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PROBLEMS OF ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN UZBEKISTAN AND PROSPECTS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract
This thesis examines the barriers to ecotourism development in Uzbekistan and its prospects for sustainable development. Using official statistics for 2019–2025 and survey evidence, it shows that record inbound flows (11.7 million visitors in 2025) and protected natural areas covering 15.7% of the territory have not yet produced a mature ecotourism market. The key barriers are narrow nature-based demand, weak infrastructure, and limited skills and finance; zoning, community-based products, green finance and monitoring are proposed.

Keywords: Ecotourism; sustainable development; protected natural areas; Uzbekistan; community-based tourism; carrying capacity; green finance; tourism policy.



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Introduction

Ecotourism has become one of the most dynamic segments of world tourism because it links visitor spending to nature conservation and to the welfare of host communities. Honey [1] defines authentic ecotourism through a set of principles: travel to natural areas with minimal impact, environmental education, direct financial benefits for conservation, and economic empowerment of local people. Weaver [2] shows that ecotourism ranges from a minimalist, site-level form to a comprehensive one that seeks to improve the destination as a whole; only the comprehensive form is fully consistent with sustainable development.

For Uzbekistan the question has acquired practical weight. Inbound tourism has recovered from the pandemic and set new records, the protected area network has been expanded several times over, and Presidential Resolution PQ-21 of 12 January 2024 opened the buffer zones of reserves, national parks and forestry lands to tourism clusters. National research, however, still describes ecotourism as a young and weakly managed segment: Khamidov [3] treats its development primarily as a management task and links its growth to the economic use of protected natural areas, while field evidence from the Aral Sea region points to gaps in infrastructure, skills and finance [4].

The aim of this thesis is to identify the main problems hindering ecotourism in Uzbekistan and to substantiate directions for its sustainable development. The study applies statistical and comparative analysis to data of the National Statistics Committee and the Tourism Committee for 2019–2025, content analysis of legal acts, and secondary analysis of published stakeholder survey results [4].



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Main Part

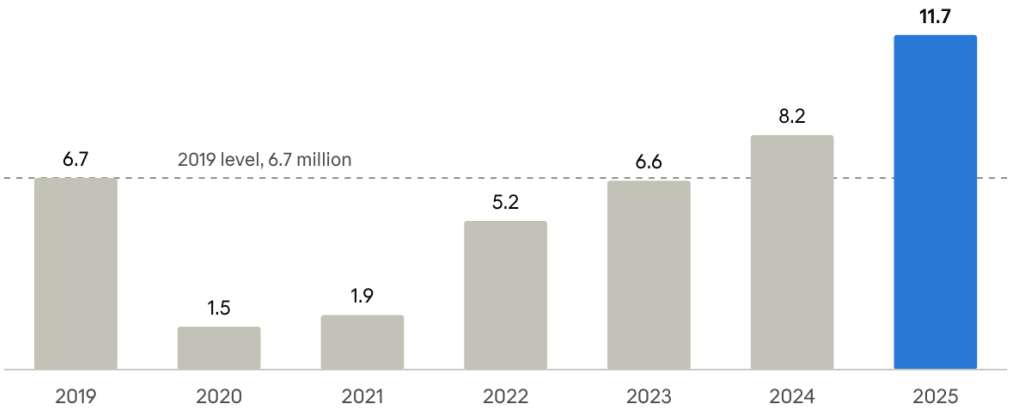
1. Ecotourism resource base and demand dynamics

Uzbekistan's ecotourism resource base has widened rapidly. Protected natural areas covered 4.5% of the territory before 2017 and 14.1% (6.33 million ha) in January 2025, reaching 15.7% on 30 March 2026; under the Bio Meros (Bioheritage) programme the national targets are 20% by 2030 and 30% by 2035. The country's landscape range, from the Chatkal and Zarafshan mountains to the Kyzylkum desert, the Aydar–Arnasay lakes, the tugai forests of the Amu Darya delta and the Aral Sea coast, allows mountain, desert, birdwatching and wetland products within one destination.

Demand has also reached record levels (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Foreign tourist arrivals in Uzbekistan, 2019-2025, million people

2025: a record 11.7 million, 1.7 times the 2019 pre-pandemic level



Source: compiled by the author from National Statistics Committee data, 2019-2025

After the pandemic collapse of 2020–2021, arrivals passed the 2019 level in 2024, and tourism service exports rose to about USD 4.8 billion in 2025. The headline growth, however, overstates the market for ecotourism: the flow is dominated by

short regional visits rather than leisure travel (Table 1, row 1), while nature-based tours are bought mainly by long-haul leisure travellers and the domestic urban market, both still small.

2. Key problems of ecotourism development

A comparison of statistical and survey evidence identifies six interrelated problems that keep ecotourism in Uzbekistan at an early stage (Table 1).

Table 1. Key problems of ecotourism development in Uzbekistan and directions for their sustainable solution

No.	Problem	Evidence	Sustainable response
1	Narrow nature-based demand	81.5% of 2025 arrivals came from neighbouring countries; in January–August 2025 about 15% of arrivals travelled for leisure and 69% visited relatives	Nature-based products and targeted marketing for long-haul and domestic urban markets
2	Poor infrastructure in natural areas	In the Aral Sea region, 93% of operators rate accommodation as average or below, 83.7% catering and 79.1% transport [4]	Small-scale, low-impact lodging; roads and utilities planned within ecological carrying capacity
3	Weak skills and market networks	Lack of experience, competence and international networks accounts for over half of the reasons operators give for not promoting ecotourism [4]	Guide certification, professional training, partnerships with international operators
4	Limited finance for small operators	Access to microfinance is named among the greatest needs [4]; PQ-21 tax relief covers star-rated hotels, spa resorts and theme parks in desert areas	Microcredit and green credit lines for guesthouses and family businesses
5	Short stays and low local spending	80.9% of operators report that ecotourists spend under USD 200 a day and stay no more than two days [4]	Multi-day routes linking heritage cities with nature sites; local procurement
6	Conservation–use conflict	Protected areas grew from 4.5% to 15.7% of the territory, while buffer-zone land is leased to tourism clusters for 10 years	Functional zoning, visitor caps, entry fees earmarked for conservation and local communities

Source: compiled by the author from the National Statistics Committee (2025 results; January–August 2025), the Ministry of Ecology, Resolution PQ-21 and [4].

The problems reinforce one another. Operators in the Aral Sea region understand the conservation and community value of ecotourism, yet lack the experience, competence and networks to sell it [4]. Poor accommodation, catering and transport keep stays short and spending low, which in turn discourages private investment in the same places. Measured against Honey's principles [1], such tourism delivers little direct financial benefit to conservation or to local people, and it remains minimalist in Weaver's sense [2]: it uses nature as scenery but does not yet improve the destination.

3. Prospects for sustainable development

The prospects for sustainable ecotourism rest on three assets that are already in place. The first is the institutional framework. Resolution PQ-21 allocates land in the buffer zones of reserves, national parks, forestry lands, mountain and desert areas and water protection zones for tourism clusters, leases it through the E-auksion platform for 10 years with the right of extension, halves profit and land tax for three years for desert resort zones until 1 January 2027, and provided for the “Journey to Nature” digital platform. The second is the protected area network itself, which supplies new destinations and a legal basis for zoning visitor use. The third is diversifying demand: arrivals from China rose 3.8-fold in 2025, and regional visitors are a ready market for short nature trips combined with heritage tours.

To turn these assets into sustainable outcomes, ecotourism has to move from the minimalist to the comprehensive model [2]. Revenues from clusters and entry fees should be tied to conservation and to the income of communities living next

to protected areas, as Honey's principle of direct benefit requires [1]. Visitor numbers must stay within the ecological carrying capacity of each site, which is especially critical for fragile desert, wetland and Aral Sea landscapes. Khamidov's [3] index of ecotourism development in protected natural areas can serve as the core of such monitoring, extended to indicators of visitor load, local employment and conservation spending for every cluster.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Uzbekistan has the resource base and the policy momentum for ecotourism, but not yet a sustainable ecotourism market. Record arrivals are dominated by short regional visits, and nature-based products are held back by gaps in infrastructure, skills and finance [4]. Closing these gaps requires the following measures:

1. Adopt functional zoning and carrying-capacity norms for every protected area opened to tourism clusters, with visitor caps for core and buffer zones.
2. Earmark a fixed share of entry fees and cluster lease payments for conservation and for the communities adjoining protected areas, in line with the principle of direct benefit [1].
3. Support community-based ecotourism through microcredit and green credit lines for guesthouses, guide certification, and joint training with international operators [4].
4. Develop multi-day routes that link Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva with nearby mountain, desert and Aral Sea sites, so that stays and local spending grow.
5. Build a monitoring system on the “Journey to Nature” platform around an index of ecotourism development in protected areas [3], with annual public reporting of visitor load, income and conservation results.

Together, these measures would move ecotourism in Uzbekistan from the minimalist to the comprehensive model [2] and make it a working instrument of the country's sustainable development goals.

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