



Ecotourism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Opportunities, Challenges and Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

Ecotourism, as a sustainable tourism model, offers a significant opportunity for environmental preservation and community advancement. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), characterised by its rich biodiversity, remarkable landscapes, and cultural legacy, ecotourism holds substantial potential to advance the region's sustainable development. This study examines the present condition of ecotourism in the KRI, evaluating the opportunities and obstacles it encounters. The researchers analyse the environmental, social, and economic effects of ecotourism, emphasising critical aspects such as biodiversity conservation, cultural heritage preservation, and community engagement. The results indicate that although the KRI possesses significant ecotourism potential, certain difficulties, including environmental deterioration, political instability, and inadequate infrastructure, need to be resolved. The paper ends with suggestions for improving sustainable ecotourism in the KRI, stressing the importance of careful planning, getting everyone involved, and creating helpful policies to ensure that ecotourism benefits the area's environmental and social goals.

KEYWORDS: Ecotourism, Sustainable tourism, Tourism policy, Biodiversity conservation, Environmental challenges, Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism is becoming more and more popular as a way to promote sustainable development. It is typically characterised as responsible travel to natural regions that protect the environment and improve the lives of local people (Blamey, 2001; Najmaldin and Yardi, 2013). This kind of tourism that is beneficial for the environment, focuses on protecting natural areas, cultural heritage, and the health of local communities. Ecotourism is different from mass tourism since it tries to reduce the impact of tourists on the environment while also promoting respect for cultural variety and understanding of environmental issues. As more and more people throughout the world worry about the loss of biodiversity and the damage to the environment, ecotourism is becoming more popular. This is leading to a trend towards more responsible travel. Fennell (2020) says that ecotourism is a vital part of sustainable development policies around the world since it helps protect the environment and helps rural communities grow economically. The ideas of sustainability, such as taking care of the environment, making money, and treating everyone fairly, are quite similar to those of ecotourism.

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) says that ecotourism is "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, supports the health of the local people, and includes interpretation and education." This definition makes it clear how important education and cultural exchange are for fostering sustainable tourism. Weaver (2001)

says that ecotourism is a way to teach people about the environment, make them more conscious of ecological challenges, and get them to live more sustainably in their daily lives. In many developing countries, ecotourism is a major source of income and jobs for local communities, which shows how it can help the economy. Ecotourism can help alleviate poverty and encourage conservation by giving people other ways to make a living that do not depend on using up natural resources.

Honey (1999) says that ecotourism can produce a positive feedback loop when it is managed well. This means that protecting natural areas makes tourists' experiences better, which brings more money for community development and conservation programs. Ecotourism has pros and cons that must be handled carefully to avoid negative effects. Some of the risks of poorly run ecotourism businesses include overcrowding, damage to wildlife habitats, and the commercialisation of culture. Buckley (2011) says that strict rules and community involvement in the planning and execution of ecotourism projects are necessary to make sure they help both conservation and local development. Ecotourism can hurt the very places it tries to protect if there isn't enough control (Buckley, 2011).

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is a great place for ecotourism because it has many different ecosystems, mountains, and cultural sites. The region's abundant biodiversity, which includes the Zagros Mountains, its many

rivers, and its cultural heritage sites, makes it a possible major ecotourism destination in the Middle East. This paper's goal is to give a full overview of ecotourism in the KRI, looking at its potential, the problems it faces right now, and ways to make it last. The study looks at the natural and cultural resources that are accessible for ecotourism, the problems that stand in the way of its growth, and the policies and plans that could help the region's ecotourism become more sustainable. In conclusion, ecotourism is a viable way to achieve sustainable development by finding a balance between protecting the environment and making money and helping people. But to reach its full potential, everyone needs to work together, including governments, local communities, visitors, and environmental groups. As more and more people want to travel in a way that is healthy for the environment, it is important to come up with and implement best practices that keep ecotourism a positive force that protects nature and culture for future generations.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Area

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is the main focus of this study. It has many different ecosystems, cultural heritage sites, and natural attractions. There are mountains (Zagros and Taurus ranges), rivers (Great Zab and Avashin), and national parks (Mount Halgurd National Park and Rawanduz Gorge) in this area. The many types of geography make it easier to look at the pros and cons of ecotourism.

2.2. Data Collection

2.2.1. Literature Review

We looked at all the research that has already been done on ecotourism, sustainable practices, and the effects on the environment. Some of the most important sources were academic journals, government papers, publications from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and case studies of ecotourism methods in places that are similar.

3. Ecotourism Potential in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

3.1. Natural Landscapes

The KRI is home to a variety of landscapes, including:

Mountains: The Gara, Zagros, and Taurus Mountain ranges provide picturesque vistas and trekking prospects. The mountain ranges extending into the Kurdistan Region are distinguished by their harsh terrain, elevated heights, and abundant wildlife. These mountains offer stunning vistas and various chances for trekking, mountaineering, and wildlife observation, establishing them as prime ecotourism destinations.

Rivers and Waterfalls: Rivers such as the Avashin, Sherana, Xabir, and Great Zab, together with waterfalls like Sharanish, Sipa, and Gali Ali Beg, offer scenic locations for nature enthusiasts. These locations are esteemed for their visual allure and are visited by tourists desiring to experience the natural splendour of the Kurdistan Region (Asaad and Balaky, 2021).

National Parks and Protected Areas: Locations such as Rawanduz Gorge and Mount Halgurd National Park include significant biodiversity and are well-suited for ecotourism endeavours. Rawanduz Gorge and Mount Halgurd National

Park are essential regions for biodiversity preservation in the Kurdistan Region. These protected areas encompass diverse flora and fauna, including species indigenous to the region, and provide many opportunities for ecotourism activities such as birdwatching, hiking, and ecological excursions.

3.2. Biodiversity

The region's biodiversity is a key attraction:

Flora and Fauna: The KRI is home to many native and migratory species, making it a wonderful place to go birdwatching, take pictures of animals, and go on nature tours. There are many different plants and animals in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), including several that are only found there and many that migrate there. The area's many ecosystems, from mountains to river valleys, let this biodiversity thrive. Such diversity makes it a great place for birdwatchers, animal photographers, and environment lovers to visit.

Endangered Species: Ecotourism programs should include efforts to protect endangered animals, like the Persian leopard and the Iraqi wild goat. The KRI's conservation efforts have mostly focused on saving endangered animals, like the Persian leopard (*Panthera pardus saxicolor*) and the Iraqi wild goat (*Capra aegagrus*). Bringing these conservation efforts into ecotourism might not only help spread the word, but it could also bring in money for ongoing preservation work. Such an initiative would make ecotourism a major part of protecting biodiversity in the area.

3.3. Cultural Heritage

The KRI's cultural heritage enhances its ecotourism appeal

Historical Sites: UNESCO World Heritage sites like the Erbil (Hawler) Citadel, which is an ancient city, provide a cultural dimension to ecotourism. In 2014, UNESCO named Erbil Citadel a World Heritage site. The Erbil Citadel is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. This ancient site has a long history that goes back thousands of years. It is not only a symbol of the region's cultural heritage, but it also makes ecotourism much better by giving visitors the chance to learn about history and see amazing buildings.

Traditional Practices: Local traditions, crafts, and festivals are examples of traditional practices that add to the culture of the area. The Kurdistan Region is noted for its lively local traditions, such as making carpets and celebrating everything from Newroz (Kurdish New Year) to traditional music and dancing. These cultural activities give tourists a full experience, helping them learn more about the region's history and supporting local economies by encouraging cultural tourism.

4. Current State of Ecotourism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

4.1. Tourism Infrastructure

The KRI has seen some development in tourism infrastructure:

Accommodation: Eco-lodges and traditional guesthouses are becoming more common, although there aren't many of them, and they aren't all that great. There has been some progress in making eco-friendly places to stay in the Kurdistan Region, but there still aren't many eco-lodges or traditional guesthouses that are of high quality. The facilities that are already there typically don't meet the standards that foreign ecotourists anticipate, which makes it challenging for the region to create

a full-fledged ecotourism economy.

Transportation: The road network has gotten better, although getting to remote nature areas is still challenging. The Kurdistan Region has made a lot of progress in making its roads better, especially in cities and towns. However, getting to distant natural regions, which are frequently the main attractions of ecotourism, is still difficult because the infrastructure is not well developed or doesn't exist at all. This disadvantage makes these places less accessible to people who want to visit them.

Tour Operators: There aren't many tour operators that focus on ecotourism; thus, there aren't many different types of experiences to choose from. The ecotourism industry in the Kurdistan Region is still new, and only a few tour companies offer ecotourism services. There aren't many ecotourism companies that focus on this type of travel, which means that tourists can't have as many different experiences. This means that the region can't fully use its natural and cultural resources for sustainable tourism.

4.2. Public Awareness and Involvement

People still do not know much about ecotourism, and not many people in the community are involved in tourism operations. Even though more and more people are realising how great ecotourism may be, not many in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq know about it. Ecotourism events don't always include the whole community, so they can't fully benefit. This lack of knowledge and participation also makes it harder for ecotourism to grow in a way that is beneficial for the environment. We need more educational initiatives that stress how ecotourism is beneficial for the ecosystem and the people who live there. There is a strong demand for education and outreach activities that show people how ecotourism can help the environment and the economy. These kinds of programs can give local populations the tools they need to get involved in ecotourism, which can help them learn more about how eco-friendly tourism can benefit both the environment and the local economy.

5. Challenges Facing Ecotourism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

5.1. Environmental Challenges

Environmental issues that threaten ecotourism development include:

Deforestation and Habitat Loss: Urban growth and unsustainable farming methods are ruining habitats. Rapid urbanisation and unsustainable farming methods are causing a lot of deforestation and habitat loss in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. These actions are destroying natural habitats, which puts local biodiversity at risk and lowers the region's potential for ecotourism. It is very important to deal with the loss of forests and natural landscapes to protect the ecological resources that are important to ecotourism.

Water Scarcity: Climate change and inadequate management of water supplies threaten natural habitats and ecotourism operations. Another big environmental problem in the Kurdistan Region is a lack of water, which is made worse by climate change and inadequate management of water resources. This problem could make ecotourism impossible because many natural features, such as rivers, lakes, and waterfalls, need water to exist. The loss of water supplies could

have a big effect on both the natural environment and the ecotourism activities that depend on it. Lack of waste disposal infrastructure leads to pollution, especially in places that are popular with tourists.

Pollution: In the Kurdistan Region, pollution is becoming more of a problem, especially in places where tourists want to visit. The lack of sufficient infrastructure for proper waste disposal causes trash and other pollutants to accumulate in natural areas. As a result, these locations become less aesthetically pleasing and lose their ecological value. This pollution not only harms the ecology, but it also makes the area less appealing as a destination for ecotourism.

5.2. Political and Security Issues

In the past, tourism in the KRI has been hurt by political instability and security concerns. The area is generally calm compared to other regions of Iraq, but people still feel unsafe, which makes it challenging to get international ecotourists. Political instability and security problems have historically hurt tourism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Even if things are relatively stable in this part of Iraq compared to other parts, the perception of insecurity still makes it challenging to get international visitors, particularly ecotourists. These ideas can keep people from going to places that are safe and stable, which is what many tourists look for when they choose a place to visit.

5.3. Economic and Social Challenges

Funding and Investment: Limited money and investment make it challenging to build up ecotourism infrastructure and conservation activities. There isn't enough money or investment in the Kurdistan Region to build up the infrastructure for ecotourism. The lack of money makes it challenging to build the infrastructure that is needed for the creation of a sustainable ecotourism sector, like eco-lodges, transit facilities, and conservation initiatives.

Community Involvement: There are not enough ways for local populations to get involved in ecotourism, which is important for making sure that the advantages of tourism are shared fairly. For ecotourism to work, local people need to be included so that they may get something out of tourism operations. There aren't many ways for local people to get involved in ecotourism projects in the Kurdistan Region. This limitation makes it harder to fairly share the advantages of tourism and makes it harder for communities to support conservation efforts.

5.4. Lack of Expertise and Training

There are not enough skilled experts in the areas of hospitality, conservation, and ecotourism management. This makes it harder for ecotourism projects in the area to last and offer good services. There aren't enough skilled experts in the Kurdistan Region in important fields, including hospitality, conservation, and ecotourism management. Because of this lack of knowledge, tourists don't get the best services, and ecotourism projects aren't as sustainable as they may be. To raise service standards and make sure ecotourism is successful in the long term, it is important to give employees the right training and opportunities for professional growth.

6. Environmental, Social, and Economic Impacts of Ecotourism

6.1. Environmental Impacts

Ecotourism, if not managed properly, can have negative environmental impacts, including:

Biodiversity Loss: An increase in human activities in sensitive areas may disturb wildlife and harm their habitats. The goal of ecotourism is to protect natural regions, but if they are not managed properly, more people may go to sensitive places, which could upset wildlife and damage their homes. Trekking, camping, and observing wildlife can all have big effects on local plants and animals. If these activities aren't carefully controlled, they could lead to a loss of biodiversity (Newsome et al. 2012).

Resource Depletion: If tourism operations aren't handled in a way that protects the environment, they can use up too many natural resources like water and timber. Ecotourism can cause people to use too many natural resources, such as water and wood, especially in places where the tourism infrastructure isn't well-planned. This loss of resources can make it harder for natural ecosystems and ecotourism activities to last in the long run (Mowforth and Munt, 2015).

6.2. Social Impacts

Ecotourism can foster cultural exchange and provide education about environmental conservation. However, it can also lead to:

Cultural Erosion: When many tourists come to an area, it can modify or even destroy local customs and ways of life. Sometimes, when many tourists come to a place, it can cause cultural erosion, which is when outside forces change or affect native customs and ways of life. As communities alter to make room for tourists, they may lose their traditional beliefs and ways of doing things (Wearing and Neil, 2009).

Community Displacement: If tourism projects aren't planned well, they can move people out of their homes, which can cause social conflicts. Poorly managed tourism projects have the potential to uproot people from their homes, which can result in social unrest and disputes. Building tourist amenities and infrastructure may take over land that is already home to people, forcing them to move and changing their way of life (Tosun, 2000).

6.3. Economic Impacts

Income Generation: Ecotourism may help the economy by creating jobs and supporting local businesses. By supporting local companies and generating jobs, ecotourism has the potential to generate significant revenue. Such activities can help the economy grow in areas where there aren't many traditional job prospects, which is good for local communities in both direct and indirect ways (Goodwin and Santilli, 2009).

Economic Leakage: But if ecotourism isn't properly regulated, a lot of the money it brings in can leave local communities, helping outside investors instead of the local economy. When a lot of the money that ecotourism makes goes to outside investors or foreign firms instead of helping local people, that's called economic leakage. To make sure that the economic benefits of ecotourism stay in local economies, it is important to have the right rules and management techniques (Hughes et al. 2015).

7. Strategies for Sustainable Ecotourism in the KRI

7.1. Policy and Regulatory Framework

A robust policy and regulatory framework are essential for sustainable ecotourism:

Zoning and Land Use Planning: Make sure there are clear rules for how land may be used in ecotourism regions so that the environment doesn't get worse. To keep ecotourism regions in good shape and protect the environment, it's important to have good zoning and land use planning. It is important to have clear rules for ecotourism operations so that they have the least amount of harmful effects on ecosystems and natural habitats (Guo et al. 2019).

Environmental Impact Assessments: All tourism projects must get EIAs to make sure they don't hurt the environment. To assess and reduce any environmental effects, all tourism developments must have Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs). This technique helps find and fix such problems before projects start, making sure that tourism development is in line with sustainable goals (Gössling et al. 2012).

Incentives for Sustainable Practices: Give firms that use renewable energy or help with conservation initiatives tax benefits or subsidies. Tax benefits or subsidies for businesses that use environmentally friendly technologies and conservation initiatives can help get more enterprises to do the same. These rewards encourage ecotourism businesses to use environmentally friendly methods (Raschke, 2024).

7.2. Community Engagement and Capacity Building

Engaging local communities in ecotourism is crucial for sustainability:

Training Programs: Set up training programs for people who live in the area to learn how to run ecotourism businesses, work in the hospitality industry, and protect the environment. Training programs for people who live in the area are important for improving their skills in ecotourism management, hospitality, and conservation. These programs give people in the community the skills and knowledge they need to run ecotourism activities well and make sure that the advantages of tourism are as high as possible (Scheyvens, 2002).

Cooperative Models: Encourage the creation of community cooperatives that can handle and profit from ecotourism operations. Community cooperatives can help run and get something out of ecotourism operations in a big way. Local communities can have a bigger say in the growth of ecotourism and share in the economic benefits by supporting the creation of these kinds of cooperatives (Goodwin and Santilli, 2009).

Public Awareness Campaigns: Start efforts to teach people about the benefits of ecotourism and how they may get involved. Public awareness campaigns can teach locals about ecotourism's benefits and get them involved. These programs assist people in understanding how valuable ecotourism is and getting them involved in their communities (Tosun, 2000).

7.3. Infrastructure Development

Investing in infrastructure is necessary to support ecotourism:

Eco-friendly Accommodations: Support the growth of eco-lodges and other long-lasting places to stay. Building eco-friendly places to stay, like eco-lodges, is essential for making ecotourism more sustainable. These places have less of an effect on the ecosystem and help ecotourism programs be more sustainable overall (Gössling et al., 2012).

Improved Access to Natural Sites: To make it easier for people to get to natural attractions, create eco-friendly buses or hiking paths as transit options. To improve ecotourism, we must invest in eco-friendly transport and make natural sites more accessible. Biking pathways, eco-friendly buses, and well-kept hiking trails can all help make tourism less harmful to the environment (Mowforth and Munt, 2015).

Waste Management: Set up mechanisms for managing trash in tourist locations to keep the environment clean and safe. To keep pollution from happening and safeguard natural areas in tourist destinations, waste management systems must work well. Recycling and throwing away trash in the right way can help lessen the bad effects of tourism on the environment (Gössling et al. 2009).

7.4. Marketing and Promotion

Effective marketing and promotion strategies can attract ecotourists:

Branding the KRI as an Ecotourism Destination: Create a strong brand identity for the KRI as an ecotourism destination that focuses on its unique cultural and natural heritage. A strong brand identity for the Kurdistan Region as an ecotourism destination can help draw in tourists. To make a strong brand image, you need to focus on the region's distinctive natural and cultural heritage (Ryan and Gu, 2009).

Digital Marketing: Use digital platforms, such as social media, to connect with a worldwide audience of people who would want to go ecotourism. Using digital marketing tools like social media can help you reach a worldwide audience and promote the KRI as an ecotourism destination. These platforms are cheap ways to connect with potential guests and show off the area's attractions (Beeton, 2006).

Collaborations with International Organizations: To build trust and reach more people, work with international ecotourism groups. Working with international ecotourism groups can make the KRI's ecotourism activities more credible and help them reach more people. These relationships can give you access to useful resources, knowledge, and a wider audience (Buhalis and Costa, 2006).

8. Case Studies

8.1. The Barzan Area: A Model for Community-Based Ecotourism

Community-based ecotourism projects have worked well in the Barzan area of the KRI, where local people help run tourism operations. This has helped the community make more money and do a better job of protecting natural resources. The Barzan area is a wonderful example of community-based ecotourism because it shows how getting locals involved may help in managing tourism and protecting the environment. People in Barzan have been involved in managing ecotourism operations, which has led to higher local incomes and better protection of natural resources. These projects show how important it is to include communities in planning and running tourism.

8.2. Mount Halgurd: Balancing Conservation and Tourism

Mount Halgurd, the tallest mountain in Iraq, is a popular place for hikers and environment lovers to go. To find a balance between tourism and conservation, people are trying to limit the number of visitors and encourage ethical hiking. Mount

Halgurd represents a unique example of striking a balance between tourism and conservation. To protect the area's natural ecosystem while still allowing tourists to visit, strategies, including limiting the number of visitors and encouraging appropriate trekking techniques, are being put in place. These steps are crucial for keeping the ecosystem in balance and making sure that ecotourism can continue in this valuable location.

8.3. Rawanduz Gorge: Challenges in Infrastructure Development

The Rawanduz Gorge is a beautiful place that might be fantastic for ecotourism. However, problems with building infrastructure, such as bad roads and not enough places to stay, have made it harder for it to flourish as a tourist destination. The Rawanduz Gorge has a lot of potential for ecotourism because of its beautiful natural characteristics. But problems like inadequate road access and not enough places to stay have made it harder for the area to become a popular tourist attraction. Fixing these problems with the infrastructure is important for making Rawanduz Gorge a wonderful place for ecotourism.

9. Future Perspectives and Research Gaps

9.1. Research on Environmental Impact

To come up with ways to reduce the bad effects of ecotourism in the KRI and increase the good effects on conservation, we need to do more research on its effects on the ecosystem. To come up with good management plans that balance tourism and conservation, we need to know how ecotourism affects the ecosystem. There isn't much research on the KRI's ecotourism effects right now, and more research is needed to find out how tourism affects local ecosystems and biodiversity. The main goals of this research should be to measure changes in the environment and come up with ways to conserve natural resources.

9.2. Longitudinal Studies on Social Impacts

Long-term studies could help us understand how ecotourism affects local populations over time, which would help make sure that tourism development is socially sustainable. Long-term studies are necessary to learn about the long-term effects of ecotourism on local communities. This kind of research can help us understand how tourism changes social structures, cultural practices, and economic conditions throughout time. This information is crucial for making tourist policies that help the community and make sure that the advantages of tourism are shared fairly.

9.3. Climate Change Adaptation Strategies

Because climate change is a big danger to the KRI's natural habitats, it is essential to study ways for ecotourism to adapt to it. Climate change makes it hard for the KRI's natural habitats to stay healthy, which makes ecotourism less possible. To make ecotourism locations more resilient to climate-related effects, it is important to study adaptation measures. The process involves looking into ways to deal with climate hazards and making sure that ecotourism can continue to help conservation and the local economy.

CONCLUSION

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has a lot of beautiful natural areas, many different plants and animals, and a lot of cultural

history. Ecotourism could help the region grow in a way that is beneficial for the environment. But in order for ecotourism to reach its full potential, some important problems need to be solved first.

1. Opportunities and Potential: The KRI's mountains, rivers, and national parks are just some of the distinct ecosystems that make it a wonderful place for ecotourism. The area's biodiversity, which includes native species and endangered animals, makes it more appealing as a place to go for nature-based tourism. The rich cultural legacy, which includes ancient places and traditional ways of life, also makes ecotourism a more captivating experience.

2. Problems with Sustainable Development: Ecotourism in the KRI has a lot of potential, but it also has many problems. Deforestation, habitat loss, and water shortages are all examples of environmental degradation that endanger the natural resources that are important for ecotourism. Political instability and feelings of fear are other big problems that make it challenging to bring in tourists from other countries. Also, the absence of infrastructure, limited investment, and lack of

community involvement make it challenging for the ecotourism sector to flourish in a way that lasts.

3. Suggestions for long-term success: To make the most of ecotourism in the KRI, we need to make some smart changes. These include making the infrastructure for tourism better, raising public awareness, and getting more people in the community involved in ecotourism initiatives. It is very important to have rules and policies that put protecting the environment and using sustainable methods first. Investing in training and capacity building for experts in ecotourism management, conservation, and hospitality would also increase the quality of services and help the business last for a long time. In conclusion, the KRI has a lot of potential for ecotourism, but it will take a lot of work to get past the problems that are already there to make it last. The KRI can build a strong ecotourism industry that helps protect the area's natural and cultural legacy for future generations by encouraging cooperation between the government, local communities, and private businesses.

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