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ECOTOURISM STUDY IN KAZAKHSTAN: THE PAST, PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

Kazakhstan has significant resources for the development of ecotourism, or also known as nature-based tourism. Their nature is characterized by a high degree of environmentally rich biodiversity, flora, fauna and wildlife, with many possessing unique landscapes and ecotourism facilities. National parks in particular have the greatest potential for the development of eco-tourism, as a type of protected areas, the main task are protection of ecosystems and regulation of territorial use for ecological, educational, scientific, touristic and recreational purposes. In the academia, the study on ecotourism is dated to the early 1970's. However, the studies on ecotourism research in Kazakhstan have emerged only in the early 2000's and still now lacks abundant specialized research output and research interest. In light of these problems, this research paper sought to evaluate the literature on ecotourism studies in the context of Kazakhstan and discuss the main findings by prominent Kazakhstani scholars. Firstly, thorough literature review analysis of the evolution of ecotourism studies will be done. Here, we will look at its conceptual emergence; historical importance, challenges and significance for the research community; previous and current research focus; potential further research studies and the importance of studies on national parks. And secondly, the paper discusses the characteristics of ecotourism destination in Kazakhstan, the emergence of ecotourism as a scientific study among Kazakhstani scholars and its present development as well as future prospects of ecotourism studies. Our discussion and literature review will offer useful information for researchers in not only understanding the evolution of how ecotourism studies have evolved over the time in the context of Kazakhstan, but also give them a thorough overview of the current state of ecotourism industry. There is a significant research and information gap on the topic of ecotourism study in Kazakhstan and this research aims to fill that gap.

Key words: Ecotourism, Kazakhstan, national parks, development, tourism.

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Қазақстандағы экотуризмді зерттеу: өткені, бүгіні және болашағы

Қазақстанда экотуризмді дамыту үшін маңызды ресурстар бар, немесе оларды табиғи туризм деп те атайды. Олардың табиғаты табиғаттың биологиялық әртүрлілігімен, өсімдіктер әлемімен, жануарлар дүниесімен және жабайы табиғатымен ерекшеленеді, олардың көпшілігінде ерекше ландшафттары мен экотуризм нысандары бар. Ұлттық парктер экологиялық туризмді дамытудың ерекше әлеуетіне ие, өйткені ерекше қорғалатын табиғи аумақтардың бір түрі ретінде экожүйелерді қорғау және экологиялық, білім беру, ғылыми, туристік және рекреациялық мақсаттар үшін аумақтық пайдалануды реттеу болып табылады. Академияда экотуризм туралы зерттеу 1970 жылдардың басына жатады. Алайда, Қазақстандағы экотуризмді зерттеу бойынша зерттеулер 2000 жылдардың басында ғана пайда болды, ал қазірге дейін оларда арнайы мамандандырылған ғылыми нәтижелер мен ғылыми қызығушылық жоқ. Осы проблемаларды ескере отырып, бұл зерттеу жұмысы экотуризмді зерттеу бойынша әдебиеттерді Қазақстан жағдайында бағалауға және белгілі қазақстандық ғалымдардың негізгі тұжырымдарын талқылауға тырысты. Біріншіден, экотуризмді зерттеу эволюциясы әдебиеттеріне мұқият талдау жасалады. Мұнда оның тұжырымдамалық пайда болуы қарастырылады; ғылыми қауымдастық үшін тарихи маңыздылық, қиындықтар және маңыздылық; алдыңғы және ағымдағы зерттеу бағыты; әрі қарайғы потенциалды зерттеулер және ұлттық саябақтардағы зерттеулердің маңыздылығы. Екіншіден, жұмыста Қазақстандағы экотуризмнің сипаттамалары, экотуризмнің қазақстандық

зерттеушілер арасында ғылыми зерттеу ретінде пайда болуы және оның қазіргі дамуы, сондай-ақ экотуризмді зерттеудің болашақ перспективалары туралы айтылады. Біздің пікірталасымыз және әдеби шолуымыз зерттеушілерге экотуризм туралы зерттеулер уақыт өте келе Қазақстан жағдайында қалай дамығандығы туралы эволюцияны түсініп қана қоймай, сонымен қатар оларға экотуризм индустриясының қазіргі жағдайына толық шолу жасайды. Қазақстанда экотуризмді зерттеу тақырыбында айтарлықтай ғылыми-зерттеу және ақпараттық олқылық бар және бұл зерттеу осы олқылықтың орнын толтыруға бағытталған.

Түйін сөздер: экотуризм, Қазақстан, ұлттық саябақтар, даму, туризм.

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Исследование экотуризма в Казахстане: прошлое, настоящее и будущее

Казахстан обладает значительными ресурсами для развития экотуризма, также известного как природный туризм. Их природа отличается высокой степенью экологически богатого биоразнообразия, флоры, фауны и дикой природы, многие из которых обладают уникальными ландшафтами и объектами экотуризма. В частности, национальные парки имеют наибольший потенциал для развития экотуризма, как вид охраняемых территорий, основной задачей которых является защита экосистем и регулирование территориального использования в экологических, образовательных, научных, туристических и рекреационных целях. В академических кругах исследование экотуризма датируется началом 1970-х годов. Однако исследования в области экотуризма в Казахстане появились только в начале 2000-х годов и до сих пор не имеют достаточных результатов специализированных исследований и исследовательского интереса. В свете этих проблем в данной исследовательской работе была предпринята попытка оценить литературу по исследованиям экотуризма в контексте Казахстана и обсудить основные выводы видных казахстанских ученых. Во-первых, будет проведен тщательный обзор литературы, посвященный эволюции исследований экотуризма. Здесь мы рассмотрим его концептуальное появление; историческое значение, проблемы и значение для исследовательского сообщества; предыдущая и текущая направленность исследований; потенциальные дальнейшие исследования и важность исследований национальных парков. Во-вторых, в статье обсуждаются характеристики направления экотуризма в Казахстане, появление экотуризма как научного исследования среди казахстанских ученых и его нынешнее развитие, а также будущие перспективы исследований экотуризма. Наше обсуждение и обзор литературы предложат исследователям полезную информацию не только для понимания эволюции того, как исследования экотуризма развивались с течением времени в контексте Казахстана, но также дадут им подробный обзор текущего состояния индустрии экотуризма. В Казахстане существует значительный пробел в исследованиях и информации по теме изучения экотуризма, и данное исследование направлено на восполнение этого пробела.

Ключевые слова: экотуризм, Казахстан, национальные парки, разработка, туризм.

Introduction

The international experience shows that ecological tourism or also known as eco-tourism is developing with a dynamic speed, mainly within the specially protected natural areas. The modern concept of eco-tourism has emerged at the intersection of the most urgent environmental, economic and social problems of society. Eco-tourism is designed on the one hand to satisfy the human need for communication with nature, privacy, study and knowledge of nature and culture, and on the other – to solve the socio-economic and environmental problems of remote regions.

The socio-economic role of ecotourism differs in areas with different functions. In agricultural areas, ecotourism can be an additional source of income to support the production, landscape and traditional way of life of the local population. Ecotourism is one of the main sources of income that economically justifies the implementation of this function in the territories whose main function is the protection of natural and cultural-historical heritage. In industrial areas, the role of ecotourism is to protect areas of little-changed nature and maintain the physical and mental balance of the population.

One of the goals of ecotourism development is to support specially protected natural areas, primarily

state national parks and nature reserves, as the most effective measure for the conservation of endemic, rare and endangered species, unique reference sites and natural ecosystems. A specially protected natural area (SPNA) is a section of land, water bodies and air space above them with natural complexes and objects of the state nature reserve fund, for which a special protection regime is established. Specially protected natural areas (SPNA) are the most important link in the development of ecotourism, as their territories are attractive for tourists due to the unique natural complexes and objects of historical and cultural heritage. The development of eco-tourism in protected areas entails environmental education of the country's citizens to respect nature, and also provides the local population with new jobs in the service sector (accommodation of tourists, organization of public catering, sale of ecotourism products and national products, provision of services as guides, etc.). Successful development of recreational activities on the territory of national parks can further contribute to the attraction of own funds.

However, the role of ecotourism is not limited to direct financial revenues. Equally important are the so-called non-monetary advantages, which are not always possible to assess, or which are only indirectly expressed by economic categories. These include, for example, the creation of new jobs, environmental education, raising the cultural level of the population, developing the infrastructure network, and raising the economy of backward areas. Many scholars have outlined that specially protected natural area such as national parks or natural reserves should not be entirely commercialized and their untapped resources depleted, as the negative anthropogenic impact will lead to an environmental damage to the whole eco-system. Instead, they should be used for the purpose of providing "ecological services" to people in a form of fresh air, clean water or protection of biodiversity. In Kazakhstan, work on securing areas of specially protected natural areas (SPNA) for long-term and short-term use began in 2006 after the adoption of a new version of the law on specially protected natural areas [1]. National parks have the greatest potential for the development of ecotourism, as a type of protected areas, the main task of which, along with the protection of ecosystems, is to regulate the use of the territory of the national park and its protected zone for ecological, educational, scientific, tourist, recreational purposes. National parks and nature reserves in Kazakhstan take up about 9% of the whole territory and can be seen as both resort zones as well as ecological zones that

should be both protected, conserved and developed for recreation purposes [2]. Recent developments in Kazakhstan with the State of the Union Address in the during last year June, 2020, by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and the introduction of a new environmental code by the Ministry of Ecology, Geology, and Natural Resources alongside the implementation "State Program for the Development of Local and Foreign Tourism for 2019-2025" have all significantly highlighted the importance of ecotourism development in Kazakhstan in the near future. According to this state program, by 2030 additional seven natural parks will be added to the currently thirteen existing natural parks in Kazakhstan with a special council to be established for each national park. In this regard, the importance of the ecotourism industry has been recognized at the highest official level of the government and will likely gain its significant push in the years to come.

Aim of the Paper & Research Methodology

The aim of this paper is to thoroughly summarize as well as analyze the ecotourism development in Kazakhstan from a both an academic as well as from a developmental path of point of view. This way scholars can understand what has so far been studied and accomplished in the field of ecotourism studies worldwide as well as in Kazakhstan in particular. Hence, in other words, being able to re-establish and refresh something that is known about a particular subject area or research study can help to identify research gaps and allows a person to understand the current state of affairs in the subject area. This is also referred to as literature review in the academia. Therefore, this paper follows a research methodology of a qualitative discourse literature review analysis.

The paper is divided into five sections. The first section concerns with the overall literature review on the studies about the concept of ecotourism and its evolutionary developmental path in the past to the present day from a scholarly point of view. The second section focuses on the emergence, challenges and opportunities of ecotourism study and ecotourism development in Kazakhstan. Here, sub-sections include the emergence of ecotourism as a scientific study in Kazakhstan, analysis of Kazakhstan as an ecotourism destination as well as the discussion on the present and future ecotourism developments with a focus on national parks. Last but not the least, the last three sections concern the conclusive part of the paper including the limitations

of the research study as well as their further research suggestions.

All research materials were extracted from only secondary sources of information. In this regard, the paper analyzes only existing sources of information that were provided through the web. These for instance include officially published reports, brochures, websites, statistics, books or journal articles that revolve around the subject area of ecotourism. This paper is of high analytical value for those scholars or experts seeking a clearer understanding on the matter concerning how the ecotourism development and its scientific study as a subject area in Kazakhstan has evolved, as there is a huge knowledge gap in this field of studies of in-depth contextual country-specific analysis, especially in regards to a literature review analysis.

Literature Review

The concept of ecotourism: its evolution, past and the present

The term ecotourism can be traced back to Hetzer in 1965, Miller in 1978 and Ceballos-Lascurain in 1983 [3]. However, the term “eco-tourism” itself has been first coined by Hector Ceballos-Lascurain in 1983 and was initially used to describe nature-based travel aspects to remote areas with a focus on education rather than conservation or preservation. Back in the early 1980’s the concept of eco-tourism emerged as a different kind of tourism as a result of negative social and ecological effects mass tourism had worldwide [4, 5]. Later on in the early 1990’s and 2000’s, the concept became an integral part in the popular movement towards sustainable development studies and especially what concerned the biodiversity aspect [6, 7] and classical natural-oriented model with a focus on untouched natural complexes and nature management from anthropogenic problems [8, 9]. The emergence of eco-tourism as a concept in the tourism studies was due to the growing concerns about negative environmental and socio-economic effects of tourism development [10]. Here, the concept initially helped natural parks to be environmentally preserved for local communities, who were marginalized from management processes [11]. As Grant put it, “it involves education and interpretation of natural environment as well as how to manage it in an ecologically sustainable way”, which basically meant that people over time with the ecotourism studies develop an environmentally-friendly consciousness and knowledge that would support people to understand conservation issues

[12]. The same has also been said by Ceballos-Lascurain in 1996 [13]. Garcia-Herrera also states that the major driving force for the eco-tourism concept to be used both theoretically and practically used in tourism studies was focus on conservation purposes of protected areas [14].

The term ecotourism can be defined as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the wellbeing of the local people, and involves interpretation and education” [15, 16]. Others such as Boo define it as merging and conversion of two modern trends of integrating conservation with economic development and the demand to be active travelers to new destinations [17]. Charnley gives the definition for eco-tourism as a low impact form of tourism focusing on travel to natural areas [18]. Neba goes even further than that and states the definition for eco-tourism to be considered as a concept that studies the decrease in environmental and socio-economic problems of a destination with ecologically sensitive areas, where sustainable development aspects play a major role [19]. Alike Neba, the same viewpoints also shared Goodwin and Blamey [20, 21]. There are various definitions of eco-tourism according to the study done by Fennel, who found 85 definitions after conducting a literature review on eco-tourism studies [22]. Most of these definitions according to Fennel revolved around the attributes of conservation, education, culture, benefits to local and reference to sources of eco-tourism activities with natural areas [22]. The same was also found out in other reports such as that of Edwards, McLaughlin and Ham or Honey [11, 23]. However, all that taken into consideration, there no universal definition for eco-tourism as it is a vibrant movement [24, 25]. The same issue with the definition on ecotourism concept, as abovementioned, goes also for understanding what type of principles pertain to eco-tourism in terms of characteristics, dimensions and components. Here, various authors have tried to study various aspects of eco-tourism principles [11, 16, 26-29]. These differences in definitions, principles, dimensions and components regarding eco-tourism concept shows us that it is often reality context dependent, may often be redefined after a certain period and may also depend on many external and internal factors.

Moreover, to better understand how eco-tourism develops, one must understand that the following stakeholders may all contribute to the process of ecotourism development. These concern stakeholders such as local authorities; government ministries and their respective governmental agencies; local

corporations and partnerships; profit-making private sector; external investors; local and regional residents; landowners; environmental and cultural groups and associations; sport clubs; economic and development organizations; research bodies; educational institutes; concessionaires, licenses and permit holders; hospitality industry; tour operators; destination marketing organizations; media; etc. [30, 31]. The stakeholders are vital to respective destination areas with eco-tourism development and recreational activities, as each of them is an integral part of the whole collaboration process in the ecotourism development [31, 32-35].

Most studies on eco-tourism focus on natural areas, natural resources and protected areas, which all can be categorized within the term of specially protected natural areas (SPNA) [36]. For instance, Wells analyzed the role of national parks and tourism as driving force for economic development [37]. Others such as Hamilton looked at the recreational land use of the largest Canadian National Park *The Wood Buffalo Park* and assessed the changing nature of the wilderness [38]. Other notable scholars include Peine & Renfro [39] Cebaballos [40] or Mantell et al. [41]. However, other authors also studied ecotourism from an ethical standpoint [42]; importance of biodiversity for and sustainable development for natural areas [43, 44] visitor segmentation issue [45, 46]; community participation aspect [47, 48] and other themes including visitor behavior [49] or stakeholder analysis [50, 51]. According to Fennell [22] and Ervin et al. [52], protected areas are considered as critical niche of eco-tourism to support on the one side the system of life in the eco-environmental area of a country, while on the other side to prevent exploitation of the wildlife and allow nature-based areas to be used for the purpose of recreational activity. Studies on ecotourism conducted on protected areas have shown that eco-tourism itself contributes positively to the growth of biodiversity, welfare of local people, promotes the use of non-renewable resources and provides job opportunities for local population via tourism promotion [53-59]. Therefore, the study of eco-tourism is also often termed and interlinked with nature-based tourism (NBT) and adventure tourism, where it involves activities such as hiking, mountaineering, sort hunting, fishing, trekking or nature observation. In this regard, eco-tourism involves the following travel experience with the focus on natural and cultural environment, ecologically sustainable activities, educative and interpretive programs beneficial for local community groups and projects; preservation and conservation

of the surrounding environment and natural areas [13]. Eco-tourism studies do not always have to study the positive aspects of nature-based tourism but may also focus on the negative impacts of ecotourism. For instance, the management issues of ecotourism concepts, risks concerning increased control by outsiders, cultural distortions, and environmental degradation or diminished visitor experiences [60].

The importance of natural parks in eco-tourism

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) defines natural parks as natural areas that protect large-scale ecological processes pertaining complementary species and ecosystems, which provide a basis for spiritual and creative opportunities, scientific experience, education and recreational activities with a focus on environmentally-friendly and cultural aspects [61].

Each country has its own way on how to conceptualize and define a national park [62]. For example, the United Kingdom defines it as a “vast region with beautiful scenery”, where its natural landscape needs to be preserved; the access to infrastructural facilities for the public maintained and improved; the surrounding wildlife to be protected by law alongside the architectural and its historical significance; and the agricultural potentials utilized for the benefit of the local community and ecosystem as a whole [63]. As a result, natural parks according to the United Kingdom are seen as open public spaces to be visited for both local and foreign visitors. Other countries such as Indonesia take a different glance at it by defining natural parks as “nature conservation area” containing native ecosystems that can be used for various purposes ranging from scientific to tourism cultivating aspects [64]. In this regard, Indonesia sees natural parks as specifically protected limited area that needs to be managed effectively and may not always be open to the public [64]. In general, most countries see natural parks as “living areas of environment” and despite the various definitions used by various countries, natural parks share similar attributes such as provision of public access to use of national parks wisely and eco-friendly [64]. According to Buckley, national parks are critical attributes of ecotourism as nature-based tourism that are intended on the one hand to minimize the negative impact of tourists and anthropogenic factors, while on the other positively impact the environment and benefit the local community alongside everything else that that surrounds natural areas [65].

The literature review on national park themes within the eco-tourism studies may vary from community participation and empowerment studies

[47, 48, 66, 67] to management studies [68-71] and tourism behavior and satisfaction analysis [45, 72-80]. For instance, Mlozi & Pesamaa studied the importance of knowledge of national parks and recreational facilities surrounding it as premises for environmental planning and visitor satisfaction in Tanzanian national parks [80]. Others such as Dangi & Gribb stressed the importance of stakeholder cooperation for the Rocky Mountain NP in the United States of America [51]. Hence, various studies found various important findings with different recommendations for different purposes within different case studies.

Ecotourism in Kazakhstan its emergence, challenges and opportunities

Kazakhstan as an ecotourism destination

Kazakhstan is rich in natural landscapes ranging from large and sunny steppes to various mountains, beautiful lakes, dense forests, sand dunes and deserts [81, 82]. Overall, developing the tourism industry has the potential to support employment, generate income and proactively help the market for spurring recreational activities in the natural areas of Kazakhstan [81-83]. Kazakhstan has specially protected natural areas (SPNA), including 10 reserves, 13 national parks, 79 natural sanctuaries and 50 natural areas as of 2020 with all of them owned by the state [2]. All these natural areas cover up to 9% of the entire territory of Kazakhstan [2]. One of the most distinguished protected natural areas is the Altyn-Emel National Park, which covers a territory of more than 1.2 million acres located in the southern region of the country. Other national parks and state nature reserves in Kazakhstan are the following: Burabai natural park, Bayanaul, Korgalzhyn state national reserves, Kolsai Lake, Bukhtarma national reservoir, Akzhaiyk state nature reserve, Lake Alakol, Charyn Canyon natural park and islands such as Araltobe Canyon Zhamanty or Zhabyktau [1]. The tourist and recreational activities in national parks are carried out directly by the national park

if it has a license for tour operator activities as well as by individuals and legal entities providing tourist services. National parks are financed largely from the state budget and little from international grants. Moreover, cultural monuments such as mausoleums of Khoja Ahmed Yassau or Arystan Baba Otrar are also important culture-historical pieces of archeology [1]. In this regard, Kazakhstan offers various forms of nature-based tourism that in different shapes, sizes and forms. On the one hand you have 154 km long Charyn Canyon with heights reaching up to 300 meters and mausoleums listed as UNESCO World Heritage buildings, while on the other hand you have singing sand dunes and isolated island reservoir in-between the Aral Sea [84-86]. Territorially, Kazakhstan provides different types of eco-tourism in different regions. For instance, in the eastern part of the country tourists can enjoy eco-tourism activities in the form of skiing, hiking and visiting different forms of national parks, natural areas and reserves. In the western hemisphere you have mountains, hiking trails, bicycle trails and historical mausoleums. Currently, a total of thirteen national parks are officially recognized as state national nature parks and are protected by law as specially protected areas [84, 85, 87]. According to recent developments, a new environmental code has been established in Kazakhstan that also has indicated that additional two national parks will be added into the list of national parks in the following upcoming years [85]. These will be “Merke” State National Park and “Ulytau” State National Park [85]. These national parks offer many opportunities for tourism development, particularly in niche segments such as ecological, cultural and adventure tourism [88, 89]. The list of all thirteen national parks in Kazakhstan can be viewed within the following Table 1 below that also depicts the location of national parks; their area in square kilometers; the year of their establishment; their prevailing type(s) of relief and natural zones; and elements of their vertical belts. Besides that, the distribution of all thirteen national parks in Kazakhstan can also be seen in Figure 1 below.

Table 1 – Natural Parks of Kazakhstan (Source: Akiyanova et al, [90]; Kazakhstani Encyclopedia [91])

Name	Location	Area in km ²	Year established	Prevailing type of relief	Natural Zone	Vertical belt elements
Altyn-Emel	Almaty region	4600	1996	mountain	desert	Semi-desert steppe, meadow steppe, forest steppe, forest
Bayanaul	Pavlodar province	684	1985	shallow	steppe	Forest-steppe
Burabay	Akmola region	835	2000	Low and shallow	steppe	Forest-steppe

Continuation of table 1

Name	Location	Area in km ²	Year established	Prevailing type of relief	Natural Zone	Vertical belt elements
Buiratau	Akmola region	890	2011	shallow	steppe	Forest-steppe
Charyn Canyon	Almaty region	1251	2004	Lowland and mountain	Semi-desert	Steppe, forest-steppe
Ile-Alatau	Almaty region	2000	1996	mountain	desert	Semi-desert, steppe, forest-steppe, forest-xerophytic, meadow
Karkaraly	Karaganda region	1121	1998	Low and shallow	steppe	Forest-steppe, forest
Katon Karagay	East Kazakhstan Region	6434	2001	mountain	steppe	Forest-steppe, forest, cryophyte, meadow, tundra, nival
Kokshetau	Akmola Region	1820	1996	Low and shallow	steppe	Forest-steppe
Sairam-Ugam	South Kazakhstan Region	1490	2007	mountain	desert	Semi-desert, steppe-forest, xerophytic, meadow, nival
Kolsay-Kolderi	Almaty Region	1619	2007	mountain	desert	Semi-desert, steppe, forest, xerophytic, meadow, nival
Zhongar-Alatau	Almaty Region	3560	2010	mountain	desert	Semi-desert, steppe, forest, xerophytic, meadow, nival
Tarbagatai	East Kazakhstan Region	1363	2018	mountain	desert	Steppe, forest



Figure 1 – Distribution of all 13 currently existing national parks in Kazakhstan (Source: Outdoor.kz [92])

The emergence of ecotourism as scientific study

However, with all the potential that eco-tourism growth can provide in Kazakhstan, the country did not focus up until 2020 seriously on the development of eco-tourism. The term eco-tourism was brought only in the early 2000's within the scientific community [90-92], to be more exact since 2003 on with several international NGOs funding eco-tourism projects in Kazakhstan [1]. For instance, fifteen eco-sites were created as a result of these projects within the concept of rural ecotourism [1]. However, the term has been used in Kazakhstan since 1995, precisely after the adoption of the law "On tourism activity in the Republic of Kazakhstan" from 13.06.2001

N.211, it officially received the status of one of the most priority tourism industries [93, 94]. In 2005, Kazakhstan Tourist Association established the first so-called Ecotourism Information Resource Center in Kazakhstan (EARO) that targeted ecological tourism and attracted information and resources base for eco-tourism development in the country by working with organizations such as VSO, USAIP, ExxoMobil or VSO [1]. It also had goals to popularize the ideas of eco-tourism in Kazakhstan and advertising support for project regions in promoting eco-tourism in regional and rural communities. Later in 2006, a state program on the development of tourism in the Republic of Kazakhstan recognized

eco-tourism as one of the priority directions for the development of tourism in the country [1]. But since then no unified organizational policies or approaches to the development of eco-tourism have been formulated [1]. Despite that, numerous authors have touched upon these issues for the last fifteen years and have highlighted the importance of eco-tourism development in Kazakhstan and the problems and challenges it faces. These scholars include S. Mukhambetov et al. [1]; Shedenov et al. [88]; Baiburiev et al. [89]; Baizhanova [95]; Karataev & Pazykhaiyr [96]; Kenzhina et al. [97]; Kairova, Essimova & Malikova [98]; Mutalievya et al. [99]; Kurmanov et al. [100]; Thapa [101]; Niyazbekova et al. [102]; Akiyanova et al. [90]. For instance, while on the one side Mukhambetov et al. in 2014 discussed the eco-tourism development in Kazakhstan in terms of the concept of sustainability life cycle [1] and Shedenov et al. provided a SWOT-Analysis of major strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities that ecotourism industry shares [88], on the other side Mutalievya et al. in 2020 have discussed the tourism potential and ecological tourism development on the example of the Kostanay region with the focus on ecological tourism management aspect [99]. Other scholars such as Baiburiev et al. analyzed the main opportunities for ecological tourism development in southeastern part of Kazakhstan with focus on the Almaty region [89]. Here he concluded with the following findings with main ecotourism market problems: insufficient development of tourism and transport infrastructure; low level of quality service and training; mismatch of infrastructure from positions of the international standards; no mechanism for subsidies, preferential duty and tax benefits to investors. Besides these weaknesses, Baiburiev et al. also found out the following strengths and opportunities: working with guesthouses; creation of new workplaces including rural areas; etc. [89]. Thapa in 2019 studied the importance of curriculum development of state's process in implementing ecotourism education in Kazakhstan [101]. Many Kazakhstani scholars have mentioned that problems such as poor road and infrastructure development have hindered the development of eco-tourism in Kazakhstan [1, 88]. Among other issues mentioned were also the weak governmental support and activity to promote ideas of ecological tourism [1]; low level of training of personnel with a lack of scientific base for tourism and specialized tourism personnel serving management [88]; discrepancy between quality of elements of tourist infrastructure and the offered price as well as absence of price cadaster of

tourist recreational resources [95]. Most scholars have discussed the term eco-tourism in Kazakhstan also in combination with the sustainable tourism development [88]. Kairova, Essimova & Malikova have stated in 2018 that the biggest potential and driver for eco-tourism growth in Kazakhstan hold especially protected natural territories, particularly national parks [98].

In terms of literature review on eco-tourism studies in Kazakhstan, back in 2017 Kenzhina et al. have already highlighted the importance of natural parks as major drivers in the development of eco-tourism in Kazakhstan, especially what concerned the aspect of maintaining nature conservation [97]. Here, they exemplified how classical eco-tourism in Kazakhstan in tourism under-developed due to lack of conceptual understanding and awareness for ecological problems and drive to be acquainted with natural and cultural heritage [97]. According to their review of the analysis of the tourism market of Kazakhstan, national parks and natural reserves in Kazakhstan are of great interest for foreign tourists, as surveys conducted in Germany, Great Britain, France, South Korea and Japan showed that environmental tours in Kazakhstan strike a huge interest for them [94]. The same viewpoint was also shared by Niyazbekova et al., who have analyzed the essence of the development of national parks in Kazakhstan [102]. The scholars noted that natural parks in Kazakhstan, such as Ile-Alatau, Burabay or Kolsay Kolderi, did not had tourist guides in the territories of state national natural parks, while some other had no accommodation places at all for tourists [102]. The same issue was found out with the availability of food facilities in national parks of Burabay, Buiratau, Zhongar-Alatau, Katon-Karagay and Kokshetau [102].

Another study done by Akiyanova et al. in 2020 assessed the development of national parks and reserves in Kazakhstan [90]. They found out that most natural parks are very rich in biodiversity and territorial landscape but use only five percent of their ecotourism potential [90]. In this regard, the potential to develop ecotourism in national parks is huge but implementation problems with management issues hinder their development growth [90]. Overall, scholars agree that natural parks have to work on solving financial issues with poor road quality, transport infrastructure, transport accessibility and lack of investments enabling expansion of tourism facilities such as trails and campsites, rental of tourist equipment or simple provision of electricity in hotels or forestry located bungalows [102].

According to Tomiris Isaeva, who wrote in 2020 an article on the situation with the development of ecotourism in Kazakhstan on the web portal *The Steppe*, environmental problems such as trash build-up, weak infrastructure or paucity of national and local environmental education have caused major ecological problems at natural parks in Kazakhstan [103]. This issue has especially been exacerbated within national parks such as in Ile-Alatau National Park [103]. The same viewpoint has also been shared by the previously mentioned scholars of Kenzhina et al., who have also added the problem of a lack of “competitive” infrastructure and lack of information support (e.g. maps, guidebooks, local memorabilia, links, etc.) [97]. Others such as Mukhambetov et al. have outlined the issue of litter and poor management of resource consumption around national parks and suggested that the country should first and foremost restore its environment and categorize the different routes of tourism and special routes of eco-tourism [1]. These eco-tourism routes should also be protected from negative impacts of anthropogenic activity based on the principles of sustainable tourism [1].

Present and future ecotourism development with a focus on national parks in Kazakhstan

Nowadays, Kazakhstan has a huge tourism potential and especially what concerns the ecotourism industry, which may in the near future attract up to 70 billion tenge (equivalent to US\$ 166.6 million) of private investment according to Assel Satubaldina article in 2020 on *The Astana Times* [104]. Mr. Magzum Mirzagaliyev, who is the current Minister of Ecology, Geology, and Natural Resources has outlined the same future prognosis during the government session chaired by Prime Minister Askar Mamin on September 1, 2020 [87]. According to government estimations, the niche sector of eco-tourism could attract up to 12.2 million visitors to national parks and invite overall investments up to \$1.2 billion by 2030 with additional 12.000 jobs to be created [87]. Besides that, according to the Order by the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan of May 31, 2019 No. 360, which is related to the development program of tourist industry of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2019-2025, by 2025 we will see an increase of GDP growth rate of 7% directed towards tourism sector as a result of increased tourist inflow and foreign and domestic investments, which will eventually increase the share of tourism sector within the GDP from 6% to 8%. This can be seen in the following Figure 2 below.

According to the National Action Plan for implementation of President’s State of the Union

address of September 1, 2020, which includes ten key areas of a focus on themes such as the adoption of a new model of public administration or importance of civic participation in government administration with elements of reforms in digitalization, a special focus was dedicated for the aspect on “ecology and protection of biodiversity” section [105]. Here, the new draft of environmental code outlined comprehensive measures that will be taken to develop not only mineral resources bases or water management issues, but also what concerns national parks [106]. This has also been once again mentioned in the “State Program for the Development of Local and Foreign Tourism for 2019-2025”, where Kazakhstan has aimed to actively support the development of tourism in Kazakhstan and in particular the ecological tourism development with the focus on specially protected natural areas [105]. Hence, as of recent government initiatives, the interest in developing in the future the state national natural parks has increased significantly, especially if we look at the aforementioned official governmental plans to further develop, finance and implement new eco-tourism projects and support the development of thirteen national parks in Kazakhstan. According to Kazakhstani legislation, the state is responsible for national nature parks in terms of important tasks of development and implementation of scientific methods of nature protection, organization and conducting environmental monitoring to preserve, restore and safeguard natural complexes with their unique natural areas, zones and objects. Moreover, the Kazakhstani law also regulates state national natural parks as specially protected areas. These specially protected natural areas have a status of an environmental and scientific institution, intended for the conservation of biological and landscape diversity.

As a result of the new draft of the environmental code, an active preparatory work for national parks is underway around Almaty region, which concern those regarding Ile-Alatau National Park, Kolsai Lakes National Park, Charyn Canyon National Park and Altyn-Emel National Park [2]. For instance, in the region of Ile-Alatau National Park glamping centers, eco-hotels, campsites and visit centers will be constructed in the near future [2]. Another region according to Deputy Chairman of JSC Kazakh Tourism NC Mr. Kairat Sadvakasov that is highly developed is the Shchuchinsk-Borovoe resort zone, while East Kazakhstan on the other hand is the least developed but the most promising alongside Katon-Karagay natural park to earn the title of holding the most potential in terms of pantotherapy,

medotherapy and adventure tourism [107]. These initiatives should support the recreational activities in protected areas with visit centers for tourists to be established by the end of 2021 [2, 108]. On top of that, those national parks envision new investments in building new infrastructure facilities for camping areas, hiking trails with navigation infrastructure, availability of service points for gastronomy, provision section for guide services, sanitary facilities and measures to minimize anthropogenic impacts according to Chief Manager of Department of Kazakh Tourism National Company Yernur Kenzhebekov [2, 108]. The plan was presented to the President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in August 2020 and has set its focus on the development of eco-tourism industry and 13 national parks. After careful review of international experience regarding national park conservation management aspects, the Ministry of Ecology, Geology and Natural Resources in Kazakhstan announced that the country will aim to adopt the US national parks development model for the thirteen national parks in Kazakhstan and give special attention to development towards building itineraries, natural trails, medical centers, visit centers, ethno-auls and camping areas [108]. On top of that, according to Mr. Magzum Mirzagaliyev, the Ministry of Ecology, Geology and Natural Resources alongside the Ministry of Culture and Sports will also set up a special council by 2021 for the development of national parks of Charyn

Canyon, Kolsay Kolderi, Altyn-Emel and Ile-Alatau consisting of tourism experts, representatives of the Ministry as well as environmental activists, and develop a draft on the Concept for the Conservation and Rational Use of Biological Diversity until 2030 [108, 109]. The latter is aimed to preserve rare species of plants and animals as well as systematically improve management systems across the country in terms of forestry aspects and specially protected natural areas, which has also been restated in the state of the union address from September 09, 2020 by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev [87, 110]. In terms of infrastructure plans, according to the “State Program for the Development of Local and Foreign Tourism for 2019-2025”, 27 infrastructures have been planned to be realized in the upcoming years that would directly support the transport routes for the recreational activities of national parks [105]. Among them is the 132.4 km long capital construction of highways and 104 km of power supply networks [105]. All measures in support for the ecotourism industry should amount up to 10 billion tenge [105]. Considering that the growth of natural parks relative to the total area of protected areas of Kazakhstan has increased for the last 30 years as shown in Figure 3 below, we can predict that the optimistic estimations made by the government towards the growth of the ecotourism industry also align with the increased growth of investment projects and finances.



Figure 2 – Structure of share of tourism in GDP

(Source: Order of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan as of May 31, 2019 No. 360 [105])

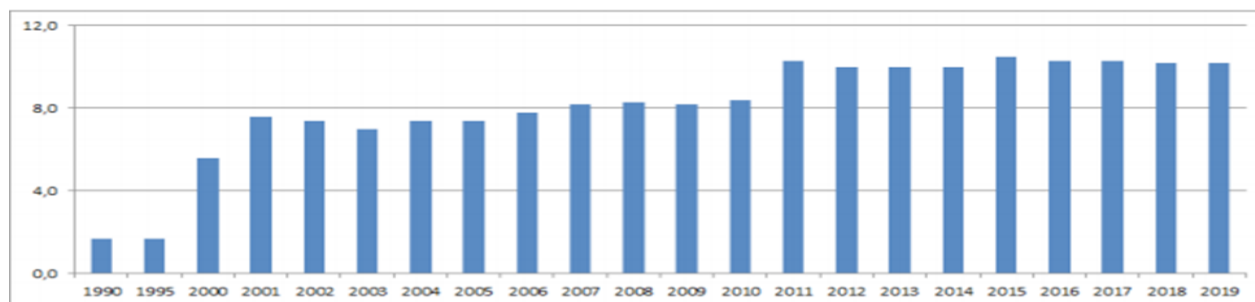


Figure 3 – Dynamics of growth of areas of the natural parks relative to the total area of protected areas of Kazakhstan (Source: Akiyanova et al. [90])

Other measures mentioned in the State of the Union Address also pinpointed the focus on “green growth” campaigns through large-scale greening projects with deep de-carbonization initiatives of the national economy [110]. Besides that, President Tokayev has urged in his state of the union address that the government should pay close attention to toughen up criminal and administrative prosecution for those committing offences in the area of environmental damage and animal harm, invest into the ecological education of the younger generation in schools and universities, and strengthen general environmental values on a systematic basis [110]. Hence, this tells us that the focus on national parks will be given special importance in the upcoming years alongside the eco-educational aspect.

Numerous reasons have been mentioned that hinder the development of ecotourism development of natural parks as an attraction site for local and foreign tourists. The first reason according to officials in Nur-Sultan and scholars such as Karataev & Pazylkhayir [96], Niyazbekova et al. [102], and Akiyanova et al. [90] are due to the low quality of infrastructure and the overall absence of infrastructure that enable growth and visitor attraction. These concern facilities such as accommodation, catering and lack of appropriate equipped trails, information centers, rental points or souvenir shops. The second and one of the main reasons, according to the head of the Ministry of Ecology, Geology and Natural Resources in Kazakhstan Mr. Magzum Mirzagaliyev, is that the country first and foremost does not have its own concept of how to revive national parks and is in a desperate need to at least start local ecotourism first [108]. In this regard, the aforementioned American model for the development of national parks will be adopted and preferences of investment projects given to the development of hiking trails and routes, camping and ethno-tourism aspects

[108]. To comparatively illustrate you the difference between successful international counterparts and Kazakhstan’s national parks, we can look at the United States of America. While the USA attracted an estimated 328 million visitors to their own national parks in 2019 alone, this number in Kazakhstan stood at only a meager 1.5 million visitors to all national parks combined [108].

Conclusion

In conclusion, the ecotourism industry in Kazakhstan is still both a developing niche for the Kazakhstani scientific community to do an extensive research and an economic sector for the country that has not yet utilized its full potential. Taking into account the present development of ecotourism industry in Kazakhstan and its future prospects as outlined with the introduction of the new Environmental Code and State of the State of the Union Address by President Tokayev as of last year, Kazakhstan is in desperate need to develop further the central ecotourism aspects in the country with a special focus on natural parks as ecotourism destinations. Moreover, as in the literature review numerous authors have touched upon different issues concerning ecotourism studies in Kazakhstan while highlighting its scientific and economic importance for the country as a whole, no comprehensive research has yet been done that would analyze the eco-tourism potential of all presently recognized thirteen national parks and natural reserve areas in Kazakhstan and those that are yet to be developed and recognized in the future. Moreover, scholars have not yet applied research tools such as the analysis of critical ecotourism infrastructure or infrastructure investment analysis, which could in fact prove useful for several purposes such as understanding the infrastructure quality development and infrastructure constraints. Even if some empirical

data exists and tourism government plans exist, there is still a huge research gap that needs to tackle various aspects of ecotourism studies, especially what concerns environmental aspects and studying the local challenges that ecotourism development faces in various regions ranging from poor road transport qualities to lack of touristic facilities. All that taken into consideration, ecotourism can be considered as a vehicle for economic development in destination of developing countries that possess rich forms of biodiversity, culture, wildlife, natural areas and flora with a focus on both ecological preservation and recreational opportunities [111-114]. Being also the fastest growing sector of tourism that aims to anthropogenic negative effects and maximize economic benefits for local communities and natural and cultural environments, it provides an opportunity for Kazakhstan to capitalize of it for good purposes [101].

What concerns the implications of ecotourism studies in Kazakhstan, here we can mention some crucial aspects that are worth taking note. For instance, an implication of the increased ecotourism study in the future in Kazakhstan would mean that the rapid development of ecotourism industry leads to the rationalization of environmental management and contributes to the formation of a resource-saving policy in the region. From the foreign experience it is known that in some cases eco-tourism brings more income than the cultivation of arable land. This is especially true in countries with marginal lands. This fact may be of interest to agricultural regions with a large amount of land that has lost soil fertility, where a change in the structure of the agricultural landscape would occur in order to improve it. Another example of implications of an increased ecotourism studies in the country is the moral problem of the consequence of commercialization for natural parks as ecotourism attractions. Ecotourism supposes that ecological, natural and cultural areas become "recreational" spaces for tourism activities in the long run with respect to the ecology and its maintenance, which mean that commercialization of tourism products and services become main elements of the ecotourism aspect. Here, it is crucial to understand that if a country wants to develop something and it does so over time, it should anticipate the negative consequences it might bring. To illustrate you better this argument, let's take the example of how an anthropogenic effect impacts on the environment. Once, a country reaches a certain developmental level, the demand for local tourism might rise and the capacity for resources and spaces for use of

tourism purposes need to be efficiently managed. If that is not the case, an influx of ecotourism visitors combined with the increase in demand for ecotourism in a particular region might also put into risk the ecological situation of that region. For instance, it might become not anymore a space of "protected special area", but a place where waste, garbage and environmental degradation might take place worse than before. Hence, commercialization of tourism activities may lead to loss of natural ever-existing nature and misbalance of biodiversity.

Limitations of Research in Ecotourism Studies

Overall, it is also worth mentioning that research on ecotourism studies also have several limitations within the following aspects. Firstly, the contextual aspect of the research location plays an important role. Since studies on eco-tourism industry pertain multicultural and cross-cultural research, usage of concepts, theories, and findings may be relevant across different cultures but may also form methodological challenges present in a mono-cultural setting [115]. In this regard, due to differences in cultural aspects, elements of research designs may not be operationalizable or contextually not applicable [116]. These challenges may with construct equivalence, operationalization equivalence, contextual equivalence or sample equivalence [115]. Secondly, there is also the risk of subjectivity of respondents towards how they comprehend concepts themselves. The very fact that the subject who is interviewed in a research study may totally differently understand the word "ecotourism" from another person also plays an important role and may divert our answers away from what we seek to know. For instance, the translation of complex concepts can also be challenging for not only us as researchers, but also in the context of a non-western country where such social concepts such as "ecotourism" are understood and translated totally differently than from those who seem to use the word in their everyday academic language, especially if that is the case with a country where research on tourism studies are heavily understudied. Moreover, according to the social desirability response bias (SDRB), there exists a tendency of participants of a study to respond in a way that depicts and reflects the most favorable image of themselves [115]. As a result, it can impair the "real picture" of the reality context, survey results and policymaking process [117].

Further Research Suggestions

Having reviewed a handful of research papers by Kazakhstani and foreign scholars on ecotourism studies in Kazakhstan, there are the following research suggestions that researchers could focus on when analyzing ecotourism industry in Kazakhstan, which have not yet been addressed by the Kazakhstani scholars.

Firstly, what concerns in particularly national parks, here it is possible for researchers to study on the one hand the tourism potential of national parks via a critical infrastructure analysis or infrastructure investment analysis. Regarding the latter, the so-called framework for prioritizing tourism infrastructure investment could be used in order to assess current infrastructure capacity constraints and capacity availability. It also identifies priority infrastructure needed to enable ecotourism industry to grow and systemic issues or barriers that impede the development of ecotourism infrastructure. Hence, the methodology is to explore both strengths and weaknesses of ecotourism infrastructure of ecotourism facilities, such as national parks. However, such methodological tools often have limitations. For instance, the wide array of potential investment depends on numerous factors. Investment prioritization in tourism industry is often dependent on the relative merits of investments benefits it brings to the industry. Moreover, due to the nature of tourism, the infrastructural needs for investment may vary from region to region. Since some destinations or natural parks might offer specific tourism experience compared to other regions, the comparative strengths and weaknesses of regions need to be taken into consideration. The same is also true when measuring the impact of tourism investment.

Secondly, scholars could assess the local ecotourism business motivations for national parks. Here, a quantitative survey instrument can be designed to collect the perspectives of local stakeholders in the Kazakhstani tourism sector to examine the scope of ecotourism development in all thirteen national parks of Kazakhstan. Such a survey could firstly aim to establish the motivation (e.g. safety, relaxation, fun, environmental conservation, comfort, natural authenticity, novelty of tourism businesses, etc.) in Kazakhstan to engage in ecotourism of national

parks. Secondly, assess how important the specific roles of ecotourism for local development are to tourism businesses in Kazakhstan. Thirdly, evaluate the extent of business understanding of the “classical” attributes of ecotourism. And finally, outlining the key operational barriers to ecotourism development of the thirteen national parks. The literature claims that ecotourism business development is driven by intrinsic and extrinsic motives when deciding on how or why to engage in ecotourism.

And last but not the least, another future research suggestion concerns the so-called stochastic multi-criteria acceptability analysis (SMAA) and preference ranking organization method for enrichment evaluation (PROMETHEE), which could be used in analyzing the ecotourism attractiveness according to their ecotourism attributes. These for instance can include attributes such as international importance; number of hotels and historic-cultural structures; diversity of outdoor activity; access to local community; number of ecotourism trails available; level of consciousness for ecotourism by local residents; utilities infrastructure such as sewer and water systems; aesthetic image of ecotourism facilities, etc. Via the usage of both methods of SMAA and PROMETHEE, we can apply the single criterion net flow function and the function and net outranking flow to compare different national parks with each other. SMAA is applied as an inverse weight space approach suitable for many group decision-making problems, where the decision-maker is unable or unwilling to provide preference information. SMAA produces rankings with Monte Carlo Generation of weights to estimate the probability that each natural park is in a certain position of the aggregate ranking that is given. The rankings of the national parks by the SMAA and PROMETHEE model could suggest a degree of competition that exists regarding the tourism attractiveness and tourism performance of natural parks. However, it may not be realistic to develop a decision-model that fits all decision makers and every decision situation. Thus, integrating SMAA and PROMETHEE methods could serve as a useful approach for supporting decision making when ranking national park-based tourism destinations, and could also provide decision makers with information for determining the position of a destination.

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