



International and Regional experience of MLI Tourism Management and Green Destination concept

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Abstract

The article analyzes the conceptual foundations of Sustainable Tourism, its economic, social and environmental significance, as well as the article analyzes the conceptual foundations of Sustainable Tourism, its economic, social and environmental significance, as well as management mechanisms applied at the International and regional levels from a scientific point of view. The purpose of the study is to substantiate the importance of integration of sustainability principles in planning and management of tourism activities, to identify international experience and potential opportunities of Azerbaijan in this direction. Within the framework of the study, the Coordination of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals of the UN, especially the 8th (decent labor and economic growth), 11th (sustainable cities and communities), 12th (responsible consumption and production) and 13th (measures against climate change) goals with the tourism sector was investigated. The analysis shows that the sustainable tourism model both ensures the preservation of Natural Resources and acts as an important factor for long-term economic stability and social well-being. Azerbaijan's "Green Destination" initiatives and ecotourism projects are evaluated against the background of international experience and practical recommendations are put forward to strengthen the principle of sustainability in the country's tourism policy.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism; green destination; ecotourism; management strategies; international standards; ecological balance; certification; Azerbaijan tourism; UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)

1. Introduction

In recent years, the rapid development of tourism on a global scale has increased attention not only to its economic, but also social and environmental aspects. Tourism, in addition to generating economic income, also plays an important role in maintaining ecological balance, keeping cultural heritage alive and improving the social welfare of local communities. In this regard, the sustainable development of tourism has become one of the main directions of state policy and international cooperation in modern times.

The concept of sustainable tourism implies the preservation of resources for both current and future generations by combining the economic, social and environmental aspects of tourism activities in a balanced way (UNWTO, 1998; UNEP & UN Tourism, 2005). This approach not only ensures the long-term development of the tourism sector, but also expands the effective use of Natural Resources and the possibility of local people to benefit from tourism.

The relevance of the study lies in the fact that in modern times, the rapid development of tourism both in Azerbaijan and at the international level creates new challenges related to the protection of environmental and social balance. In particular, the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and its 8th (Decent Work and economic growth), 11th (sustainable cities and communities), 12th

(responsible production and consumption) and 13th (combating climate change) goals necessitate the development of tourism as an activity that has not only economic but also environmental and social responsibility.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the ways of economically and ecologically effective application of sustainable tourism management strategies and to identify important criteria in the formation of green tourism models both in Azerbaijan and internationally.

2. Concept and importance of Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism is an activity that fully considers current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, aimed at meeting the needs of visitors, industry, the environment and local communities.(United Nations, n.d.).

From an ecological point of view, sustainable tourism contributes to the conservation of water, energy, soil and biodiversity, reducing waste and protecting ecosystems (Mihalic, 2016). In the social and cultural aspect, however, sustainable tourism increases the employment opportunities of local communities, strengthens social justice and serves to preserve cultural heritage (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). This approach ensures the joint implementation of tourism activities not only with economic goals, but also with the well-being of communities and the preservation of cultural values.

From an economic point of view, sustainable tourism provides long-term profitability, supports the stable development of the tourism sector and increases the international competitiveness of the region. Regions with green destination and ecotourism certificates are becoming reliable and attractive to tourists, strengthening the regional brand and prestige (UNWTO, 2019).

The basic principles of sustainable tourism include the efficient use of resources, the maintenance of ecological balance, the preservation of cultural heritage and local traditions, the involvement of communities in the tourism process and the creation of long-term economic stability (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2015). These principles are directly related to the behavior of tourists; the fact that tourists allocate waste, use energy and water sparingly, and respect local communities play an important role in ensuring environmental and social sustainability (Gössling, 2020).

The future prospects of sustainable tourism are directly related to global trends, technology and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Smart tourism, ecotourism routes and environmental monitoring systems contribute to the sustainable management of tourism facilities and serve to ensure social justice, economic stability and environmental safety on a global scale (UNWTO, 2019; Gössling, 2020).

Sustainable tourism is recognized as one of the key strategies to ensure social justice, economic stability and environmental safety within the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (UNWTO, 2019). This approach ensures the joint implementation of tourism activities not only with economic goals, but also with the well-being of local communities, gender equality, protection of cultural heritage and Environmental Protection. For example:

SDG 8-quality work and economic development: sustainable tourism creates employment opportunities for local communities and promotes equal distribution of tourism income.

SDG 11-Sustainable Cities and Community: Green Destination and ecotourism projects take into account environmental and cultural aspects in the planning of cities and regions.

SDG 12-Responsible Consumption and production: the efficient use of resources by tourists and tourist facilities, reducing waste and saving energy are ensured.



SDG 13 – Climate Action and SDG 15-terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems of life: sustainable tourism contributes to the conservation of ecosystems, the maintenance of biodiversity and the fight against climate change.

Sustainable tourism serves as an important tool in the implementation of SDGs both nationally and globally, and contributes to a balanced contribution to the ecological, social and economic development of the regions (UNWTO, 2019; Gössling, 2020).

3. Sustainable Tourism In The Context Of Azerbaijan

The tourism sector of Azerbaijan has become a priority in public policy in recent years and has been adapted to the principles of sustainable tourism based on the country's rich natural, cultural and social potential. The sustainability of tourism in the country is ensured mainly in the areas of development of Tourism Infrastructure, Protection of the environment, promotion of innovative tourism services and rational use of tourism resources.

The “Strategic Roadmap for the development of the specialized tourism industry in the Republic of Azerbaijan” and other state programs adopted in 2016 have created new opportunities for the sustainable development of tourism in the country. At the same time, the reforms carried out in recent years — the ASAN visa system, the Baku Shopping Festival and the action plan aimed at the development of beach tourism (2017-2020) — have strengthened the economic and social sustainability of Tourism. (Kalantarli, Guliyeva, & Farajova, 2024)

The development of tourism in the liberated Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding regions in 2020-2025 has been one of the main priorities of sustainable tourism. Tourism in these regions is promoted both for the purpose of economic income and for the social welfare of local communities, for the preservation of cultural and historical heritage. (Rahmanov, et al., 2020)

According to the principles of sustainable tourism, infrastructure is modernized, tourist routes are developed, Environmental Control is introduced, and cultural heritage is protected. These measures ensure economic, social and environmental sustainability in the region and turn the Nagorno-Karabakh region into a strategic tourism region of Azerbaijan.

The charming nature, rich cultural heritage and geographical location of Azerbaijan create favorable conditions for the development of sustainable tourism. However, for the effective use of the existing tourism potential, it is important that activities take on a permanent, not seasonal character. The main goal of sustainable tourism is both to preserve tourist resources and to increase the employment of local communities. The proposed solutions for the development of sustainable tourism include the improvement of infrastructure, the protection of natural and cultural heritage, the involvement of local communities in tourism activities, the training of personnel in the field of Tourism and the application of Environmental Assessment (EIA) reports. (Bayramli & Aliyev, 2020)

Thus, sustainable tourism in the context of Azerbaijan is based not only on the principles of economic development, but also on the principles of preserving the ecological balance and improving social welfare, which ensures the preservation of both natural and cultural heritage for future generations.

4. Sustainable Tourism Management Strategies

Sustainable tourism management is an approach aimed at ensuring long-term development by balancing the environmental, social and economic aspects of Tourism. This approach takes into account the preservation of natural and cultural heritage, the well-being of local communities and economic development together. While traditional tourism models have negative impacts on the environment and local communities, sustainable management aims to minimize these impacts.

Sustainable tourism management is focused on addressing complex issues related to impacts on the natural and built environment in the field of tourism, as well as the history, culture and heritage of local communities. This approach involves the formation of theoretical and practical policies to ensure positive and high-quality economic development in the tourism sector. Sustainable tourism management promotes harmonious cooperation between local communities, the private sector, non-profit organizations, academic institutions and government structures, while developing management principles for the protection of natural, established and cultural environments.

Sustainable tourism management is an approach aimed at ensuring long-term development by balancing the environmental, social and economic aspects of Tourism. The main goal of sustainable tourism management strategies is to carry out tourism activities within the framework of the principles of economic efficiency, social justice and environmental balance. These strategies strengthen the long-term sustainability of tourism by both increasing the well-being of local communities and ensuring the conservation of Natural Resources (UNWTO, 2023). While traditional tourism models have negative impacts on the environment and local communities, sustainable management aims to minimize these impacts.

Sustainable tourism management strategies are mainly formed in four directions: (Hall, 2019; Gössling & Hall, 2021).

1. Environmental Management: minimizing impact on nature, waste management, energy efficiency and Biodiversity Conservation.
2. Social management: increasing the participation of local communities in decision-making, preserving cultural values and ensuring social equality.
3. Economic management: supporting local entrepreneurship, fair distribution of income from tourism and ensuring long-term economic sustainability.
4. Institutional management: is the strengthening of cooperation between the public and private sectors, the creation of strategic planning and monitoring mechanisms.

Sustainable tourism management is focused on addressing complex issues related to impacts on the natural and built environment in the field of tourism, as well as the history, culture and heritage of local communities. This approach involves the formation of theoretical and practical policies to ensure positive and high-quality economic development in the tourism sector. Sustainable tourism management promotes harmonious cooperation between local communities, the private sector, non-profit organizations, academic institutions and government structures, while developing management principles for the protection of natural, established and cultural environments.

Sustainable tourism management faces a number of pressing challenges. Tourist congestion (overtourism) puts pressure on the environment and local communities in popular destinations. Bali began in February 2024 to impose an entrance fee from foreign tourists in the amount of 150,000 Indonesian rupiah (about US \$ 10) (Skift,2024) these funds will be used for the purpose of protecting the environment and restoring cultural heritage. Since 2015, the Icelandic government has developed Destination Management Plans (DMPs) to ensure the sustainable development of Tourism. These plans are developed with the aim of increasing the well-being of local communities and reducing the environmental impact of tourist activities (Ferðamálastofa, 2024).In Norway, various green certification systems are being implemented in order to reduce the environmental impact of tourism activities and ensure sustainable development. For example, the Ecotourism Norway certificate ensures that tourism enterprises meet high environmental standards. (Visit Norway, 2024).

In New Zealand, the “Tiaki Promise” program calls on tourists to protect nature, people and culture. This initiative is aimed at promoting responsible behavior between the government and local communities (New Zealand Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment [MBIE], 2022). In 2022, the “Green Spain” strategy was adopted in Spain and government subsidies were allocated for ecotourism projects in



rural areas (Ministerio de Industria, Comercio y Turismo, 2022). The European Union's "European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS)" "mechanism provides a unified system of indicators for the assessment and monitoring of sustainable tourism (European Commission, 2022).

A number of strategic documents on sustainable tourism management have been adopted in Azerbaijan in recent years. In "Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for socio-economic development", the ecological sustainability of Tourism and the development of alternative types of Tourism (agritourism, ecotourism, mountain tourism) in the regions are defined as a priority direction (State Tourism Agency of Azerbaijan, 2023). Ecologically oriented tourism projects are implemented in Gabala, Zagatala and Lerik regions within the framework of the "Green Tourism" initiative by the State Tourism Agency (State Tourism Agency of Azerbaijan, 2023).

The effectiveness of sustainable tourism management strategies depends not only on public policy, but also on the active participation of local communities and the responsible approach of tourism enterprises. In this direction:

- * Environmental certification of tourism facilities
- * Involvement of local communities in tourism planning
- * Measures such as the promotion of a culture of environmental behavior among tourists should be a priority. (United Nations Environment Programme & UNWTO, 2020).

5. Green destinations and ecological balance protection

The concept of green destination is the concept of space in which tourism activities have a minimum impact on the Environment, Natural Resources are protected and the socioeconomic development of local communities is supported. Green destinations come to the fore not only from an ecological point of view, but also from the point of view of preserving local cultures and improving the well-being of communities. The experience of European and Scandinavian countries shows that the introduction of green destination models ensures long-term sustainable development of the tourism sector (Ecobnb, 2025).

The success of the green destination concept is due not only to governance and infrastructure, but also to the behavior of tourists. It is important for tourists to separate waste, use water and energy sparingly, and respect local communities (Gössling, 2020). For this reason, tourist awareness programs should be added to green destination strategies.

Criteria such as conservation of the region's nature, waste management, water and energy efficiency, and involvement of local communities in the process are taken as the basis for obtaining green destination status.

The concept of green destination generates numerous effects for both the environment and the local community:

1. Environmental impacts: reduction of air and water pollution, conservation of biodiversity, promotion of clean energy use.
2. Social impacts: increasing employment opportunities for Indigenous people, preserving cultural heritage, strengthening social justice and equality.
3. Economic effects: long-term tourism revenues ensure the provision of better quality services for tourists, the development of local businesses. (Greenly, 2025)

As positive effects increase, competition in the tourism market intensifies in the current context of globalization. Modern tourists pay attention not only to the beauty and quality of service, but also to the environmental responsibility of the place where they go. Technologies such as GPS tracking, water and energy monitoring system, waste reporting make Green Destination Management effective (Mihalic, 2016).

This contributes to both the reduction of environmental impacts and the continuous fulfillment of certification criteria.

In the long run, the green destination keeps tourism revenues stable and provides a sustainable market for local businesses (UNWTO, 2019). When tourists choose eco-certified places, the brand and prestige of the region increases.

A number of strategic approaches based on international and regional practices are proposed for the development of sustainable tourism and the success of the green destination concept. First of all, it is important to establish national certification systems. The application of certificates in accordance with GSTC standards in Azerbaijan improves the quality of the functioning of ecotourism facilities, strengthens the region's credibility at the international level and ensures the long-term sustainability of the tourism sector (GSTC, 2023).

The expansion of Blue Flag and Green Key certifications is also of strategic importance. The application of these certificates on the coast of the Caspian Sea and in national park areas not only increases the confidence of tourists, but also serves to maintain environmental standards (FEE, 2023). The active involvement of local communities in the certification process contributes to their socio-economic development and ensures the preservation of cultural heritage (Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

The development of awareness programs to promote the ecological behavior of tourists is also of strategic importance. These programs allow the development of behaviors such as reducing waste, using energy and water sparingly, respecting local communities (Gössling, 2020). At the same time, the application of technology and monitoring systems ensures effective control of water quality, waste management and energy use, contributing to the continuous fulfillment of certification criteria (Mihalic, 2016).

The study of international experience and its adaptation to the region make it possible to improve Azerbaijan's ecotourism strategies. The green destination and certification practices of countries such as Scandinavia, Estonia and Denmark provide practical examples in the management of national parks and rural tourism facilities (UNWTO, 2019).

Thus, when certification, participation of local communities, education of tourists and application of technology are combined, Azerbaijan's sustainable tourism strategies serve to maintain ecological balance, socio-economic development of local communities and the country's International Tourism Competitiveness.

6. Certification and international standards in Sustainable Tourism

GSTC (Global Sustainable Tourism Council) is an organization that sets international standards for sustainability in tourism. Its criteria cover four main areas:

1. Management System (Planning and monitoring of tourism activities),
2. Socio-economic benefits (job creation for local communities),
3. Preservation of cultural heritage (keeping local culture and traditions alive),
4. Environmental protection (biodiversity conservation, waste reduction). (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2015)

Costa Rica, for example, has achieved the protection of tropical forests, taking as a basis the GSTC criteria in its national tourism strategy, and has taken a leading position in the eco-tourism market. (Sword & Cuning, 2010)



“Blue Flag” is an international program that certifies beaches, marinas and tourist yachts for environmental standards. Its main criteria are:

1. High water quality: compliance with good water quality standards
2. Proper waste management: managing waste in an effective and environmentally friendly way
3. Security and awareness-raising activities: ensuring the safety of tourists and implementing environmental awareness programs

For example, Spain and Greece have the largest number of Blue Flag certified beaches in Europe. This strengthens the image of countries among tourists and contributes to the development of ecological tourism.

Spain, for example, is the country with the largest number of Blue Flag certified beaches in the world in 2025. (The National Academy of Sciences Spain.info, 2022). In total, 642 beaches, 101 marinas and 6 tourist boats received this prestigious certificate, bringing the total to 749. (Foundation for Environmental Education, 2025)

Greece is the country with the second most Blue Flag certified beaches in the world in 2025. (Blue Flag Greece, 2025). In total, 623 beaches, 17 marinas and 17 eco-friendly tourist boats received this prestigious certificate, bringing the total to 657. The region of Greece that receives the most Blue Flag certifications is Crete; in 2025, 153 certified beaches were available here. (Visit Greece, 2025)

However, there are also some difficulties associated with the application of certificates: high costs, unsustainable monitoring and lack of proper awareness of local communities (Gössling, 2020). Therefore, certification programs should include not only technical, but also social and economic aspects.

Table 1.

Region / Country	Main actions and features	Result and advantages
Scandinavia – Norway	Ecotourism facilities in fiord areas operate according to GSTC criteria and smart monitoring systems are implemented for the management of national parks (Mihalic, 2016).	Norway has gained an international image as an ecotourism Center
Europe – Denmark	The cycling infrastructure in Copenhagen is not only for the environment, but also strengthens the city’s tourist brand. As part of the” Copenhagen Green City “initiative, Hotel energy and waste management programs are certified (UNWTO, 2019).	The city has gained the image of the” green capital”, tourist interest has increased
Europe-Estonia	The” VisitEstonia “program provides for the protection of national parks, the creation of ecotourism routes and the promotion of the ecological behavior of tourists (Bramwell & Lane, 2011).	National park Tourism developed, environmental awareness strengthened
Regional-Turkey	In Antalya,” Green Key “and” Blue Flag “certificates ensure increased environmental standards in hotels and international competitiveness of coastal tourism (FEE, 2023).	Environmental standards in hotels have strengthened, coastal tourism has increased competitiveness

Regional-Azerbaijan	Sheki and Lahij are included in the UNESCO Cultural Heritage List (UNESCO, 2019) it enables the involvement of local communities in tourism projects, the development of ecotourism routes and international recognition. Within the framework of the “Green Destination” concept, which has been implemented since 2022, national parks and rural tourism projects are supported by certification and monitoring mechanisms.(State Tourism Agency Of The Republic Of Azerbaijan, 2023)	The potential of ecotourism is growing, opportunities for international recognition are expanding
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The table presents the sustainable tourism strategies of Scandinavia, Europe and regional countries in a comparative way and shows that in all examples, environmental certification and management approaches are considered as top priorities. (Table 1)

7. Methodology

This article uses the benchmarking method to compare the development of Azerbaijan’s tourism sector at regional and global levels. During the study, data were collected on the main criteria – types of tourism, infrastructure and services, number of tourists and income, marketing and branding, tourist satisfaction and safety. Official statistics, international reports and academic articles were used for the analysis (OECD, 2024; UNWTO, 2024; Azerbaijan State Tourism Agency, 2024; T.C. Ministry of culture and Tourism, 2023). As a result of Benchmarking, Azerbaijan’s strengths and weaknesses were identified and strategic recommendations for development were developed.

Azerbaijan’s tourism has become one of the areas of strategic importance in the country’s economy in recent years. The country’s rich natural resources, historical and Cultural Heritage, Mountain and sea tourism opportunities are the main factors that increase the interest of tourists. In order to increase its competitiveness at the international level, it is important to compare the development of the tourism sector of Azerbaijan with the experience of other countries and study successful practices.

For this purpose, the benchmarking method was applied in the article. Benchmarking, that is, a comparative assessment, allows you to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of Azerbaijan in the field of Tourism, Study best practices and develop strategic recommendations for development.

The purpose of the study is to compare Azerbaijan’s tourism with regional (Turkey) and global (France) countries, assess the existing potential and, based on the results, provide practical recommendations for the development of Tourism.

Within the framework of the Benchmarking method, the following criteria were selected in order to compare the development of the tourism sector of Azerbaijan with other countries. These criteria are widely applied in international benchmarking practices and allow an objective assessment of tourism performance (González-Rodríguez, 2023; OECD, 2024).

8. Types of Tourism

Azerbaijan’s tourism products are mainly limited to Mountain, ecotourism, cultural and city tours. This approach brings to the fore the natural and cultural riches of the country. However, according to studies



conducted by Aktaş Çimen (2024), Turkey offers various types of tourism, such as sea, mountain, cultural and health tourism. This diversity increases the competitiveness of the country's tourism sector, responding to the different interests and needs of tourists.

At the global level, however, France has rich experience in urban, cultural, Maritime and gastronomic tourism. According to UNWTO's 2023 data, France was the country with the highest number of tourists worldwide in 2023, receiving 100 million international tourists (UNWTO, 2024)

This success is attributed to the fact that the country offers various types of Tourism and a high quality of Service.

This comparison shows that Azerbaijan can adapt to international competition by diversifying tourism products. The development of new industries, such as gastronomy and rural tourism, for example, can contribute to the sustainable development of the country's tourism sector.

9. Infrastructure and services

Tourism infrastructure includes hotels, transport facilities, tourist centers and quality of Service. According to the OECD (2024) report, the level of infrastructure and quality of Service are the main factors that determine the international competitiveness of the tourism sector. The development of tourism infrastructure in the OECD countries is carried out in parallel with the overall development of the economy. For example, in countries such as France and Turkey, infrastructure investments are at a high level, which has a positive impact on the development of their tourism sector.

Infrastructure in Azerbaijan is under development; hotels and transport services, especially in the regions, have not yet been fully provided. According to the data published by the State Tourism Agency of Azerbaijan (2024), various projects are being implemented in the country for the development of tourism infrastructure, but there is still a serious need for development in this area.

Turkey, on the other hand, has high standards in the field of infrastructure. According to OECD (2024), investments in tourism infrastructure in Turkey are steadily increasing, which strengthens the competitiveness of the country's tourism sector.

10. Number of tourists and income

According to UNWTO (2024), in 2023 France received about 100 million international tourists. This has led France to become the country that receives the most tourists worldwide.

In 2023, Azerbaijan received about 2.1 million foreign tourists, an increase compared to previous years. According to the data published by the State Tourism Agency of Azerbaijan (2024), the country's tourism revenue amounted to 2.5 billion US dollars.

Turkey, on the other hand, in 2023 received 56 million tourists, which showed a significant increase compared to previous years. T.C. According to the Ministry of culture and Tourism (2023), Turkey's tourism revenue was US \$ 34 billion.

This comparison shows that France and Turkey have high tourist numbers and incomes, but Azerbaijan has also achieved significant developments in the tourism sector in recent years.

11. Marketing and branding

Tourism branding and marketing strategies influence the international perception of the country's tourism image. According to the OECD (2024) report, branding and marketing strategies in the global market

directly determine the success of the tourism sector. These strategies increase the interest of tourists in the country, strengthen the flow of tourists and raise the country's international competitiveness.

The "Experience Azerbaijan" platform operates in Azerbaijan and aims to promote the natural and cultural riches of the country. But international promotion is still limited, and the country's brand is not fully accepted among foreign tourists.

The Turkish campaign "Go Türkiye" and the French programs "Visit France" are successful examples. These campaigns have attracted the attention of tourists through high marketing budgets and international promotion networks, increasing the tourism revenues of countries (T.C. Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2023; UNWTO, 2024).

This comparison shows that Azerbaijan also needs to expand its marketing and branding strategies and increase its international visibility on various platforms in order to strengthen its tourism brand internationally.

12. Tourist satisfaction and safety

Tourist satisfaction and safety are considered key factors for the sustainable development of the tourism sector. According to the OECD (2024) report, together with the recovery of the tourism sector, improving the quality of Service and strengthening security measures are at the forefront. This approach positively affects the experience of tourists, ensuring repeated visits and the growth of tourism revenues.

According to UNWTO (2024), the international tourist flow increased in 2024 by 5% compared to previous years, highlighting the importance of tourist satisfaction and safety. This growth has also had a positive impact on rising tourism revenues and supporting economic development.

In the tourism sector of Azerbaijan, especially in regions such as Baku, Guba, Gabala and Sheki, steps are being taken to strengthen the quality of Service and security measures. However, in some regions there is still a need for improvement in the quality of Service and security issues.

Countries such as Turkey and France are among the more preferred destinations by international tourists, applying high standards in the areas of quality of Service and safety. The experiences of these countries can serve as an example for the development of the tourism sector of Azerbaijan.

13. Strengths and weaknesses in tourism

According to Benchmarking results, Azerbaijan's tourism sector has a number of strengths and weaknesses. Among the strengths, the country's rich natural and Cultural Heritage, Mountain and sea tourism opportunities, historical cities and unique ecotourism areas stand out (Aktaş Çimen, 2024; Azerbaijan State Tourism Agency, 2024). These factors allow Azerbaijan to become an attractive destination for international tourists.

Weaknesses are related to regional differences in infrastructure, unequal service quality, and limited opportunities for international branding and marketing (OECD, 2024; UNWTO, 2024). There are also some development needs in the field of increasing tourist satisfaction and strengthening safety standards.

Regional and global comparisons show that Turkey and France are distinguished by high-standard infrastructure, various tourism products, effective marketing and security measures (T.C. Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2023; UNWTO, 2024). The experience of these countries forms a fundamental basis for shaping the strategic development plans of the tourism sector of Azerbaijan.



14. Recommendation and results

Based on the results of Benchmarking, a number of strategic recommendations for the development of the tourism sector of Azerbaijan are presented. First of all, it is important to diversify tourism products; new areas such as rural tourism, gastronomy and health tourism should be developed (Aktaş Çimen, 2024).

Improving the quality of infrastructure and services should also be a priority. In particular, increasing the standards of hotel and transport services in the regions, strengthening tourist satisfaction and safety are of great importance (OECD, 2024; Azerbaijan State Tourism Agency, 2024).

In addition, it is important to expand international marketing and branding strategies. The international promotion of "Experience Azerbaijan" platform should be increased, the image of the country should be presented more actively in social media and global tourism exhibitions (T.C. Ministry of culture and Tourism, 2023; UNWTO, 2024).

As a result, benchmarking method comparisons show that Azerbaijan has significant potential in the tourism sector and it is possible to increase competitiveness at regional and global levels through strategic planning. This approach supports both economic development and strengthens the country's position in the international tourism arena.

15. The result

Sustainable tourism management is of paramount importance not only for the protection of nature, but also for the promotion of the well-being of local communities and the transfer of cultural heritage to future generations. The introduction of the concept of "green destination" is a strategic advantage for countries, as this approach serves both to ensure environmental responsibility and to increase competitiveness in the tourism market. Certification systems, in particular international standards such as GSTC and Blue Flag, form indicators of quality, trust and reliability in the field of Tourism.

The experience of Scandinavia and European countries in general shows that the principles of sustainability play a key role in the long-term development of Tourism and have significant consequences both economically and socially. From this point of view, by applying these principles, Azerbaijan will be able not only to increase the potential of ecotourism, but also to form the image of "Green Destination" at the international level. Such a step will create conditions for our country to gain a stronger and more competitive position in the tourism sector.

The main goal for Azerbaijan is to reconcile the national tourism policy with the principles of sustainable development, taking into account international experience. The country's rich natural resources, diverse climatic conditions and deep cultural heritage create favorable conditions for the implementation of these goals.

The research results show that a number of directions are of particular importance for the effective management of sustainable tourism. First of all, it is important to develop the concept of ecotourism and "green destination". At the same time, the introduction of mechanisms for environmental certification of tourist facilities (for example, GSTC and Green Key) will help to ensure quality standards. At the same time, the active involvement of local communities in tourism planning and the protection of their economic interests is an important factor. In addition, the strengthening of educational and environmental education programs, as well as the expansion of cooperation between the public and private sectors and the transparency of the investment climate serve to ensure sustainable development.

Consequently, the consistent and purposeful implementation of the sustainable tourism policy will make a significant contribution to the socio-economic development of Azerbaijan, the balanced progress of the regions and the strengthening of its international image. The steps to be taken in this direction will pave the way for future generations to maintain a healthy ecological environment and ensure the long-term sustainability of Tourism

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