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THE IMPORTANCE OF ECO-TOURISM DEVELOPMENT ON THE EXAMPLE OF SPECIALLY PROTECTED NATURE AREAS OF RA IN THE CONTEXT OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE REGIONS

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Abstract

The article explores various aspects of the potential for ecotourism development within Armenia's Specially Protected Nature Areas (SPNA's). With growing global interest in sustainable travel practices, ecotourism presents a promising avenue for promoting conservation efforts while simultaneously providing socio-economic benefits to local communities. Armenia's SPNAs, characterized by their rich biodiversity and unique landscapes, offer an ideal setting for ecotourism initiatives, however, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited visitor facilities, insufficient marketing strategies and absence of data analytics hinder the realization of ecotourism potential in SPNA's.

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By capitalizing on the natural and cultural assets of SPNAs and adopting sustainable tourism practices, Armenia has the opportunity to establish itself as a leading ecotourism destination in the region, attracting environmentally conscious travelers and contributing to the country's socio-economic development.

The primary objective of the article is to assess the existing situation of the recent 5 years by providing respective data analysis, as well as highlight the gaps and opportunities, ultimately striving for a balanced and sustainable outcome both for affected communities and natural ecosystems.

Keywords: ecotourism, data deficiency, social conditions, affected community, stakeholders.

Introduction

Although certain state coordination units have been established in Armenia to oversee the development of ecotourism in RA SPNA's effective tools and methodologies have not yet been developed through state funding. As early as 2015, units were created under the Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Armenia with the aim of supporting ecotourism development, including the Ecotourism Support and Development Department and the Ecotourism Information Center. These units collaborate with both domestic and international entities, facilitating the dissemination of information on tourism destinations throughout Armenia. However, interdepartmental cooperation with the RA Tourism Committee, subordinate to the Ministry of Economy remains insufficient. In some SPNA's, tourist registration mechanisms are insufficient or not conducted, posing significant obstacles to obtaining quantitative data for measurement, analysis, and further strategy development. Furthermore, the level of ecotourism utilization in RA remains relatively low due to inadequate financial analysis of ecotourism revenue, which often presents greater financial potential with minimal capital investment requirements. This issue is compounded by the lack of data collection on ecotourism and, in many cases, insufficient consideration of environmental impacts of the tourism sector. The absence of a cohesive state program or strategy guiding the activities of tourist companies active in the regions further hinders the development of ecotourism in communities. Establishing such a program would orient tourism towards ecological principles, promote landscape recovery, preserve ethnic values, historical and cultural heritage, and actively involve communities in all the processes. Additionally, a well-developed and scientifically based ecotourism implementation system in one region could serve as a model for others. Analysis reveals that IUCN Category I reserves are more active in ecotourism development among the protected areas of Armenia compared to national parks and sanctuaries. However, under current legislation, reserves have the strictest conservation regulations, often lacking developed ecotourism routes and attractive destinations. This oversight neglects the potential of ecotourism as an alternative income source, leading to the continued exploitation of other ecosystem services and subsequent ecosystem disruption paired with sustainable revenue loss. In recent years, respective management plans have been established or updated in several protected areas of RA, mostly due to international grant resources, incorporating ecotourism development programs, creation of ecotourism routes and capacity building for SPNA management or community

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members. However, the potential of ecotourism remains largely untapped, yielding less than 1 USD per hectare annually, despite a consistent rise in tourist numbers in Armenia since 2019.

Conflict Setting

The purpose of this article is to underscore the significance of data based decision making in the management process of Armenia's SPNA's with the aim of additional income generation from ecotourism, as well as contribute insights to the discourse on ecotourism development in protected areas. By emphasizing the importance of data-driven decision-making, the article seeks to highlight the potential for leveraging data analytics and evidence-based approaches to enhance the management and promotion of ecotourism in Armenia's SPNAs.

Overall, the article aspires to contribute valuable insights to the ongoing dialogue on ecotourism development in protected areas, advocating for a data-driven approach to decision-making that balances economic prosperity in communities with the preservation of natural & cultural resources.

Materials and Methods:

The research method involves a multi-faceted approach, incorporating data analyzing methods such as quantitative & comparable analysis. Initially, relevant data regarding the ecological, cultural, and economic aspects of Armenia's SPNAs were collected from various sources, including government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and academic institutions. Quantitative analysis techniques were then applied to assess the current state of ecotourism in SPNAs, including statistical analysis of visitor numbers, revenue generation, and resource utilization.
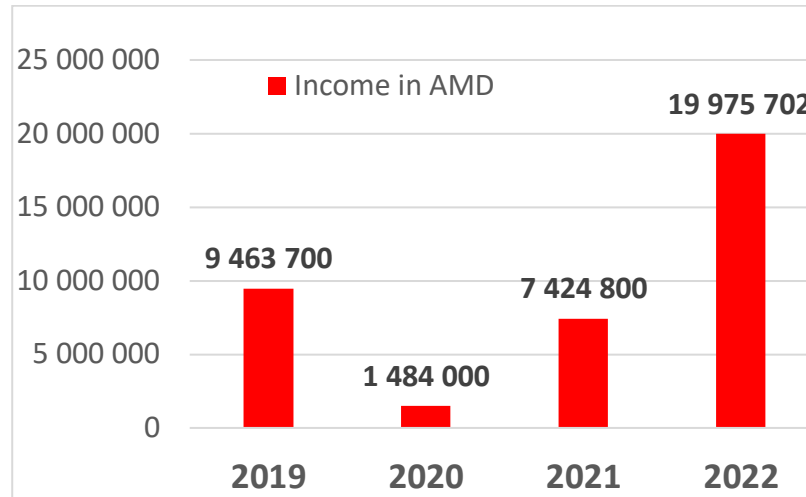
Research Results

The specially protected natural areas (SPNAs) of the Republic of Armenia constitute 13% of the territory and serve as habitats for 60-70% of endangered plants and animals registered in the Red Book of RA. Within Armenia, there are 3 state reserves, 4 national parks, 27 state reserves, and 232 natural monuments. Despite the significance of these SPNAs for biodiversity conservation and environmental education, there is currently no standardized system for tracking ecotourism statistics under the purview of the Tourism Committee of the Ministry of Economy. Instead, data collection is overseen by the Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Armenia, though this system lacks comprehensive data due to the absence of centralized entry/ticketing systems in many SPNAs, resulting in both accounting inaccuracies and significant revenue loss.

Moreover, our study revealed that approximately 90% of SPNAs do not calculate tourist loads or lack scientifically justified data regarding visitor numbers. This dearth of information hampers the formulation of annual tourism plans and inhibits the implementation of advance online ticket sales. Furthermore, many SPNAs lack developed websites or effective channels of communication that could serve as a marketing tool.

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The collected data from SPNA's on their financial income from ecotourism activities for a period of 2019 -2022 was calculated, the results of which are detailed in the subsequent Fig. 1.

**Fig. 1 The income of Armenia's SPNA's from ecotourism
for a period of 2019-2022 (in AMD)**

The data depicted in Fig. 1 indicate a substantial increase in revenue, with some instances of doubling or even tripling since 2019. This surge in revenue can be attributed to various factors, including the revision of management plans in certain SPNAs, the establishment of ecotourism routes, the implementation of access control measures, and the availability of guide services. However, it is noteworthy that the figures for 2020 show a decline, a trend likely influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and concurrent military operations.

Despite the apparent growth in revenue, it is important to acknowledge potential limitations in the data's accuracy. Specifically, the high prices associated with ecotourism excursions across Armenia may skew the revenue figures, with costs averaging at a minimum of 35,000 Armenian Drams per person per day, including overnight stays. Moreover, while Armenia possesses considerable ecotourism potential and experiences increasing demand for eco-tours, the income generated from ecotourism within RA national parks remains notably lower compared to that of developed countries.

For instance, revenue from activities within American national parks averages at $40 per hectare, a substantially higher figure than observed in Armenia. Authors make a note that comparison of American & Armenian SPNA revenues is presented rather as an example of effective management and is not based on a detailed analysis of all underlying factors contributing to revenue generation.

To elucidate this discrepancy, a comparative analysis was conducted between the ecotourism incomes of the two most frequently visited SPNAs in 2022, juxtaposed against their respective areas. This comparison is aimed to assess the gross income generated per hectare and offers useful insights into the economic dynamics of ecotourism within SPNA's.

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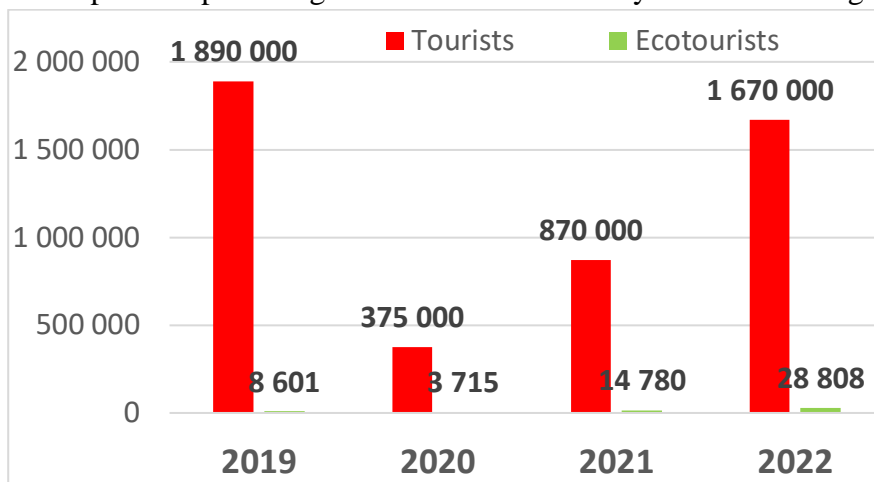
Table 1.

The highest incomes received by the two frequently visited SPNA's, 2022.

N	Name of SPNA	SPNA area (ha)	Generated income (in AMD)
1	Khosrov State Reserve	23, 213	6,384,800
2	Dilijan National Park	33,765	7,309,102

Hence, through a straightforward calculation, it is determined that the Khosrov Forest State Reserve yields AMD 275 per hectare, while the Dilijan National Park generates AMD 216 per hectare, a stark contrast to the revenues observed in the United States. Notably, in the American context, ecotourism is concentrated on only 10% of protected area territories, yet yields approximately $40 or roughly 16,000 AMD per hectare.

Despite this, given the critical role of protected areas in ecosystem preservation and ecotourism development for each state, concerted attention from governmental entities is imperative. Prompt responses to factors impeding the functioning of protected areas are essential to ensure their sustained operation.

When comparing the influx of tourists to the Republic of Armenia (RA) between 2019 and 2022 with the visitation rates of SPNA's during the same timeframe, it was discerned that in average only 1% of tourists have visited the SPNA's which is delineated in Tab. 1, illustrating the comparative percentage of eco-tourists for the years 2019 through 2022.

Fig. 2 The comparative analysis of tourists & ecotourists

for a period of 2019-2022

Tab. 2 below provides a detailed comparison of tourists and eco-tourists visiting the Republic of Armenia (RA) from 2019 to 2022, presenting the absolute numbers for each year. This tabular representation offers a comprehensive overview of the proportions observed during the specified timeframe.

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Table 2

The visiting dynamics of ecotourists during 2019-2022

Year	Tourists (in absolute number)	Ecotourists (in absolute number)	Percent Relation
2019	1,890,000	8,601	0,4%
2020	375,000	3,715	0,9%
2021	870,000	14,780	1,69%
2022	1,670,000	28,808	1,7%

As previously indicated, our analysis suggests that the actual number of eco-tourists visiting SPNA's is notably higher than the figures provided by state authorities. Over the past four years, there has been a discernible rise in the visitation rates of eco-tourists to SPNA's, increasing from 0.4% to 1.7%. Despite constituting a relatively modest percentage, it is noteworthy that a majority of eco-tourists allocate their time to exploring other natural and historical-cultural sites across the marzes of the Republic of Armenia. In contrast to tourists who tend to spend extended periods in Yerevan, the capital city, eco-tourists contribute significantly more to local communities and expend greater financial resources in the regions. Consequently, to foster community-based tourism initiatives, it is imperative to prioritize the further advancement of ecotourism, including the development and management of appropriate routes & capacity building.

It is obvious that the potential for ecotourism development is particularly promising in mountainous regions. Notably, the national parks of RA offer numerous and diverse ecotourism routes. For instance, the "Khosrov Forest" State Reserve features five main routes, while the "Dilijan" National Park boasts sixteen routes, and the "Sevan" National Park has four routes. However, it is notable that the majority of sanctuaries lack designated routes or have none developed. The tabulated data below presents pertinent information regarding the protected areas of the Republic of Armenia, underscoring that the ecotourism potential of most protected areas in the country remains untapped.

Currently, the activities of SPNA's require significant state attention, with the following aspects being particularly emphasized as per our view:

▪ Formulation and implementation of an ecotourism strategy tailored to each SPNA.
▪ Establishment of a centralized control system for SPNA's;
▪ Renovation and enhancement of infrastructures, equipment and accessories;
▪ Integration of trained ecotourism personnel into the workforce.

As previously mentioned, the establishment of well-designed eco-trails is a critical prerequisite for fostering ecotourism, necessitating careful planning and construction considerations, such as:

▪ Engagement of multidisciplinary specialists in the trail construction process, including botanists, zoologists and ecologists;
▪ Conducting comprehensive territorial studies to identify key stops along the route;
▪ Minimizing environmental disturbances during any type of activity;

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- Removal of obstacles along the trail, while avoiding extensive deforestation and grass destruction/clearance;
- Preferential construction of eco-trails with curved designs to enhance appeal and interest for eco-tourists, while safeguarding vulnerable areas such as animal nesting sites and water bodies.

Table 3

The area & routes of RA SPNA's

SPNA name	Location	Area (ha)	N of routes	Distance (km)	Payment for entry /activity in AMD	
					RA citizen	Foreign citizen
					On foot/on horse	On foot/on horse
RESERVES Khosrov State Reserve	Ararat, Kotayk	23 213.5	5	93	F.3500 H.10000	F.5000 H.15000
Shikahogh	Syunik	12 137.1	11	278	F.3500	F. 5000
Erebuni	Yerevan	89.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
NATIONAL PARKS Sevan	Gegharkunik	147 455.0	4	4,4	-	-
Dilijan	Tavush	33 765.0	16	200,69	F.3500	F. 5000
Arpi Lake	Shirak	21 179.3	4	116,1	F.3500 H.10000	F 5000 H.12000
Arevick	Syunik	34 401.8	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Akhnabad living park	Tavush	25.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Arjatkhlenu	Tavush	40.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Juniper thin forest	Gegharkunik	3 312.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Gulagarak	Lori	2 576.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Herher sparse forest	Vayots_Dzor	6 139.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Jermuk forest	Vayots_Dzor	3 865.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Sou grove	Gegharkunik	64.2	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Aragats Alpine	Aragatsot	300.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Banksy Pine	Kotayk	4.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Goravan dunes	Ararat	95.99	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Caucasian blackberry	Lori	1 000.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Arzakan-Meghradzor	Kotayk	13 532.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Gandzakari	Tavush	6 813.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Getiki	Gegharkunik	5 728.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Ijevani	Tavush	5 908.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Margahovti	Lori	3 368.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Yeghegnadzor	Vayots_Dzor	4 200.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Goris	Syunik	1850.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Vordan the red	Armavir	219.85	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

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Boghakar	Syunik	2 728.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Sev lich	Syunik	240.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Khor Virap	Ararat	50.28	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Hydrological of Hankavan	Kotayk	5 169.04	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Jermuk hydrological	Vayots_Dzor	17 371.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Zangezur	Syunik	25 870.64	-	97,2	-	-
Zikatar	Tavush	150.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Khustup	Syunik	6946.74	1	44	-	-

In the "Travel and Tourism Development Index 2021" ranking, published in 2022, Armenia secured the 61st position among 117 countries. This index assesses tourism competitiveness by aggregating various indicators across three sectors: tourism regulatory environment, business environment and infrastructure, as well as human, cultural, and natural tourism resources. The ranking occurs biennially and encompasses both tourism-related datasets and survey responses. The findings concerning Armenia (RA) are deemed commendable, with notable advancements observed across several domains, particularly in price competitiveness, health and hygiene, and safety and security, where Armenia ranks 19th, 37th, and 19th, respectively. Progress is evident in visa acquisition and international accessibility, with ranking of 45th. Moreover, strides have been made in Information Communication Technology, with a ranking of 55th. However, indicators pertaining to air, land, and cultural resources, as well as business trips, remain underdeveloped, with Armenia positioned at 78th, 74th, and 85th, respectively. Despite possessing abundant natural resources, inadequate evaluation and utilization practices have resulted in a low ranking of 105th in natural resource assessment. Consequently, the utilization of recreational resources for tourism development is hindered, necessitating systematic approaches and comprehensive assessments rooted in precise calculations and data analysis, which in its turn justifies the findings of the authors in this article.

In conclusion, it is evident that ecotourism facilitates the redistribution of revenue to regions and remote villages, fostering their equitable development. Additionally, it contributes to the preservation of ethnic culinary traditions, cultural heritage, and employment generation. Hence, effective regulation of the sector necessitates the acquisition and synthesis of analytical data with proactive state involvement to enhance quantitative assessments for better decision making at all state levels.

Conclusion

The analysis conducted in this study sheds light on various facets of ecotourism potential within Armenia's Specially Protected Nature Areas (SPNAs). Despite the rich biodiversity and unique landscapes offered by Armenia's SPNAs, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited visitor facilities, and insufficient marketing strategies hinder the realization of ecotourism potential. However, there is substantial scope for leveraging the natural and cultural assets of SPNAs to establish Armenia as a leading ecotourism destination in the region.

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Key findings indicate a need for enhanced data collection and analysis to inform ecotourism strategies and decision-making processes. Current data deficiencies, particularly in tracking visitor numbers and revenue generation, underscore the importance of implementing centralized entry/ticketing systems and improving communication channels within SPNAs. Additionally, the disparity in revenue generation between Armenia and developed countries highlights the need for targeted investments and strategic planning to maximize ecotourism's economic benefits.

The study also reveals a growing interest in ecotourism among visitors, with a notable increase in the proportion of eco-tourists visiting SPNAs over the past four years. However, further efforts are required to capitalize on this trend and promote community-based tourism initiatives. Developing well-designed eco-trails, integrating trained personnel, and fostering interdepartmental cooperation are crucial steps towards realizing ecotourism's full potential in Armenia.

Suggestions

1. **Formulation of Ecotourism Strategies:** Develop tailored ecotourism strategies for each SPNA, focusing on sustainable tourism practices and community engagement.
2. **Centralized Control Systems:** Establish centralized control systems for SPNAs to streamline data collection, visitor management, and revenue tracking.
3. **Infrastructure Enhancement:** Invest in infrastructure upgrades, equipment, and facilities to improve visitor experiences and support ecotourism initiatives.
4. **Capacity Building:** Integrate trained ecotourism personnel into SPNA management teams to enhance service quality and environmental stewardship.
5. **Eco-Trail Development:** Prioritize the development of well-designed eco-trails in SPNAs, involving multidisciplinary specialists and minimizing environmental disturbances.
6. **Interdepartmental Cooperation:** Foster collaboration between relevant government agencies, including the Ministry of Environment and the Tourism Committee, to align ecotourism policies and initiatives.
7. **Data Collection and Analysis:** Strengthen data collection efforts to accurately track visitor numbers, revenue generation, and environmental impacts, enabling evidence-based decision-making.
8. **Promotion and Marketing:** Implement targeted marketing strategies to raise awareness of Armenia's ecotourism offerings and attract environmentally conscious travelers.
9. **Policy and Regulatory Framework:** Develop comprehensive policies and regulations to guide ecotourism activities, ensuring the sustainable management of SPNAs and equitable distribution of economic benefits.
10. **Community Engagement:** Engage local communities in ecotourism planning and decision-making processes, emphasizing the importance of preserving cultural heritage and natural resources for future generations.

By implementing these suggestions, Armenia can harness its ecotourism potential to promote sustainable development, preserve biodiversity, and enhance the well-being of local communities at large.

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[3] Լոնդոնի համալսարանի քոլեջ (UCL)
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Քննարկվում են Հայաստանի բնության հատուկ պահպանվող տարածքներում (ԲՀՊՏ) էկոտուրիզմի զարգացման հիմնահարցեր ի դեմս էկոզբոսաշրջության

զարգացման հնարավորությունների ու ռիսկերի` շեշտադրելով տվյալահեն որոշումների կայացման անհրաժեշտությունը:

Զարգացած երկրներում կայուն զբոսաշրջության նկատմամբ հետաքրքրության աճն ու զբոսաշրջային պահանջարկը գնալով աճում է, իսկ էկոտուրիզմը տարեցտարի գրավիչ ուղղություն է դառնում դեպի զարգացող լեռնային երկրներ` հանդիսանալով ոչ միայն բնության պահպանության համար լրացուցիչ եկամուտներ ապահովող տնտեսության ճյուղ, այլև սոցիալ-տնտեսական էական օգուտներ ապահովելով տեղական համայնքներին` ապահովելով համաչափ զարգացում:

Հայաստանի բնության հատուկ պահպանվող տարածքները, որոնք բնութագրվում են հարուստ կենսաբազմազանությամբ և եզակի լանդշաֆտներով, ունեն մեծ ներուժ էկոտուրիզմի զարգացման համար, ինչի արդյունքում կարող են ապահովել հավելյալ եկամուտներ, որոնք կուղղվեն բնական տարածքների պահպանության ծախսերին, սակայն ԲՀՊՏ-ներում կուտակված ինստիտուցիոնալ և կազմակերպչական խնդիրները, ինչպիսիք են սահմանափակ կարողությունները, անբավարար ենթակառուցվածքը, պլանավորման բացերը` պայմանավորված տվյալների վերլուծության, մարքեթինգային ռազմավարությունների, տարբեր շահատունների հետ համագործակցության բացակայությամբ, հնարավորություն չեն ընձեռում իրացնել ամբողջական ներուժը, այն դեպքում, երբ ՀՀ-ն կարող է դիրքավորվել որպես տարածաշրջանում էկոտուրիզմի առաջատար ուղղություն` նվազագույն ներդրումներով ապահովելով կայուն եկամուտներ:

Հոդվածի նպատակն է գնահատել ներկա իրավիճակը վերջին 5 տարիների ընթացքում` ԲՀՊՏ-ների համապատասխան տվյալների վերլուծության միջոցով, ինչպես նաև բացահայտել ոլորտի զարգացման հիմնական բացերն ու հնարավորությունները, ինչը կապահովի բնական էկոհամակարգերի ծառայությունների տրամադրումն ու տեղական համայնքների համաչափ զարգացումը:

Բանալի բառեր. էկոզբոսաշրջություն, կենսաբազմազանություն, սոցիալական պայմաններ, համայնք, շահագրգիռ կողմեր:

ЗНАЧИМОСТЬ РАЗВИТИЯ ЭКОТУРИЗМА НА ПРИМЕРЕ ОСОБО ОХРАНЯЕМЫХ ПРИРОДНЫХ ТЕРРИТОРИЙ РА В КОНТЕКСТЕ ЭКОНОМИЧЕСКОГО РАЗВИТИЯ РЕГИОНОВ

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Данное исследование рассматривает потенциал развития экотуризма в Особо охраняемых природных территориях (ООПТ) Армении. С растущим глобальным

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интересом к устойчивым практикам путешествий экотуризм представляет собой многообещающий путь для продвижения усилий по сохранению природы, одновременно обеспечивая социально-экономические выгоды для местных общин. ООПТ Армении, характеризующиеся богатым биоразнообразием и уникальными ландшафтами, предлагают идеальные условия для развития экотуризма, однако вызовы, такие как недостаточная инфраструктура, ограниченные возможности для посетителей, недостаточные маркетинговые стратегии и отсутствие аналитики данных, мешают реализации потенциала экотуризма в ООПТ.

Путем максимального использования природных и культурных ресурсов ООПТ и принятия устойчивых практик туризма Армения имеет возможность позицинироваться в качестве ведущего экотуристического направления в регионе, привлекая экологически осознанных путешественников и способsvуя социально-экономическому развитию общин страны. Основной целью является оценка текущей ситуации за последние 5 лет путем предоставления соответствующего анализа данных, а также выявление пробелов и возможностей, стремясь к сбалансированному и устойчивому исходу как для затронутых общин, так и для природных экосистем.

Ключевые слова: экотуризм, недостаток данных, социальные условия, община, заинтересованные стороны.