

THE ROLE OF ECOLOGICAL TOURISM IN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TERRITORY

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Abstract

In many countries around the world, ecological tourism is considered a significant part of the global tourism industry. Ecological tourism occupies an important place within the state management system, operating within the regulatory and legal framework. Tourism is a priority sector of the economy, contributing to investment activation, entrepreneurial activity, service development, interaction within the framework of designing international programmers and tourist flow growth, which highlights the need for optimal environmental management. The sustainable development of ecological tourism is analyzed using a systematic approach to financial, socio-economic and environmental factors. The specificity of ecological tourism is reflected and the necessity of improving its material and technical base for careful use of its resources is emphasized. Natural-geographical, scientific-technical, institutional, geopolitical and economic factors of development are identified as criteria for the sustainable development of the territory, based on a PEST analysis. Current tools for the development of ecotourism in different countries worldwide, models of the sustainable development of ecotourism and statistics on visits to specially protected natural areas worldwide are considered, as are the most popular ecotours.

Keywords: ecological tourism, ecotourism, sustainable development, specially protected natural areas

I. Introduction

The growth of socio-economic and scientific-technical development contributes to the active development of numerous types of life activities, one of which is tourism, which has long gone beyond individual national borders. In the tourism sector, the process of globalization is reflected in the availability of various tourism products and services offered in different countries and regions. Tourism as a type of economic activity significantly contributes to the expansion of such areas as construction, hospitality, transport, trade, public catering, education, and culture. In parallel with mass tourism, problems related to the natural management are becoming more acute, and the burden on natural and historical and cultural heritage sites is increasing. The growth of industrialization and urbanization in the 1970s influenced the demand for recreational opportunities in the natural environment. Scientific research on the subject of discussion and

debate on environmental protection has intensified, and theoretical concepts of “ecological tourism” have emerged. The problems and issues related to sustainable development of territories as an optimal balance of natural, economic, cultural and social phenomena within the framework of natural management are becoming increasingly relevant. As an established independent scientific direction, ecological tourism is multifaceted. Two approaches have been formed in science on the subject of identifying the ecological direction in tourism. In the first case, the meaning of the concept of ecological tourism is wild nature with ecotourism objects. In the second case – ecotourism as a type of sustainable tourism. The key point is the location of the tourist, as a consumer of specialized services, in a natural environment that has a beneficial effect on physical and mental health.

II. Methods

The aim of the research was to determine the role of ecological tourism as a criterion for the competitiveness and attractiveness of the territory.

The theoretical and methodological basis of this study was formed by scientific works of specialists in the field of the problems under investigation. Ecological tourism is an interdisciplinary object of study. The theoretical and methodological basis includes scientific works of foreign scientists: H. Ceballos-Lascurain, D. A. Fennel, D. C. Malloy, K. Miller, as well as many Russian ones – O. E. Afanasyev, I. N. Bogatyrev, D. M. Ivanov, I. N. Kuzbozhev, E. Yu. Ledovskikh, N. V. Moravleva, A. V. Drozdov, S. M. Nikonorov and others.

Research methods: theoretical and methodological, analytical, statistical, expert, information retrieval method, PEST analysis.

III. Results and discussions

Tourism is a cross-sectoral complex of various types of economic activity which is characterized by a number of key indicators reflecting its economic essence. One of them is the tourist flow indicator, which is determined by the total number of trips to a certain place over a corresponding time interval. In 2024, tourists around the world made about 1.4 billion trips. This is 11% (or 140 million trips) more than in 2023.

The role of tourism in the global economy is clearly reflected in the indicators given in Table 1.

The contribution of tourism to world GDP in 2023 was 9.1%, and in 2024 it reached 10%. The growth in the share of tourism in world GDP amounted to 12.1%. The increase in the share of the contribution of the tourism services sector to global GDP compared to 2019, which was characterized by the highest indicators in the tourism and hospitality sector, amounted to 7.5% .

This is direct evidence of the recovery of the tourism market after the COVID-19 pandemic. The indicator of export of tourism services in this case reflects the ratio to the total volume of goods and services exports. The share of investment in fixed capital in the tourism sector reflects the attitude towards investment in fixed capital in general. There has also been significant growth in the area of employment in tourism, amounting to 348 million people in 2024, with every 10th job in the world being in the tourism and hospitality industry.

The COVID-19 pandemic is now a part of the past, but it has left many people with health consequences. This circumstance has affected the tourism market in two ways. On the one hand, the consumer profile is changing in terms of choosing individual programs with a stay in a natural area. This has led to the expansion of various programs in the direction of ecotourism by tourism service providers. There has been an increase in demand for recreation programs in natural areas

without a large number of people, with travel aimed at restoring both physical and mental health being a priority.

Table 1: *The role of tourism in the global economy*

Indicator	2023	2023	2024	2024
	billion US dollars	In % of total number	billion US dollars	In % of total number
The share of tourism in world GDP	9 899.3	9.1	11.1	10
Number of jobs in the tourism sector (million units)	330	10.0	348	5.07
Export of tourism services	1 632.6	5.3	1	-
Residents' expenditures within one country	4 968.5	4.6	5 134.6	-
Vacation expenses of residents and foreigners	5 296.0	5.0	5 643.2	-
Business travel expenses of residents and foreigners	1 305.2	1.2	1 438.6	-
The amount of investment in fixed capital in the tourism sector	1 013.2	3.6	1 201.5	-

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, ecotourism generated \$1 billion per day for the global economy. It now accounts for about a quarter of the global tourism market. The global ecotourism market volume in 2024 was estimated at \$219.81 billion.

In 2024, 78% of tourists chose environmentally oriented destinations and accommodations in natural areas. Around 70% of ecotourism consumers are willing to spend 10-15% more for accommodation that adheres to sustainable development principles.

According to the Ecotourism Global Market Report - 2025, the volume of ecotourism services in the world has a clear growth trend. The demand for such programs from potential consumers is showing active dynamics. In 2024, it amounted to US \$247 billion, and by the first half of 2025 – US \$279.4 billion, which can be explained by the growing demand for authentic experiences, and in some cases by active initiatives from the state, etc.

The largest share of the ecotourism market is occupied by the North American region – 35%. The absolute leaders of the tourism services market, along with the established leaders, were Mexico, Portugal, China, Morocco, Iceland, Australia.

The global special interest tourism (SIT) market is projected to grow from US \$5.1 billion in 2025 to an estimated US \$17.4 billion by 2035, reflecting a compound annual growth rate of 13% over the period [22].

In 2024, 78% of tourists chose environmentally oriented destinations and accommodations in natural areas. This growth is driven by a shift in consumer preferences towards experimental and niche segments of tourism, which are increasingly supported by comprehensive market research and consumer behavior analytics.

A detailed analysis shows that ecotourism and wellness tourism within SIT are demonstrating the highest growth rates, due to increased environmental awareness and the global trend towards healthy lifestyle. Quantitative data shows that the bookings of ecotourism packages have increased by 20% between 2021 and 2024, indicating strong demand for personalized

tourism.

Ecotourism as a scientific category has a theoretical and methodological basis. Among the first to apply this concept in the late 1970s and early 1980s were researchers such as K. Miller, who put forward the concept of life-affirming tourism [27, p.9]. Scientific research by the Swiss scientist H. Weiss led to the emergence in science of such terms as “soft tourism”, “green tourism”, “ecological tourism” [20].

The concept of the Swiss Ecotourism School is based on the concept of H. Weiss, which promotes environmental education, preservation of the socio-cultural environment, and improvement of environmental education of personnel directly related to the services in this area. H. Ceballos-Lascurain significantly expanded theoretical concepts of scientific understanding of the category of “ecological tourism” (Fig. 1) [21, p. 8].

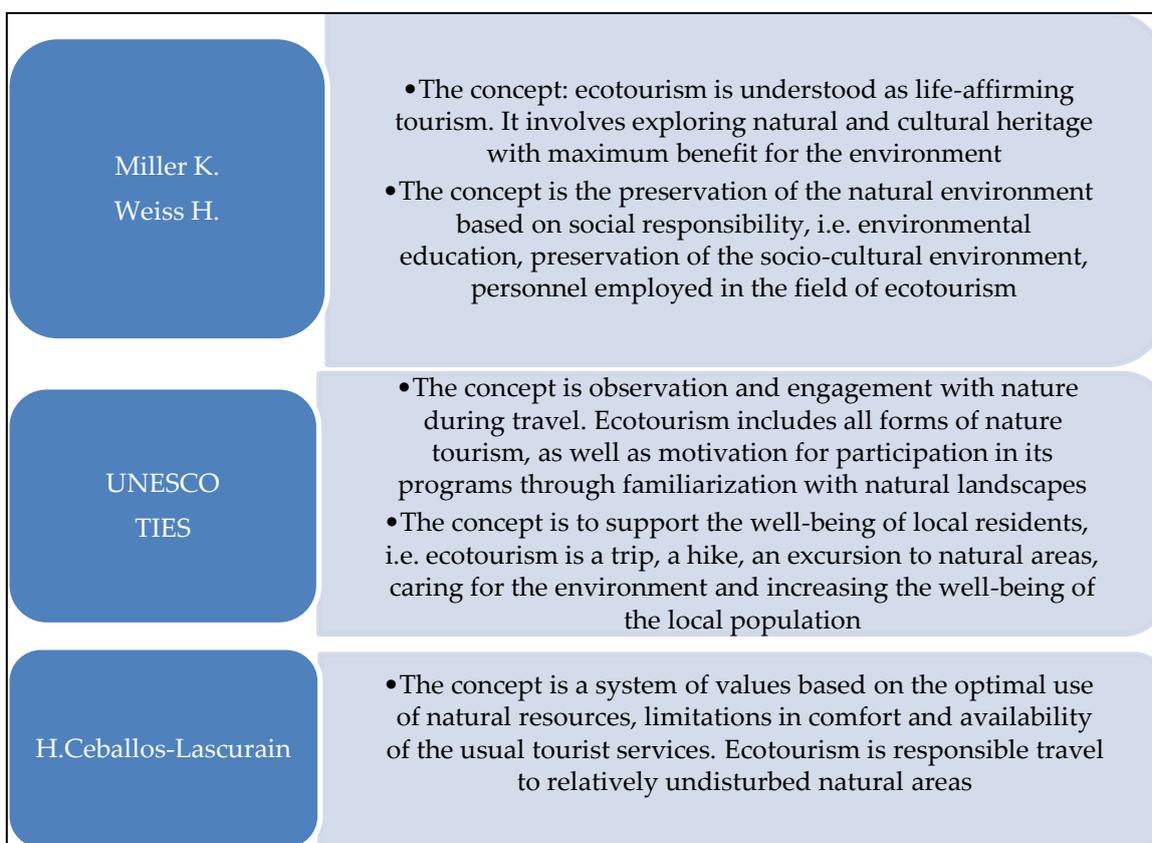


Figure 1: *The concepts of ecological tourism*

In the theory and practice of modern scientific research, the problems of ecotourism, synonymously understood as the development of sustainability of tourist destinations, have received wide coverage by specialists in various fields: economics, biology, geography, philosophy, sociology, etc. Various international organizations involved in research and monitoring of the ecotourism market present their own concepts.

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES). The concept is to support the well-being of local residents, i.e. ecotourism is a trip, a hike, an excursion to natural areas, caring for the environment and raising the standard of living of the local population.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The concept is observation and engagement with nature during travel. Ecotourism includes all forms of nature tourism, as well as motivation for participation in its programs through familiarization with natural landscapes.

International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The concept is that trips to natural

areas should promote both nature conservation and create the necessary economic conditions, with the interest of the local population.

A significant contribution to the development of ecotourism concepts was made by P. Bjork, P. Wight, D. Fennel, who considered it as an integral part of nature tourism [19, 22].

Ecotourism is sustainable and nature-oriented tourism and recreation.

As an innovative form of tourist activity, ecotourism was formed in the 1980s in the process of searching for solutions to a range of problems caused by rapid industrialization processes, which prompted the search for optimal interaction between man and nature. Summarizing various approaches and assessments to understanding the category of “ecological tourism”, we conclude that ecotourism is an environmentally friendly type of tourism, in which special attention is paid to visiting natural regions with the aim of helping the environment and local communities. Its aim is to reduce environmental damage, promote cultural exchange and raise awareness of biodiversity and its conservation. Wildlife watching, hiking and staying in eco-friendly hotels are typical activities that provide travelers with valuable experiences while preserving ecosystems and promoting local economic development.

Over the past decades in the global tourism market there has been a clear trend towards demand for programs and services of specialized tourism, including wellness, gastronomic, industrial and many others. The ecotourism market is divided into such areas as green, nature conservation, ecosphere, noosphere, soft, nature-oriented, eco-biotourism, and tour-realism. In fact, these are similar concepts implemented within various tourist destinations. From this perspective, all types of ecotourism can be classified as specialized tourism, aimed at satisfying the needs of special interests (SIT) of consumers.

Ecotourism programs are gaining popularity due to growing public concern about environmental issues and the growing popularity of the concept of sustainable development. Research in the field of sustainable development shows that responsible tourism principles are increasingly becoming a priority for both travelers and tour operators, which is in line with global principles of environmental and social management. The concept of sustainable development covers a wide range of socio-economic and environmental aspects (Fig. 2). Ecotourism is primarily focused on the long-term sustainable development of natural areas, which is the reason for the interchangeability of terms. In this sense, ecotourism is one of the effective forms of sustainable tourism.

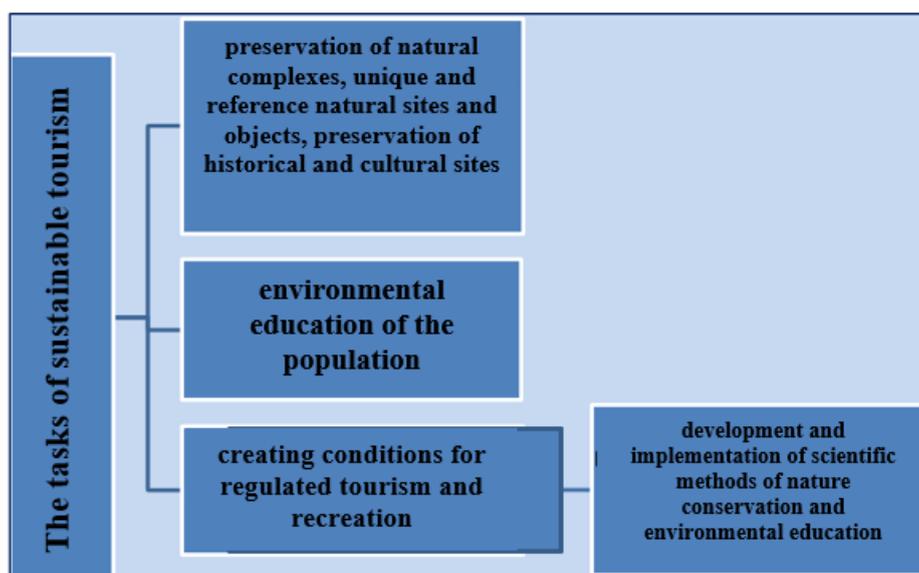


Figure 2: *The tasks of sustainable tourism*

The tasks of sustainable tourism are universal. According to the statistics provided, ecotourism, as one of the main forms of sustainable development, has become widespread. From the perspective of consumer preferences and the degree of impact on the natural environment, researchers make a distinction between “soft”, socially responsible tourism, focused on all possible for environment preservation, and “hard” tourism, aimed at extracting maximum profit.

The vast majority of ecotourism programs are implemented in specially protected natural areas (SPNA). Over the period from 1976 to 2024, the number of natural reserves increased from 59 to 759, and the number of participating countries from 8 to 136. Specially protected natural areas usually include national parks, various nature reserves, dendrological parks, and botanical gardens. There are currently more than a thousand national parks and tens of thousands of protected areas in the world. According to the approximate evaluation there are 70 000 of them, and they occupy around 10% of the entire land area. In Russia there are 101 nature reserves and 35 national parks, which together cover an area of 40 million hectares (about 2% of the area of the Russian Federation). Table 2 reflects the features of the ecological tourism market in terms of leading countries.

Table 2: Countries leading in the development of ecological tourism in specially protected natural areas

No	Country	Amount of biodiversity (units)	Share of protected areas (of the total area of the country, in%)	Number of protected species	Number of UNESCO natural and cultural heritage sites	Efficiency of nature protection activities	Rating
1.	Brazil	43.205	30.0	91	8	43.6	94.9
2.	Mexico	28.989	14.6	115	8	45.5	86
3.	Australia	26.653	20.4	101	16	60.1	84
4.	Ecuador	22.673	23.4	52	2	46.5	82.1
5.	Costa Rica	13.678	26.6	12	3	46.3	81.2
6.	Bhutan	6.470	49.7	22	0	37.4	70.5
7.	Peru	24.777	22.5	61	4	39.8	81
8.	Indonesia	27.505	12.2	209	4	28.2	80.1
9.	Panama	13.505	31.4	16	3	50.5	79.6
10.	Tanzania	13.854	38.4	38	4	34.2	79.3

More than 30% of the ecotourism market share is in North America, which is facilitated by the developed infrastructure in specially protected natural areas. Table 2 shows the 10 countries in the world with the highest ecotourism ratings. The rating, as a complex indicator, includes such indices as the share of specially protected areas in the total area of the country, the amount of biodiversity of flora and fauna, the number of protected species of flora and fauna in the area, the presence of UNESCO natural and cultural heritage sites, and the degree of efficiency of nature management. The results were interesting. For example, in Brazil the overall ecotourism index was 94.9 out of 100. Brazil is one of the richest countries in the world in terms of biodiversity, with over 43 000 different species of animals and plants. And this is despite the massive deforestation in the Amazon. Currently, about 30% of Brazil's territory is under protection. The country has 8 UNESCO natural heritage sites, one of which is the Central Amazon Conservation Complex, where endangered species such as the Amazon manatee and black caiman are protected.

Mexico also has a high ecotourism index of 86. The country is home to 29 000 species of animals and plants, of which 115 are protected. Endangered species include the Angel Island mouse, the fishing bat, and the Buller's chipmunk. Mexico has an area of 2 million km², which is about four times smaller than Brazil, but it is also home to 8 UNESCO natural heritage sites. One such site – 244 coastal areas, islands and islets in the Gulf of California – is home to 39% of the

world's marine mammals.

Ecotourism is highly valued in Australia, with an ecotourism index of 84. Australia is the only country in the top five outside of America. Its rating was boosted by an environmental performance score of 60 out of 100. The country has 16 UNESCO natural heritage sites, the largest number of all 50 countries surveyed. The UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Great Barrier Reef, is the world's largest collection of coral reefs, home to endangered species such as the sea cow and the green sea turtle. About 20% of Australia's land area is protected, as are 101 of its 27 000 animal and plant species.

Special interest tourism drives growth and implementation of innovation in the global tourism sector by meeting the growing demand for personalized and meaningful travel experiences. Travelers are actively looking for eco-friendly travel options, and destinations like Costa Rica are leading the way. Costa Rica promotes ecotourism through carbon-neutral resorts and protected rainforests, setting an example that encourages the global tourism sector to adopt environmentally responsible practices, which has resulted in a 57% increase in forest cover.

Ecotourism is developing in various forms and consists of a specific set of services, formed into specific programs and offered to potential consumers. One of the tools for determining external factors of ecotourism market development is PEST analysis. Determination of macroenvironment factors of international ecotourism development by PEST analysis is given in Table 3.

Table 3: *Macroenvironmental factors for the development of ecotourism*

Natural and geographical	Political	Socio-economic	Scientific and technological
1. Climatic; 2. Floristic; 3. Faunistic; 4. State of the environment	1. State regulation of the ecotourism market; 2. External threats of geopolitical instability; 3. Internal political stability; 4. Ethical and political standards; 5. State programs and initiatives; 6. Environmental protection laws; 7. Foreign economic activity; 8. Tourism laws and regulations. Compliance with tourism regulations and laws, including licenses and insurance; 9. Responsibility for safety.	1. Availability of financial resources; 2. Tax regime; 3. Income level of the population; 4. Level of infrastructure development; 5. Differentiation of population incomes; 6. Socio-cultural preferences; 7. Development and promotion of ecotourism as an attractive form of recreation; using online channels and traditional media.	1. Improving the information technology infrastructure, as digital technologies help to predict visits to specially protected natural areas to prevent excessive load on them; 2. Creation of digital platforms in the direction of environmental education to obtain information about environmental problems in a specific territory, its biodiversity, and following the rules for behavior there; 3. Creating online marketplaces to help local communities promote their own products; 4. Development of sensor technologies for condition monitoring

Source: compiled by the authors

Political decisions made by governments around the world, including new laws and changes to existing legislation, can have a direct impact on businesses in ecotourism sector. Global conflicts, trade wars or sanctions can have a long-term negative impact on tourism.

Economic factors cover the influence of economic conditions and processes on the development of tourism. Reduced tax rates for companies operating in the ecotourism sector, or tax breaks for those who invest in such projects, significantly stimulate its development. These factors help to understand the macroeconomic environment and its impact on the tourism business. Economic factors contributing to the growth of the ecotourism market are the financial leverages for the development of ecotourism (which include direct investment, grants, tax incentives, loans, as well as various forms of partnership and cooperation) and investments in

hotel infrastructure, transport communications, improvement, repair, restoration of visiting sites, as well as investments in biodiversity conservation and environmental education projects.

According to various evaluations, income from the sale of ecotourism services worldwide ranges from 170 to 300 billion dollars per year. The USA has the highest income – 14 billion dollars from visits to protected areas; in Australia the same indicator is 3 billion dollars per year; in Kenya – 450 million dollars per year. In the Russian Federation, the area of specially protected natural areas is only 2%. The growth in demand for ecotourism programs and services is 20-30%. The most visited SPNA in the Russian Federation are the Kislovodsk National Park – 5.3 million people per year, the Sochi National Park – 1.7 million people, the Krasnoyarsk Pillars National Park – 1.1 million people, and the Curonian Spit National Park – 850 thousand people.

The cost of such programs varies significantly depending on the region, duration, etc. For example, the cost of a program in the largest Russian National Park, the Commander Islands named after S. V. Makarov, starts from 250 000 rubles, where visitors are very attracted by watching whales, killer whales, dolphins, and seal rookeries.

Factors of scientific and technological direction in ecotourism are modern engineering and digital solutions that help to reduce the negative impact on the natural environment and get the expected quality from traveling in a natural area. These factors include the introduction of digital and engineering solutions that help minimize impact on nature and improve the quality of the tourist experience. Digital technologies are being promoted in the form of mobile applications.

1. ECO Trip – an eco-friendly route on hand. A platform for booking green tourist routes in Russia, combining ecological paths, eco-hotels and farms. Travelers can choose eco-friendly routes, book accommodation and participate in educational tours on the topic of ecology. The application helps find eco-hotels and tours that support eco-friendly practices.

2. Green Key – eco-friendly comfort. In 1994, Green Key International was founded in Denmark. Green Key is an international organization that helps find hotels and resorts with green certifications. They all care about reducing the consumption of water, energy and other resources, and also support local initiatives.

3. Green Globe is a similar program that offers a certification process for the hospitality industry.

4. Good Guide – conscious consumption on holiday. Good Guide will help you choose eco-friendly and ethical products, whether they are gourmet delicacies, cosmetics or memorable souvenirs.

Mobile apps for responsible tourism make eco-friendly travels accessible and convenient. The study of the macroenvironmental factors for the development of ecotourism at the state level allows us to determine the optimal course of its development at the national and international levels.

IV. Conclusions

After the COVID-19 pandemic, the demand for ecotourism products and services has been higher than other types of tourism. In the near future, the demand for ecotourism services will experience an upward trend and could reach US \$498 billion by 2029. This forecast can be explained by the increase in the number of recovery trips, the expansion of digital platforms for the purpose of awareness of the proposed ecotourism programs, and the growth in the attractiveness of investments and finances for ecotourism. The concept of ecotourism remains controversial. In a broad sense, it is a form of nature tourism focused on responsible interaction with the environment. There is no definition of “ecotourism” at the legislative level, which hinders the development of sustainable practices. Ecological tourism should be based on three main components: 1) a contribution made by visitors to the conservation of nature, through entrance

fees or other instruments that support the ecosystem; 2) ecotourism should have a positive impact on the local economy; 3) the damage from such tourism to the natural area should be minimal.

Ecological tourism has many varieties that are present in almost every country in the world. The most common among them are the following types: tourism in specially protected natural areas (SPNA), rural tourism, agritourism, some types of sports tourism, as well as cultural tourism implemented within SPNA. Ecotourism today is one of the dynamic segments of the international tourism market. Analysts from consulting companies predict that its average annual growth will be 15.2% per year until 2030, while the entire tourism market will grow by only 5.4% annually. The largest share of the ecotourism market today is occupied by Europe due to the diversity of natural landscapes and high-quality environmental policies that allow Europe to maintain a leading position in this area. In the coming years, the main growth drivers will be the regions of Asia, as well as Latin America and Africa, due to rising living standards, development of transport infrastructure and government support for sustainable tourism.

A comprehensive analysis of the external environment, i.e. natural-geographical, political, socio-economic, technical, legal factors, allows for an objective assessment of the comprehensive approach to the prospects and opportunities for ecotourism at the national level. The growth of ecotourism is driven not only by changes in policy and infrastructure, but also by a deeper social and cultural transformation. Mass tourism today has become too unified. It doesn't really matter which country a tourist is visiting – Finland, Germany, the USA, Thailand, Turkey, Mexico – because there are almost the same supermarkets, standard souvenirs from the same factories, clothes from the same brands, i.e. everything is the same everywhere. Much more attractive is the natural environment, the culture of local communities, i.e., unique things and phenomena, and these are what will be the main centers of attraction for tourists.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST.

Authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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