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Opportunities for Preserving Natural Areas and the Development of Inclusive Tourism Spaces to Achieve Sustainable Development

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ABSTRACT

Natural ecosystems often face the challenge of balancing recreational use with limited public access, particularly when conserving unique ecosystems under budgetary constraints. In this regard, this research examines the potential of ecotourism as a tool for sustainable development and for financially supporting protected natural territories, using Burabay National Park in Kazakhstan as a case study. The study used a mixed-methods approach for data collection, including a SWOT analysis, expert interviews, and a visitor survey. The research revealed several systemic problems, including underdeveloped ecotourism infrastructure, poor coordination among tourism stakeholders, and deficiencies in the legal and regulatory framework. However, a high percentage of tourists (47%) were ready to make voluntary donations to the benefit of the park, and half of the sample were willing to engage in volunteer activities. These results suggest that ecotourism development requires an integrated approach. It should incorporate legislative improvements, mechanisms to attract non-budgetary funds, closer collaboration with local populations, and the introduction of contemporary means for managing tourist flows. Implementing these actions could turn ecotourism into an effective mechanism for preserving natural heritage and supporting the region's sustainable development.

Keywords: *Protected natural areas, Wildlife and plant conservation, Poaching, Charitable contributions, Sustainable development goals*

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is part of contemporary life and an important economic sector (Mishra *et al.*, 2023), generating revenue for the government (Fedchenko *et al.*, 2023) and creating jobs in the labor market (Capocchi *et al.*, 2019; Putrik *et al.*, 2024). In economic terms, tourism is a special kind of consumption that includes material and intangible goods and services, and it is recognized as a separate branch of economic activity (Higgins-Desbiolles *et al.*, 2019). Ecotourism mainly evolves in specially protected natural areas (SPNAs) (Pegova & Shagarov, 2019). Preserving natural ecosystems in SPNAs requires a delicate balance between recreational needs and environmental protection obligations (Nugmanov *et al.*, 2025; Yulianto *et al.*, 2025). National parks such as the Burabay State National Natural Park (SNNP) have high potential for nature-based recreation, which attracts tourists. Still, they also operate under special regulatory regimes and legal constraints. However, tourism planning often underestimates the value of ecosystem services (Dolgopolov *et al.*, 2024). For instance, the aggregate

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value of ecosystem services provided by the Burabay forests far exceeds the market value of timber, yet development strategies rarely account for this (Kitaibekova *et al.*, 2023).

Institutional obstacles also exist: discrepancies between the stipulations of the Law "On Specially Protected Natural Territories" (Environmental Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan, n.d.; Federal Law, 2023) and Kazakhstan's Environmental Code (Law of the Republic of, n.d.) prevent the creation of stable, clear conditions for nature use and ecotourism development. In addition, income distribution problems and the lack of mandatory local community involvement in tourism initiatives reduce the industry's effectiveness and sustainability. Financial investment in these zones is still scarce. As estimated, the Burabay SNNP needs over USD 2.5 million per year to achieve sustainable ecotourism development, while actual investments are much lower (APGazeta, 2019). Poor collaboration among tourism stakeholders and the lack of cluster-based models reduce tourism's multiplier impact below its potential (Hospitality-Kazakhstan, 2021). Regional tourism cluster models differ in the distribution of participant roles, patterns of interaction, and the extent of government involvement (Dukhovnaya *et al*., 2023).

Ecotourism can generate revenue for conservation and local livelihoods. Its ecological effects vary across settings, and evidence of lasting conservation benefits remains limited (Stronza *et al.*, 2019).

This research aims to evaluate the potential for ecotourism in the context of the sustainable development of the Burabay State National Natural Park (SNNP) as a tool for environmental protection and attracting extrabudgetary funds.

This study aims to understand the current limitations to expanding ecotourism and to determine how ecotourism can be developed to secure additional funding for protected natural areas. This, in turn, would not only create the financial resources needed to sustain these areas, but also boost local incomes by expanding service industries (Stolbovsky & Kosareva, 2018; Abdullayev *et al.*, 2024).

Literature review

In modern terms, ecotourism is described as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of local people, and involves interpretation and education" (Matova & Shagarov, 2021).

According to Mkrtchyan and Blam (2021) and Otcheskiy *et al.* (2023), ecotourism synthesizes nature conservation, support for local communities, and ongoing travel activities. The development of environmental tourism in Russia reflects similar trends, including the gradual adoption of sustainable tourism principles in protected areas (Adashova *et al.*, 2016). In practice, this means that those involved in the development, participation, and promotion of this type of tourism at the international level must follow the fundamental principles of ecotourism (Blamey, 2001; Kiper *et al.*, 2011), among which are: reducing physical and social (behavioral) impacts; promoting environmental awareness and respect for nature (Babintseva *et al.*, 2025); being a positive experience for visitors and hosts (Antonova & Putimtseva, 2024); providing direct financial benefits for nature conservation; creating economic benefits predominantly for local communities; providing visitors with meaningful experiences, which make them more sensitive to the ecological and social environment of the host area; and planning, building, and operating facilities with minimal adverse effect on the environment and human welfare. In urban settings, green architecture and landscape design are discussed as approaches to reducing the environmental impact of construction while enhancing tourism appeal (Vasilyeva *et al*., 2023).

Researchers consider ecotourism part of sustainable tourism, which aims to balance the ecological, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions of tourism development (Dorobantu & Nistoreanu, 2012).

Sustainable ecotourism, like sustainable tourism more generally, must:

- make optimal use of natural resources as a significant component of tourism development (Kuandykova *et al.*, 2024), sustaining important ecological processes and assisting in the conservation of natural heritage (Khakimov *et al.*, 2024; Nurgaziyev *et al.*, 2024), biodiversity (Abdrassulova *et al.*, 2016; Abayev *et al.*, 2025), and the integrity of natural ecosystems (Singh, 2014; Borodulin & Maksimenko, 2023);
- uphold the socio-cultural identity of local communities, maintain their social organization and living cultural heritage, traditional values (Kharkovskaya *et al.*, 2024), and foster intercultural understanding and tolerance (Roxana, 2012);
- provide durable, viable economic activity, notably by creating socio-economic value for all stakeholders (Bozhuk *et al.*, 2017; Abdullayev *et al.*, 2023).

In our research, we investigated the natural resources of Kazakhstan in the Burabay State National Natural Park. The park has 14 large lakes (such as Burabay, Shchuchye, and Katarkol) and many small lakes. One of the most famous landforms of the Burabay region is Mount Kokshetau, which reaches a height of 947 meters.

In light of the above, this study aims to establish the contribution of ecotourism to enhancing regional well-being by identifying the socio-economic drivers and potential sources of finance for natural territories in Kazakhstan, using Burabay National Park as an example.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To achieve the aim of this research, a qualitative-quantitative (mixed-methods) research design was used.

The research was carried out in 2024 in Burabay State National Natural Park.

Burabay SNNP is situated in the Akmola Region of Kazakhstan, in the Kokshetau Uplands (53°05′00″ N, 70°18′00″ E).

The Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan established the park by decree on August 12, 2000, and it covers 129,484.88 hectares (Official portal of Burabay State, n.d.). The Office of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan manages the park, which serves several functions: preserving natural ecosystems, conducting scientific research, providing environmental education, and supporting tourism (QR-PIB information page on Burabay, n.d.).

Burabay SNNP's vegetation includes 754 plant species, including 20 listed in the Red Book of Kazakhstan as rare and

endangered, and 79 as relict plants (Bazargaliyeva *et al.*, 2024). Fauna consists of 469 species of animals, including 17 species protected at the national level and 21 species listed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) (Official portal of Burabay State, n.d.).

Over the past two decades, the park has undergone functional zoning, established a protected buffer zone covering more than 370,000 hectares, and designated water protection zones for nine lakes. As part of conservation efforts, reforestation activities have restored more than 1,080 hectares of forest, resulting in more than a 70% increase in forest cover. The first national Smart National Park Burabay system was implemented to enable early wildfire detection, and hydrological and weather monitoring stations were installed at key water bodies.

The park is accredited as a scientific research institution and has voluntarily achieved certification in environmental and conservation management (QR-PIB information page on Burabay, n.d.). To control tourist movement, the park created 29 specially designed routes, comprising 40 kilometers of walking and cycling paths that protect ecosystems from trampling (Official portal of Burabay State, n.d.). In 2015, the park was named the country's best national park, highlighting its role in nature preservation and the growth of ecotourism. Furthermore, since 2022, Burabay has been listed in the UNESCO World Network of Biosphere Reserves, highlighting its international importance and strengthening global collaboration on nature protection (Official portal of Burabay State, n.d.). Visitor numbers point to a record tourist boom: in 2024, the park hosted about 1 million visitors, a 15% increase from the previous year. Over five days during the spring holiday of Nauryz in March 2025, about 40,000 guests visited the park—double the previous year (Qazinform, 2025). In addition, over 175,000 cars entered the park, adding pressure on the ecosystem and straining waste management facilities with the increased amount of trash (Official portal of Burabay State, n.d.). These numbers show the high recreational load and the level of visitor interaction, calling for sustainable tourism management models.

In the initial phase of the study, to formulate proposals for ecotourism development, we conducted a SWOT analysis of the park's tourism potential to identify its strengths and weaknesses, and opportunities and threats for further development. This allowed us to evaluate the internal and external factors influencing tourism in Burabay in a structured way.

At the second stage, a sample group was selected consisting of employees from tourism companies specializing in domestic travel. The researchers invited these individuals via email to participate in the study. A total of 64 respondents took part in the survey after receiving an introductory email outlining the research's purpose and scope. The survey was conducted from September 25 to October 25, 2024. Experts were asked to respond to the following key research questions related to the status and challenges of ecotourism development in Kazakhstan:

1. What are the organizational and economic causes of ecotourism underdevelopment in Kazakhstan?
2. What factors hinder the successful development of ecotourism in Kazakhstan?
3. What are the key priorities for developing ecotourism in Kazakhstan?

After gathering the answers, we sent the experts a follow-up email asking them to prioritize each answer on an ordinal scale. From this ranking, weighted scores were computed to establish the relative importance of each problem.

Among the possible solutions to ecotourism financing in protected territories, we consider charitable donations and contributions worthy of special attention. Thus, in the second phase of the research, the author sought to evaluate park visitors' readiness and motivation to make charitable donations for ecotourism development. The main survey goal was to identify the extent to which tourists are willing to invest money in maintaining and improving protected-area ecological routes. A questionnaire consisting of 11 items was developed for the study. The survey was conducted via the VKontakte social network, within online communities dedicated to mountain tourism. Participation was anonymous, and respondents were not required to provide personal details or signatures. Exceptions applied to questions about gender, age, and monthly income, which were used to categorize participants into demographic groups.

In total, 160 individuals of varying ages took part in the survey: 21% were under 20; 60% were between 20 and 30; and 19% were between 30 and 45. The gender distribution included 29% women and 71% men. Participants also reported a wide range of combined monthly incomes: 18% earned less than 153,000 tenge; 44% reported incomes between 153,000 and 254,000 tenge; and 38% earned more than 254,000 tenge. (As a reference, the average annual exchange rate set by the National Bank of Kazakhstan was 469.44 tenge per US dollar.)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Assessment of the tourism potential of the burabay state national natural park

A SWOT analysis of the potential for ecotourism development in the Burabay National Park is presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. SWOT analysis of ecotourism development potential in the Burabay National Park.

Strengths (S)	Weaknesses (W)
Clean and safe environment; beautiful scenery and rich biodiversity	Low level of international promotion of the region
Diverse landscapes: mountains, lakes (including Burabay, Shchuchye, Katarkol), rivers, waterfalls, mineral springs	Underdeveloped accommodation and food service infrastructure
Rich historical and cultural heritage, including folk traditions	Poor condition of roads, especially in mountainous areas
Development of a network of households oriented toward ecotourism	Insufficient number of routes and weak utilization of historical and cultural heritage
Affordable accommodation and quality food services	Lack of foreign language skills among residents, hindering communication with international tourists
Large number of individual tour operators	Insufficient knowledge of ecotourism organization among residents
Hospitality of the local population	
Opportunities (O)	**Threats (T)**

Increased income for residents through ecotourism development	Presence of unclassified lodging facilities that lower the quality of services
Economic growth of the region through the creation of new jobs	Competition and lack of coordination between ecotourism organizations
Raising environmental awareness among tourists and residents	Weak cooperation with local authorities and travel agencies
Reducing anthropogenic pressure on the territory through regulated tourism	Absence of a clear legal and organizational framework for ecotourism
Development of scientific tourism and educational programs for students	Risk of overcrowding popular routes, leading to degradation of natural sites
Attracting charitable contributions and volunteer programs to support the park	Insufficient government funding

Results of the expert survey

The expert survey revealed the economic and organizational reasons behind the underdevelopment of ecotourism in Kazakhstan **(Table 2)**, as well as the factors hindering its successful growth **(Table 3)**.

Table 2. Economic and organizational reasons for the underdevelopment of ecotourism in Kazakhstan.

№	Reasons for the underdevelopment of ecotourism in Kazakhstan	Rank	Weight
	Economic reasons		
1	Lack of start-up capital to finance the development of targeted ecotourism programs	2	0,24
2	Insufficient investment in tourism infrastructure	1	0,42
3	Deficiencies in ecotourism management and marketing	3	0,21
4	Absence of targeted scientific research and an imperfect system of personnel training	4	0,13
	Organizational reasons		
1	Limited number of tourist routes in ecotourism areas and their inadequate development	3	0,17
2	Lack of specialized tour operators in the field of ecotourism	6	0,03
3	Bureaucratic bans and restrictions on ecotourists visiting attractive sites	4	0,12
4	Limited range of recreational services for tourists	1	0,37
5	Insufficient promotion and advertising of ecotourism	2	0,23
6	Shortage of qualified personnel in ecotourism	5	0,08

Note: Compiled based on the results of the expert survey.

Table 3. Factors hindering the successful development of ecotourism in Kazakhstan.

№	Factors hindering the successful development of ecotourism	Rank	Weight
1	Lack of favorable economic conditions for investment in ecotourism development	1	0,31
2	Lack of detailed (especially specialized) information about the recreational opportunities of protected natural areas (SPNAs), their promotion (e.g., brochures), and media coverage. Ecotourism success largely depends on visitors having access to reliable information before starting their tours.	4	0,13
3	Absence of a tourism product that meets the standards of the international tourism market (imperfect specialized routes and programs for different categories of ecotourists)	2	0,24
4	Lack of sufficient experience and knowledge in ecotourism organization among the full-time staff of relevant administrative units of SPNAs, particularly in marketing, pricing, and educational programs	6	0,05
5	Absence of unified standards for service pricing; frequently, prices charged do not correspond to the quality of services provided	5	0,09
6	Specialized administrative units of SPNAs do not provide adequate management of recreational and tourism activities carried out by joint ventures such as travel agencies and tour operators	3	0,16
7	Undervaluation of the role of local communities in ecotourism development	7	0,02

Note: Compiled based on the results of the expert survey.

Experts identified the following key priorities for developing ecotourism in Kazakhstan **(Table 4)**.

Table 4. Key priorities for the development of ecotourism in Kazakhstan.

№	Key priorities for the development of ecotourism	Rank	Weight
1	Legislative regulation of ecological activities conducted within protected natural areas (SPNAs)	4	0,19
2	Implementation of an economic mechanism for providing paid tourist services, based on self-sufficiency, self-financing, and cost recovery of budget-accounting recreational units	2	0,28
3	Provision of recreational and tourist infrastructure in SPNAs according to international standards (including accommodation and food services, transport, observation towers, etc.)	1	0,40
4	Development and arrangement of scientific and educational tourist routes and ecological-educational trails by the parameters of internal and external landscape diversity (including small architectural forms, informational and protective signs, information boards, etc.)	3	0,13

Note: Compiled based on the results of the expert survey.

Study of willingness to make charitable contributions for the maintenance and improvement of ecological trails

According to the survey results, all respondents reported having visited Kazakhstan (100% affirmative response). Most (54%) had visited protected natural areas (SPNAs) once or twice, 21%

had been there more than twice, and 25% had never visited an SPNA.

To assess tourists' willingness to contribute voluntarily to the development and upkeep of ecological tourism routes within protected areas, respondents were grouped into three categories based on the amount they were prepared to donate. These amounts reflect the voluntary contributions visitors would be willing to make to enter the park **(Table 5)**.

Table 5. Categories of respondents willing to make charitable contributions for the development of ecotourism in protected natural areas (SPNAs).

№	Category of respondents	Number of people	Contribution amount (tenge)
I	Respondents willing to make a one-time charitable donation during a park visit	29	2,500–5,000
II	Respondents willing to contribute during each visit to the park	18	500–2,500
III	Respondents not willing to make charitable contributions for the development of ecotourism	33	–

We also asked respondents from all three categories whether they would be willing to help improve ecological trails. Half of the respondents (49%) said they would volunteer for such activities, while 27% would participate if financially compensated. One quarter (24%) said they were not willing to take part in improving ecological routes within the park.

Further analysis was conducted on Category III respondents, those unwilling to make financial contributions to support ecological trail development. Within this group, 36% were unwilling to participate at all, 30% were open to volunteering, and 34% indicated they would contribute if compensated. These responses may reflect factors such as relatively low environmental awareness or, more likely, limited personal financial resources.

Overall, the study found that most respondents are prepared to make voluntary financial contributions toward developing ecotourism and recreational infrastructure in protected areas. Many are also willing to volunteer for environmental activities. Although the sample size was relatively modest, the findings provide a meaningful basis for analyzing public engagement and developing targeted measures to improve the park's financial sustainability.

The ecotourism potential of protected natural areas (PNAs) lies in systematically using available natural, infrastructural, and scientific resources. This includes designing and developing ecological and eco-cultural routes, as well as implementing planning (Kuanyshbayeva *et al.*, 2025), management, and tourism activity monitoring mechanisms (Nametova *et al.*, 2025). An agent-based model of river rafting in the Republic of Tyva illustrates the use of simulation in planning ecotourism routes (Boikova & Smirnova, 2024). In this context, developing scientific tourism and student fieldwork programs becomes particularly relevant, especially in areas with high levels of environmental preservation, such as the Burabay State National Natural Park.

One of the main obstacles to developing ecotourism remains the undervaluation of ecosystem services. Although the overall value of ecosystems—like the forests of Burabay—far outweighs the market value of their physical resources, planners and managers seldom factor these ecosystem functions into decisions (Kitaibekova *et al.*, 2023). This omission compromises the efficiency of development strategies and diminishes the investment attractiveness of ecotourism. A revaluation of natural assets is therefore necessary, with greater focus on including ecosystem functions in long-term strategic planning.

Financial aspects are a key factor in ecotourism sustainability (Stronza, 2007). A shortage of public finance is commonly noted as a main hindrance to Burabay's ecotourism development, with annual demands of over USD 2.5 million (APGazeta, 2019). Meanwhile, tourism receipts are often allocated ineffectively, and the overall economic multiplier effect is not achieved (Hospitality-Kazakhstan, 2021).

This emphasizes the need to seek non-budgetary funding sources. These include renting forestland to recreational, sporting, and tourist organizations (Mkrtchyan & Blam, 2021); imposing taxes or user fees for short-term ecotourism use of protected areas (Bozhuk *et al.*, 2017; Protasova, 2024); and expanding paid services and infrastructure. To enhance transparency and public trust, legal mechanisms for equitable income distribution and purpose-oriented use of funds, along with explanatory public reporting, are necessary.

Some tourists are also willing to contribute financially to the upkeep of protected natural territories and to support their better functioning (Kiper *et al.*, 2011). In this context, it would be appropriate to create a charity infrastructure: open a special bank account for voluntary donations, include a section on the official park websites explaining ongoing projects and reporting how funds are spent, and set up volunteer programs for trail and facility maintenance. It could add a "visitor feedback" section to improve public interaction and communication.

Beyond financing, another Achilles' heel is enforcement of nature-protection legislation. An expert-based comparison of Russia, Poland, and Germany examines environmental digitalization through legal regulation, state supervision, and public–private partnerships (Portnova, 2024). Despite its official status, the Burabay State National Natural Park still suffers from encroachment by commercial and recreational infrastructure into protected areas. Monitoring and environmental impact assessments often fail to meet legal requirements (Law of the Republic of, n.d.). For effective conservation, Kazakhstan should implement a systematic ecological monitoring system consistent with Article 152 of its Environmental Code (Law of the Republic of, n.d.), using digital instruments and independent control mechanisms.

Legal uncertainty, driven by inconsistencies between the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Specially Protected Natural Territories" and the Environmental Code, also impedes sustainable development in areas such as zoning, activity regulation, and public participation (Environmental Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan, n.d.). This calls for legislative harmonization and regulatory reforms considering the specific nature and requirements of ecotourism.

Particular attention must be paid to developing ecotourism in communities situated in or near the borders of protected natural territories (PNAs) (Kasimova, 2024). This implies

elaborating practical recommendations for municipal authorities, conducting seminars and training sessions for local inhabitants (Vasileva *et al.*, 2025) interested in ecotourism, and building partnerships with private homeowners, farmers, and tour operators. For hospitality providers, staff qualifications are one factor shaping service quality (Saenko *et al*., 2017). Introducing microfinance or grant schemes may also support local initiatives. It is also necessary to publish promotional and educational materials to raise public awareness and popularize ecotourism. A survey of prospective visitors to Wakatobi National Park identified a link between electronic word of mouth and visit intentions (Suhud *et al*., 2026).

A continuing challenge is low involvement from local communities. Unlike community-based tourism approaches elsewhere, Kazakhstan lacks legal measures requiring local actors to be involved in tourism planning and management. This hampers the sustainability and public legitimacy of ecotourism initiatives. One way forward is to formalize partnerships, facilitate small-scale entrepreneurship, and promote local initiatives in hospitality, food services, and guided tourism. In conclusion, the successful evolution of ecotourism in Kazakhstan's protected natural territories requires an integrated approach. This implies institutional and legal reforms, revaluation of natural resources, establishment of sustainable financing mechanisms, introduction of public monitoring, active community engagement, and regular information and awareness-raising campaigns.

CONCLUSION

Ecotourism in natural protected areas is progressively viewed not just as a recreational activity, but rather as a strategic instrument for sustainable development. It balances conservation goals with those of local communities and the tourism industry, optimizing tourism's contribution to biodiversity conservation while also supporting poverty alleviation and broader sustainable development objectives. Given constrained public finances, it is essential to leverage these sites' ecotourism potential to mobilize additional resources without undermining conservation regimes.

The experience of the Burabay State National Natural Park demonstrates that sustainable development is achievable through an integrated approach. This includes diversifying income streams by introducing paid recreational services, leasing land for regulated tourism activities, and implementing short-term environmental fees. Promising directions also include developing infrastructure for charitable donations, expanding educational outreach to visitors, and engaging volunteers in conservation and maintenance efforts.

Equally important is the full involvement of local communities at all levels of ecotourism development—from design to execution. This is possible through training, financing of small-scale entrepreneurship, and official partnership. Harmonizing environmental legislation and eliminating inconsistencies between the Law on Protected Natural Areas and the Environmental Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan will create a legal basis for long-term sustainable solutions.

Finally, enhancing transparency and public participation is imperative. Providing feedback mechanisms for visitors, releasing information on conservation and tourism initiatives, and building platforms for discussion and cooperation can greatly enhance trust and involvement. Only an integrated mix of economic, social, and legislative interventions can develop a sustainable ecotourism model—one that not only protects natural heritage but also delivers real benefits to host communities and regions.

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