



CHALLENGES OF SUSTAINABLE ECOTOURISM AND ITS IMPACT ON ECONOMY (GEORGIAN CASE)

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses main aspects of sustainable ecotourism, as the economic field (environmental protection, economy, and social well-being), which plays an important role in increasing sustainability of the world economy and is one of the strongest priority powers.

The role of the state for the sustainable development of sustainable ecotourism, specific programs for the development of national sustainable tourism are analyzed and the expected risks that may arise in this process are evaluated (environmental protection, economic and social aspects). Also, statistical data analyzes the impact of tourism on the economy and future tourism sustainability **Objectives:** Define the role of sustainable ecotourism to ensure sustainability of the society, analyze and assess its impact on the economy. **Methods/Approach:** Scientific analysis methods such as deduction, analysis and synthesis, analysing graphic data, dynamic research, forecasting, and others. **Results:** The research showed that analysing development of ecotourism sector and sustainable development, it is focusing on economical, ecological, social and cultural factors. The results of the study highlight that ecotourism is an integral part of sustainable tourism development.

Conclusions: The paper examines the mechanisms and activities of sustainable development and sustainable tourism, as an economic sector, are of crucial importance for many developing countries, and as an economic phenomenon, they cover many aspects of current issues of society's development.

Keywords: sustainable ecotourism, sustainable economic development, business environment

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INTRODUCTION

Due to various economic, social and political processes of globalization tourism is the leading economic sector in many countries. The strategic approach should be focused mainly on building the desired image of the destination ... (Konstantinova, 2022). Ecotourism is one of the most quickly advancing areas of global tourism. Ecotourism is based on the fundamental principles of sustainable tourism, therefore ecotourism is an integral part of sustainable tourism (Dorokhov et al., 2023; Lazarova et al., 2023; Petrova, Buzko & Dyachenko, 2018).



Sustainable development- system of social development, which considering the interests of economic development and environmental protection of the community, ensures human well-being, the increase in the quality of life and the right of future generations to enjoy natural resources and the environment protected from irreversible quantitative and qualitative changes to the extent possible (Briassoulis, 2002).

Sustainable development implies a form of economic growth, which ensures social well-being is short, medium, and most importantly long-term. It is based on the principle that today's needs shall be satisfied in a manner which does not threaten future generations. Development of a sustainable environment establishes conditions for long-term economic development, considering environmental protection issues (Odinokova et al., 2018). In 1995 Copenhagen world summit on sustainable development has highlighted combat against social segregation, and need for public health protection. Biological resources should be used in the manner and speed, which will not result in degradation of biological diversity and will be preserved considering the needs of future generation. 2030 Agenda for sustainable development (includes 17 goals - sustainable development goals (SDGs), and 169 objectives for achievement of these goals) is to be adopted within 15 years to ensure the solution of the most important tasks for the well-being of all countries and people of the world, which means: ending extreme poverty, preventing climate change and environmental degradation, reducing inequality and injustice.

The World Tourism Organization actively participates in the realization of the provisions of the sustainable development of tourism, which are established in the document "Agenda for Travel and Tourism Sectors in the XXI Century". Based on this document, the "Silk Road Campaign" is being launched, and many countries including Georgia are part of it. In August 2002, at the World Summit on Sustainability Development in Johannesburg addressed Sustainable Tourism, the program of the World Tourism Organization UNWTO and UNCTAD was approved - a number of recommendations for facilitation of sustainable economy in developed and developing countries were shared.

Sustainable tourism - Sustainable Tourism-Eliminating Poverty (ST-EP)- this program aims at achieving two main goals: sustainable development of tourism, and its role in elimination of poverty, and sustainable economic development of less developed and developing countries.

Ecotourism is the type of travel, which not only serves to preservation on ecosystem, but also respects the interests of local population (Goeldner, 2010). Main principles of ecotourism are as follows: minimization of physical, social, behavioural and psychological impacts; raising awareness and respecting environment and culture; ensuring positive experience for local population, as well as for tourists; direct financial benefits for protection and preservation of the nature; ensuring financial benefit for local population and private industry; providing memorable experience to the tourists (Kotler, Makens, 2017) , which will support the host country in raising awareness on political, natural and social climate; respecting rights and believes of the local population, recognition, protection and cooperation; establishment, construction and exploitation of facilities with minimum impact on the environment (Dorobantu & Nistoreanu, 2012).



The idea of ecotourism includes the following elements: 1. Natural environment; 2. Ecological and cultural sustainability; 3. Education; 4. Ensuring local and national income; increased interest in ecotourism is facilitated by growing public desire to visit and experience the natural environment and to adopt minimal impact practices to preserve the quality of the environment visited. Today, as increased number of travelers seek to visit untouched nature and cultural heritage, ecotourism is experiencing significant growth.

Sustainable ecotourism shall:

- ensure the optimal use of natural resources (which are the main element of tourism development), promote the correct management of ecological processes and thereby preserve and protect natural resources and biodiversity;
- respect local social-cultural characteristics, preserve cultural heritage and traditions;
- ensure fair distribution of socio-economic benefits for all parties involved in the process - employment, profit, social security and thereby contribute to reducing the level of poverty.

In September 2017, Georgia hosted the 67th conference of AIEST (founded in 1951), the most influential international association of scientific and practical tourism experts, whose goal was to improve the world's sustainable tourism industry based on the analysis of the latest tourism trends and developments expected in this area, as well as forecasting challenges and finding ways to solve them. During the conference, the sustainability of tourism business in Georgia and related challenges and business models of sustainable development of tourism were also discussed. According to the international experts, sustainable development of Georgia implies balancing two business models. On the one hand there is a society-oriented business model, which is focused on the small and medium size businesses, and on the other hand, there is a cooperation-oriented business model, which is focused on resort development, for example ski resorts and recreation centres. The experts believe that, balancing these two business models is required for development of sustainable tourism in Georgia. It shall be noted that, the cooperation between the private and public sectors in Georgia is currently governed by the state entities, which is why the interesting innovative concepts presented by associations and non-governmental organizations in the field of tourism are rarely taken into account. In this regard European practice shows that, cooperation between the private and public sector is important, and attempts of such cooperation are observed in Georgia as well (Abuseridze et al., 2022). This process also supports the development of society, which in turn is crucial for the creation of authentic and reliable touristic products (Vadachkoria & Okrotsvaradze, 2011).

Development of sustainable society is one of the key factors for development of sustainable tourism. It is noteworthy that, tourism as strategic field is mentioned in three target categories, in particular: goal 8 – to promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all; goal 12 – to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns; goal 14 – to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development purposes. All the above-mentioned indicate the importance of tourism as a universal field for the further development of our planet. For the sustainable development of tourism, the Paris Agreement of December 12, 2015, within the framework



of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change should also be considered, as climate change is one of the main challenges for the development of the tourism sector in the long term. The target of the goal eight is also separation of economic growth and environmental degradation- sustainable consumption and production- a ten-year program; implementation of “Global Jobs Pact” (ILO), and others. The objective 9.1 implies development of quality, reliable, sustainable, and resilient infrastructure. For example, the "Kakheti Regional Development Project 2012-16" or the planned construction of waste processing facilities correspond to the above-mentioned objective, and the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure is responsible for these projects. However, the role of tourism in sustainable development of the economy is not limited to these three indicators, as it is directly or indirectly related to other sustainable development goals (SDGs).

METHODOLOGY

The article is based on the scientific literature, by analysing ecotourism as an integral part of sustainable tourism development, general research methods were used - systematic, logical and comparative analysis of scientific literature, synthesis. In this literature search the main search criteria were ecotourism, sustainable development, which were searched separately and combined.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Relevance of the subject

We have studied, analysed, and assessed economic indicators in cases of stability and instability (pandemic), as well as impact on economy.

Table 1. Income from international travels (thousand US Dollars)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total	1 787 140	1 868 479	2 110 709	2 704 340	3 222 074	3 268 654	541 687	1 244 942	3 516 634
Including:	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
I quarter	315 461	305 180	342 590	425 673	550 730	578 442	427 699	53 551	393 708
II quarter	429 690	409 470	497 441	629 854	809 969	877 626	28 842	246 123	748 822
III quarter	649 775	742 849	813 161	1 078 274	1 210 561	1 126 771	42 534	565 981	1 374 653
IV quarter	392 215	410 979	457 517	570 538	650 814	685 814	42 611	379 287	999 451

Source: Author's illustration

In the third quarter of 2022, the average monthly number of local visitors aged 15 and older on the territory of Georgia was determined by 1,286.8 thousand, and the average monthly number of visits made by them to the territory of the country amounted to 1,470.8 thousand. In the mentioned period, the average monthly number of visitors is 6.7% less than the similar indicator of the third quarter of 2021.

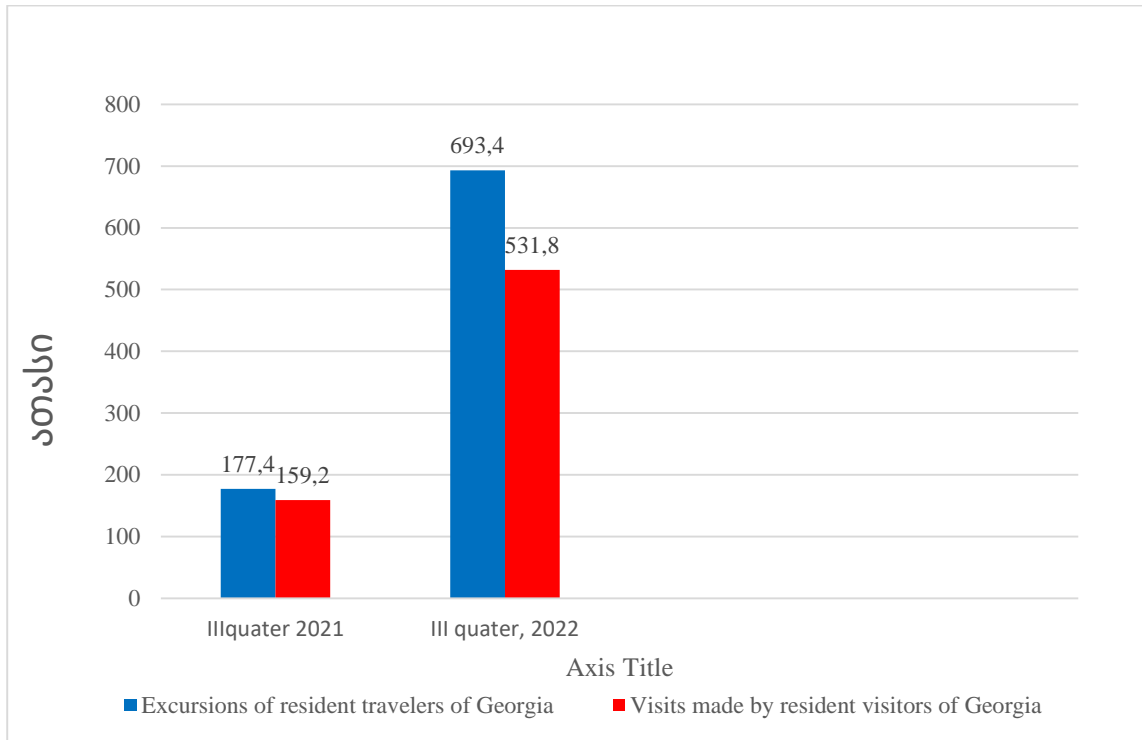


Figure 1. In the III quarters of 2021-2022, the number of departures of Georgian resident travelers and the number of visits made by Georgian resident visitors abroad.
Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia

In the third quarter of 2022, the average monthly number of touristic visits by Georgian residents to the territory of Georgia was 774.7 thousand, which is 4.8 percent less than the corresponding period of the previous year. The diagram 2 shows the distribution of the number of visits made by resident visitors of Georgia based on the type of visit (III quarter, 2022).

Number of visits of the Georgian citizens based on the data on visits during the III Quarter of 2021-2022.

According to the data of 2022, during the third quarter, 1,693,400 Georgian residents traveled abroad, which is 3.9 times more than the indicator of the corresponding period of the previous year. The majority of visits-46.3 percent were made by travelers aging 31-50.

Distribution of travels of Georgian residents by age groups during the III quarters of 2021-2022

The number of visits abroad by Georgian residents amounted to 531.8 thousand, which is 3.3 times more than the indicator of the corresponding period of 2021.

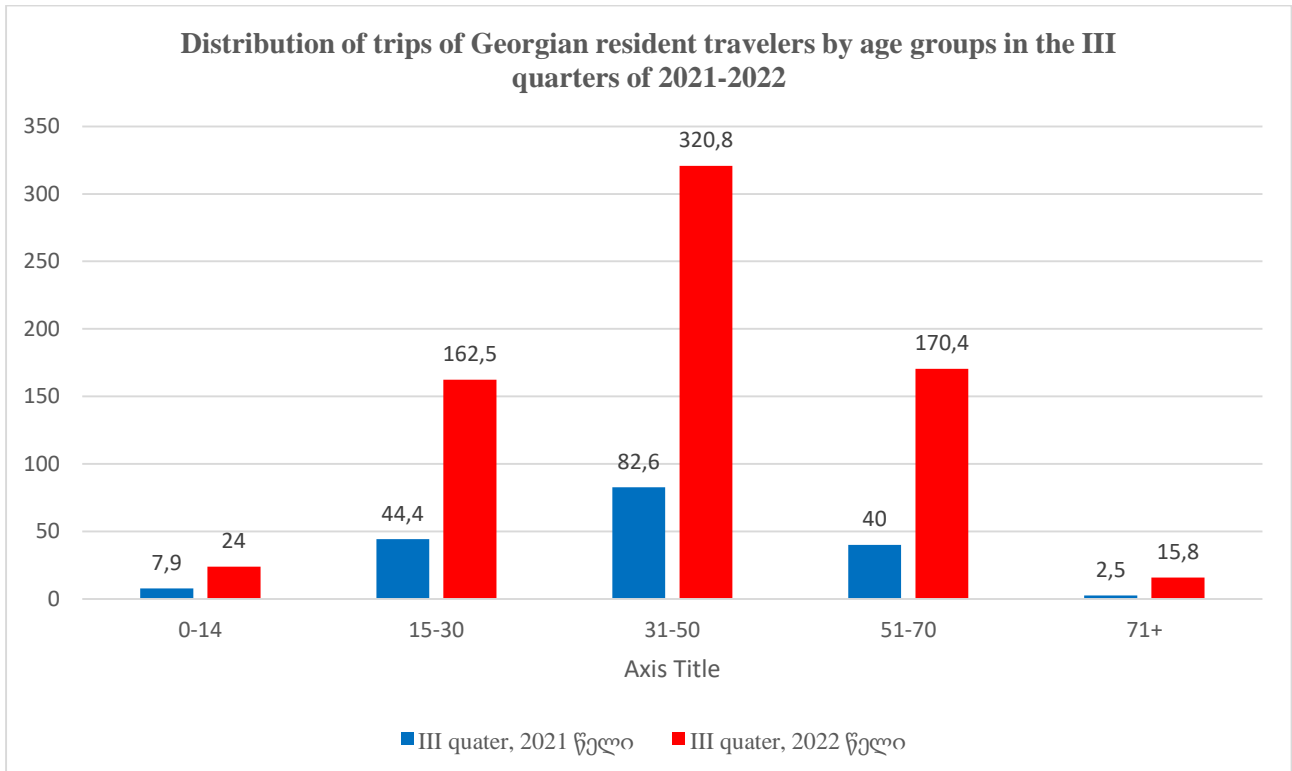


Figure 2. Distribution of trips of Georgian resident travelers by age groups in the III quarters of 2021-2022

Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia

Based on the statistical data provided above, we can say that sustainable ecotourism, as the economic sphere plays a decisive role for our county and as an economic phenomenon covers many aspects of current issues related to society development. By analyzing international and local trends, we can conclude that sustainable development of tourism decreases the level of migration from the mountainous areas. It helps increase the volume of local agricultural products in tourist areas and reduces the influx of imported goods. Along with increased number of the tourists, the state is implementing effective measures in order to preserve cultural heritage and protect natural treatment resources in touristic areas, as well as to protect it from depletion and destruction, and to avoid disasters. Georgia is an inspired tourist destination, which has huge tourist potential, and for preservation purposes it is crucial for Georgian legislation on tourism to take into account sustainable tourism development preconditions for following decades, and regulate the destination management organization. The legislation to regulate the cultural heritage, and nature protection, as well as conservation, legislation to regulate tourism payment infrastructure is also required.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we would like to point out that sustainable development and sustainable tourism, as an economic sector, are of crucial importance for many developing countries, and as an economic phenomenon, they cover many aspects of current issues of society's development. It can generate increased employment opportunities



and large cash flows for local businesses. The level of tourism sustainability (including ecological tourism), constant growth of its economic importance was deemed as one of the major factors for sustainable economic development by the world leaders. Countries have different strategies and approaches to development to sustainable development of the tourism; There is a lot of experience in the sustainable development of tourism in the world, and in recent years' integration of sustainable tourism on business, location, political organization, and association level has been observed. Establishing communication between the tourist locations and the industries is the greatest challenge around the world.

World experience has proved that it is necessary to fundamentally change the rules of unsustainable production and consumption, for which developed countries shall ensure scientific-technological and innovative capacity building of the developing countries through the financial and technical assistance, and for this purposes the world's leading organizations are intensively implementing various levels of international legislative acts and programs and their implementation in practice. Nationalization process in each country, including Georgia has shown that, the study on tourism potential and expectations of the local population shall be carried out. The impact of tourism development on the economy, natural and social environment shall be studied thoroughly, and preventive measures shall be established in order to avoid negative impact on economy, environment, and population. The following shall be improved in Georgia:

- existing database;
- development strategy plan;
- safety measures (accidents in mountainous resorts), engagement of qualified personnel;

The level of professional services does not meet the requirements set out in the Sustainable Development Goals; new methods are applied accordingly. The need for modern cultural and historical heritage websites that support lighter but fully functional mobile versions, facilitating and facilitating their access from portable devices is undeniable (Stefanov & Stefanova, 2012). The use of free smartphone applications is relevant, providing users with information about historical and cultural attractions while traveling (Stefanov & Stefanova, 2013).

Sharing international experience in the tourism sector, economic sustainability, and well-defined economic outcomes, preventive measures- identification of effective means for resolution of these problems will support transformation of sustainable tourism into the driver of economic development.

Author Contributions:

Conceptualization, S.M, D.Ch.; methodology, Z.M.; formal analysis, S.M.; investigation, D.Ch. Z.M; project administration, D.Ch; data curation, S.M.; resources, Z.M.; supervision, S.M.; validation, Z.M. D.Ch; writing - original draft preparation, S.M. D.Ch.; writing - review and editing, Z.M.
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Conflicts of interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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