

Driving Economic Growth and taking Care of Nature through Sustainable Tourism in the Western Balkans

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Abstract: This abstract explores tourism's potential as a catalyst for sustainable development in the Western Balkans, focusing on the intricate balance between economic growth and environmental preservation. It also examines tourism's multifaceted impacts on the region's socio-economic growth and natural ecosystem protection. It aims to highlight tourism's opportunities to generate employment, foster cultural exchange, and stimulate local economies while acknowledging the associated challenges to society and nature.

The main hypothesis presented in this paper is that encouraging a sustainable model of tourism in the Western Balkans could guarantee inclusive growth that cares for nature and society in the region.

The literature review and methodology are mainly based on secondary data and information collected from academic literature, governmental reports, and case studies, which support the analysis, comparisons, and evaluation of situations and predictions.

This paper emphasizes the imperative of adopting a holistic approach to tourism development in the Western Balkans, prioritizing sustainability principles and promoting responsible tourism practices. It discusses the importance of community engagement, stakeholder collaboration, and policy frameworks integrating environmental conservation, socio-cultural authenticity, and economic viability.

The paper recommends prioritizing a tourism model that fosters long-term sustainability and inclusive growth, considering the present and future generations while safeguarding the region's natural and cultural heritage.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Growth, Society, Nature, Western Balkans

I. Introduction

Sustainable tourism is a concept that has gained increasing attention in recent years due to the negative impacts of tourism on the environment and local communities. The term "sustainable tourism" refers to tourism that considers the environmental, social, and economic impacts of tourism and seeks to minimize these impacts while maximizing the benefits. One of the key aspects of sustainable tourism is preserving natural resources and protecting the environment. This can be achieved by implementing practices such as reducing waste and pollution, conserving water and energy, and promoting sustainable transportation options. In addition, sustainable tourism also seeks to support the conservation of biodiversity and cultural heritage. Another critical aspect of sustainable tourism is the promotion of social and economic benefits for local communities. This can be achieved by developing community-based tourism initiatives that involve residents in the tourism industry and provide them with economic opportunities [1]. Sustainable tourism also promotes cultural awareness and respect for local customs and traditions. Several initiatives and programs have been developed to promote sustainable tourism, including the Global Sustainable Tourism Council and the United Nations World Tourism Organization's Sustainable Tourism Program. These programs provide guidelines and standards for sustainable tourism practices and encourage tourism operators to adopt sustainable practices. The region is home to some of the most diverse ecosystems in Europe, including the Adriatic Sea, the Dinaric Alps, the Pindus Mountains, and the Danube River. Beyond this reality, these ecosystems are threatened by pollution, deforestation, and overfishing. Protecting these ecosystems is essential for the region's biodiversity and economic development, as many industries, such as tourism and agriculture, rely on healthy ecosystems. The region's third challenge is promoting social inclusion and reducing poverty. Despite progress in recent years, poverty and inequality remain significant problems in the Western Balkans. This is particularly true in rural

areas, where many people lack access to essential services such as healthcare and education. Addressing these issues is essential for promoting sustainable development and ensuring that everyone in the region can participate in economic and social development [2]. Despite these challenges, there are also significant opportunities for sustainable development in the Western Balkans. One of the leading social impacts of sustainable tourism in the Western Balkans is the creation of employment opportunities. Sustainable tourism often involves the development of local businesses and services, which can provide jobs for the local population [3]. This can help to reduce poverty and improve the standard of living in the region. Another social impact of sustainable tourism is the preservation of cultural heritage. According to the World Tourism Organization [4], heritage tourism is one of the fastest-growing segments of the global tourism industry, with an estimated 40% of all international tourists visiting cultural and heritage sites. The Western Balkans have a rich cultural heritage, which includes historic sites, traditional crafts, and unique customs and traditions. Sustainable tourism can help to preserve these cultural assets by promoting their value to visitors and encouraging their protection. Sustainable tourism can also promote social inclusion and respect for diversity. By promoting cultural exchange and interaction between visitors and locals, sustainable tourism can help to break down barriers and promote understanding between different cultures and communities. However, it is important to note that sustainable tourism also has its challenges in the Western Balkans.

One of the main challenges is ensuring that local communities are involved in the planning and decision-making process. This can help to ensure that local needs and concerns are considered and that tourism development is sustainable over the long term [5]. Sustainable tourism has the potential to provide many social benefits in the Western Balkans, including employment generation, cultural preservation, and social inclusion. The main hypothesis presented in the paper consists of the idea that fostering a sustainable model of tourism in the Western Balkans could guarantee inclusive growth that cares for nature and society in the region. The above-mentioned idea addresses the following research question: What are the main pillars of tourism to be developed, and what are the main actions to be undertaken by stakeholders in order to achieve a sustainable model of tourism in the region?

II. Literature review

Sustainable tourism has been a topic of interest for researchers and scholars in the field of tourism and sustainability. Many studies have been conducted to explore the concept of sustainable tourism and its impact on the environment, society, and economy [6]. It has also been a widely discussed topic in the tourism industry in recent years due to its potential to promote responsible tourism practices and minimize the negative impacts of tourism on the environment and local communities. In this literature review, we will examine some of the key concepts and theories related to sustainable tourism and some of the initiatives and programs developed to promote sustainable tourism. This literature review will also discuss some key findings and themes in the existing literature on sustainable tourism. One of the key concepts related to sustainable tourism is the triple-bottom-line approach, which considers tourism's economic, social, and environmental impacts. This approach was first introduced by [7], who argued that sustainable development requires a balance between economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection. The triple-bottom-line approach has been widely adopted in the tourism industry to promote sustainable tourism practices [8]. As mentioned before, the key theme in the literature on sustainable tourism is balancing economic, social, and environmental sustainability. According to [9], sustainable tourism should be viewed as a system that balances economic development with environmental and social sustainability. This requires a holistic approach that considers the interdependence of these three dimensions of sustainability. Another important concept related to sustainable tourism is ecotourism, which refers to responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people [10]. Ecotourism has been recognized as a key component of sustainable tourism, as it promotes the conservation of natural resources and the protection of local communities [11]. The literature also highlights the importance of education and awareness-raising in promoting sustainable tourism. According to Garrod and Fyall [12], education is a key tool for promoting sustainable tourism practices among tourists and operators. This includes educating tourists about the environmental and social impacts of tourism and providing training and support for tourism operators to adopt sustainable practices. In addition, the literature emphasizes the need for destination management organizations (D.M.O.s) to take a proactive role in promoting sustainable tourism. As noted by Hall [13], D.M.O.s can play a key role in promoting sustainable tourism practices by providing guidance and support to tourism operators, educating tourists, and working with local communities to ensure that tourism development is sustainable and beneficial. Another important theme in the literature is the need for collaboration and partnership between stakeholders in the tourism industry. As Koen [14] noted, sustainable tourism requires the cooperation of various stakeholders, including governments, local communities, tourism operators, and tourists themselves [15]. Collaboration and partnership are necessary to ensure that tourism development is sustainable and

beneficial for all stakeholders. Several initiatives and programs have been developed to promote sustainable tourism, including the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) and the United Nations World Tourism Organization's (UNWTO) Sustainable Tourism Program. The GSTC provides global standards for sustainable tourism practices, while the UNWTO's Sustainable Tourism Program promotes sustainable tourism practices through research, capacity building, and policy development [16]. Sustainable tourism is a prominent topic in the Western Balkans region due to its potential for economic growth while preserving the natural and cultural heritage of the area. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in sustainable tourism development in the region, leading to various research studies and publications. Other important authors in this field are M. Petrovic and V. Potocan, who have researched the impact of tourism on the natural environment in the Western Balkans. Petrovic and Potocan [17] highlight the need for sustainable tourism practices that minimize environmental degradation and maintain the region's biodiversity. The authors argue that sustainable tourism can contribute to preserving historic sites and cultural traditions while providing economic benefits to local communities. In addition to these authors, several other studies have explored the potential of sustainable tourism in the Western Balkans region. For example, the research conducted by T. Mihailovic and N. Knezevic [18] focuses on the role of ecotourism in sustainable tourism development and the importance of sustainable tourism practices for regional development. Overall, the literature on sustainable tourism in the Western Balkans region emphasizes the need for a holistic approach that considers tourism's social, economic, and environmental aspects [19]. The studies and publications discussed above provide valuable insights into the potential of sustainable tourism for preserving the natural and cultural heritage of the area while also contributing to the economic development of local communities. Sustainable tourism has become an increasingly important topic in the Western Balkans region due to its potential for economic growth and natural and cultural heritage preservation.

The literature on sustainable tourism highlights the importance of balancing economic, social, and environmental sustainability, collaboration and partnership between stakeholders, education and awareness-raising, and proactive destination management [20]. By adopting these approaches, stakeholders in the tourism industry can work together to promote sustainable tourism practices and ensure that tourism development is sustainable and beneficial for all. Sustainable tourism is a crucial concept that seeks to promote responsible tourism practices and minimize the negative impacts of tourism on the environment and local communities. By adopting sustainable tourism practices, we can ensure that tourism continues to provide economic benefits while preserving natural resources and promoting cultural heritage [21].

Also, in Western Balkan countries, sustainable tourism has become a popular topic in recent years as more and more people have become aware of tourism's environmental and social impacts. The Western Balkans region, which includes countries such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, is a prime location for sustainable tourism due to its natural beauty and cultural heritage [22]. One of the critical challenges for sustainable tourism in the Western Balkans is striking a balance between economic development and environmental protection. Similarly, their article "Sustainable Tourism Development in Montenegro: The Role of Local Communities [23] emphasizes the importance of community involvement in sustainable tourism development. They also suggest that promoting ecotourism and cultural heritage tourism can help minimize tourism's negative impacts on the environment and local communities.

Another critical aspect of sustainable tourism development in the Western Balkans is preserving cultural heritage sites. Based on the references mentioned above, we can bring evidence that developing sustainable tourism in the Western Balkans requires a holistic approach considering tourism's economic, environmental, and social impacts. Involvement of all stakeholders at the territorial and national levels in the planning and implementation of tourism development projects, promoting ecotourism and cultural heritage tourism, preserving cultural heritage sites, and promoting sustainable tourism practices, the region can achieve long-term sustainable tourism development [24]. Considering the arguments mentioned earlier, sustainable heritage tourism is an essential concept in the field of tourism that aims to promote sustainable tourism practices while preserving cultural and natural heritage [25]. Community involvement, conservation, education, and responsible tourism practices are essential to achieving sustainable heritage tourism. Studies have shown that sustainable heritage tourism can contribute to economic development, preserve cultural heritage, and positively impact the environment.

III. Methodology

Different pillars of sustainable tourism are considered measurable indicators in this study with respective scores [26]. Scores provided for each country reflect the evaluation for different pillars. Then, comparison analysis and quality evaluations, assessments, and findings are based on data collected separately for each pillar. For example, the non-leisure resources pillar is assessed based on key indicators, including but not limited to natural resource

endowment, infrastructure quality, education levels, and healthcare access etc.[27]. Scores provided for each country indicate their relative standing in this pillar, offering insights into areas of strength and areas requiring improvement. How can we understand the scores for each pillar? If we start with the pillar of natural heritage sites, the scores provided for each country reflect the evaluation of their natural heritage sites on a scale of 1 to 7. These assessments consider factors such as ecological importance, biodiversity, geological significance, and level of preservation. While a higher score indicates superior quality and value, lower scores suggest areas for improvement or conservation challenges.

III.1. Data and interpretation

Information and data show that tourism significantly contributes to growth in Western Balkan Countries. Based on the sustainability pillar of the travel and tourism index, the natural resources pillar measures the available natural capital, outdoor tourism activities, and richness of fauna. In this case, the scores range from 1 to 7, and the ranking of the countries based on this pillar is as follows: 1. Albania - scored 2.1/ North Macedonia - scored 1.8/ Bosnia and Herzegovina - scored 1.7, and Serbia - scored 1.6. This pillar also considers the number of World Heritage natural sites, the number of species, and the total square km of terrestrial and marine areas under protection. The ranking of the countries based on these criteria is as follows:

1. Albania - has 2.5 scores of World Heritage natural sites, 1,901 species, and 5,662.0 km of protected areas.
2. North Macedonia - has 2.5 scores of World Heritage natural sites, 1,396 species, and 2,687.9 km of protected areas
3. Bosnia and Herzegovina - has 2.0 scores of World Heritage natural sites, 1,598 species, and 1,857.8 km of protected areas.
4. Serbia - has 1.0 scores of World Heritage natural sites, 1,505 species, and 6,766.1 km of protected areas. On the other hand, the cultural resources pillar measures the availability of cultural resources, such as archaeological sites and entertainment facilities. The scores range from 1 to 7, and the ranking of the countries based on this pillar is as follows: 1. Serbia scored 2.12; North Macedonia scored 1.8; Bosnia and Herzegovina scored 1.8; and Albania scored 1.8.

The number of World Heritage cultural sites and the number of sports stadiums with a capacity greater than 20,000 seats are also taken into consideration in this pillar. The ranking of the countries based on these criteria is as follows: 1. Serbia - has 2.0 scores of World Heritage cultural sites and 1.3 scores of sports stadiums. 2. Bosnia and Herzegovina - has 1.6 scores of World Heritage cultural sites and 1.2 scores of sports stadiums. 3. Albania - has 1.6 scores of World Heritage cultural sites and 1.2 scores of sports stadiums.

4. North Macedonia - has a 1.1 score for World Heritage cultural sites and a 1.2 score for sports stadiums.

The Non-Leisure Resources pillar measures the extent and attractiveness of factors that drive business and other non-leisure travel, including the presence of global cities, major corporations, and leading universities. The scores range from 1 to 7, and the ranking of the countries based on this pillar is as follows. Serbia - scored 1.9/and Albania - scored 1.6/3. Bosnia and Herzegovina - scored 1.6/4. North Macedonia - scored 1.4/and Serbia - scored 1.0.

The number of World Heritage natural sites, the number of species, and the total square km of terrestrial and marine areas under protection are also considered in this pillar. The ranking of the countries based on these criteria is as follows:

Albania - has 2.5 scores of World Heritage natural sites, 1,901 species, and 5,662.0 km of protected areas. North Macedonia - has 2.5 scores of World Heritage natural sites, 1,396 species, and 2,687.9 km of protected areas. Bosnia and Herzegovina - has 2.0 scores of World Heritage natural sites, 1,598 species, and 1,857.8 km of protected areas, and Serbia - has 1.0 scores of World Heritage natural sites, 1,505 species, and 6,766.1 km of protected areas.

The number of cities that are members of UNESCO's Creative Cities Network is also considered. The scores range from 1 to 7, and the ranking of the countries based on this criterion is as follows: Bosnia and Herzegovina - Scored 1.7, North Macedonia - Scored 1.7 3, Serbia - Scored 1.7, Albania - Scored 1.0. The Non-Leisure Resources pillar measures the extent and attractiveness of factors that drive business and other non-leisure travel. It considers the presence of global cities, major corporations, and leading universities. The scores range from 1 to 7, and the ranking of the countries based on this pillar is as follows: 1. Serbia - Scored 1.9 2. Albania - Scored 1.6 3. Bosnia and Herzegovina - Scored 1.6 4. North Macedonia - Scored 1.4.

Based on data accessed from "Travel and Tourism Development Index 2021: Rebuilding for a Sustainable and Resilient Future," the countries from the highest scores to the lowest are as follows:

- 1- Serbia with 3.8 scores;
- 2- Albania with 3.8 scores;
- 3- North Macedonia with 3.5 scores;
- 4- Bosnia and Herzegovina with 3.4 scores;

Based on this ranking, scores do not differ significantly between those four countries. As for the travel and tourism industry's direct contributions to G.D.P., US\$ million is:

- 1- Albania 668.44 M;
- 2- Serbia 498.5 M;
- 3- Bosnia and Herzegovina 247.8 M;
- 4- North Macedonia 147.8 M;

Albania's economy is largely based on Tourism, as the data presented show. Employment is another direct indicator of the region's tourism industry growth. The travel and tourism industry's direct contribution to employment, 1000 jobs, presents the following data: Albania is the country in which tourism has assured most of the population of employment.

- 1- Albania 75.8
- 2- Serbia 35.1
- 3- Bosnia and Herzegovina 22.4
- 4- North and Macedonia 15.0

The contribution of G.D.P. to individual countries is as follows: Direct Travel and Tourism industry share of G.D.P.

- 1- Albania with 4.5%
- 2- Bosnia and Herzegovina with 1.3%
- 3- North Macedonia with 1.2%
- 4- Serbia with 1.0

III.2. Discussion and findings

The World Heritage List, designed and developed by UNESCO, comprises cultural and natural sites of outstanding universal value. Cultural sites often garner significant attention, as they are equally vital in preserving the Earth's biodiversity and geological wonders. This discussion will delve into the significance of natural World Heritage Sites, focusing on the scores assigned to four Balkan countries – Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia.

Albania has a relatively modest score (2.5). It possesses natural sites that exhibit notable ecological diversity and geological features. The score may indicate a moderate level of conservation efforts and recognition of these sites' value. However, there could be potential for further investment in preservation and management to enhance their universal significance.

Similarly, to Albania, North Macedonia's score (2.5) suggests a moderate standing concerning its natural heritage. The country's landscapes and ecosystems hold considerable value, yet there might be efforts to improve conservation strategies to safeguard these assets effectively. Collaborative efforts with international conservation organizations might enhance the recognition and protection of North Macedonia's natural treasures. With a slightly lower score (2.0), Bosnia and Herzegovina's natural sites may face more significant challenges or conservation issues. This could stem from insufficient preservation measures, human encroachment, or natural threats. Efforts to address these challenges should prioritize sustainable management practices and community involvement to ensure the long-term viability of these sites.

Serbia's score (1.0) indicates that its natural heritage sites may urgently need attention and protection. This low score could reflect significant conservation challenges, such as habitat destruction, pollution, or a lack of recognition of their value. Immediate action is crucial to address these issues, including implementing rigorous conservation measures and raising awareness about the importance of preserving Serbia's natural treasures.

Analysis and discussion on the non-leisure resources pillar. Complex political dynamics, economic challenges, and social disparities have long characterized the Western Balkans region. In recent years, efforts have been made to foster economic growth and development, enhancing various pillars of prosperity. One such pillar is Non-Leisure Resources, encompassing natural resources, infrastructure, and human capital. Understanding the status of this pillar in countries like Serbia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia is crucial for policymakers and stakeholders aiming to formulate effective strategies for sustainable development.

In the first position, Serbia, with a score of 1.9, leads the ranking in the non-leisure resources pillar among the selected Western Balkan countries. Serbia benefits from diverse natural resources, including arable land, mineral deposits, and water resources. Its strategic geographic location facilitates trade and connectivity with neighboring countries and beyond. Furthermore, investments in infrastructure, particularly in the transportation and energy sectors, have enhanced the country's economic prospects. Nevertheless, challenges persist, such as the need for further educational attainment and healthcare infrastructure improvements.

Ranked second with a score of 1.6, Albania demonstrates significant potential in non-leisure resources. The country boasts abundant natural beauty, including coastal areas, mountains, and fertile land, which could be leveraged for tourism and agricultural development. Moreover, Albania has improved its infrastructure, particularly in the transportation sector, with ongoing projects to enhance regional connectivity. Nonetheless, the country faces challenges related to institutional capacity, governance issues, and the need for more substantial investments in human capital.

Bosnia-Herzegovina shares the same score of 1.6 with Albania. It exhibits a mixed picture concerning non-leisure resources. The country possesses considerable natural resources, including forests, minerals, and waterways. However, the legacy of past conflicts and political fragmentation has hampered efforts to capitalize on these resources fully. Infrastructure development remains uneven, with disparities between urban and rural areas. Additionally, the education system requires reforms to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving economy.

Ranked last with a score of 1.4, North Macedonia faces notable challenges in the non-leisure resources pillar. While the country benefits from a strategic location and access to key transportation routes, its natural resource endowment could be more extensive. Moreover, infrastructure deficiencies, particularly in rural areas, hinder economic development and regional integration. Addressing these challenges necessitates concerted efforts to improve infrastructure, strengthen institutions, and invest in human capital development.

Future research endeavors could focus deeper on specific aspects of the Natural Heritage and the Non-Leisure Resources pillar, such as the impact of infrastructure investments on economic development, the role of natural resource management in sustainable growth, and the effectiveness of education and healthcare policies in enhancing human capital. Comparative studies across other regions could also provide valuable insights into best practices and lessons learned for fostering prosperity and resilience.

IV. Conclusion

Promoting responsible tourism practices can generate economic benefits while minimizing environmental impact, contributing to natural heritage conservation for Western Balkan countries. All Balkan countries can benefit from collaboration with other nations and international conservation organizations to share best practices, resources, and expertise in natural heritage preservation. It is also of great importance to involve local communities in conservation efforts and foster a sense of ownership and responsibility, ensuring sustainable management practices and long-term protection of natural sites. Continuous efforts should also address monitoring of natural sites to assess their status, identify threats, and adapt conservation strategies accordingly.

The evaluation of World Heritage natural sites in Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia provides valuable insights into the state of their natural heritage and conservation efforts. By addressing challenges, enhancing conservation strategies, and fostering collaboration, these countries can preserve their unique ecosystems and geological wonders for future generations to appreciate and cherish.

The non-leisure resources pillar plays a pivotal role in shaping Western Balkan countries' economic trajectory and social well-being. While each country in the region exhibits unique strengths and challenges, there is a shared imperative to prioritize investments in infrastructure, education, and healthcare to unlock their full potential. By addressing these fundamental aspects, policymakers can foster sustainable development and prosperity, thereby advancing the overall resilience and competitiveness of the Western Balkans.

Prioritizing infrastructure development [28], particularly in rural and underdeveloped areas, to enhance connectivity and facilitate economic growth is of great importance for the region. It is also very essential for the individual countries in the region to invest in human capital through targeted education and skills as well as training programs to equip the workforce with the skills needed for the modern economy. Strengthening governance mechanisms and institutional capacity to improve transparency, efficiency, and accountability in resource management and fostering regional cooperation and integration to leverage synergies and promote shared prosperity across the Western Balkans, are some recommendations which might contribute to foster the sustainable tourism in the region.

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