

Trends in the Development of Green (Eco) Tourism in Georgia and Its Socio-Economic Aspects

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Abstract

This paper analyzes current trends in the development of green (eco) tourism in Georgia and examines its socio-economic and environmental implications at the regional level. The study is based on official statistical data from 2017–2025, documentary sources, and comparative analytical methods. The findings indicate that ecotourism plays a significant role in increasing local employment, strengthening small and medium-sized enterprises, and supporting the diversification of regional economies. Analysis of visitor dynamics reveals a steady growth in tourist flows, particularly an increasing share of international visitors, reflecting Georgia's rising attractiveness in terms of natural and cultural resources. At the same time, the research identifies infrastructural, institutional, and governance-related challenges that limit the full realization of ecotourism potential. The paper proposes practical, policy-oriented recommendations aimed at promoting sustainable green tourism development, ensuring environmental protection, and enhancing the socio-economic well-being of local communities. The results of the study can be applied in tourism policy planning, protected area management, and the formulation of sustainable regional development strategies.

Keywords: green tourism; sustainability; social impact; economic development; environmental protection

Introduction

In the context of ongoing global environmental and economic changes, green (eco) tourism has emerged as a significant economic, social, and environmental activity that integrates the sustainable use of natural resources, the preservation of cultural heritage, and the improvement of local communities' quality of life (Georgian National Tourism Administration, 2025). From an economic perspective, green tourism contributes to employment generation for local populations, the

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development of small and medium-sized enterprises, and the establishment of hostels and eco-tourism service facilities (Georgian National Tourism Administration, 2023). At the social level, ecotourism supports the preservation and enhancement of local cultural traditions and historical heritage, thereby increasing community participation and strengthening social sustainability (IUCN, 2008). The environmental dimension of green tourism is associated with the protection of natural resources and the minimization of tourism's negative impacts on ecosystems. Ecotourism promotes the effective management of protected areas, biodiversity conservation, and the implementation of sustainable tourism practices (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005).

Georgia possesses substantial potential for the development of green tourism, particularly within protected areas, regions rich in natural landscapes, and settlements characterized by strong rural traditions. Regions such as Kakheti, Adjara, Samegrelo, and Svaneti offer unique tourism experiences that contribute both to economic development and to the enhancement of environmental awareness. However, the main challenges facing ecotourism development in Georgia include insufficient infrastructure, an underdeveloped regulatory framework, limited international promotion, and a relatively low level of local community involvement (Georgian National Tourism Administration, 2022).

Literature Review

Green Tourism, Protected Areas, and Regional Development

Green tourism is commonly framed as an approach to tourism development that seeks to generate economic and social benefits while limiting environmental harm. The United Nations Environment Programme and World Tourism Organization (2005) describe sustainable tourism as a policy concern spanning environmental protection, local prosperity, employment, and the well-being of host communities. This perspective is particularly relevant to ecotourism in protected areas, where visitor access and commercial activity must remain compatible with conservation objectives. The IUCN framework provides a basis for distinguishing protected areas by management purpose and for considering what forms of tourism are appropriate within them (Dudley, 2008).

Georgia provides a useful setting for examining these relationships because nature-based tourism intersects with protected-area management and regional economic development. The Georgian National Tourism Administration's *Tourism Strategy 2025* sets out national tourism-development objectives, while its *Ecotourism Strategy 2020–2030* addresses the development of ecotourism products through cooperation among tourism, protected-area, and forestry institutions (Georgian National Tourism Administration [GNTA], n.d.-a, n.d.-b). These documents indicate a policy interest in expanding tourism opportunities. They do not, by themselves, demonstrate that the resulting benefits are evenly distributed or that environmental pressures have been adequately controlled.

Official tourism yearbooks provide a further basis for assessing sectoral trends. GNTA's reports for 2022 and 2023 document tourism activity and broader industry indicators, while the Agency of Protected Areas publishes visitor statistics for protected areas (Agency of Protected Areas of Georgia, n.d.; GNTA, 2022, 2023). These sources can establish changes in recorded visitor activity, but visitor growth alone is an incomplete measure of ecotourism success. It does not show how much revenue remains in local communities, whether employment is stable and adequately paid, or whether increased visitation affects habitats and infrastructure. For that reason, economic and environmental outcomes should be assessed separately rather than inferred from arrival figures.

Place-based research illustrates the importance of management decisions. In a study of Kolkheti National Park, Mzarelua and Alania (2019) argue for regulated visitor activity, appropriate tourism products, marketing plans, and environmental education alongside ecosystem protection. Their case shows how a protected area's ecological characteristics can shape its tourism offer. At the same time,

findings from one park cannot automatically be extended to Georgia's protected-area network: parks differ in accessibility, ecosystems, visitor demand, and management capacity. scholar.bpengi.com The literature therefore points to a distinction between **tourism expansion** and **sustainable regional development**. The former can be observed through visitor and industry data; the latter requires evidence concerning local employment, small-business participation, distribution of income, conservation outcomes, and institutional capacity. This study brings these dimensions together in its analysis of Georgian green tourism. By reading tourism statistics alongside policy documents and protected-area evidence, it examines both the opportunities associated with visitor growth and the conditions required for that growth to benefit communities without undermining the natural resources on which ecotourism depends.

Research

The aim of this study is to examine the current state of green tourism development in Georgia, identify its socio-economic effects and regulatory environment, assess existing challenges, and formulate recommendations to support sustainable tourism development.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the dynamics of visitor numbers in Georgia's protected areas and assess regional resource potential;
2. To evaluate tourism infrastructure in different regions and assess its socio-economic impact on local communities (Georgian National Tourism Administration, 2023);
3. To examine existing regulations and policies and develop recommendations to support sustainable tourism.

Materials and Methodology

The study is based on national statistical data covering the period 2017–2025 and employs socio-economic analysis and data visualization methods. The following approaches were applied:

- descriptive statistical analysis;
- regional analysis based on protected areas and tourism infrastructure;
- development of graphs and tables for the visual presentation of research results.

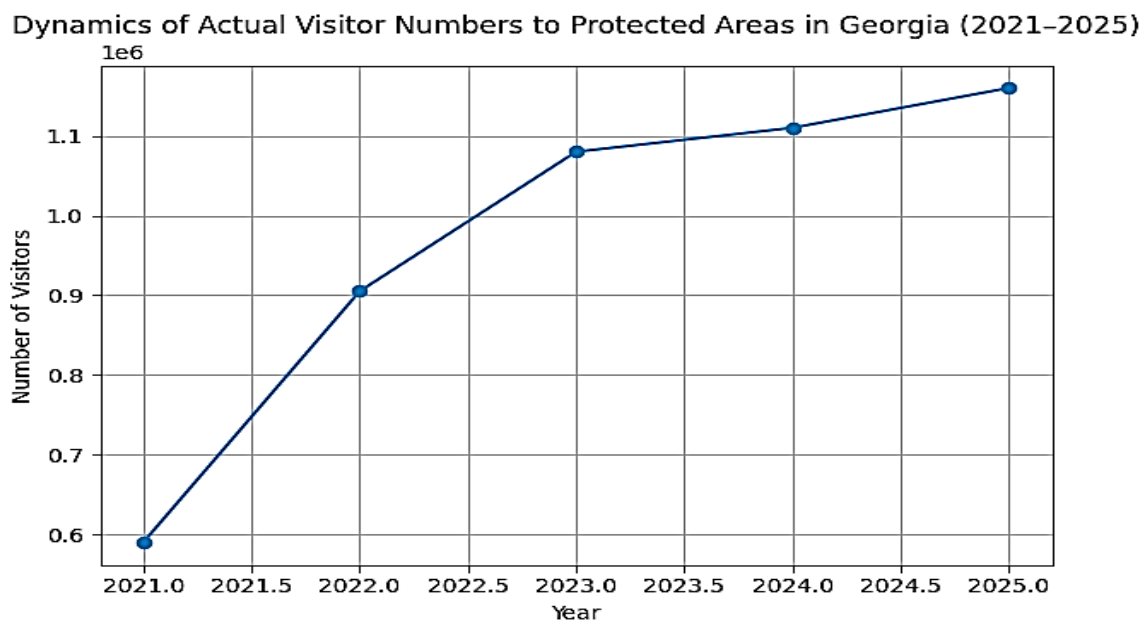
Results

The study reveals a positive dynamic in the development of green tourism within Georgia's protected areas, particularly driven by the increasing share of international visitors, indicating the growing global attractiveness of the country's natural and cultural resources.

Regional analysis highlights disparities between resource potential, infrastructure development, and socio-economic impact. Regions with high natural and cultural potential are unable to fully capitalize on available opportunities due to infrastructural limitations, while areas with more developed tourism infrastructure demonstrate a direct positive effect on employment levels and local income generation. The findings indicate that the effective development of sustainable green tourism requires the strengthening of regulatory frameworks, the integration of measurable indicators into management plans, and an increased level of local community involvement (Georgian National Tourism Administration, 2023; APA, 2025; UNWTO, 2023).

Figure1.

Trends in the number of actual visitors to protected areas in Georgia (2021–2025)



The graph illustrates the sharp increase in tourist flows during the post-COVID period. Another factor contributing to this trend is the infrastructural projects implemented by the Agency of Protected Areas of Georgia. The realization of these projects has made previously inaccessible sites accessible to both domestic and international tourists.

Table 1. Percentage distribution of domestic vs. international visitors per year

Year	Total Visitors	Domestic (%)	International (%)
2021	589,098	≈47%	≈53%
2022	902,063	≈46%	≈54%
2023	1,078,112	41.8%	58.2%
2024	1,110,885	40.8%	59.2%
2025*	Jan–May	40%	60%

*Data for 2025 cover the period from January to May.

The analysis of visitor structure (the percentage share of domestic and international visitors) is based on official statistics of visitors to protected areas in Georgia (Agency of Protected Areas of Georgia [APA], 2025). The percentage share of domestic and international visitors was calculated based on officially published structural data. For the years in which the percentage was not directly provided, a comparative analysis of the quantitative data published by the agency was conducted, resulting in approximate (≈) percentages derived from state and international institutional sources.

The resource potential of the protected areas was assessed using a comprehensive approach that combines three main components:

Table 2. Assessment of resource potential by region

Region	Natural Resources	Cultural Resources	Infrastructure	Average Score
Samegrelo–Upper Svaneti	9	8	6	7.7
Adjara	8	7	8	7.7
Kakheti	7	8	7	7.3
Imereti	7	6	7	6.7
Mtskheta–Mountainous	8	7	6	7.0

The assessment of resource potential by region demonstrates that the development of protected areas in Georgia is uneven. Regions with high natural potential (Samegrelo–Upper Svaneti, Adjara) have particularly strong opportunities for ecotourism development; however, infrastructural limitations partially constrain the full utilization of this potential.

This analysis is crucial for planning sustainable tourism policies, as it allows for the identification of:

- Regions that require infrastructural investment;
- Areas where stricter protection of natural resources is necessary;
- Locations where ecotourism can be intensified with minimal environmental impact.

Tourism infrastructure is one of the main prerequisites for ecotourism development, as it determines both the quality of visitor services and the impact of tourism on the local socio-economic environment. Within this framework, the existing tourism infrastructure in protected areas across different regions of Georgia was analyzed, and its impact on the economic and social conditions of the local population was assessed. **(Gvinjilia M. 2023.,)**

Tourism infrastructure was evaluated based on the following indicators:

- Number of visitor centers;
- Marked ecotourism trails and their length;
- Availability of guides and tourist services;
- Accessibility of accommodation (guesthouses, cottages);
- Transportation accessibility.

The socio-economic impact was assessed using the following criteria:

- Increase in employment opportunities;
- Growth of local income;
- Development of small and medium-sized enterprises;
- Social engagement and participation of local communities in tourism.

The assessment was conducted using a scoring system (1–10).

Table 3. Assessment of tourism infrastructure and socio-economic impact by region

Region	Infrastructure Development	Employment	Income Growth	Social Impact	Average Score
Adjara	9	8	8	7	8.0
Samegrelo–Upper Svaneti	7	7	6	6	6.5
Kakheti	8	7	7	7	7.3
Imereti	7	6	6	6	6.3
Mtskheta–Mountainous	6	6	5	6	5.8

The table clearly shows that Adjara stands out with a high level of tourism infrastructure development and strong socio-economic effects. This is due both to the proximity of protected areas and the combination of coastal tourism with ecotourism activities.

The development of tourism infrastructure has a significant impact on local communities. In Adjara and Kakheti, the growth of ecotourism has contributed to increased employment in tourist services, guesthouses, guide services, and rural tourism activities. In these regions, tourism has become an important source of income. (Imzarelua 2019...)

Despite the high potential of natural resources in Samegrelo–Upper Svaneti and Imereti, insufficient infrastructure limits the full economic impact of tourism. In Mtskheta–Mountainous regions, infrastructural constraints and seasonality reduce the social and economic benefits of tourism.

The development of tourism infrastructure in the regions is directly linked to the socio-economic conditions of the local population. In regions with better-developed infrastructure, tourism generates sustainable economic benefits and enhances local community engagement. Therefore, targeted infrastructural investments are essential for the sustainable development of ecotourism.

Sustainable tourism development in Georgia largely depends on an appropriate legislative and institutional framework. Particularly in protected areas, ecotourism requires regulations that simultaneously ensure the protection of natural resources, control tourism activities, and support the socio-economic well-being of local communities. Within this framework, key regulations and policies in Georgia were assessed, and recommendations were developed to promote sustainable tourism.

Recommendations for supporting sustainable tourism:

- Strengthening visitor flow management mechanisms (quotas, pre-registration);
- Integrating clear sustainable tourism indicators into protected area management plans;
- Enhancing institutional coordination between APA and GNTA;
- Regular monitoring of pressure on ecosystems;
- Zoning of ecotourism activities within protected areas;
- Promoting environmentally-friendly transport and infrastructure;
- Increasing local community participation in tourism services (guides, guesthouses);
- Developing training and educational programs in the regions;
- Supporting small and medium-sized enterprises near protected areas.

Conclusion:

This study analyzed the main directions of green (ecotourism) development in Georgia and its socio-economic aspects. The research demonstrates that ecotourism is one of the most promising tourism sectors for the country, as it integrates economic development, environmental protection, and social welfare objectives.

Analysis of visitor dynamics in protected areas revealed a stable upward trend in tourist flows, particularly the increasing share of international visitors, indicating Georgia's growing attractiveness on the global stage. At the same time, increasing visitor numbers raise pressures on ecosystems and underscore the need for sustainable management.

Assessment of the resource potential of protected areas by region showed significant spatial differences. Mountainous regions and biodiversity-rich zones possess high ecotourism potential, but uneven infrastructure development and limited services constrain the full utilization of these resources.

Analysis of tourism infrastructure and socio-economic impacts revealed that ecotourism development positively affects local employment, income growth, and the strengthening of small and medium-sized enterprises. Nevertheless, community engagement remains insufficient and requires targeted policies and support mechanisms.

Overall, the study confirms that green tourism in Georgia represents a significant lever for sustainable development. Its successful implementation, however, depends on balancing environmental, economic, and social interests. Implementing the recommendations will promote long-term ecotourism development, protect natural resources, and improve the socio-economic conditions of regions.

Declarations

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Conflicts of interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data availability: The study uses publicly available tourism statistics and documents cited in the article.

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