum* **2006**, *37*, 212–226. [CrossRef]

84. Relógio, A.T.; Tavares, F.O. An Evaluation of Passenger Satisfaction among Users of Huambo Airport in Angola. *Urban Sci.* **2023**, *7*, 57. [[CrossRef](#)]
85. Spenceley, A.; Bien, A. Ecotourism standards: International accreditation and local certification and indicators. In *International Handbook on Ecotourism*; Edward Elgar Publ: Gloucestershire, UK, 2013; pp. 404–418. [[CrossRef](#)]
86. Fang, W.T.; Hassan, A.A.; Horng, M. Ecotourism planning and management. In *Ecotourism: Environment, Health, and Education*; Springer: Singapore, 2024; pp. 195–231.
87. Yamada, N. Why tour guiding is important for ecotourism: Enhancing guiding quality with the ecotourism promotion policy in Japan. *Asia Pac. J. Tour. Res.* **2011**, *16*, 139–152. [[CrossRef](#)]

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.