

SILK ROAD HERITAGE AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM: INSIGHTS FROM BUKHARA TOUR OPERATORS

Abstract.

The United Nations (UN) has established the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda Goals (SDGs), wherein sustainable tourism holds a crucial position. Sustainable tourism development has the potential to address critical global challenges such as poverty alleviation, reduction of inequality, climate change mitigation, and environmental conservation while simultaneously fostering cultural, social, and economic progress. This study investigates the tour operators in the Bukhara region, considered significant stakeholders, and evaluates their comprehension of the Silk Road heritage and their disposition towards employing this heritage for sustainable tourism development. A survey methodology was utilized to collect data on the tour operators' perspectives and attitudes.

The findings reveal that tour operators endorse sustainable tourism development and acknowledge the Silk Road heritage as a vital element in realizing this objective. Moreover, the study identifies existing deficiencies in the collaboration between the private and public sectors, such as a lack of awareness about sustainable development incentives. Drawing on these results, the paper offers academically grounded recommendations aimed at addressing these challenges and enhancing cooperation among all stakeholders engaged in sustainable tourism development.

Keywords: *Silk Road, Sustainable tourism development, Stakeholders, Cooperation*

Introduction.

17 interrelated SDGs are part of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was established in 2015 and aims to address issues like poverty, inequality, climate change, and environmental degradation. One of the biggest sectors in the world, tourism, contributes significantly to attaining these objectives. Sustainable tourism can support social progress, environmental preservation, and inclusive economic prosperity (Buckley et al., 2019; Koens et al., 2018). By generating income, creating jobs, and encouraging local entrepreneurship, sustainable tourism may encourage economic growth (SDG 8). (UNWTO, 2017). Nonetheless, it is imperative to control tourism's detrimental effects, including the industry's overdependence, income disparity, and the commercialization of local culture (Mihalic, 2016). By supporting community-based tourist efforts and strengthening marginalized people, tourism may help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 1, 4, 5, and 10: poverty alleviation, educational opportunity, gender equality, and reduced inequities (Scheyvens, 2011; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012). The importance of inclusive stakeholder involvement and social responsibility-promoting policy frameworks cannot be overstated (Jamal et al., 2017). Through increasing knowledge, earning money for protected places, and promoting sustainable behaviors, tourism may help environmental conservation (Balmford et al., 2015). However tourism also puts natural resources (SDG 6, 7, 12, 13, 14, 15) at risk due to issues including energy use, waste production, water scarcity, and biodiversity loss (Gössling et al., 2012). Ecotourism and other forms of nature-based tourism should be promoted in order to lessen these effects (Honey, 2008). To accomplish the SDGs through tourism, cooperation between the public and commercial sectors is crucial (SDG 17). The creation of community-based projects, public-private partnerships, and multi-stakeholder initiatives can help execute sustainable tourism policies (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Nunkoo & Smith, 2013). Limited awareness, a lack of resources, poor policy frameworks, and competing

stakeholder interests are among the obstacles to integrating tourism with the SDGs (Buckley et al., 2019; Gössling et al., 2015). Innovations in technology, adaptable management, and ethical marketing are potential ways to improve sustainable tourism (Ruhanen et al., 2015).

Literature review.

Developing tourism in a way that balances its economic, social, and environmental impacts is known as sustainable tourism. Government policies, market demand, stakeholder collaboration, resource availability, local community participation, and technical breakthroughs are some of the elements that have an impact on its development (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Gössling et al., 2015). Several strategies for promoting sustainable tourism have been developed, including ecotourism, which emphasizes responsible travel to natural areas that protect the environment and enhance local well-being (Honey, 2008); community-based tourism, which encourages local participation, empowerment, and cultural preservation (Scheyvens, 2011); pro-poor tourism, which focuses on eradicating poverty and fostering economic development for marginalized communities (Ashley et al., 2001); and responsible tourism, which emphasizes (Goodwin, 2011). Research, innovation, and cooperation must continue if sustainable tourism efforts are to be successful over the long term.

Stakeholder participation is essential for the creation and adoption of sustainable tourism practices because it promotes group decision-making and the inclusion of varied viewpoints and interests (Jamal & Getz, 1995; Reed, 1997). Local communities, government entities, tourism firms, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and tourists themselves are stakeholders in sustainable tourism (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). With their participation, varied interests are taken into account and balanced, resulting in the development of more egalitarian, environmentally responsible, and culturally aware tourism (Timur & Getz, 2009; Waligo et al., 2013).

Key stakeholders include: **a.** Local communities: Through their involvement, tourist development is guaranteed to benefit locals, maintain cultural heritage, and uphold local values (Scheyvens, 2011). **b.** Governmental organizations: Governments are in charge of developing the legal and institutional frameworks, rules, and infrastructure that enable sustainable tourism (Nunkoo & Smith, 2013). **c.** Tourism-related businesses: Private sector participants can promote innovation, adopt ethical standards, and support regional economic growth (Dodds & Butler, 2010). **d.** NGOs: These groups can promote social justice, environmental protection, and ethical travel habits (Budeanu, 2005). **e.** Travelers: By making thoughtful decisions, travelers may promote sustainable tourism projects and reduce adverse effects (Weaver, 2006).

Stakeholder involvement in decision-making is essential to the effectiveness and sustainability of programs for sustainable tourism (Reed, 1997; Simpson, 2008). Many formats for collaborative decision-making exist, such as: **a.** Workshops and public consultations: At these gatherings, participants can voice their thoughts, issues, and ideas (Gursoy et al., 2002). **b.** Multi-stakeholder forums and committees: Bringing different stakeholders together to communicate, bargain, and decide together (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). **c.** Including local communities and other stakeholders in the creation, execution, and assessment of tourism programs is known as participatory planning and co-management (Timur & Getz, 2009).

Several more best practices can be employed to increase stakeholder engagement in decision-making about sustainable tourism (Medi et al., 2015; Aas et al., 2005): **a.** Early involvement is important because it enables stakeholders' interests and concerns to be better understood and taken into account during the planning and decision-making process. **b.** Processes that are inclusive: Ensuring that underprivileged and underrepresented groups are included in decision-making procedures fosters social fairness and gives local communities more influence. **c.** Building capacity can help stakeholders, especially local communities, engage more effectively in decision-making processes by providing them with resources and training. **d.** Communication that is open and transparent among parties involved promotes confidence, cooperation, and a common understanding. **e.** Adaptive management: Promoting adaptation and flexibility in decision-making

processes enables ongoing learning and development depending on stakeholder input and shifting circumstances.

The growth of the tourism sector depends on tour operators, who serve as middlemen between different industry participants like lodging providers, transportation suppliers, and travelers (Holloway & Taylor, 2006). They greatly affect the choice of destinations, travel plans, and the general caliber of services provided because they serve as the gatekeepers to the tourism experience (Tapper & Font, 2004). Their marketing plans and distribution methods have the potential to influence visitor choices, which can either enhance or detract from the growth of sustainable tourism (Dodds & Butler, 2010). Because of this, tour operators have a special role to play in promoting sustainable tourism practices, such as providing eco-friendly goods, working with ethical local vendors, and informing visitors about ethical travel practices (Budeanu, 2005). As a result, tour operators' involvement and dedication to sustainable tourism growth are crucial for the industry to see long-term economic, social, and environmental benefits (Tapper & Font, 2004).

A historically significant location along the historic Silk Road, a network of trade routes that connected East and West for millennia, is Bukhara, Uzbekistan. Bukhara has long been a melting pot of several civilizations as a significant cultural, religious, and commercial hub, drawing traders, intellectuals, and tourists from various places (Wood, 2002). Bukhara offers tourists a singular chance to investigate the meeting point of numerous cultures and civilizations that flourished along the Silk Road as a UNESCO World Heritage site (UNESCO, 1993). The captivating bazaars, detailed workmanship, and lively atmosphere of Bukhara still enthrall visitors today, making it a crucial stop for anybody wishing to follow in the footsteps of the early traders and travelers in the heart of Uzbekistan. Based on the above discussion, a survey was conducted among tour operators operating in Bukhara, which has a significant role in tourism development. The survey aimed to understand their knowledge of the Silk Road heritage, their utilization of it, and their support for sustainable tourism.

Methodology

The research was conducted during 2022. According to the information provided by the Bukhara Tourism and Sports Department at the end of 2021 there were 115 tour operators in the region. The researcher found it appropriate to conduct surveys through questionnaires for the study. This is because, using a questionnaire is often more advantageous than conducting interviews when dealing with many respondents or when seeking to gather information on a wide range of topics. There are several reasons for this preference: cost and time savings; standardization; anonymity and confidentiality; ease of data analysis; reduced interviewer bias.

In conducting the research, a sample size calculator was utilized to determine the appropriate sample size for the study. In research, a sample size calculator is important to make sure that the work is reliable because it helps get a sample that is representative of the target population. By figuring out the right sample size based on a confidence level and margin of error that have already been set, the calculator lets reduce the margin of error and make sure results are more accurate and reliable. This process adds to the reliability and applicability of research results, which are important for keeping high academic standards (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2014). As a result, it was determined that obtaining questionnaires from at least 89 tour operators would be appropriate for the study.

Before starting to gather the response to the questionnaire pilot test which is a widely supported methodology in the research process was used. By seeking feedback from supervisor, a group of scientists, and public service responsible persons, involved experts and stakeholders in the pretesting phase. Bryman (2016) stated that their input can help improve the questionnaire's content, design, and overall quality, making it more suitable for addressing research objectives.

The obtained results were analyzed using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software for descriptive analysis, and conclusions were presented.

Results and Analysis

In the first step, the types and areas of activity of the participating tour operators were identified through the survey. According to the indicators, 59 (66.3%) tour operators were involved in domestic, outbound, and inbound tourism simultaneously. The next highest indicator was tour companies focusing on domestic tourism, with 15 (16.9%) participants (Table 1). The attention given to the development of domestic tourism in recent years can be considered a result of this. Moreover, the large number of tour operators contributes significantly to enhancing competition and creating high-quality tourism products.

Table 1. Activity directions of questionnaire tour operators

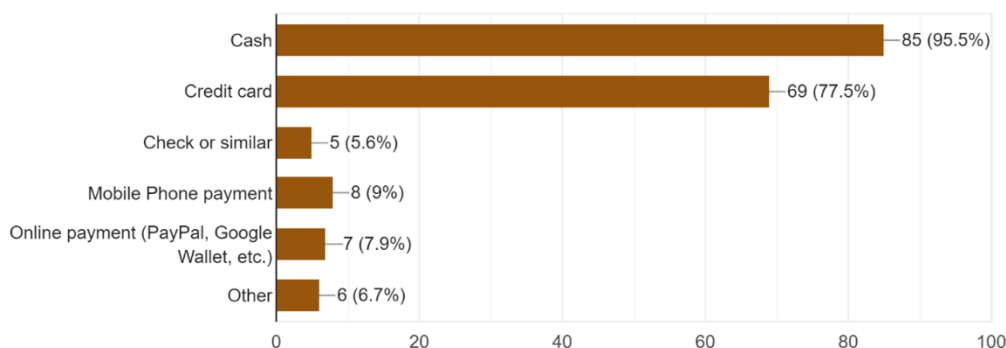
	Direction	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Domestic touroperator	15	16.9	16.9
	Domestic, Inbound touroperator	3	3.4	3.4
	Domestic, Outbound, Inbound touroperator	59	66.3	66.3
	Inbound touroperator	2	2.2	2.2
	Outbound touroperator	3	3.4	3.4
	Outbound, Inbound touroperator	7	7.9	7.9
	Total	89	100.0	100.0

Source: Author

The majority of the questionnaires were filled out by directors (66.3%), managers (25.8%), and the remaining by administrators and supervisors. These positions are indicative of the hierarchical structure present within tourism companies. The number of employees within these organizations ranged from 2 to 20, with an average of 4.91 employees per tour operator. The primary distribution of companies included 12 with 3 employees, 24 with 4 employees, and 18 with 5 and 18 with 6 employees.

Tourism operators primarily accept payments for their services through cash (95.5%) and credit cards (77.5%) (Figure 1). Some emerging and small tour companies, which organize domestic trips, currently offer services exclusively for cash payments. Additionally, local customers could make payments through PAYNET, CLICK, PAYME, and other mobile phone payment methods. Tourism operators that attract foreign tourists have implemented various online and alternative payment methods, tailoring them according to the preferences of their clients.

Figure 1. Payment methods

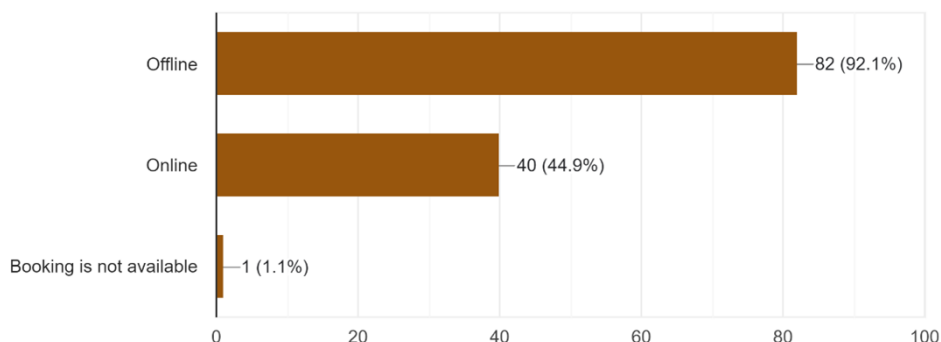


Source: Author

When surveying the availability of booking services 92.1% of respondents reported that booking services are carried out offline, primarily through accepting clients in person. This mainly applies to tour operators focusing on domestic and outbound tourism. 44.9% of tour operators have

online booking services available, and reservations can be made through their websites mainly for inbound tourism (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Booking methods



Source: Author

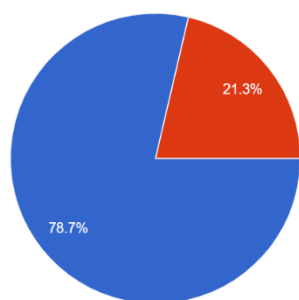
Tour operators excel in utilizing social media for their businesses compared to other providers. 78.7% of respondents indicated that they use social media platforms (Figure 3) such as Telegram, Facebook, and Instagram to promote their businesses, attract customers and organize them into groups.

Figure 3. Usage of social media by tour operators

Source: Author

9. Do you use social networks for business?

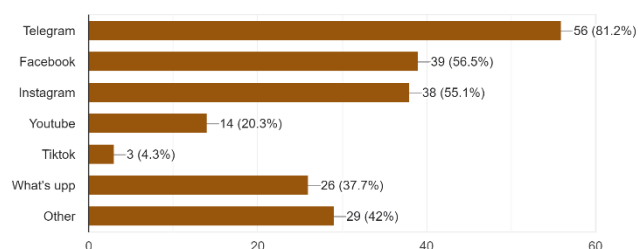
89 responses



If you use social networks, please, select which one? (optional)

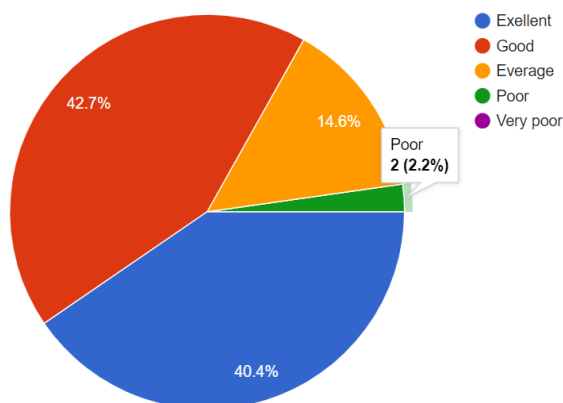
69 responses

• YES
• NO



In the next stage, tour operators were asked to assess their understanding of the Silk Road heritage. 42.7% (38 respondents) of tour operators indicated a “good” understanding, while 40.4% (36 respondents) emphasized a “excellent” understanding. The remaining 16.8% of respondents indicated an average or lower understanding (Figure 4). In general, it can be concluded that the majority of tourism companies in Bukhara understand the Silk Road heritage and support the creation of Silk Road tourism products.

Figure 4. Results of tour operators’ understanding of the Silk Road heritage



Source: Author

In the next short-answer question, respondents were asked about the use of the Silk Road brand in their business. 47 of them (52.8%) confirmed not using it, while 42 (47.2%) confirmed using it (Table 2). Comparing this question with the previous one, it can be inferred that the majority of companies not currently using the Silk Road brand indicate a lack of experience and knowledge in using the brand. The primary responsibility lies with the public sector, and it is considered appropriate to organize capacity building programs to provide information, education, and share experiences of successful tour operators with newly established and emerging ones.

Table 2. Tour operators' Silk Road brand usage

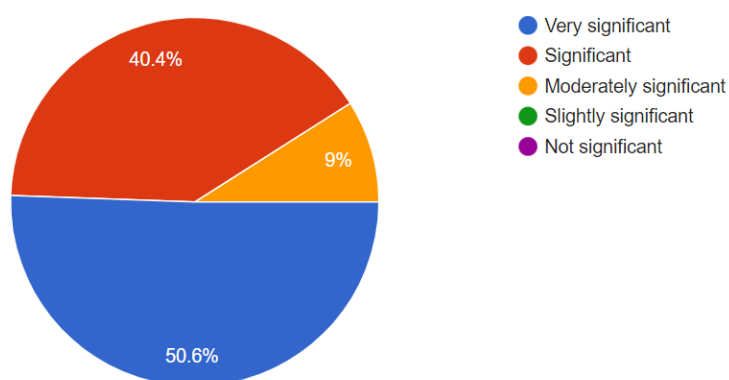
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	No	47	52.8	52.8
	Yes	42	47.2	47.2
	Total	89	100.0	100.0

Source: Author

When asked to rate the importance of the social, economic, and environmental elements of sustainable tourism development, 50.6% of respondents considered it “very significant”, while 40.4% considered it “significant” (Figure 5). In other words, almost all tour operators support the implementation of sustainable tourism development. Nowadays, tourism is generating significant revenue for the Bukhara region economically. It is worth noting that taking into account the social and environmental aspects beforehand is essential, according to one of the tour operator company leader. Therefore, it is necessary to implement a system that supports sustainable tourism, promotes it, conserves heritage, and fosters development. In Uzbekistan, several projects have been implemented and are ongoing to facilitate this process, such as Visa liberalization, Development of cultural and historical tourism, Promotion of ecotourism, Support for local businesses and community-based tourism, Infrastructure improvements, Capacity building, and education, among others.

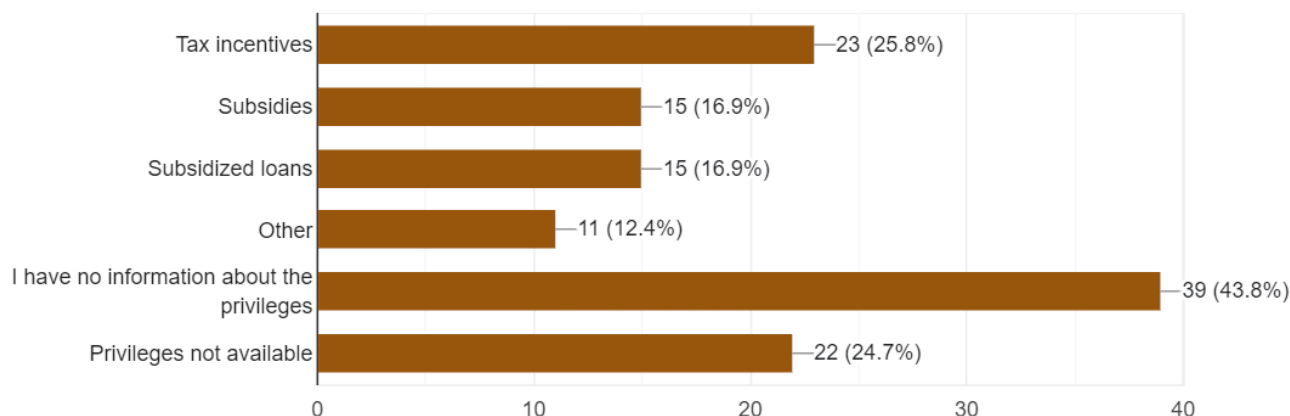
Figure 5. Indicators for assessing the significance of sustainable tourism development social, economic, environmental elements.

Source: Author



Taking this into account, when tourism operators were asked about the incentives provided for the development of sustainable tourism projects, 39 respondents (43.8%) indicated they were not informed, 22 respondents (24.7%) stated that there were no incentives available, and the remaining respondents were given multiple choices, noting tax incentives (25.8%), subsidies (16.9%), and subsidized loans (16.9%) (Figure 6). Overall, this indicates a lack of sufficient information about the available incentives among the majority of respondents. This situation may reflect a lack of proper communication or shortcomings between the public and private sectors. In Uzbekistan today, there are various incentives available for the development of the tourism sector, such as reduced corporate tax rates, VAT exemptions or reductions, tax credits for investments, property tax incentives, and income tax incentives for employees.

Figure 6. Awareness of incentives for implementing sustainable tourism programs



Source: Author

Conclusion and suggestions

Based on the above analysis and results, it is possible to see the presence of opportunities for the development of tourism and conducting tourism business in the Bukhara region today. The fact that 115 tourism operators are registered in Bukhara alone indicates the competitiveness of the market. In addition, there are many other tourism operators in Uzbekistan that attract customers for Bukhara's tourism destinations.

Tour operators' extensive use of social networks in offering their services helps to establish communication with clients and contributes to increasing competitiveness in today's highly relevant market. However, it was noted that 21% were not present on social media platforms. At the same time, during the study of the payment infrastructure, it is possible to see that all clients have the opportunity to make payments through various payment systems. To create convenience for foreign tourists, ATMs are installed near the Historic Centre of Bukhara and all tourist destinations, operating 24/7.

Tourism operators in the region highly appreciate the existing heritage as a part of the Silk Road heritage. This situation undoubtedly establishes Bukhara as a significant Silk Road destination, capable of competing with other Silk Road destinations. The main factor here is to take advantage of the Silk Road brand. According to the survey results, nearly 50% of operators do not use this brand. In the development of sustainable tourism, a strong image and brand are also important. Consequently, it is considered necessary for the public sector to take the required measures to expand the use of the Silk Road brand and further develop it.

Sustainable tourism development in Uzbekistan is being supported by various projects and incentives at different levels across the country. According to the survey results, nearly 70% of tour operators either lack information about or indicate the absence of incentives. This situation underlines the deficiency or inadequacy of information exchange and collaboration among all stakeholders. Based on this, in order to further develop the partnership among stakeholders, the following recommendations are proposed, drawing from measures suggested by scholars such as Bramwell & Lane (2011), Nunkoo & Smith (2013), Koens et al. (2018), Ruhanen et al. (2015), and UNWTO (2013):

- Establishing Public-private partnerships (PPPs);
- Encourage regular communication and collaboration among all stakeholders, including government agencies, tourism providers, local communities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and tourists;
- Provide capacity-building programs and training opportunities for tourism providers and public-sector employees to enhance their understanding of sustainable tourism practices and policies;
- Develop and enforce clear regulations and guidelines that promote sustainable tourism development;

- Establish systems for monitoring and evaluating sustainable tourism initiatives, ensuring that both providers and the public sector are held accountable for their actions and progress;
- Promote awareness and education among tourists, providers, and public-sector employees about the importance of sustainable tourism and the specific actions that can be taken to support it;
- Implement destination management plans that outline sustainable tourism development strategies, integrating the interests and needs of various stakeholders;
- Develop or promote certification and labeling schemes that recognize and reward sustainable practices among tourism providers;
- Encourage and support local and community-based tourism initiatives that focus on preserving the environment, promoting social equity, and fostering cultural heritage;
- Leverage innovative technologies and practices to enhance the sustainability of tourism operations.

Research limitation:

During the research, questionnaires were sent multiple times to the groups on social networks organized by tour operators to collect responses. However, only 35% of the questionnaires were completed after several attempts. The remaining questionnaires were obtained by directly contacting the tourism organizations through their phone numbers or offices and then analyzed. In turn, this situation required a significant amount of time.

Bibliography

- Aas, C., Ladkin, A., & Fletcher, J. (2005). Stakeholder collaboration and heritage management. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 32(1), 28-48.
- Ashley, C., Boyd, C., & Goodwin, H. (2001). Pro-poor tourism: Putting poverty at the heart of the tourism agenda. *Natural Resource Perspectives*, 51, 1-12.
- Balmford, A., Green, J. M., Anderson, M., Beresford, J., Huang, C., Naidoo, R., ... & Manica, A. (2015). Walk on the wild side: estimating the global magnitude of visits to protected areas. *PLoS biology*, 13(2), e1002074.
- Bramwell, B., & Lane, B. (2011). Critical research on the governance of tourism and sustainability. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 19(4-5), 411-421.
- Budeanu, A. (2005). Impacts and responsibilities for sustainable tourism: a tour operator's perspective. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 13(2), 89-97.
- Buckley, R., Zhong, L., Ma, J., & Chen, N. (2019). The linkages between the sustainable development goals and the tourism industry. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 27(7), 709-731.
- Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Butler, R. W. (1999). Sustainable tourism: A state-of-the-art review. *Tourism Geographies*, 1(1), 7-25.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Dodds, R., & Butler, R. (2010). Barriers to implementing sustainable tourism policy in mass tourism destinations. *Tourismos: An International Multidisciplinary Journal of Tourism*, 5(1), 35-54.
- Gössling, S., Peeters, P., Hall, C. M., Ceron, J. P., Dubois, G., Lehmann, L. V., & Scott, D. (2012). Tourism and water use: Supply, demand, and security. An international review. *Tourism Management*, 33(1), 1-15.
- Gössling, S., Scott, D., & Hall, C. M. (2015). Tourism and water: Towards a more sustainable relationship. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 14, 161-167.
- Goodwin, H. (2011). *Taking responsibility for tourism*. Goodfellow Publishers.
- Gursoy, D., Jurowski, C., & Uysal, M. (2002). Resident attitudes: A structural modeling approach. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 29(1), 79-105.
- Honey, M. (2008). *Ecotourism and sustainable development: Who owns paradise?* Island Press.

- Holloway, J. C., & Taylor, N. (2006). The role of networks in the development of UK sustainable tourism. In *Tourism, Recreation, and Sustainability* (pp. 244-263). Routledge.
- Jamal, T., & Getz, D. (1995). Collaboration theory and community tourism planning. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 22(1), 186-204.
- Jamal, T., Camargo, B. A., & Wilson, E. (2017). Collaborative governance and the challenges of sustainable tourism planning and development. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 6(1), 44-50.
- Koens, K., Postma, A., & Papp, B. (2018). Is overtourism overused? Understanding the impact of tourism in a city context. *Sustainability*, 10(12), 4384.
- Mihalic, T. (2016). Sustainable-responsible tourism discourse—Towards ‘responsustable’ tourism. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 111, 461-470.
- Medic, S., Milovanovic, V., & Palic, R. (2015). Stakeholders' influence on the environmental strategy of the hotel sector: The case of Serbian hotels. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, 58(6), 1091-1111.
- Mowforth, M., & Munt, I. (2015). *Tourism and sustainability: Development, globalization and new tourism in the Third World*. Routledge.
- Nunkoo, R., & Smith, S. L. (2013). Political economy of tourism: Trust in government actors, political support, and their determinants. *Tourism Management*, 36, 120-132.
- Reed, M. S. (1997). Power relations and community-based tourism planning. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 24(3), 566-591.
- Reed, M. S. (2008). Stakeholder participation for environmental management: A literature review. *Biological Conservation*, 141(10), 2417-2431.
- Ruhanen, L., Scott, N., Ritchie, B., & Tkaczynski, A. (2015). Public policy networks and tourism: A theoretical framework. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 18(8), 727-744.
- Ruiz-Ballesteros, E., & Hernández-Ramírez, J. (2013). Social-ecological resilience and community-based tourism: An approach from Agua Blanca, Ecuador. *Tourism Management*, 35, 77-87.
- Scheyvens, R. (2011). Tourism and poverty. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 19(1), 1-18.
- Simpson, M. C. (2008). Community benefit tourism initiatives—A conceptual oxymoron? *Tourism Management*, 29(1), 1-18.
- Swarbrooke, J. (1999). *Sustainable Tourism Management*. CABI Publishing.
- Tapper, R., & Font, X. (2004). *Tourism supply chains*. Report of a desk research project for the Travel Foundation. Leeds: Leeds Metropolitan University.
- Timur, S., & Getz, D. (2009). Sustainable tourism development: How do destination stakeholders perceive sustainable urban tourism? *Sustainable Development*, 17(4), 220-232.
- Telfer, D. J., & Sharpley, R. (2015). *Tourism and development in the developing world*. Routledge.
- Tosun, C. (2000). Limits to community participation in the tourism development process in developing countries. *Tourism Management*, 21(6), 613-633.
- Tosun, C. (2006). Expected nature of community participation in tourism development. *Tourism Management*, 27(3), 493-504.
- Tucker, H., & Boonabaana, B. (2012). A critical analysis of tourism, gender and poverty reduction. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 20(3), 437-455.
- UNESCO. (1993). Historic Centre of Bukhara. Retrieved from <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/602>
- UNWTO. (2013). *Sustainable tourism for development guidebook*. World Tourism Organization.
- UNWTO. (2017). *Tourism for Development. Volume I: Key Areas for Action*. United Nations World Tourism Organization.
- Weaver, D. B. (2006). *Sustainable tourism: Theory and practice*. Elsevier.
- Wood, F. (2002). *The silk road: Two thousand years in the heart of Asia*. University of California Press.