

Development of Community-Based Ecotourism In Mountainous Regions: A Case Study Of Urgut District, Uzbekistan

Toyirova Shohista Bobobekovna

“Silk Road” international university of tourism and cultural heritage, Samarkand, Uzbekistan

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Abstract

This research studies the opportunities for developing community-based ecotourism in the Urgut district, Uzbekistan by aligning empirical findings with current perspectives. The study analyzes the role of institutional support, infrastructure, local specialization, and in shaping tourism development. The results show that sustainable growth depends on strategic alignment, modernized infrastructure, and regional ecosystems. The paper proposes a localized model for ecotourism development that supports to both academic discourse and practical policy implementation.

Keywords: Ecotourism, rural areas, community-based ecotourism, sustainable development, tourism clusters.

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1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the high growth industries, significantly contributing to economic development, workforce expansion, and regional cooperation. However, explosive growth of mass tourism has also resulted in considerable environmental degradation, socio-cultural turmoil, and unsustainable use of natural resources. Handling these difficulties, the concept of sustainable tourism has garnered increasing attention among policymakers, researchers and practitioners globally. Ecotourism is widely recognized as a responsible form of tourism that encouraging eco-friendly practices, supports local communities, and boosts guests' understanding of natural and cultural heritage. The study combines global theoretical perspectives and local empirical evidence to propose a sustainable model for ecotourism cluster formation. The findings demonstrate that government support

mechanisms, solid infrastructure, and community participation significantly influence on tourist inflow and sustainability. The research contributes to both scholarly discourse and practical policymaking by offering a site-specific conservation tourism planning. In addition, the concept of community-based ecotourism (CBET) has proven to be an efficient method for ensuring local participation, fair revenue distribution and long-term sustainability. However, there is still empirical support remains sparse and methodological frameworks that evaluate the viability of forming ecotourism clusters based on the specialization and capacities of local communities. Therefore, the research aims to analyze the ecotourism potential of selected villages in the Urgut district and to justify the formation of a community-based ecotourism cluster. These days many countries have actively embedded ecotourism into their national development strategies as a tool for achieving sustainable development goals. In this context, Uzbekistan with its

strong cultural traditions, ecological abundance, unique landscapes and exhibits high potential for the development of ecotourism, especially in rural and mountainous areas. The study investigates the potential for developing community-based ecotourism (CBET) clusters in the Urgut district of Uzbekistan. Including both primary data and regional resource appraisals, the research evaluates key factors influencing ecotourism development, including institutional support, infrastructure, local community engagement. The research focuses on identifying key factors influencing sustainable tourism, evaluating local resources and social preparation, and suggesting an integrated model for ecotourism development. By doing so, the paper attempts to contribute both to academic literature and to policy implementation in the field of sustainable tourism.

2. Literature Review

Ecotourism has increasingly been recognized as a sustainable development roadmap by balancing environmental conservation, socio-cultural heritage maintenance, and economic development. Nascent theories (Martha Honey M., 2008) defined ecotourism as responsible travel to natural areas that protects the environment and promotes community welfare. This structural viewpoint has been further elaborated by contemporary scholars who emphasize resilience, governance, and inclusivity in tourism field. The economic dimension of ecotourism has been extensively studied by researches that highlight the economic valuation of environmental services and the importance of protected areas as economic assets. Additionally, inclusive business models ensure equitable benefit distribution among stakeholders (Spenceley A., 2022). Climate change and environmental constraints have also emerged as critical themes in recent literature. Climate variability influences tourism demand (Gössling S., 2021) and destination sustainability (Scott D., 2022). There is always the need for adaptive strategies in ecotourism planning. Rural tourism and diversification (Becken S., 2023) are closely linked to ecotourism development, and rural areas benefit from tourism through diversification of income sources (Sharpley R., 2020). Heritage-based tourism can be accepted as a complementary strategy (Garrod B., 2019). The concept of community-based ecotourism (CBET) has gained traction as a sustainable development model. Recent studies (Goodwin H., 2020) highlight the transition from conventional tourism models toward sustainable tourism frameworks, where transparency and measurable consequences are prioritized. The role of certification systems, sustainability indicators, and stakeholder engagement (Xavier Font X., 2023) are crucial in enhancing tourism performance. From a planning perspective, tourism development must adopt a systems approach, integrating environmental, economic, and social dimensions (Hall M., 2020). This is supported by

numerous scholars (Weaver D., 2021., Buckley R., 2019), who distinguish between “soft” and “hard” ecotourism models, underscoring the necessity of tailored approaches depending on destination characteristics. Moreover, spatial clustering (Saarinen J., 2023) is particularly relevant for mountain foothills and rural regions.

Governance structures and stakeholder collaboration (Dredge D., 2021) play crucial role in ensuring ecotourism development, while well-functioning tourism networks and institutional structures (Scott N., 2022) assist to enhance resource allocation, cooperation long-term structural robustness. The progress of tourism sector mainly depends on implementation of productive and high-performance system and the development of supporting infrastructure (Kadirov D., 2021). Community engagement in tourism development plays crucial role in promoting inclusive growth, fair benefit distribution and preserving cultural and natural environment (Abdullaeva S., Yusupov M., 2022). Despite of existing literature there is still remains empirical research gap focusing on community-based ecotourism in mountainous areas. In Uzbekistan, research on sustainable tourism development has primarily emphasizes natural resource endowment and spatial planning. Efficient utilization of natural resources along with cultural safeguarding play significant role in tourism development (Rakhimov A., 2020 & Tukhlov I., 2021).

3. Methodology

The paper adopts a hybrid research design to comprehensively evaluate the ecotourism potential of the selected district. The methodology combines quantitative statistical analysis with qualitative assessment of local capacities and institutional frameworks. Primary data were obtained through structured questionnaires conducted among local stakeholders such as locals, tourism service providers and local officials. The survey focused on key variables such as community engagement, infrastructure availability, government support mechanisms, and tourism services. Secondary data were obtained from regional statistical reports, administrative records, and field observations. These data offered detailed insights into resource distribution, including handicrafts, fishing, beekeeping and other local economic activities. To examine the relationship between tourist inflow and influencing factors, statistical techniques such as Pearson chi-square tests and Kendall rank correlation coefficients were used. The methods were chosen due to their suitability for assessing categorical and ordinal data. The study further applied a cluster-based analytical framework to identify potential ecotourism clusters. 5 villages were categorized based on their specialization (e.g., handicrafts, agriculture, horse breeding...), resource potential, and tourism readiness. This approach was helpful for the identification of

cooperative linkages between communities, ensuring the basis for cluster development. The study incorporated institutional analysis to analyze the role of governance mechanisms, including tourism organizations, local authorities, and international partners.

4. Results and Discussion

Urgut district located in the southeastern part of Samarkand region, Uzbekistan, near the border with Tajikistan. It lies within the foothills and mountaneous areas of Zarafshan Range which significantly shapes its natural and climatic conditions. Due to its mountain

terrain, scenic landscapes, and proximity to natural attractions, the district holds a strategic geographical position for the development of community-based ecotourism. Given the district's rich natural landscapes, diverse economic activities (pic.1) such as handicrafts, beekeeping, horse breeding as well as strong local community involvement the area possesses significant potential for community-based ecotourism development. For this reason it becomes essential to systematically assess the region's ecotourism capacity and identify key factors influencing its sustainable growth ensuring a logical foundation for further analysis of tourist flows and their determinig variables.

Table 1. Correlation analysis of factors influencing tourism activities in the district

№	Indicators	5-10	10-15	15-20	20-25
1.	Road conditions				
	- Pearson chi2	0,587	0,185*	0,012**	0,004***
	- Kendall qiymat	-0,0384	0,0430	0,1778	0,2391
2.	Internet access				
	- Pearson chi2	0,731	0.543	0,074*	0,021**
	- Kendall qiymat	0,0243	0,0430	0,0832	0,1169
3.	Transport access				
	- Pearson chi2	0,372	0,012**	0,0686*	0,0789*
	- Kendall qiymat	0,0776	0,1102	0,0385	0,0609
4.	Accommodation				
	- Pearson chi2	0,005**	0,018	0,616	0,569
	- Kendall qiymat	0,1244	0,1190	0,0355	0,0403
5.	Tour operator activities				
	- Pearson chi2	0,042**	0,033**	0,086*	0,731
	- Kendall qiymat	0,0473	0,0440	0,1214	0,0243

The results of the study demonstrate that infrastructure development is a critical determinant of ecotourism growth in the Urgut district. Road conditions were found to have a statistically significant impact on tourist inflow, particularly for medium and large groups. Improvements in road infrastructure can increase tourist arrivals by up to 23.9%, highlighting the importance of accessibility. Internet connectivity also plays an increasingly important role, especially for larger tourist groups. The

findings suggest that digital infrastructure enhances destination attractiveness by enabling information sharing, online promotion, and communication. Transport availability is another key factor influencing tourism development. The analysis shows that improvements in transport services can increase tourist inflow by approximately 11% for medium-sized groups. This reflects the importance of mobility in mountainous regions. Accommodation availability significantly

affects smaller tourist groups. The development of homestays and local lodging facilities not only increases tourist retention but also contributes to local income

generation. This aligns with the principles of community-based tourism.

Table 2. Correlation analysis of external factors influencing the development of ecotourism in the district

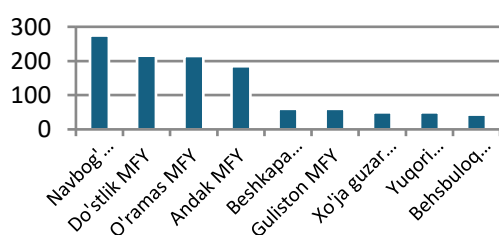
№	Indicators	5-10	10-15	15-20	20-25
1.	Granting a subsidy				
	- Pearson chi2	0,414	0,090*	0,027**	0,826
	- Kendall qiymat	0,0578	0,1200	0,1567	0,0156
2.	Provision of concessional loans				
	- Pearson chi2	0,733	0,632	0,019**	0,002***
	- Kendall qiymat	-0,0241	0,0339	0,0962	0,1183

Government support mechanisms, including subsidies and preferential loans, were found to have a strong positive impact on tourism development. Subsidies can increase tourist numbers by up to 15.6%, while access to credit enhances service quality and capacity expansion. The analysis also highlights the importance of tourism enterprises and tour operators. Collaboration between

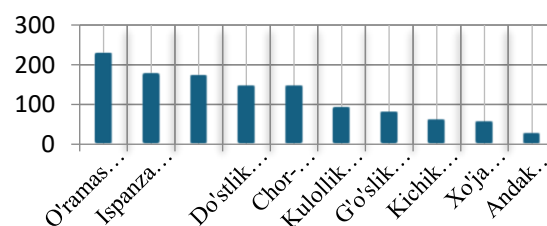
local communities and tourism firms significantly increases tourist inflow, particularly for smaller groups.

The tourism potential of local communities in Urgut district closely linked not only to natural resources but also socio-economic activities. Traditional activities such as handicraft, beekeeping, livestock breeding provide unique and authentic experiences for visitors.

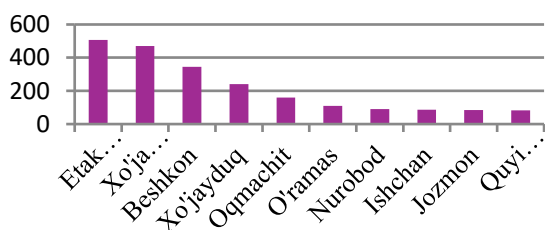
Home-based production engaged mahallas in Urgut (number of people)



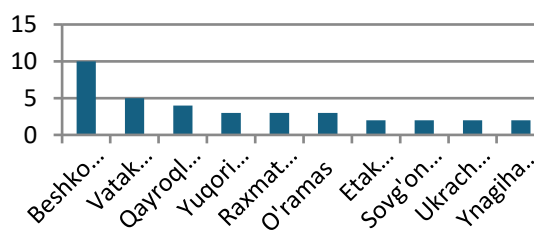
National craft engaged mahallas in Urgut (number of people)

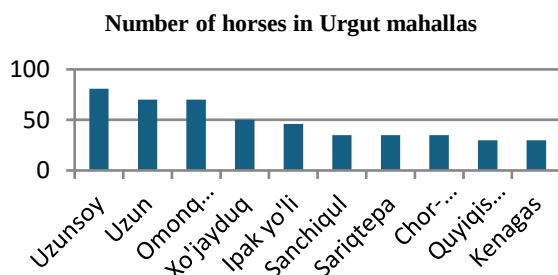


Beekeeping engaged mahallas in Urgut (number of people)



Fishing engaged mahallas in Urgut (number of people)





Picture1. Resource potential of Urgut district

This district attract attention through its distinctive traditions of national handicrafts and home-based cottage industries. Unlike other districts its pottery products are characterized by the use of mustard, lemon and golden colors. Natural dyes are used in decorating these items. Among the neighbourhood citizens' assemblies of the district Uramas holds a leading position in terms of the the number of the residents engaged in national handicrafts with a total of 231 individuals. It is important to note that the district is also significant for its beekeeping and fidh farming activities. Although fish farming family numbers are relatively low compared to other communities there are still considerable number of households involved in this activity (10 families). In the context of ecotourism special attention is given to the transportation. Any mode of transport used in tourism activities should minimize environmental harm. Moreover, to reduce air pollution the use of animals such as horses, elephants, camels can be encouraged. Horses can serve not only as transportation, but recreational activity families, offering horseback riding experiences. One of the most essential findings of this study is the strong potential for cluster-based ecotourism development. The Urgut district exhibits a high degree of specialization among its communities. For instance, Uramas mahalla is a leading center for handicrafts, while Etak Beshkapa is known for beekeeping. Such specialization creates opportunities for developing integrated tourism products. The proposed establishment of sustainable ecotourism development centers is identified as a key institutional innovation. These centers can facilitate training, research, and stakeholder collaboration, thereby enhancing the overall efficiency and sustainability of the tourism sector. Overall, the results confirm that ecotourism development in the Urgut district requires a holistic approach that integrates infrastructure development, community participation and institutional support. The cluster-based model provides a practical and scalable framework for achieving sustainable tourism development in mountainous regions.

5. Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, several practical and policy-oriented recommendations can be proposed to

ensure the sustainable development of community-based ecotourism in the Urgut district.

Government support mechanisms need to be strengthened and better targeted. The allocation of subsidies and preferential loans should focus on local entrepreneurs engaged in ecotourism activities. Financial support programs should be complemented by technical assistance and monitoring systems to ensure efficient use of resources and long-term impact.

Capacity building and education programs should be expanded to improve the skills and knowledge of local communities. Training programs in areas such as sustainable business practices, hospitality management, foreign languages and digital marketing will enhance service quality and increase tourist satisfaction.

Infrastructure development should be prioritized as a fundamental driver of tourism growth. Improvements in road conditions, transport services, digital connectivity, and accommodation facilities are essential for increasing tourist accessibility and enhancing overall visitor experience. Special attention should be given to developing eco-friendly infrastructure that aligns with sustainability principles.

It is recommended to strengthen partnerships between public and private sectors, as well as international organizations. Collaborative governance models will ensure better coordination, resource mobilization and knowledge exchange thereby contributing to the long-term sustainability of ecotourism development.

It is crucial to promote the development of community-based ecotourism clusters. Policymakers should facilitate cooperation among villages with different specializations, such as handicrafts, beekeeping, fishing, and agriculture. This integrated approach will enable the creation of diversified tourism products and increase the competitiveness of the region.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the Urgut district possesses substantial potential for the development of community-based ecotourism, particularly within its

mountainous and rural landscapes. By integrating empirical data with established theoretical frameworks the research confirms that ecotourism development is not solely dependent on natural resource availability but rather on the effective combination of infrastructure, institutional support, and community engagement. The findings reveal that infrastructure factors such as road quality, transport availability, internet access, and accommodation play a decisive role in shaping tourist flows. Improvements in these areas significantly enhance both the volume and quality of tourist visits. At the same time, government support mechanisms including subsidies and preferential credit, are shown to be critical in stimulating local entrepreneurship and expanding tourism-related services. A key contribution of this study lies in its identification of strong opportunities for cluster-based ecotourism development. The specialization of local communities in activities such as handicrafts, beekeeping, fishing and agriculture creates a foundation for integrated tourism products. This cluster approach not only enhances the competitiveness of the destination but also ensures a more balanced and inclusive distribution of economic benefits among local stakeholders. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of institutional innovation through the establishment of sustainable ecotourism development centers. These centers can serve as platforms for knowledge transfer, capacity building, research and stakeholder coordination, thereby strengthening the long-term sustainability of the tourism sector. From a theoretical perspective, the research contributes to the growing body of literature on community-based ecotourism by providing a localized model applicable to mountainous regions with similar socio-economic characteristics. From a practical standpoint, the study offers actionable recommendations for policymakers including the need to prioritize infrastructure investment, strengthen public-private partnerships and enhance community participation.

In conclusion, the sustainable development of ecotourism in the Urgut district requires a systemic and integrated approach that aligns environmental conservation with economic development and social inclusion. The proposed cluster-based model provides a viable pathway for achieving these objectives and can serve as a replicable framework for regions in Uzbekistan and beyond.

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