

Research on Environmentally Responsible Tourism in China from the Perspective of Sustainable Development

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Abstract: This study delves into China's tourism industry within the sustainable development framework, analyzing the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, i.e., governments, tourist destinations, tourism enterprises, and tourists in promoting sustainability. It emphasizes the government's pivotal role in formulating eco-friendly policies and effective environmental management at all tourism levels. The study highlights the need for transitioning China's economic model to enhance its global tourism image while balancing economic, environmental, and social aspects across diverse tourism destinations. Furthermore, it discusses the vital role of tourism businesses in environmental conservation, focusing on the long-term economic gains from responsible operations and green tourism practices. The study underscores the importance of cultivating environmentally responsible tourist behavior through advertising, training, public welfare initiatives, and education, aiming to foster a society that values environmental protection and promotes sustainable tourism practices. Collaboration among stakeholders is essential to harmonize ecological preservation with economic growth for the tourism industry's long-term sustainability.

1. Introduction

In today's Chinese tourism and leisure industry, the protection and utilization of the ecological environment has become a key strategy for promoting the development of the industry^[1]. As a vital component of the tourism economy, the ecological environment not only attracts tourists but also demonstrates its enormous potential in the tourism economy while providing leisure experiences^[2]. However, it's important to recognize that large-scale and environmentally irresponsible tourism activities can cause damage to the ecological environment^[3]. Additionally, tourism involves numerous stakeholders with diverse and complex interests, and relying solely on government initiatives to reduce the environmental impact of tourism is often ineffective. The key issue is whether stakeholders can participate in the production, operation, and consumption of tourism products with a more responsible attitude^[4]. Such participation is crucial in determining if the ecological environment can be a sustainable resource for tourism, underscoring the need to strike a balance between economic development and the preservation of the natural environment.

2. The Environmental Responsibility and Sustainable Development of the Tourism Industry

2.1 The Impact of Tourism Activities on the Ecological Environment

Unregulated mass tourism activities can cause damage to the ecological environment. In China, due to the large population base and the diversity of the tourism market, even smaller-scale, self-organized tourism activities tend to congregate at popular destinations, forming a substantial market volume. If there is a neglect in fostering tourists' awareness of environmentally responsible travel and in regulating the environmental responsibility of tourism businesses, this concentration trend could have a severe negative impact on natural and cultural resources.

In large-scale tourism activities, aspects such as food, accommodation, transportation, travel, shopping, and entertainment all involve significant energy consumption and waste management issues^[5]. "Food" involves handling kitchen waste. "Accommodation" involves energy consumption for heating and cooling, the use of disposable guest products, and the disposal of guests' waste. "Transportation" relates to emissions from vehicles, causing environmental pollution. "Travel" includes activities like picking flowers and branches, random picking, and scribbling on cultural relics, damaging the ecological environment and cultural heritage. "Shopping" generates packaging waste. "Entertainment" that is not ethically restrained can damage the ecological environment and local culture of the tourist destination. Tourism scale-up heightens ecological and cultural risks.

In smaller-scale customized trips and independent travels, tourists' behavior and choices significantly impact the environment. For example, the pursuit of luxury accommodation by tourists forces hotels to consume more energy to meet guests' needs. Although most tourists are environmentally conscious, this does not always translate into action. Therefore, the sustainable development of the tourism industry depends on the joint efforts of governments, tourist destinations, businesses, and tourists.

2.2 International Initiatives for Environmentally Responsible Tourism

The call for environmentally responsible tourism (ERT) has long been echoed by the international community^[6]. ERT is a crucial component of sustainable tourism, focusing on how the actions of stakeholders in the tourism industry can minimize the environmental impact of tourism activities^[7]. ERT demands that stakeholders have a strong awareness of protecting the ecological environment and cultural heritage. Tourism businesses should adopt environmentally responsible attitudes and behaviors in tourism development and operations, assessing and monitoring the impacts on natural environments and cultural heritage^[8]; tourist destination communities should be able to participate in tourism development and operations, gaining economic benefits from tourism activities^[9]; tourists should achieve pleasure through meaningful connections with local residents^[10]. However, there is often a significant gap between theory and practice in ERT, especially evident in developing countries. In times of conflict between economic development and environmental protection, some developing countries may choose economic development at the expense of the environment.

2.3 China's Ecological Economic Practices and Sustainable Development

China recognized the vital relationship between ecological environment and economic development early on and proposed a goal of economic transformation in the "Ninth Five-Year Plan", transitioning from an extensive to an intensive economy while considering both economic development and ecological environment protection. This transformation emphasizes that ecological environmental advantages can be converted into economic benefits, viewing the

ecological environment not only as a natural resource but also a valuable resource for the tourism industry. This concept and practice aim to achieve economic growth while protecting and improving the ecological environment, promoting sustainable development.

3. Formulating Environmentally Responsible Tourism Policies by Government Authorities under the Perspective of Sustainable Development

Under the framework of sustainable development, governments strive to achieve dual goals of economic growth and environmental protection through policies and regulations. It is essential to integrate environmentally responsible tourism and sustainable tourism development into the policy systems of central and local governments at all levels. In government-commissioned tourism planning projects, the impact of tourism planning schemes on the ecological environment should also be scientifically assessed.

In formulating environmentally responsible tourism policies, it is necessary to transcend the boundaries of a single industry authority, achieving policy coordination across different levels and departments. For instance, departments like the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, the Ministry of Transportation, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs should collaborate to ensure the extensive coverage and enforcement of environmentally responsible tourism policies.

As the main authority in the tourism industry, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism should actively promote multi-departmental legislation, joint announcements, departmental documents, and industry standards, regulating the environmentally responsible tourism behaviors of stakeholders. Currently, the regulation intensity of environmentally responsible tourism by the tourism authorities is not sufficient. Taking energy-intensive tourism accommodations as an example, among the standards issued by the tourism authorities for various types of accommodations, only the "Boutique Hotels" (LB/T 066-2017) outlines environmental responsibilities for hotel operators, advocating green consumption, rational resource use, sustainable development concepts, energy-saving and emission-reduction measures, and a strong sense of social responsibility. In the future, the documentation and standard-setting by tourism administrative authorities should place greater emphasis on regulating and guiding environmentally responsible tourism operations by tourism product providers and environmentally responsible tourism consumption behaviors by tourists (consumers).

4. Management and Operation of Environmental Responsibility at Tourist Destinations and Businesses from a Sustainable Development Perspective

In the tourism industry, tourist destinations are complex systems with multiple spatial scales. Different levels of economic development and resource endowments lead to varying understandings of sustainable development at these destinations. China, an increasingly important source of global tourism, needs to enhance its attractiveness to international tourists. Nationally, China's economic transition from rapid to high-quality development helps enhance its image as an international tourist destination. At the provincial, city, district, and county levels, economically developed tourist destinations pay more attention to environmental behavior regulation. For instance, Shanghai, being the first in China to introduce local regulations for garbage management and improvement of living environments, reflects this trend. In natural tourist destinations, such as lake and forest areas, there is a greater focus on the protection of ecological resources.

The key to managing environmental responsibility in tourist destinations under the sustainable development perspective is to establish a strong concept of ecological environment sustainability, regardless of the spatial scale. Nationally, China has established the Ministry of Ecology and

Environment to focus on ecological conservation, with specialized audits by the National Audit Office and central environmental inspection teams to enforce compliance. This demonstrates China's commitment to environmental governance and reshaping its green tourism brand image. At the local level, governments need to balance economic performance, environmental performance, and social outcomes, avoiding sacrificing the environment for economic growth or overly stringent environmental policies that ignore economic development. In tourist areas, attention should not only be given to the ecological environment within the area but also to the surrounding areas, strictly controlling pollution from accommodations, dining, and other facilities.

Tourist destinations often have to balance economic, social, and environmental goals, while tourism businesses naturally aim for profit. In sustainable development, tourism businesses must consider whether environmentally responsible operations can bring long-term economic benefits. Compared to tourist destinations, businesses should be more cautious of being misled by short-term profit goals. Especially for publicly listed tourism companies, it's crucial to avoid sacrificing long-term environmental and social responsibilities for short-term shareholder satisfaction. Under sustainable development, tourism businesses need to demonstrate to investors that, although social responsibility might impact short-term profits, it will be compensated by long-term economic gains. This strategy helps maintain financial health while contributing to the sustainable development of society and the environment.

Key tourism enterprises such as scenic areas, travel agencies (both traditional and online), and hotels have significant social responsibilities for environmental protection. Under sustainable development, environmentally responsible operations in scenic areas should harmonize with local communities, providing jobs for residents who cannot engage in high-pollution activities, educating tourists and residents, and collectively protecting the environment. Travel agencies, whether operating traditional group tours or emerging personalized services, directly influence tourists' environmentally responsible behavior. Tour guides should educate tourists throughout the trip, reducing the carbon footprint of tour groups. Online travel agencies can use their websites or apps to prompt tourists to engage in environmentally responsible tourism. Hotels and catering businesses, especially those in coastal or lakeside resorts, should properly manage wastewater discharge and waste treatment to prevent water resource damage. Businesses should balance economic interests with ecological responsibilities. Governments and industry associations can recognize and certify green tourism businesses, turning environmental responsibility into a brand advantage and competitive strength, enhancing customer trust. Governments can also offer financial subsidies or tax breaks to green businesses and issue warnings to those harming the environment, using a combination of rewards and penalties to guide and regulate the environmentally responsible operations of tourism businesses.

5. Cultivating Environmentally Responsible Tourism Behavior Among Tourists from a Sustainable Development Perspective

The behavior of tourists is complex, influenced by external factors like tourism regulations, advisories in scenic areas, and guidance from tour guides, as well as internal factors such as personal values, knowledge level, and motives for travel. Although the environmental impact of an individual tourist may seem insignificant, the collective irresponsible behavior of tourists can severely damage the ecological environment.

To cultivate environmentally responsible tourism behavior among tourists from a sustainable development perspective, it begins with changing their values. Governments and tourism businesses can use advertising, training, public activities, and school education to instill environmental awareness. Environmental advertisements in crowded places like subways and stations, pre-trip

training by travel agencies, continuous environmental education and reminders by tour guides, and participation in public activities that benefit the ecological environment and cultural heritage preservation are effective strategies. Integrating environmental protection content into moral education in schools is also crucial.

Furthermore, a combination of behavioral constraints and incentives is necessary to transform tourists' environmental values into actual responsible behaviors. Legal measures can penalize environmentally harmful actions, with tourists being informed about potential legal and financial repercussions upon arrival. Encouraging responsible behavior can involve recognizing exemplary tourists and publicizing their stories, establishing a points system for environmentally responsible actions redeemable for benefits like airline miles or accommodation discounts. These comprehensive measures, combining rewards and punishments, social encouragement, and economic incentives, aim to create a societal atmosphere where environmental protection is honored and environmental destruction is shamed.

6. Conclusion

This study underscores the essential collaboration among stakeholders such as governments, tourist destinations, tourism businesses, and tourists in sustainable tourism development. It advocates a comprehensive strategy encompassing legal regulations, educational initiatives, and incentives for environmentally responsible tourism practices, emphasizing ecological protection alongside economic growth. The aim is to foster a society that values and respects environmental conservation, turning sustainable tourism into a practice beneficial to both nature and society. This shift promises profound impacts, enhancing the ecological environment, promoting healthy tourism development, and creating a greener, sustainable tourism environment for future generations.

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