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Green Tourism Development in Rural Areas – A New Way to Create Sustainable Economic Resilience for Locals

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable economic resilience demands economic diversification activities in rural areas that emphasize the important role of sustainable productivity growth in achieving balanced development and reducing rural areas' dependence on local or central government support. This conceptual paper explores the concept and mechanisms of green tourism, investigating the opportunities and challenges of green tourism development in rural areas to create sustainable economic resilience. Diversification, particularly through green tourism, serves as an important mechanism to enhance the resilience and well-being of rural communities by reducing their vulnerability to external shocks and economic disruptions. This approach promotes greater self-reliance and reduces the economic risks associated with over-reliance on traditional industries. This study argues that green tourism in rural areas offers opportunities to revitalize local economies, preserve cultural heritage, and protect the environment, while diversifying livelihoods and engaging communities in sustainable practices. However, it also faces challenges, including the risk of environmental disruption from excessive restoration, weak community involvement, cultural dilution, social fragmentation, and the need for effective policy frameworks to ensure long-term economic resilience.

Keywords: Green Tourism; Sustainable Rural Economy; Rural Economic Resilience; Rural Economic Diversification

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1. Introduction

Over the past years, the interconnections between tourism and development in rural areas have been assessed and confirmed from various perspectives. The positive impacts of tourism—such as its multiplier effects on local economies, job creation, and the potential for sustainable development in underdeveloped rural regions—are widely recognized. As a result, tourism has become a key priority in the long-term strategies of many countries and rural communities worldwide. However, more recent studies have started to shift from a development-based approach to a resilience-based one, raising questions about the universally positive impact of tourism in rural areas. While tourism can enhance economic resilience in rural communities under certain conditions, it can also introduce vulnerabilities, potentially exacerbating the effects of a shock. Tourism plays a crucial role in both regional and national economies and is often seen as having strong recovery potential after a disruption, contributing to the idea of regional resilience ^[1]. In the context of tourism-driven economic growth, the concept of tourism-led resilience capacity is introduced, which includes both the sustainability of tourism resilience and the speed of recovery.

Thus, although tourism is widely recognized for its crucial role, some argue that it is susceptible to various pressures and disruptions ^[2–4]. These challenges include economic and financial crises ^[5], social disturbance ^[6], natural disasters ^[7], political instability ^[8], and pandemics ^[9]. The vulnerability of the sector is closely tied to the structure and functioning of the system, which can be easily damaged due to its inability to quickly adapt to disturbances both from within and outside the system ^[4]. The recent crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has raised concerns about the resilience of the tourism industry and its inherent ability to recover, particularly in economies where tourism is a major driver of growth and employment ^[10].

Economic resilience is essential for a region's growth and prosperity, serving as a critical factor in long-term sustainable development ^[11]. However, economic resilience demands economic diversification activities by its actors. Economic resilience encompasses not only an economy's capacity to endure shocks and recover swiftly ^[12], but also its ability to adapt to ongoing environmental changes ^[13].

The positive impacts resulting from tourism development in rural areas will experience saturation or decline due to various factors (maybe internal or external).

Currently, the rise of new tourism forms, such as rural green tourism, is presently driving structural shifts in the tourism industry. This diversification within rural tourism creates numerous opportunities to leverage local natural, cultural, and material resources ^[14]. Green tourism in rural areas is a perspective in the tourism industry that offers opportunities for addressing many rural development problems, including the market saturation of conventional rural tourism. In which, rural tourism is one of the most important areas of rural development and a means to improve the living standards of rural residents.

Based on the previous discussion, it can be concluded that rural areas need to diversify their economic activities to foster economic resilience. The development of existing and future tourism must consider many aspects in the planning, development, and implementation process. By implementing green tourism principles—such as resource efficiency, waste and pollution reduction, biodiversity conservation, and respect for local cultures—rural areas have the potential to transform their tourism sector. This approach can reduce negative environmental impacts while fostering greater community engagement, preserving cultural heritage, and creating more sustainable economic opportunities ^[15]. Rural areas have the potential to become world-class tourism destinations, significantly contributing to local, regional, and national tourism economies. Therefore, it is essential to examine the opportunities and challenges in developing green tourism, which is the focus of this paper. The findings of this paper will help diversify the future of rural tourism and potentially create sustainable economic resilience for rural areas.

2. Green Tourism Development in Rural Areas

Tourism in rural areas encompasses a range of activities, including agritourism, ecotourism, green tourism, responsible tourism, alternative tourism, and others ^[16]. Ecotourism, green tourism, and responsible tourism have distinct meanings and concepts, even though they are closely related ^[17]. Ecotourism is the general concept of utilizing natural resources as tourism products in a sustainable and

commercially viable way. Responsible tourism destinations extend beyond just eco-friendly initiatives. It adopts a holistic approach by integrating sustainability principles into the economic, social, and environmental aspects of tourism^[18]. Green tourism, also known as sustainable tourism or green travel and often used synonymously with terms like sustainable tourism, nature tourism, and rural tourism, is a form of tourism that aims to minimize negative impacts on the environment, society, and economy while maximizing benefits for local communities and ecosystems^[19–22]. The core principles of green tourism emphasize environmental preservation, prioritizing the protection of natural resources, biodiversity, and ecosystems through responsible travel behaviors, including waste reduction, energy and water conservation, and support for conservation efforts^[23]. Green tourism promotes sustainable development by strengthening local economies, creating employment opportunities, and advocating for the use of locally sourced goods and services to conserve cultural heritage^[24,25].

Green tourism also emphasizes the protection and celebration of cultural heritage by encouraging respectful interactions with local communities and supporting the conservation of traditional customs and practices. It advocates responsible travel behaviors, including reducing environmental footprints, respecting local cultures, and supporting ethical businesses^[26]. Green tourism requires the active involvement of various stakeholders, including tourists, local communities, governments, and tourism operators, in the development and implementation of sustainable tourism strategies. Furthermore, it emphasizes education and awareness, urging tourists to make informed decisions and adopt sustainable practices in their daily lives^[27,28].

Diversifying the rural economy through green tourism has the potential to become a new growth engine and a strong catalyst for creating decent jobs, provided that the appropriate policies and strategies are implemented. In China, green tourism has played a key role in enhancing the country's green development efficiency, demonstrating its effectiveness as a catalyst for China's transition to a green economy^[29].

3. Rural Economy – Diversification, Sustainable, and Resilience

In rural areas, where the economy is experiencing

stagnation and decline, fostering economic resilience is crucial for achieving sustainable growth. The traditional model of relying on a single industry for economic development is no longer effective for long-term stability. Local governments need to promote industrial diversification by encouraging a broader range of industries, fostering stronger connections between them, and enhancing their stabilizing roles. This approach should involve adopting targeted industrial policies that move away from narrow, specialized industry clusters. Instead, they should focus on supporting industries that complement existing local sectors and foster new, emerging industries that can counter economic downturns.

Industrial diversification can enhance economic resilience^[11]. Resilience, in a general sense, refers to a system's capacity to recover following a shock or disruption. This includes the community's ability to recover after a disaster, the level of preparedness in facing or dealing with a disaster, and the capacity to recover quickly and successfully^[30]. In the context of economics, economic resilience refers to an economy's ability to adjust and return to its previous state or shift toward a new, improved path of growth and development after experiencing specific shocks^[31]. Economic diversification in regions offers alternative solutions in the event of a disruption. It also serves as a strong driver for narrowing the gap between core and peripheral areas^[1]. Therefore, regional policymakers should implement tailored strategies to strengthen resilience in underdeveloped and lagging regions, helping to reduce regional inequalities.

Some research highlighted the significant influence of innovation on tourism resilience^[1,32]. As noted in a recent study on the role of innovation and creativity in post-economic crisis recovery^[33], policymakers should prioritize boosting innovation in their regions, as it can play a crucial role in accelerating recovery and promoting sustainable development. For tourism to be sustainable, it must prevent the overexploitation of local natural resources and ensure that the local communities benefit economically. To address climate change and maintain sustainability in the sector, adaptation and mitigation strategies are necessary, including investments in more resilient infrastructure and the diversification of services and products to reduce climate dependence^[34].

The introduction of innovative tourism products can enhance the resilience of tourism development^[35]. Additionally, preserving traditional livelihoods while fostering tourism growth is a strategy that strengthens village resilience, all while maintaining the village's core authenticity^[36,37].

4. Discussion

So far, among the three primary impacts of tourism, economic factors tend to hold more weight in policy decisions compared to socio-cultural and environmental considerations. With a strong focus on the economic advantages of tourism, the socio-cultural and environmental consequences are often seen as less important. This economic emphasis has led to the belief that tourism can solve various social and economic issues, resulting in the rapid and often unplanned development of tourism infrastructure in many countries. However, this has also led to negative effects, including social and environmental harm. As awareness of tourism's environmental impact grows, efforts to promote sustainable tourism have intensified. Consequently, there is a rising interest in how tourism development affects environmental quality, with a growing focus on specialized forms of tourism, such as green tourism rooted in local traditions.

Green tourism in rural areas can serve as a powerful strategy for re-generating employment, safeguarding vulnerable livelihoods and productive assets, and restoring natural resources^[38]. As the public becomes more aware of the benefits of sustainability, non-renewable energy, and green tourism, the social mindset of the community may change. This change has the potential to have a significant impact on the rural economy and has already begun to some extent, as efforts are underway to meet the growing demand from high-income individuals seeking eco-friendly and sustainable travel experiences^[39].

The green tourism concept involves at least four key elements: environmental responsibility, supporting the local economy, cultural preservation, environmental education, and experiential richness^[40]. Environmental responsibility involves safeguarding, preserving, and enhancing the natural environment to maintain the long-term health of the ecosystem that supports life. Local economic vitality focuses on supporting local economies, businesses, and communities to promote economic sustainability and growth.

Cultural diversity emphasizes the importance of respecting and valuing different cultures to ensure the continued flourishing of local or host communities. Experiential richness aims at offering fulfilling and meaningful experiences through active engagement with nature, people, places, and cultures.

Green tourism development in rural areas can bring sustainable economic resilience, which will create many opportunities, as shown in **Figure 1**. Regeneration: This refers to renewing income by revitalizing existing resources and infrastructure. Rural areas often have untapped potential, including abandoned buildings, unused land, and traditional crafts. By revitalizing these assets, new attractions and experiences can be created for tourists, thereby reinvigorating the local economy. Diversification: Relying on a single type of tourism can be risky. Diversification helps spread the economic benefits and reduces vulnerability to internal and external factors. Rural areas can explore green tourism as a variety of tourism niches. This not only attracts more visitors but also creates opportunities for different businesses and skills within the community.

Conservation: Protecting and enhancing the natural and cultural resources that attract tourists is essential for long-term sustainability. Conservation efforts can include sustainable agricultural practices, wildlife protection, and preservation of cultural heritage. These initiatives not only benefit the environment but also enhance the tourism experience, attracting environmentally conscious tourists and offering a unique appeal to the destination. Reformulation: Involves adjusting strategies for creating tourism products and services to meet changing market demands and evolving visitor preferences. It is about staying relevant and innovative. Rural areas can integrate technology, offer unique experiences, and target specific market segments, such as luxury travellers or digital nomads. This adaptability ensures that tourism remains a viable and profitable driver of economic resilience over time. By capitalizing on these opportunities, rural areas can build a strong and resilient tourism sector that benefits local communities while preserving the environment and cultural heritage.

As shown in **Figure 1**, several challenges arise for the development of green tourism in rural areas, aiming for sustainable economic resilience. Spatial challenge: Excessive or poorly planned restoration efforts can disrupt the

natural environment, leading to imbalances. Overdevelopment in certain areas may harm the ecosystem, undermining the very resources that attract tourists and diminishing the long-term sustainability of the tourism sector. Economic challenges: Weak community engagement and uneven levels of interest in green tourism can hinder its potential. If local communities are not actively involved or invested, the economic benefits may not be widely distributed. Additionally, the restricted diversification of livelihoods within rural communities can make them overly reliant on tourism, leaving them vulnerable to market fluctuations or external shocks. In the case of Banten, Indonesia, economic challenges are linked to the substantial initial investments and resource requirements needed to implement sustainable practices, including the construction of eco-friendly infrastructure and energy-efficient facilities^[41].

Cultural challenges: green tourism, while focusing on sustainability, can sometimes lead to the loss of authenticity and rural identity. As tourism grows, there is a risk that local cultures may become commodified or diluted, resulting in the loss of the unique rural character that initially

draws visitors. Social challenges: the “isolated island” effect^[42] can occur when tourism-focused areas become disconnected from the broader rural community. This means that local communities are working alone and missing out on opportunities to benefit from cooperation with the surrounding area^[43,44]. Without cooperation and connections, they struggle to attract more visitors and share resources, which limits the overall success of tourism in the area. This fragmentation can create social divides, where only specific groups benefit from tourism, while others feel excluded, weakening the overall social fabric and community cohesion. Policy challenges: inadequate or poorly designed policies can obstruct green tourism development. Without proper guidelines, incentives, or regulations, rural areas may struggle to implement sustainable practices, preserve local resources, or effectively manage the impact of tourism on the environment and community.

Addressing these challenges is crucial for ensuring that green tourism contributes to long-term economic resilience, while safeguarding the cultural and environmental assets of rural areas.

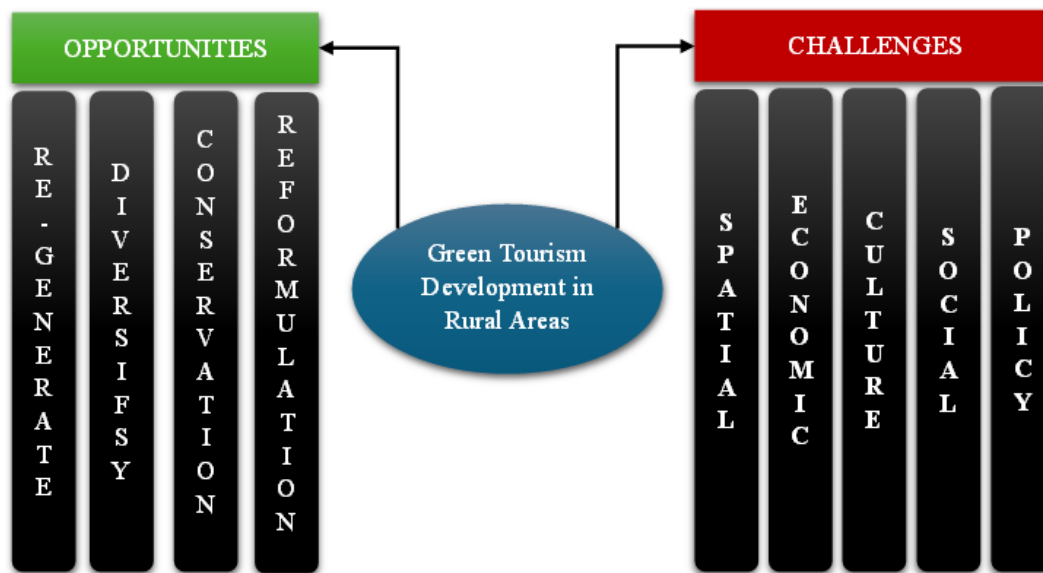


Figure 1. Opportunities and challenges of green tourism development for sustainable economic resilience of rural areas.

5. Conclusion

The development of green tourism in rural areas offers substantial opportunities to foster sustainable economic resilience, enhance local economies, and preserve cultural and environmental heritage. By diversifying tour-

ism offerings, revitalizing existing resources, and emphasizing conservation and sustainability, rural communities can reduce their reliance on traditional industries and build a more resilient and self-sufficient economy. However, challenges such as overdevelopment, weak community engagement, cultural dilution, social fragmentation, and poli-

cy gaps must be addressed to realize the potential of green tourism fully. Overcoming these barriers requires careful planning, effective policies, and active community involvement to ensure that green tourism contributes to long-term sustainability and economic stability. By leveraging the unique assets of rural areas and prioritizing responsible practices, green tourism can become a powerful catalyst for both economic growth and environmental stewardship, ultimately benefiting rural communities. From a policy perspective, an integrated rural tourism strategy, a clear regulatory framework, targeted support programs, and alignment of national and local policies with sustainability objectives are essential to create an enabling environment that encourages green tourism, leverages rural assets, promotes responsible practices, and fosters economic growth and environmental management for the benefit of rural communities and global tourism sustainability.

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Conceptualization, T.W. and N.H.M.S.; writing—original draft preparation, T.W. and Y.A.; writing—review and editing, T.W. and N.S.; visualization, T.W. and Y.A.; supervision, N.H.M.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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The authors declares that they have no conflict of interest.

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