The potential and development opportunities of ecotourism in Georgia

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Abstract.
The development of sustainable tourism in Georgia, its economic, political and social importance in the international tourism market depends to a significant extent on the development of such a type of tourism, which is in high demand today, is in the interest of the population of almost all countries and provides the opportunity to receive environmentally friendly tourist services, as well as the protection of the environment, the country's ecological safety and the preservation of biodiversity as much as possible. The main goal of the work is to study and investigate the potential of ecotourism in Georgia and the challenges in this field and the opportunities for its development. However, it is worth noting how deliberately and systematically the potential of ecotourism will be utilized and the existing opportunities will be used, which can almost completely change the current reality in terms of traditional tourism. Based on the fact that, according to various estimates, ecotourism accounts for approximately 10% of capital turnover in the international tourism business. The paper analyzes the prospects for the growth of ecotourism potential in Georgia and the positive economic and financial effects derived from it. However, ecotourism can become such a priority area of tourism that can be more beneficial than the economic and financial effects obtained from it, which is manifested in the preservation of the country's environment, natural and cultural heritage and biodiversity.

Keywords:
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Introduction

Georgia is distinguished by its attractive and diverse tourist potential, which always motivates tourists and visitors to visit the country. An important basis for the economic development of the country itself is the sustainable development of tourism and its multifaceted expansion. The tourism sector has sufficient potential in terms of sustainable development of the country's economy and formation of financial income.

Like all over the world, among many types of tourism in Georgia, ecotourism deserves special attention. It is a type of tourism that harmonizes with the interests of a responsible population in an ecologically clean and natural environment. According to international data, about ninety countries have some form of ecotourism at the state or regional level, which has developed over the last three decades. No other type of tourism has become the foundation of global tourism and the country's economy at such a rapid pace. According to the forecast of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the most promising direction and one of the most sustainable and dynamic types of tourism in the XXI century will be ecological tourism. We want to focus on the challenges and priority issues facing the ecotourism sector of Georgia.

- What potential is the development of ecotourism in Georgia and what opportunities exist in this field?
- Is it possible to maintain the current potential of tourism, in parallel with the development of ecotourism?
- Despite the reality already existing today, it is still not fully known what challenges ecotourism contains for the sustainable development of the tourism sector?
- What positive factors does ecotourism bring for the further sustainable development of the Georgian tourist market?

Methodology

The paper includes the opportunities for the development of ecotourism in Georgia and its interdependence and mutual influence, both on the sustainable development of the tourism sector itself, and on the dynamic development of the country's economy in general. Qualitative approaches are used in the research to determine the existing reality. It is based on statistical materials, data received from governmental
organizations and non-governmental agencies. The conclusion and recommendations are based on the analysis of the received data on the current situation and international experience.

Review and discussion:

Georgia is known not only for its standard tourist opportunities, but also for its diversity of flora and fauna and unique historical and cultural values. At the same time, it is crucial to protect and preserve the aforementioned values and diversity, which will be successfully ensured by the development of ecotourism as a form of socially and ecologically responsible travel that ensures the protection of the vulnerable environment and the improvement of the population's well-being, as it is an alternative to tourism with relatively less negative impact.

Ecotourism is a special form of sustainable tourism that has far-reaching goals and objectives. In recent years, the number of visitors interested in ecotourism is growing 3 times faster. According to the studies of the International Organization of Ecotourism, the incomes received from tourism worldwide amounted to about 8.8 trillion dollars, of which about 800 billion dollars come from ecotourism, which, according to experts' estimates, is about 10% of the capital turnover in the international tourism business.

Worldwide, more than 11 million people are employed in the field of ecotourism and the annual growth is 10%-12%. Therefore, at this stage, ecotourism is the most growing segment of tourism, and the interests of consumers of ecotourism products have also increased. The field of ecotourism is of interest to all layers of society.

According to studies, young people are more interested in ecotourism and spend much less on them than other travelers. Also, ecotourism is in the interests of high-income groups, which allows us to conclude that in the future the share of the mentioned market will increase even more, because ecotourism contributes to the preservation of the natural and cultural values of countries, appreciation and sustainable use of ecosystems.

Ecotourism in Georgia can develop its opportunities especially in protected areas, due to the fact that according to international criteria, there are 94 protected areas of five different categories in Georgia and 11.4% of the total
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area of the country, and it has increased by 38% in recent years. The action plan of the protected areas, due to their peculiar and limited character, taking into account the natural and conserved state, sets certain barriers to ecotourism. The development of ecotourism in protected areas is an important issue that has a great impact on the economic situation at the regional level. It is one of the powerful factors of nature protection in the country, which can stop the migration of the local population and massively stimulate the arrival of tourists to the protected areas of Georgia.

Due to the fact that the inefficient operation of tourism often leads to disastrous results and poses a threat to tourist locations (especially in protected areas), the development of ecotourism enables a new systematic approach to the field of tourism, which will be focused on the following main areas: natural and cultural assets, tourist infrastructure and, most importantly, society on active engagement.

It is important to clearly define the links actively involved in ecotourism, as well as potential participants and stakeholders involved in ecotourism activities and identify potential objects and entities that will become an integral part of ecotourism in the future. The ecotourism system, with its involved stakeholders and areas of interest, can be represented as a diagram as follows: scheme N1

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![Scheme N1](https://example.com/scheme_n1.png)

**Scheme N1**

Ecotourism system
In particular, we would like to mention the main factors and determinants of ecotourism, without which it will be impossible to fully achieve the set goals and results:

- Active support and involvement from the state;
- Further refinement and development of ecotourism strategy and action plan;
- Mobilization of human resources and capacity development
  - maximum involvement of interested parties;
  - Interest and active involvement of the business sector;
  - Marketing activities and awareness;
  - Attracting investments (including foreign investments);
  - continuous and dynamic development of ecotourism products;
- Systematic monitoring and feedback.

The ecotourism strategy for Georgia envisages the following main goals: Georgia should become a leading ecotourism country in the Caucasus region already by 2030, providing ecotourism offers for all seasons; In the long term, ecotourism should ensure economic and financial growth and further sustainability in Georgia, preserve biodiversity, natural and cultural heritage, and raise environmental awareness.

Based on the ecotourism strategy, the country has set the following priority tasks:

- Promoting the development of competitive and quality ecotourism products, supplies and services based on ecotourism principles and in accordance with internationally established norms;
- Creation and management of appropriate ecotourism infrastructure, which will be adapted and adapted to existing and potentially possible ecotourism destinations;
- By developing ecotourism infrastructure and products at the local and regional levels, the growth of economic and financial income and their effective management;
- Involvement of the local population in the management and development of ecotourism services, support and development of various educational programs taking into account relevant cultural values;
- Preservation of existing ecotourism resources and minimization of possible risks in order to avoid its...
inefficient use.

A complex approach has been developed for the segmentation of ecotourism target markets and consumer target groups in Georgia, which takes into account both geographical and demographic behavioral characteristics of tourists, as well as psychological factors and motivations in the direction of determining the appropriate strategy and specific measures. In addition, the main characteristics of the internal market are taken into account, which is ultimately important for the further refinement of the strategy and the implementation of relevant measures. The segmentation of ecotourism target markets and consumer target groups in Georgia can be represented as a chart as follows: scheme N2

![Scheme N2](image-url)

**Segmentation of ecotourism target markets and consumer target groups in Georgia**
International involvement and support:

For the further development of ecotourism in Georgia, great importance is attached to the help, involvement and sharing of experiences of the governments of various developed countries, international organizations, donor organizations, charity funds and agencies. In recent years, different types of international projects have been successfully implemented in Georgia, and the involvement of the European Union and a large dose of support in the mentioned issues are particularly noteworthy. We would like to mention those international organizations and representatives of different countries that support and promote ecotourism in Georgia in the direction of solving many problematic issues: EU - European Union; SDC-Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation; USAID - US Agency for International Development; JICA-Japan International Cooperation Agency; ADA-Austrian Development Agency; SIDA-Civil Development Agency; CENN-Caucasus Network of Environmental Organizations; WWF-Scientific Research Center for Conservation of Species Green Alternative; ELKANA - Association of Biological Farms "Elkana"; GFA - Georgian Farmers' Association; Mercy Corps EU - Mercy Corps - European Union; GIZ - German Society for International Cooperation; TJS - Transboundary Joint Secretariat; CNF - Caucasus Nature Foundation; KfW - German Reconstruction Credit Bank.

The involvement and sharing of experiences of international organizations and governments provides answers to many questions, regardless of their different historical and cultural heritage.

Conclusion and recommendations:

The basis of Georgia's economic development is the development of tourism and especially ecotourism, which has a great potential to make a special contribution to the development of the economy of Georgia and the formation of financial income for the country. The development of ecotourism is manifested by the growing trends of the ecotourism market and the increased demands of interested target groups. By studying the segmentation of the target markets of ecotourism, including the domestic market and the target groups of consumers, it is possible to get a clear picture of the current situation and to define further
perspectives.

The development of ecotourism is one of the important prerequisites for improving the economic condition of the population of Georgia and is one of the powerful factors of nature protection in the country, which can stop the migration of the local population and massively stimulate the attraction of tourists. Therefore, the research of the ecotourism market and consumer motivations requires complex and systematic approaches to make the best strategic decisions.

Ecotourism provides great public benefits and investments. For its development, it is necessary to overcome many challenges at the governmental, non-governmental and civil levels, to maximize the interest and involvement of the private sector, to attract foreign and domestic investments, taking into account the political, ecological and social conditions of the countries.

The growing popularity of ecological tourism is of great interest and relies on the high level of ecological awareness of people. This field is of interest to all layers of society, and especially to young people and high-income layers. Based on this, in the near future, ecotourism may become the leading type of tourism in Georgia.

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