

Journal of Environmental and Sustainability Science

journal homepage: <https://academiansedu.org/jiess/>

The Status and Importance of Ecotourism in Afghanistan

Assistant Researcher Hekmat Rahman Amiri,*Institute of Kushan Research, Academy of Sciences of Afghanistan**Email: rahmanhekmat452@gmail.com*

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 April 2026

Received in revised form
02 June 2026

Accepted 14 July 2026

Available online 07
August 2026*Keywords:**Ecotourism,
Sustainable Tourism,
Afghanistan,
Environment, Local
Communities,
Sustainable
Development.*

ABSTRACT

Ecotourism, or nature-based tourism, is one of the most important branches of sustainable tourism and plays a fundamental role in environmental conservation, the economic development of local communities, employment generation, and increasing environmental awareness. Afghanistan, with its diverse climatic conditions, high mountain ranges, valleys, lakes, rivers, forests, rich biodiversity, and valuable cultural and historical heritage, possesses considerable potential for the development of ecotourism. The aim of this study is to examine the status and importance of ecotourism in Afghanistan, identify the country's natural and cultural potentials, assess the opportunities and challenges associated with its development, and propose strategies for the sustainable utilization of these resources. The study employs a descriptive-analytical research method, and its findings are based on an analysis of scientific literature, relevant documents, and reports on sustainable tourism and ecotourism, particularly the guidelines and criteria developed by international institutions such as the World Tourism Organization, the United Nations Environment Programme, and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council. The findings indicate that areas such as Band-e Amir, Wakhan, Badakhshan, Nuristan, the Pamirs, as well as numerous valleys, forests, lakes, and mountainous regions of Afghanistan, have significant potential for ecotourism development. Furthermore, ecotourism can contribute to employment generation, strengthening local economies, conserving natural resources and cultural heritage, and increasing public awareness. However, inadequate infrastructure, limited accessibility, insufficient education and managerial capacity, security challenges, and certain social and cultural impacts constitute major barriers to its development. Therefore, the formulation of a national ecotourism strategy, implementation of pilot projects, empowerment of local communities, development of environmentally compatible infrastructure, and continuous monitoring can provide a foundation for the sustainable development of ecotourism in Afghanistan.

Introduction

In recent decades, ecotourism has emerged as an important branch of sustainable tourism and has gained a significant position in the economic, social, and environmental planning of countries around the world. Ecotourism, or nature-based tourism, refers to responsible travel to natural areas that aims not merely to enjoy the beauty of nature, but also to conserve the environment, respect indigenous cultures, educate visitors, and improve the economic well-being of local communities. From this perspective, ecotourism establishes a link between the conservation of natural and cultural resources and economic and social development. Accordingly, this article examines ecotourism not merely as a recreational activity, but as a scientific and managerial approach to environmental conservation, economic development, and the enhancement of public awareness and culture.

Afghanistan, owing to its geographical location, mountainous terrain, climatic diversity, natural landscapes, biodiversity, and rich historical and cultural heritage, possesses considerable potential for the development of ecotourism. The Hindu Kush and Baba mountain ranges, numerous valleys, rivers, waterfalls, forests in Nuristan and Paktia, lakes such as

Band-e Amir, Lake Shewa, and Lake Chaqmaqin, and natural areas including Wakhan and the Pamirs represent only a portion of the attractions that can provide opportunities for attracting domestic and international tourists. In addition to these natural resources, the country's historical and cultural heritage offers opportunities to integrate nature-based tourism with cultural tourism.

The importance of examining ecotourism in Afghanistan lies in the fact that its proper and well-planned development can contribute not only to environmental and biodiversity conservation but also to employment generation, strengthening local economies, poverty reduction, and reducing rural migration. Furthermore, nature-based tourism can increase public and tourist awareness of the value of natural and cultural resources and strengthen the participation of local communities in their conservation. Despite these potentials, however, ecotourism in Afghanistan faces a number of obstacles, including inadequate tourism infrastructure, difficult accessibility, limited educational and managerial capacity, security constraints, and certain social and cultural consequences.

Accordingly, the central problem addressed by this study is why, despite Afghanistan's extensive natural and cultural potential, ecotourism has not yet achieved a position commensurate with these resources and what strategies could facilitate its sustainable development. The significance of this issue lies in the fact that identifying the potentials and limitations of ecotourism can provide a foundation for policymaking, tourism planning, and the conservation of the country's natural and cultural resources.

The main research question is: What is the status and importance of ecotourism in Afghanistan, and how can its potential be utilized for the sustainable development of the country?

The **sub-questions** of the research are as follows:

1. What natural and cultural potentials does Afghanistan possess for the development of ecotourism?
2. What role does ecotourism play in environmental conservation and the economic and social development of local communities in Afghanistan?
3. What are the major challenges and obstacles to the development of ecotourism in Afghanistan?
4. What strategies can facilitate the sustainable development and effective management of ecotourism in Afghanistan?

To address these questions, the present study employs a **descriptive-analytical research method** and, based on scientific sources and reliable reports related to ecotourism and sustainable tourism, examines the potentials, significance, challenges, and strategies for the development of ecotourism in Afghanistan.

Research Findings

The findings of the study indicate that Afghanistan possesses considerable natural and cultural potential for the development of ecotourism. The country's geographical and climatic diversity, combined with its high mountain ranges, natural valleys, rivers, waterfalls, lakes, forests, plains, and relatively pristine areas, provides favorable conditions for a wide range of ecotourism activities, including mountaineering, hiking, birdwatching, caving, nature-based therapy, scientific and cultural tourism, and wildlife observation. Band-e Amir, Wakhan, Badakhshan, Nuristan, the Pamirs, and a number of the country's mountainous areas and valleys represent some of the most significant examples of this potential.

Another finding of the study demonstrates that ecotourism can play an important role in environmental conservation in Afghanistan. In accordance with the principles of ecotourism, tourism activities should cause minimal damage to habitats and natural resources, while a portion of the benefits generated from tourism should be allocated to environmental conservation. Furthermore, educating tourists and involving local communities can increase environmental awareness and strengthen a sense of responsibility toward natural resources.

From an economic and social perspective, the findings indicate that the development of ecotourism can contribute to employment generation, increased income, the expansion of local industries and products, diversification of rural economies, and reduction of socioeconomic deprivation. The participation of local communities in providing tourism services, guiding visitors, operating community-based accommodations, and marketing local products ensures that a greater share of the economic benefits of tourism reaches local residents. This, in turn, can strengthen their motivation to protect the natural and cultural environment.

However, the study also demonstrates that the major obstacles to the development of ecotourism in Afghanistan include difficult access to natural areas, inadequate roads and transportation facilities, insufficient accommodation and tourism infrastructure, limited waste-management systems, weak managerial and educational capacity, security-related challenges, and the potential emergence of adverse social and cultural impacts. The absence of scientific and participatory management may result in the inappropriate exploitation of natural resources and undermine the sustainability of ecotourism activities.

Finally, the findings demonstrate that the formulation of a national ecotourism strategy, implementation of pilot projects in high-potential areas such as Band-e Amir and Wakhan, empowerment and training of local communities, development of environmentally sustainable infrastructure, enhancement of tourist awareness, and establishment of a continuous monitoring and evaluation system constitute some of the most important measures for achieving the sustainable development of ecotourism in Afghanistan.

Concept of Ecotourism

Ecotourism is one of the branches of sustainable tourism that, in recent decades, has emerged as an effective instrument for environmental conservation and local development. Various definitions of ecotourism have been proposed, each emphasizing particular aspects of environmental protection, education, and economic development.

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of local people, and involves interpretation and education" (The International Ecotourism Society [TIES], 2015, p. 3). This definition emphasizes that ecotourism is not merely a visit to natural areas, but an experience accompanied by education and the enhancement of environmental awareness.

The Canadian scholar David A. Fennell conceptualizes ecotourism with an emphasis on ethical and sustainable management and defines it as "a form of tourism based on natural resources that has minimal negative impacts and focuses on visitor experience and education." From Fennell's perspective, ecotourism should possess three key characteristics: non-consumptive use, ethical management, and localism. These principles, emphasizing environmental conservation, equitable resource utilization, and local community participation, constitute a theoretical framework for

the sustainable development of ecotourism (Fennell, 2022, p. 45).

The World Tourism Organization also describes ecotourism as responsible tourism to natural areas that conserves the environment and local culture while contributing to local economic development. According to this perspective, nature-based tourism should be aligned with sustainable development and the improvement of the well-being of local communities. Furthermore, the criteria established by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) provide specific principles for assessing and ensuring the sustainability of ecotourism, including natural-resource management, local participation, equitable distribution of economic benefits, and visitor education (Global Sustainable Tourism Council, 2020, p. 5).

Persian-language literature has likewise addressed ecotourism as an instrument for sustainable development and environmental conservation. Iranian scholar Mohammad Reza Shariati states that “ecotourism is a form of tourism that emphasizes direct experience of nature, understanding local cultures, and improving the economies of indigenous communities.” He further emphasizes that the development of sustainable infrastructure, education of local communities, and participatory management constitute the principal foundations for the development of ecotourism in Afghanistan (Shariati, 2018, p. 123).

Considering the definitions presented above, ecotourism can be scientifically analyzed through four principal dimensions:

1. **Environmental Dimension:** This dimension focuses on the conservation of biodiversity and natural habitats, reduction of human-induced impacts, and sustainable management of natural resources. Ecotourism should be designed not only to minimize damage to ecosystems but also to play an active role in environmental conservation (UNEP, 2017, p. 28).
2. **Economic and Local Development Dimension:** One of the principal objectives of ecotourism is to generate income and employment opportunities for local communities. Revenue derived from ecotourism activities can provide economic incentives for environmental conservation and contribute to the development of rural and economically disadvantaged areas. This dimension also includes the production and sale of local products, guiding services, and community-based accommodation (Weaver, 2008, p. 72).
3. **Educational and Awareness-Raising Dimension:** Visitors to natural and cultural areas can acquire knowledge of the environment and local culture through education and direct experience. This enhances their environmental knowledge and attitudes and plays an important role in sustainable development. Responsible visitor behavior can consequently reduce the adverse impacts of tourism on natural and cultural resources (TIES, 2015, p. 9).
4. **Social and Cultural Dimension:** Ecotourism should be accompanied by respect for indigenous cultures,

participation of local communities, and the promotion of social equity. This dimension can contribute to reducing social conflicts, strengthening cultural identity, and fostering greater understanding and solidarity between visitors and host communities (Fennell, 2022, p. 48).

Based on the above definitions and analysis, ecotourism can be understood not merely as a tourism activity, but as a scientific and managerial approach to environmental conservation, economic development, cultural enhancement, and education.

Characteristics and Principles of Ecotourism

Minimize Impact: Visitors should behave responsibly and minimize negative impacts on habitats, species, and natural resources. This includes following designated routes, controlling visitor numbers where necessary, and preventing pollution.

Provide Benefits for Conservation: A portion of the revenue generated through ecotourism should be allocated to environmental conservation and ecological projects, thereby creating economic incentives for the protection of natural resources.

Generate Benefits for Local People: Employment creation, the sale of local products, and participation in tourism services can improve the livelihoods and economic conditions of local communities.

Build Awareness and Respect: Through local guides and environmental education, visitors can become familiar with the natural environment and culture of the destination and develop more responsible attitudes toward environmental protection.

Deliver a Quality Visitor Experience: The travel experience should be educational, safe, and memorable in order to strengthen visitors' motivation to protect natural and cultural resources and to behave responsibly.

Local Management and Stakeholder Participation: Decision-making and management processes should be carried out with the meaningful participation of local communities and relevant stakeholders.

Sustainable Use of Natural Resources: Resources such as water, energy, soil, and natural habitats should be utilized responsibly and efficiently in ways that maintain their availability and ecological functions for future generations.

Studies indicate that adherence to these principles can contribute simultaneously to environmental conservation and the economic and social development of local communities. In Afghanistan, areas such as Band-e Amir and Wakhan, which possess relatively pristine natural landscapes, provide suitable contexts in which the implementation of these principles can support sustainable ecotourism development. In particular, participatory management and the empowerment of local communities are essential in these areas because, without the meaningful involvement of indigenous populations, tourism projects may become short-term and potentially environmentally and socially harmful (Amiri & Nowruzi, 2019, p. 50).

Furthermore, visitor education and awareness-raising play an important role in reducing the negative impacts of ecotourism. Direct experiences of nature, accompanied by scientific and cultural guidance, can enhance visitors' understanding of and respect for the environment and local culture. In the long term, this can contribute to the establishment of sustainable tourism practices and the conservation of natural and cultural resources.

The Status and Importance of Ecotourism in the World

Tourism is considered one of the most important economic activities worldwide, accounting for approximately 10% of global gross domestic product (GDP) and 10% of global employment. Consequently, intense competition exists among major tourism destinations to secure a larger share of the international tourism market. In this context, countries that have developed clear and well-defined strategies for tourism development have been able to attract a greater share of tourism revenues by establishing themselves as leading destinations.

Nature-based tourism or ecotourism accounts for a significant share of the global travel market, with some estimates indicating that it represents approximately 20% of the international tourism market. In many countries, revenues generated from this form of tourism are substantially reinvested in environmental conservation and research activities.

Nature-based tourism constitutes a segment of the broader tourism industry that generally generates fewer negative impacts on the environment and local cultural structures. By emphasizing the conservation of the environment and natural resources, it also places considerable value on the cultural and indigenous characteristics of local communities. Ecotourists are generally travelers who respect the cultural, social, and religious norms of host communities. They often possess strong environmental awareness and can play an effective role in reducing pollution, conserving natural resources, and promoting environmental awareness and culture among local populations.

Given the environmental, social, cultural, and economic significance of nature-based tourism, the United Nations designated **2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism** in order to raise public awareness of the potential of ecotourism to improve the living standards of local communities and to encourage greater study and attention to natural, cultural, and indigenous environments. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), in cooperation with the World Tourism Organization, was assigned responsibilities related to activities during this international year. The objectives included reviewing previous experiences in ecotourism, identifying and promoting forms of nature-based tourism that contribute to the protection of endangered ecosystems, ensuring that the benefits generated by such activities are shared with local communities, and respecting indigenous cultures.

Estimates by the **The International Ecotourism Society (TIES)** indicate that nature-based tourists can generally be divided into two broad groups according to their motivations.

The first group consists of tourists seeking adventure, visits to relatively pristine areas, and sports-oriented tourism. These travelers are generally younger than 40 years of age, with a significant proportion falling within the 19–35 age range. The second group consists of tourists who travel primarily to enjoy nature, observe wildlife, and experience natural landscapes; they generally fall within the 35–54 age range. It should be noted, however, that these estimates primarily concern international ecotourists, whereas domestic and local nature-based tourists generally encompass a wider range of ages.

Ecotourists do not exhibit a specific gender composition, and their gender distribution is often approximately equal. TIES studies have also indicated that more than 80% of international nature-based tourists possess higher education. This proportion approaches 100% among tourists particularly interested in experiencing natural environments and visiting natural attractions, including those who engage in nature-based tourism as a means of changing their everyday lifestyle. Adventure-oriented nature tourists, however, are generally younger and consequently include a considerable proportion of university students and even secondary-school students.

Estimates further indicate that the largest proportion of nature-based tourists—approximately 60%—prefer traveling in groups. Around 15% prefer family trips, while approximately 13% generally travel alone. For roughly half of nature-based tourists, the average duration of travel is between 8 and 14 days, although this figure varies according to the type of trip. Most international hunting tours are planned for periods exceeding 20 days, while adventure tours may approach 30 days in duration. By contrast, locally organized nature-based trips are generally much shorter. Nevertheless, an important characteristic of nature-based tourism is that the average duration of travel is generally longer than that of tourists visiting historical, cultural, or commercial attractions. Even recreational trips are often shorter than nature-based tourism trips, a factor that has considerable importance in analyzing the ecotourism market.

At the local level, nature-based tourism can create new employment opportunities, contribute to addressing unemployment, reduce rural-to-urban migration, and facilitate the gradual transfer of underemployed agricultural labor into the service sector. Ecotourism can also stimulate the development of profitable local industries, generate foreign exchange, diversify local economies, inject capital into local communities, and facilitate cultural exchange. According to estimates attributed to the World Tourism Organization, the arrival of each tourist can generate approximately 2–6 direct jobs and, when employment in production and tourism-related service sectors is included, approximately 9–15 jobs. The number of employment opportunities generated per ecotourist has been estimated at approximately 1.5 times the number generated by a conventional tourist. Overall, there is a meaningful relationship between the development of nature-based tourism, the economic prosperity of local communities, and the reduction of socioeconomic deprivation.

Today, the development of nature-based tourism, with an emphasis on the effective participation of local communities, is

regarded as one of the effective approaches to local economic development, poverty reduction, and improvement of living standards. This issue has gained considerable importance at the international level. International organizations affiliated with the United Nations, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the World Trade Organization (WTO), have allocated significant portions of their resources to projects related to the empowerment and development of local communities (UNEP, 2017, pp. 28–30).

Scope and Range of Ecotourism

Nature-based tourism, or ecotourism, encompasses a broad range of tourism activities associated with natural environments. These activities include visits to national parks and protected areas, exploration of relatively pristine natural environments, birdwatching, nature walks, trekking, mountaineering, visits to natural caves, study of plant flora and animal fauna, field studies of wildlife, ecological research, and similar activities.

Natural tourism resources can generally be divided into three major categories:

First: Primary tourism resources. These constitute the principal attractions that motivate tourists to visit a destination. They include natural attractions such as forests, rivers, lakes, wildlife, caves, waterfalls, and other natural features. They may also include facilities established for tourism-related activities, such as natural history museums, art galleries, theaters, and similar attractions.

Second: Secondary tourism resources. These include accommodation facilities, shops, exhibitions, restaurants, and other services and facilities that support visitors during their stay.

Third: Supporting tourism resources and services. These consist of institutions and organizations responsible for providing information, guidance, and tourism-related services, including tourism authorities, tour operators, travel agencies, and related organizations (Azimi, 2012, p. 57).

Afghanistan's Natural Environment: An Opportunity for Ecotourism Development

Ecotourism refers to travel to natural areas undertaken with a sense of responsibility, contributing to the improvement of local people's livelihoods while supporting environmental conservation. Afghanistan is among the countries of the world with considerable biological and environmental diversity, providing substantial potential for sustainable tourism and employment generation. Through the organization of nature-based tours and the promotion of Afghanistan's biological and environmental diversity, both international and domestic tourists can be encouraged to engage in ecotourism. Desert tourism, ethnographic tourism, trekking, hunting and fishing, nature-based therapy, mountaineering, cave exploration, winter sports, and related activities represent some of the major forms of nature-based tourism that can attract visitors and contribute to wealth generation.

Afghanistan is a predominantly mountainous country. Its high and snow-covered mountain ranges—including the Hindu Kush, Baba Mountains, Safed Koh, Tirband-e Turkistan, Spin Ghar, and Siyah Koh—along with its cold glaciers and spectacular peaks such as Nushaq, Tirich Mir, Shah Foladi, Sikaram, and Takht-e Sulaiman, provide exceptional opportunities for mountaineering and adventure tourism. Climate itself can also be regarded as an economic asset for tourism. Afghanistan's climatic diversity is remarkable and corresponds closely with the country's diverse geographical and human landscape. While the central and northeastern regions are cold and heavily snow-covered during winter, Jalalabad and Laghman may experience spring-like weather during the same period.

Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur, who ruled parts of Afghanistan until 931 AH and subsequently moved toward India with the aim of conquering the region, described this climatic diversity in his memoir, the *Baburnama*, written in Chagatai Turkish. He noted that from Kabul, one could travel within a single day to an area where snow never falls, while within approximately two hours one could reach an area where snow never melts except during particularly warm summers. This historical observation illustrates the remarkable geographical and climatic diversity of Afghanistan.

The country's fertile and scenic plains, including Dasht-e Laili, Dasht-e Nawur, Dasht-e Archi, Dasht-e Shadian, and the plains of Qaisar, Faryab, Herat, and Helmand, constitute important natural attractions. Likewise, the lush and visually striking forests of Paktia, Nuristan, Laghman, Khost, and Nangarhar in eastern Afghanistan, as well as the pistachio forests of Badghis, Baghlan, Badakhshan, and Samangan in the north, represent valuable ecological and tourism resources.

Afghanistan's powerful and abundant rivers, including the Amu Darya, Helmand, Hari Rud, and Kabul River, further enhance the country's ecotourism potential. Its waterfalls, such as those in Tang-e Gharu, Panjshir, Khwaja Gharicha Khan in Andarab, Nijrab, Koh-e Daman, and the mountainous areas of the Hazarajat, Nuristan, Yiftal, and Badakhshan, constitute additional natural attractions. Wetlands such as those in Ishkamish, Ghor, Baghlan, and Nawur are also important ecological reserves, particularly as habitats for wildlife and bird species.

The country's beautiful blue lakes, including Band-e Amir, Lake Shewa, Chaqmaqin, and Ab-e Istada, as well as high-altitude lakes such as Howz-e Khas between Shakardara and Parsa, Parghula in Balkhab, and Bozgol in Tala wa Barfak, offer significant opportunities for attracting tourists. Hamun Lake, with its extensive reed beds, is also of considerable ecological and international importance. Similarly, Afghanistan's hot and arid deserts, including Dasht-e Margo, Dasht-e Jahanam, Dasht-e Bakwa, Dasht-e Dagh-e Namadi, and the deserts of northern Afghanistan, offer distinctive landscapes, clear skies, and star-filled nights that are particularly attractive to nature-oriented travelers.

Likewise, Afghanistan's valleys and gorges, owing to their remarkable natural landscapes and distinctive geographical characteristics, constitute important attractions for ecotourists. The country contains numerous valleys with exceptional

natural features, including the valleys of Istalif, Paghman, Shakardara, Sanjidara, Panjshir, Nijrab, Bamyan, Foladi, Ajar, Shakh, Baharak, Angosht Shah, Wakhan, Shighnan, Munjan, Keshem, Farkhar, Ishkamish, Khenjan, Nur, Bandol, Ashpi, Askin, the Five Valleys of Nijrab, Hazara Valley, Shekari Valley, Angosht Shah, Balkhab, Sangcharak, Kabchak, Chahar Dara, Kahmard, Gul Dara, Jalrez, Shakardara, Khyber, Nazyan, Pachir wa Agam, Waziri, Khogyani, Charkh, Kurram, Jaji, Zarmast, Tutakhel, Shamal, Shewaki, Surobi, Dara-e Suf, and Anar Dara. These areas offer scenic landscapes and favorable climatic conditions and can serve as important destinations for nature-based tourism.

Afghanistan is also a habitat for rare animal species, including species whose distribution is particularly associated with the country's territory. According to accounts cited in tourism-related studies, Afghanistan's extensive geographical area contains wildlife species associated with the broader natural heritage of prehistoric Southwest Asia, India, Turkestan, and the Himalayan region. Zoological research conducted to date has identified approximately **120 species of mammals** in Afghanistan.

Only a small proportion of Afghanistan's territory is currently designated as protected areas. Nevertheless, the country possesses five major ecological zones, including the Central Highlands, plains, semi-desert regions of the south, forests influenced by monsoonal rainfall, and the eastern intermontane basin. These ecological zones support distinctive biological diversity and provide considerable potential for nature conservation and ecotourism development.

It should also be emphasized that the tourism industry is important for Afghanistan in both its domestic and international dimensions. Domestic tourism can strengthen national understanding and social cohesion among communities living in different parts of the country. At the international level, cultural interaction with both Muslim and non-Muslim countries is important and can contribute significantly to mutual understanding and international peace. In general, visits by people from different countries to archaeological, cultural, and tourism destinations in one another's countries can reduce misunderstandings, promote intercultural dialogue, and strengthen mutual understanding (Azimi, 2018, pp. 48–50).



Figure 1. Beautiful natural landscape of Nuristan Province, Afghanistan. Source: Google/Kapisa. Retrieved September 26, 2025, from .



Figure 2. View of the highlands of Wakhan, Afghanistan. Source: ATIS. Retrieved September 28, 2025, from .



Figure 3. View of Lalan Pond in Panjshir Province, Afghanistan. Source: ATIS. Retrieved September 28, 2025, from .



Figure 4. View of the beautiful natural landscape of Kapisa Province, Afghanistan. Source: ATIS. Retrieved September 28, 2025, from .

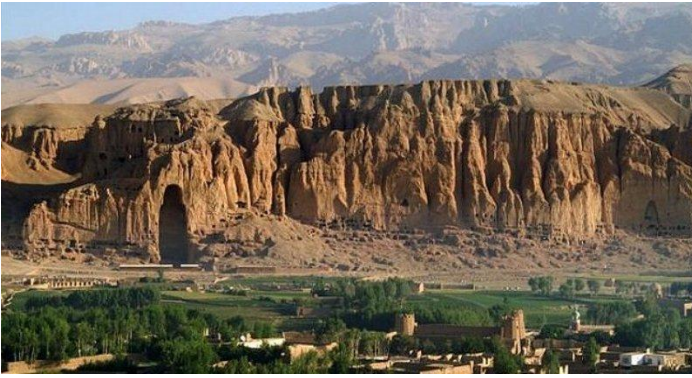


Figure 5. Panoramic view of Bamiyan City, Afghanistan.
Source: ATIS. Retrieved September 28, 2025, from .



Figure 6. View of Band-e Amir, Afghanistan. Source: Pinterest. Retrieved September 28, 2025, from .



Figure (7), View of the Mud-Brick Bridge in Badakhshan Province, photographed by Kitab Khan Faizi, 2025.

Challenges to the Development of Ecotourism in Afghanistan

Despite its considerable potential, the development of ecotourism in Afghanistan faces several serious challenges:

1. **Difficult Accessibility:** The shortage of roads and transportation facilities limits access for tourists and discourages investment.
2. **Weak Tourism Infrastructure:** The lack of standard accommodation facilities, waste-management systems, reliable water and electricity

supplies, and designated trails represents one of the major barriers to development.

3. **Limited Management Capacity and Training:** Insufficient capacity among local communities and government authorities may lead to inappropriate management of natural and cultural resources.
4. **Social and Cultural Impacts:** Unintended changes in local lifestyles and negative cultural impacts may occur in the absence of proper education and community participation.
5. **Risk of Greenwashing:** Tourism projects that claim to be sustainable but fail to comply with environmental and social protection standards pose a threat to genuine ecotourism (Amiri & Nowruzi, 2019, p. 63).

Strategies for the Development of Ecotourism in Afghanistan

To overcome these challenges and take advantage of existing opportunities, the following scientific strategies are proposed:

1. **Developing a National Ecotourism Strategy:** A comprehensive framework based on GSTC criteria should be developed, focusing on environmental conservation, economic development, and local community participation to promote the growth and development of ecotourism in Afghanistan.
2. **Implementing Local Pilot Projects*:** Selected areas such as Band-e Amir and Wakhan can serve as pilot sites for ecotourism management and for assessing its social and environmental impacts.
3. **Empowering Local Communities:** Training and involving local people in the management of projects and tourism services are key to achieving sustainable success.
4. **Strengthening Infrastructure with Minimal Environmental Impact:** Standard accommodation facilities, designated trails, waste-management systems, and sustainable transportation should be developed without damaging the natural environment.
5. **Increasing Visitor Awareness:** Environmental and cultural education programs for tourists can promote responsible behavior and respect for local cultures.
6. **Continuous Monitoring and Evaluation:** Monitoring systems should be established to assess the economic, social, and environmental impacts of projects and to revise policies based on reliable data.

By combining opportunities and challenges, it becomes clear that ecotourism in Afghanistan can serve as a strategic instrument for sustainable development, provided that scientific

* - **Pilot Project:** A pilot project is a preliminary experiment conducted before large-scale investment and implementation in order to assess the feasibility, effectiveness, and potential outcomes of a project on a larger scale.

principles, local participation, and environmental management are properly observed. The successful experiences of comparable countries demonstrate that participatory management, education, and international frameworks can contribute to positive economic, social, and environmental outcomes (Fennell, 2022, p. 60).

Therefore, policymakers and tourism institutions should focus on selected destinations, local capacity building, and international standards to create the necessary conditions for sustainable ecotourism and to develop this sector as a strategic economic and conservation opportunity.

Conclusion

An examination of the position and importance of ecotourism in Afghanistan demonstrates that the country possesses extensive natural and cultural potential for the development of nature-based tourism. In response to the first research question, it can be stated that high mountains, valleys, rivers, waterfalls, lakes, forests, plains, biodiversity, and pristine natural areas, together with the country's historical and cultural heritage, constitute the major resources for the development of ecotourism in Afghanistan. Areas such as Band-e Amir, Wakhan, Badakhshan, Nuristan, and the Pamirs are among the most prominent examples of this potential and, if properly managed, can become important ecotourism destinations.

In response to the second research question, the findings indicate that ecotourism can play an effective role in environmental conservation, strengthening local economies, and improving the social conditions of indigenous communities. The participation of local people in tourism management and service provision, the creation of employment and income opportunities, the sale of local products, and the education of visitors can not only generate economic benefits but also increase communities' motivation to protect natural and cultural resources. Therefore, ecotourism in Afghanistan can simultaneously function as a conservation, economic, educational, and social instrument.

In response to the third research question, the major barriers to the development of ecotourism in Afghanistan include inadequate tourism infrastructure, difficult access to natural areas, insufficient training and managerial capacity, security-related limitations, and the possibility of undesirable social and cultural impacts. These factors demonstrate that the existence of natural attractions alone is not sufficient to establish a sustainable ecotourism industry. Scientific planning, effective management, appropriate infrastructure, and local community participation are also essential.

In response to the fourth research question, the study demonstrates that developing a national ecotourism strategy, implementing pilot projects in high-potential areas, empowering local communities, establishing environmentally compatible infrastructure, educating and raising awareness among tourists, and creating a continuous monitoring and evaluation system are among the most important strategies for the sustainable development of this sector. Applying international standards and participatory management can also

help prevent the degradation of natural and cultural resources and provide the basis for their sustainable utilization.

Overall, ecotourism in Afghanistan is not merely an opportunity for developing the tourism industry; it can also serve as a strategic instrument for environmental and cultural heritage conservation, employment and income generation, reducing the marginalization of rural areas, and increasing public awareness. Therefore, the future of ecotourism in Afghanistan depends on how these resources are managed. If its development is based on scientific principles, environmental protection, local community participation, education, appropriate infrastructure, and continuous monitoring, ecotourism can make a significant contribution to the country's sustainable development and transform Afghanistan into a valuable destination for both domestic and international nature-based tourism. This conclusion is consistent with the overall findings of the study, which identify ecotourism as a strategic capacity for Afghanistan's economic, social, environmental, and cultural development.

References

- Amiri, H., & Nowruzi, S. (2019). *Ecotourism management in neighboring countries*. Mashhad: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies Press.
- Azimi, M. A. (2018). *Geography of Afghanistan and wealth-creation opportunities*. Kabul: Nashr-e Negar Publications.
- Fennell, D. A. (2022). *Ecotourism: An introduction* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Global Sustainable Tourism Council. (2020). *GSTC criteria for destinations*. <https://www.gstcouncil.org/gstc-criteria/>
- Shariati, M. (2018). *Sustainable tourism and ecotourism*. Tehran: University of Tehran Press.
- The International Ecotourism Society. (2015). *What is ecotourism?* <https://ecotourism.org/what-is-ecotourism/>
- United Nations Environment Programme. (2017). *Ecotourism: Principles, practices and policies for sustainability*. UNEP.
- United Nations World Tourism Organization. (2018). *Sustainable tourism and ecotourism report*. UNWTO.
- Weaver, D. (2008). *Ecotourism* (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.
- Stronza, A. L., Hunt, C. A., & Fitzgerald, L. A. (2019). Ecotourism for conservation? *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 44, 229–253. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-101718-033046>
- Rahman, M. K., Masud, M. M., Akhtar, R., & Hossain, M. M. (2022). Impact of community participation on sustainable development of marine protected areas: Assessment of ecotourism development. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 24(1), 33–43. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.2480>
- Mudzengi, B. K., Gandiwa, E., Muboko, N., & Mutanga, C. N. (2021). Towards sustainable community conservation in tropical savanna ecosystems: A management framework for ecotourism ventures in a changing environment. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, 23, 3028–3047. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-020-00772-4>
- Krüger, O. (2005). The role of ecotourism in conservation: Panacea or Pandora's box? *Biodiversity and Conservation*, 14, 579–600. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10531-004-3917-4>
- Stem, C. J., Lassoie, J. P., Lee, D. R., Deshler, D. D., & Schelhas, J. W. (2003). Community participation in ecotourism benefits: The link to conservation practices and perspectives. *Society & Natural Resources*, 16(5), 387–413. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920309177>
- Bookbinder, M. P., Dinerstein, E., Rijal, A., Cauley, H., & Rajouria, A. (1998). Ecotourism's support of biodiversity conservation.

Conservation Biology, 12(6), 1399–1404.
<https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1523-1739.1998.97229.x>
Qian, C., Sasaki, N., Shivakoti, G., & Zhang, Y. (2018). Effective governance in tourism: Stakeholder collaboration and sustainable tourism development in protected areas. *Sustainability*, 10(4), 1215. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su10041215>