Ecological tourism as a promising trend of sustainable development in Georgia: topicality, capabilities, peculiarities

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Abstract.
The article analyzes the prospects for the development of ecological tourism in Georgia, in particular, the opportunities and conditions for the development of sustainable or ecotourism for different regions of Georgia are studied. Each region has distinct characteristics of natural environment, economic level, recreational and ecotourism resources. The article emphasizes that the development of ecotourism contributes to its main resources - the diverse nature of the country and the long-term preservation of a rich culture of life. Economic growth in the regions, providing employment for the local population, improving their well-being and, what is most important for the highland regions, solving the current demographic problem. Development of at least one national park visitor management plan that includes environmental impact and capacity assessments. Development of appropriate institutional capacity for sound and efficient operation. Creation of mechanisms for joint coordination practices in ecotourism management. Development of ecotourism/recreational development plans in forest areas. Development of national ecotourism standards based on existing international criteria and promotion of their implementation.

Keywords:
Ecotourism
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Introduction. Ecotourism, as special travel in the natural environment, serves to protect the environment and enhance the well-being of the local population. In other words, ecotourism is a tool for environmental protection. Ecotourism products are relatively untouched nature and the pleasure derived from observing it, ancient cultural monuments and any natural as well as man-made values. This direction of tourism differs from mass and resort tourism in that it does not require significant infrastructure and causes less damage to the environment.

Ecotourism cannot by itself ensure the development of natural monuments located in the region. It should be considered as an important component of traditional farming or sustainable development of these areas, providing additional income. The tourism business in this way promotes the development of the local economy, the participation of the local population ensures the proper conduct of environmental activities and the formation of attractive and unique tourist products.

Ecotourism is travel undertaken by tourists, during which they clearly realize their responsibility towards nature, which is of particular importance, where nature is still preserved in its original state. Ecotourism minimizes negative impacts of a social, cultural and ecological nature, and because it helps to raise funds for environmental protection measures, it can therefore become a major source of income for the region's population.

To properly understand the meaning of ecotourism, it can be considered as a trip during which: nature is the main value; the traveler studies the environment; The received funds are directed to finance environmental protection; participants or ecotourists personally participate in activities aimed at the protection and preservation of wildlife; All activities are "environmentally clean and light"[1].

Ecotourism can also be defined as tourism The part that covers the journey is relatively intact In the natural environment with specific objectives: wild flora and exploring, experiencing and enjoying fauna. The concept of ecotourism includes the following elements: 1.Natural environment; 2. ecological and cultural sustainability;
3. Education; 4. Provision of local and national income.

In modern conditions, ecotourism is considered as the basis of environmental protection and sustainable development. In some cases, tourism development creates favorable conditions for environmental protection - income from the tourism industry often allows the destination to take additional measures to save vulnerable and unstable ecosystems. In some regions, tourism enables the maintenance of a healthy and attractive physical environment. Thus, unlike other branches of the economy, the long-term goals of tourism include the protection and improvement of the quality characteristics of the environment for the benefit of future generations of tourists.

**Aim of research.** The study of the importance of developing ecotourism in Georgia aims to highlight all the advantages that small, but amazingly rich and diverse Georgia has for the development of tourism. The paper also aims to analyze the problems that burden not only the natural environment, but also economic development. What prevents not only the full coexistence of us and nature, but also the improvement of the social and economic condition of the local population. It is important to understand the principle of sustainable use of the natural environment, to engage in ecotourism activities as much as possible, which in turn will positively affect both their daily environment and their economic strength. Visitor management is important in protected areas. Develop a plan for at least one national park that includes an environmental impact and capacity assessment.

**Methodology.** The theoretical and methodological basis of the research

Leading scientific publications and statistical data, evaluation of the main directions of Georgia's ecological tourism strategy, sustainable development policy.

**Literature review.** Primary and secondary sources, materials containing own texts, classical works of scientists and researchers are used in the work. Papers dedicated to our research ecotourism resources: Alikhanashvili, N. "ecological tourism"; Macharashvili, I. Arveladze, T. Svanidze, I. Archuadze, M. Kobakhidze, D. Kutateladze, I. "Biodiversity Monitoring in Protected Areas". Gigauri, G., Supatashvili, A.

We discussed the statistics of visitors to protected areas. According to the data of the Statistical Service of Georgia, it should be noted that the growth of tourism in the protected areas in Georgia is going on at a much faster pace. The number of visitors to the protected areas of Georgia in 2023 (786533), in 2022 (902063 visitor) compared to the data of 2021 (589098 visitors) by 53% grew up.


In 2023, the highest number of visitors (87% of protected area visitors) visited Martville Canyon with 19% of protected area visitors; 19% of visitors to the protected areas of
Prometheus Cave; 11% of visitors to Tsalki Canyon protected areas; 10% of visitors to the protected areas of Sataflya; 9% of visitors to Mtirala National Park protected areas.

In 2022, revenues from ecotourism services amounted to 8314439 GEL, which is 43% compared to the previous 2021 figure (5,832,764 GEL) increased. In 2022, 407 hotels, 250 shops and 184 in the vicinity of the protected areas It is a catering facility, employs 1445 people and their income amounts to about 5 713 651 GEL [2].

**Discussion and Results.** Tourism and the environment are
closely related. The natural and man-made environment contains many attractive elements for tourists. Along with this, tourism includes such areas of service as: hotels, restaurants, transport, excursion services, etc. The concept of sustainable development of tourism and its analysis should mean the possible results of growth and not only the goal. This is evidenced by the priority of "sustainable development" announced by the world summit held in Rio in 1992, which should lead to a careful approach to tourism activities and care for cultural and natural values. During the sustainable development of tourism, resources are consumed in such a way that it meets economic, social and aesthetic requirements, but at the same time preserves the cultural identity of the country, the biodiversity of the environment and the main life systems.

The sustainable development of tourism is based on the model of economic development, the purpose of which is:
1. Ensuring a pleasant trip for tourists;
2. Maintaining the state of the environment, which has a direct impact on both tourists and local residents;
3. Raising the standard of living of the local population.

The principles of sustainable development of tourism include:
- sustainable consumption of resources. Protection and sustainable consumption of natural, social and cultural resources is a prerequisite for long-term and successful activities;
- Reduction of loads and waste in tourist areas. Regulation of resource consumption and reduction of waste contributes to the increase in the quality of the tourism product and at the same time reduces the costs of nature conservation;
- preservation of natural and cultural diversity. Natural and cultural diversity is a determining factor for the success and sustainability of tourism activities;
- Support of the local economy. Ecotourism contributes to the development of the local economy, provides compensation for possible damage to the environment, and in turn protects and reduces the negative impact on the wild environment;
- Participation of the local population. The
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participation of the local population not only brings economic benefits, but also makes the tourist product much more interesting and attractive:

- Consultations and cooperation. Consultation and cooperation between protected area management, local communities, administration and tourism industry representatives will ensure that conflicts of interest are avoided.

- Raising the qualification of the staff. The purpose of professional trainings for employees of protected areas is to improve visitor services and services and operational efficiency of services;

- Marketing. Providing guests with complete and objective information about the local natural and cultural environment is a determining factor of respect, interest and satisfaction on the part of guests;

- Research and evaluation. Effective monitoring of the tourism industry and a full-fledged information base for timely and effective problem solving It is a necessary condition of operation, which ensures the protection of the natural and cultural environment and the interests of consumers.

Tourism based on sustainable development is special because most of the activities are related to sightseeing and activities related to the protection of nature, historical heritage and cultural identity of the respective area. If the condition of these resources deteriorates or is destroyed, then tourist regions will not be able to attract tourists and tourism will not be successful. Tourists are attracted to natural, clean and uncrowded places.[3].

In the XXI century, in the process of rapid development of tourism, tourism companies are forced to recognize ecology as a priority, since today tourism is the largest branch of the economy, and ecology occupies a central place in the development of tourism.

According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the number of international tourists by 2030 will be 1.8 billion. Will grow to man. Like all industries, tourism requires resources that are exhaustible, so it is of utmost importance [4].
“Tourism Towards 2030 shows that there is still significant potential for further expansion in the coming decades. Established, as well as new destinations, can benefit from this trend and opportunity, provided they shape the appropriate conditions and policies with regard to business environment, infrastructure, facilitation, marketing and human resources,” “Nevertheless, alongside this opportunity, challenges will also arise in terms of maximizing tourism’s social and economic benefits while minimizing negative impacts. As such, it is more important than ever that all tourism development be guided by the principles of sustainable development” [5].

Sustainable use and protection of resources. An alternative way to this process is to increase the role of ecotourism. Ecotourism is a growing field of tourism, and therefore its basic principles are still in the formative stage. That's why we offer the so-called eco tourist, developed by the specialists of the International Ecotourism Organization (TIES). To the 10 commandments, which will help us to understand better in the future and, as far as possible, to add to this field of tourism the specificities already focused on a specific region, namely Georgia: 1. Remember that the earth is vulnerable; 2. Leave only footsteps, take only photos, kill only time; 3. Get to know the world you are in: local culture, landscapes, biodiversity; 4. Respect the local population; 5. Do not buy products, the production of which harms the nature; 6. Walk only on paved paths; 7. Support local conservation programs; 8. Try as much as possible to use methods that are less harmful to nature; 9. Support and help local nature protection organizations as much as possible; 10. Use only the services of those companies that recognize the main principles of ecotourism.

Georgia is located in the central and western part of Transcaucasia. The total length of the country's border is 1968.8 km, of which 1660.4 km are land. In the west of Georgia, between the mouth of the Psou River and the village of Sarpi, the Black Sea flows, to the north - the Russian Federation, to the east - Azerbaijan, to the south - Armenia, to the southwest - Turkey.

The territory of Georgia extends vertically from the level of the Black Sea to 5068.8 meters (peak Shkhara). Georgia is
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distinguished by the complexity of the terrain - almost 2/3 of its territory is mountainous. Along the northern border, more than 1/3 of the country's area is occupied by the Caucasus mountain system. Georgia is characterized by almost all zones of the air on the surface of the earth, starting from humid subtropical, ending with the zone of eternal snow and glaciers.

From the point of view of use, the territory of Georgia can be divided into three parts:

1. Three-year territory - 15.8%;
2. Natural-agricultural area (forest, shrubland, meadows) - 70.6%;
3. Unused land for agriculture - 13.6%.

Georgia is a mountainous country, so the forests here are almost entirely (97.7%) on the mountain slopes. In western Georgia, forests begin at sea level and cover the plains and foothills up to 500 m above sea level [6].

The forest is a global and vital factor for the entire complex of ecological systems of the earth. It is the only planetary accumulator of living matter, which holds a number of chemical elements and water in the biosphere, actively interacts with the troposphere and determines the level of oxygen and carbon. More than 60% of oxygen in the biosphere is released by terrestrial vegetation and its main component - forest. One hectare of mixed forest absorbs 13-17 thousand tons of carbon dioxide and emits 10-15 thousand tons of oxygen. The forest is the most productive formation of our planet and is characterized by a high intensity of biological circulation. The forest has many functions: it is a powerful accumulator of solar energy and has a significant influence on the formation of the climate - the circulation of water in nature, gas exchange in the atmosphere - it creates the biological and climatic conditions necessary for human life. The beginning of this cycle is the process of photosynthesis, during which oxygen is released. Georgia is one of the richest among countries with a temperate climate from a floristic point of view. Also, the animal world (fauna) of Georgia is quite diverse. In 1996, the Parliament of Georgia adopted the Law "On the System of Protected Areas". This law creates the legal basis for the establishment of protected areas, the purpose of which is to protect the country's remarkable
natural environment and valuable cultural heritage. As a result, the categories of protected areas matching the international criteria and norms and the procedure of their formation, which is based on the recommendations of the World Conservation Union (IUCN), were legalized in Georgia. In terms of ecotourism, Georgia, and the Caucasus region in general, has a great potential: landscape, flora, fauna and others. The number of protected areas and alpine forests make Georgia one of the most attractive countries for mass tourism in the world, which will allow tourists to see the spectacular flora and fauna and enjoy its beauty.

Georgia, as a part of the Caucasus, is recognized as one of the special regions in terms of biodiversity - a "hot spot" of biodiversity, whose nature is distinguished by a high level of species diversity, endemism and ecosystems of global importance. Protected areas are a key tool for biodiversity conservation. The larger the area of protected areas, the better conditions are created for the preservation and protection of endangered species and habitats.

Due to its geographical location, climatic and relief conditions, Georgia has the greatest potential for tourism development. Such diversity of natural conditions is the necessary resource for the development of ecotourism. Since protected areas are one of the actual destinations of ecotourism, this fact allows us to promote the protection of the forest fund in parallel with the development of ecotourism, since approximately 75% of the protected areas are forests. Currently, there are 88 legally protected territories in Georgia. Protected area - this is an area that has been given a special status in order to protect the physical characteristics of the mentioned area, to be protected as a cultural heritage. A protected area can be a state reserve, a national park, a protected area, a natural monument, a protected landscape and a multi-use area [7].

In 1912, the first Lagodekhi reserve of complex significance was created in Georgia, where cattle grazing, forest cutting and hunting were prohibited. One of the world's well-preserved, primeval, wild natural landscapes, protected areas of Lagodekhi St. It is located in Lagodekhi, in the extreme north-eastern part of Georgia, on the southern slopes
of the Caucasus and extends to an altitude of 590-3500 m above sea level. The first protected landscape in Georgia - "Tusheti Protected Landscape" was created in 2003, and in 2009, "Kintrish Protected Landscape" was established. In the protected area of this category, it is possible to sustainably use natural resources and develop ecotourism to promote conservation goals.

In 2021, for the first time in the history of Georgia, 4 protected areas were added to the UNESCO natural heritage list. According to the decision taken at the 44th session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in the Chinese city of Fuzhou, Kolkheti and Mtirala National Parks and Kintrish and Kobuleti Protected Areas, under the name of "Kolkhuri Forests and Wetlands", were added to the list of just 213 natural heritage sites in the world and won a worthy place. Next to such famous natural heritages as the Amazon rainforest, the Swiss Alps, the Grand Canyon National Park and more.

The territories with UNESCO World Natural Heritage status are located in Georgia, in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, Guria and Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti. These regions are characterized by unique biodiversity, diverse ecosystems and amazing landscapes. The area includes typical Kolkhi ecosystems at 2500 meters above sea level. The main ecosystem is the ancient Colchian forests and wetlands, especially in the Colchian region, which is characterized by wetlands throughout Europe and Eurasia. The area includes most of the Kolkharian flora and fauna, and is also rich in endemic plant species. The World Natural Heritage Area is distinguished by a high degree of unity – its perfection, its integrity and the absence of serious threats [8].

It is possible to develop ecotourism in protected areas, but stricter ecotourism development regimes are imposed in protected areas compared to others. The number of visitors and capacity must be regulated. Cultural heritage monuments are also a resource of ecotourism, which are gathered in protected areas. The implementation of the tourist route in the protected areas will be limited only to the strictly regulated directions in the buffer zone. Borjomi municipality in Georgia is rich in resorts, climatic and balneological resorts. There are several classes and types of mineral
As the Georgian scientist Nazi Alikhanashvili points out, the main basic principles of ecotourism are: preservation of recreational natural areas; increasing the economic benefits and level of sustainability of the regions involved in the field of ecological tourism; preservation of the ethnographic status of recreational areas; Preservation of diversity of fauna and flora in natural areas [9].

For the development of ecotourism and the sustainable use of tourist potential, it is necessary: 1) the number of visitors to protected areas and national parks should be strictly defined and regulated 2) zoning of protected areas is necessary 3) in case of the route being carried out directly in the protected area, the preservation and control of natural resources should be carried out 4) it does not require protected New hotels are being built on the territory, visitors can be accommodated in the surrounding settlements. The importance of a modern national park is manifested in the following features: soil protection, water regulation, climate stabilization, preservation of biological resources, protection of genetic resources, creation of a healthy living environment, preservation of traditional values, educational function, development of tourism and creation of jobs, recreational development.

Georgia has a great resource for ecotourism development, with diverse natural areas, aesthetically attractive landscapes, intact flora and fauna, diverse local culture and traditions, unique cuisine and traditional hospitality. Using this potential is an excellent opportunity for the socio-economic development of the territory, the integrity of the natural complexes and the improvement of the quality of life of the local population. Georgia belongs to the number of countries that have diverse conditions for the development of tourism, therefore, due to the existing potential in the country, the complex industry in the field of tourism services is an ideal basis for the economic growth of the sector [10].

Ecotourism can bring economic benefits when both the natural and business environments are healthy. It is worth noting the fact that tourism cannot develop without having a clear impact on the outside, although the emphasis should be correctly placed not only on the development of tourism, but
also on minimizing its negative impact on the environment. That is why the main principle of sustainable development of ecotourism is to involve the population as much as possible in this process.

Sustainable use of natural resources and preservation of ecosystems are important to meet the needs of both present and future generations. For this, it is necessary to raise the culture of relationship with nature, to develop ethical norms of behavior in the natural environment. It is in this respect that ecotourism generates income, which in turn generates local budgets and creates an opportunity for the formation and implementation of ecotourism strategies. Raising awareness and actively involving local people for sustainable use of the natural environment that can bring additional economic benefits to local people [11].

Innovative tourism management is increasingly focused on local destination management and its sustainability. Scientists argue that destination is the core of tourism. Therefore, it is easy to assess the importance of destination sustainability, what is practically equivalent to tourism sustainability. Nevertheless less attention is paid to the problems of destination in general and its sustainability in particular. One of the important conditions for the organization of ecological-tourism activities is to ensure rational, sustainable nature use in protected areas. In terms of protected areas managed by an approved management plan, if we exclude the issue of IUCN Category VI Protected Areas, there is no legal basis or institution for sustainable management. Ensuring the sustainability, maintenance and development of the destination is even dependent on its management. The essence and advantage of sustainable management is that the balance of the destination is not disturbed, the sustainability of the destination is ensured in all three directions: environment, economy, socio-cultural heritage [12].

Researchers Khoshtaria T, Chachava N. The paper "Prospects of ecotourism development in recreation areas of South Georgia" notes that recreational areas with untapped potential strengthen the tourism and recreation cluster. For this purpose, they bring the example and experience of
Kharagauli National Park in Borjomi, natural conditions, balneological resources and cultural heritage of the Middle Ages of Georgia. They developed a general concept of landscape planning of spatial zoning, which takes into account protecting natural diversity, cultural, educational, health tourism prospects and supporting the interests of local communities, in terms of promoting ecotourism and creating a positive environment Organic agriculture [13].

**Conclusion and recommendations.** Priority actions are important: Avoiding excessive use and destruction of ecotourism resources; Different tourist destinations and their natural if adapted to cultural values Creation of ecotourism infrastructure and management; Develop a Visitor Management Plan for at least one National Park that includes an environmental impact and capacity assessment; Development of relevant institutional capacities to work reasonably and efficiently; Creation of mechanisms for joint coordination practices in ecotourism management; Ecotourism/recreational development in forest areas develop plans.

"By 2030, Georgia will be the leading ecotourism country in the Caucasus region. In which its rich living culture and nature, as well as high-quality with service in mind, it provides ecotourism offers for all four seasons. Ecotourism in Georgia provides an authentic experience for tourists Sharing benefits local communities and contributes significantly contribute to the economic well-being of the country; At the same time, it provides natural and preserving cultural heritage and raising environmental awareness among tourists and local residents" [14].

Georgia's move towards sustainable and green development requires a combination of targeted policies, incentives and public investment. This is needed both for the structural challenges in the Georgian economy for the response as well as to support the post-Covid-19 recovery.

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