

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY IN SUPPORTING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

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Abstract:

Tourism has emerged as a key economic driver globally, contributing significantly to cultural exchange and economic growth. However, its rapid expansion has often come at a steep environmental and social cost, including habitat destruction, biodiversity loss, and cultural homogenization. This article explores the transformative role of eco-friendly tourism practices in addressing these challenges, with a particular focus on the case study of Patagonia, which spans regions of Chile and Argentina. It examines sustainable initiatives such as the establishment of protected areas, community-based tourism models, and government policies that harmonize conservation efforts with socio-economic benefits. By analyzing these strategies, the article highlights how responsible tourism can simultaneously preserve natural ecosystems, empower local communities, and drive economic development. The findings underscore the critical need for global adoption of sustainable tourism practices to ensure the long-term viability of this dynamic sector while fostering equitable and meaningful travel experiences.

Key words: Sustainable Tourism, Eco-Tourism, Community-Based Tourism, Environmental Conservation, Cultural Preservation, Tourism Development, Patagonia, Sustainable Infrastructure. JEL: Z32: Tourism and Development

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable tourism is a vital approach to ensuring that travel benefits not only the visitors but also the local communities, economies, and ecosystems. By prioritizing practices that minimize environmental impact, preserve cultural heritage, and promote economic fairness, sustainable tourism helps create a balance between exploration and conservation. These practices are a crucially important aspect because, in the long-term, tourism is not sustainable if the environment is subjected to degradation. Sustainable tourism allows destinations to thrive while maintaining their natural beauty and cultural significance for generations to come. As travelers, embracing sustainability ensures that our journeys leave a positive impact on the world, fostering mutual respect and shared responsibility.

2. SUSTAINABLE TOURISM – GENERAL OVERVIEW

Tourism, as a global economic sector, has experienced unprecedented growth over the last century, contributing significantly to employment, cultural exchange, and economic development. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), international tourist arrivals worldwide grew by 4% in 2019, reaching a total of 1.5 billion. This marked the tenth consecutive year of growth in global tourism, underscoring the sector's resilience and its significant contribution to global economic development. Given the global situation at the time (when the Covid-19 pandemic significantly affected worldwide travel), it can be inferred that the growth of this sector will keep increasing like clockwork in the following years. However, this expansion has not come without its costs, including environmental degradation and cultural homogenization. As the adverse impacts of conventional tourism practices have come into sharper focus, eco-friendly initiatives have emerged as a necessary and sustainable alternative. Tourism needs to become sustainable not only to preserve the environment, protect the locals and increase its ability to host people, but also to increase its revenues. Eco-tourism – defined by the International Ecotourism

Society (TIES) as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of local people, and involves interpretation and education” – has become a cornerstone of modern tourism development strategies (TIES, 2021).

The concept of sustainable tourism is defined by the UNWTO as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities." (United Nations Environment Programme and World Tourism Organization, 2005). This framework seeks to align the interests of investors and stakeholders while mitigating the negative consequences of mass tourism (which is characterized by high volumes of visitors concentrated in specific destinations). Central to this approach is the integration of eco-friendly practices that minimize carbon footprints, protect ecosystems, and foster a sense of respect for the environment among travelers and local communities alike. Eco-friendly tourism initiatives are not only a response to the growing demand for sustainable travel options but also a pathway to preserving the delicate balance between human activities and natural ecosystems, a balance which, over the previous decades, has become more and more delicate and easy to disturb. According to Buckley (2012), "The success of eco-tourism is measured not just by visitor numbers but by its ability to positively impact biodiversity conservation and the socio-economic conditions of host communities." In many regions, sustainable tourism practices have led to the preservation of biodiversity hotspots, revitalized local economies, and promoted cultural heritage, thus setting a precedent for future tourism models.

This paper explores the transformative potential of eco-friendly practices within the tourism sector, focusing on how these initiatives contribute to environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and community development. Eco-friendly practices have become an absolute necessity in today's world. While tourism is one of the fastest growing industries on the planet, it unfortunately has a plethora of negative effects on the environment, some of which might be irreversible. These include habitat destruction, biodiversity loss, water and air pollution, and overuse of natural resources. As noted by Gössling and Hall (2006), “unsustainable tourism development can lead to the very environmental degradation that undermines its long-term viability.” In this context, eco-friendly practices have emerged as a vital counterbalance, providing a sustainable pathway for the industry. While the term eco-tourism has become a buzzword in the industry, its implementation often serves as more than just a marketing strategy. When properly executed, eco-friendly practices reshape tourism by embedding sustainability into every layer of operations, from resource management to traveler engagement.

One critical element of sustainable tourism is its capacity to address the environmental degradation that has resulted from decades of unchecked tourism growth. Mass tourism, characterized by the concentration of large numbers of visitors in a single area, leads to significant ecological strain. For instance, natural landmarks like the Great Barrier Reef suffer from coral bleaching due in part to pollution and physical damage caused by human activity. (News.com.au, 2024). Similarly, Machu Picchu has witnessed accelerated erosion of its ancient stone pathways and surrounding vegetation due to high visitor footfall. It is unfortunate, but destinations that attract millions of tourists annually often pay the price in diminished ecological integrity and a compromised ability to sustain local livelihoods. Eco-friendly tourism counters these destructive trends through practices that emphasize preservation and minimal impact. Protected area tourism, for example, regulates visitor access to sensitive ecological sites and reinvests tourism revenues into conservation efforts. Such approaches are evident in regions like Patagonia, where strict visitor limits and environmentally conscious accommodations help protect the area's pristine wilderness while offering visitors an immersive natural experience. These initiatives demonstrate that tourism and conservation can coexist, provided a deliberate framework is in place. Another dimension of sustainable tourism lies in its potential to empower local communities. Traditional mass tourism models often lead to economic leakage, where the majority of tourism revenues are siphoned off by foreign-owned corporations, leaving little benefit for local populations. In contrast, community-based tourism initiatives focus on ensuring that local residents play an integral role in managing and

profiting from tourism activities. Such efforts not only uplift communities but also ensure that travelers gain an authentic understanding of local culture and traditions.

Despite these benefits, the implementation of sustainable tourism practices is not without challenges. One pressing issue is the phenomenon of “greenwashing,” where businesses falsely advertise themselves as eco-friendly to attract environmentally conscious consumers. This practice undermines genuine sustainability efforts and erodes trust among travelers. Additionally, the higher cost of eco-friendly infrastructure and services can pose a barrier to accessibility, limiting these experiences to wealthier demographics. This means that these factors can hinder the widespread adoption of sustainable transportation solutions, potentially limiting their accessibility to more affluent populations who can afford the associated costs. (Tafida et al., 2024). Addressing these issues requires robust certification systems, such as the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), which establishes clear criteria for sustainability and holds operators accountable for their claims.

3. CASE STUDY. BEST PRACTICES IN ECO-FRIENDLY TOURISM – A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Eco-friendly tourism is no longer an optional niche but a necessity for the industry’s survival and growth. It provides a viable framework for mitigating the negative impacts of mass tourism while delivering economic, environmental, and social benefits. As the following sections will demonstrate, the application of sustainable practices offers not only a means to protect and rejuvenate our planet’s most treasured destinations but also a blueprint for creating equitable and meaningful travel experiences for all stakeholders involved.

An interesting and rather recent example of good practices in tourism can be found in South America. Patagonia's vast landscapes, including glaciers, mountains, and diverse ecosystems, have attracted increasing numbers of tourists seeking unique natural experiences. However, this surge in visitation has raised concerns about environmental degradation and cultural impacts. In response, various stakeholders have initiated eco-friendly practices to promote sustainable tourism. Patagonia has emerged as a global benchmark for eco-tourism, demonstrating how deliberate practices can harmonize conservation, economic development, and cultural preservation. By integrating environmentally conscious strategies into its tourism model, Patagonia offers valuable lessons for other regions seeking to balance tourism growth with sustainability. This region is found in South America, and it spans two countries: Chile and Argentina.

First of all, the establishment of protected areas, such as national parks, has been central to Patagonia's conservation strategy. These areas regulate visitor access to sensitive ecological sites and reinvest tourism revenues into conservation efforts. For instance, the creation of Patagonia National Park in Chile, a project which took around 15 years to finish, involved extensive land restoration and the reintroduction of native species, transforming former ranchlands into protected areas that support biodiversity and sustainable tourism. (Condé Nast Traveler 2024). Moreover, Patagonia's establishment of protected areas, such as Torres del Paine National Park and Patagonia National Park, is a cornerstone of its eco-tourism model. These parks implement strict visitor limits to protect biodiversity while creating opportunities for immersive experiences. Tourism revenues are reinvested into conservation projects, such as restoring native species and preserving natural habitats (Castilla et al. 2023). This model aligns with global best practices, as highlighted in the *ETC Sustainable Tourism Handbook* (2021), which emphasizes that effective visitor management enhances ecological preservation while supporting local economies.

Recognized as a conservation priority by the National Forestry Corporation (CONAF) for its diverse ecosystems, the park benefits from the dedication of Explora’s owners, the Ibañez family, who are devoted to supporting the mission [...]. Hiking alongside one of Explora’s expert naturalists offers travelers the opportunity to witness firsthand the regeneration of grasslands and forests, and if you're lucky, catch sight of one of the area's protected species. In fact, the conservation work has been so successful that thousands of guanacos have returned to the valley

and with the guanacos come the pumas, the region's apex predator. Not to mention, for Explora guests, puma sightings are very likely! (Condé Nast Traveler, 2024).

In other words, protected areas in Patagonia have seen measurable success in biodiversity preservation. Rewilding efforts, such as reintroducing native species, have revitalized ecosystems. Additionally, the parks' management practices reduce the environmental impact of tourism, preserving the region's pristine wilderness for future generations.

Another key element that was properly implemented in Patagonia was community engagement, which helped local populations to benefit from tourism. Community-based initiatives empower residents to manage and profit from tourism activities, fostering economic resilience and cultural preservation. Examples include local guides offering eco-tours and accommodations sourcing supplies from nearby producers. Efforts to integrate community involvement extend beyond rural areas into urban centers located near National Protected Wild Areas (NPWAs). These urban hubs serve as critical gateways, providing tourists with essential services such as lodging, transportation, dining, and equipment rentals:

Lodging predominates the supply of services by destination, followed significantly by the collection of travel agencies, adventure tourism, and tour guides. The latter are of great relevance and show that outdoor activities in the NPWA are a central element of the supply. (Castilla et al. 2023)

Many of these businesses collaborate with local artisans, farmers, and service providers, further strengthening the local economy. For example, in regions like El Chaltén, cooperative tourism models have emerged, where local residents operate guesthouses, lead cultural workshops, and offer locally produced goods, ensuring that visitors contribute directly to the community's well-being. This holistic approach not only improves economic resilience but also promotes cultural preservation and sustainable tourism practices, ensuring that both visitors and residents can coexist harmoniously with Patagonia's fragile natural environment. For example, certain cities like Punta Arenas, Coyhaique Puerto Montt act as gateways towards Patagonia. Moreover, they are also hubs that offer tourists a variety of services and act as the main catalyst of the development of tourism. (Castilla et al., 2023)

Such initiatives reflect principles of responsible tourism outlined by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), which advocates for tourism models that enhance the well-being of host communities. In this model, communities are not only encouraged to involve themselves in the tourism business, but they are also given an opportunity to make money and broadcast the beauty of their country to the rest of the world. It is both a source of revenue and national and cultural pride which blends seamlessly with the attention given to the protection of biodiversity. This community-based tourism has strengthened local traditions, allowing residents to share their culture authentically. This fosters a deeper connection between visitors and host communities, enhancing the overall tourism experience while preserving cultural heritage. Furthermore, the region promotes eco-friendly accommodations that minimize carbon footprints and utilize sustainable energy sources. Lodges and campsites in Patagonia often integrate renewable energy systems and emphasize waste reduction, providing environmentally conscious travelers with attractive options:

Explora's commitment to conservation extends far beyond its property boundaries. In 2023, the company assumed management of [Patagonia National Park](#) and its facilities, including a 13-room lodge nestled within the park. This lodge offers breathtaking views of the Chacabuco Mountain Range, Mount Tamanguito, and Mount Tamango. One of the few luxury lodges in Patagonia, it embodies rustic elegance and aligns with conservation principles by using building materials such as stones from local quarries, recycled wood, and copper for the roofs. (Condé Nast Traveler, 2024)

This combination of healthy conservation practices and eco-friendly tourism has had visible effects on the economy of Chile. Statistics show that sustainable tourism has significantly boosted Patagonia's economy. Regions such as Magallanes in Chile report consistent revenue growth from

eco-tourism, with 7.19 million Unidades de Fomento (approximately 305 million USD) generated in 2021 alone (Statista, 2021). This is even more interesting because the collected data is from the time when the COVID-19 pandemic was affecting the entire planet. There is data which shows that the same year saw a significant decline in visitors to natural areas within these regions, with just over 210,000 visits—the lowest in a decade (Statista, 2024). This downturn is attributed to the aforementioned pandemic, which led to travel restrictions and reduced tourism activities. Even so, the sector prospered from an economic point of view. Despite the decrease in visitor numbers, the substantial revenue indicates that eco-tourism remains a vital economic contributor to Patagonia, underscoring the importance of sustainable tourism practices in the region. The author of the article has not managed to find accurate data for the years 2022 and onwards, but it might be possible to infer the development of Chile's tourist sector by looking at international trends, which show a healthy rebound after the pandemic. In 2023, international tourism reached 88% of pre-pandemic levels, with approximately 1.29 billion international arrivals, marking a 34% increase from 2022 (RoadGenius, 2024). In 2024, international tourist arrivals were estimated at 1.1 billion between January and September, about 11% more than the same period in 2023. This growth was driven by strong post-pandemic demand, increased air connectivity, and the recovery of Asian markets (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2024). Although it might be a bit of a stretch to make inferences from the aforementioned information, there is data that shows an upward trend of foreign tourists constantly entering Chile, and the figures are increasing every year. Foreign tourist numbers that entered through border crossings doubled in the last 10 years. In addition, visits to the NPWA increased by 9% annually. In 2019, Patagonia's NPWA received around 751,000 visits (Castilla et al., 2023)

Based on the overall resurgence of global tourism towards the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, we can surmise that Patagonia experienced a similar rebound in tourism activity during 2022, 2023 and 2024. Given the fact that its revenues from tourism increased during the pandemic, the region's emphasis on eco-tourism and natural attractions likely contributed to its appeal as international travel resumed.

What's more, the government of Chile has shown a strong commitment to advancing the tourism sector through strategic investments and comprehensive planning. It has announced and initiated numerous large-scale projects that span the current decade, all designed to enhance infrastructure, promote sustainable tourism, and support economic growth within the industry. For instance, the "Special Infrastructure Plan of the Ministry of Public Works to Support Sustainable Tourism to 2030" (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2020) has allocated USD 4.188 billion for projects focused on improving accessibility to remote regions, upgrading transportation networks, and integrating eco-friendly technologies into tourism services. These initiatives aim not only to increase the appeal of Chile as a global tourism destination but also to ensure that tourism development aligns with environmental conservation and social responsibility. The following UNWTO report sums it up quite nicely, and it shows that Chile has taken the right steps in promoting and developing its tourism sector:

As for investments in tourism, these are also growing. Chile is ranked in the top 10 in Latin America and the Caribbean in greenfield FDI investment announcements in tourism. In addition, the country focuses on improving key enablers in the development of the sector through the Special Infrastructure Plan of the Ministry of Public Works to Support Sustainable Tourism to 2030 (Plan Especial de Infraestructura del Ministerio de Obras Públicas de Apoyo al Turismo Sustentable a 2030), with projects worth USD 4,188 million until 2026. (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2020)

Moreover, the government's efforts extend beyond infrastructure. Policies such as the *National Sustainable Tourism Strategy 2035* emphasize innovation, community participation, and environmental stewardship, aiming to position Chile as a leader in sustainable tourism globally. Projects like the *Ruta de los Parques de la Patagonia* serve as exemplary models of how conservation and tourism can work hand in hand, connecting 17 national parks to showcase Chile's unparalleled biodiversity while directly benefiting local communities. Launched recently, this

massive project, which was announced in November 2024, aims to position tourism as a central pillar of Chile's sustainable development. It emphasizes economic and environmental sustainability, social and cultural inclusion, and effective governance. Key actions involve developing certification systems for sustainable practices, providing training programs, promoting responsible tourism, and investing in eco-friendly infrastructure. Below are some of the main points of the project:

Key actions

To achieve these objectives, a number of actions have been identified:

1. **Certification and Eco-labels:** *Develop certification systems for tourism businesses that adopt sustainable practices.*
2. **Training and awareness-raising:** *Offer training programmes for tourism professionals to raise their awareness of sustainability issues and best practices.*
3. **Promotion of Responsible Tourism:** *Launch promotional campaigns to encourage tourists to adopt responsible and environmentally-friendly behaviour.*
4. **Investment in Sustainable Infrastructure:** *Allocate resources to develop ecological and sustainable tourism infrastructure (Visit Latin America, 2024)*

By investing in these transformative efforts, Chile is crafting a tourism sector that is not only resilient to global challenges but also capable of delivering sustained economic, social, and environmental benefits for generations to come. It is important to remember that the influence of the nation's government has a massive influence on the development of the sector, and this is one example of a well-thought, long-term strategy that is likely to yield more and more benefits over the course of the next decade. The varied investments, from eco-friendly infrastructure to policies that prioritize conservation and community engagement, have positioned Chile as a leader in sustainable tourism. Patagonia's approach, in particular, stands as a powerful example of how deliberate strategies can give palpable results and insure an upward trend in the development of the tourism sector. Through a balance of ecological preservation, cultural celebration, and economic inclusion, Patagonia has demonstrated that sustainable tourism is not just a theoretical ideal but a practical necessity. Its model of integrating local communities into tourism operations has enhanced economic resilience, empowered residents, and preserved cultural heritage. Simultaneously, the emphasis on protecting its unparalleled natural landscapes has ensured the conservation of its rich biodiversity.

Despite sharing the breathtaking landscapes of Patagonia, Chile and Argentina have approached sustainable tourism with varying degrees of effectiveness. While Argentina has implemented similar measures, (such as protected areas and community engagement to support eco-tourism) its efforts lack the scale and comprehensive planning evident in Chile's strategy. Based on the sources and available information, Argentina does not appear to have a centralized policy framework for sustainable tourism akin to Chile's National Sustainable Tourism Strategy 2035. Instead, Argentina's efforts in Patagonia seem to rely on localized initiatives, such as community involvement in eco-tourism and the establishment of protected areas like Patagonia Park and Monte León National Park. (Rewilding Argentina, n.d.) Moreover, even though Argentina has decent roads in its more populated areas, it doesn't have a good infrastructure in the remote and sparsely populated areas of Patagonia, making it harder for tourists to access these areas. While Argentina has demonstrated a commitment to ecological initiatives, such efforts are not always aligned with the development of sustainable tourism. A notable example is the country's green hydrogen and Power-to-X project, which focuses on evaluating port infrastructure and advancing renewable energy production (PtX Hub, 2023). While this initiative reflects Argentina's dedication to environmental sustainability, it is primarily geared toward industrial energy goals rather than addressing the infrastructure or accessibility challenges faced by Patagonia's tourism sector. As such, its impact on tourism is minimal, unlike Chile's targeted investments in eco-friendly infrastructure and tourism policies.

Chile has emerged as a leader in sustainable tourism, driven by significant investments in eco-friendly infrastructure and its aforementioned National Sustainable Tourism Strategy. In contrast, Argentina's initiatives, though impactful at the local level, are less cohesive and lack the large-scale

policy framework that has propelled Chile to global recognition. The table below provides a comparative analysis of their approaches, highlighting the similarities and differences in protected areas, community involvement, infrastructure, and policy initiatives.

Table 1 Comparative analysis between Chile and Argentina regarding eco-friendly tourism in Patagonia region

Dimension	Chile	Argentina	Analysis
Protected areas	Chile has established iconic protected areas like Torres del Paine and Patagonia National Park, focusing on biodiversity and rewilding efforts (e.g., guanacos, pumas).	Argentina's Los Glaciares National Park and Lanín National Park focus on glacier preservation and scenic landscapes.	Both countries prioritize protected areas, but Chile emphasizes rewilding, whereas Argentina focuses more on glacier ecosystems.
Community involvement	Community-based initiatives integrate local guides, eco-tours, and urban hubs like Punta Arenas to benefit locals economically and culturally.	Local initiatives like those in El Calafate and El Chaltén engage residents in managing guesthouses and cultural workshops.	Both countries involve local communities, but Chile appears to have broader regional strategies, integrating urban hubs into its tourism model.
Eco-friendly infrastructure	Projects like Explora lodges use renewable energy, recycled materials, and eco-friendly designs, supported by the Special Infrastructure Plan (USD 4.188 billion).	Argentina employs eco-friendly measures in national parks but lacks large-scale infrastructure projects like Chile's.	Chile leads in eco-friendly infrastructure due to substantial investment and integration of technologies, whereas Argentina's efforts are more localized.
Policy initiatives	National Sustainable Tourism Strategy 2035 promotes certification systems, training, and responsible tourism campaigns.	Argentina's policies focus on regulating tourism activities in national parks but lack a cohesive national strategy.	Chile has a more comprehensive, forward-looking policy framework, while Argentina's policies are less centralized.

Source: own elaboration

As global tourism continues to expand, adopting similar strategies will be crucial for destinations worldwide. Patagonia's success highlights the potential to harmonize economic growth with environmental protection and cultural preservation, showing that tourism can serve as a catalyst for positive change. By following this blueprint, other regions can aspire to create tourism models that not only attract visitors but also leave a lasting legacy of sustainability and shared prosperity.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, Patagonia serves as a remarkable example of how sustainable tourism can align environmental preservation with socio-economic advancement. Through the creation of national parks and protected areas, the region has effectively safeguarded its diverse ecosystems, ensuring the conservation of its unique flora and fauna. These efforts have not only maintained the area's natural beauty but have also attracted eco-conscious travelers seeking authentic experiences.

Central to this success is the active involvement of local communities. By empowering residents to participate in tourism activities—as guides, hospitality providers, and suppliers—the region has fostered economic growth that directly benefits its people. This community-centric approach has enhanced cultural preservation, allowing locals to share their traditions and way of life with visitors, enriching the overall tourism experience.

Government initiatives, such as substantial investments in sustainable infrastructure and the implementation of the National Sustainable Tourism Strategy 2035, have further reinforced Patagonia's commitment to responsible tourism. These strategic efforts have boosted the local economy and positioned the region as a global leader in eco-friendly travel practices.

Patagonia's holistic model illustrates that tourism can be a powerful catalyst for positive change when sustainability is placed at the forefront. By harmonizing environmental stewardship

with community development and economic prosperity, the region has set a valuable precedent. As global tourism continues to expand, embracing such principles will be essential in creating a more sustainable and equitable future for destinations worldwide.

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