

UDK: 338.48

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THE ROLE OF THE CLUSTER APPROACH FOR ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN ARAL SEA REGION OF UZBEKISTAN

Abstract

Ecotourism holds great potential to support and enrich cultural tourism in Uzbekistan. Evaluating the current situation of ecotourism in the Aral Sea region (ASR) of Uzbekistan and offering strategies for its sustainable development are the main objectives of the study. The results show that state support with cluster approach should be strategically coordinated to secure the sustainability of the ecotourism industry in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: ecotourism, sustainable development, pandemic, Aral Sea basin, Uzbekistan, explorative study.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the Aral Sea region of Uzbekistan has emerged as a new attractive destination for incoming foreign and domestic tourists. The development of tourism in ASR contributes more employment and income opportunities for local people while the generated revenue can be further used to update the infrastructure in the respecting territory (Saidmamatov et al, 2020a). From a practical point of view, as of January 1, 2021, over 1500 tour operators have been registered in Uzbekistan and only 4% of them are registered in Khorezm region and 2% in Karakalpakstan. It means that most of the incoming investment via tourism is staying in the capital city Tashkent and the second-largest city Samarkand leading to an imbalance of the regional economic growth in the country as well as poor destination management, marketing, logistics of tourism in general in Aral Sea region (UzbekTourism, 2020).

The research gap that motivated authors to write the paper is that there are very few academic articles available revealing the situation of ecotourism development, challenges and opportunities in Central Asia, mainly in the Aral Sea basin which is an ecologically catastrophic region.

2. Literature review

Tourism contributes to strengthening foreign exchange rates, drives regional development, directly supports several types of jobs and businesses and sets up many local communities. The tourism sector generates 4.4% of GDP and 21.5% of service exports in OECD countries. These shares are much higher for several OECD countries. For example, tourism in Spain contributes 11.8% of GDP while travel represents 52.3% of total service exports, in Mexico, these figures are 8.7% and 78.3%, in Iceland 8.6% and 47.7%, in Portugal 8.0% and 51.1%, and in France 7.4% and 22.2% (UNWTO, 2020).

Ecotourism is one of the most important activities that can reserve natural and cultural resources and bring economic benefits to both local people and government at the same time. A successful plan of ecotourism is a function of developing precise goals and criteria (Demir et al, 2016). It is a fact that ecotourism if developed sustainably, can have

less negative environmental impact, reduce adverse externalities, increase cultural and environmental integrity, make resource management more effective and bring extra financial wellbeing (UNEP, 2013).

Ecotourism is about integrating conservation, communities and sustainable development. It means that ecotourism activities should be in line with the key principles: to minimize negative environmental impacts; to build environmental and cultural awareness and respect; to provide positive engagement for both visitors and hosts; to provide direct economic interests for conservation; grant financial benefits and empowerment for local people; and establish sensitivity to host countries' environmental and social climate (Higham, 2007; Holden, 2007; Das & Chatterjee, 2015). Ecotourism can be explained as "environmentally engaged travel to comparatively undisturbed areas to enjoy and respect nature that supports conservation with low negative visitor impacts while offering active socio-economic wellbeing for local people" (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996; Jalani, 2012). Ecotourism is a new type of tourism that is a consumable resource, it is for an educational and adventurous character, focused on undeveloped and sparsely visited natural, cultural and historical sites (Mayaka and Prasad, 2012; Liu et al. 2013, Lenao, 2016).

Ecotourism calls for low-impact tourism, participation in decisive manners, sensitive approaches to biodiversity and local cultures. It supports local conservation efforts and can bring financial and physical benefits to home communities as well as educational opportunities to travelers. An applicable ecotourism destination should include both original nature and cultural heritage (Weaver & Opperman 2000; Rahemtulla & Wellstead 2001; Dowling & Fennel 2003; Rein 2005; Yilmaz 2005).

Evaluating the ecotourism development prospects of the Aral Sea can open the concept of ecotourism, which allows local communities to benefit from recreational activity. If ecotourism is organised well, it is the best way to protect natural places and benefits both natural heritage and the local people. Through tourism, public awareness can be raised to become environmental respect and can also stimulate the emergence of new local economic activities (Salvatore et al, 2019).

3. Ecotourism in Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan has great ecotourism potential. Nowadays, there are 17 natural reserves in Uzbekistan, including Baday-Tuqay, Kizilkum, Nurota, Zarafshon, Orol Paygamber, Zomin, Charvak and Chatqal and these reserve areas are mainly used as a place for the protection of the endangered species and plants (Hoshimov, 2009). Besides, ecotourism destinations increased from 29 to 65 covering 8`144 thousand hectares with capacity of hosting over 1`074 visitors per day. (Khamidov, 2016).

Uzbekistan has developed a scientific and theoretical framework aimed at ensuring the sustainable development of ecotourism and improving ecotourism services in the market of tourism services (Berdiyev, 2010). Organizational and managerial forms, practices, development trends of ecotourism in developed and developing countries are analyzed and recommendations for their use in Uzbekistan (Khamidov, 2017). In 2007, the State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on ecology and environmental protection adopted the concept of ecological tourism in Uzbekistan. This particular document elaborated the problems of ecological and socio-economical, organizational-legal issues, goals, potential development ecotourism of Uzbekistan (SCRep, Uz EEP., 2007).

The President of Uzbekistan, Sh. Mirziyoyev delivered a speech at the UN General Assembly to draw global attention to the acute ecological problems of the Aral Sea catastrophe. Overcoming the negative consequences of the environmental catastrophe in the Aral Sea region requires the active engagement of international, regional and local efforts. As a result, the special UN program was accepted to bring effective assistance to the local population affected by the Aral Sea crisis.

In December 2019, the UN General Assembly at its plenary session adopted a special resolution “Sustainable Tourism and Sustainable Development in Central Asia” that was initiated by the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev in Beijing at a meeting with UN Secretary- General Antonio Guterres as part of the international forum “One Belt, One Road” (UzDaily, 2019). The accepted UN General Assembly Resolution emphasizes the essence of the efforts of Central Asian countries to disseminate the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, numerous international events for further development of tourism in the Silk Road, as well as measures taken by local governments of Central Asian countries to widely captivate international investment and finance to the tourism sector. It is noteworthy that the UN General Assembly (2019) invites The Member States, other stakeholders and UNWTO to support the activities carried out by the countries of Central Asia to support sustainable tourism development in the region (UN, 2019), and in this regard:

1. expand cooperation in the field of tourism with the countries of Central Asia;
2. provide the growth of the main sectors of a consolidated and comprehensive policy for sustainable tourism development in Central Asia, considering the specifics and current condition of economic advancement of each country in the region;
3. promote the development of tourism and strategies to attract foreign tourists to Central Asia;
4. join forces for the enforcement and application of innovative technologies for the modernization of the tourism industry in Central Asia (UzDaily, 2019).

The meeting of the Council of heads of founding states of the “International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea: in Turkmenistan, the President of Uzbekistan mentioned that providing conditions for attracting foreign investment to the development and implementation of environmentally clean technologies in the Aral Sea region, the fulfilment of the principles of “green economy” as well as the comprehensive implementation of the principles of environmentally friendly energy-saving technologies, elimination of desertification and continuation of ecological migration and development of ecotourism are priority aim that should be realized (UzDaily, 2019).

As a result of reforms in the field of tourism in Uzbekistan, the flow of foreign tourists visiting the Aral Sea region is growing year by year. In particular, the Republic of Karakalpakstan in 2019 was visited by a total of 46,386 tourists, including 21,399 foreign and 24,987 local tourists. In 2019, a total of 2,646,597 tourists visited the Khorezm region, including 420,828 foreign and 2,225,769 local tourists. Local tour experts consider ecotourism as the Aral Sea of Moynak district, Lake Sudoche, Koyi Amudarya biosphere reserve of Beruni district, Ustyurt plain of Kungrad district (canyon, chink), Barsakelmes Salt Lake (salt deposit), open-air ship cemetery, Offer Eshan ravot lakes (UzbekTourism, 2020).

4. Methodology

The research methodology is to conduct a literature review on ecotourism opportunities, challenges and promotion approaches in the Aral Sea region of Uzbekistan. Cluster approach and stakeholder mapping are assessed that helps to develop short-term and long-term oriented strategies to improve the ecotourism market in remote zones of Uzbekistan while the stakeholder map assists to integrate and harmonize the functions of local authorities to mitigate weaknesses as well as minimizing the expected threats.

5. Findings

5.1. Cluster approach

In order to implement a cluster approach to tourism development in the Aral Sea region, it is advisable to create at least four small tourist zones (STZ) that are developed based on ecological situation, transportation, logistics, allocation of biodiversity and location of ecotourism destination (Kamaletdinov, 2018):

1. So, under STZ tourists can go to Akchakul lake, located on the Amu Darya coast in the Ellikkala district, which has a high potential for the development of both archaeological and medical tourism. In addition, there are also opportunities to create new tourist routes using the recreational resources of Akchakul, other natural reservoirs and tukai, sources with a high concentration of minerals, etc.
2. The second STZ is proposed to be located in the Beruni district, in the village of Oltinsay, which is located near the Lower Amu Darya State Biosphere Reserve (Badai Tugai), where endangered species of plants, fish, birds and animals live in natural conditions. This zone can also be aimed at the development of ecotourism, historical and special programs of pilgrimage (ziyorat) tourism. To accommodate tourist infrastructures and tourist accommodation networks (Business Daily, 2018).
3. The third STZ may be located in the city of Muynak, where there are great prospects for the development of ecological and extreme tourism. Arrival at new tourist attractions - "Ship Cemeteries", where old fishing vessels and steamboats got stuck. Travellers are expected to get acquainted with saxaul forest plantations on the bottom of the Aral Sea, meet with swans, pink flamingos, pelicans and other rare birds on Sudochye Lake. Muynak also attracts those who want to feel the fragility of nature. Extreme tourists will be interested in visiting the higher days of the Aral Sea and other local disasters. For these purposes, it is necessary to implement comprehensive measures to expand tourism opportunities, as well as various cultural and recreational activities (Kamaletdinov, 2018).
4. The fourth - the central zone is proposed to be created in the city of Nukus, not far from the international airport "Nukus". This organization will provide travel services worthy of living conditions (Business Daily, 2018). As an implication of research findings, the authors distributed the TOWS to make proper strategic decisions to promote ecotourism in the Aral Sea region of Uzbekistan.

5.3. Stakeholder mapping of the Uzbek tourism sector

Stakeholder mapping is the visual representation of a stakeholder analysis, organizing those people according to the key criteria. It is a process and visual tool to clarify and categorize the various stakeholders by drawing further pictures of what the stakeholder groups are, which interests they represent, the amount of power they possess,

whether they represent inhibiting or supporting factors for the organization to realize its objectives or methods in which they should be dealt with (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Stakeholder engagement chart



Source: authors development

The conducted stakeholder map provides evidence that Uzbek tourism market is regulated by the State Committee for Tourism Development, State Committee on Ecology and Environmental protection. The newly established Ministry of Innovative Development is playing an accelerating role to solve tourism problems innovatively while the Ministry of Culture controls the museums and tourism destination objects. Increasing the wellbeing and livelihood of the local community remains the key priority behind developing the tourism sector.

For support structure and service providers, it is highly important to cooperate jointly with four key regulatory bodies in order to realize strategic projects to reform the tourism industry in a complex and integrated way.

Conclusion

The conducted explorative study focuses on ecotourism development in the Aral Sea region of Uzbekistan. In this context, accelerating the development of inbound and domestic tourism in the Aral Sea region by implementing the concept of a touristic cluster as one of the most important factors for sustainable socio-economic development of the region and will contribute to the transformation of the tourism sector into one of the leading

sectors of the regional economy and the widespread promotion of ecological tourism. The analysis of stakeholder mapping plays an essential role in overcoming the mutual interests, expected risks and misunderstandings of stakeholders in the tourism sector of Uzbekistan. In addition, it possesses an important role in the development of organizational and economic mechanisms that have a positive impact on stakeholders in the development of tourism in the region.

In order to utilise the potential, there must be professional management and cooperation strategy among authorities to plan and implement ecotourism development in short and long term scenarios. The management should focus more on the opinion of the tourists as end-users while considering the foreign experience as a roadmap to develop successful ecotourism development in ASB. Hence, making ecotourism as a financially attractive business leads to enormous improvement in the living conditions of the rural population which is a main motive behind promoting ecotourism in rural parts of Uzbekistan.

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